



The Changing Contours of Social Realities in India

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<https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.130>

Submitted on: 2013-12-19

Posted on: 2013-12-19

(YYYY-MM-DD)

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The Changing Contours of Social Realities in India

Theologizing cannot be done in a vacuum. Whether one is conscious of it or not the hermeneutical task of theological reflection and articulation takes place within a particular context. The challenge of theological formation in India today is to see how 'context-sensitive' we are as theological educators and formators. Do we take adequate efforts to teach our students to retell the story of Jesus in the present-day Indian context? Or do we take it for granted that it takes place automatically? There are various contexts to be considered in the project of theologizing. In this paper I propose to make an overview of the changing social realities of India. But first let me explain a word about why it is important to consider social context in Theological Formation.

Importance of Social Context in Theological Formation

As theologians and theological educators we need to take the social context seriously on two accounts. First, we are all products of society. We need to have the awareness that we are shaped by the society in which we are born. In order to understand ourselves and others, we need to understand society. As theological formators we also need to become aware of the social context from which our students come and the contexts that have shaped them. For instance, if one is born into a tribal society, one is shaped in a particular way with certain attitudes and values. If one is born into a caste-ridden society, the attitudes and values that one imbibes will be completely different.

Second, we are subjects who also can shape society and are not only shaped by it. As theologians we have the double responsibility of shaping our society since the task of theology itself is to bring about transformation or to further the reign of God. This has to happen both at the individual level and in society at large. Therefore any theological articulation done with this aim in mind cannot ignore the social realities around. Ultimately, theology is nothing but the interpretation of reality in the light of Christian faith, with a view to bring about change. Working for transformation demands that we understand the realities correctly, with a critical mind.

The Present Situation of Theological Formation in India

Before we look at the present social context of India, it is fitting to see the current understanding about the need to engage in a context-sensitive theology. Gleaning through the official document, *Charter of Priestly formation for India*¹ it is clear that the Indian Bishops are convinced that due emphasis during the formation of priests should be given on understanding the Indian context. They are concerned that the theological formation in seminaries be related to the challenges of the present world and the actual Indian context. According to them, an understanding of Indian reality, particularly of the socio-economic, political and cultural, and religious forces shaping the country today, will equip seminarians to respond more effectively in the light of faith to the challenges that the society faces.²

The document mentions the context of poverty, institutionalized inequality and injustice coming from casteism, communalism, religious fundamentalism, etc. to be taken seriously in our theological formation. It acknowledges that the church in India is affected by tensions and conflicts arising from gender, caste, ethnic and regional and linguistic differences.³ The priest's role as the animator of the community is seen as one who helps people to overcome the many barriers that divide, and to bring about reconciliation.⁴

The document highlights the importance of family in fostering priestly vocations.⁵ It

emphasizes the need for seminarians of sex education and normal social contacts with girls and women.⁶ During the major seminary formation the formees are to draw upon India's rich cultural and spiritual heritage as well as its contemporary experience of modernization, globalization, scientific progress and the struggle of the marginalized for human rights and social justice. Further it stresses the need for seminarians to be given opportunities to interact with and respond to Indian society with its scientific and modernizing thrust on the one hand and the struggle of the masses for fundamental human dignity and justice, on the other.⁷

The Changing Contours of Indian Social Realities

India has witnessed massive social change over the past century or so. This change is visible in all the institutions such as family, caste, kinship, village, polity and economy.⁸ On the whole, Indian society today is the kaleidoscopic interplay of tradition, modernity and post-modernity. Even though all the three processes operate simultaneously, there is disenchantment on the part of the people for all the three. For instance, there are traditions like *sati*, child marriage, notions of purity-pollution, etc., that have outlived their time; modernity is often seen as working out for the benefits of the dominant class/caste and political groups of the society; and post-modernity, which is based on pluralism, differentiation, autonomy and self-identity, bring out disintegrative tendencies in the society.⁹ These changes in the Indian context require a 'recontextualization' of theological statements. As Lieven Boeve puts it, "A new context demands new ways to express the Christian Truth, new ways to name God."¹⁰

Normally a society is studied keeping in mind the three-fold division. These are a) economic activities of the market, b) political activities of the state and c) aggregate social relations of society.¹¹ This paper mainly focuses on the third aspect of society, namely the social context. However, we know that a clear cut distinction is not always possible between the social and the cultural contexts. These coexist and are interwoven into the various layers and processes of society. Though social context includes social problems and issues, I do not intend to enumerate and explain the various social problems that we encounter in India.¹² However, I want to highlight a few aspects of the social context including some socio-cultural issues which we need to consider in our theological formation. I consider the following dimensions important for this purpose.

1. The Indian Family

The predominant picture of the traditional family that comes from the writings of sociologists is that of joint family.¹³ The status of family that we find in sociological research today belongs to the 70s and 80s. But the Indian family today is different from its earlier form. With regard to the number of children, many families adhere to the national ideal of two per family. Families who have the economic means send their children for higher and specialized education to centres of science and technology. Such highly trained children either go abroad or take up employment in multinational companies in metropolitan cities. Often old parents are left behind with no one to take care of them. Lack of adequate employment facilities close to one's residence compel couples to live separately from each other, causing children to grow up with a single parent. This too adversely affects the formation of healthy family relationships.

At the village level, too, the family is in crisis. For the majority of the rural families, especially those belonging to Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Castes and Scheduled Tribes, land in the village is scarce. Whatever land is cultivated, is not sufficient to provide subsistence to the family members. With the onset of economic liberalization and market driven economy, agriculture has now ceased to be a gainful occupation even at the national level. Agriculture does not hold top

priority any longer for the Indian State. The small farmers and landless cultivators are left high and dry. So, for the vast majority of rural Indian families, the main problem is that of survival. Such a situation ends up in many migrating to cities and towns in search of employment, which in turn brings problems to families. Deprivation of family relationships and support systems for a long period of time takes the toll on individuals, often turning them into criminals, or drug addicts who engage in anti-social activities. Survival struggles of rural families give rise to many social problems like suicide, child labour, human trafficking, prostitution, etc.

In contrast to the above, the urban rich and middle class families are driven by consumerism. With the arrival of post-modernity, the individual has come to take the centre stage. There is an overemphasis put on the needs of the individual. The new life style gives a person a post-modern identity. He or she is a computer engineer, a film actor, a scientist and an advocate of human rights. The clothes or the brands which a person uses give him/her a special status in society. Everything in society- a house, a car, a watch, shoes, even a pen with which he/she writes, are items of lifestyle.¹⁴ Though lifestyle changes are more observable in the youths and adolescents, the elder people do not remain unaffected by the new lifestyle.

Gender Dimensions in Family

When one applies gender dimension in the family studies which has been a neglected area in the mainstream sociology so far, one gets a different picture of Indian families. The women study scholars and activists, recognizing the role of the family for women in the absence of other support systems, have critiqued the situation from three or four vantage points. First, they consider the need to treat gender as a central variable in understanding intra-family relationships and the internalization of the dependency of women through the socialization process. Secondly, the prevailing assumption of the ideology of 'monolithic' family has been challenged by the feminists. Family is not a homogeneous institution where all members occupy equal position and derive equal benefits in terms of resources, training and opportunities. Thirdly, women study scholars refer to the question of family boundaries. They question the dichotomous approach -private and public, family and wider society- which in turn has raised the whole issue of violence in the family. Such questioning has also eroded the illusion of family as a peaceful island in the competitive world. Finally, the critics also recognize the mix of conflictual and consensual relationships in the family.¹⁵

Even today many households are organized on the basis of division of labour between a primary breadwinner (male) and a primary child rearer (female). This model is reinforced and perpetuated through the media emphasis of this model. Thus, family acquires significance as an ideology where there is acceptance of hierarchical structure and unequal power sharing as inevitable component. The socialization process reinforcing gender inequality also reinforces subordination of women within the families. An important aspect of the family living is that men and women do not experience family in the same way.¹⁶ Glorification of motherhood, love, family as a domestic 'heaven' are some of the notions which have mystified the place of the family. The activists have drawn attention to the family violence, commodification of woman through widening menace of dowry and female foeticide, the overarching dominance of patriarchy as reflected in the Roop Kanwar, Shah Bano, Bhanwari bai and so many such cases, the bias of the judges to stereotyping of the role of woman in family as reflected in the family court procedures.¹⁷ The patriarchal family ethos, within the caste and class matrix, has been unfair to women in actual practices which have been strengthened through the ideology of family honour.¹⁸ The unequal power sharing between male and female does not limit itself to families but it spreads its tentacles to all the institutions of society. The increasing violence unleashed against women both in the private and public space is one of the outcomes of this unequal power sharing.

2. Caste Hierarchy and Conflicts

Even after sixty six years of Independence and the enforcement of Indian Constitution which affirms equality of all citizens, the so called lower castes and the Scheduled castes who call themselves Dalits, occupy the bottom of the social pyramid. The SCs (Scheduled Castes) constitute 15-16 per cent of India's total population. In rural India, they constitute 88 per cent of their total population. However, their relationship with the so called higher castes is changing. Today they experience more tensions and violence. Property and land ownership seem to be crucial areas of social tension and conflict. These social conflicts which often take place in rural India are a cumulation of a complex interaction of the processes of social awareness that started with the Gandhian initiative and growth of literacy among SCs, and other modernizing processes.¹⁹ Tension and conflict is also due to a process which M.N. Srinivas calls as Sanskritization whereby the so-called lower castes claim the status of the so-called higher castes by adopting some of the rituals, eating habits and traditions of the high castes. Paradoxically there is also an acute competition among castes to claim 'backward' status, as that entitles them to the benefits of protective discrimination.²⁰

One of the significant changes taking place in rural and urban India is the growing dissociation with hereditary occupation. Several forces have been responsible for such a process. One major factor is that the caste panchayats lost their importance after the passing of the Constitution of India in 1950. The second factor is the gradual decline of what is called the *jajmani* system.²¹ Although this system is still operative in some places, a growing body of literature suggests its decline. The dissociation of castes from traditional occupations was further accelerated by other factors such as industrialization, the spread of education, urbanization, and the emergence of new occupations.²²

There are an increasing number of the so-called lower castes and Dalits today asserting their Constitutional rights to an equal status in society. Such assertions are not welcomed by the other caste groups. As a result, every year several incidents of inter-caste violence are reported in the papers and discussed in state Legislative Assemblies. Such outbursts of violence generally involve mass killings, physical assault and rape, and the economic and social boycott of the upwardly mobile lower castes by the dominant castes.²³ The Scheduled Castes have been a frequent target of such violence, notably in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. The dominant and other high castes not only resent the erosion of their power and prestige but are indignant at the benefits conferred on the Scheduled castes through the policy of reservation in education and employment. As the various measures designed for their benefit become effective, traditional power relations between them and the higher castes, in particular the dominant castes are thrown out of gear.²⁴

3. Corruption

Corruption is not a social context peculiar to India. Though it existed almost always in different forms, today we experience corruption almost in its full grown stage so to say. Corruption seem to be the air we breathe in daily. Nothing works well because of corruption. The state machinery including the bureaucracy, police, judicial system, political parties, all these are affected by the virus of corruption. It exists from the lowest to the highest rungs of society. The vegetable or fruit vendor, the one who supplies milk, people who run eateries, the baker, the butcher, name any one in our society, including the 'religious people' are not an exception. If you need to get permission to build a house, you cannot get your file passed without giving bribes to a number of persons. Admissions to education institutions, to various professional courses, entry to the military,

police or navy all these are possible if you can shell out money in the form of 'donations' in addition to the normal fees.

From time immemorial, our country is known for its rich religious traditions and spirituality. Most Indians are still religious believers. However, we are still one of the most corrupt countries in the world. *Transparency International* placed India 95th as among the most corrupt of the 182 countries it had surveyed in its December 2011 study on Corruption Perception Index. The corruption literature has identified several factors having causal relationship with corruption. These include the political systems and practices, the economic development and policies, and the social and cultural variables. In developing countries like ours, the salary scales are really inadequate to cope with the growing cost of living. The co-existence of acute poverty and extreme wealth has eroded the moral integrity of the people. While in most modern countries, the difference between the highest and lowest incomes is about 10 times or less, in India it is between 11 to 54 times.

Corruption undermines the social fabric and the political stability of a country. It jeopardizes the allocation of resources to sectors crucial for development. In the extreme, corruption can make the majority of citizens feel alienated from their government and the electoral processes, engendering democracy itself. Corruption has not only political and economic effects; it also undermines values that are vital for the peaceful coexistence within a society. It promotes injustice instead of justice; inequality instead of equal rights for the poor; lies instead of truth; extortion instead of freedom; theft instead of performance; manipulation instead of human dignity; self interest instead of general welfare; irresponsible use of power instead of power used with responsibility.²⁵ In the final analysis, corruption constitutes an affront against the gratuitous God who freely offers all that is created for a life that promotes human flourishing for all citizens, especially the suffering poor and powerless.²⁶ Corruption dehumanizes both the rich and the poor.

4. Hindutva Ideology and Communalism

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was the main progenitor of Hindutva ideology in India. His thesis was simple:

A Muslim or a Christian, even if born in India, could not claim to possess the qualities of Hindutva.

The essentials of Hindutva are a common race (*Jati*) and common civilization (*Sanskriti*).²⁷

This theory gets support from M.S. Golwalkar when he says, "Hindutva excludes all non-Hindus from the ambit of the nation. Hindutva, therefore, serves as an ideological justification for the construction of India as a Hindu nation."²⁸ This ideology is in direct opposition to the Indian Constitution with its affirmation of secularism. Over the years Hindutva ideology is being propagated by means of creating a large number of organizations which are called cultural organizations. Some of these include *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSSS), *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), Bajrang Dal and a large number of other organizations covering all the sectors of society- youth, women, marginals, tribals, students, trade unions, bureaucracy, and educational institutions, urban and rural.

The ultimate aim of Hindutva is cultural nationalism or to make India a Hindu nation where people of other faiths will be treated as second class citizens. Under the BJP government, Gujarat became a testing ground in 2002 when communal riots broke out and the minority community was ruthlessly attacked with arson and looting. The second instance was Kandhamal in 2007-8. The Christians were the victims. This ideology is spreading like fire and it is destructive of the secular and democratic fabric of our nation. Reports of attack on Christians are not rare in other parts of the country as well. Today the Hindutva ideology has made inroads to almost all spheres of our life. The result is that when the minority community is attacked, they do not get justice, the police remain as a mute spectator, courts do not convict the offenders and the perpetrators of heinous

crimes are let free under the influence of this ideology. What is happening in Kandhamal today is an illustration of the success of this ideology which is very dangerous and poisonous in nature.

I have outlined a few areas which I consider important for theologizing in India today. In no way it is meant to be an exhaustive list. But one thing is clear, Theological formation in India today cannot be indifferent to the changing social context. Society is always in the process of change and therefore there is a constant need for 'recontextualization' of theology.

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- 1 Charter of Priestly formation for India, Revised on the basis of the Apostolic Visitation (New Delhi: Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India, Commission for Vocations, Seminaries, Clergy and Religious, 2004).
 - 2 *Ibid.*, 18
 - 3 *Ibid.*, 1.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 3.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, 4
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 8
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 11
 - 8 D. N. Majumdar, S.C. Dube, G. S. Ghurye, Andre Beteille, M.N. Srinivas, Yogendra Singh and few others have studied social change in Indian society.
 - 9 See S.L. Doshi, *Postmodern Perspectives on Indian Society* (New Delhi: RAWAT Publications, 2008), 79.
 - 10 Lieven Boeve, "Bearing witness to the Differend : A model for Theologizing in the Postmodern Context," in *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995) 362-379 at 364.
 - 11 See Veena Das (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology*, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.
 - 12 For a detailed study of social problems, see Ram Ahuja, *Social Problems in India*, second edition (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1997).
 - 13 See Iravati Karve, *Kinship Organization in India*, 1990. I.P. Desai, K.M. Kapadia, A.M. Shah and others too have studied family and its types in India.
 - 14 See Doshi, *Postmodern Perspectives on Indian Society*, 86.
 - 15 See Neera Desai, "Gender Dimension in Family Studies," in *Social Transformation in India*, Vol. 2 ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1997), 466-500 at 474.
 - 16 See Barrie Thorne with Marilyn Yalom, *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions* (New York: Longmans, 1982), 2.
 - 17 See Desai, "Gender Dimensions in Family Studies," 477.
 - 18 See *Ibid.*, 489.
 - 19 See Pravin Sheth, "Caste, Class and Violence in Rural India," in *Social Transformation in India*, Vol. 2, ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1997): 420-450 at 423.
 - 20 Srinivas M.N. *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 20.
 - 21 Under this system, members of certain castes rendered their services or supplied goods to the village community, particularly the landowning dominant castes, in return for an annual wage paid in kind.
 - 22 See G.K. Karanth, "Caste in Contemporary India," in *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, edited by M.N. Srinivas (New Delhi: Viking, 1996), 87-109 at 90.
 - 23 A recently reported caste conflict is from Bihar. See "Bihar village flags off caste violence on I-Day," *The Hindu*, Delhi, August 21, (2013): 9. The news paper report talks about what happened on Independence day this year. Dalits were attacked in Rohtas in a village called Baddi, by the upper caste people. The Dalits saw their Ravidas temple go up in flames, their children thrown off from roof tops and their elderly beaten up mercilessly. On August 15, a mob from the upper caste Rajput community led a violent attack on the lower caste Chamars, killing one and injuring 54, including women and children. For the upper castes the Ravidas Temple of the Dalits became a visible sign of their assertion and their claim on the public space.
 - 24 See *Ibid.*, 96.
 - 25 See Christoph Stuckelberger, "Fighting Corruption in and by Churches. An Important Task of Church Leaders," in *Responsible Leadership: Global and Contextual Ethical Perspectives*, eds. Christoph Stuckelberger/Jesse N.K. Mugambi (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 180-190 at 183.
 - 26 See Jojo M. Fung, SJ, "The Menace of Corruption: An Accursed Malaise and a Systemic Evil," in *Asian Horizons*, Vol. 6, No.1, (March 2012): 41-59 at 52.
 - 27 See Doshi, *Postmodern Perspectives on Indian Society*, 118.
 - 28 *Ibid.*