



# Identify and Evaluate Modern Trends in Indian Christian Theology

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## Introduction

Christian Theology is a discipline that seeks to reflect and interpret God's revelation in Jesus Christ and this interpretation is based on and for the faith community. In the early stages, the Christian theology in India had reflected the Hindu religious philosophies and practices. It is also translated Christian faith into the terminology of Hindu philosophical system which is based on *Advaita*, *Dwaita* and *Visistadwaita*, *Bhakti* and various *Margas* ideologies. Hence, the Indian Christian theology directly or indirectly fully influenced by these above philosophical ideologies and articulated accordingly. These approaches have been developed and continued up to the end of 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Since then Indian Christian Theology has been changing. One of the major tasks of theology is to interpret the person and work of Jesus Christ. The challenges for theology are to re-interpret the meaning of Jesus to the given context as a result, that the meaning of theology will impact the communities. Interpreting theology requires a committed encounter with the context because it is the context which becomes the locus of the theological reflection. The hallmark trends of today's context are the awareness of one's own identity and this awareness definitely shapes theology. Hence the present modern trends in Indian Christian theology are people-centered, praxis-oriented, contextual and liberative in nature.<sup>2</sup> Here in this article, I would like to bring out some important trends in Christian Theology in general and followed by trends and modern trends in Indian Christian Theology in particular.

## 1. Trends in Christian Theology

Generally the term trend in Christian theology is applied for the non-western world. The western theology is developed in the context of Europe and North America. Though there are many

<sup>1</sup> R. S. Surgirharajah and Cecil Hargreaves, eds, *Reading in Indian Christian Theology* Volume I (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Laji Chako, *Introduction to Christian Theologies in India* (Kolkata: ESPACE, 2014), 196.

theological trends within western theological field but here the western theology means with traditional/classical/dogmatic theology. It tends to ignore Asian, African and indigenous people's cultural potential and identity. C. S. Song, a Asian theologian says, "Asia is neither a theological vacuum nor a theological wilderness. There are signs that attract our theological curiosity. And there are symbols that lift us from the depths of Asian humanity to the heights of God's redemptive dealings with the world".<sup>3</sup> T. Balasuriya, a Srilankan theologian also agrees that a theology developed by the Western people cannot be relevant for all people, especially to African and Asians.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, trends have been developed and molded by the experience and interest of the context and it has become a locus *theologicus*. However, they have been largely related to the needs, concerns and interests of the margins.

### 1.1. Liberation Theology

Liberation theology refers to several expressions of theology which intend to reflect on the presence and power of God in the life and struggles of oppressed people. Generally it is identified with its Latin American expressions. It has brought awareness in relation to the categories like equality, justice, peace and hope for social change. The starting point of Latin American Liberation Theology is the historical situation of oppression, poverty and injustice experienced by the people of Latin America. Liberation theologians try to re-interpret the Gospel relevant for the millions of poverty stricken and oppressed people living on this great continent. Liberation theology applied an opposite methodology and hermeneutics of reading and interpreting the Bible. It starts from the context and go to the text. Indeed, it is a re-reading of the text from the side of the poor and oppressed. The task of Liberation theology is of freeing the oppressed people living in inhuman conditions. Liberation theology tried to develop a new theology from the liberation perspective.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.2. Black Theology

Black theology is found among the Blacks of USA and of Southern Africa, particularly the Republic of South Africa. Black theology insists on foregrounding the adjective "Black" for at

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<sup>3</sup> C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 16-18.

<sup>4</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, "Towards the Liberation of Asian Theology", in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, edited by Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1980), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus the Liberator: A Critical Christological for Our Times Fabella* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 238-239.

least a few broad reasons.<sup>6</sup> James Cone, the drafter of Black theology, defined both Black power and Black theology in bringing them together. He set forth an understanding of Black theology on the Black power that is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of Blackness. Further he said that theology is not simply the rational study of the being of God rather it is the study of God's liberating activity in the world, so that the oppressed will get earthly freedom, a freedom made possible in the resurrection of Christ. Firstly, Black theology was a theology by Black and for Black. Its norm was not universal human experience, but the specific experience of the Black community. Then the Christian narrative of salvation and its categories were cast in socio-economic-political and especially ethnic.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.3. Feminist Theology

Feminist theology emerged in order to address the liberation of the other half of humanity. The term "feminist theology" refers to a way of doing theology which takes seriously the criticism and conclusions of contemporary feminism. Feminist theology was developed in three distinct steps which remain permanent aspects of its ongoing work.<sup>8</sup> It begins with a critique of the past memory of women's oppression. It seeks alternative biblical and extra-biblical traditions that support women's personhood, her equality in the image of God, her equal redeemability, and her participation in prophecy, teaching and leadership. Feminists set forth their own unique method of theology, which includes the re-visioning of Christian categories.

Along with other liberation theologies, feminist theology follows an inductive<sup>9</sup> approach. It is more powerful to do theology drawing out the material for reflection from their life experience as it relates to the gospel message.

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<sup>6</sup> a) It highlights that the Western theology which tries to be a universal, biblical Christian theology is effectively nothing but white theology b) whereas Blackness has become the basic imagery of evil and badness, Black theology deliberately seeks to embrace rather than flee from this very category and to do so in its own positive terms, thus giving it new life and new meaning. c) the foregrounding of Blackness also implies a challenge to and dissatisfaction with white theology, even though the latter seldom recognizes its own biases. d) "Black" qualifying theology is not about pigmentation of the skin but is about Black the experience, out of which the reflection on God's word emerges. See John S. Pobee & Tinyiko Maluleke, "Black Theology" in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Geneva: WCC Publication, 2002), 1105.

<sup>7</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 30-32.

<sup>8</sup> Diane M. Brewster "Feminist Theology" in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Geneva: WCC Publication, 2002), 1115.

<sup>9</sup> There are two methods in terms of emerging point—deductive and inductive. Deductive method means coming from outside or it can be understood as imposing model (macro model) of theology. Inductive method is just opposite—coming from within or self theologizing (micro model).

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## 2. Development of Christian Theology in India

What is attempted here is an examination of some of the earlier trends at theological reformulation in India with a view to understanding how in India Christian theology served the renewal of the church for its mission. Those earlier trends commencing with;

### 2.1. Contribution of Missionary Theology in India

One of the earliest to raise the question of adopting indigenous forms for expressing the Christian theology was the Roman Catholic Jesuit Robert de Nobili followed by first protestant missionary, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and others. Here I will be limiting myself to present the theology of Nobili. According to his mission the more Indians discarded their customs and the closer they adhered to Portuguese ways. But Nobili said it was unjust to require people to change their national customs, give up caste and other forms of social and cultural life. He has presented Christianity as universal religion not as the religion of parangis.<sup>10</sup> His approach, however, was mainly to making Christianity look less objectionable in external forms. He made no attempt to modify any part of his theology, which was just the Tridentine theology of his time.

### 2.2. Christian Theology from outside the Indian Church

When we turn of the western missionary theologians in India to Indian theologians we need also to recognize the contribution of those who did respond to the message and the person of Jesus in a very profound way without either joining the Christian church or subscribing to the traditional formulations of the Christian faith. One of them<sup>11</sup> may be considered for the presentation. Ram Mohan Ray belonged to the Brahmo Samaj movement which stood for a radical reform of Hindu religion of Hindu religion and society. He comes under the influence of western rationalism and Unitarian Christianity. For him and his faith, the teachings of Jesus had a moral reform of Hinduism which could be brought about by calling people to accept the teachings of Jesus as the moral expression of their faith in one God. He rejected the doctrines of the divinity of Christ, the Holy Spirit, trinity, atonement as presented by the missionary theologian of the time. These also appeared to him as irrational. At the same time he gave the centrality of place to Jesus' ethical teachings and his acceptance of titles like 'son of God, the doctrines of virgin birth and the resurrection interpreting them in his own rationalistic manner.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology in India* (madras: CLS Press, 1975), 11-14.

<sup>11</sup> Ram Mohan Ray, Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Vivikananda, etc.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion of the theology of Ram Mohan Roy, see R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology in India...*, 19-26.

### 2.3. Christian Theology form within the Indian Church

Many Indian Christian theologians have attempted to reformulate Christian theology in a manner relevant for the Indian context. These attempts have produced different models, depending on the particular framework and the concerns of the Gospel expressed through that framework. Only one of these<sup>13</sup> representative theologians has been taken for this presentation. Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861-1907), he tried to make Hinduism advaitic in line with Thomistic Catholicism. According to Upadhyaya, it is possible to be a Hindu by birth and Catholic by rebirth and he coined the term “Hindu-Catholic” to designate one of such. He writes. “By birth we are Hindus and shall remain Hindu till death. But as *dvija* (twice born) by virtue of or sacrament rebirth, we are Catholics, we are members of the indefinable communion embracing all ages and claims”. Upadhyaya also incorporated other aspect of classical *advaitic* views into a framework, such as description of ultimate reality as *sat* (being) *chit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (bliss) or *saccidananda*, which he paralleled with the Christian Trinity of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit respectively. Hence, Boyd points out “Upadhyaya has begun new lines of thought and suggested new possibilities of interpreting the Christian Gospel in an Indian setting”.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Identifying and Evaluating Modern Trends in Indian Christian Theology

Since 1980 the production of modern trends in Indian Christian Theology began to rise from the perspective of the margins or the sidelined. The trends can be called as contextual theologies in India. These contextual theologies or modern trends challenge the traditional paradigm of doing theology. Rather than merely being the corollary of western theology. They start with suffering and struggle of the people. Of course there are many modern trends emerged in Indian Christian theology but here in this article I will be restricting to identify and evaluate only a few modern trends in Indian Christian theology. Those are;

#### 3.1. Indian Liberation Theology

In recent times, the Latin American Liberation Theology brought the issue of socio-economic factor as part of theological exercise. It is a process of reflecting out of praxis and upon praxis.

<sup>13</sup> Brahmabandhav Upadhaya, Appasamy, Chenchaih, etc.

<sup>14</sup> R. H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 67.

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In 1970s many Indian Christian leaders initiated to develop Indian Liberation Theology. Liberation theology connected Christian faith to the struggles for social justice and liberation. M. M. Thomas was the main proponent of this stream and others like Sabastian Kappen who did theology in liberation method. According to S. Kappen “what we have in India is a form of dependent capitalism characterized by the vase concentration of the means of production in a few hands. Though it has contributed to the development of the productive forces, capitalism has created wide disparities in income and opportunity, which have only increased since independence.”<sup>15</sup> Page | 57

When we speak of a theology from the struggles of the marginalized peoples of India, it is important to hold all the issues<sup>16</sup> in our mind today. Their being marginal in society and being oppressed is a point which brings them together in search of freedom and a fuller life. Their theology is not centered on the doctrines or the dogmatic definitions. These are not questions of any immediate concern to them. Their interpretation of the gospel is as something which addresses them, which shares their life, its struggles and sorrows. Therefore, in the gospel stories dealing with the poor, those at the periphery of society have found great echo in the hearts of the poor in India.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the socio-economic reality of the community requires a theology that can present as the liberation.

Liberation theology is an epistemic trend in the history of Indian Christian theology. It shifted the focus of the theological task from orthodoxy to ortho-praxis. By the influence of Liberation theology, Indian Christian theology became more praxiological and justice orientation. Liberation method helped Indian Christian theology to formulate theologies based on human experiences rather than any doctrinal issue. But on the other hand it failed to attend to the complex power relations of caste and patriarchy. It did not provide proper attention to the ecological reading of Christian theology. It was not able to address the micro-power issues of the oppressed communities. The main objects of its study is to seek and hope for the ending of

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<sup>15</sup> 47 percent are doomed to live below subsistence level. Here is how an economist sums up the result of capitalist development thus far: nine-tenth of India’s populations are left behind in economic backwaters. Mass poverty is on the rise; the non-availability of the most basic human necessities per capita such as food grains and clothing are scarce; rural indebtedness has multiplied; unemployment and underemployment have reached the level of 20.8 million person-years. To this must be added the proliferation of slums, the marginalization of tribal and the outcastes, the destruction of traditional handicrafts and the ecological ravages wrought by profit-oriented production. See S. Kappen “Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation” in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology* Volume I, edited by R. S. Sugirthajah and Cecil Hargreaves (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 24.

<sup>16</sup> Economic backwaters, mass poverty, non-availability of most basic human necessities, unemployment, etc

<sup>17</sup> S. Kappen, *Jesus and Cultural Revolution: An Asian Perspective* (Bombay: Build Publication, 2002), 33-35.

the oppression and poverty and Neglecting the particular life-worlds of indigenous traditions and cultures, liberation theology followed the theoretical framework of modern theology that used universal indices. Therefore, it is a historical theology, very much of its time.<sup>18</sup> In view of this, Arvind P Nirmal contents that Liberation theology failed to offer a proper method for analyzing and interpreting the issue of Dalits in India.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.2. Dalit Theology

Dalit theology concentrates on the liberation of the Dalits from the cultures of castism in the Indian context. According to James Massey, “Dalit theology was born in the context in the context of the struggle against caste-based social order and in the aspirations for social justice both in the church and society”.<sup>20</sup> The question of the distinctive identity of Dalit theology, according to Nirmal, is inseparably linked with the identity of the Dalit people. All people’s theologies are really theologies of identity seeking to express the distinctive identities of particular people who are denied their distinctive character. Examples are Dalit theology, Tribal theology, Black theology, African theology.<sup>21</sup> In Nirmal’s view, Dalit theology will represent a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian Theology of the Brahminic tradition and this Brahminic tradition will be challenged by the emerging Dalit theology. This also means that a Christian Dalit theology will be counter theology.<sup>22</sup> For M. E. Prabhakar, it is a new theology because it is from below and uses Dalit peoples languages and expressions their stories and songs of sufferings and triumphs, popular wisdom including their values, proverbs, folk lore and myths and so on to interpret their history and culture and to articulate a faith to live by

<sup>18</sup> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 90-92.

<sup>19</sup> In the 1970s Indian theologians began to take the questions of socio-economic justice more seriously and the Indian theological scene thus changed considerably and there emerged “Third world theology.” The advocates of the Third world theology were held together by their allegiance to “Liberation Theology.” Its chief attraction was the liberation motif and it seemed entirely relevant in the Indian situation where the majority of the Indian people face the problem of poverty, but the liberation motifs in India are of a different nature since the Indian situation is different and we have to search for liberation motifs that are authentically Indian. The Latin American Liberation Theology, in its early stages at least, used Marxist analysis of socio-economic realities. However, the socio-economic realities in India however are so particular that a traditional doctrinaire Marxist analysis is inadequate to unearth them. It neglects the caste factor which adds to the complexity of Indian socio-economic realities. See Saral K. Chatterji, “Why Dalit Theology,” in Arvind P. Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, 1991), 24 - 26. Saral points out that “the idea and ideology of caste as well as its morphological aspects, the nature of oppression and the inherited inequalities perpetuated by it, and its persistence through the interaction of social, cultural religious and economic factors remained neglected in Marxian analysis.

<sup>20</sup> James Massey, “A Review of Dalit Theology” in *Contextual Theologies* (Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2013), 149.

<sup>21</sup> Arvind P. Nirmal, “Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,” in Arvind P. Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, 1991) p.143.

<sup>22</sup> Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards A Christian Dalit Theology...”, 58-59.

and to act on.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the elitist theology, which as an academic discipline and an intellectual activity has little or no direct contact with realities experienced by people, Dalit theology is people's self-affirmation of doing their theology from within their own situations, which they want to transform, with an alternative consciousness of economics of equality, politics of justice, and a religion of God's freedom. It is the people's challenge to the dominant consciousness that propagates economics of exploitation, politics of oppression and a religion that supports the unjust caste structure. Thus, "Dalit theology is an attempt towards an authentically Indian liberation theology"<sup>24</sup>

### 3.3. Indian Feminist theology

Feminist perspectives emerged against gender discrimination against women. It is also the struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choices to control lives and bodies within and outside the homes. Feminist theology thus far dealt with the experience of women and how this experience is based on suffering due to the patriarchal domination. Feminist theology has situated itself at the centre of all oppression and exploitation. Feminist theology has been engaged in reformulating the whole of Christian theology. The movements of inclusive language and for the admission of women in ministry and priestly ordination lead to the exploitation and development of new understanding of the major themes of Christian thought. Feminist scholars argues that the explicit incorporation of the perspective of women have consequences for Christian understanding of God, Christ, Church, theological anthropology, sin, salvation, grace, etc.<sup>25</sup> The feminist theology evolves feminist hermeneutics of suspicion where the stories of women's experience serve as the critical paradigms for theology. Feminist theology presupposes ecclesial and theological praxis so liberation and humanization is considered as partners of theology. Feminist theology contributed in humanization based on compassion, love, sensibility, care, nurture etc.<sup>26</sup>

However, feminist theology in each continent of the globe also addresses the local issues related to gender as well as reinterpreting the Bible out of the genuine and concrete experiences of women. Whatever manner women organize themselves questioning the male domination can

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<sup>23</sup>M. E. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology," in James Massey, ed., *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate* (Delhi: ISPCK), 48.

<sup>24</sup>M. E. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology...", 50

<sup>25</sup> Gabriele Dietrich, *A New Thing on Earth* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2004), 89.

<sup>26</sup> R. L. Hnuni, *Vision for Women in India: Perspectives from the Bible, Church and Society* (Bangalore: ATC, 2009), 278.

be construed as struggles for the dignity, honor, and celebration of womanhood. Ultimately the prime goal is liberation from the clutches of male domination, gender injustices. In India, feminist theology is the struggle for the achievements of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choices to control lives and bodies within and outside the homes.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.4. Tribal Theology

Tribal theology is one of the recent trends in Indian Christian theological scenario coming out from the tribal communities in order to address the tribal issues like economic dependency, alienation, tribal culture and land, identity crisis, social injustice, corruption, exploitation, disunity manifested in the many forms. Tribal theology is basically fighting against treating them as second class citizens as most of the indigenous people belong to economically backward and the underdeveloped communities. The fore more characteristic to develop tribal theology is needed to know the tribal ethos. Tribal people have a strong sense of community. Each tribal exists because the community exists. This community feeling is seen particularly in times of celebrations, preparing of fields for cultivation, wedding, harvesting, collaboration in terms of need, of natural calamities, etc. This sense of corporate identity is very strong among the tribals. The second characteristic is closeness to creation and attachment to the land. Land is more than a means of production. It is "mother" earth. There is a strong spiritual relationship between tribal people and their land. It is strongly interwoven with their tribal identity.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.5. Adivasi Theology

Adivasi theology is also another modern trend in Indian Christian theology. It is doing theology from the Adivasi perspective. It seeks to re-read and re-interpret the gospel from Adivasi perspective so as to make the gospel message relevant to the Adivasi life-situation now characterized with varieties of socio-political and human problems. In this process it comes under the category of contextual theology. As a contextual theology, it seeks to relate the gospel message as "God-given-answer to human problems. In its spirit and orientation, it is therefore as 'answering theology'.

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<sup>27</sup> Kamala Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan, *Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994), 3.

<sup>28</sup> J. Puthenpurakal, "Jesus the Tribal and The Tribal of Jesus," in *Christ Among the Tribals* (Bangalore: FOIM, 2007), 246-247.

## Conclusion

In the beginning, theology was seen as faith seeking understanding, focusing on the explanation and defense of dogma. It was an intellectual approach.<sup>29</sup> Later most of the theology has been developed from the experience of the human being in relation with divine being or God. And when the developed theology is related to any particular context, the theological task is to relate with it and reading the theology according to the defined context. The significant fact is that as per the human experience and thought are not consistent and is a variable factor. So the developed theology is forced to have trends/shifts in its thought. Hence, trends in Indian Christian theology or Christian theologies in India means doing Christian theology in the Indian context. It is a theology that is both Indian as well as Christian at the same time. Indian Christian theological thought has moved sine then in different directions, taking new turns, while incorporating, questioning, challenging, correcting and enriching the earlier theological endeavors in the different Indian contexts and in the process, blazing a trail.

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<sup>29</sup> Kamala Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan, *Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994), 3.

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