

Religion and Development of the Poor: A Socio-Ethical Perspective

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There is a plethora of faith-based organisations engaged in developmental works in India. While most of these draw their inspirations from different religions, at the operational level many adopt a secular way of working. Such faith-inspired development institutions restrict formal religious practices to private domains, though some organisations adopt some form of religious practices under the broader umbrella of a multi-religious approach. Some organisations make conscious attempts to separate religion or religious practices from developmental discourses. At times, religion and development are seen as opposing poles by the faith-inspired development organisations, though at a personal level one might see the convergence of religion and development. This grey and complex area requires deeper investigation.

It is observed by critics of religion that it is a double-edged sword. Charles Colton, an English cleric and writer, rightly summed up this dilemma when he said, “Men will wrangle for religion, write for it, and fight for it, anything but live for it.” Taking this insight forward, Richa Singh wrote, “The strict moral tenets of our religion are gradually being forgotten. No longer do we find many Christians going to church every Sunday, Muslims offering *namaz* five times a day or Hindus going to temples daily for offering prayers. This is so because our outlook has become very moderate and easy-going. However, at the political or social level, we are ready to exploit our religion for garnering more power. It is this contradiction in our psyche that is being exploited by the unscrupulous leaders, who sow discord among us which results in communal strife.”¹

The interplay of religion and development is linked to the idea of secularism. India is a secular country. By the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976, the Parliament added the term Secular in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. Under the principle of secularism, the state is neither religious nor anti-religious. The state does not have any religion and they do not promote any religious activity of a particular community. The state primarily believes in the principles of “Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava” meaning “Equanimity toward All Religions” and “Dharma Nirapekshata” which means “Being Indifferent to Religion.” The principle of secularism also meant that the state must protect all religions and the citizens must adopt religious tolerance as a way of life. Despite these lofty ideals, religious tolerance is contested by majoritarian politics. It is common knowledge that political parties use religion as a political weapon for vote bank politics and religious minorities are made to feel unsafe in India. Evidence shows that violence against religious minorities goes unabated, despite constitutional protection. Mixing religion with politics has a huge impact on the developmental engagements of faith-based organisations.

After a brief discussion on the understanding of religion from sociological perspectives, a parallel is drawn between models of development and the historical growth of the Indian Social Institute,

¹ <https://www.thejamiareview.com/religion-a-double-edged-sword/> (last accessed 10/08/2022).

Bangalore, a faith-inspired social institution working in the human development sector. The contributions of the two stalwarts - Frs. Henry Volken and Stan Swamy, who worked in this institute for nearly three decades, giving it a definitive shape and perspective, are highlighted to draw insights.

Western sociology of religion

Unlike India, the western concepts of religion and secularism are very different. The writings of Marx (1818-1883), Durkheim (1858-1917) and Weber (1864-1920), for instance, have had a significant impact on subsequent theorising about the nature, role and future of religion. For Marx, religion played a crucial role but as a response to the social alienation inherent to the capitalist system rather than as a positive social force: this is expressed in his famous depiction of religion as the ‘opium of the people’. When people seek solace in religion they are compensating for their sense of alienation and suffering and he posited that religion would wither in a socialist society: thus, secularisation is both desirable and inevitable.²

For Durkheim, religion operates through this ‘collective consciousness’, which embodies the moral codes and beliefs that are shared amongst members of society. “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (cited in Thompson, 1982, p. 129). The distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ is crucial to understanding Durkheim’s view of religion.

Geertz (1973, p.90) defines religion as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [and women] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. This functional definition has been criticised for failing to explain specifically how a researcher might identify religion when encountered in the field.³

² Religions and Development, Working Paper 4. <http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk>.

³ William H. Swatos, Jr Editor, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*. <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/Anthropology.htm>.

For Weber, religion played a role to make a sense of the world. He placed his emphasis upon religion as a system of meaning rather than upon its social function, as either a pacifying opiate or a source of cohesion. “The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behaviour. The external courses of religious behaviours are so diverse that an understanding of this behaviour can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas, and purposes of the individuals concerned - in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behaviour’s ‘meaning’”. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1963, p.1). He suggested that the ‘spirit’ of the caste system, reliant upon the idea of cycles of rebirth and the superiority of the Brahmin class, acted against an indigenous development of capitalism in India. This thought has been captured by Das Gupta (1977).⁴ Western sociologists greatly influenced the development discourse in India.

Faith-based organisations and religion

The role of faith-based NGOs in the development sector is under-researched and generally neglected by mainstream civil society research. According to the World Bank: “Civil society ... refers to a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations. Faith-based organisations in this list might look like an odd category for some. When mobilized, civil society - sometimes called the “third sector” - has the power to influence the actions of elected policy-makers and businesses. But the nature of civil society - what it is and what it does - is evolving, in response to both technological developments and more nuanced changes within societies.”⁵ London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society defines civil society as:

⁴ The idea that the ‘Brahmanical mind’ in India prefers to follow rules and authority and is not inclined towards innovation and risk. This, they argue, has hindered India’s modernisation.

⁵ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/what-is-civil-society/> (last accessed 10/08/2022).

“... the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values.”⁶

One can find converging dimensions between cavity society and Catholic Social Teachings (CST). The principles of CST - Life and Dignity of the Human Person, Call to Family, Community, and Participation, Rights and Responsibilities, Preferential Option for the Poor, The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers, Solidarity, Common good and Care for God’s Creation are based on universal values, and not restricted to any religion. Many Catholic faith-based organisations embrace CST and put them into practice in development interventions.

There is substantial literature on social movements and religion, yet again this has not directly been absorbed into work on development. Social movements are a key feature of civil society, particularly concerning the pursuit of democracy, civil liberties or human rights. However, as Wood (1999) suggests, recent work by political sociologists and social movement theorists on the role of religion in democratisation tends to focus on religious institutions as institutions rather than what religion *per se* might contribute. In this background, it is important to bring to the fore aspects of convergence and divergence between religion and development.

Development interventions of faith-based institutions

To illustrate the dilemmas faced by faith-based social institutions in bringing together religion and development, let me highlight two instances. Fr. Stan Swamy, SJ, a Jesuit priest, died as an undertrial in Taloja prison on 5 July 2021, falsely implicated in the Bhima Koregaon case along with 15 others. Stan served at the Indian Social Institute, Bangalore from 1975-1991, for about 16 years, of which 11 years as its director. Stan Swamy In his book, *I am not a Silent Spectator*, has narrated his experience with religious authorities in Bangalore.

In a small village, a stone’s throw from the north of Bangalore city, three landlords owned about 300 acres of land and the rest of the village, about 30 families, were the tenants (the actual tillers) of the

⁶ http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/29398/1/CCSRReport05_06.pdf (last accessed 10/08/2022).

land. If anybody had the right to become owners, these tenant families had that right.⁷ We did a brief study of the situation, contacted the tenants quietly and impressed upon them their rights. A local English daily published the findings of our study titled ‘New awakening in sleepy hamlet’. Immediately, the landlords breathed anger at the tenants and ISI....

In this painful scenario, a few local parish Catholic priests who were in good relationship with the landlords accused ISI-Training Centre, and me, of plotting to divide the local church. The Diocesan authorities asked for my removal from Bangalore. Fortunately, the Jesuit superiors stood in solidarity with me and ISI and declined to oblige the demand of the local church authorities.⁸

While the first incident is related to Stan’s mission while he was at Indian Social Institute, Bangalore, the second narration also pertains to Stan, which happened after his death. Two weeks after his death during an informal conversation one of Stan’s relatives said, “About 20 years ago several Bishops and heads of religious orders called me and advised me to convince Stan, that he should not critique the Church or Church officials. Many of those people, after his death, called me to express their condolences and said that they admire him as a saintly person”.

These two narratives demonstrate the interplay of the thinking of religious leaders and faith-inspired social activists on issues related to people’s development. It also demonstrates how religious leaders joined hands with the ruling class, often impinging on the rights of the poor. However, in the last few decades, there are perceptible changes in the understanding of religion and its development by religious leaders and faith-inspired social activists. The history of the Indian Social Institute, Bangalore captures this creative tension.

Indian Social Institute, Bangalore

In 1961, Fr. Jim Berna SJ and Mr Ryan started the work of the Extension Service of ISI-Delhi, to support the Diocesan Developmental

⁷ Land to the tiller was introduced by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in her 20-point programme in 1975.

⁸ Stan Swamy, *I am not a Silent Spectator*, P. 3-4, Indian Social Institute, Bangalore, 2021.

activities which had just taken off, in a big way in most of the dioceses. Catholic Relief Service (CRS) and Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) were the two major development actors. The lack of trained personnel in the development sector persuaded them to initiate a Training Centre as well. It was in 1963, with the arrival of Fr. Henry Volken SJ, that the training centre took off in full swing. The Extension Service was shifted to Delhi in 1966. With this change, ISI-B began its journey as a Training centre responding to the massive changes/challenges in the developmental sector.⁹ The initial focus of the Training Centre was on 'Community building among the poor, skill – courses on agriculture, kitchen gardens, poultry, nutrition and accountancy'.

As it can be noticed, during this era, the development discourse was based on two models, Charity, and Development. What are these models about? The charity model provides services to needy persons and communities, those living in abject poverty, and helps during emergencies and natural calamities, like floods, earthquakes, droughts, epidemic diseases etc. This is done with minimum involvement of the affected persons and holds the belief that outside agents must help those who are unable to help themselves. Charity demands that the wealthy demonstrate their philanthropic gestures in words and deeds and help people in their miserable conditions. On the other hand, the development model is based on the belief that the poor lack skills and resources and must change the way they run their lives with the help of outside experts, who are 'considered' to know the well-being of the poor better. Therefore, institutions, be it a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), or Developmental Organisation, initiate development works to reform the present condition of the people and equip them with the required skills and capacities and thus, help them to stand on their own. However, this model does not sufficiently investigate and address the root causes of the problems, which make people vulnerable. It primarily focuses on the development of the people from their present status and condition. After much investment, human and financial, the question remained, what has changed in the lives of the poor? It was then realised that the poor became more dependent

⁹ The Legacy, Golden Jubilee, 1963- 2013, Indian Social Institute, Bangalore, 2013 .

on the ‘providers.’¹⁰ This realization paved the way for new thinking. Stan Swamy began his social work in Jamshedpur by being the nodal person for CRS, which he handed over in two years and decided to move on into social action.

Social action model

The Community Development approach of the Government of India in the 70s added fervour to the efforts of ISI-B. Constant study of the changing environment and reflection on the changes made the team alert to creative ways of conceiving programmes and training activists. In the 70s, the Freirean philosophy and methodology dominated the training of ISI-B. The words of Dom Helder Camara (1909–99), Roman Catholic Archbishop of Olinda and Recife in Brazil, ‘When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why so many people are poor, they call me a communist was widely discussed’. Fr. Volken said, “We want to come close to the poor, to help them in their need - till we realise that we must learn from them. We cannot teach the poor how they are meant to live, rather we learn from them how we have to live.”¹¹ This new understanding changed the way faith-based institutions conceived their interventions.

“The Training Centre of the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore is very impressive as hundreds of social workers, men and women, of different castes, Hindus, Muslims and Christians have been prepared for their work,” wrote the Swiss Ambassador after a visit in 1970. Later, after being the Secretary for Social Apostolate of the Jesuits in Rome, on social apostolate today, Fr. Volken wrote: “I believe that, within a comprehensive perspective of human rights, we can best make the contribution of the Society of Jesus to the transformation needed for the survival of humanity: a transformation that makes human development possible, reverses the present trend of increasingly dividing humanity into rich and poor across the world, destroying the resources of the planet and fostering a culture of violence. We may work with people on both sides, provided our vision is clear and in tune with the

¹⁰ On Models of development https://isibangalore.com/isi-pdfs/handbooks/English_Handbook.pdf p. 21-22.

¹¹ http://www.sjweb.info/documents/sjs/pj/docs_pdf/pj_073_eng.pdf (last accessed on 13/08/2022).

requirements of God's dream of one united human family, living in solidarity and peace as universal brothers and sisters."¹²

Stan Swamy succeeded Volken as the Director of the institute and began an intense period of training social activists for political intervention through courses, ranging from three months to shorter periods. The participants were activists with grassroots contact, deeply conscious of the political dimension of poverty and the need for a structural change. Popularly, the model was known as the social action model of development and the idea of structural or systemic change received prominence. This model called for direct involvement in the struggles of the oppressed and the marginalized for structural change, and to build a society based on justice, equality, and freedom. In the '90s the institute was involved in fisherfolk struggles in Kerala, and the emancipation of Dalits in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka from caste clutches. The social action model adopted cadre and capacity building of youth to building vibrant people's movements.

It is a *political action* that leads to a struggle for participation in power. It is a *cultural action*, that envisages ending dominating, dehumanizing culture and establishes equal opportunity. It is an *economic activity* where the marginalized will have an equal share of the resources. It is a *spiritual action* that tries to establish a society based on justice, equality, and fraternity.¹³ For some, participation in the struggles of the poor might be a secular action but for the believers, God is present and active in the cries and struggles of the poor for their dignity, rights, and freedom. Articulation of Liberation Theological perspectives emanating from Latin American countries contributed to this deeper understanding of the relationship between religion and development.

Rights-based Justice and Reconciliation model

The vision of empowering the powerless towards sustainable development in the context of the market-ushered economic order premised on privatization, liberalization and globalization adversely impacts

¹² <http://www.sjweb.info/documents/sjs/pjnewarticles/103-1-12ENG.pdf>.

¹³ On Models of development https://isibangalore.com/isi-pdfs/handbooks/English_Handbook.pdf p. 21-22.

with dire consequences the working classes, the poor and the weaker section, destroying the eco-systems, became the dominant view of ISI-B in the 1990s. The emergence of ultra-right-wing fundamentalist forces with a communal agenda, operating covertly and overtly, co-opting the marginalized sections has been posing a great threat to the secular and inclusive social fabric of the nation. A new understanding of ‘people as rights-holders gave birth to the rights-based approach’, which builds on the social action approach and includes human rights standards and principles as its focus.¹⁴ During this period, the focus of the training programmes was on human rights and gender rights along with the rights of the marginalised communities within the constitutional framework.

Currently, from a rights-based approach, there is a movement towards a peace, justice, and reconciliation model. In this model, the idea of reconciliation is premised on restorative justice. In contrast to Distributive, Procedural and Retributive justice, Restorative justice demands the restoration of relationships and repair of justice through reaffirming a shared value-consensus in a bilateral process. It guarantees that all members of society can actively participate in social life, both by contributing to the common good and sharing in the common good to the degree necessary to protect their human dignity. Restorative justice brings this participation back to civic life when society has been fractured by conflict and injustice. How forgiveness is to be blended with the ongoing commitment to justice in specific social circumstances will call for wise political insight and prudent moral discernment. Developing these virtues is one of the great spiritual challenges in the political life of our fractured world.¹⁵ Learning from the past and reimagining the future, the Indian Social Institute, Bangalore is currently engaged in three interconnected thematic areas, namely, Social Inclusion and Democracy, Labour Migration and Peace and Reconciliation, intentionally establishing the linkage between social change processes and depth dimensions of religions.

Spirituality of Social Justice

Is there a point of convergence between religion and development? Thomas Massaro writes, “Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <http://www.sjweb.info/documents/sjs/pjnewarticles/103-1-12ENG.pdf>.

have a spirituality - a personalized way of relating to the larger whole of the world we inhabit. In the course of our lives, we cobble together our systems of meanings and aspirations that express the depth dimension of our very inner selves, beyond the mere material level. Even if it remains unconscious and barely explicit, we all conduct a lifelong quest for a developed relationality to self, others, and the wider world. In short, to be human is to be in relationships in ways that go beyond what meets the eye.”¹⁶

Spiritualities premised on shared values and ethical foundation invite us to live a life of ‘mysticism of open eyes’. An excessively inner-worldly approach will reduce a religious community to just another humanitarian agency or NGO supporting social reform. An excessively other-worldly approach may soon lapse into irresponsible escapism, devaluing the temporal order of secular experience and turning the world into a mere waiting room for the afterlife.¹⁷ One of the major contributions of the institute has been building the collective identity of the marginalised in their long march to dignity, rights, and freedom, in partnership with faith-based and secular organisations. The institute nurtures a unique space where people of all religions, non-believers, the excluded and victimised can come together collectively for knowledge and truth and speak truth to power.

Controversies are inevitable if anyone attempts to ‘speak truth to power.’ The founding fathers of the institute left a legacy for the institute - May truth emboldens us, to speak truth to power and be ready to pay the price whatever it is. This has been the institute’s core mission through its varied programmes and interventions, linking the foundations of religion and the principles of development paradigms. I believe this is the message Indian Social Institute, Bangalore would like to imbibe and carry forward, a deep faith in God and his love for the broken humanity. Religion and development will meet the eyes when spiritualities and ethics have an overriding effect on both.

¹⁶ <https://canopyforum.org/2020/07/27/a-spirituality-of-social-justice-and-peacemaking-elements-from-within-the-roman-catholic-tradition/> (Last accessed 22 August 2022).

¹⁷ Ibid.