MODERNITY, DEMOCRACY AND CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

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Indian Modernity and its Dialectics

Today postcolonial studies have opened up a vantage point to critically look at the claims of modernity. They have unearthed some of the core contradictions implied in the universal claims of western modernity – the will to power embedded in them, establishment of empires of knowledge among the once colonized minds, continuance of hegemonic dominance over different others, etc. However, theories have been proposed to look at modernity also in a context-sensitive manner. The proposal of S. N. Eisenstadt for imagining multiple modernities is a case in point. He argues that "the best way to understand... the history of modernity is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs." (Eisenstadt, 2000: 2) Going by this insight, one might consider an Indian modernity, which unlike the western variant, created its own modern 'cultural program' by retaining a thicker content of beliefs and traditions, while taking in scientific and technological rationalities. Even if one acknowledges Ashis Nandy's highly radical critique of modernity as the very form of violence (Nandy, 1999: 321-344), it is not possible to deny the positive effects of the historical operatonalisation of modernity in the Indian context. It brought about an opportunity for equality for an average Indian. That a 'silent revolution' of emancipation, as in the words of Christophe Jaffrelot, was witnessed to in the Indian society is no less a convincing fact of Indian modernity (Jaffrelot, 2003).

However, that today we are witnessing to some of the dialectics of Indian modernity is a sad reality to be reckoned with. The emergence and sway of ethnocentric cultural nationalism, religious nationalism to

be specific, instrumentalizing democracy, is indeed the point of dialectics of Indian modernity. It is true that, as a manner of achieving political freedom, the erstwhile colonised countries drew much strength from the then prevalent spirit of secular nationalism. That the pioneers of Indian freedom struggle did draw upon this Indian nationalism is part of the process of birthing of India as an independent nation-state. However, even at that context, some of the free-minds like that of Rabindranath Tagore doubted the very legitimacy of nationalism and called it a 'menace' that corrupted the freedom of consciousness of a citizen. That Gandhi himself wished for closing down the Indian National Congress once freedom was achieved cannot be forgotten. What has unfortunately happened in the post-colonial Indian context is the caricature and manipulation of nationalism to win elections and capture power. As Eric Hobsbawn observed, it has become an atavistic non-progressive ideology, and even as Edward Said, the famous post-colonial critique, himself observed, it has turned out to be a sectarian divisive force in India (Said, 1993). The mindless manipulation has generated much hatred between different others, especially between majority and minority others, in addition to reiterating the dominance of the hitherto elites by a hegemonic dynamics of manufacturing consent. That India as a developing nation, emerging out into the global arena, has a certain predicament or a need for constructing its own identity can be no less appreciated. However, the identity construction with the cultural resources of a perceived majority, at the cost of the very substance of democracy and its pillars like citizenship, participation, respect for plurality and differences, can never be on the right road to democracy. Indian modernity, as operationalized especially in the political sphere, has come apparently to meet its own dialectics today.

Liberal Democracy and Beyond

It is not a less known fact that the modern liberal democracy is facing up too serious challenges in several parts of the globe today. As we know, in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) Francis Fukuyama argued that with the fall of the Berlin wall (and the end of the cold war),

human political ideological evolution had come to an end and that there was no alternative anymore to liberal democracy in the world. The euphoria of this victorious 'proclamation' unfortunately did not last long. Liberal democracy all over the world had to face up to the challenges of terror in the name of religion, religious nationalism, racism, re-emerging totalitarian ideologies and other sectarian identities which manufactured hatred towards different others; it had to reckon with a burgeoning regime of corrupt practices catering to the greed of individuals and corporate houses, and with 'naked' public spheres devoid of values and solidarity. Questions were seriously raised and are being raised today as to wether a liberal democracy which hinges solely on the liberty of the individual subject would take us further.

Against this context, amidst attempts to revise and reinterpret the liberal political philosophy to come to terms with the contemporary challenges,[1] there is an attempt also to revisit and revive the ideals of republican democracy in a contextual manner. While republicanism has had a thick historical tradition which is generally seen as a conservative and elitist political philosophy (Aristotle, Roman *res publica*, Machiavelli, Rousseau, etc), its revision today as *neo republicanism* (Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Philip Petit, Iseult Hanon, Cecile Laborde, and others), especially as *civic republicanism* offers insights which seem to be relevant for us today. Its basic philosophy is that human beings, as political animals, can realize their nature only in self-governing communities, and that the community they constitute is fundamentally political. Unlike the liberalism which begins with the natural rights of individuals, civic republicanism treats rights as basically derived from social living characterized by traditions, but continuously being propounded through a political culture. This derivative right hinges on or becomes effective in shaping up a substantive citizenship, which is built upon the pillars of rule of law, participation, non-domination, and freedom from arbitrary powers. *Participation* means not just involvement, but joining in a political process by cultivating the civic virtue of solidarity with different others to work for

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[1] John Rawls, for example, makes a sustained effort to reinterpret it for our times.

common good. It would mean evolving a public political culture from below, recognizing the validity of different others, and dialoguing with different others as the very manner of existence. *Non-domination* stands for 'a condition or a possibility' wherein a citizen is not coerced or made to act in a particular way. It differentiates itself from the fundamentals of liberal citizenship like 'freedom of self-mastery' and 'freedom from interference.' The important difference is that neo-republicanism treats the presence of non-domination in the social ambience as indispensable for the ability of an individual to be free. It is not enough to say that no one is visibly interfering in your freedom, but also vital to consider whether the *condition* created is free. *Freedom from arbitrary powers* stands for freedom from factors which do not become public or do not participate in the public political process, but exert undue unconstitutional authority.

The new civic republican democracy has features which have much relevance to the Indian context today. Its central vision characterized by participatory democracy, absence of dominance and non--interference from arbitrary powers has much to offer to a context of sequestration of power, rigidly hierarchical and exclusionary social system, and undue dominance of market forces in conjunction with casteist arbitrary powers. A republican vision is not new to India, and it has already been intoned by its constitution. The preamble of Indian constitution presents India as a democratic republic. Bhikku Parekh, the Indian born British parliamentarian, points out that in the original draft the word 'republic' alone was used, and in the text it was replaced with democracy, and in the final version it became 'democratic republic'.

Indignation to one-sided liberal democracy also has not been new to India. Ambedkar, the chief architect of Indian constitution himself had to come to terms with the inadequacy of the liberal side of Indian democracy, which ignored the other kindred values of equality and fraternity. He said, "[P]arliamentary democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made a nodding acquaintance with equality. It failed to realize the significance of equality and did not even endeavor to strike a balance between liberty and equality, with the result that liberty swallowed up equality and has made democracy a name and a farce"

(Dreze, 2018; 172). He continues: "Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things." (Dreze, 2018: 171)

Democracy, in Ambedkar's vision, is "a form and a method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed" (Dreze, 2018: 170). He said: "[...] political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy (...) social and economic democracy are the tissues and the fiber of a political democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fiber are, the greater the strength of the body" (Dreze, 2018: 172). Ambedkar cautioned also against the 'divine right' of the majorities. He said, "[U]nfortunately (...) Indian nationalism has developed a new doctrine which may be called the Divine Right of the Majority to rule the minorities to the wishes of majority. Any claim for the sharing of power by the minority is called communalism while the monopolizing of the whole power by the majority is called nationalism". (Thorat, 2018: XVII) Sukhdeo Thorat, a known educationist, says: "[I]n Dr Ambedkar's view, a democracy is not confined just to a form of government and state apparatus; rather it is more than a system of political governance – it embraces social governance (...) [it] is primarily a mode of associated living with an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen. Therefore, the roots of political democracy are located in social relationship among the people in a society." (Thorat, 2018: VIII) Jean Dreze, the well-known economist, is of the opinion that Ambedkar had a visionary conception of democracy which needs be rediscovered today. In his words: "The future of Indian democracy depends a great deal on the revival of Ambedkar's visionary conception of democracy. This vision, I believe, also needs to be enlarged and updated in the light of recent experience." (Dreze, 2018: 170)

To reconstruct Indian democracy along the line of Ambedkar's more integrated emancipatory vision, I think one could draw upon the features of the new civic republicanism to transform Indian 'liberal' democracy into an emancipating participatory democracy.

Participatory Democracy and Public Spheres

Public spheres, indeed, are the primary spaces of participatory democracy. Jürgen Habermas, with whom theorizing on modern public sphere is generally associated, understood public spheres to be spaces wherein debates took place to form public opinion which weighed upon decisions for public life. He thought of three types of public spheres: 1) public spheres in the political domain (a domain which is proximate and yet different from the state, preparing individuals for statecraft, 2) public spheres in the 'world of letters' (discussion and debates in the domain of literatures, academia, press, clubs, etc.), and 3) public spheres in the 'town', in coffee houses, salons, etc. Jose Casanova, a more recent scholar of public religion, thought of different public spheres operative at various levels of civil society, political society and the state: civil society in its voluntary organizations / initiatives, political society in legislatures and political parties, and state in its bureaucracy. Thus, there are different identifications and categorizations of public spheres. The commonality among them is that they are discursive *fora*, contributing to the formation of public opinion and the general will of the people. Discussion (lexis), according to Habermas, embodies the *public reason*, whose characteristic elements are neutralization of status, inclusiveness, and debates on matters of public concern. 'Neutralization of status' means a certain 'disregard' for status-positions of the discussants involved in discussion, and inclusiveness meant a seamless inter-subjective universality. These features make the public debates effective carriers of public opinions, which participate in decision making on matters concerning public policies, common good and public life in general. Creating appropriate *fora* for such public discussions, learning the skills of public debates or discussions, and actively participating in public spheres need to get priority in constructing a civic republican participatory democracy today.

There has been much debate as to whether any normative argument of ethical or religious nature could participate in public reasoning. The concern of liberal democracy has been whether such normative arguments could be universal enough to represent the voice of the general humanity, or those concerns of the general public. It used to be argued

that normativity would base itself on particular traditions which would not be intelligible to outside others or on particular sources of authority which would come into conflict with the universality and the neutrality of public reason. However, there have also been questions as to whether public reason, devoid of normative ethical or faith-dimensions, could be historically factual and effective to inspire actions for common good. Liberal theorists like John Rawls tried to answer the questions first of all by acknowledging the value of ethics and religion for public life and then by suggesting the method of 'translation', that is, translating the message of ethical or religious doctrines into 'secular' language so that it could be intelligible to all. The contemporary 'post-liberal world' has cast serious doubts upon the relevance of Rawls' suggestions and has come up with other methods like 'conversations' between different incommensurable ethical or religious comprehensive doctrines for common good.

The contemporary post-liberal political philosophy, by and large, accepts the need of bringing in ethical or religious doctrines into the public sphere for the cultivation of virtues of solidarity, sacrifice, respect and reverence to different persons, etc. Similarly, it is positive towards the role of religion in the public sphere. Such a positive openness is born upon multiple realizations: firstly, religion as an influential category is already present in the public sphere, controlling the political behavior of individuals and collectives involved in the political process; secondly, the attempt to be neutral under the garb of being secular has not been a successful endeavor, because secularity *per se* is not a neutrality, but a position against religion or a bias against religion; thirdly, there is a growing realization that the so-called secular liberal public spheres have not succeeded in achieving universally egalitarian politics, but, on the other hand, have impoverished the political morality, ethics, and experiences of transcendence. It would therefore be necessary to acknowledge the publicness of religion, treat it as any other language or perspective, and integrate it in public conversations. Religions, indeed, have been active components in public spheres or political decision making across space and time. The Indian experience would vouchsafe for it. Religion, religious sentiments, visions, doctrines, and beliefs are indeed present in the modern Indian political

processes. However, there has been a hesitation to articulate them in public spheres. In such situations, what passes for is a taken-for--grantedness of the legitimacy of the religious presence or influence of the dominant or the numerical majority, while those of different others, especially of minority others, get vilified or antagonized. It would therefore be a matter of fairness that religious presence in the Indian public sphere is acknowledged and articulated in public conversations or dialogues. It is in this context that one would think of the role of Indian Christianity for nurturing a participatory democracy.

Christianity and the Indian Discursive Public Sphere

Christianity's relationship with the Indian discursive public – a prototype of the civil sphere – has indeed been complex, characterized by processes of involvement, contestation, differentiation, and distinction. Though we do not have many studies focusing on the way Indian Christian community related with the native public during the first fifteen centuries of the Common Era, what emerges as a concerted opinion among the scholars today is that it was a multidimensional relationship, interacting with native cultures and religions even while maintaining its distinctiveness. The anecdotal statement made by Pacid J. Podipara that Indian Christianity of the time was 'Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in worship' conveys the sense of the relationship. Being a trading community that had established commercial relations with others and had struck marital ties with the natives, Indian Christians of the time had been to a large extent socio-culturally integrated but continued to be religiously distinct. As A. M. Mundadan would put it, "[T]he life St. Thomas Christians had been leading till the arrival of the Portuguese spanned two worlds: the geographical, political and social world of Malabar or Kerala (India), and the ecclesiastical world of East-Syrian or the Persian Church..." (Mundadan, 2001: 145) Though spanning the two worlds, the Syrian Christians (St. Thomas Christians) lived their lives more as natives than outsiders, and as Susan Bayly would put it, were "honored and rewarded" by native rulers on account of their being

"warriors, traders and Church notables." (Bayly, 1989: 243-244) The native rulers seemed to have constructed Church buildings and donated lands, finance, etc., to the Syrian Christians. Such a benefaction, as Bayly would narrate, points to a considerable level of integration of the Syrians with the native community. Moreover, they shared a rich content of religious beliefs and cultural practices with the natives, including their purity-pollution laws (Bayly, 1989: 250-257).[2] Thus a specific manner of native existence, though sharing in different socio--cultural and political worlds, characterized the life-world of Syrian Christians of India from older times.

Christianity's relationship with the Indian discursive field became more pronounced during the modern era. Aided by the availability of the inchoate print media, Christian missionaries began to interact with the wider public from the sixteenth century onwards. Catholic missionaries in the southern Tamil region – starting with Henrique Henriques (1520-1600), who introduced the printed Christian literature, to Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) and Joseph Constantine Beschi (1680-1747) who produced varieties of rich literatures, prose and poetry, had embarked upon public conversations and disputations on religious and philosophical matters. Disputations on religious themes went hand in hand with adaptations of Indic language, symbols, and traditions to express and shape up a native Christian tradition. Literary creations like epics, tales, commentaries, dictionaries, and translations of Indian classics into European languages created a base for early public discursive practices emergent during the sixteenth-seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. This is not to deny the existence of discursive forums prior to their introduction by Christian missionaries; the vibrant debating forums of the last Tamil Sangam (circa 400 BCE – 200 BCE), the inter-religious dialogical forum run by Akbar as recent as mid sixteenth century CE, the "intensifying religious interactions" during the Mughal period (Dalmia & Faruqui, 2014), are good examples of their earlier existence. However, while the latter debating spheres existed more among rulers and experts, the former began to include wider sections of people.

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[2] See also Susan Viswanathan (1993).

The Protestant missionary presence, beginning with the first Protestant missionary Bartholomew Ziegenbalg who had installed a printing press at Tranquebar, and the Serampore trio who had established a printing 'industry' at Serampore during the eighteenth century, contributed to the emergence of a printed-literature-based discursive field in the Indian public. The subsequent eventful missionary activities of the classical missionary societies and of the Anglican churches during the nineteenth century contributed multi--dimensionally to the relative strengthening of the discursive public. Translations of Bible into native languages and printing them, and undertaking the 'mission' of imparting modern education to wider sections of Indian population, along with making efforts to do away with discriminatory and oppressive practices in the Indian socio--cultural systems, went a long way in enhancing the Indian discursive public, which, along with the rule of law and the relatively more rationalized administration of the British India, began to grow steadily. Founding of various institutions by 'orientalists' for study of native literatures and printing the Indological classics to circulate them among the public markedly changed the demography of readership in the Indian subcontinent. A process of democratization of Indian classics, along with the spread of modern mass education, contributed significantly to the emergence of the structures of public communication. It is no less significant a fact that Indian Christianity was a singular contributor to this process.

However, it needs be noted that there were also elements which kept isolating Indian Christians from the wider public. For example, the exclusivist discourse of 'no salvation outside the church', embedded in both the Catholic ecclesiology and the Protestant evangelical proclamation, kept other religiously knowledgeable persons at a distance and vice a versa; the manners, customs, food habits, and other cultural markers of the colonizers with whom Indian Christians were identified with was yet another source of isolation; and, as Chandra Mallampalli has shown, the British rule effectively shifted the Indian Christians to the margins of the Indian public, when it came to the application of laws related to inheritance, property holding, etc. (Mallampalli, 2004) And, finally, the emerging

Indian nationalist discourse, though secular in character, made the Indian Christians self-conscious about their identity as a minority amidst a majority.

The post-colonial era has brought forth a different scenario as regards the presence of Christianity in the Indian discursive public. A phase of post-independent national integration, combined with the project of Five-Year plans for development, saw Indian Christians involved enthusiastically in welfare schemes, programs of poverty alleviation, literacy programs, disaster management, sanitation, health, and primary / higher / professional education of the Indian population. Spread of the modern education to further layers of Indian population set in a 'silent revolution' as in the words of Christophe Jeffrelot (Jeffrelot, 2003), and Indian Christians came to consider modernization as an ingredient of humanization. As M. M. Thomas, a well-known Indian Christian theologian, argued, it was through the project of humanization that India (also Asia in general) came to acknowledge Christ (Thomas, 1969). Through this project, Indian Christianity mediated, however limited though, the humanitarian values of individual dignity, autonomy, liberty, and freedom, along with human rights and civil liberties. Involvement in movements for various social goals, voluntary initiatives for amelioration and eradication of social evils, advocacy for the rights of the subaltern people, etc., became important sites of Christian presence. In terms of relationship with other religions, they undertook inter-religious dialogues, study-centers, and ashrams for inter-religious experiences.

All these were done in an ambience of relative spontaneity and freedom! The scenario changed with the political ascendance of the far-right, with its religious and cultural nationalism. As studies show, violence against Christians (Sahoo, 2018) has rapidly increased, and conversion has become a thorny issue between those who affirm their Constitutional right for conversion and others who oppose it not merely in debates but also through acts of violence. Majoritarianism in politics has given a hegemonic power to the religious majority in the domains of culture, knowledge, education, and even civil rights, and it has been adversely instrumentalized by a small section that has self-assumed the religious leadership of the majority, by collating an

ideology with religion, and this religion with patriotism. Indian Christians, as a result, seem to develop tendencies to 'in-grow', to become self-conscious, etc., rather than actively participate in the public life of the nation. The religious and cultural nationalism of the self-assumed leadership goes to the extent of implicating the Indian Christian identity to be culturally conflictive and politically divisive, with an implied accusation of preventing the Indian nation from emerging into the global world as a united political power; it is as if the patriotism of Indian Christians, along with that of other religious minorities, needed to be proved on a day-to-day basis. One could think of the isolation of Indian Christians also as one suffered by a subaltern identity in a ritual framework of purity and pollution characteristic of the Indian caste--system.

Indian Democracy and Christian Public Theology

Transforming the democratic State into a substantive one, with participatory discursive public and civil spheres, obtains priority for political and public Christian theologies in India today. A substantively participatory democracy is of theological value because of peoples' hopes and aspirations attendant upon such a political vision for India. When a constitutional democracy was born in India, the hopes especially of the subaltern people of India were raised: they began to imagine a political community which would ensure economic equity, social equality, civil liberties, human rights and dignity to all sections of people. Dr. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Constitution, sought to integrate these transforming hopes in the democratic instrument. The Constitution opened up an agenda for social justice (the affirmative action), embodying the ardent wish for retributive justice. The focus was on *opening the public* to everyone, beyond ascriptive exclusions. That the Constitution provided for the right of the State to intervene and open up the temples for the subalterns is a case in point. An Indian Christian public theology would then premise itself upon this hope of 'opening the public', opening up the spaces of freedom and opportunities to the excluded.

David Tracy speaks of three publics wherein public theology can be meaningfully practised: Church, Academy and Society (Tracy, 1981).[3] I find these three domains relevant, *mutatis mutandis,* also for the Indian context. I am aware of the differences between the western and Indian contexts. One major difference would be the very confidence of Tracy to place the Church as one of the publics. In India, one will have to think of "religious / multi-religious publics" in the place of the Church. However, since this particular reflection here is undertaken from the Indian Christian perspective, I find it meaningful to speak of the Church as a public.

1. Church is the home of faith for Christians. They draw resources of faith from the faith-community, i.e., the Church. As a voluntary community based on faith, the Church is an active player in the civil society, and this opens not only a wider site, but also a dynamic possibility for the practice of faith. It can network with other voluntary organizations, and help create an interactive sphere, whereby spiritual energies, ethical sensitivity, and theological visions can be transmitted for transforming the wider society. It can help create an interactive sphere between the multiple religious traditions operative in a particular vicinity and contribute to the creation of a "community of communities" (Kim, 2011), consisting of various religious communities. It may even help create an interactive sphere between the so-called social groupings (communities in the Indian societal sense), and help them get liberated from in-ward looking ethnic closures and become open communities to participate in the wider public in a healthy manner to build up the democratic polity.

In so far as it is part of the civil society, the Church itself functions as a civil society within its own sphere. As is known, the primary trait of a civil society is the democratic public sphere within itself. The Indian Church needs to establish this democratic public sphere within itself. First of all, every individual church needs to make itself

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[3] Sebastian Kim, another important proponent of public theology in the contemporary context, thinks of six areas of the public sphere as sites for doing public theology: state, market, civil society, academies, media, religious communities. These sites are more differentiated than Tracy's scheme. However, I find Tracy's scheme more simple and theologically congenial.

people-based and democratic. It is the power of the people that is going to give every church the power to negotiate the wider democratic society and bring meaning and vitality to itself. We need to therefore empower the people with theological education and various pastoral / institutional roles. Secondly, Indian Christians need to establish a communicative sphere between the various individual churches, including the denominational and independent churches. It needs to urgently forge this solidarity, taking into account of the fact that all the churches together constitute the Indian Church and together they share a common identity in the public sphere. And therefore, establishing and shaping up the inner-church communicative sphere is a manner of becoming an effective player in the wider civil society.

To that end, Church in India needs to become a *public body* today. It needs to become public not so much to project itself and its activities as to bear witness to its faith in a transcendent God, whose revelation the community called the Church experienced in the words, deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God. It was in Jesus Christ this community began to experience the encounter of history and mystery of transcendence in a transforming manner. A call for transformation of relationships, embodying mutuality, creativity and peace, was the core of this encounter. This transforming experience needs to continue through history and Church, as a community, needs to be a catalyst in this. In so doing, the Church finds the democratic institutions of the State and civil society, however fragile and failing, the most solicitous, and brings itself in participatory solidarity with these institutions to mediate the experience of transforming relationships.

Inasmuch as these institutions are public, the Church body itself is *a public*. It cultivates the character of publicness within its own body as much as in the wider society. It makes itself a public body, by imbibing the spirit and practice of democracy, doing away with unmeaning hierarchies; it makes itself a public sphere, wherein a 'public reasoning' can take place among the believers; and it makes itself a civil society wherein the spirit of participatory democracy among the community of equals can be cultivated.

It should become public also in the sense of becoming more interactive in the wider public. There are several ways in which it can

become publicly interactive. A very unassuming but firmly witnessing way is to bear witness to the Christian values whenever or wherever one holds public offices. Christian subjects, in their embodied person-hood, can be the best witness to the transforming values. Another way of becoming public is interacting in 'conversational publics' with the Christian vision of events and issues. Needless to point out to the fact that the Christian voice does not emerge significantly in media publics, at least not proportionate to the education that it has received. Yet another important way, challenging though, is becoming accountable to the wider public in matters public. Churches have the highest level of human resources, individually and collectively; but what is its out-put to the wider society? Can there be an auditing of human resources in the Churches? Similarly, can mechanisms for social auditing be oper-ative in the Churches? These are questions only to see that the Indian Church becomes truly public, effectively interacting in the public, with-out burying its head in deep furrows of self-pity and defeatism.

Similar to such 'Public Christianity', there can also emerge 'Public Islam', 'Public Hinduism', and the like. In his article titled, "Religion in Politics and the Politics of Hinduism", written as an introduction to his edited volume on *Political Hinduism – The Religious Imagination in Public Spheres*, Vinay Lal ends the article with a query whether a polit-ical Hinduism – a Hinduism that is sensitive to the political goals of establishing justice, citizenship rights, human rights, community rights, development and peace is not possible. He calls it a political Hinduism, away from the Hindutva variety of political ideologies, but one that represents the religious aspirations of the majority of Hindus to con-struct a polity which is deeply democratic and egalitarian. Such Hin-duism, according to him, can be shaped up, not so much from the Brahminical religious traditions, but from the religious traditions of the subaltern or marginal people of India. One would be intoned by this to think of the socio-religious movements which arose during the mod-ern era, constructing emancipatory identities for the subaltern people. Can such religious traditions be found today? If yes, they can become the participants of public theological conversations in India.

Indian Christianity needs to be involved in an educational praxis, both formal and informal, for participation in public spheres. Similar

to the informal education or literacy campaign in which different civil society organs, including the churches, involved in, Churches need now to be involved in 'education for public reasoning', which would focus on political participation, citizenship, dialogue of cultures, religions and ideologies, social justice, equality, solidarity for common good, decentralized power for statecraft, etc., along with fine skills of argumentation, disputation and conversation. Education, in its multiple variants, has been at the root of transformations, and education aimed at public reasoning would transform an individual to be a citizen, a particular will to be the general will, individual aspirations to be ideals of the state, and individual frustrations to public acts of resistance. It will bring the particularities of culture, religion, ethics, and aesthetic preferences into dialogue with one another, and synergize a vibrant public resource. In an important way, it will also help learn to live inter-subjectively with different religious others, without fear and hatred.

2. Academia is yet another public proposed by David Tracy for doing public theology. It is unfortunate that the contemporary academia seemingly serves the interests of the State or the *status quo* economic system. As a domain of knowledge and wisdom, it must function in an independent autonomous sphere of the civil society. While the freedom of the civil society is meaningfully furthered by the academia, the latter's creativity draws its wisdom and commitment from the power of the civil society.

Indian Church is a major player in academia, starting with the formal school education to the higher education and to the vast arena of non-formal education. With its centuries-old commitment in the field of modern education, the Indian Church had imparted the knowledge to a people, who had empowered themselves with this education; they became aware of their rights and dignity, and by demanding their civil liberties, civilized the public sphere of India to a large extent. To the extent it involved in this process of 'humanization', the Indian Church was doing indirect public theology, mediating Faith, and contributing to the unfolding of salvation (as M. M. Thomas would have it). However, the involvement in education has become rather dubious during

the present times: whether the Christian involvement is contributing to mediation of Faith that gives us an experience of transcendence or to a mere technological professionalization (of a certain section which self-perpetuates its own comfort) which inhibit and impair the human ability for transcendence is a critical question Indian Church has to ask itself. Its open-minded participation in the civil society will invite such questions from the wider society and clarify its goals in the light of wider criticisms. This ability to interact with the civil society as regards its involvement in education is one of the ways in which Indian Church would do a very basic public theology today.

It has also its own sites of academia like the Theological Colleges, Research Institutes, Departments of Theologies or Religious Studies, wherein it can effectively do public theology and mediate Faith. Tracy would propose systematic theologies to be pursued in Christian academia as a way of doing public theology. Systematic theology is one by which Christians formulate their faith-claims and pursue their meaningfulness in wider publics shared by different denominational and religious others. In our contemporary context, where there are increasing numbers of denominational Churches along with their own theologies and many religious traditions establishing their study centers or Departments in the academia, it is the duty of the Indian Church to systematically pursue public conversations with them in order to be able to mediate the vitality of Faith in these circles.

3. Society at large is the wider public, Tracy suggests, a public theology should engage itself with. Wider public includes those spheres where we pursue social, cultural, economic, and political interests with the goal of common good. The wider public in India today is threatened by multiple closures! The most visible one is, as mentioned above, majoritarianism in politics, backed by religious nationalism and sectarian communalism (Katju, 2017). Not merely a case of travesty of democracy, this closure threatens to revive the forces of social and cultural hegemonies, with a will to dominate over the public sphere. It means loss of freedom not merely to the religious minorities, but to social minorities as well. The less visible, but more substantive form of closure is the one caused by the market forces today. As if 'there is no development outside the market', the contemporary world is getting

organized by the neo-liberal invisible hand which threatens the life-
-world of the people, with commercial urges entering even into the
moral, ethical, aesthetic and cultural veins of the people. The general
humanity seems to lose the power to transcend the closures caused by
these commercial impulses. Along with these two forms of closures,
the age-old oppressive and discriminatory systems like caste and patri-
archy, with the combination of residual feudalism (mainstay feudalism
in many rural areas), get expressed in such uncivil acts like honor kill-
ing, rape, moral policing, and so on. These oppressive systems are fur-
ther compounded by the increasing cleavage between the rich and the
poor. These realities, sustaining a serious imbalance in socio-economic
and political systems, present a fertile soil for the production of fatal-
ism, deterministic thinking, reductionism, fundamentalism and violent
reactionary forces. In this context, religion, otherwise a fountainhead
for the experience of transcendence turns into irreligion. Public theol-
ogies, pursued from different religious traditions, will go a long way
in nurturing the experience of transcendence in public spaces.

Religions need to play appropriate roles in the civil sphere to help
humanity nurture a sense of autonomous self along with the spirit of
transpersonal relationships characterized by sacrifice, dedication and
mutuality, which are abiding values of democracy. Civil society is the
sphere where different religions can come together in an ambience of
freedom to work for common good. A participatory democratic State
provides the space where people as citizens can be related to one
another even on a transcendental basis, journeying towards ever
greater realizations of common good.

Conclusion

This article has sought to present an argument for pursuing public
theologies, Indian Christian public theology in this case, to cultivate
the virtues of participatory democracy in India. It begins by observing
that Indian modernity, in spite of contributing to emancipatory trans-
formations, has met with its dialectics. The most perceptible field of
such dialectics is that of democratic politics, wherein anti-democratic

elements like majoritarianism, religious communalism, hegemonic caste identities, and those of neo-liberal market have come to instrumentalize the democratic system for their own ends. This happens in an ambience of a global retreat of liberal democracy which has been centering round the rights of individuals. It is time democracy, as a form of political behavior, took note of the role of communities and traditions, and lent itself for participatory practice of democracy. Participation in democracy can well be nurtured by conversations in public spheres. In such a context, religious communities, in this context, Indian Christianity, which has hitherto been an active contributor to public spheres, would do well to pursue public theology, in the three arenas of the Church, academia and the wider society for the wellbeing of democracy in India.

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