

Church as Civil Society:

An Exploration from Indian Subaltern Perspective

Gnana Patrick, Department of Christian Studies,
Madras University, Chennai.

Introduction

Church, as an ever-renewing organisation, makes good attempts to respond to newer insights on human living. It has, in the recent past, come to reflect and respond to the discourse on civil society too.¹ The grassroot organisations and movements operating within the Church have begun to see how best they can integrate the insights on civil society into their programmes. Indian theologians started theologising about it rather earlier. Felix Wilfred, for example, spoke of 'Christianity as an Interlocutor in Civil Society' in the year 2000.² Today, theologians all over the world are reflecting how best the Churches in their part of the world should transform themselves into effective civil societies.³ The President of CCBI, Archbishop Oswald Gracias, in his address to the 19th General Body Meeting, touched upon the role Christians in India have to play for the "progress of civil society."

With this growing interest in Christianity on civil society at the backdrop, this essay intends to explore the theme further and make some methodological and thematic observations. It begins with enquiring as to which understanding of civil society is a relevant framework to think of the Church as civil society, and then moves on to reflecting how the Church, especially the Indian Church, is called upon to function as a civil society.

¹ Though the discussion on civil society is more than two hundred years old, it has found a reinvigorated discussion during the past three decades, against the advancement of the global market on the one hand, and the disappearance of some of the socialist states on the other.

² Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Christianity - Interlocutor in Civil Society" in his *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2000.

³ Cf. Gerhard Kruij and Helmut Reifeld (ed.), *Church and Civil Society - The Role of Christian Churches in the Emerging Countries of Argentina, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa*, Germany: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2007.

Civil Society

Civil society, a concept that is in existence for over two hundred years,⁴ has found a reinvigorated discourse in the recent past, for about three decades. As we are aware, it was an idea that arose originally in the European context to underline the importance of a certain independent sphere where the autonomous individual could actualise himself/herself with his/her rights, including the right to private property. In a later phase, in the context of the emergence of the Socialist States, the idea came to represent an independent sphere away from the authoritarianism of the State. In the recent times, theoreticians have come to speak of it as a 'third' sphere, independent from the State, on the one hand, and the sphere of economics or the market, on the other. Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous political commentator, spoke of the civil society in this vein. This manner of speaking about the civil society was rationalised and supported by several theorists in India too. For example, Andre Betteille, a well-known sociologist in India, rationalised it saying, "Society is not a matter only of legal rights guaranteed by the state or of economic interests driven by the market. It is matter also of ideas, beliefs, values, customs and habits that act on the state and the market and are in turn acted upon by them in complex ways and at different levels."⁵ It is being said that the constituting elements of civil society, such as "parties, public opinion, churches, moral crusades, literary and scientific societies and professional and recreational groups"⁶ have an 'autonomous' space and a force over the state and the market.

However, this manner of speaking on civil society as the third sphere has found its critique too. Neera Chandhoke, for example, puts forward a strong critique on the whole concept of civil society as an autonomous third sphere between the state and the economy. She argues persuasively against it. And she does not accept the view that the civil society lends space for independent associational life, free from the controls of the state or the market. If at all the civil society provides

⁴ The pioneering theorists who reflected on the theme were Hegel, Adam Ferguson, Alexis de Tocqueville, Antonio Gramsci, etc.

⁵ Andre Betteille, *Antinomies of Society*, OUP, 2000, p. 176.

⁶ Neera Chandhoke, "A Critique of the Notion of Civil Society as the 'Third Space'", in Rajesh Tandon and Ranjita Mohanty (eds.), *Does Civil Society Matter? - Governance in Contemporary India*, New Delhi, SAGE, 2003 p. 35.

space for associational life, it offers, according to her, also to hegemonic and oppressive forces. In her own words:

For if civil society consists of associational life per se, then we have to accept that associations of every stripe and hue exist in this space. Patriarchal forces exist alongside feminist groups, religious fascists exist along with movements against communalism, class oppression exists alongside groups fighting for redistributive justice, and pro-state associations that further and strengthen the dominant project of society exist alongside groups that challenge the legitimacy of the state.⁷

Thus there is difficulty in treating civil society as a fixed and stable 'space', which is a 'third' sphere between the State and the market. It poses real difficulty especially when looked at from subaltern perspective.

Civil Society and the Subaltern People

The space said to be represented by the civil society is quite ambiguous and not without difficulties for the subaltern people. The space, though offering an opportunity for enhancing the democratic process whereby the subalterns stand to gain, does not recognise the specific questions of justice and empowerment addressed by the subalterns. As rightly observed by Felix Wilfred, "one relates civil society with the freedom of association, of expression, etc. But the point to note is that such a freedom could co-exist with inequality. This means that we would have left out of the purview of the civil society the concerns of the marginal peoples and groups – the dalits, tribals, the women of the lower castes and classes."⁸ A similar concern is voiced by Bishnu N. Mohapatra in his questions, "Are all groups in civil society equally capable of forming associations? What about people who are not in a position to form associations or networks to ensure that their interests are regarded as legitimate? What happens when the state refuses to even recognise a particular group of people?"⁹ Basing on a study on the pavement dwellers

⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸ Felix Wilfred, "Community and Civil Society", in Felix Wilfred and George Thadathil (eds), *Community and Identity Consciousness*, Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, p. 158.

⁹ Bishnu N. Mohapatra, "A View from the Subalterns – the Pavement Dwellers of Mumbai," in Rajesh Tandon and Ranjita Mohanty, *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India*, New Delhi, SAGE, 2003, p. 293.

in Mumbai, Mohapatra states that, "the sphere of civil society, like that of the state, is shaped by the inequalities prevalent in the society." And he continues to say that "a romantic understanding of civil society as a repository of positive values is historically flawed and politically naïve."¹⁰

Conceptualising the civil society in opposition to the state does not augur well for the democracies of the post-colonial countries, and especially to the subaltern sections of people as in India. The state, in its form of a welfare nation-state, as emergent in post-colonial countries, has not fulfilled its promises to the subaltern people.¹¹ As far as these people are concerned, the state is to be promoted inasmuch as it contributes to the birth of a democratic egalitarian polity, and simultaneously is to be critiqued when it betrays the agenda of social justice. This means the subaltern people cannot reject outright the role of the state. An observation by Mohapatra is very pertinent: "...in the context of most post-colonial societies, it is difficult to abandon the project of the state in the name of civil society. The objective should be to make it more democratic, more responsive to the needs of the poor and socially excluded. Where societies are fractured by segmentation and structural inequality, the state can play the role of a protector of the disadvantaged individuals and groups. The aim should therefore be to make the state as well as the civil society more democratic in India."¹²

A civil society that would be responsive to the needs of the subalterns would therefore be not so much a space as a dynamic process of interrogating the state as well as the civil society from the standpoint of the subalterns. An observation of Neera Chandhoke is in place here: "Civil society is not an institution; it is, rather, a process whereby the inhabitants of the sphere constantly monitor both the state and the monopoly of power within itself... Civil society thus has to constantly reinvent itself, discover new projects, discern new enemies, and make new friends. It is not something that, once constructed, can be left to fend for itself because it is a process. And this is important, for civil society is an essential precondition for democracy."¹³ It is from this

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 310.

¹¹ The project of distributive justice, undertaken in the state policies of reservation has not run its course.

¹² Mohapatra, p. 312.

¹³ Neera Chandhoke, pp. 57-58.

understanding of civil society that this essay explores into the theme of Church as a civil society.

Religion and Civil Society

When we try to understand the Church as a civil society, it is a preliminary and necessary step to see whether religion and civil society can go together at all. Civil society, whether as space or process, is usually associated by social theorists with the concept of secularism, which in the western sense meant a 'wall of separation between religion and politics'. Betteille opines that "the well-being of civil society depends upon the emergence of open and secular institutions, and on their differentiation from each other."¹⁴ He, for one, does not consider religion to be a healthy institution of civil society, and looks for more secular institutions that would mediate between the individual and the state as part of the civil society.¹⁵ Looking at it from this western sense, (because civil society is also a concept that has come from the west), it becomes difficult to find a place for religion as a mediating institution (civil society) between the state and the individual.

But in the Indian context, the question obtains more complexity. Complexity begins from the fact that the Indian society is deeply overlapping with the religions. Religion is ubiquitously present in all areas of Indian social living. As noted by Betteille, "Caste, kinship and religion combined to give a distinct character to all social relations, associations and networks in India."¹⁶ While this being the case, what does it mean to say that civil society in India has to be secular? By implication, would it then be possible to speak of the Church, a religious organisation, as an institution of the civil society?

To answer these questions, we need to go into the specific Indian context of secularism. Rajeev Bhargava, a social scientist of repute, argues that Indian secularism is one that works neither in tandem with nor in opposition to religion. He speaks of 'contextual secularism'¹⁷

¹⁴ Andre Betteille, p. 187

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 186.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Cf. Rajeev Bhargava, "What is Secularism For?" in Rajeev Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and Its Critiques*, OUP, 1998, pp. 486-551.

which implies that there is neither an a priori compartmentalising nor collusion between religion and politics. It implies, however, being neutral in political decision-making, without shunning the role of religions. This view of secularism does not exclude religion, but has a positive view of the religious resources.

Moreover, today, there is a re-evaluation of religion and its civic contribution against the dismaying experience of the modernist paradigm of secularism. The secularisation thesis is increasingly getting weakened against the re-emergence of the religions. There is a positive evaluation of religion today in that religion is considered a resource of creative energy for the individuals who constitute the state and the civil society. And as Rupert Graf Strachwitz, a German commentator, suggests, "religious faith is similar to civil society in that this is related to trust and love, attitudes that are positive and self-giving and away from being utilitarian."¹⁸ Such a positive consideration of the link between religion and civil society is a matter of necessity today. This understanding of secularism does not go against civil society.

Civil Society and Church as Interrogators

Speaking of the two ways of understanding civil society, i.e., as space and process, Prof. Gerard Kruip says that, "the second way of understanding civil society is more as a normative concept that is operative in the mode of communication. It is more an evaluatory or value-laden concept that projects an utopia to reach." Civil society, as a normative concept, can, according to him, serve as a good critique of the Church too. An observation by him is in place here:

There are and there have been religious ideas and religious authorities which propagated violence for religious aims, which in the past and in the present supported military regimes, which denied the claims of tolerance and freedom of opinion, which oppressed their members (particularly the women among them), which helped to form

¹⁸ Rubert Graf Strachwitz, "The Churches and Civil Society", in Gerhard Kruip and Helmut Reifeld (ed.), *Church and Civil Society - The Role of Christian Churches in the Emerging Countries of Argentina, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa*, Germany: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2007, p. 29.

authoritarian personalities and extremely anxious consciences, which didn't accept necessary differences and respective autonomies between Church or religion and state. Therefore, civil society must help "civilize" religion and rationalize religious forms of life so that religions are able to coexist peacefully with other religions as well as with secular parts of civil society.¹⁹

Similarly, Church can also be a good critique of the civil society. Civil society needs a constant critique and a continuous re-envisioning lest it becomes an instrument in the hands of the exploitive classes. It may be remembered that the idea of civil society, during its time of origin, as discussed by Hegel for example, was something that was identified with a bourgeois society, reflecting the interests of the propertied class of people. During the succeeding stages of development, civil society came to protect the interests of the middle classes and finally of the market too. As Philip Quarles van Ufford and several others have noted, "in today's context, civil society is being organised also for aggrandising the powers of the market."²⁰ Without a critical interrogation, therefore, civil society may turn out to be an oppressive concept, especially for the subaltern and marginal people. One, therefore, needs to take a critically positive attitude to civil society today. While promoting the elements of civil society as positively contributing to the well-being of a society, we need to continually ask the question whose interests the institutions are serving today? Can they become instruments for the empowerment of the marginalized and subaltern people? This concern will be one that characterises the specificity of treating the Church as a civil society.

Church as a Civil Society in the Indian Context

Considering the Church²¹ as civil society or as an institution of the civil society in the Indian context has its specific features, as it has its own in other countries. In the traditional societies of the European countries, the Church is still, in some sense, part of the State – to the

¹⁹ Gerhard Kruij and Helmut Reifeld (Ed.), p. 14.

²⁰ Philip Quarles van Ufford, et al. "Interventions in Development", in *A Moral Critique of Development - In Search of Global Responsibilities*, Routledge, 2003, p. 6.

²¹ When we say Church, we speak of Church as an organisation rather than Church in its spiritual or theological senses.

extent that in some countries they are being supported monetarily by the State. Though there is a certain 'wall of separation' between religion and society due to the process of secularisation, still some countries do recognise some religions to be state or quasi-state religions. Whether it is possible, if so, to what extent, for religions to serve as a civil society in such countries is a pertinent question which needs context-specific discussion.

The situation in India is characteristically different. Church in India is a minority religion, and it can never attain the position of being a state religion. It may well be said that being a minority religion gives it a special advantage and opportunity to perform as an unfettered civil society. From a more or less free location, the Church in India can involve in such vital issues as promoting secularism, building up the nation, empowering the subalterns, constructing emancipatory identity for the oppressed, etc. It has the facility to promote such issues even as it has the freedom to critique the State on such fronts.

The multi-party system of Indian politics is yet another area of opportunity as well as challenge for the Church to function as a civil society. The opportunity lies in the fact that the Church can serve as a moral agent inspiring the activities of individuals taking to different political parties. During the times of need, it can become the rallying point, mobilising people beyond their party loyalties to work for certain vital issues that affect the lives of the people. That in our situation, when the danger of communalism loomed large, the Church, especially the Tamilnadu Church could become a directive force (to the extent of even openly suggesting to vote for non-communal parties!) is a case in point. The Church can thus make political interventions, helping people to get united for common causes, freeing themselves from political enslavements and party-fundamentalisms. On the other hand, the challenge lies in the fact that the Church needs be on guard lest it tends towards appropriating undue political powers to itself. It can always be a temptation to the Church to play the role of a moral power, considering it to be superior to other areas of human living. It can, in particular, become an obstructive force in the exercise of the political freedom of the individuals.

It would do well to relate the Church to some of the recent developments that affect the civil society in India. One such development is the emergence of the construction of cultural homogenisation, a project undertaken by the rightist forces of the country. Cultural homogenisation, which builds on the premises of hegemonising the socio-cultural fabric, augurs ill for a civil society, the foundations of which are to be non-hegemonic and non-coercive. Having this project at the backdrop, several incidents take place to coerce the people to 'behave' or become 'disciplined' actors of civil society. The phenomenon of cultural policing undertaken by certain political forces is a case in point. The anti-conversion laws being enacted by the different states is yet another coercive activity of the state on a civil society institution. These activities encroach upon and tend to stifle the space of civil society. It is against such emergent conditions of life that we need to reflect how Church in India could function as a civil society.

Church, Civil Society, and Caste in India

Caste is a serious impediment to the emergence of civil society in India. The modern institutions of state and citizenship, introduced to India by the colonial dispensation, have engaged with the reality of caste dialectically, in the sense that both have functioned to negate one another to the extent possible. While the modern institutions have negated to some extent the hold of caste, the latter has, on the other hand, dwarfed the workings of the former in its own way. State and citizenship, as observed by Andre Betteille, are two institutions that give civil society its life and carrier. Caste, as the proverbial python, continues to exist and swallow these modern institutions. As observed by Dipankur Gupta, caste, in the contemporary India, is turning from a matter of identity to one that mobilises people for the electoral exercise of democracy. Caste, in this contemporary avatar, is seriously impeding the blossoming of the modern institutions of state and citizenship, and thereby the emergence of civil society. And, according to Betteille, it is this factor than anything else, which has increased the risks to civil society in India.²² He states that, "unless the state as well as the other open and secular institutions of society are substantially insulated from caste, the

²² Cf. Andre Betteille, p. 193.

prospects of civil society will remain uncertain.”²³ We thus experience a situation wherein Indian polity has become a product of the mixture of the modern institutions and their attendant values on the one hand, and the traditional social institution like caste on the other.

Against this background, it is important to see how the Church in India has fared as regard the question of caste, especially in relation to its implications for the civil society. It may well be stated that Christianity in India, at least from the sixteenth century onwards, has consciously engaged with the reality of caste. From that time on, it has pursued a dual posture (contradictory indeed!) towards the reality of caste. It had exhibited this contradiction very tangibly in its missionary policy and rhetoric. Among the pioneering Catholic missionaries, Robert de Nobili contributed to the contradiction more pronouncedly. Distinguishing caste as a social phenomenon than a religious phenomenon, he treated it as something that did not interfere with the practice of Christian religion. He even went to the extent of saying ‘it is a work of the devil’ to denounce caste as anti-religious and anti-Christian.

While this was the case with the pioneering Catholic missionary of the seventeenth century, the first Protestant missionary, Ziegenbalg and his companions, who landed in the Southern part of India (Tranquebar), during the early eighteenth century, followed a ‘gradualist approach’ towards caste, and were ‘tolerant’ of caste basing on a distinction similar to that of de Nobili. These stances of the pioneering Catholic and Protestant missionaries gave a dubious start to the Christian approach to the reality of caste. However, it must be stated that the approach changed its course. Within a short duration, the Protestant missionaries, those who came with Enlightenment values, began to attack caste as something seriously against the Christian Faith. For example, Schultz, the immediate successor of Ziegenbalg, was a staunch opponent of the caste-system. He initiated a whole stream of anti-caste stances towards caste. A group of Christian missionaries, known as ‘hard corists’, emerging from the Serampore mission as well as the South Indian Protestant mission, opposed caste vehemently.

²³ Ibid., p. 194.

While this being the reality of Christian engagement with caste in the open rhetorical as well as ritual arena, the indirect and beneath-the-surface engagement of Christianity with the caste was more pronouncedly against the system of caste. It cut the roots of the institution of caste more radically. This engagement was that which mediated modernity to this soil. Introduction of the print-media - in which the Christian missionaries starting with Henry Henriques, Ziegenbalg, William Carey and others played a leading role - had a substantial contribution to make to the emergence of democratic values in this country. Christianity, fired by the drive of the 'civilising mission' (though the 'civilising mission' has come under serious attack in today's post-colonial mood, one cannot deny the contribution this made to the emergence of civil society in India), served as the agency that mediated most of the modern civic values and institutions. The modern press, an important institution of civil society, owes its origin to the missionary practice.

The idea of individual autonomy, which, later on, came to be discussed under the modern concept of citizenship, was another important contribution Christianity, the Protestant Christianity in particular, made to this land. A society whose public sphere was conditioned by such features of the feudal system as caste, joint-family system, patriarchy, etc., was challenged by the modern concepts of equality and individual autonomy. Mass educational programmes, including the female education, were singular contributions of Christianity that laid the foundations of civil society. The idea of modern medicine, introduced by the missionary practice, contributed to the 'disenchantment' of the human body and of the diagnosis of disease (disenchanted them from their obscurantist moorings), and, in its own way, contributed to the idea of a modern individual, emerging in his/her own right. All these and other contributions influenced the construction of individual subjecthood in the Indian scenario, and to a great extent, freed the individual from the clutches of the feudal caste system, and laid the foundations for the civil society in India.

However, this is not to deny the continuing problematic being experienced by Christianity today. Christianity, which served as a recognisable factor in the process of weakening of the caste system, is, in the contemporary scenario, facing serious limitations. It is not able to

Such social movements are a matter of necessity today for the Indian context. They are indispensable, first and foremost, for addressing the questions of social justice, which are integral to the project of building up a healthy civil society. It is a point that we have noted above, that civil society, as modelled in the western style - building it just in opposition to the state, and not addressing or ignoring the questions of social justice will not be a relevant and effective instrument in the hands of the people, especially the subaltern people. It will remain an elitist and alienated project, not touching the lives of the people. Civil society that supports a state that is wedded to issues of social justice (in the Indian context, the question of reservation is one important constituent of social justice) is a must, and this kind of civil society is constituted the best way in and through the instrumentality of social movements.

Social movements are also necessary from a symbolic angle. They are sites of human creative agency. Social theorists argue very much on whether life is structurally conditioned, if so, to what extent, and so on. Social movements bear witness to the fact that life is not essentially a conditioned reality, but one we can constitute with our agency. By trying to overcome the structural injustices, social movements challenge the deterministic view of life and reality. This type of challenging is very much necessary to our Indian masses, who, for a very long time in history, remain imprisoned by such deterministic view as *karma*, *vithi*, etc.

By promoting the social movements, Church acts as a civil society. Indian Church, it may reasonably be claimed, is well attuned to the operation of social movements. During the era of the introduction of modernity - to which Indian Christianity played a vital role, the conversion movements that emerged among the ordinary people embodied the social aspirations of the people too. Quest for social respect, dignity, and justice were some of the important factors attendant on the conversion movements. Today, social theorists do not hesitate to address the conversion movements as social movements. It may therefore be surmised that the Indian Church is introduced in some way to social movements from the era of mass conversions. During the contemporary era of modern social movements too, Indian Church has been, by and large, pro-social movement than otherwise. First of all, the majority of Indian Christians are from among the subaltern or marginalized sections of Indian

population and this fact makes Indian Christianity closely tied to the struggles of the marginalized people, which in turn keep it radically open to the emergence, performance and functions of social movements. Secondly, during the post-Second Vatican phase, when liberation theology was introduced to our soil, a section of the Indian Christian population imbibed the spirit of it and practised it to the extent that others - especially secular social activists and theorists - recognised it as a Left Force within Christianity (The Christian Left). This 'left' factor within Indian Christianity made a congenial ambience for social movements to take roots.

Now, we find a new genre of social movements emerging and operating all over the world. Ecological movements, movements for sustainable developments, feminist movements, Dalit movements, movements for the rights of Indigenous people, Human rights movements, etc. are some such new social movements. These movements are the new idioms of civil society. They strengthen the foundations of civil society, by mobilising people around issues or dimensions of life seriously endangered by either overbearing States or an aggrandising market. It is the duty of the Indian Church to identify and support these movements and thereby contribute to the strengthening of the civil society.

In this context, we must also speak about Church-related movements which play a crucial role in making the Church-community itself a civil society. Church, due to its institutional aspects, tends to acquire the nature of a State in its administration and adjudication. Supported with the additional strength of 'religious ideology', the Church, sometimes, can become a ruthless ruler of its subjects, allowing no space for people's participation and democratic governing. This danger makes the Church inimical to the very idea of a civil society. In order to avoid this danger, we need to keep reiterating and reinforcing to ourselves, through new theologies, the idea that we are a pilgrim Church, more in the nature of a movement, than a structure. The Church-related structures must become movement friendly. The Church must allow enough space for inner-Church movements to take shape and operate, and must not treat them as anti-structural and anti-Church, but as elements that strengthen the roots of a healthy Church. It must also

foster the networking of inner-Church movements among themselves, and with secular movements that have people's progress, liberation and social transformation as their ideal.

Civil Liberties and Christianity in India

In India we have a situation wherein the subaltern people still experience the oppressive denial of civil liberties – the most fundamental building blocks of a civil society. Perpetuated by feudal economic structures (which are still, anachronistic though, prevalent at some levels of Indian society), legitimised by feudal values, and sanctioned by some traditional and conservative religions, the denial of civil liberties continues to exist even to this day. Not being allowed to hold electoral posts (the case of Keeripatti, Paparapatti, etc), being obstructed inhumanly from seeking justice (the case of Thinniam, where a woman was made to eat the human excreta because she sought justice), being burnt alive in their habitats (the case of Maharashtra, where the Dalit villages were burnt down, the repeated killings of Dalits by the Ranbir Sena of Bihar, and so on), etc. are some of the gruesome cases of the subaltern class of people reeling under the oppressive negation of civil liberties.

Against such a background, it is the bounden duty of any civil society institution, and in a special manner, of moral and religious institutions of the public sphere, to work actively for the establishment of civil liberties, as a basic precondition for the blossoming of the structures of civil society. Church must be a vanguard agency in such an endeavour. As opined by Gerhard Kruip, "Civil society needs civil rights for all and a minimum of social aid, so that all members of society are able to participate in civil society processes. In many developing countries, these conditions need to be created. Christian churches can and must help establish the preconditions for these conditions by promoting understanding about human dignity and social justice."²⁴

Media, Church and Civil Society

Media is one of the major fields of influence on the contemporary global society. From the point of view of power and dominance, it plays a dual role. It works, on the one hand, to carry forward the hegemonic agenda of the dominant, and on the other, due to its own inner dialectics,

²⁴ Gerhard Kruip, p. 15.

works to dismantle the empire it builds for the dominant by playing a mediatory and advocatory role for the subaltern classes of people. People empower themselves with knowledge, that comes through the channels of media, and they interrogate the existing systems of dominance with the aid of media.

Church, needless to say, is a significant player in the field of media at national and international levels. To its credit, it has set up a wide and effective network of communication. It is efficient in terms of traditional, modern and contemporary modes of communication systems. With these facilities, it can play a great role in mediating knowledge for the empowerment of the subaltern or ordinary masses. Not merely through the electronic media, but through peoples' media (the number of pious associations, welfare associations, civil rights associations, etc.), which can serve as human media, the Church can contribute greatly. It can help democratise knowledge. It can also play a vital role, in the present-day situation, to enhance the operationalisation of the Right to Information, provided by the constitutional agencies.

Media can, in a big way, contribute to the enhancement of the social capital, which, in turn, by strengthening associational life, can contribute to the growth of the civil society. The idea of social capital as proposed by James Coleman and Robert Putnam is an useful framework within which Church can be meaningfully understood as a civil society. These thinkers opine that social capital is any 'feature that contributes to the ability of society to work together and accomplish certain goal'.²⁵ According to them, this ability increases in direct correlation to the density of associational life, or in other words, institutions of civil society, a particular society has. And the increase of this ability goes to strengthen the foundations of democracy. Democracy, a participatory social behaviour of human beings, depends, after all, to the level of trust each individual can place on social networks or endeavours. The associational networks of civil society increases the level of such trust. This framework of social capital can be usefully applied to the Church. Church, as we all experience, is a strong supporter of associational life. It promotes networks of social relationship, trust, and common endeavour in and

²⁵ Neera Chandhoke, p. 50.

with involving in non-formal educational programmes, which gathered the people around conscientisation programmes, anchoring on alternative vision of education. Paulo Freire's alternate vision of education was heard in our non-formal educational centres. This kind of mobilisation led to the creation of several inner-Church movements, and, for a section of Christians, to the involvements in secular movements for change.

Today, the Indian Church is Janus-faced as regards its involvement in education. It, with the facility of involvement with movements, is participating in the blossoming of a empowering civil society on the one hand, and, by recklessly involving in 'commercial' education, is contributing to the strengthening of the market oriented bourgeois civil society on the other. It is time the Indian Church, through a process of self-reflection, clarified its vision of education and strengthened its commitment to the subaltern classes of people, even as strengthening the foundations of civil society. This commitment will stand the Indian Church in good stead in the long run; more so, when looked at from its position as a minority religion in India. It will give the lever for dynamically and critically interrogating a majority, which might turn oppressive. This facility for interrogation will make the Indian Church a healthy player in the civil society too. For, as T.K. Oommen observes, "...the interrogation of the majority by the minority groups, of the dominant by the dominated groups and vice versa, too, should be recognised as normal activities within the sphere of civil society."²⁶

Conclusion

The essay has tried to underline the following ideas: Understanding civil society as a processual and normative ideal is helpful to treat the Church as a civil society. This understanding would help the Church to interrogate the civil society, or in turn to be interrogated by the civil society, from the emancipatory concern of the subaltern people, who are the mainstay of the Indian Church. When we look at the Church from this framework of civil society, we realise that there are many ways in which Church can act as civil society. Some of the prominent ways by which the Indian Church can become an active player in civil society are by continuing to interrogate the reality of caste, by committing to the promotion of social movements, and, by actively and critically involving in such areas as media and education.

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