

A Re-reading of Mary from an Indian Feminist Perspective

*Dr. Metti Amirtham, SCC.
Chennai.*

On the eve of 9th December, 2011, I received a phone call from one of my friends. The phone message was that there was a glimmer in the eyes of Mother Mary's statue in one of the convents' grotto in Trichy, Tamilnadu. When this news began to spread, people from all walks of life from all over the city and from the neighbouring villages and towns started pouring into the convent to see the statue. They started to take photos and videos. Despite the differences of opinion regarding the fact, people began to say rosary and novena prayers in front of the statue. This was a clear indication of people's love for Mother Mary. Down the centuries, Mother Mary has been the center of an extraordinary amount of devotion, piety and theology in Christianity. She has been and continues to remain important to the vitality of Christianity around the globe. However, it takes a slightly more advanced reading of the continuing Marian story to discern the ways Marian devotions and doctrines converge with core feminist concerns of India. Today, one cannot interpret Mother Mary from an Indian feminist perspective without paying attention to the following elements which have a greater influence on their psyche. Namely, the significance of mother goddess worship which is deeply rooted in India and the feminists' critique on Mary from the West which play a very important role in the thinking of Indian feminist theologians.

Hence in the first part of this paper, the author discusses briefly about the impact of mother goddess worship in India and presents the summary of

the Western feminists' critique on Mary. In the second part, employing the feminist theological methodology, the author attempts to re-read Mary through the lens of an Indian feminist.

Mother Goddess Worship Vs. Mother Mary

One common theme in explaining the rise of Marian devotion in the Church has been to recognize that, with the spread of Christianity over the known world, the newly converted Christians inevitably assimilated or sublimated pre-existing local cults. The interpretation given in these early historical developments will depend upon one's ideological or theological perspective, but no one doubts that Marian devotion was at the very least kindled by the pre-existing pagan myths and the goddess worship.

Goddess worship is one of the long standing religious traditions in India. From East to West and from South to North, what one sees in India are the temples dedicated to goddesses. A goddess is also addressed as *amma* or *amman* or *ma*. In India mother is given a status, if not equal to God than next to god at least, always. Indians are so fond of mother worship that they consider besides their own mother, earth as mother. They call their country '*Bharata Mata*' (Nation as Mother) / Mother India. It can be easily said that Indians are fond of concepts related to mother. There are numerous stories, poems, films and films songs composed on the theme of mother's love.

Arthur Basham, a well-known historian of India wrote that the theme of *shakti* perhaps grew out of a conflict and eventual compromise between a powerful matriarchal culture that existed in India before the Aryan migrations (2500 B.C.) and the male-dominated society of the Aryans. The Mother Goddess of the Indus Valley people, never really gave place to a dominant male. The Earth Mother is continued to be worshipped in India as the power that nurtures the seed and brings it to fruition. This basic reverence of an agricultural people affirmed that men were really dependent on women for they gave life, food and strength. The mother goddess has always been

venerated from the earliest times. Goddess Durga and Kali are some of the examples of this veneration. Besides, in Hinduism, every deity is accompanied by a female counterpart, or goddess, such as *Parvati-Shiva*, *Lakshmi-Vishnu*, *Sita-Rama*, *Radha-Krishna*, etc. Even though such deities are usually considered officially secondary, popular devotions seem to accord them a higher worth. Many temples are dedicated to these goddesses who represent the merciful and the loving side of the deity. Just as a child feels safe and secure in the lap of its mother, a devotee feels safe and secure in the presence of the Divine Mother. The worship of God in the form of Mother is a unique contribution of the Indian Mind. When a devotee worships God as Divine Mother, he or she appeals to her tenderness and unconditional love. All the Indian sages had worshipped mother goddesses and they have established a personal relationship with them. Thus the mother goddess worship has a greater implication on the lives of the Indians.

Consequently, it is very vivid that this impact is seen in people's devotion to Mother Mary as well. First of all, it is seen in the way she is portrayed in the Churches. For instance, the way she is adorned with jewels, flowers, dressed up in silk *sarees*, the way she holds the child, etc. is almost like an Indian goddess. Mary is also mostly seen as a boon giver and this image is highly pre-dominant among the believers of all religions and particularly among the Catholic faithful. Although the Catholic Church teaches that Mary should not be venerated but only be honoured, still people in India seem to run to her as if they run to their gods. The faithful tend to have more faith in Marian devotions than in any of the spiritual practices of the Church. Even today there are people who say rosary and read novena prayers during Eucharistic celebration. The way, the people flock to Mother Mary's churches reveal their love and veneration towards her. This is also because of the Indian psyche. In the Indian culture, anyone who does some favour is considered as a god. People don't hesitate to build even temples for them.¹ Therefore one finds that more churches are dedicated to Mother Mary than to any other saints or to the Trinitarian God in the Catholic Church in India.

Even if there are churches dedicated to Trinity or to other saints, still the Catholic church is known as *Madha koil* (church of Mother Mary). The Catholic Church in India exalts her in liturgical worship, art and hymns, etc. The hymns that are composed in the regional languages clearly depict people's undaunted faith in her love, care and concern. She is also identified as the fullness of Wisdom and grace, the new Eve, the valiant woman, the daughter of Zion, etc. During the month of May, every parish church in India salutes her with the litany. Month of September is very special to the Catholics of India because of the birthday of mother Mary which falls on 8th. People take up journeys to get the blessings of our Lady of Velankanni. Taking up a *padayatra* to Mother Mary's shrines have become very famous among the faithful nowadays. A good number of pilgrims make offerings of flowers, coconuts, hair (a practice steeped in Hindu tradition), etc. In the month of October, people carry her statue from one house to the other saying rosary. Many girls and institutions are named after Mother Mary. The dioceses are dedicated to Mother Mary. She has numerous titles of reverence identifying her with all the virtues and all the beauties of nature. There are hymns composed in regional languages dedicated to her describing her as the most beautiful woman in the world. What Edward Schillebeeckx exclaimed about Mary would fit in here. He said, "It is clear that she must be a creature of matchless wonder, this Immaculata and Assumpta, with whom even the most physically and spiritually beautiful women in the world cannot in any way be compared....."²

Feminists' Critique on Mary

For, so far as feminist theologians are concerned, it is not just the biblical texts alone, but centuries of habits of exegesis, ecclesiastical practices and traditions which are now ripe for scrutiny, all alike without immunity of any kind. Therefore critiquing includes the texts, traditions and devotions about Mary.

Feminists all over, are of the opinion that Mary is placed on an unreachably high pedestal and cannot serve as a genuine model for all women. They bring to light how the image of a woman is split into two halves: the evil Eve, with whom all real women are equated, and the impossible ideal of a virginal Mother of God, who is free of all sin. However, it would be interesting to see how Mary is now viewed by a variety of feminists and other theologians, moving along a spectrum from the extremely hostile to the more constructive. Obviously, feminists vary because they come to their feminist convictions from different starting points and inevitably retain their ideological allegiances to different worldviews. Before we move on to re-read Mary from an Indian feminist perspective, here below, we shall briefly review the Western Feminists' critique on Mary down the history.

Western Feminists' Perspective - An Aerial View

The crucial impulse to theological feminists' critique of Mariology came in the year 1973, from Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*. Already in the year 1968, Daly published a book closely tied to Simone de Beauvoir's³ *The Church and the Second Sex*. For Daly, too, one does not arrive in the world as a woman, but one becomes a woman. In the light of the theory of evolution, one can no longer speak of an "essence" of man or of woman or, likewise, of an immutable God who grounds immutable orders of things. Hence, there are no longer any creation imposed presuppositions to serve as standards for the transformation of society and the Church, but only the ideal of equality.

In her critique, it is evident that Daly has been inspired by Simone de Beauvoir, who had pointed out the contrast between the ancient goddesses and Mary as early as 1949. While the goddesses are commanded to have autonomous power and utilized men for their own purposes, Mary is wholly the humble servant of God: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord.' Beauvoir writes, "For the first time in the history of humankind, a mother kneels before her son and acknowledges, of her own free will, her inferiority. The supreme victory of masculinity is consummated in Mariolatry: it signifies the

rehabilitation of woman through the completeness of her defeat.”⁴ Daly sharpens this critique and puts it in a wider systematic context. She writes, “Mary is a remnant of the ancient image of the Mother Goddess, enchained and subordinated in Christianity, as the ‘Mother of God’.”⁵

In her later work *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Daly abandons the ideal of “androgyny” that she had previously advocated and she becomes the most important representative of the gynocentric “goddess feminism.” According to her, Mary is a “pale derivative symbol disguising the conquered Goddess,” a “flaunting of the tamed Goddess.”⁶ However, Daly’s notion of Mary as a “domesticated goddess” is not something new to feminism. This notion was already found since the nineteenth century, among the liberal polemics who were against the Catholic teaching on Mary. Particularly, the title “Mother of God” was often explained in terms of the common people’s need to worship a goddess. For instance, the title of a book by the Protestant theologian Christa Mulack provides a characteristic example here, *Mary: The Secret Goddess in Christianity*.

While critiquing the dogmas about Mary, the basic principle behind Daly’s feminist interpretation is that of establishing independent status for the figure of Mary, who needs to be freed from her relation to Christ. Mary’s virginity then becomes a paraphrase for female autonomy: woman is independent of man and not defined solely through her relationship to man. This interpretation of Mary’s virginity gained almost universal acceptance in feminist circles. Christa Mulack refers to the assumption of biological virginity as “materialistic,” and Catharina Halkes,⁷ probably the best known Catholic feminist in Europe, holds that virginity is an attitude, and not abstinence. Daly simply refrains from making any definite commentary on Mary, the Mother of God which is central to the whole of Mariology. The reason for this is understandable. “Being a mother” always implies an inherent relation to a child which is not compatible with Daly’s feminist ideal of autonomy.

After Daly, the title “Mother of God” was not raised for discussion for sometimes by the feminists. As distinct from the Mother of God aspect,

Daly finds Mary's Immaculate Conception to be something worth reinterpreting: divested of dogma, what is involved here is a negation of female evil and a rejection of patriarchy. Woman has no need of being redeemed by a male. According to her, "Immaculate Conception is a metaphor that represents the "process of a woman creating herself," free of chains from fathers. Otherwise, the dogma of Immaculate Conception would become a source of frustration⁸ to some of the Western feminists, including Daly. Along with the Immaculate Conception, the dogma of Assumption is also given a new interpretation by Daly. She considers this dogma as a reinforcement of patriarchalism when Christ actively ascended into heaven, whereas Mary was taken up. However, as a symbol in itself, the assumption signifies the ascendance of woman into the divine sphere.

Followed by Daly, Marina Warner's book, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), explores into the cultural and artistic history of Marian doctrines and devotions. But she also laments by saying that the Virgin Mary has become an effective instrument of asceticism and female subjection. Warner's title phrase, "alone of all her sex," is a line taken from a medieval poem, but she selects it to express her view. According to her, Mary's exaltation emphasizes her uniqueness and in so doing, excludes and damages the condition of the majority of women. Other Christian feminists have agreed in part with Warner.

While they see in general, Christianity as a liberating force in history, they assess Marian devotion as counterproductive for women. Even Carolyn Osiek in her book, *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church* (1986), says that Mary provided Catholic women an impossible ideal to which no woman could attain and with whom all women are invited to feel inadequate. Another problem from Osiek's perspective is that Mary's chief qualification for exaltation is maternity. So even for Mary, 'biology is destiny.'

As a result, some of the female theologians were of the opinion to abandon the figure of Mary altogether. For example, according to Kari Børrensen,⁹ a Catholic theologian from Norway, veneration of Mary is a

reaction to the masculine image of God and, therefore, is superfluous. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel makes a similar skeptical judgment. According to her, Mary Magdalene, is much "closer to life" for modern women than Mary of Nazareth. By contrast, with the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, as Jesus' friend, is not tied to any notions of order. Hence, for women who are becoming more independent, the model is not Mary but Mary Magdalene. Either a rejection of Mary or a cautious skepticism about Mary would probably predominate in the attitudes of western feminists as a whole.

Such critiques and attitudes are normal, because these feminists echo the criticisms from that part of the secular feminist movement shaped by the anti-religious animus of Simone de Beauvoir, who considered the Judeo-Christian tradition "savagely anti-feminine." Many secular feminists took up her hostile stand towards the Western religions because traditional doctrines defined women as inferior and secondary. Religion reduced them as reproductive objects rather than as self-defining subjects. Beauvoir, for instance, thought that women would remain socially suppressed until they could throw off the biological bondage of their reproductive functions. For her, women remaining unmarried and childless by choice (not becoming a victim of male model of permissive sexual eroticism) could provide them with true equality and freedom.

In addition, Western feminism also arose during a decade of intense social upheaval. The Western society simultaneously experienced the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the sexual revolution and the feminist movement. Unfortunately, parts of the feminist movement, while generally inspired by the human rights movement that advocated the equality and dignity of all persons, also adopted the worst of the period's permissive sexual ideologies and were generally critical of marital, religious and family commitments.

A Paradigm Shift

There was a shift in feminist thinking on Mary among the Western feminist theologians by the 1990's. Since the culture had changed once again, the understanding of feminism too changed. Feminism had become multicultural and pluralistic and had moved on to a renewed appreciation of women's lives, history and traditional strengths in their reproductive, familial and maternal roles. Today, in many feminist visions, the sweeping anti-religious dogmas of the past have been left behind. Forms of religious feminism have developed within every traditional faith and outside of them as well. There are also attempts among feminist theologians to redefine Mariology in the light of liberation theology in order to overthrow the traditional image of Mary and to bring out the liberative elements to make her down to earth. The main representatives in that direction are Rosemary Radford Ruether¹⁰ from America and Catharina Halkes from Holland.

According to Ruether, Mariology becomes a liberating symbol for women, only when it is seen as a radical symbol of a new humanity freed from hierarchical power relations, including that of God and humanity. In conformity with the democratic world view, it is not only subordination between human beings that is rejected, but also the subordination of humankind to God. Catharina Halkes takes on a somewhat more cautious position. She admits that Mary's affirmative response in the Magnificat has a positive quality as an expression of creaturely receptivity. But Halkes, too, vigorously rejects any attempt to establish a link between Mary's privilege of being allowed to give free and active consent to the Incarnation and being a woman. To put any emphasis on Jesus' maleness and Mary's femaleness is a threat to women. Receptivity is not a trait for which women have more aptitude than men. Mary's being a woman has no exemplary function specifically related to women is also the view of Elisabeth Gössmann, probably the most "moderate" of those feminists who have written on the subject of Mariology.

In her Mariology, skepticism about the existence of predetermined essences of man and woman leads to a denial that Mary has any special exemplary significance for women.

Rosemary Radford Reuther ties the *Magnificat* into the revolutionary spirit of liberation theology with women above all representing the 'nobodies' made to be 'persons' as a result of the self-emptying of divine power in Jesus. Anne Carr¹¹ makes Mary, a symbol of the transformed world for which women hope and edging away from Mary as the impossible double-bind figure identified by Mary Daly. Anne Carr acknowledges that Mary is a Utopian figure and a mystery. She opines that Mary's intimate place in the Christian pattern enables us to imagine a healed, reconciled and finally transformed world. While it is God who works human salvation in Christ, and the Spirit who inspires the active response of the Church, it is Mary who is the sign of the final transformation of the world.

Therefore according to Western feminists, Mary is not merely emblematic of the human being who opens herself to God and collaborates in the redemptive process but also revelatory of the "feminine" and "maternal" attributes of God. It must be noted, that Mary does not represent the "maternity" of God but is the mother of God and thus embodies creaturely worth at its supreme level. Furthermore, even though Mary is not a "secret goddess," still she serves to attract the positive psychological forces in human beings that were directed, in paganism, toward goddesses. From that viewpoint, there is a certain justification in the approach taken to the figure of Mary by comparative religion. At the same time, the case of Mary suggests the need for a refinement and fundamental correction here: Mary is not simultaneously sinful and holy, not simultaneously whore and virgin, but the totally holy woman, who does not provide humankind with a kind of self-confirmation, rather, draws human being to a higher level. In so doing, Mary is not an exchangeable projection screen for human needs but the historical Virgin and Mother of God, who gives a firm historical anchoring to humankind's strivings.

Through the lens of an Indian Feminist

Since Mary points in a unique way toward the mystery of Christ and the Church, it is impossible to conceive of sacred history without her. By virtue of that position, she also becomes a criterion against which new theological conceptions must be measured. Mary's criteriological significance is of supreme value when assessing feminist theology, which puts forward demands for fundamental changes in the practices of religion. Therefore having looked at the Western critiques on Mary, we shall now move on to re-read Mary from an Indian Feminist perspective.

A re-reading of Mary not as a victim but as an agent of autonomy and empowerment enlightens the future direction of feminist theology in India. All the passages that have a direct reference to Mary in the Bible¹² (the four gospels and Acts of the Apostles from the New Testament are the only direct sources for information about the life of Mary) makes it very clear from an Indian point of view that Mary was and is a feminist in her approach. A feminist is one who is conscious of the real status of women around and takes some consistent effort to bring about transformation in their lives. Although Mary's appearances in the biblical accounts are always in relation to Jesus, whether in his birth, his public ministry, his death, his resurrection or after his resurrection, yet behind the scenes one can trace a composite portrait of Mary through the pens of the four evangelists. Based on the biblical episodes, I shall re-read Mary in the Indian context.

Mary's Fiat

Mary's "fiat" to the angel (Lk 1:26-38), accepting to bring forth child Jesus in total freedom without waiting for any male's approval, has greater implications today for Indian women. Indian women are expected to consult their fathers before marriage, husbands after marriage and sons in their old age. And much worse, when it is a matter of pregnancy, they cannot freely decide. While pointing to the maternity of Mary, Carolyn Osiek writes that

even for Mary, biology is destiny. But if we analyse deeply, of all women in the world, Mary is the last one of whom it can be said that “biology is destiny.” Because it is Mary’s personal “fiat” that produced a pregnancy and childbirth and it can be seen as heralding a new era of human reproduction. A redeemed woman freely consents to cooperate with God and life as a responsible and responsive moral agent.

Nevertheless, Mary’s active collaboration also speaks about an “emancipatory” significance, which Pope Paul VI identified in *Marialis cultus* (no.37): “The modern woman, anxious to participate with decision-making power in the affairs of the community, will contemplate with intimate joy Mary who, taken into dialogue with God, gives her active and responsible consent.” Here, one might also recall an important thought of Gertrud von le Fort: “The virgin who is consecrated to God “does not have her place within generation, but she marks an end to generation . . . From that position, she is an invocation to belief in an ultimate worth of the person as such . . . ; the virgin naturally symbolizes the religious emphasis on, and affirmation of, the worth of the person in his or her ultimate, immediate relation to God alone.”¹³

Mary, the Virgin

Mary, the virgin (*parthenos*, Mt 1:23; Lk 1:27) stands, as a powerful symbol of single motherhood and the self contained sexual power that often accompanies such a life. The virginity of the mother of Jesus is not merely a biological fact but rather shows that she is a person who has grown to wholeness through well-fought-for autonomy. She did not lead a derived life, that is, she was not merely someone’s wife or mother but a person in her own right. Further, the fact that the story excludes any male fathering is seen as a sign that the patriarchal order of fathers is overthrown. In this way the virgin acts as a symbol of resistance to patriarchal values and lifestyles. This is further seen in the words of Magnificat (Lk 1: 46-55) where Mary is shown to be on the side of those marginalized within a patriarchal society.

Mary's virginity and the virgin birth can be interpreted as symbols of her autonomy, signaling her direct relationship to God, unmediated through any hierarchically placed male or spouse. Virginity for both men and women also symbolized integrity, an undivided mind and wholly focused heart and signed in the untouched body. This virgin is never a victim and she becomes a model for all women and Indian women in particular. The patriarchal culture in India continues to colonize them in the name of marriage. Women are treated as the property of men and their body and sexuality are male prerogatives. They are to depend on their husbands even when they are educationally and economically well-off. As more and more women are educated and employed, what is needed right now is to become the agents of their own selves. In this sense, all women should become virgins like Mary, that is, they should never be conquered by men but always renewed and self-contained in their own bodily strength. These virgins certainly relate well with men but never become a property of others, not even in their most intimate moments thus overcoming unequal relationships. They are undomesticated, free, delighting in their sexuality and remaking all the rules. The church in India should promote this model of virginity if women are to find embodied empowerment.

Mother Vs. Son

Mother Mary's role in the life of Jesus is highly significant. Not only at his early formation, but also during his public ministry, Mary was at the scene from place to place (Mt 12: 46; Mk 3: 31-32; Lk 8: 19; Jn 2:1, 12). She had formed him and followed him till the end. She was there with him offering support and services (Mk 15:40-41; Jn 2:1-12). She bravely followed Jesus even to the foot of the cross (Mt 27: 56, 61; Mk 15:40, 47; Jn 19:25). She not only fed him with milk but also with love and concern for the 'then' divided patriarchal society. That's why looking at the way Jesus dealt with the poor, the sinners, the sick and the women, someone was able to proclaim loudly in the crowd, blessed are the breasts that you suckled and the womb that bore

you (Lk 11: 27). This is very much seen in the Indian culture too. In India, the role of a mother in the formation of a child is immense. The support and services of the mother towards the child does not stop with the childhood days but lasts till the end. However, being carriers of the culture, the mothers play a greater role in the perpetuation and continuation of the patriarchal culture in India. Realising the seriousness involved in the deconstruction of the patriarchal culture in the minds of the children to build a healthy and equal society today, conscientisation of the Indian mothers is a must and the need of the hour.

Shouldering the burden

Mary reaches out to Elisabeth who in her old age had conceived (Lk 1: 39-45). Although the gift of a child is a blessing for a mother, still conceiving at the old age is not a fun. It involves physical pain due to the age constraints and the psychological hurts due to the social comments. Being aware of this, Mary reaches out to her and the text reads, “She remained there” remaining with someone in moments of need makes a person greater than anything else. In his book, *The Maternal Face of God*, Leonardo Boff summarises various routes into Mariology, the second of which was the one followed by the Council. In the words of Boff, “Mary never lived in or for herself. Mary was a woman ever at the service of others - of God, of Christ, of redemption, of the Church, of the ultimate meaning of history.” From this perspective, Mary is never to be the subject of a theological consideration of her own, but finds her place in other theological treatises. Mary has proved that greatness by her life.

This passage also brings to light how two women could meet, appreciate, encourage and stand by each other while facing their given realities. In her sixth month of gestation, Elisabeth received her relative Mary into her home. Although they were in a helpless situation, they did not dwell on the dangers, discomforts and unpleasantness of the condition when they met. Rather they focussed on the glory of the anticipation. The exaltation of

the two women arose not only from the sheer joy of carrying a child within them but also from their knowledge of the mission destined for their unborn children who would transform the world into which they come. Mary was provided with a confidante with whom she could share the uncertainties, discomforts, and perplexities of incipient motherhood.

But what happens in the Indian situation? The patriarchal culture in India has created a myth that women can never work and live together. Often the media portrays them as enemies. They are shown as head ache for men. Even there are humiliating ads, serials and films that promote and perpetuate in a subtle manner this 'divide and rule' mentality of the patriarchal culture. So women need to be consciously alert to this patriarchal strategy and take efforts to deconstruct this myth.

Teaching to be a Good Samaritan

In Jn 2:1-12, Mary teaches Jesus to be a Good Samaritan by enabling him to begin his public ministry at the wedding at Cana. In any family, till the marriage gets over, the marriage party is always in tension. Now the situation is turning worse. The wine runs out. All the more it is a anxiety and a shame for the groom's party. There were so many present for the wedding. If not all, at least some of them must have been aware of the wine running out too. Except one, no one thought of doing something concretely. It was Mary and not even to Jesus that the thought came. Mary takes the initiative. Mary decides to enhance the situation to save them from embarrassment and stigma. So Mary tells Jesus, "They have no wine." To this Jesus replies "what is that to me and to you woman?" In the Jewish culture, a guest is not called on to do anything. It is a matter of honour for the groom's family to provide wine. One might dishonour them by presuming that they could not do so. But Mary does not yield to her son's saying. She insists that he does something to ease the condition. It is also an invitation for Jesus to be a Good Samaritan. It is a clear evidence that Jesus must have learnt from his mother Mary about who could be a Good Samaritan – serving the one who

is in need (Lk 10: 25-37). Mary also initiates him to begin his public ministry. Thus, Mary was a very active mother involved in the formation of her son, instructing him to respond to different needy situation, to listen to the needs of the poor and do something concretely about it.

When Jewish religion had reduced women to the reproductive role, Mary emerges as a model of a good leader who initiates people to take up the common cause. After having drawn the attention of Jesus towards the neighbour's need, she now instructs the servants to yield to her Son. Thus she becomes a symbol of two way mediation. On the one hand, she becomes the pleader of our cause with her Son and on the other, as the monitress of our obedience to him. Often the Indian Catholic women in marriages seem to be obsessed with *sarees*, jewels, ornaments and physical appearances. It is high time that women free themselves from these distracting and destroying factors and get involved in the lives of the people in need. Moreover, taking initiative for a common cause is not much found among the Catholic women.

Facing the reality

Mary stands as an example for standing at the foot of the cross (Mt 27: 56, 61; Mk 15:40, 47; Jn 19:25-27). The Cross of Christ is a symbol of evil in the society. It reveals the cruelty of humankind – how much a human can be cruel to another human being. When Jesus was faced with cruelty and torture, Mary did not run away from it. Instead, she was out on the road along with other women. Moreover, the situation of widows in the time of Jesus was still worse. Widows in Judaic society were denied of public space and had to be dependent. But Mary did not confine herself to the four walls but daringly occupied the public space by trespassing the widow's boundary. A widow venturing into the public space itself was a silent weapon of protest that Mary undertook. She did not imprison herself to the Jewish patriarchal conditionings. Although she was conscious of the fact that her son's death was unjust and brutal, she did not flee from the reality but faced it boldly.

Mary stands as an example for millions of women in India who suffer unjustly just because of their gender. They are killed right at the womb. They are killed soon after the birth. They die of malnutrition. They suffer from sexual harassment and genital mutilation. They are the victims of domestic violence, rape, kid-napping, dowry deaths, human trafficking, acid attacks and the list in India is endless. It's all because they are women. Today Indian women as mothers, wives and daughters endure and tolerate torture within the four walls. Still they continue their lives' journey. These women should be empowered like Mary to take the weapon of protest towards the patriarchal society.

Marian Cult and Devotions

In the Indian context often Mary is presented as a boon giver and it is the pre-dominant image people have of Mary too. People prefer, a feminine mother rather than a masculine father. One of the beautiful qualities of feminine nature is to be inclusive, to embrace everyone without distinction. This is seen very much in Mother Mary who has a love which is eternal and her broad arms encompass all without difference. She embraces everyone who goes to her and fulfils all their needs. That's why, numerous people are drawn to her for health, wealth, prosperity, peace, harmony, etc., trusting that she would never desert them but would fulfill their needs. This reveals that a sexually stamped religious symbolism is not merely a peripheral factor but a reality that enters most intimately into the shaping of our life and actions as Christians. From this we can arrive at a conclusion that the importance of Mary and Marian devotion has preserved a feminine presence and the recognition of feminine power within an officially male-dominated structure. One holy woman, at least, has never been forgotten, left nameless or banished from leadership in the church. This unveils the fact that although Scripture and tradition characterize God largely in terms of masculine images, still the position of human beings before God largely in terms of feminine ones. Insofar as feminist theology calls attention to the significance of symbolism with a

•

masculine or feminine stamp, it is fundamentally correct even if evaluation of this factor must lead to other kinds of conclusions. All the same, preserving the feminine presence alone is not enough, because this often has not enabled the faithful to go beyond.

In addition, the image of Mary as a boon giver has also often narrowed down the people's relationship with her. It is mostly one of benefactor and beneficiary relationship. Although Mary and Marian doctrines are explained in a deeper way, still the impact is not profound in peoples' lives. Today what should be given emphasis is Mary's role as "the first disciple," and presenting her as the model for every faithful Christian believer, whether male or female. Discipleship involves listening to God and accomplishing his will which Mary did right from the annunciation till the early formation of the Church. Listening implied in the life of Mary, taking initiative to reach out and to respond to people in need, facing valiantly the hard core reality of life, etc. How far our Catholic community especially the Catholic women are empowered or trained to listen and to respond to people in need has to be explored critically. The reality discloses that the members of legion of Mary continue to be pious women who mostly recite chain rosaries rather, not courageous enough to act like Mary of Nazareth. Evolving the legion of Mary into a movement of Mary is the need of the hour in the Indian context.

Doctrines of Immaculate Conception and Assumption

It is true that the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are to be understood as necessarily interrelated and implicitly derived from Christ's redemption of all humankind. Mary is the first fruit of Christ's saving act, which overcomes sin and death. Mary's "yes" to God made possible the redemption and through Christ every Christian may also say "yes," become impregnated with hope and create new life. However, from the feminist perspective it takes another implication too.

Today the church is beginning to confront the worldwide feminist movement, and this soon brings to the fore deeper theological questions of

embodiment, gender and sexuality. Mary's freedom from sin (Immaculate Conception) and her bodily assumption into heaven (Assumption) bear witness to the goodness of the female human body which is created in the image and likeness of God and the truth of the promised resurrection of all bodies. But what are the implications for bodies and the body-mind unity of the human being at this juncture? Marian dogmas speak out powerfully about the sacredness of the female body, but does the Catholic Church promote this understanding of the dogma? Today, the bodies of women in India are used, abused, tortured, wounded, massacred, violated, etc. even within the Catholic families. Every year it celebrates these dogmas without fail on 15th of August and 8th of December. Has the Catholic Church take some effort to honour not only the body of Mother Mary but also the bodies of millions of women?

Marian Shrines

Feminism in India is concerned about the empowerment of all religions and intertwined with other emancipatory movements because in so many instances women remain the poorest of the poor, unjustly subjected to gender discrimination, sexual abuse and violence. At this juncture, Mary, the mother of Christian feminism, appears as an eternal sign of God's urgent desire for justice and peace in India. Mary's apparition testifies to the fact that Mary makes an appearance to simple people of all religion. Whether it was in Velankanni (Tamilnadu), or in Gunadala (Andhra Pradesh), or in Bandel (Calcutta), she appeared to the poor. She does not go by religion. So people flock to her throughout the year. Thus in India, Marian shrines stand as a sign of the reign of God here on earth which Jesus spoke in his parable of the mustard seed sprouting to become a big tree. The big tree gives shelter to everyone. Similarly in Marian shrines too people from all walks of life and religion find shelter in it. Anyone can approach her and she responds to them with affection.

Marian devotion in India has also overcome all religious barriers and more than 40% of the pilgrims to Marian sanctuaries are non-Catholics. They bring all kinds of offerings - flowers, garlands, coconuts - and it is not unusual to see women dressed in *burqas* who pray to Our Lady. Despite the fact that the girl child is frowned upon and in many cases women are treated as objects rather than persons, Indian tradition has contradictorily held women/mother goddesses in high esteem. Mary, the mother of Jesus is also venerated by people of all faiths in many parts of India. Velankanni in Tamilnadu, Our Lady of Perpetual Succour and Mount Mary in Mumbai are striking examples of such veneration and honour given to Mary. People are able to see in Mary's figure (and by extension in 'Mother goddesses') who will fulfil their aspirations and answer their prayers. The churches and shrines built in honour of Blessed Mary bear witness to her powerful intercession and they have become pilgrimage centres and evangelisation centres. In a multi-religious context in India, they have become centres of unity, harmony and solidarity. ~~People belonging to all religions converge at the Marian shrines.~~

As Pope Francis has recently said, "our God is too big to be pigeon-holed or placed in a box. God is bigger than anything we can ever imagine and as human beings we need to realize this. Often we tend to make God in our image and likeness and so restrict God to a Church/Mosque/Temple or other place of worship. This is a disservice to God." Marian shrines in India are wonderful examples of religious harmony when we see people of all faiths converge to pray to God who is all and in all.

Holy Family – a liberating model

From an Indian feminist perspective, the Holy Family demonstrates a liberating model of equal gender relationships. Mary is equal, in no way dominated by her spouse Joseph and completely free as a moral agent. Even in a misogynous age of her time and in a patriarchal Jewish religion, Mary's powers and privileges, her strengths and virtues, could be seen as independent of her status as a wife. While presenting the names of Jesus'

parents, it is Mary's name which always comes first (Mary and Joseph). This exemplifies an interdependent and equal relationship of mutual respect in a family. This has a greater significance in India when women are known or identified with their father's name attached to them before marriage and husband's name attached to them after marriage. Even when they are introduced, introduced as Mrs. so and so. For example, if the husband's name is Antony, then the wife is introduced as Mrs. Antony. And, often the wife's name remains hidden or ignored completely.

Call to spiritual motherhood

Mary, in her combined and unique image as virgin and Mother is not an impossible example for all the faithful to follow her. In fact this serves to demonstrate precisely the unexchangeable self-containedness of Mary. But this aspect of relative "self-containedness" is overlooked by the Western feminists, who otherwise like to object that Mary is regarded merely as a being "in relationship." Reference may be made here to what is said in John Paul II's "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (*Mulieris Dignitatem*)" about the exemplary character of virginity and motherhood. The Pope speaks of the "two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality." By preserving virginity for the sake of the reign of God, a woman confirms herself in her being as a person, having been created for her own sake, and realizes her calling to love through devotion to Christ. This fundamental "bridal" attitude of Christian love is also reflected in marriage and extends outward, through spiritual motherhood, to all people, who are embraced by the love of Christ.

I am also sure that in the next round of the feminist struggle for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church, Mary's life and actions will be cited as the model of women's full equality and emancipation within the church. She who first brought Christ, both body and blood, into the human community can be invoked as the exemplar of women's priestly ministry among the faithful. There have been earlier movements advocating the

priesthood of Mary, but they have never been developed. Once the church grows into a more balanced view of gender and personhood, women will surely be ordained. Gender, as seen in the life of both Mary and Christ, is a dimension of human identity but is not more important than charity and doing God's will. Marian devotion makes this clear by validating female human nature and female bodies while not allowing Mary's gender to limit the ways she serves God. Anointing and gifts of the Holy Spirit, like Divine Sophia and truth, know no gender. I predict that when women priests are finally welcomed and ordained in the Roman Catholic Church, Marian images will be used in the official documents of acceptance, and invocations to Mary will be featured in the ordination ceremonies.

In the way of conclusion, I throw some challenges to the Catholic Church in India and to the Catholic women in particular who honour Mary more in their lives.

Challenges to the Catholic Church

- There are so many churches constructed and under construction for Mother Mary. There are so much of devotions to Mother Mary being carried out in India today. People are encouraged to take up *padayatras*, undertake novenas, rosaries, etc. In what way our Catholic community is different from the people of other denominations and faiths in treating women? In the Indian context, where women are oppressed and tortured by men, undertaking *padayatras* or organizing a novena or a car procession for mother Mary should lead the Catholic faithful to deal with the women in the family, workplace, public place and in the Church with respect and honour. Any devotion that does not bring about changes in the lives of the faithful is futile and useless. Besides, true devotion to Mary should lead the faithful to discover and establish full humanity here on earth. Paul VI says Mary mirrors for us, contemporary men and women, our expectations for a better humanity. It is high time that the Catholic Church in India begins to retrospect honestly into this area.

- The churches and Shrines built in honour of Blessed Mary bear witness to her powerful intercession and they have become pilgrimage centres and evangelisation centres. In a multi-religious context in India, they have become centres of unity, harmony and solidarity. People belonging to all religions converge at the Marian shrines. What are the efforts that the Catholic Church in India takes to promote inter-religious dialogues in these centres and shrines?

- Women constitute the largest section of practising believers. They are crucial to the economics of religious practice. The patriarchal Church and the society often keeps them ignorant and under the subjection, thereby ensuring a dependable clientele. Under the garb of protecting women and tradition, it exploits them in order to achieve its political and economic objectives. So the women continue to be subservient and submissive. When it is a matter of public involvement, the fact reveals that the level of participation of Catholic women in general is very low. Therefore, the Catholic Church must take consistent effort to empower the Catholic women theologically, biblically and politically.

Challenges to the Catholic women

- Women do see so many incidences wherein their sisters are in difficulties in different ways. There are so many issues that affect women. But how far they respond to it concretely is a question mark. Especially the Catholic women who pay more attention to Mary do not get involved in other women's problems. They are ready to attend novenas, car processions but not willing to attend public rallies that are arranged in view of people's issues and esp. women's issues. Even the number of women religious congregations, whose patroness is mother Mary, do not seem to address women's issues in a powerful way.

The life of Mary depicts the journey of any common woman, daughter, sister, wife, widow, and mother, especially in the concerns of women today.

However she crossed the boundaries of her time and exercised her freedom with "full of grace" (Lk 1: 28). Therefore, Mary needs to be redeemed from the traditional understanding of a docile, sanctified, and gentle mother to a self-defining woman, bringing forth transformation and wholeness. She is not a victim to the plan of God rather model of fulfillment and autonomy. She is a model for a fully liberated human being and for a true discipleship. She accepts the challenge of the Holy Spirit and acts as co-redeemer for human salvation. Mary symbolizes a woman who yearns for liberation of the oppressed people and nurtures the hope of new humanity through perseverance and suffering. What Indian women need today is undaunted courage like Mary. As women in India face a lot of hardships, problems, failures, disappointments, violence, torture within the family, disloyalty from the husband side, etc Mary exhorts them to face the reality boldly, even dare to stand alone in deconstructing the oppressive patriarchal structure.

Footnotes

- ¹ India has a history of people building temples for kings, valiant men and women who have risked their lives for people's sake, even for film actors and actresses, etc.
- ² E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 172.
- ³ Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. (2009) Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. (Random House: Alfred A. Knopf. (1949).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.
- ⁵ Cf. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (New York: Beacon Press, 1973), 82-3.
- ⁶ Cf. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (New York: Beacon Press, 1978), 84-7.
- ⁷ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, Catharina Halkes, *Mary, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (London: SCM Press, 1993).
- ⁸ For Mary is honoured highly as new Eve, while all the other women are treated as children of the evil Eve.

- ⁹ Cf. Kari Elizabeth Børrensen, *Subordination and Equivalence*. Translated by Charles H. Talbot. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1968; reprinted., (Washington: University of America Press, 1981).
- ¹⁰ Cf. Rosemary. R. Ruether, *Mary* (London: SCM, 1979); *Mary, the Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977).
- ¹¹ Cf. Anne Carr, "Mary, Model of Faith," in *Mary Woman of Nazareth: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, ed., Doris Donnelly Mahwah (NY: Paulist Press, 1989).
- ¹² There are of course approximately thirty direct and indirect references in the Bible.
- ¹³ Gertrud von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman: The timeless meaning of the Feminine* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010).