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Examining the Growth and Development of Christian Education and Democracy in India: A Critical Study of George Thadathil's Exploration of the Same in Modern India

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This book is a collection of scholarly papers edited by George Thadathil,[1] including a couple of his own works. The commentary is made from the perspective of a Catholic, a beneficiary of Christian education, who believes in its potential to nurture change agents. As noted by Rudolf C Heredia, if contextualization sets the framework for understanding a discussion, then where one positions oneself sets the context for the remarks'.[2] I have placed myself on the inside, albeit on the periphery, in making this commentary.

India's tryst with modernity coincided with its introduction to formal education formats; designed and implemented by western missionary educators. Thadathil's compilation deals in considerable detail with the motivations, intentions and the manifested vision of the early pioneers of western education in India. The Company-administration and later the colonial government were keen to have indigenous staff, capable of running the administration at various levels. They may at best have required such Indian staff to have functional knowledge of their language and administrative practices. The elementary schools that were established in the hundreds by the 18th century and the limited resources for secondary education should have been enough to meet the requirement. What then explains the centres of excellence that came up after the Charter Act of 1833? The obvious reasons seem to have been to spread the 'Word of the Lord' to the privileged, and their hope of engaging with the intellectually inclined to bring about a sympathetic environment for Christian teachings. Nevertheless, even the most committed of those missionaries realized by the late 19th century, the appalling cost-benefit ratio they were achieving. The colonial administrationdistanced itself from missionary work and adopted a secular stance as early as the turn of the 18th century.

Peter Ronald DeSouza, who wrote the foreword for the book, talks about the idea of 'Christian Mission 'in' and 'for' India', which is compelling.[3] There are the underlying intangibles in the mission work of the early Christian missionaries that go beyond the obvious motivations for their efforts. The missionaries while combating the superstitions,of course, governed by their own notions of civilized life, were also moved by a compassion and neighbourly love for the underprivileged of their host land. It led them to conclude that education alone could improve the lot of the indigenous people. It was their Christian faith that inspired them to endure the opposition they faced and compelled them to stay the course, with hardly any numerical advantage or significant outcome to show for it. They continuously rewrote their playbook over the decades to remain true to the Christian mission as well as to the service they were rendering, imparting liberal progressive ideas and Christian values. They also were alive to the aspirations of the countrymen and hence most of them came to accept and encourage Indian nationalist

[1] George Thadathil (ed). Christian Education and Democracy in India (Kolkata: Penprints,2024, ISBN: 978-81-966577-4-1, 489 pages, ₹900)

[2] Rudolf Heredia, *Christian education and modern India*, 447

[3] Peter Ronald DeSouza, *Foreword*, xiii

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sentiments. This idea of the Christian mission, says Peter DeSouza, remains under-explored by secular educationists.[4]

The Macaulay's Minute often draws flak for its role in the colonization of the Indian mind. English education is still variously hailed and condemned in India depending on the spirit of the occasion. The experiment that began three centuries ago by the missionaries still continues to be debated for its merits and deficiencies, with no tenable alternative emerging so far. The form and quality of the average Indian mind at the turn of the 18th century as developed till then, by the Gurukul and Pathshala systems of education, must be held in perspective while examining the impact of the missionary system of education in India. The minimal and exclusionary learning doled out as largesse, depending on the magnanimity of the various rulers of the land until then, had by no means paved the way for the opening of the Indian mind to liberal and democratic values. Nor was there a unifying philosophy or public consciousness which succeeded to engender, preserve and promote a monolithic Indian culture. Evidently, this was by no means due to the lack of originally created knowledge or philosophies indigenous to India. The knowledge created by the great minds of the time could barely have been disseminated through the social and religious barriers erected by those who stood to gain from the prevailing order. Most of such knowledge-creation remained theoretical or discursive exercises, with hardly any tangible benefits in uplifting the lives and minds of the common populace. One could point to the renowned Buddhist centres of learning of ancient times, however, when reconciling the impact, they had on the socio-cultural landscape of the time, one is likely to come up short. Hardly any social transformation towards more egalitarian societies had come about from the ancient learning systems except by those rare initiatives driven by the fancies of the respective rulers.

Thadathil describes the book as an exploration of the impact of Christian education in India from the perspective that guided the making of the Constitution of India. He,in his joint work with KurialaChittattukulam, provides a comprehensive overview of the framework of Christian education, evolved over the decades, through schools and colleges in India. They elaborate upon the collaborating and coordinating efforts that are made by various denominations, towardspresenting a monolithic and integrated façade, to the edifice that is built by the efforts of Christian educators in India.

In the introduction to the book, Ambrose Pinto and the editor touch upon the contributions and impact of CEIs (Christian Educational Institutions) on higher education and their attempt to promote Christian and liberal values including egalitarianism. They also address a few staple criticisms regularly levelled at Christian institutions. The missionary work could not have waited for the socio-economic climate prevalent in India during the colonial period to turn conducive for the introduction of Christian values. Missionaries hit the ground running, forming alliances and creating allegiances where possible. They were convinced that the social conditions could be improved only by those affected by such circumstances and that the best way to achieve it would be to offer them the tools for facilitating change. The privileged were shown the way byexample and attempts for inculcation of egalitarian values through education. The disadvantaged were provided with the tools of learning and awareness of the tenets of social justice, enabling them to communicate, organize and stand up to their oppressors and even demand their rights on occasion. With hardly any support from the colonial administration, the missionaries relied on the power of Christ's teachings and their own convictions, to connect with the vast expanse and populace of the host country.

[4] Ibid, xv

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The introductory chapter also discusses the caste system, its internalization, its cultural connotations and the vested interests maintaining an oppressive social order. Thadathil and Pinto explain the part CEIs played in ushering in socio-cultural modernity. They speculate upon the reasons for the appeal of CEIs to the Indian middle class, withoutisolating any. They do credit the trailblazing by the CEIs in creating a model of education that enabled a new class of people without the baggage of the past and the burdens of traditional problems to emerge. These new entrants are focused on upward social and economic mobility in an India connected to the world and they cannot wait to discard the traditional forms of inspirations and methods of doing things. At the same time a caveat is issued by the authors,noting the decline of values in recent times.

The constituency that the CEIs traditionally catered to be an eclectic mix from different class and caste strata and religions. The CEIs did contribute to affirmative action by way of educating students from the poor and unprivileged sections of society. As discussed earlier, the motives for establishing Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in urban areas was to engage with the upper and privileged classes in the hope that they, having imbibed the values of social justice and egalitarianism from the Christian teachings and environments, would then be encouraged to be agents of social change. It is quite clear from the rejoinders of the early pioneers of Christian Higher Education (CHE) that they did not place much stock in converting the upper classes to Christianity. Additionally, they realized that their hope of the upper and privileged classes enabling any trickle-down phenomena of social change was not going to pay much dividend either. The privileged beneficiaries knew the motivations of the Christian educators well enough; not that the missionaries were subtle about them; and armoured themselves against being swayed. They were in it for the temporal benefits afforded by western education which helped to cement their position and thereafter were assiduous in jealously guarding such privileges.

Joseph Bara, in his brilliantly researched and lucidly articulated paper gives a detailed and nuanced account of the missionary manoeuvres in India in the 19th century. He explains the complexities of the social realities of the time and the opposition faced by the missionary efforts from the administration as well as the social elites. The paper tries to understand the missionary mind and traces the strategies they used to respond to the challenges and keep up with the ever-shifting Indian soil they were hoping to cultivate. The objectives of the missionaries as traced by the paper, evolved or varied through the decades; they started out with the hope for direct evangelization of the population, tempered the expectation to spreading Christian influence in the society, was prepared to be content with the preparation of soil and training of church leaders, resorted to inculcating scientific temper in the masses by attempting to demonstrate the absurdity of superstition and certain types of religious ritualism, tried the silent evangelization of the upper castes and finally resigned to the upliftment of the poor and the marginalized. They experimented with the language of instruction, beneficiary groups and classes, and the methods of learning. The paper closely follows the evolution of CEIs over a century, painting a clear and moving picture.

The missionaries were aware that the locals who benefitted from Christian education, especially the dominant castes, did not care to be influenced by the Christian ethics and merely wished to benefit from the English education, with their core being protected consciously from being touched by the Christian values being imparted. The Indian middle class assiduously ignored the intellectual and spiritual appeal to consider Christian teachings and was perfectly content with the temporal benefits that Christian education afforded. They remained well insulated to the uplifting themes of Christianity. The missionaries were convinced that "the problem behind the youth's disinclination towards Christian teachings lay on the quality of the receiving soil, i.e. the audience and not on the seed of the word" (page

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122).[5] If anything, that soil is at its most barren today. Miller's[6] 'great preparatory work' for ChristianIndia, barely made progress beyond the confines of the institutions. As he had feared, Christian institutions to some extent did turn into 'guilds for the worldly welfare of its sons'.[7] With the colonial government maintaining a cautious stance and the educators themselves keen on being seen as nationalists, it can be said that the CHE colleges were effectively hijacked by the Indian colonial society. The agenda was lost, in the education-by-degree system and the 'English mania', by the 1880's. This begs the question; what has changed in Indian society since; what new evidence compels CHEIs today to consider that the agenda is intact and push ahead with more colleges and not secondary education?

In this context it is profitable to further examine and criticize the claims of higher education towards promoting democratic ideals. Can Christian HEIs claim a legacy that is independent of those CEIs imparting primary and secondary education? Character formation occurs progressively, and crystallization happens due to the experiences that the young adult student garners during the course of study while pursuing higher education. A publicly funded institution would be hard-pressed to claim a significant contribution to characterformation in higher education, especially in an era where adult consciousness evolves and behaviour patterns crystallize at lower ages. If the seeds are sown and cared for, and the process taken care of during secondary education, the quality of the fruit may be refined in the later years owing to the influence of higher education. However, the range of possibilities of the fruit itself is likely to be defined by the early years. Rev. Thomas Gardiner remarked in 1860, that "the positive attitude of students on Christianity at the high school level evaporated as one of indifference in the college",[8] which is seen even today in more vivid detail and significant numbers. There is hardly any effective remedy to this except perhaps strengthening the roots, focusing on primary and secondary education.

Trying to impart Christian values through higher education alone could be like fertilizing the grown tree, in the Indian context. It could be argued that the current achievements of the community in terms of Christian identity and influence are results of a long period of imparting primary and secondary education. In 1907, Bishop Whitehead came to the conclusion that "The Christian colleges were, in the circumstances, less and less possible means of Christian influence".[9] Joseph Bara notes that, the Catholic missionaries of the time also "found the college impact on non-Christians negligible, the high schools rather offered 'more promising ground' for the missionary purpose". The Cottonian model, including their 'Monitorial system' being followed up by the later military and public schools, is further testimony to this. Though the authors do make a case for increased attention on university/tertiary education and Christian presence in the area of higher education, a critical evaluation of this strategy would not be misplaced.

[5] Joseph Bara, *CHE & Missionary manoeuvres in India, 1818-1910; 122 (The report of the deputation of the Free Church of Scotland, 1889-90)*

[6] Ibid, 128 (Dr. Miller's view of the function of the colleges)

[7] Ibid

[8] Ibid, 117 (Conference of missions held in 1860)

[9] Ibid, 135 (Whitehead,H., *Our Mission policy in India*)

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In his seminal paper, 'Education and community development', Jose Kalapura gives a longitudinal view of the growth of Bettiah Christian community in Bihar. It may be argued that the Bettiah story reflects the significant and disproportionate influence of primary and secondary education on community building and progress, over Higher Education. It can be seen that the community achieved uniform prosperity for the members through basic and skill-oriented education. The members found employment by migration, due to the favourable aspects of learning English, teacher training, knowledge and internalization of moral values, liberal ideas and Christian ideals. These favourable factors, combined with the confidence and open mindedness they gained from Christian influence placed them in demand for service jobs, teaching jobs, clerical jobs, government employment and the like.The study shows strong correlation between Christian education, evidencing causation, and the upward social mobility of the Bettiah Christians. Parallels could be drawn with the Christian communities of Kerala who were similarly welcomed in other states and countries owing to their work ethics and liberal values, which they imbibed through Christian upbringing, especially through primary and secondary schooling afforded by Christian educators and institutions.

There are active and relentless forces planning and executing measures to curb the space available to the minority communities. There are direct threats and attacks on institutions reported now and these forces have all but proclaimed that inclusive, liberal Christian ideals are inimical to their regressive designs for the country. It is worth noting that most of the serious designs targeting the influencing of the minds and themore nuanced attacks are affected on the secondary school curriculum, which means that these forces have identified the strong roots provided by Christian education to be unusually resilient to propaganda in the later years. 'Catch them young', seems to be the accepted credo by all. The growing population and the rising religious and ethno-nationalistic fervour will increasingly serve to nullify the impact of CEIs.Proactive, long-term yet flexible approaches are required to withstand such an onslaught, rather than being reactionary or defensive.

Queeny Pradhan Singh, in her paper titled 'Novitiate in the hills - Reproduction of imperial ethics', dwells in detail on the intent and motivations of the early pioneering educators. She does not reconcile the purported intentions with an objective assessment of the outcome and seems a bit unsure about what to make of it, thereby leaving a few questions unanswered. The school system created by the missionaries did continue to influence the local and Indian outlook towards education, in the later period. The intentions of the colonial administration vis-à-vis educational grants may not have been purely altruistic; however, the missionaries were genuinely committed to their purpose of spreading Christ's message. Their efforts were not lacking, albeit the standards of outcome expected from the initial schools for the colonizers and those for the colonized were different, for reasons articulated in the paper.

In his paper titled 'Missionaries and education – genesis and development in British Bengal', Sandeep Sinha, discusses the personalities and their varied approaches towards education. Alexander Duff's approach, though might have been more hawkish and radical, had it been followed through, may have had a comparatively more enduring impression on the culture of India through better assimilation of Christian ethics and western influence.[10] Push for the vernacular education seems to have left the mission stranded, due to the strong religious and cultural roots and symbolisms inherent in the classical and

[10] Ibid, 108.

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vernacular languages.[11] Though this is a counter-factual argument, it appears that the missionaries had in fact, some inkling of this difficulty.[12]

Praveen Perumalla, in his paper 'Dalit appreciation of Christian education', explores the trajectories of the work of CEIs and Dalit struggles, to evaluate interactional intersections. He rejects the portrayal of such interactions as mere charity by which depictions; the Dalits were further objectified as incompetent dependents. He also refuses to see such interactions as products of the machinations of the missionaries to achieve religious conversions alone. He appears to be suggesting that the interactions the Dalits had with the missionaries were on their own terms and wherever the values of each other intersected, such interactions were promotive. Dalits did realize that Christian education would serve to empower them. It could impact the future of their children and the future of their relationship with the Dalit lands. The ownership of land or the lack thereof, is the most rudimentary layer or theme in the multilayered saga of Dalit struggles in India. The commitment of Christian missionaries to the Dalit children and the Dalit lands seems to be the crucial factor in the appreciation of missionary work and its outcome, with regard to the state of the marginalized in India.One would hope that Christian education can facilitate the achievement of Dalit aspirations in this regard, and moreover, that this relationship is more profound, going beyond temporal aspects.

Was the engagement of early Christian missionaries with the marginalizedcastes,Dalits, incidental? Missionary educators as early as 1907 had given up hope on a possible trickle-down phenomenon in education. From the perspective of the missionaries, it was imperative to make the indigenes; the Hindus, realize the futility or waywardness of their superstitions, idolatrous worship and religious practices. When they realized that these religious practices were situated on the bedrock of caste consciousness and traditions, it was determined that they first needed to upset this dynamic. However, the missionaries knew what they were up against and also were quick to accept that they were ill equipped for this task. Against the backdrop of such apparently insurmountable difficulty, do the altruistic and charitable notions of caste upliftment and emancipation take form. It is clear that they were not fully able to make up their minds about how to direct or approach evangelization in this context. Hence the varied attempts and apparatus ranging from direct invitation to conversion, to spreading Christian influence through education of the indigenous people. It is true that every approach faced resistance or opposition from all caste groups at some point or the other, overmanner or intent.

The paper by Perumalla and the reflections thereon serve to highlight several questions. Is the marginalized benefitting from a value-based education or are the CHEIs only seen as relatively stable, safe environments where good results alone are coveted? Have they too come to look at CHEIs in the same way as upper classes/elites? Is the endeavour of the Christian educators to emancipate Dalits from caste identification or from the repression and discrimination that follows caste identity? Is it within the purview or sphere of influence of Christian education to facilitate autonomy from social imperatives and caste identity for the marginalized? Do the scheduled castes/Tribes wish to continue to be identified as caste Hindus, remain within the framework, sans the discrimination? Is it possible to acquire such dignity with caste identity and the rest of the caste super structure intact?And finally, is the calculated distance maintained by the marginalized castes with regard to Christian influence working out in their favour?

[11] Joseph Bara, 105

[12] Ibid

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George Thadathil and Terence Mukhia, in their joint work, examines the role of higher education in democratizing people, with a focus on the early missionary work in Darjeeling, in the areas of education, healthcare and economic activity. The paper discusses the possible impact of a Christian education institution in a local community.The missionaries are credited with awakening the political consciousness and enabling the subaltern to challenge the feudal power centres. The examination of missionary work on the hill town of Darjeeling throws up a few interesting questions and observations. The hill people, due to their practical orientation and a positive work ethic, were found to be suitable for some professions, more than others. Are some demographics more suitable to assimilate Christian education? Of all the hill communities in Darjeeling, the Lepchas and sections of Nepalis responded most favourably to Christian ideals. Could it be that one social group is more amenable to evangelization than others? Have the political / religious /cultural climate of the locale favoured CEIs more in some places than others? Rudolf Heredia mentions the 'good soil' (pg. 455) which has deep connotations. Indiscriminate use of models without reference to the recipient community and culture is unlikely to be effective and at times counterproductive.

George Plathottam discusses the Promotion of language and Christian education in Bengal by the early missionaries. The outcome report reads as if it were written today (on education, social reform, women empowerment, girl children). It forces the reader to wonder about the reach and permanency of the effects of the change catalyzed by the missionary work in various fields. Though the missionary institutions survived and continued their work post the missionary era, the momentum achieved during the early years may have withered subsequently. There is no doubt that their work made an impact on the respective communities, however its extent and the sustainability it achieved remain to be critically evaluated and acknowledged.

Evolution of languages and often their extinction are organic processes. If a minority community is scattered or displaced due to social and economic forces and migration, leading to change in their culture and way of life, its language may not be protected without an interactive and close-knit group continuing its use. Unlike a cultural aspect which could be recorded and preserved for posterity, the language, unless in active use, may be as good as lost. As the person adapts and survives in the new environment, their language also is likely to metamorphose or be replaced. External interventions are not likely to prolong the natural life of a language. There is no reason to believe that the language or cultural tradition of a minority community would be superior to one that iswillingly and pragmatically adoptedby the members of such a displaced community and deserves to be specially protected. This is not to endorse predatory practices or imposition of the culture or language of one social group over another, but the natural order that dictates the evolution and at times metamorphosis of cultures, languages and even communities should be taken in stride. The lament which may be born out of sentiment for the quaint and the old is not entirely justified.

The book, after having discussed the historical framework, seeks to evaluate in the later part, the continuing work of the CEIs from a contemporary perspective.

Tom Kunnumpuram, in his paper, 'Empowering marginalized communities – ODL and vocational training', discusses the benefits of ODL programmes and their positive impact on students from marginalized and remote communities. Apart from the congratulatory platitudes and assertions, there seems to be hardly any evidence of the MOOC and ODL formats significantly facilitating skill and knowledge acquisition by students. It is true that a lot of degree certificates are being handed out and the enrollment numbers are growing by the year. The number of students who enrolled for or completed the programme alone may not be evidence enough of the quality of the programme, as there are several

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factors that lead to the choice of a distance programme, in India. The ODL departments even in public universities are currently adjunct entities. Mostly, the resources available at the colleges are just sufficient to cater to the regular students, enrolled to maximum capacity. For all the enthusiasm generated, the current digital infrastructure in India does not support the need at this time with respect to reach, quality and reliability. The ODL system in India still mostly relies on the format of assignments and paper-pencil examinations, with hardly any interactions between the students and the teachers, which were to have been seamlessly and at scale facilitated with internet technologies.Any significant ODL resources will have to be separately allocated, for which specific budgetary provisions, clear and declared intent and objectives, and a sense of purpose are necessary.

A cursory exploration showed hardly anyleading CEIs that offer meaningful ODL programmes that are actively promoted. Even Assam DBU – DBU Global, offers a few generic courses as per their website, and currently most of their efforts are focused on their stated objective of decreasing the physical separation between the educator and the student. However, according to Stephen Mavely, ADBU has an ambitious plan to enroll 3 lakh students online, in the immediate future. Comprehensiveprogrammes would have to be offered to generate interest and subscription, rather than uploading subject specific lectures alone, which would then meet the twin objectives of learning and exerting Christian influence. ODL is popular among urban demography as well, therefore the target population should be well defined. In order topopularize ODL in vocational fields, a network of practical training shops, apprenticeships and workshops in specific industries would have to be created, all of these weaved together to follow a curriculum with specific coursework. These would have been proved to be effective only when the studentsturn employable. The paper remains more of a call to action than an outcome study. CHEIs may need to look at task forces and special/hybrid programmes that target specific populations and regions with restricted access to regular programmes with a Christian influence.

Charlotte Simpson-Veigas, in her paper; 'Jesuits of Calcutta and modern Democratic India', examines the contributions of Jesuits towards education and social action in Bengal. 'Ambedkar exhorted the nation to make Indian political democracy a social democracy; a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity, as the essential principles of life'.[13] How far the national consciousness accepted this call is a matter of reflection. The project at times feels all but abandoned as fault lines across communities and groups are likely widening. The author cites NR Narayana Murthy, who in his 2010 book, 'A Better India - A Better World', wrote that quality higher education institutions in India are limited to a few islands of excellence.[14] Murthy also lamented then, the lack of leaders who could push capitalistic ventures and facilitate an environment that maximises profit making. It appears that his wish was granted soon enough. A complaint against these centres of excellence would be that their contributions to the continued efficacy and vibrancy of democracy in India amount to precious little. A measure of such contribution would be their graduates displaying social consciousness and responsibility in their respective areas of influence.

India has been an independent democracy for almost eight decades. It is no revelation that democracy as practiced in India is at best flawed. It would also not be unfair to state that there is hardly any vibrant and objective public reasoning. Yogendra Yadav recently discussed (The Indian Express)[15] the decline of

[13] Charlotte Simpson-Veigas. *The Jesuits of Calcutta (Bengal) and Modern Democratic India*,363

[14] Narayana Murthy, N.R..*A better India, A better world* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009)

[15] Yogendra yadav. "The poverty of political imagination needs remedy, not mourning". 01 Sep 2024.

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political imagination and reasoning in India. It is interesting how the trajectory of ascent and decline of such capacities, as traced by him, coincide with the trajectory of Christian influence in Indian higher education. The capacity of the Indian society for critical thinking and reasoning has diminished visibly. The mainstreaming of the agency and voice of the marginalized in the public sphere is still a work in progress. The various organs of the government have continued to retain the vestiges of colonial authoritarianism to varying degrees. Educated elite, over the years, have contributed significantly to perpetuating this deficiency. The Jesuits were able to identify and acknowledge the problems of Indian education; especially that of it being hijacked by elites and interest groups, early on. Remedial measures were contemplated and implemented to some extent. The author mentions the Jesuit Social action agenda, drawn up in 1973, towards preparing agents of social change.[16] The intent and the road map were well defined and clear; however, the pursuit of the objective may have languished, mired in practical difficulties.

Simpson-Veigas invokes Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, who in 2010 described the challenges posed by the future, networked world. He highlighted "'The globalization of superficiality'; where one can copy and paste without the need to think critically, write accurately or come to one's own well-thought-out conclusions. This leads to the superficiality of thought, vision, dreams, relationships and convictions".[17] This scourge is already upon us. Generations of learners are graduating with nothing but superficial and incomplete knowledge, pedestrian reasoning abilities, undeveloped critical thinking skills and a stubborn refusal towards independent application of mind. Christian education and ideals can help retain objectivity, and clarity of thought, if the institutions insist on these as learning outcomes and actively encourage learning methods that promote critical thinking. Simpson-Veigas acknowledges the question of the status quo; i.e., CHEIs being instrumental in perpetuating the status quo. She also addresses the charge of Jesuit institutions Europeanizing Indians and that of perpetuating elitism. The new social elites and upper class retain their position and power to a large extent due to their octopus hold on educational opportunities. An honest appraisal, which if undertaken universally by CHEIs, can go a long way towards a reassessment of objectives and course correction. The author calls for continued evaluation of institutions, to better understand whether the structures and policies reflect their overall mission. It is indeed reassuring that the Jesuit Society is seized of the challenges and is continually trying to address those.

Stephen Mavely, the founding Vice-Chancellor of Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU), Guwahati, explains the rationale behind the project, the vision of the University and the efforts being made to achieve the mission. Mavely highlights with a tinge of regret, the transformation of universities into mere agencies trying to ensure employability of their graduates. He discusses the hindrances and pressures faced by Christian educators and the problem of 'invisibility' of CHEIs in the 21st century.[18] However, while grudgingly acknowledging the transformation driven by the market, the author suggests that, in order to remain relevant, CEIs must effectively respond to the fast-changing scenario, and stay in the race.

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www.indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/yogendra-yadav-writes-the-poverty-of-political-imagination-needs-remedy-not-mourning-9534618

[16] Charlotte Simpson-Veigas. *The Jesuits of Calcutta (Bengal) and Modern Democratic India*,367

[17] Ibid, 377. & Nicholas, A..*Speech of the Superior General* (Kolkata: St.Xaviers college, 2011)

[18] Stephen Mavely, *Assam Don Bosco University*, 410

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The paper describes the significant infrastructure development plan of ADBU. Assam is currently embroiled in inter-community tensions and is constantly being pushed to the edge by political brinkmanship. It must be acknowledged that the changed political climate indicates continued turbulence for minority institutions in the immediate future. While recognizing the fact that the autonomous route is the way of the future, it must also be kept in mind that such high-value investments can easily be sieged and held hostage to unreasonable demands. In the face of significant economic and political hurdles, there is not likely to be much manoeuvring space. This is not to discourage large investments in higher education, however, to reclaim the high ground hitherto held by Christian institutions, it may have to be demonstrated to the public and the nation at large that the ethos of Christian teachings remains undiminished. In order to demonstrate unyielding resolve and commitment to democratic values, sacrifices may have to be made, or a 'kenosis undergone',[19] as characterized by Heredia, in the confrontation that will ensue. I doubt that such large projects can take such risks. The muzzling of Ashoka University is a case in point. Mavely hopes for Christian universities and institutions to be at the forefront of new global thinking and expects a 'two-way' movement of students between the first and the third worlds. ADBU is off to a great start with an admirable vision and a challenging mission. One hopes to witness its radiance as a beacon of liberal Christian ideals in the country.

Pius V Thomas, in his paper, 'The Christian Educational Institutions and the Christian Identity'; which is a part of the summations of the book, echoes Stephen Mavely as he points out the crisis in Higher education in India. This crisis, according to him, emerges from the pressure to promote a system making cheap HR for labour markets and also from the failure to facilitate a rights-based, liberal and democratic educational and social climate. He flags the decontextualization of knowledge, commercialization of education, and disincentivizing of critical thinking and liberal ideas. Education is no longer the lynchpin that supports our social economy. Peter DeSouza also calls for an objective evaluation by the CEIs to reconcile their current trajectory with the definitive objectives of their Christian mission.[20]

Thomas discusses the interdisciplinary dimension of education while criticizing[21] the changed stance of educational institutions towards merely market-oriented knowledge creation and dissemination, while ignoring research-oriented education. Stephen Mavely does attempt to clarify the position of CEIs to some extent, by explaining the need and efforts to balance the scale while at the same time negotiating the rapidly evolving global scenario. Thomas says that the true nature of knowledge is inherently interdisciplinary and makes the case for developing interdisciplinary competence through higher education. He argues for the facilitation of interdisciplinary knowledge creation and dissemination, and charges CEIs with the responsibility to lead the efforts. This concept is indeed gaining traction in the country at this time with new policy initiatives. CEIs should anticipate demand from the environment and reposition themselves correctly. The influence or lack thereof of CEIs in policy formulation assumes significance in this regard.

CEIs are accused of disregarding their educational ideals by the minority rights guaranteed by the constitution and of their perceived lack of responsiveness to social justice concerns. How CEIs reconcile secularism and minority rights concerning agency and identity is called into question. This issue may

[19] Rudolf C Heredia, *Christian education and modern India*, 447, 466

[20] Peter Ronald DeSouza, *Foreword*, xvi

[21] Pius V Thomas. *The CEIs and the Christian identity*, 422

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have come into sharper focus with their venturing into self-financing professional educational institutions. CEIs should consistently reconcile the vision and motivations behind such projects with the measured outcomes. While discussing agency and identity, Thomas encourages CEIs to help in evolving a democratic Christian identity. He also discusses secularism and nationalism, highlighting different perspectives in the debate, in the Indian context. He calls for a democracy that facilitates secularism aligned with ethical religiosity and the development of a democratic identity. The argument is compelling. The concept of the public sphere as introduced by J Habermas is discussed to evaluate application in the context of the current reality.[22] According to Habermas, "large economic and government organizations took over the bourgeois public sphere (social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power), while citizens became content to become primarily consumers of goods, services, political administration and spectacle, dedicating themselves more to passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation".[23] One can see how this may resonate with contemporary Indian socio-political scenarios.

The concept of counter-public as an alternative to maintain the Christian democratic identity and take forward the dialogue in an alternative discursive arena created by the marginalized, as proposed by Thomas, feels like a retreat, a defensive manoeuvre. The loss of direct engagement in the public sphere, the loss of discursive space, may be catastrophic, and irretrievable in today's fast-evolving social economy. Dominant forces opposed to Christian ideals are strong and persistent enough to wipe and rewrite the collective consciousness of the nation. While social dialogue is imperative, it needs to be acknowledged that the issue faced by Christian identity is not that of a lack of understanding of other cultures or unwillingness to engage in dialogue. It is the lack of space for such engagement, of marginalization and exclusion from the public sphere and policy discussions. Rudolf Heredia states unambiguously the opposition and hostility towards Christian presence in education in India, even by secular rationalists.[24] The intercultural counter public as explained in the context of Kerala may have run its course, finding its democratic identity in the self-affirming phase, as concluded by the author. Hence forceful promotion and maintenance of identity-affirming public sphere intent, as the author suggests, should enable ethical interventions to defend and protect minority rights. He encourages the CEIs to attune their educational intent to this frequency, to initiate a constantly renewing, self-reflecting dialogue to contribute to strengthening Indian democracy. We have to trust that CEIs are seized of this imperative and substantial investments are being made to foster, nurture and carve out spaces, which will help in influencing the public imagination and the discourse on democracy in India, such as being done by ADBU and many others. It is the challenge to which CEIs and the Christian community in general must rise.

'Christian education and modern India - Hermeneutical reflections or reorientation' is the last chapter of the book, effectively summing up its arguments and insights. The paper by Rudolf C Heredia, attempts to call out and tackle issues within the community and emphasizes the need for innovation and rising up to the current challenges. Heredia calls out the hostility of the secular rationalists and the

[22] Ibid, 431

[23] Ibid, 439 & Juergen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. (Trans:Thomas Burger, 1998)

[24] Rudolf Heredia, *Christian education and modern India*, 447

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majoritarian agenda while at the same time warns the minority communities against the traps of exclusivity, reactionary isolation and minorityism. He invites the minority communities to introspection and calls for sensitivity towards other communities. Heredia points out how the CEIs may be losing the plot, by sticking to past practices and refusing to innovate, thereby inviting marginalization.

The convent school model is mentioned by Heredia and other authors. It may be worthwhile to evaluate the success of the convent education model and the reasons for its popularity in 20th century India. The conservative elites and upper castes identified with the strictures and cloistered format of a convent, though they were largely unconcerned about the faith and mission of the nuns. They found the ostentatious discipline appealing, approved of the exclusivity and sanitized spaces, afforded by the model, which helped to promote class consciousness and status quo. Add to this the lure of English language education as imparted by these institutions, seen as somehow more authentic, because of the identification of Christianity as a western religion. Convent schools and CHEIs were tranquil oasis within chaotic Indian cities and towns, where higher and nobler pursuits were possible, undisturbed by the sights and sounds of pedestrian India. CEIs may have played into the hands of conservative Hinduism, while largely failing to influence the constituent societies positively. It would be fruitful to examine why they may not have helped significantly in introducing egalitarianism where none existed in the first place or how they fared in dealing with caste/class identities. Heredia mentions "the reverse influence the constituencies may have had on the providers";[25] a notion which has significant importance for CEIs. The convent school model may have been imitated poorly, deceiving the gullible, but the imitators hardly can achieve the genuineness of these institutions. The life-long, selfless commitment and dedication of the nuns are but impossible to be replicated by fleeting business interests. The convent schools were revered because they were true to form and intent. Their imitators can compete only if the originals are corrupted. It may not be their model of pedagogy that attracted the populace, but the visible form and the virtues attached to it. Heredia seems to acknowledge this and exhorts CEIs to innovate and reclaim lost space.

Heredia warns against the tendency to rest on past laurels and calls for mining inspiration from the past and creatively innovating to shape the future. He discusses the dichotomy in the functions of education and how to decide the best in the Indian context, considering contemporary challenges. He laments the breakdown of Nehruvian consensus and the ascent of majoritarianism, which had been waiting in the wings all along, and the resultant capture of spaces for knowledge creation and dissemination, along with the deepening of class divisions affecting educational institutions. He is convinced that the only solution is a pluralistic approach where diversity takes centre-stage in any policy debate. The debate needs to be framed as an issue of diversity and social transformation with development, employability and social mobility, with CEIs entering the discussion, influencing the discourse and the policy sphere.

CEIs are accused of reinforcing the status quo in the Indian social sphere where they had some influence, not without substance. Creating economic value and establishing legacies must stop becoming priorities as these are temporal investments which may have to be protected with compromises. The Christian values and ideals that the institution seeks to impart must not become collateral damage in the fight for survival. An institution surviving on compromise is not adding value to society, it is churning out timid tools of production thereby perpetuating the status quo and associated evils it started out to combat. Apeksha Yadav (Delhi University), in her recent article in The Wire,[26] says that the upper castes have

[25] Ibid, 456

[26] Apeksha Yadav. "*Why the pedagogy of dissent is explicitly prohibited in India academia*" (The Wire, 22 Aug 2024). www.thewire.in/livewire/why-the-the-pedagogy-of-dissent-is-explicitly-prohibited-in-indian-academia

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cornered the academic spaces and attempt to delegitimize any knowledge produced by others. The institutionnormalizes and promotes the 'common sense' or conventional 'truth' which is all too often nothing but the imposed conventions of hegemonic groups; as characterized by Heredia, that legitimizes the hegemony of the oppressors and undermines democratic ideals. Have CHEIs, over time ceded space and surrendered the right to create and disseminate knowledge to the dominant groups?

The author calls for a shift in the way the dilemmas and contradictions are viewed and calls for innovative responses that may help create a new institutional model. The contradiction between the proclaimed vision and the adopted practices points to structural dysfunction, according to Heredia, and must be addressed courageously. In the current scenario, is it possible to find a balance, a dialectical go-between? The closing of the Indian mind has been centuries in the making. The notions of merit and talent being held as cover for inadequate training should be called into question and redefined. If incremental progress is what is being aimed for, with powerful forces in opposition, regression is likely in the offing. Paying lip service to the ideals pursued by the pioneers, while cynically adopting a policy of exclusion or favouritism will only help to further mediocrity. In essence, CEIs cannot afford to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

Heredia also explores the practical possibilities for future institutional models. "The Christian community is too small to change Indian education with any pretense of quantitative input",[27] Heredia acknowledges. But a qualitative impact with a niche model with seed value will be possible and shall certainly be emulated by some part of the mainstream due to a subconscious or normative acceptance of the virtues CEIs stand for. Individual level influence is significant as CEIs have demonstrated with its distinguished alumni. Christian education needs to identify the good seeds and fertile soil, which can be achieved through proper selection of potential agents of social change through innovative processes and by empowering them with the tools for societal transformation. CEIs have run some of the best residential schools and colleges in India and should be able to draw from their experience. ADBU, with its vision of constant contact with the student, may be able to successfully resurrect this model.

Strategic course correction, with a drawing-board level review, needs to be undertaken. There is likely to be a reflexive aversion to this seemingly conservative or fundamentalist pivot. Every reversion to first principles need not be necessarily fundamentalist. CEIs need to shed the baggage acquired over the last half-century; imposing edifices and comfortable classrooms must not come at the cost of the deserving; legacies and continuity matters less than the values imparted. There is no competing with the private-industrialist-educator except in the arena of content and quality of education. "It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to implement radical educational reforms which threaten the existing social structure or run counter to its imperatives",[28] as Heredia quotes. This calls for the courage and confidence of the early Christian pioneers. The struggle for the preservation of Indian secular democracy and the legacy that paved the way for its institution, as Peter De Souza says, is for everyone who has been a proponent or beneficiary of it, to be a part of.

According to Rudolf Heredia, "the saga of Christian education has been told in bits and pieces and has yet to develop into a credible narrative in our public consciousness".[29] This book is a significant step

[27] Ibid, 459

[28] Ibid, 462 & Citizens for democracy, Education for our people, (Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 1978)

[29] Rudolf Heredia, *Christian education and modern India*, 450

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in that direction. It is also testament to the fact that academic treatment of esoteric pedagogical issues apart, the scholars and experts of Christian education are seized of the matters that seem pedestrian, yet of vital interest to the layperson. The editor succeeds in weaving together apparently distinct threads to provide a comprehensive and contextualized account of the impact of Christian education introducing and nurturing democratic and liberal values through Christian ideals, along with all its symmetries and contradictions.