

FCI

St Thomas of India Unity Lecture 2006

MODELS OF LEADERSHIP IN THE INDIAN CHURCH An Evaluation

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Father Monodeep Daniel, a Member of the Delhi Brotherhood of the Ascended Christ and Chief Executive of their Social Development Programme, gave the 'St Thomas Unity Lecture', at the invitation of the Friends of the Church in India, in six different centres in the UK in May 2006. *Here is a brief summary.*

THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

Over six millennia in India, one element is constant: the hierarchical social structure called caste. Leadership in the contemporary Protestant church in North India cannot be properly understood apart from this cultural reality of caste.

Caste is understood as a social group that is endogamous, engages in a specific type of occupation, and relates to other caste groups in a manner appropriate to this hierarchical structure. Furthermore, it involves the practice of untouchability based on the notion of ritual purity and pollution. So, the social groups that consider themselves to be superior avoid the possibility of physical touch with the social groups that are deemed polluted and polluting. Some groups, therefore, are socially excluded from the main stream; they describe themselves as Dalit.

THE ORIGINS OF CASTE

These are variously described by scholars but mostly leadership in the caste system is seen in terms of **Authority**

Caste's existence, whatever its origins, was eventually sanctioned by the hymn of creation in the *Rig Veda* that describes the sacrifice of *Prajapati* out of whose body the four varnas were said to have sprung: the *brahmans* out of his mouth, the *kshatriyas* out of his arms, the *vaishyas* out of his thighs and the lowest, set to serve the others, *shudras* out of his feet. No mention is made of those outside this four-fold system. Thus was justified the monopoly of power of the three upper groups, the power of the few over the large majority. **Leadership is seen as possessing Authority.**

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

From the fourth century BCE, with the rise of Jain and Buddhist philosophical thought, the authority of the Vedas, the *Puranas* and the graded hierarchy of

society were all challenged and the world of established caste was turned upside down especially with the rise of the *Maurya* dynasty and the Emperor Ashoka.

ASHOKA OF THE MAURYA DYNASTY & MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP

The dynasty, established by conquest in 321 BCE, found its greatest king in Ashoka. But the conquests and the suffering they caused greatly distressed Ashoka: in a consequent edict, his salient moral premise was that all destruction of life, human and animal, and all suffering – no matter how small – are regrettable and to be avoided; this was stated regardless of caste.

Here we note that a leader uses his absolute authority and sets an example of benevolent rule over his subjects. It is a very desirable model of *Ministerial* leadership.

AKBAR OF THE MUGHAL DYNASTY & MAGISTERIAL LEADERSHIP

By 1556 when Akbar came to the throne the Mughal Empire had shrunk so he set out to recover the losses not by force but diplomacy. His initiatives were not in accordance with caste customs. He tried to establish a religion that incorporated both Islam and Hinduism, as well as elements of Christianity and Jainism and attempted to liberate knowledge from the oppressive grip of Sanskrit.

In the case of Akbar, his leadership in diplomatic endeavours and his practice of tolerance were aimed to maintain the unity of the empire in a *Magisterial* role.

THE RISE OF MODERN INDIA

PUNDITA RAMABAI AND MANAGERIAL LEADERSHIP

My third model is exemplified by Pundita Ramabai, the youngest daughter of a liberal, progressive Brahmin family. Against tradition, her father taught her Sanskrit and the Hindu scriptures. She married a non-Brahmin Bengali; among his books she read the Gospel of Luke, received instruction, became convinced of the truth of the Christian faith and was baptized. She translated the Bible into Marathi from the original Hebrew and Greek. As a nationalist she was the first woman to address the Indian National Congress. In Mumbai she established Sharad Sadan for women of all caste communities and also a number of schools to educate women. She is now remembered as a nationalist, educationalist and an emancipator of women.

In the work and life of Pandita Ramabai we see a great organizer of relief work, administration of Women's Homes and educational institutions. She sets an example of a *Managerial* model of leadership.

DR B.R. AMBEDKAR & TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

My fourth model is that of Dr B.R.Ambedkar. Of low caste, he became a brilliant scholar and was appointed Chief of the Finance Ministry of the Rajah of Baroda. Yet his subordinates would not touch him or have him near them: clerks would throw papers from a distance onto his table for him to sign. This was the beginning of his struggle. In 1923 he founded *Bahishkrit Hitkaraini Sabhato* encourage outcastes to educate themselves and to improve their economic status and his successful march at Mahad to assert the right of Dalits to taste water at the Public Chawdar Lake, traditionally prohibited to them, marked the beginning of the anti-caste movement in India. He held that "Political power alone could not be a panacea for the ills of the depressed classes. Their salvation lay in social elevation". He said, "educate, agitate and organize, have faith in yourself . . . ours is a battle not for wealth nor for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality."

To ensure justice and dignity to the Dalit people Ambedkar strove for the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of the State Policy in the Constitution of India. This provision protects the Dalit people from disabilities caused due to social degradation and economic disadvantage.

Noting that it was from within the Hindu fold that the Dalit people were being stripped of their dignity, he proposed: CONVERSION TO AN EGALITARIAN RELIGION. He said that he was born a Hindu and there was nothing he could do about that. But he could do something! Taking a deep breath, he boomed, "I solemnly assure you, I will not die a Hindu!" There were some indications that Dr Ambedkar would embrace Christianity; but on 14th October 1956, Ambedkar along with his 30,000 followers embraced Buddhism.

Dr Ambedkar set a model of *Transformational* leadership. The aim of transformation was not only to bring a change in human behaviour but also in the human society.

AN ASSESSMENT OF INDIAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

These four leadership models grew mostly in the context of feudal India, before the rise of democracy, welfare governments, free Press and Human Rights. The Indian Church was also established in a feudal and pre-democratic India, initially, perhaps, by Thomas the Apostle in the year 52 AD; then came the Orthodox Church; then later the Roman Catholic Church;

and finally (after the small scale Ziegenbalg initiative) came the Protestant missions from the nineteenth century onwards.

From Independence onwards and the uniting formation of the Church of South India in 1947, the Indian Church was to be an integral part of the independent Republic of India; and indigenization of its own governance was part of those developments. And in the North came the Church of North India in 1970, a post-denominational, united and indigenous church governed by democratic process at each level, i.e. the Pastorate, the Diocesan and the Synodical. It draws 90% of its membership from the Dalit and Indigenous people of India.

However, in spite of the intended "democratic process" at each level, the organizational structure of the CNI is hierarchical. The ordained Ministers are privileged to preside at gatherings whether administrative or sacramental; the rite of ordination grants to Ministers a permanent legitimacy that, I consider, fences them off to a degree from the people.

The CNI Constitution reads, "The ordained ministry of the Church has descended from Christ and His apostles, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit continues to derive its authority in the Church from Christ. The minister is in his own charge the representative of the Church as a whole, and also represents his own charge to the Church as a whole".

Therefore, the leadership that entails everything from shepherding to governing is in the hands of the few – the ordained clerics. To cite the Constitution again and crucially: "The authority of the whole church shall be represented in ordination". So leadership comes to be understood and exercised as possession of 'authority' in the hands of the few. This is precisely what the caste structure of India establishes.

The consequences, at times, can be high-handedness, authoritarianism, monopolization of public resources, inefficiency and the temptations of corruption and nepotism with consequent loss of empowerment to the laity so that identifying, nurturing and electing befitting leaders, which should be the norm, has hardly been possible. The Dalit church, alas, too often emulates the caste society surrounding it. The constitutional provisions tend to reinforce these weaknesses.

It is clear that the magisterial, managerial and ministerial models of leadership within the Church of North India do not adequately seek the social transformation of the country. Certainly, there are praiseworthy undertakings in the field of relief, development and charity; and some of these encourage people participation. However, these all come within the ambit of managerial

and ministerial leadership; they are significant and needed, but they do not bring about social transformation.

REDISCOVERING DR B.R. AMBEDKAR

We therefore need to rediscover Dr Ambedkar as a prophetic figure: In his conversation with Bishop Pickett in 1935, he pointed out that the Christian missions in India were poor representatives of Jesus for at least three reasons:

First, many missionaries had compromised with Brahmins, giving Hinduism a respect it did not deserve. Instead of listening to Brahmins they should have, like Jesus, been attuned to the cries of the oppressed.

Second, Christians in India were too "otherworldly"; Jesus was interested in all kinds of human needs, but missionaries were more concerned with salvation from a perspective of hell.

Third, missionaries had not adequately adapted their methods to the Indian social order and had, thus, produced leader with little social conscience.

Dr Ambedkar wanted "equality and removal of all discriminations based on caste". His challenge entails social change. He asked Bishop Pickett, "I want to know what the Christian church can do and is prepared to do to remove the disabilities under which my people live". On the anvil of this challenge we need to measure the life and witness of the church.

SIGNS OF HOPE AND SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

In February in Raipur 2006 there was a very well attended "People's Synod", a direct result of the Chattisgarh Christian Convention; this exemplified "the model of counter-leadership within the Church".

A second "example of hope" was the rise and growth of the Dalit Avatari group who refer to Jesus as the Dalit Avatar of God . . . This dynamic movement was started in 1984 in western and central Uttar Pradesh with 4000 scattered Bhangi Christian villagers. They sense pastoral neglect, have young adult leadership, have a longing for religion but steer clear of institutional form. This "Dalit Avatari Movement of liberated untouchable Bhangis is an exemplary model of alternative leadership outside the Church".

***Editorial note:** It is problematic for the FCI, based 5000 miles away from India, to be the 'messenger' for certain detailed critical references to aspects of the CNI in the original lecture, so we omit them; hence the account above of the 'People's Synod' and the Dalit Avatari group is extremely abbreviated*

THE CHALLENGE FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IN INDIA

The idea of social transformation is not absent from the thoughts of the leaders of the Indian church. This is evident from the concluding words of the CNI Mission Conference of July 2005, "Standing firm . . . to . . . work together for the transformation of India through the Gospel".

So leaders must identify the silent victims of the caste system or they will not be able to address their needs. The solidarity with the struggles of the victims (Philemon v10) and becoming the voice of the voiceless (Proverbs 31v8-9) whenever necessary, is the basic requirement of those in leadership. It also entails that those who exercise leadership will not surrender till they lead justice to victory, (Matthew 12.v20), in terms of equality, liberty, fraternity and dignity. It needs leaders with courage (Acts 4v13) to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4v15) without fear or favour (Galatians 1v10) till India is led to a thorough transformation in genuine tears of repentance.

Violence against Dalits and indigenous people has made parts of India a fertile ground of Naxalite and Maoist terrorism. The Church is a stakeholder in the conflicts of her people's struggle; but the demands of the Church seem to be for managers, ministers and magistrates whereas the contextual issues are of caste and degradation, poverty and inequality, oppression and exploitation, exclusion and negligence requiring a different kind of leadership. If such leadership is lacking, the church community can seem to imitate the values of the oppressive caste structured society.

I put forward three requirements. Firstly, the ultimate goal of all inner Church activities and its outreach programmes in society must tend towards the abolition of the caste system. Leaders must unhesitatingly encourage such action. Secondly, the discriminatory nature of the Reservation Policy of the Government especially against the Christians of Dalit origin must be opposed; Dalits must be free to choose any religion without fear of losing the benefits of reservation. Thirdly, all institutions under church management must admit 50% Dalit Christians as compensation for the social discrimination they face in the main stream of society. The methods and strategies for this purpose must include networking with similarly minded Christian, Dalit and secular voluntary organizations.

Christian leaders with such concerns will be in harmony with Dr Ambedkar who wrote in the 1949 Official Report to the Constituent Assembly:

"On 26th January 1950 we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will be recognizing one-person, one vote and one vote, one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one-person one value.

How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy, which this Assembly has so laboriously built up."

[This is a synopsis of the lecture prepared by the Revd J.D. Clapham, the previous Editor of 'Pilgrim', to whom we are very grateful.]