

The Empire, Powerlessness and Power of the Oppressed: Focus on North East India

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Abstract

This paper analysis North East India context on the cause of the oppressed ones regarding Christian's duties. This paper attempts to highlight how the empire structures make indigenous people become powerless, especially referring to the struggle of people in North East India. A section highlights how Christianity and modern development activities contributes to colonization to show that Christian needs to liberate from empire's mindset. The paper also argues that concrete location for transformative action is the margins. Without locating in the margin's context, we would run the risk of serving the interests of the empire. Finally, the paper concludes with the power of oppressed people for transformation.

Key-words: religion; empire; oppression; liberation; North East India.

O império, a impotência e o poder do oprimido: foco no nordeste da Índia

Resumo

Este artigo analisa o contexto do nordeste da Índia sobre a causa dos oprimidos em relação aos deveres do cristão. E tenta destacar como as estruturas do império fazem com que os povos locais se tornem impotentes, especialmente se referindo à luta das pessoas no nordeste da Índia. Ele destaca como o cristianismo e as atividades modernas de desenvolvimento contribuem para a colonização, na tentativa de mostrar que o cristão precisa se libertar da mentalidade do império. O artigo também argumenta que a localização concreta da ação transformadora é a das margens. Sem nos situarmos no contexto da margem, correríamos o risco de servir aos interesses do império. Finalmente, o artigo conclui com o poder do povo oprimido para a transformação da situação atual.

Palavras-chave: religião; império; opressão; libertação; Nordeste da Índia.

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El imperio, la impotencia y el poder de los oprimidos: enfoque en el noreste de la India

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el contexto del noreste de la India sobre la causa de los oprimidos con respecto a los deberes cristianos. Intenta destacar cómo las estructuras del imperio hacen que los pueblos indígenas se vuelvan impotentes, especialmente en relación con la lucha de los pueblos en el noreste de la India. Se destaca cómo el cristianismo y las actividades de desarrollo moderno contribuyen a la colonización para mostrar que los cristianos necesitan liberarse de la mentalidad del imperio. En el trabajo se sostiene que la ubicación concreta para la acción transformadora son los límites, donde sin esa ubicación en el contexto del límite, se corre el riesgo de servir los intereses del imperio. Finalmente, se concluye con el poder de los oprimidos para la transformación.

Palabras clave: religión; imperio; opresión; liberación; Noreste de la India.

Introduction

God told prophet Ezekiel,

“Tell my people, `God says: I'll bring your hope back to life – O my people! I have given that responsibility to the people who still have love and compassion in their hearts. When they bring your hopes for justice back to life, you'll realize that I am God. I'll breathe life into you, and you'll live. Then I'll lead you to straight back to a time of justice, and you'll realize that I am God. I've said it, and I'll do it – God's Decree.”

“God grabbed me. God's Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them – a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain – dry bones, bleached with by the sun”

“God said to me, `Can these bones live?’

“I said, `God, only you know that.’

“God said to me, `Prophecy over these bones: “Dry bones, listen to the message of God!”Ezek.37:1-5.

The passage reflects situation of hopelessness and despair of oppressed people. People in exile were living like dry bone under the bondage of empire without hope. Seeing people without land, without political right, without identity, Ezekiel felt despair. “Can these bones really be brought back to life?” God, only you know that. Dry bones represent powerlessness. Restoring justice to the powerless people is divine imperative. This paper attempts to highlight how the empire structures make indigenous people become powerless, especially referring to the struggle of people in North

East India. A section highlights how Christianity and modern development activities contributes to colonization to show that Christian needs to liberate from empire's mindset. The paper also argues that concrete location for transformative action is the margins. Without locating in the margin's context, we would run the risk of serving the interests of the empire. Finally, the paper concludes with the power of oppressed people for transformation.

Oppression under the Empire Structure

The Empire refers to unjust structure/institution and mind-set. This includes ideologies, cultural practices, economic, social and political structures. The empire defined the value system and imposed upon the others. It has different layers. We can broadly categorize them into two - The domineering structure where a group of people or a few individuals exert maximum power to dominate the other. They set the norms for the other based on the structure they created for their exclusive interest. The other group is the dominated ones who are made to servitude and suffer exclusion. This empire power structure excludes the other to marginality. Oppression is justified by manipulating religion and God. The other personhood is controlled by the empire. For example,

- **Anthropocentrism** excludes other segments of God's creation. Affirming humanity as the point of reference, the empire denies integrity of God's creation. The nature is mere object for gaze and enjoyment. It is a commodity. In the empire value judgment, the world and its resources are thus mere object to be exploited and abused.
- **Androcentrism** defines women as meek, inferior and weak. Women are subordinate to men. Affirming male's superiority, women are excluded from the leadership role in the church and society. Women are objectified as mere property and forced into the cheap labour and flesh market.
- **Racism** defines black, people of colour and indigenous people as less valuable. Affirming white superiority, the others are seen as inferior, incapable, ugly, lazy, not intelligent and less valuable. The most disrespectful one is commercialization of their culture. Musicians, dancers and other artists perform, exhibit and sell their creativity to earn some income, at the cost of their self-respect.

- **Casteism** defines and excludes dalit, adivasi and other backward classes from power structure of society and religious life by imposing false doctrine of pollution. Affirming the superiority of Brahmin and other high castes, the dalit and Other Backward Communities (OBC) are denied of right to life and treat them as slaves;
- **Ableism** excludes persons with disabilities from the mainstream society. Affirming perfectionist, prosperity theology and abled construct ideology and society, Persons with Disabilities (PwD) are seen as dependent, inferior, sinner, and cursed by God.
- **Heterosexism** excludes LGBTIQ from the mainstream society and the right to family life. Affirming heterosexual alone is divine creation and normal, the OTHER sexual experiences are considered as abnormal, psychologically sick and deny them justice and right to life.

These are empire structures and they are built on false ideology. Religion, culture and God are manipulated. It is sustained because of manipulative legal system, forced occupation, intentional misrepresentation. Social power structure is organized in which the others are defined as inferior, not intelligent, weak, incapable, unclean and impure, uncivilized, backward and primitive. Thus, subjugation of the other is divine will. This false presuppositions, beliefs and institutions are created by the empire to protect their vested interests. It is within this framework of empire that the Indigenous people struggle for justice needs to be located.

Colonization of Indigenous Territory, Culture and Language

Affirming the same empire value system, colonization was/is justified. Colonization refers to exercise of power and control over one people by another. It is both the formal and informal methods (behaviors, ideologies, institutions, policies, and economics) that maintain the subjugation or exploitation of indigenous peoples, lands, and resources. (WAZIYATAWIN & YELLOW BIRD^{2008, p. 2}) The first phase of colonizing process involves land or territory confiscation of others militarily or sometimes through diplomatic dialogue or treaty agreement. In many cases, colonized people are forcefully evicted; sometimes creating fear and tension to drive them away often in the name of religion, national integration and interest. In extreme cases, the

whole community is genocide to take over the land and its resources. With the loss of land which is the main source of their livelihood, indigenous people are forced to live in abject poverty. Along with the loss of land, their cultural pattern disrupted leading to identity crisis. However, for the empire, colonization is divine providence to spread the Gospel of Jesus to the “heathen” and the “dark world”. In the name of civilizing them in their own terms, killing, domination and confiscation of land is justified. In this colonizing process, the oppressed people are denied access to their own resources, rights, economic, political, cultural, religious and social activities. This denial affects both the quality of life of individuals and society. They are always at the receiving end as they are treated as objects and they bear the brunt of the empire unjust structures and social system.

After disarming and controlling the territory, the second phase of colonization process is imposed which is called cultural and social colonization. Robert Odawi Porter expounds the process of cultural colonization as follows:

Cultural change at this level could be called “acculturation” or “assimilation” but the more accurate term is “social engineering”. At first, the colonizer uses violence to force the colonized people to change who are as people. This occurs through the application of new laws and punishments that outlaw traditional behaviors, such as religious practices, dancing, and certain family and marital relations. The next phase is equally as violent, but takes the less overtly threatening form of taking children away from their home and raising them in the colonizer’s educational institutions. This “educational” process, often referred to as “promoting civilization,” involves beating, hard labor, and psychological abuse. The “benefit” associated with this is that the seeds of the colonizer’s culture are planted deeply in Indigenous Peoples at a very early age. (WAZIYATAWIN & YELLOW BIRD^{2008, p. 89})

Social and cultural colonization is done in several ways. First, the empire will change the name of the native villages, towns and even mountains and rivers. The people will not be allowed to identify by their indigenous names; but the empire will give them a new name. This process was strategically done in countries like Taiwan, Australia, Argentina and many countries. Second, the indigenous names, icons, symbols and cultural practices will be replaced or used by empire in an undignified, demeaning purpose to inculcate feeling of lower self-esteem and negative image of their culture and wisdoms. (HARIO, 2008, p. 31) In some cases, people would be

forced to change their religious beliefs, educational practices, economic and political system.

Language is power. Language is one of the greatest gifts of God. It gives an identity to a particular community and it is through the language we analyse, express and relate to the world around us. A major function of language is to act as reservoir of people's identity and self-expression. It helps people to dream their future and assists them to articulate their hopes and visions of new society. Language is also one of the most important social agencies that create feelings of community by providing distinct cultural identity. (JOSEPH, no year, p. 6) Recognizing the power of language, the empire, in the name of national integration, people are not allowed to speak their own language. In the case of Taiwan and Australia, indigenous people were punished for speaking their own language.

The empire value system denies right to life to many indigenous people all over the world. We may cite some examples:

1. The Kingdom of Nepal claims that it is the only "Hindu Kingdom" in the world. This claim denies the existence of about 30 tribal communities. The Govt. of Nepal denied not only the existence of the indigenous people, but they also try to wipe out the tribal culture and traditions by declaring the slash and burn cultivation as illegal. The tribal culture and traditions are deeply rooted on the rotation of agriculture and cycle of nature. It is not only culture and spirituality, but also people who depended on the forest for centuries have become landless, foodless, waterless and homeless soon. The intention was to create a labour community who will survive by selling their labour power and bodies.
2. In the name of national integration, peace and harmony the present Government does not allow to teach ethnic languages in Myanmar. Children are denied to learn, write and speak in their own mother tongue.
3. The indigenous people in Thailand like Laos, Karen, etc have been living for centuries in their home land. But today many are struggling to obtain Thai citizenship. In their ancestral home, they are being denied of citizenship. Their forests have beentaken over by the Govt. They cannot hunt, fish and cultivate in their ancestral land.

4. The Japanese Govt. has declared that there is only one homogenous community in Japan denying the existence of indigenous people like Ainus.
5. In Medan city in Indonesia, the indigenous people were/are denied to construct their worship places till today because the Government of Indonesia does not recognize Indigenous religion as distinct spirituality.
6. Thousands of indigenous communities have been evacuated by Govt. of Taiwan from their ancestral land to develop park and wild life sanctuary.
7. The indigenous people in Sri Lanka, North East India and many parts of the world kill each other because of divide and rule policy by the empire.

Christianity and Colonization

Christianity spread applauding empire's ideology. Upholding that empire culture as 'superior' in terms of religion, race, political structure, economic system and culture, missionaries went across the world;¹ they saw the 'others' as primitive, uncultured, uncivilized people and thus need "civilizing". Indigenous people were seen as people without culture or inferior culture, savage life-styles and ways of life. Indigenous people's religion and spirituality was thus derided as demonic, superstitious and evil. They saw the 'others' as the world to be conquered by Christian faith. Some missionaries even went on to the extent of banning indigenous people musical instruments – drum, flute – songs, dances making them rootless and nameless. Seeing that colonial power and Christianity working hand and hand, Waziyatawin criticized the motive of Bible translation. To quote:

While most invading Europeans never attempted to learn or understand Indigenous languages, when they did they often did so only to facilitate the conversion of Indigenous Peoples to Christianity. If missionaries could deliver sermons in an Indigenous language, more potential converts could be reached. Among such missionaries, indigenous orthographies were often quickly created so that the Bible could be translated and printed in the

¹ One cannot deny the contributions of western missionaries towards the transformation of indigenous people. They were able to create a new sense of identity and dignity by introducing a new ecclesial structure, new faith and providing them with literature, to name a few. Modern education and medical services introduced by them are acknowledged by all.

Indigenous language. This practice was not developed out of love or respect for indigenous language; it was developed to more rapidly acquire souls for Christianity's kingdom. When indigenous people converted to Christianity, they were expected to learn the colonizer's language, whether it was Spanish, English, or French. (JOSEPH, no year, p. 113)

This shows the perception of superiority-inferiority value system. The empire value system imposed on indigenous people have made tremendous negative impact on their life and culture. Indigenous people also internalized inferiority complex in regard to their culture. The idealization of the empire's culture and religion have brought the greatest damage to God's rich blessing of cultures. Even today many indigenous people think that their religion, spirituality, economy and culture are inferior and backward, and aspire to adopt empire's lifestyle.

Internalization of indigenous culture as inferior and empire culture as superior is one of the greatest threats for the existence of indigenous community today. I had a privilege of facilitating Training in Mission (TIM) program of the Council for World Mission (CWM), both in India, Taiwan and Fiji. Students mostly come from Asia, Africa, Pacific and Caribbean countries. Once I asked them to define "beauty" and their answers were – fair, slim, long hair, long leg, good breast, pointed nose, etc. All these answers depict western influenced beauty norms. I told them that they are excluding majority of the humanity – the black, brown and yellow – because their definition reflects "white is superior" mindset. Once I also posed a question "Slaves were taken out from Africa", True or False? All ten TIM students including those from Africa said, True. Then, I reversed the quote, "Good and innocent people were forcefully kidnapped from Africa and made them into slaves by the colonizer." They said the reversed sentence is True. If children were asked to color the pictures of angel and devil, they will color white for the angel and black for the devil. We have several books entitled *From Darkness to Light* depicting superiority of white. We often affirm saying "He/she is the black sheep in the family". When I asked students at Yushan seminary to put down words associated with "religion", they would normally write – God, scriptures, temples, prayers, singing, ethical life, Lord's supper, chapel, preaching, etc. Though most of them are indigenous students, they would not mention land, water, ocean, mountain, myths, stories, oral tradition, dance, drum, animals, trees, rock, community life, sharing, etc. This shows

how deeply the empire mindset has taken root in our ways of thinking and perception. Theology is also articulated from empire's lenses.

Development, Denial and Subjugation

The empire development ideology is rooted on the conquest of nature and the demonization of indigenous people's spirituality which is rooted on the land. The empire visualizes a highly mechanized and industrialized society. The booming of economic progress, high-tech and throw-away life-style is perceived as attainment of higher quality of life. Material growth is seen as the only principle of liberation. This paradigm of development is a serious threat to indigenous people's existence. Crying out that business must benefit all of society, not only multi-nationals, a tribal farmer in Thailand narrated:

The Government asked the people to plant only one kind of plant and allowed them to borrow money for this endeavour. They planted trees according to government advice using chemicals. They borrowed money and used it for business. But after they planted and got the fruit, they could not sell it because the companies refused to buy from them. People have lot of debt. ... The people from the villages go to the cities to work, especially the young people. But they get a very low salary. Many women are sold into commercial sex.

Crying out that decision making should consciously include the excluded and vulnerable, an indigenous leader in Philippines lamented:

Just like King Ahab and his wife Jezebel forcefully taken away after killing Naboth, the Government of Philippine continues to take away the land from the indigenous people. For instance, the indigenous peoples of Binga and Ambuclao were forced to resettle in Palawan to make way for hydroelectric plants. The Ibalays of Benguet were displaced and the vast Marcos Sports Complex and a huge bust of President Marcos was erected. Almost all the mountains of Abra, belonged to the Tinguians of Abra, were given to the Cellophil Corporation as a logging concession. The government built several dams along the Chico and Abulog rivers that would submerge at least sixteen municipalities of the Kalingas.

Crying out that people and nature are not mere instruments of production, an indigenous activist in India deplored:

Many unfortunate tribes have already taken farewell from the world. Civilization has squeezed them out of this world. The rest are facing a

serious threat of extinction or a life of slavery. Our big brothers want us to be their coolies (bounded labourers); when we refused, they plan to finish us. Ruthless exploitation, deprivation from human rights, alienation from land, suppression of our ethnic identity and derogation of our culture and traditions has been almost paralyzing us.

Crying out that social equity, identify and respect of diversity, an indigenous brother from Cambodia spoke of the discrimination of their tribe:

In Cambodia, some ethnic groups (for example, the Cham) are not given equal opportunities for jobs and education. If they want a job, they have to change their name to a Khmer name. They hide their own identities in order to survive. Even though some indigenous communities are given official recognition, there is still discrimination in employment, political and economic opportunities.

Crying out that economic growth alone will not ensure inclusive and sustainable development, an indigenous person from Vietnam said:

In Vietnam, rivers have dried up because the trees are felled indiscriminately. But it is not the indigenous people who do this. Others come from afar to seize our land and forest. Our identity as indigenous people is rooted in our land. The land, as we have said is the Mother; the giver of life, she gives everything for life to go on.

We can cite many indigenous people cry for justice in Asia. Their testimonies speak of fear, threat, pain and despair as well as resistance, hope and life. With the slogan “minority should sacrifice for the sake of majority”, many indigenous people in Asia have been forced to sacrifice their land, forest and water. The empire extractive growth model has become a threat to survival.

- It threatens the waters that are sacred to people and means of life for all human beings and all of creation;
- It removes people from their traditional lands, and threatens the food web that human beings and all creation are dependent upon;
- It enables genocidal effects on human beings, where indigenous peoples, vulnerable peoples, and the poor are displaced, poisoned, and killed so that multi-national economic systems can reap benefit for the sake of a few beneficiaries.

In summary, the sole objectives of economic expansion are mere profit, pleasure and enjoyment. It does not respect life, culture and spirituality. It denies the right to live in dignity especially to the poor and marginalized people. In the empire's ideology, there is nothing amazing about the cosmos. God is separated from the natural world. Nature has only an instrumental value, determined by the extent to which human can utilize it. The empire market operates affirming this destructive ideology.

One will notice that the root cause of ethnic conflict, tension between different religious communities, wars are all directly related to control of land and its resources. Indigenous people spiritual heritage, traditions, culture are slowly disappearing in the name of peace, development, national integration, tourism, preservation of environment. The inalienable rights of the indigenous peoples over land and resources have been forcibly taken away. Repressive laws have resulted in massive displacement. People have been uprooted, dislocated and evicted from their ancestral homes. Land, mountains and rivers are also being polluted and forests lay waste.² People's sacred areas have been destroyed and have resulted disconnection with their culture and spirituality. The deprivation produces poverty which child labour, forced labour, trafficking of children, drugs and substance abuse, armed conflict and violence. All these are justice issue. The indigenous communities quest for a community where justice is expressed in equality and sharing, and affirms a community economic system with reciprocal sharing and hospitality. It involves personal, communal and social commitment.

Indigenous People Struggle in North East India (NEI)

The independence movement of NEI needs to be located within the larger context of indigenous people struggle for justice around the world. There are about 30 insurgency groups active in the region. Some movements started alongside India's independence movement in 1930s and 40s. The recent ones are born out of unjust policies, market capitalism and some are created deliberately by the empire to divide and rule. The strategy is to suppress the justice movement in the name of peace and national integration. All forms of violence like killing, kidnapping, torturing, raping, extortion and ransacking are the daily experiences of the common people. Everyday the

² It is to be recognized that there is no social justice without ecological justice. They are inseparably interrelated. Indigenous people heavily depend upon the labour and sustenance provided by the eco-system for their survival.

common people live in uncertainty and insecurity. They feel insecure even in their own home. People have to pay multiple taxes to the underground outfits. Anytime, the underground outfits or army personnel will torture or ransack homes, shops, and other government establishments. Yet, their suffering and misery are not known much to the outside world due to isolation. The region is strategically kept isolated from rest of the world in order that the world will not know their nefarious acts. Some factors that contribute to the present crisis in North East India are:

- a) Historical negligence of government on basic services, resulting in worsening marginalization, poverty and food insecurity among tribal peoples. Reasons are geographical distance, racial and religious differences.
- b) Poverty is massive due to lack of development. After more than sixty years of India's independent, the government has not undertaken any tangible developmental works in the region. The dominant society treats them as second-class citizens because of racial and cultural difference. More importantly, most of the tribals are Christians and so indifferent attitude and discrimination. Christians are looked upon as betrayers of their brothers and sisters.
- c) Instability of governments. Economic dependency is the key for political instability. Most of the state governments are proxy governments of the ruling party in the centre.
- d) Many parents cannot pay school fees of their children. The school dropouts are on increased. This is one of the reasons for all kinds of social evils flourishing in the regions. The region ranks the highest crime cases in India
- e) Unequal treatment of citizens on the basis of tribe, ethnic and religion.
- f) Racism is rampant and there are many cases of denial of top position in Govt. service and army.
- g) Tribal culture is treated as inferior and Hindutva ideology is imposed. Institutionalized discrimination and cultural chauvinism is experienced in education system and even in media establishment.
- h) Taking advantages of the unstable situation, the officials and the contractors often misused or manipulated the people's money. This corruption not only hinders the developmental works but also create gap between the haves and have-nots.

The tribal communities in NEI are tactfully militarized by the empire. The communal riots are engineered to weaken the people's movements. In recent years, we have experienced Meiteis-Naga, Naga-Kuki, Karbi-Kuki, Karbi-Assamese, Assamese-Bodo, Chakmas-Mizo, Arunachali-Chakma, Bengali-Tripuri, Garos-Khasi, Khasi-Nepali, etc. In all these communal riots and unrests, one will notice the hands of empire.

Though the empire defined those people's movement as anti-national and anti-development, one will discover that people's cries are not anti-development and anti-national but they want to protect the whole earth and its resources from greediness and overexploitation. People cry for their right to culture, language, customary law and progress. They are –

- a) demanding for the right to ancestral domain and territorial integrity, including systematic and massive land grabbing;
- b) resisting against anti-people development aggression;
- c) resisting against militarization of tribal/indigenous communities and violation of human rights;
- d) fighting against institutionalized discrimination and cultural chauvinism and demanding for celebration of diversity;
- e) resisting against commercialization of culture;
- f) demanding rectification of the long historical government neglect of basic services that has resulted marginalization, poverty and food insecurity;
- g) demanding the right to own, manage and develop their territory and resources there in;
- h) demanding to recognize the right to practice and develop their socio-political systems, including customary laws, justice systems, rituals and beliefs, and other cultural practices, and to maintain their cultural integrity and ethnicity.

God among the Powerless

God's still, small voice spoken through the words of the wise, especially the poor, the oppressed, and the rejected ones. The God of the Bible is the one who journeys to and with the people who are outside of power structure. God is the God who stands against the manipulators of justice. To hear God's voice we need to listen to the testimonies, pains and sufferings of the people who are outside of the power structure. It is the marginalized people's cries for justice that become God's cry.

The incarnation of God in Christ Jesus took place among the people at the margins. Jesus was not born in a palace, but in a manger, a ragged cowshed, an open and unprotected place. At the time of the birth of Jesus, people who gathered around him were people outside of the power structure. They were people without any political power, nor religious authority, women, children and the poor people like the shepherds who were landless and who did not have legal protection and from whom the rich people even refused to buy milk and vegetable. The wise men, who were strangers in Jerusalem, who brought precious gifts to Jesus refused to be subjected to empire obligation. They were asked by the empire to report about the birth of Jesus. Instead they left by another route to Galilee to protect the life of Jesus. (LONGCHAR, 2007, pp. 187-198) People who welcomed Jesus were those outside of power hierarchy. These people were not allowed to enter the temple and did not have any political influence. People who were missing during the birth of Jesus were the rich men, rich women, the king, queen, prince and princesses, high priests, nobles and other high officials. The birth of Jesus was astonishing, threatening news for those decision makers. Being threatened by the news, Herod, the king, ordered to kill all two-years-old and younger in the regions of Bethlehem (Mtt. 2:16). They never expected that God would be revealed among the lowly people. The angel announced the message, “Peace among *you*”, among the marginal people. The incarnation of God happened outside of unjust power structure. God chose the ‘margin’ – the people on the underside of history – to inaugurate His Kingdom, bringing justice and peace. God was and is encountered among the powerless and in unexpected locations like manger, but not in the palace. If the God of the Bible took side of the people in margin, then it is clear that God continues to take side of the marginalized people even today, identifying with the dry bones and challenging their oppressors. The Bible testifies that the Divine participates in history to defend those who are victims of power. James Cone has rightly said:

Yahweh is known and worshipped as the One who brought Israel out of Egypt, and who raised Jesus from the dead. God is the political God, the Protector of the poor and the Establisher of the right for those who are oppressed. To know God is to experience the acts of God in the concrete affairs and relationships of people, liberating the weak and the helpless from pain and humiliation. For theologians to speak of this God, they too must become interested in politics and economics, recognizing that there is no

truth about Yahweh unless it is the truth of freedom as that event is revealed in the oppressed people's struggle for justice in this world. (LONGCHAR, 2007, p. 57)

God's Healing Power comes from the Oppressed People, not from the Empire

The gospel writer records about the story of rich man and Lazarus. The parable explains about two persons – one in the “Centre” – the Rich man; and the other one in the “Margin” – Lazarus (Luke 16: 19 ff.) Lazarus being subjected to miserable inhuman condition knew what was meant to be thirsty, hungry, pain, to be begged in front of someone's gate without dignity. The rich man who was partying sumptuous meal everyday could not understand the pain of Lazarus. Similarly, the rich who are protected by unjust power structure cannot understand the pain of the marginalized people. People who cannot understand the suffering of the oppressed people cannot bring solution and transformation. Tribals, dalits, women, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups who have been marginalized for centuries know what affirms life and deny it; what helps communities and what hurts them; what contributes to their well-being and what denies their rights. From the margins, they bring first-hand knowledge of the suffering that accompanies exclusionary practices as well as unmask the forces that work against God's will in the world.³ Through their lives and struggles for life, they hold forth what God wants in the world that is needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God.⁴ The change can take place only when marginalized people raise their voice.

There are many testimonies both in the Old and New Testaments, how people in the margins were used by God as instrument for transformation and change. For example, 2 Kings 5:1-19 presents a story of how people in the margins became the agents of healing. Naaman suffered from leprosy, though he was also a successful commander of the army of the king of Syria and had won favour from the king and the people because of his skilful and dedicated work. And the nameless little girl – the prisoner and victim of war, displaced from her family, her people and land - was put to force labour, working for Naaman's wife, but she became an agent of healing.

³ A draft WCC document on “Mission from the margins,” a process initiated by Just and Inclusive Community, October, 2012, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1.

We see the following contrasting positions of the two – Naaman and the Nameless little girl;

Naaman is powerful - the Nameless girl is powerless and helpless.
Naaman is a ruler - the Nameless girl is ruled.
Naaman is a conqueror - the Nameless girl is conquered, abused & misused.
Naaman is an army commander - the Nameless girl is a victim of the army.
Naaman is a slave owner - the Nameless girl is a slave.
Naaman is a predator - the Nameless girl is a victim.
Naaman needed healing - the Nameless girl offered help/healing.
Naaman has a name - the girl does not have a name. (RAO, 2015, pp. 8-10)

In her pitiable and pathetic experience of war and dislocation, the Nameless girl knew what Naaman was going through in his life. She knew the pain and sorrow of Naaman. Instead of rejoicing and revenging over his misfortune and pain, the Nameless girl offered words of healing.

It was indeed difficult for the ruler to listen to the words of the ruled. The ruler wanted to get healed by maintaining the royal power and offering wealth; exercise of power and money is paramount for the people who never experience pain and suffering. First, he obtained an official letter from the king of Aram thinking that the royal authority and power would be respected and obeyed by the subjects. Second, he took ten talents of silver, six thousand shekelsof gold and ten sets of clothing to impress and to appease the prophet Elisha. As was common protocol at that time, Naaman expected that the prophet would come out, bow down before him and perform rituals like calling on the name of God, touched over his body and cure his leprosy miraculously. The ruler thought that he would be healed. But it happened in quite a different way.

Instead of going and meeting Naaman, Elisha sent a message through a messenger, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and you shall be clean” (v.9). People in power always want protocol and so also Naaman. He felt insulted and took this as disrespectful not only to him but also to the king. He became angry and decided to go away without obeying what Elisha asked him to do. But then another Word of healing came from his servant, another person in margin. He said “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleaned’” (v. 13). Only when he listened to the voice of his servant, did he finally get healed.

What is the meaning of washing in the Jordan River? The river did not have, of course, substances within it that could cure leprosy. There is a deeper meaning in the act of washing in the dirty river for seven times. It was the river where the poorest people lived, where they drank and where they bathed. To be healed from leprosy, Naaman needed to wash himself in the river where the poor washed their bodies, too. By washing his body seven times in the river Jordan, Naaman expressed solidarity with the people at the margins. To wash himself seven times in the river would compel Naaman, a General and a fighter, to be humble in front of the prophet, and in front of the Nameless girl and his servant, and become servant of the people he had conquered. In this dirty river that Naaman despised, he could get his holistic healing. It was in solidarity with the people in margins that he could find the power of healing. Listening, obedient, humbleness and solidarity with the least ones are the basis of transformation.

Power of Powerless

To live a life of dignity, respect and freedom is the intrinsic right of all beings. It is a divine gift to all beings. The victims can celebrate God's given life in abundance only when justice is restored to them. Forces that threaten celebration of life must be resisted. It is not an option, but a divine mandate. Therefore, the words of Jesus "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45) should not be understood *submissiveness and idealistic terms*. It is a *radical and costly leadership*. It involves *liberating marginalized people from the yoke of religious formalism, legalism, misuse of power, and unjust economic structures that oppressed and marginalized people*. Jesus' uncompromising defense of life led him to a life of conflict with the empire of his time. This conflict resulted in Jesus' death on the cross. Similarly, the disciples and followers of Jesus of Nazareth confronted the 'principalities and powers' of structural/institutional/systemic empire structure that exploit the poor of their times. They risk their life for Christ's sake and became martyrs for justice.

Women were the most powerless people at the time of Jesus. But God prepared ordinary womenfolk to be the agent of the transforming power of God. We see this testimony in the Gospels – who will roll the stone away? (Mark 16:1-4; Lk 2:1-5; Mtt. 28:1-10). The tomb was sealed in three ways: First, a large stone was rolled against the tomb. The stone was not only large but it was also sealed by the Empire. Palestine was ruled by the Romans, the most powerful empire at that time. Nobody could challenge

the Romans. Disobeying them and removing the stone was punishable by death. Second, it was guarded by the most powerful Roman soldiers. They were armed. The Roman guards were strict and disciplined fighters who knew that failure on duty was punishable by torture and death. The soldiers were there by the order of the Emperor. Third, the Roman seal was affixed on the stone by the order of the king. The seal symbolized the power and authority of the Empire. Moving the stone from the tomb entrance would break the seal, thereby deserving execution by crucifixion upside down. Womenfolk had no weapon or gun. They had no money, no political connection and influence. They were mere ordinary rural women. Their only weapon against the mighty Romans were courage, solidarity, commitment and love. With this weapon they went to the tomb to fight the empire. The mighty Roman trampled down. The Romans could not suppress the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The feeding of 5000 speaks of solidarity, care and love of one another. Jesus changed their attitude from being scared and egocentric, selfish attitude to an attitude of sharing and caring, from a lust for profit to a sharing of benefit for all, from their dependency on capital to their emphasis on their own resources. The early Christian community, motivated by the spirit of Pentecost, resisted the empire's market. Instead of turning to market, they collected what they have and shared among them. This expresses the power of sharing and solidarity.

Conclusion

To fight against the empire – we have weapon of solidarity among the people, courage to face the unjust system, commitment to change the existing social system and love and care for one another. This act is not emotional feeling and action; it is a *continual struggle and commitment for transformation of the sinful social structure and liberation of the victims*. It involves *raising consciousness* of both the victims and perpetrators by exposing the unjust structure and false belief systems. In a systemic injustice, it also demands *mobilization of collective justice action groups* not only Christians but all civil societies. Silence to unjust system is denial of justice. The women, disciples of Jesus brought down the empire's power and value through the weapons of solidarity, courage, commitment, love and care.

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