

The Role of Catholic Institute of Higher Education in Democratizing People

George Thadathil is the Principal of Salesian College Sonada and Siliguri. He is the author of *Vision from the Margin* (2007) and has edited and co-edited number of books besides contributing to a number of journals and edited volumes on Philosophy, Literature and Social Science. He is the founder Director of Salesian Publications, Salesian Research Institute and Salesian Translation Centre.

Abstract

The paper attempts to look into the role of a catholic institute of higher education in an emerging economy like India, seeking to position itself as nurturing a unique cultural and civilizational heritage. This is done first by locating the institution specific thinking and an assessment of the development of the emergence, assimilation and critique of Christian education. In this background the democratic conceptualization of the 'ideal life' contained in the constitution of India is relooked and its normative evolution is connected with the European Christian heritage as well as the indigenous value systems. The paper makes the submission that Christian/catholic educational institutions across the country, despite its pre-colonial/colonial appearance do provide the democratic thought base upon which the systemic institutional structures are built. The arguments are spelt out with a contextual frame of reference and the experience emerging out of the decade long association with the administrative and teaching roles in a premier catholic institution located in one of the tribal, hilly and backward districts of the state of West Bengal in the eastern part of India with international borders to Nepal, China/Tibet, Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Keywords: Christian Education, Democracy, Contextuality, Community, Diversity

The Indian Scenario

India is a country of 1.2 billion people with 20 million Christians having 32000 colleges and 650 universities. It has only two catholic and four Christian universities, as of now, where as there are over 350 Christian managed colleges and more than 250 among them are catholic colleges spread across the country with higher concentration in the south of India. Their location reflects the spread of Christian community strongholds being in South, West and North East. The uneven spread and the traditional hold on the education though these institutions are slowly giving way due to the increased presence of private players in higher education. The impact these institutions have had on society and in the community development and growth is what needs to be looked at in order to assess the contribution made of Christian education to the overall development of the country.

The history of Christian higher education is linked with the history of colonialism in India. Though much has been said and written about colonialism in India, on a larger scale, it is to be seen as a passing phase in the evolution of Indian civilization. Post colonial revaluations in the form of innumerable studies that are undertaken attempt to come to terms with and reconcile the processes unleashed into the civilizational flow

as a result of the series of colonizations that the indic civilization has undergone. Any civilization is upto its optimum function when it engages in its own way with other civilizational flows that come to cross-fertilize it. It is in this process that the European cultural super-eminence apparently presents a dominant presence within contemporary indian civilization as experiencing a serious engagement with the western cultures.

The Heritage

The ongoing influx of cultures and the assimilations it engendered ought to be seen without prejudice to one or privilege to another. In tracing the footsteps of education the debates that emerged around Anglicization (leading to the decision regarding the medium of instruction being English than vernacular), westernization (the appreciation for western values and culture than mere language), modernization (the aim of English education as a means to discover modernity than mere appreciation for west or its language), are all significant moments that brought Indian intelligentsia to the doorstep of secularism (distinct from its western notion and uniquely Indian in its origins in as much as it nurtured the ideal of the co-survival of all religious cultures than the domination by or negation of any one) and globalization (the contemporary desire to make a mark on the world scene as an economic power and a nation capable of asserting itself). In other words, the widely acclaimed educational system prevailing in India today is the result of a critique and assimilation process applied by the elite beneficiaries of the imported system or of its original in England during the colonial era. The pre Colonial system of Persian/Sanskrit integrated education for governance purpose was apparently replaced by the British model that served a newly emerging elite and reluctantly gave way to the slow birth of a middle class. It was to their sensibilities and loyalties that both the British as well as the mushrooming Indian print media approached for consolidation of their respective power bases. The vestiges of neo-colonialism and resistances to it follow somewhat similar route to date.

Within India, Education, as also other interventionist agents have had pressures from fourfold ideological streams: First, the brahminic ideology represented variedly by Ram Mohan Roy, Tilak, Gandhi, Golwalkar, Shyam Prasad Mukherjee etc. Second, the Dalit-Bahujan ideology mooted by Jyotirao phule, BR Ambedkar, Periyar, Sree Narayana Guru etc. Thirdly, the communist socialist ideology represented by MN Roy, RP Dutt, T. Nagareddi, E.M.S. Namboodiripad etc. Fourthly, the liberal democratic ideology spearheaded by Nehru and the initial phase of government machinery. It is this last space that was and in a way still being contested and fought for by the respective above groups in order to have a sway over Indian ideological spectrum as well as developmental processes.

The present predicament of Indian higher education comes from yet another quarter. The globalization trend, which has lead on to the GATT and WTO agreements, considers higher education as one more commodity an education intensive country can trade in. America earns 10 billion from higher education offered to foreign students and Australia

to the tune of 3.2 billion.¹ The pressure on India to trade in Education is very high. Therefore the hitherto perception of education “as a public good with a commitment to the inculcation of values, to social service including community development, and to sustainable development through creation and dissemination of knowledge” stands in danger of being ideals of the past. The commoditization of education system is bound to affect access and equity, funding and quality. Quality education will more and more be provided by reputed international providers and will be accessible only to the privileged few that can pay for it. Access to education that can provide decent employment will probably be limited to those with more than adequate financial resources. This is likely to entrench in the near future three classes of graduates: those highly merited with accessibility to reputed institutions; those who have quality international education with accessibility due to payment capability and the average students who will have to satisfy with the government provided education.² The question as to whether all who are in the higher education slab or age group ought to enter into it has been resolved partly by the decision to expand regular educational opportunities and by expansion of open distance learning mode of education. The IGNOU has thus proven to be one of the largest open universities of the world.

The public-private divide in the educational field has been brought forward in different states with varying nuances in a balanced approach as to encourage conditionally and restrictively in order to enhance quality and give opportunities for accessibility to a segment that can afford.³ In the case of Kerala, the private has a big chunk of religious community owned institutions having the privilege of state funding as well. Whereas in Bengal, while it might ring true for the Muslim minority, the entire state has only 9 Christian minority higher educational institutions. In this process, as mentioned earlier, the shift that has occurred in the manner in which education has been viewed is significant: from a primordial value oriented character forming sacred activity to a commodity that is saleable and buyable in the market as to enhance ones capability of access to market and greater purchasing capacity in materialistic terms. This shift in terms of a business-like view of education is accepted more and more.⁴

¹ The growth of higher education in India has been phenomenal. Starting with 1950-51, there were only 63,000 students in all disciplines in 750 colleges affiliated to 30 universities. This has grown by 2005 to 11 million students in 17,000 Degree colleges affiliated to 230 universities and non-affiliated university-level institutions. In addition, there are about 10 million students in over 6500 in vocational institutions. The enrolment is growing at the rate of 5.1 per cent per year. However, of the Degree students only 5 per cent are enrolled into engineering courses, while an overall 20 per cent in sciences. The demand for professional courses is growing rapidly. (cfr. Sanat Kaul, “Higher Education in India: Seizing the Opportunity”, Working Paper No. 179, (May 2006), Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations; www.icrier.org/pdf/wp_179.pdf)

² Ibid.

³ In India both public and private institutions operate simultaneously. In 2000-01, of the 13,072 higher education institutions, 42 per cent were privately owned and run catering to 37 per cent of students enrolled into Higher education, that is, approximately 3.1 million out of total 8.4 million. It is also likely that most of the growth in the rapidly expanding higher education sector took place in private unaided college or in self-financing institutions. Since grant-in-aid to private colleges is becoming difficult, many governments/universities have granted Recognition /affiliation to unaided colleges and many universities have authorized new ‘self-financing’ courses even in government and aided colleges. It is felt that as of now more than 50 per cent of the higher education in India is imparted through private institutions, mostly unaided. (cfr. www.icrier.org/pdf/wp_179.pdf)

⁴ Ritty Lukose, “Private-Public Divides” in *Seminar 494 Unviable Universities*, (October 2000).

Therefore the question is as to the orientation we desire for the future in promoting higher education. Do we desire the primacy of equality or the primacy of freedom? In other words, is the direction for the future a movement towards eradicating the evils of inequality or promoting the possibilities for new freedoms? Often there is no choice but to say that the direction being desired is inherent in the belief that education possesses the power to modify societies towards greater equality and greater liberty. There is however a growing critique or resistance to this belief surfacing from the more fundamentalist of the rightwing ideological spectrum within India because it perceives the very goal of democracy as a secularized version of Christianity. Besides, there is also the critique that “Neo-liberalism represents in the sphere of political thought what fundamentalism represents in the sphere of religion, namely, a jump over history which enables a return to the so-called original beliefs and practices. Neo-liberalism is not just about applying market principles in education; it is also about treating ideas – especially political ideas – as being of no relevance to the study and practice of education.”⁵

While the CEI over two centuries helped transform the country along with public institutions, the desirability of this transformation can be looked at in two different ways: first as having modernized and democratized India by challenging the traditional feudal and orthodox power centres and dominant forces of society; and second, as a critique on this intended or assumed modernization as having been detrimental to the revival of indigenous ideologies, philosophies and practices. The monocultural, Eurocentric ideological spread throughout the colonies as a result of a euro modeled domination is what is being decried. “The intellectual history of societies falling as colonies under the political domination of Europe and later, the US, shows two major phases: in the first phase, there is a determined assault on their intellectual and spiritual traditions which is often internalized and often uncritically accepted by the leading and influential sections of the subjugated populations.. Thereafter in the second phase there is an overt attempt to completely replace the indigenous system with the ideas associated with the experience of the colonizer.”⁶ In contrast, the effort to read into the civilized past of India for identifying therein the very seeds of democratic and modernistic practices can also make interpretations of cultural trajectories meaningful. In this light, one of the suggestions made by Claude is to delink both Eurocentric social sciences as well as European university teaching models as to ‘guide the prospects of a new beginning in which universities anywhere will re-appropriate their predominant function of being centres for the creation of knowledge that serves the real life concerns of all the diverse people of the world’⁷

Contextual Considerations

A contextualized location specific response to the challenges facing higher education

⁵ Krishna Kumar, “Teaching and Neo-liberal State” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37-40.

⁶ Claude Alvares, “A Critique of Eurocentric Social Science and the Question of Alternatives” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI (28 May 2011)22, 72-81.

⁷ Ibid, p. 81.

consists in looking ahead along the following lines: firstly, the search for relevant educational guidelines and orientations in the new millennium, offers two beacons: the worldwide demand for human rights and the world wide assertion of communitarianism (cultural/religious nationalism in the case of India). While one – the human rights – caters to the global/universal need for equality (a project of liberal democracy) the other – communitarianism – clamours for liberty and recognition (the twin project of democracy); secondly, standards of higher education will have to be judged not only on pure merit but also in relation to the relevance of the courses and programmes, the social commitment of college and their contribution to national development. This is best expressed in the research and studies in basic arts and sciences that a college builds up and which is indispensable to the maintenance of the intellectual capital of a society; thirdly, the search for and amassing of knowledge in the western scheme is associated with power while in the eastern traditional scheme knowledge was related more to freedom. One who had knowledge (*jnana*) was liberated, was free. It is this linkage between knowledge, power and freedom that probably needs a comeback or a reinforcement in order to bring educational wisdom back to its roots; fourthly, the process of indigenization has to move away from the fear that “the academic viability of many ideas in the mainstream global culture of universities does not ensure their political survival in the tropics,”⁸ to a hopeful harnessing of opportunities emerging in front of the younger generation of students anywhere in the world.

The impact of a Christian educational institution in its neighbourhood is a study yet to be seriously undertaken. Certain broad features can be authored here with specific reference to the institution with which one has special knowledge: firstly the induction and training of staff in an ethic of work which is quite different from elsewhere; second, the discipline that the students imbibe in terms of love for the rules and the connection between good life and rightful life; third, the order and cleanliness in the campus acts as incentive for neighbourhood behavior and action; four, good practices of waste management, organic farming a saving of water and conservation of energy etc gets percolated as feasible ideas for implementation in the neighborhood; five, the middle income parents who admit the children and sometimes the children being first time learners in English there is an exchange of culture and values that benefit and makes the parents feel that their children are doing them proud. This might also have a negative side by way of creating alienation of the parents and from the children and both from the nurturing culture due to the promotional values of the imbibed culture of the educational institution and foreign language; fifthly, this however is to be yet seen as a positive value because on the one hand, the sway of the vernacular is not altogether lost, secondly the engagement with the ‘foreign language’ is a means towards appropriating it and turning it into another of cultures re-valuators; sixthly, social service, the need to reach out to others as an integral part of one’s life is something that is picked up from school. That one has a duty to the other besides having the rights due to oneself.

⁸ Ashis Nandy, (1999). “The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism and Other Masks of Deculturation” in Veena Das, Dipankar Gupta and Patricia Uberoi (eds.), *Tradition, Pluralism and Identity: In Honour of TN Madan Contributions to Indian Sociology Occasional Studies 8*, New Delhi, Sage Publications.

The Vision and the Task

The vision of Indian constitution contained in its preamble emphasizes the sovereign, democratic and secular, character of the Indian republic.⁹ The freedom, equality and fraternity that underlie any modern nations egalitarian spirit in the formation of its citizenry is notably marked in the Indian vision for itself. This vision enshrined in the constitution is churned not only from the best expressions of nationhood prevailing in mid twentieth century across the world, but also from the millennial history of the Indic civilization. While the respect for the dignity of the human person as an individual came strongly with the modern conceptions of freedom and equality, the communitarian basis for the harmonious living of peoples despite differences of religion and ethnicity is a heritage that the Indian civilization had bequeathed. In the summation of the modern and the ancient, and in the revaluation of the traditional by negating or wanting to reform its negative aspects the constitution entered onto a journey of creating a people out of the landmass earmarked as India. The acknowledgement of the various forces that entered into play in remaking Indian society and continues to do so is a task often not too well considered.

In this background, a recent seminar on 'Christian educational institutions: the making of modern democratic India' emphasized the contribution made by the pioneers in modern education in India towards 'awakening the political and cultural consciousness; affirming the social component in the outreach to marginal groups like Dalits and Tribals; addressing gender and caste issues; reviving and preserving local languages and cultures; and in connecting with indigenous rationality.'¹⁰ These perspectives amplify the mode and rationale within which Christian educational institutions intervened in order to energize and enthuse a society that had succumbed to the weight of tradition.

The concerns of Indian higher education have come a long way since the days it was initiated by a colonial government and the Christian missionaries. The concerns of 'excellence, inclusion and access' steer the governmental plans for an increasingly technology driven aspirations of the upcoming generation. In this project the Christian institutions do have a role in reinventing the much appreciated 'convent education' model for the present times without succumbing to the pressures of the market. The Christian University could thus become the initiator of a new paradigm in Christian education for strengthening and deepening the democratic and modern spaces created

⁹ We, The People of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic (Forty second Amendment) Act, 1976) and to secure to all its citizens: Justice, social, economic and political; Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; Equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation; In our Constituent Assembly this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do hereby Adopt, Enact and Give to ourselves this Constitution.

¹⁰ Cfr. The report of the National Seminar on "Christian Educational Institutions: The Making of Modern Democratic India" organized by Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla in collaboration with Salesian College, Sonada & Siliguri, and Don Bosco University Guwahati at IAS, Shimla from 27-29 April 2011.

by varied forces among which the Christian educational institutions and their leaders have had a significant part. Promoting the values of the constitution and spearheading a human rights oriented education thus become not only watchwords but the very identity markers of Christian education in the country. Finally, this location specific reflection on the role of Christian educational institution in democratizing society can be replicated in contexts similar to the one from which it has emerged.

Conclusion

These reflections are the fruit of the involvement in the field of higher education for the past twenty years. The location where one engages in higher education, especially if it is a rural, hilly, border area, means much in making an assessment and envisaging one's aspirations. The movement that the country experienced a hundred years ago, is in a way, being replicated in some places even today. The first generation learners and their aspirations to make a mark in the world today give an angle to higher education that is spontaneous and imbued with energy that is contagious. The constraints of location to a great extent can be overcome by the modern tools of education, especially the internet. The natural talents of the indigenous people of the hills make them readily wanted and amiably desired even in the metros and for service industry given their congenial dispositions.

The learning disabilities that are structured into the poor village level education, and lack of adequate qualified teachers have to be helped overcome with the assistance provided by way of institution by way of remedial coaching and additional opportunities for performance. The interactions with students from other campuses and engagements with the local youth by way of recreational and social awareness related activities do strengthen the personality formation of the graduate. The approach to study seen more in terms of its applicability come easier to a lot many of the tribal students than the abstract thinking processes. However, the easy polarisation of the capabilities of students from the diverse communities cannot be substantiated as over the years one does observe the qualitative improvement of new generations of students from an erstwhile average educational background. It substantiates the general claim that education is a proven agent for the overall enhancement of the capabilities of a people. The value modulation in the process is a factor that needs further assessment in as much as, one seems to gather that the more educated one becomes the rethinking on the given values and received notions of propriety undergoes a scrutiny and it gives way to a phase of uprootedness and alienation prior to reconciliation and recovery of self.

The Christian contribution to the world of education, whether it be in the small village of Sonada or in the modern city of Avila, consists probably in addressing the fundamental question of what does it mean to 'be' or even better to 'become' a Christian today. The openness to the 'other' of another faith, another language, another culture in the very

process of one's self understanding helps reconfigure the given normativity and aspire for new grounds of relational, non-dogmatic, dialogical existence. The coming together of universities from across the world can create a cross fertilization of Christian uniqueness in terms of its openness to the other as witnessed in earlier centuries in this very land.