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Glimpses of the "Feminine" in Indian Religion and Society: A Christian Perspective

*T Johnson Chakkuvarackal**

Introduction

India is the cradle of major Religions of the world. It is called as the land of "Unity in the midst of Diversity", because it includes different Religious fundamentalism, communal tendencies, and cultures. But women are dehumanized ever both in religion and society. The patriarchal structures and its various related problems such as androcentricism and misogyny challenge the equality of women with men. The patriarchal system makes a sense of superiority and inferiority and causes other social taboos. Women in India are still victims of the cruel and oppressive socio-religious order. The hierarchical attitudes of different religious people bring exclusive and violent tendencies among the people and it causes fragmentation and dehumanization in the society of human beings. Religion seems to become now a source of exploitation and distress for many and a threat to equality and social order.

The major reason for the growth of Christianity is that it "has come to crossroads." Indian Christian feminist methodology is now only crystallized into a creative and energizing force and is therefore full of potentialities. Christianity in India conceptualized 'the woman power' as a force with paramount importance with an emphasis on the biblical doctrines. Now in the mission activities Christianity attempts for the welfare of women in every aspects of life. In the following pages we will see women in the conceptual level both in religion and society, and the coming of Christian mission in the present day as an endeavor for change.

A. Women: Some General Observations

Male voices, perspectives, interests, ideas and modes dominate all thinking. For all intents and purposes, "official" intellection and male intellection have become coextensive. In the realm of thought the male is universalized. As a result the categories of relevance have been appropriated by the male frame of reference.... Not only have women had no part in defining the content of philosophical speculation, but also they have had even less influence over the categories of concern and the modes of articulation.¹

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GLIMPSES OF THE "FEMININE" IN INDIAN RELIGION AND SOCIETY

In the religious scriptures women are treated as 'powerless' beings. Their voices are not heard directly. As John Berger says, "the essential way of seeing women ... has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men - not because the feminine is different from the masculine-but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter Him".² She further explains, "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male; the survived female. Thus she turns herself into an object and most particularly an object of vision; a sight".³

Women have been discriminated at the conceptual as well as at the empirical level - at the theological as well as at the practical level. Consequently, they have been deprived of power and privileges for centuries. Plethora of prohibitions and consequent inhibitions afflict women all over the world. Women have internalized the imposition from outside and this has resulted in an inferiority complex.⁴ Ramila Thaper has stated that what we consider to be 'traditional' has been deliberately selected by the modern people. She says, "nothing comes to us in a completely pristine form through the centuries... so the way in which present day society picks up a tradition is determined by present day attitudes to women."⁵ Here, Thaper never denies the role of traditional approach to women and its influence upon the modern thinking and practice. Rajni Kothari states, "any approach to the 'liberation' of any segment of society that is based on a polarized view of social reality (men versus women, majority versus minority, centre versus state) is for me at once unreal and apolitical-and indirectly a tribute to the attempts of the dominant structure to create a dualist situation and to push the 'other' out and dispense with it."⁶

Economic globalization is intensifying the world's disparities. The transfer of financial and natural resources, local expertise and knowledge are escalating. The transfer of power and decision making from nation states to multinationals is creating more losers than winners at a speed never seen before. Globalization of production has increased the feminization of jobs particularly sectors such as food processing, garment manufacturing and assembly-line work. In this vulnerable situation, women often are traumatized, sexually abused, held in bondage in the countries they migrate to with no access to the outside world and without the adequate remuneration formerly agreed on.⁷ The borderless societies that the global economy promotes continue to exploit women by selling them as "wives", forcing them into prostitution, or engaging them in other kinds of exploitative work, such as working in sweatshops and domestic labour.⁸ Trafficking in women for prostitution from other countries is widespread in China, Hong Kong with women coming from across Asia, Latin America, and former Soviet Union to serve a market with a high demand for paid sex.⁹

The well known quote of the United Nations Decade of Women states that, "women constitute one-half of the world's population, perform nearly two thirds of the world's work hours, earn one third of the world's property."¹⁰ In the Church level also women are the most sufferers. An examination of the history of Catholic theology reveals that the ordination of women has never in any century prior to our own has been a substantive question. A Roman Catholic theologian writing recently, men have a stronger bone structure and bigger hands: "their more powerful arm muscles enable them to take, literally, a more solid 'grip' on the world. Women are more suited to nurturing and tending, guided more by intuition and feeling,

more ready for religious devotion.”¹¹ Thus, the scriptures, the religions and the society treated ‘women’ as powerless beings, without trying to bring out the ‘multifarious’ and ‘intrinsic’ power in them.

B. Development as a Means of Oppression

In Asia, as in other parts of the world, equality is not available to all. Asia’s societies have built walls whose invisible bricks of discrimination grant privileges and power to some and poverty and injustice to others. One of these lines of demarcation in Asian societies is gender. The fact that most women in Asia today are not well organized and educated adds to their exploitation as well. Expressing the injustices of their lives as individuals or as small groups, they lack power to tender justice for themselves.¹² A presentation by Loh Cheng Kooi from Christian Conference of Asia’s (CCA) Committee for Asian Women (CAW) stressed that people working with women’s issues at the grassroots level often address the problems of economic survival and governmental policies but failed to respond to the issue of male domination. She suggested that a holistic approach be employed which recognizes the role that male domination play within the family and society, especially since it is male domination that controls and defines the economic and political life of the culture.¹³

Femininity, by definition, cannot and should not be limiting value but an expanding one-holistic, eclectic, trans-specific and encompassing of diverse stirring.¹⁴ Seen from the experience of Third World women, the modes of thinking and action that pass for science and development, respectively, are not universal and humanity inclusive, as they are made out to be; modern science and developments are projects of male, western origin, both historically and ideologically. The new relationship of man’s domination and mastery over nature was associated with new patterns of domination and mastery over women, and their exclusion from participation as *partners* in both science and development.¹⁵

Contemporary development activity in the Third World super-imposes the scientific and economic paradigms created by western, gender-based ideology on communities in other cultures. A woman, as victims of the violence of patriarchal forms of developments has risen against it to protect nature and preserve their survival and sustenance. Indian women have been in the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve forests, land and water. They have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as *Prakriti*, the living force that supports life.¹⁶ The every day struggles of women for the protection of nature take place in the cognitive and ethical context of the categories of the ancient Indian world-view in which nature is *prakriti*, a living and creative process, the feminine principle from which all life arises.¹⁷

C. Indian Women in Religion and Society

The independent, fertile, and unblushingly erotic female principle may be discerned within the historical and ethnographic complexity of village India.¹⁸ The Indus Valley Civilization (ca. 2300-1750 BCE) contained the roots of India’s village-based, philosophically oriented society. Women- or at least some women- were apparently assigned divine qualities in the Indus Valley. It is impossible to determine with certainty which deities were worshipped in the Indus Valley, or what meaning they carried for the people. It appears likely that a regionally known, Devi-like deity was worshipped along with a perhaps equally central male hunting

and fertility deity, or "Lord of the Beasts."¹⁹ Perhaps the most compelling evidence suggesting a Devi-like deity lies in the relatively egalitarian social symbolism of the Indus Valley.²⁰ Thus, in the Indus Valley, womanhood was highly honored than in the subsequent periods.

1. *Traditions from Hinduism*

Indian civilization has a long and varied history. Concepts, codes of conduct, roles and functions of women and girls in our society today, are greatly influenced, not only by the original inhabitants of India, but also by other people who have invaded our country, namely the Aryans, the Mughuls, Greeks, and the Europeans, particularly British.²¹ During the thousand years of Aryan consolidation and expansion called the Vedic Period (ca. 1500-500 BCE), the worship of *Devi* and the *Mahadevi* proto-type virtually disappeared from socially elite circles. Over the long Vedic centuries political, economic, social and religious developments substantially affected the conceptualization and status of women and goddesses.²²

Realization of the unity in diversity is the greatest achievement of the Indian mind. The primal creative power is considered as a mother or female entity by many religious thinkers. The Vedas and the Upanishads also express this creative power as *Maya*. 'Indra with the help of Maya assumed various forms'-is the statement of the Veda. The Brahmanical Puranas-especially the Devipurana, Kalikapurana, Markandeyapurana etc.-describe the glory of this Mother-Power in various forms and as the guiding principle in all 'creation, preservation, and destruction'.²³ The position of women during the early Vedic period was high. The ritual status of women in early and middle Vedic times was virtually equal to that of men. Women enjoyed enormous freedom and power during this age.-But during the late Vedic period (900-500 BCE) the scene was totally changed. Names of Sita, Savitri, Damayanti and Draupati are constantly cited as exemplary characters to be emulated.²⁴ The political, economic, social and ritual status of women was high during early and middle Vedic era, but declined in late Vedic times.²⁵

We know very well that both the *sruti* and the *smriti* literature of Hinduism have not advocated the rights and equality of women. On the contrary, they have considered them as slaves to be exploited and oppressed. The *Devadasi* system is thoroughly exposed and evaluated in a study undertaken by the Joint Women's Program. This system is widely prevalent in the adjoining districts of Karnataka and Maharashtra.²⁶ Women have been kind to religion, but religion has not been favorable to them. Feminist critiques of classical Hinduism unequivocally assert that Hinduism betrayed women. Study of the early scriptures, the Vedas, amply proves that women could not become priestesses, run religious institutions, or have direct access to spiritual liberation. These criticisms are often framed in the context of the great divide between the exalted image of the divine feminine under her inferior status on the social plane.²⁷

Several myths and legends illustrate the idealizations for women. The characterizations of the two epic heroine and the goddess, Sita and Parvati provide exemplary role models for women. Sita in the *Ramayana* embodies the ideal Hindu wife who forsakes all the luxuries of life to live with her husband in exile for fourteen years. Another central character is the goddess Parvati, whose only aim in life was to win Siva as her husband. To achieve this end,

she performs fierce austerities for sixty thousand years. The portrayals of Sita and Parvati are supported by the theology of subordination of the feminine, which expounds the notion of male superiority over the female.²⁸

One of the reasons for the low status and dignity of women in India can be traced to the oppressive patriarchal values of Hinduism. Indian culture as influenced by the Hindu view has perpetuated the subjugation of women. For example, the Law Book of Manu, written c. 200 BCE is one of the most revered and influential codifications of Hindu laws. Manu consigned the women of India to centuries of oppression and pain by his laws. It influenced non-Hindu population such as Sikhs, Jains, Animists, Muslims and Christians.²⁹ The *Manusmriti* or the Law of Manu laid the foundation of their social, legal, and moral code and introduced several innovations those concerned women. It eulogized the eternal nature of *dharmic* marriage and introduced a husband-deifying ideology, according to which a faithful wife must worship the spouse as God. It was also introduced in abolishing female property rights and prohibiting widow remarriage.³⁰

Another viewpoint on the ideal feminine and the corresponding images of women come from the *Sakta* Tantras.³¹ One of the most interesting features of *Sakta* Tantra is that women share with the goddess a continuity of being. All women, irrespective of their caste, creed, age, status, or personal accomplishment, are regarded as the physical incarnation of *Sakti*, the divine cosmic energy, the Great Goddess. All women at birth are the bearers of an intrinsic *Sakti*. This Saktihood is not extrinsic to their female experience as something to be acquired from the outside of their own selfhood, but a spark that inheres naturally as apart of their being at birth.³² *Sakta* Tantras do not make any gender evaluations in that they do not consider that women are subordinate to men. They claim that at birth all women, of all cultures, naturally assume the power and divinity of cosmic energy and that they are to be looked on as the goddess's physical counterpart on earth.³³ But these kinds of documents were not popularized in the society.

When Swami Vivekananda, speaking from the platform of the Western world, addressed the human race, like the ancient Rishi, as *Amritasya Putrah*, children of immortality, obviously he had no gender bias in mind. To his vision, everyone, all humanity, man and woman alike, was the children of Bliss. But the concept *Amritasya Putri*, 'daughter of immortality', has a bias in favor of women, but there is nothing to object to since it emphasizes this fact only that 'woman Power' is a factor to be continued. This is very much in tune with Swamiji's concept of 'woman power'.³⁴

Colonial rule meant political enslavement. Women due to their lack of vigilance lost ground, economically and socially. Politically too they were isolated, so they became powerless.³⁵ The Social Reform Movement had swept away some cobwebs from the minds of people. Ground was prepared for new ideas. Therefore fertile soil was found for Mahatma Gandhi's radical ideas. When he made a clarion call for women who formed nearly half of the population, to come out in large numbers to support the battle for freedom, they poured out without hesitation and accepted the challenge.³⁶ Since Independence, India has progressed in many spheres of activity. In the community of nations it not only holds its head high, but also men and women have contributed to the many accomplishments and the heights attained. Yet in common with most societies of the world, Indian society has not changed basically.

It is still a patriarchal society.³⁷

The ancient and medieval customs and practices in the name of religion like *Sati* and so on dehumanized women and they are still problems in the village India today. On the 4th September in 1987, an eighteen-year-old Rajput girl Roop Kanwar was burnt alive and on the 16th of the same month lakhs of people glorified her death as *Sati* and opposed the ordinance against it. Those people asserted categorically, "*Sati* was an integral part of Rajput culture and the Hindu *dharma*."³⁸ Thus, these kinds of ancient malpractice still creep into the surface of the earth to disturb the societal order.

2. *Women and Buddhism*

The position of women in Buddhism, especially during its early days, has always been a source of great debate. The written records of Buddhism, including authoritative Buddhist texts, have in general presented a negative image of women- for instance, in that the *sangha* places nuns at a lower level than the monks. However, this kind of portrayal in Buddhist literature is in conflict with the philosophy propounded by the Buddha and appears to be a reflection of contemporary social relationships rather than a philosophical justification of the patriarchal control of women.³⁹ Chapla Verma argues that, "the Buddha's philosophy is universal in nature and makes no distinction between the genders".⁴⁰

The negative position of women is a result of the compilation of texts by men who introduced words and stories that do not reflect the emphasis on universal equality inherent in the Buddha's philosophy. Buddhist texts may appear to altogether silence women. However, a careful analysis of Buddhist historical and philosophical discourses gives us information about female voices that have survived over the centuries. When scholars attempted to draw up rules to regulate society in accordance with the Buddha's philosophy, they incorporated an imbalance in the positions of men and women into the texts, all of which, we may note, were written long after the Buddha's death. Situating women so negatively appears to have proceeded from the personal opinions of the writers, all of them men, reflecting the patriarchal values of the age.⁴¹ But towards the end of the Buddhist period women were described as *narakasya dvaram* (gateway to hell)⁴²

3. *Women in the Muslim Period*

The Muslim period saw some outstanding women in several fields. There were those who ruled large or small kingdoms. The best known among them was Raziyya Zultana (13th century) and Rudramba (13th and 14th century). There were also women who helped their menfolk in the administration of their kingdoms from behind the scenes. Some were in the forefront and very dynamic. Nur Jahan (1646) and her niece Mumtaz Mahal (1593-1631) are often mentioned in history books as the wives of Emperor Jahangir and Shah Jahan respectively. Jija Bai (1594-1614) mother of Shivaji played an important role in his overall development as well in his life as a fighter and king.⁴³

Women also excelled in spiritual matters. Both Mukta Bai (1275-1297) and Mira Bai (1493-1547) placed great importance on the religious and spiritual life. Several scholarly women also were famous during the Muslim period. Gulbadan Begum, the daughter of Babur who wrote *Humayun Namah*- a book in Persian, giving an insight into the life and time of

Humayun, Babur, Humayun and Akbar sought her advice.⁴⁴ Jahanara (17th century), daughter of Shah Jahan, read Persian and Arabic well and her intellectual abilities were a great help at the court. Zeb-un-nisa, daughter of Emperor Aurangzeb, was an Arabic and Persian scholar. As a gifted poetess, she was a patron of literary persons. She is well known for her collection of valuable books and the lay out of the Charbag garden at Lahore.⁴⁵ During this period the women tasted power and used it for the benefit of the community.

Muslim women of India to a certain extent enjoyed freedom during the periods of Sultanate of Delhi and the Mughal period. But ever in history they were suffering under the clutches of religion and its practices. Even in the present day the practices like pardah system, shariat, child marriage, polygamy etc. affected the status of women and they are still victims of rape, dowry death and so on.⁴⁶ The patriarchal structure of Islamic religion dehumanized not only Indian women, but women all over the world.

4. *The Status of Rural and Dalit Women*

Discriminatory thinking and practices against women persist in the Indian society although the Indian Constitution guarantees equality of sexes. India is also a signatory to the UN Charter affirming equal rights of the sexes.⁴⁷ In India, a predominantly rural-agrarian country, although women enjoyed a respectable position during the ancient period but later changes in the economy, society and religious beliefs degraded their status. The rural women have less power, less money, less freedom, more work and more responsibilities. They constitute the underprivileged group leading subordinate lives in abject poverty and without any hope of improving their living conditions. Developmental efforts being made by the government are not reaching these women because of, among others, the difference in the educational and knowledge levels.⁴⁸

Indian society's inherent male chauvinism is among the distressing facts in the rural social life, which has not changed much in the last 50 years after independence.⁴⁹ The women of rural agrarian society can be divided into two groups. Firstly, the "housewives", who are not earning monetary as their male counterparts are able to arrange their basic needs in their socio-economic status. They work right from morning till late in the night-keeping their houses, children and even animals. The contribution of these women in terms of conventional measures of economic activity has been totally ignored and their unpaid labor is not counted.⁵⁰ Generally these women are illiterate, dependent on males, wife-husband relationship marked by absolute dominance of husband and submission of wife. Among the working women, the condition is different. Most of them have to play dual role of housewives as well as working outside the house. Rural Indian women are bound with social values and traditions and that restricts them from asking for their rights or better living conditions.⁵¹

The historical perspectives of most of the global societies are seen to be categorically influenced by these sorts of gender-based subordination, oppression and discrimination. But it is a matter of great concern that the women, in spite of their taking of the positive and invaluable roles in the designing of the social system as well as its effective functioning, have not received befitting recognition for their sincere performances, but, on the contrary, they have become most of the time the victims of utter negligence.⁵²

The Dalit Christian woman is a woman, a Dalit, and a Christian. There is in India a

tradition defining what each of these identities involves which is so strong that a Dalit Christian woman can be described as thrice handicapped or thrice alienated on the basis of her gender, her caste, and her membership in a minority religious community. If viewed from within the perspective of that tradition, the description is an accurate one; Women, Dalits and Christians are definitely not only looked down upon but also made to feel their inferiority in many different ways.⁵³ At present and for the foreseeable future, Dalit Christian women are "the least of these"(cf. Mt. 25: 40, 45) within the Indian churches and societies.⁵⁴ Thus, Indian women suffered due to the religious laws imposed upon them and the dehumanizing traditional societal practices.

D. The Emergence of Feminist Thought

Socio-anthropological studies show that women in general are endowed with the qualities of patient suffering, forbearance, adaptability to people and their personal needs, selfless giving, loving concerns for others, kindness, understanding and the like.⁵⁵ Some of these noble qualities taken together constitute what is revered as motherhood, for motherhood is not the exclusive prerogative of women who bear and rear children. Mother power is transparent in women as well as some men, particularly saintly persons, in varying degrees. And it is that power which the scriptures such as the *Chandi* glorify as existing in all beings.⁵⁶ An Indian feminist says, "so much energy had been generated during the past Decade-women celebrating their many gifts; women surviving violence and exclusion; women resisting; women creating spaces of healing and support; women praying and worshipping together; women honoring their unity; women weeping... and laughing."⁵⁷

Indian Council of Social Science Research's search to organize knowledge about women comes from changes in reception about women's contribution to society and their needs and problems in the context of social change. ICSSR'S main objectives are (a) to uncover significant trends in economic and social organization, which affect women's position in the long run, with a view to arouse public consciousness and assist the formulation of appropriate policies for women's development and welfare; (b) to develop new groups of women in society, particularly those in 'less visible' or underprivileged sections of Indian population; and (c) to revive the debate on the women's question that was initiated during the struggle for freedom and social construction.⁵⁸

In one of her articles, Aruna Gnanadason comments, "a new wind is blowing all over the world- the re-emergence of the feminine energy, *sakti*⁵⁹ which had been for centuries submerged under patriarchal structures".⁶⁰ This energy which has spread with renewed force through out the world in this century, has not left the Church and the theological basis of our faith untouched. Out of this energy has emerged one of the most important and relevant theologies of liberation for our times-feminist theology.⁶¹

Feminist theology is born out of women's experiences and their suffering due to patriarchal domination. It seeks liberation from all sorts of oppression and violence. Therefore, feminist theology speaks of God and the meaning of our relationship to God in Christ from the perspective of women's experience in the present context.⁶² Women's theological voices are emerging in every continent of the world. New theological visions are being born out of the womb of women's experiences of suffering, pain and struggles. Women all over the world

recognizes that traditional expectations of long-suffering and sacrifice, which have been imposed on women, can no longer be accepted. Women affirm theologies of hope and action, of laughter and joy, of liberation and freedom for all God's people and all creation.⁶³ As Daphne Hampson says, "feminists have of recent years tried to inaugurate a way of being and of acting which is free of past authorities and in which hierarchical ways of thinking do not prevail."⁶⁴

Feminist thought has made its way into all areas of study in academy. The discipline of literary criticism, psychoanalysis, classical studies, and anthropology tended to be more receptive to feminism than other areas of study such as religion, philosophy, history and broadly, science.⁶⁵ Women, working and practicing in the area of the study of religion, have contested interpretations of sacred texts and offered new interpretations.⁶⁶

There are reasons why women have been excluded and these reasons are rooted in the androcentric philosophical underpinnings of inter-religious dialogue. To a certain extent, women have already realized the need to come together among themselves in inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. When they do, however, they encounter difficulties that are unique to them and are not always issues for their male counterparts.⁶⁷ But women in today's context come forward to face challenges for the common good.

The women's movement in India has moved to a new phase of maturity, in attempting to formulate a feminist political methodology to understand the roots of oppression of women and other oppressed groups in Indian society, particularly tribals and dalits. A feminist hermeneutics of suspicion in India is (therefore) based on a new understanding of our biblical and extra-biblical history so that we can discover the liberating possibilities of the gospel for today so as to challenge a society which has so devalued women's labour, their sexuality and their dignity as human persons.⁶⁸ The young men and women of today can change the image of women as a commodity for sale and restore her dignity and honour. The process of change has already begun, one sees it in the awareness and reactions of a generation that has begun to think and question age-old but meaningless customs and traditions.⁶⁹

E. Christian Religion for a Change

Although women have read the Bible for countless generations, we have not always been self-conscious about reading as women. During the women's movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries there emerged a clear sense of the need for women to read the Bible self-consciously as women.⁷⁰ As Sharon H. Ringe comments, "interpretation of the Bible begins with careful and active reading. Such reading attempts to understand the time, place and purpose for which a particular biblical book was written, the principal concerns of the author and of the communities that shaped the book, and the meaning of particular terms found in the text."⁷¹

Western feminist theologians have been a source of inspiration to Third World/Indian women. However, there is a questioning whether the hermeneutic principles Western feminists offer are adequate to reflect on the complexity of structures of oppression within which Third World/Indian women live.⁷² Out of their experiences, Asian women are reinterpreting Christology. The cross takes on new significance in a context where women are expected to "sacrifice" themselves for the sake of others at all times, totally denying their own identity.⁷³

With regard to gender, Sweden is a society where great efforts have been, and are being made to minimize women’s subordination. In 1995 Sweden was ranked number one in gender development and gender empowerment indexes by the United Nations Development Program and in the same year Sweden also received a special prize for extra ordinary contributions in this area at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing.⁷⁴ The feminist liturgical movement in Sweden is a growing feminist ecclesiological praxis. It is no exaggeration to say that the central place of justification by faith in the liturgies has been replaced by a stress on justice within the community.⁷⁵ Swedish society set an example for the third world countries to follow in matters of gender issues.

At the inaugurating assembly of the WCC, held in Amsterdam in 1948, a report on “the Life and Work of Women in the Church” was presented by Sarah Chacko. Sarah, one of the few women present, began by pointing out that the subject of women in the Church should be the concern of the Church as a *whole*, and not seen as a problem of women alone. The report began with the statement that “the Church as the Body of Christ consist of men and women, created, as responsible persons, together to glorify and to do his will. This truth, accepted in theory, is too often ignored in practice”.⁷⁶

Indian womanhood has ever been praised and there has developed a sense of glorification, of course, theoretically. But in actual practice the line of thinking is completely different. It is noted that Indian womanhood is found to be established in a splendid manner in the traditional life and love of the country. Indian spiritualism is especially characterized by the conceptual idea centering on the perpetual strength contained in women.⁷⁷ Women constitute half of the population of the country and therefore, it is natural that their role in the nation building process cannot be evaded, rather it must be activated with the seriousness to reach the desired goal. Keeping in mind this particular aim and all rounded movement for the empowerment of women has been launched nation wide to keep pace with the rapid and integrated efforts for nation building.⁷⁸

Christian women have contributed to nation building through reformation, education, health care and social services. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was the greatest woman produced by modern India and one of the greatest Indians in all history. She was the champion of women’s rights and a pioneer in the field of women’s education. Mother Teresa is a symbol of untiring commitment to the poor and suffering.⁷⁹ Mary Varghese is one of the best leprosy surgeons in India. She has pioneered in the field of rehabilitation at the Christian Medical College in Vellore. She is the founder of the trust, ‘A Christian Mission of the Physically Handicapped’. The Christian doctrines and Christian teachers influenced B.V. Subbamma, as an Orthodox Hindu. She pioneered the Ashram Movement. Her basic philosophy is that ashrams will be a place for women to live together a disciplined Christian life for the development of the total person. Women also work as educators, nurses, social activists, counselors, sisters, pastors, theologians, leaders and so on.⁸⁰ Indian women including the religious women have been involving themselves in integrating Jesus’ narrative into the Christian community using the indigenous cultural movements, e.g., Ashram Movement, social justice model etc.⁸¹ Thus, women in India looking for an ‘Another Pentecost’ in which a New Humanity of God and New Creation.

The indispensable key to unlock the desolate hearts of women is education. The recent

census makes it clear that those houses where the husband and wife are equally educated, they share the family burden 94% equally. This proves the role of education in social transformation. As education is a powerful instrument in forming an egalitarian society, the program of universalisation of elementary education should be further accelerated towards higher enrolment and encouragement of girls in schools.⁸² In India, Christian missionary organisations and churches are promoting education in every levels of the community.

William Carey and Serampore Mission have made a valuable contribution to the upliftment of women. The Serampore missionaries promoted the education of women. Hannah Marshman, the wife of Joshua Marshman, one of the founders of Serampore Mission, had worked tirelessly for female education. By Hannah's efforts several schools were established for female education. It enabled the women to achieve to a great extent their development and emancipation. The efforts of Serampore Mission and Ram Mohan Roy are to be understood as a noble task and a challenge even today for the liberation of women.⁸³

The YWCA of India is over a hundred years old and forms part of the movement of Christian world over. The services provided by the YWCA are of varying types that cater to needs of young and old women. They are, hostels for working women, schools for children, and technical and vocational training centres for youth, non-formal educational programs for the rural people, Girl's Town and other special projects.⁸⁴ Thus, through various projects YWCA targets for the transformation of Indian society.

Violence against women is deeply rooted in power relations between women and men. Women are socialized to believe that they are powerless and have no right to 'own' power.⁸⁵ The church as a healing community has made attempts to deal with the issue of violence against women however sporadic, insignificant or inadequate they may have seemed.⁸⁶ The churches would be acting in accordance with Jesus' practice by deliberately focusing its ministry upon Dalit Christian women for the sake of all of the women and all of the men God has called the churches to serve.⁸⁷

The Asian Women's Consultation of EATWOT held in Manila in 1985, described how Asian women are trying to carve out a theology that is "very Third World, very Asian, and very women."⁸⁸ It is like the wind-the feminine energy, Shakti-blowing over the land-liberating, nurturing and freeing. It grows gently but absolutely into a volatile force that will transform the tears and suffering of women into songs of joy and hope.⁸⁹ The praxis-oriented theological articulation in favor of women in India from the Christian circle is highly remarkable.

A text when applied to the context becomes the Word of God. Any application, which denies the humanity of people, is against the Christ event.⁹⁰ Biblical Christianity is liberating also for the Asian women. One Asian Christian, Kwok Pui Lan, warns those feminists who are moving away from the biblical tradition that "they tend to alienate themselves from global sisterhood because the Bible is an important part of our common 'heritage' and 'language'".⁹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether writes, "the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels can be recognized as a figure remarkably compatible with feminism."⁹²

The new paradigm of theology at this time is rightly characterized as 'Christo-centric Universalism', 'Cosmic Christ', 'Lordship of Christ over all', and 'Christ, the New Creation'-

all these are attempts to build a bridge between Christian faith and the reigio- cultural and socio- political realities of Indian context. In all these a universal significance of Christ reality was unambiguously affirmed.⁹³ The emergence of organized movement of the women, dalits and tribals and other marginalised sectors and their determination to do theology drawing on their experience of oppression and hardship as well as their spirituality is a new watershed point in Indian theology. It has posed a serious challenge to traditional paradigm but more significantly it provides a new way of doing theology-a new paradigm.⁹⁴

Concluding Remarks

In recapitulation, women of Indian society were victims of patriarchal and androcentric customs for centuries. Those customs severely traumatized the feelings of women in the past and even now it hurts their identity. The existence of women is under threat, especially due to the misinterpretations of various religious scriptures, and the hierarchical societal order. But the Christian feminists have taken initiative for a 'Christ-centered' approach for sexual equality, i.e., a 'mission in action', which is inclusive in nature.

Indian Christian feminist theology is rooted in the suffering and hopes of women, which the women's movement in the country has articulated and continues to articulate. Christian women, working and practicing in the area of the study of religion, have contested traditional interpretations of sacred texts and offered new interpretations. The Christian feminists put forward the remedy, which lies in cultural upgrading through the spreading of education to every corner of the country. It will act as a tool in promoting equality, agent of social change and important input for development as well. Women's contribution to the society in all levels of cultural development can never be ignored or underestimated, rather these must be regarded as the inevitable factor in the smooth running of the society concerned.

The Jesus of the Biblical traditions can be presented as a paradigm in the present day Indian context for a 'New Humanity', in which men and women enjoy equality, justice and peace. An affirmation in the 'humanity of Christ' can bring out a praxis-oriented theology by which a radical transformation is possible for all. Therefore, Christian missions should take a Christ-centered methodology for doing theology.

NOTES

1. Maura O' Neill, *Women Speaking Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 4.
2. Susan Durber, "The Female Reader of the Parables of the Lost", *JSNT*, ed. Francis Watson (March 1992), Issue 45, 64.
3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), 47; Also see, Susan Durber, "The Female Reader of the Parables of the Lost", *JSNT*, 67.
4. Somen Das, *Christian Ethics and Indian Ethos* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 151.
5. Ibid; Also see, Romila Thaper, *Analytical Study of Sakuntala* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000); Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Status of Women", *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, eds. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (London: SCM Press, 1986), 663-666.
6. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Forward by Rajni Kothari (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), xiii.
7. Priscilla Singh, "Churches Say 'No' to Violence Against Women", *The Lutheran World Federation Development for Mission and Development of Women in Church and Society*, Geneva (Nov., 2000), 23.

8. Rose Wu, "The Impact of Globalization on Women in Prostitution: A Hong Kong Feminist's Perspective", *Theology for our times: On Global Economy*, ed. M.J. Joseph, Bangalore, Ecumenical Christian Centre, Indian School of Ecumenical Theology (July 2001), No.8, 96-102.
9. *Ibid.*
10. "Conceiving a New Creation: Grassroots Women's Leadership Formation, 13-19 October 1990, Penang YMCA, Malaysia" (Urban Rural Mission, CCA), 50.
11. Janet Martin Soskice, "Turning the Symbols", *Swallowing A Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (Britain: SPCK, 1996), 25.
12. Ahn Jae-Woong, In the *Preface* of, "Conceiving a New Creation: Grassroots..." (URM, CCA), i.
13. *Ibid* iii
14. Rajni Kothari, "Foreword", in *Staying Alive*, by Vandana Shiva (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988).
15. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), xvii.
16. Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce sustenance. *Prakriti* is worshipped as *Aditi*, the primordial vastness, the inexhaustible, the source of abundance. She is worshipped as *Adi Sakti*, the primordial power. The existence of the feminine principle is linked with diversity and sharing.
17. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 38.
18. Lynn E. Gatwood, *Devi and the Spouse Goddess: Women, Sexuality and Marriage in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991), 1.
19. *Ibid.*, 26.
20. *Ibid.*, 27.
21. Jessie B. Tellis Nayak, ed. *Indian Womanhood Then and Now: Situations, Efforts, Profiles* (Indore: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1983), 17.
22. Lynn E. Gatwood, *Devi and the Spouse Goddess...*, 29.
23. Satchidananda Dhar, "Dasha-Mahavidya: The Ten Forms of the Divine Mother", *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*, ed. Swami Prabhananda, Gol Park, Calcutta (Oct., 2000), Vol. LI, No. 10, 443.
24. Somen Das, *Christian Ethics and Indian Ethos* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 156.
25. Gatwood, *Devi and the Spouse Goddess*, 29.
26. Somen Das, *Christian Ethics*, 158.
27. Madhu Khanna, "The Goddess Women Equation in Sakta Tantras", *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India*, ed. Mandakranta Bose (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 109.
28. *Ibid*
29. Leela Manasseh, "Emancipation of Women and Nation Building: A Christian Perspective", *TBT Journal*, ed. Ken Gnanakan, Paul Mohan Raj, et. al., Bangalore, TBT (Nov., 2001), Vol.3, No. 1, 67.
30. Madhu Khanna, "The Goddess Women Equation in Sakta Tantras", 110: For more details see, AS. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962).
31. Outside the mainstream Hinduism, such as some forms of Tantra, several traditions attempted to create a distinct "world of their own" setting beside the patriarchal ethos of brahmanical religion.
32. Madhu Khanna, *Faces of the Feminine...*, 114.
33. *Ibid.*
34. "Woman-Power in the Light of Swami Vivekananda's Ideas-I", *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*, 464-8.
35. Tellis Nayak, *Indian Womanhood*, 31.
36. *Ibid.*, 37.
37. *Ibid.*, 41.
38. Somen Das, *Christian Ethics*, 161, Quoted from *National Policy on Education: 1986*, The Government of India, 22.
39. Chapla Verma, "The Widening Gloom"-Women's Place in Buddhist History, *Faces of the Feminine*, ed. Mandakranta Bose, 69

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40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.* Also see, B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dharma* (Bombay: Siddhartha Publication, 1974); Jose Ignacio Cabezon, ed. *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).
42. “Woman-Power in the Light of Swami Vivekananda-I”, *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture*, 664-8.
43. Tellis Nayak, ed. *Indian Womanhood*, 27.
44. *Ibid.*, 28.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Cf. Asghar Ali Engineer, ed. *Problems of Muslim Women in India* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited).
47. Somen Das, *Christian Ethics*, 160.
48. Shahab Fazal, “Status of Women in Rural India: Some Preliminary Observations”, *Man in India: A Quarterly Journal of Anthropology*, ed. R.M. Sarcar, Ranchi (July- December 2001), Vol. 81, Nos. 3,4, 353.
49. *Ibid.*, 361.
50. *Ibid.*, 362.
51. *Ibid.*
52. R. M. Sarcar, “Editorial”, *Man in India*, 250.
53. John C. B. Webster, Deborah Premraj, et. al., *From Role to Identity: Dalit Christian Women in Transition* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 1.
54. *Ibid.*, 142.
55. “Mother Power: Its Use for a Better Future”, *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture*, ed. Swami Prabhananda, Gol Park, Calcutta (Oct., 2000), Vol. LI, No. 10, 442.
56. *Ibid*
57. Aruna Gnanadason, *The Ecumenical Review*, ed. Konard Raiser (WCC, Jan., 2001), No.1, Vol. 53, If.
58. Asok Mitra, *The Status of Women: Literacy and Employment*, ICSSR Program of Women’s Studies-II (Bombay: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1979), back cover page.
59. Feminine Force.
60. Aruna Gnanadason, “Feminist Methodology: Indian Women’s Experience”, *Confronting Life: Theology Out of the Context*, ed. M. P. Joseph (Delhi: ISPCK, 1995), 173.
61. *Ibid.* For more details on Asian Feminist Theology, see Gabriele Dietrich, *A New Thing on Earth* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001).
62. Ivy Singh, “Eco-Feminism: A New Departure in Contextual Theology”, *Codex 2002 of Serampore College* (2002), 57.
63. Ofelia Ortega, ed. *Women s Vision. Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action* (Geneva: WCC Publication, 1995), viii.
64. Daphne Hampson, ed. *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist theologians Debate Christianity* (Britain: SPCK, 1996), 14.
65. Darlene M. Juschka, ed. *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 2001), 1.
66. *Ibid* 13.
67. Mama O’ Neill, *Women Speaking Women Listening*, x.
68. Gnanadason, “Feminist Methodology”, *Confronting Life*, 184.
69. Tellis Nayak, ed. *Indian Womanhood*, 73.
70. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *The Women ‘s Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), xiii.
71. *Ibid.*, 1.
72. Gnanadason, “Feminist Methodology”, 185.
73. *Ibid*, 186.
74. Ninna Edgardh Beckman, “Mrs. Murphy’s Arising from the Pew: Ecclesiological Implications”, *The Ecumenical Review*, ed. Konard Raiser (WCC, Jan., 2001), Vol.53, No.1, 7f.
75. *Ibid.*, 9.
76. Janet Crawford, “Women and Ecclesiology: The Ecumenical Streams”, *The Ecumenical Review*, ed. Konard Raiser (WCC, Jan., 2001), Vol.53, No.1, 14.

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77. R.M.Sarcar, "Editorial", *Man in India*, 250.
78. *Ibid*
79. Leela Manasseh, "Emancipation of Women and Nation Building: A Christian Perspective ", *TBT Journal*, ed. Ken Gnanakan, Paul Mohan Raj, *et. al.*, Bangalore, TBT, Vol. 3, No. 1, 200 1,69; Also see Dietrich, *A New Thing on Earth*.
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81. *Ibid.*, 77.
82. Raj Kumar, "Women: A Mere Baby- Producing Machine?", *Sandhya-2002, An Annual Publication from Vidyajyothi*, Delhi, Vidyajyothi, 2002,46.
83. M. Stephen, *A Liberated Vision* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 22-4.
84. Tellis Nayak, ed. *Indian Womanhood*, 111ff.
85. Priscilla Singh, " Church say 'No' to Violence Against Women", 10.
86. *Ibid.*,15.
87. John C.B. Webster, Deborah Premraj, *et. al.*, *From Role to Identity*, 142.
88. *From the Proceedings of the Asian Women 's Consultations,* " Highlights of the Asian Women's Consultation" (Manila: EATWOT, 1985), 3; Also see Aruna Gnanadason, *Confronting Life* 192.
89. Gnanadason, *Confronting Life*, 193.
90. M. Gnanavaram," 'Dalit Theology' and the Parable of the Good Samaritan", *JSNT (June 1993)*, Issue 50,82.
91. Maura O' Neill, *Women Speaking Women Listening*, 69.
92. *Ibid* Quoted from Rosemary Radford Ruether.
93. K.C.Abraham," Third World Theology: Paradigm Shift and Emerging Concerns", *Confronting Life*, ed. M.P. Joseph, 206.
94. *Ibid.*, 207.