

STATEMENT OF THE INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Women's Concerns and Indian Theological Responses

Introduction

1. We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA), gathered together at our 27th Annual Meeting, held at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, 25—29 April 2004, reflected on a strongly felt need of our times: “Women's Concerns and Indian Theological Response”. The 70 participants deliberated on this theme and arrived at some recommendations that would constitute a response.

I. Situating the Question –Women's Experiences and Concerns

2. Beneath the loud clamour of “India Shining,” we hear the faint scream of 5 million newborn female babies who are killed every year in our motherland. The girl child population shows a shocking decline in India—a national average of 927 girls to 1000 boys as per the 2001 census—because of the alarmingly increasing female feticide. Like the sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Kshipra, Cauveri, Godavari and others, desired for their refreshing and cleansing waters yet violated by the indiscriminate disposal of wastes into them, the lives of a great majority of Indian women mirror the ambiguity of being bearers of life yet driven to death in multiple ways.
3. Being made to feel that they derive their identity from men, women experience victimization from all sides. Neither in public nor in the private space of their homes are they safe from violence. In addition to being victims of chronic hunger and susceptible to various diseases, so many of them continue to experience battering, harassment, rape, incest and dowry deaths.
4. Many Indian women go through life with fetters that keep them in a perpetual state of subjugation especially in the socio-economic sphere. They are denied education and employment opportunities. Even today, the content of the UN Report (1985) rings true: Women perform nearly *two-thirds* of the society's work, receive a *tenth* of its income and own less than a *hundredth* of the property at a time when India posts a high growth rate in the corporate sector.
5. Most women are kept out of the political power structures that govern our society. The much-debated 33% reservation issue is a sign of the resistance that women encounter in their struggle to break through the stifling boundaries that circumscribe their lives. Marginalized from decision-making processes at all levels and confined within domestic walls, they are unable to make an adequate contribution to society.
6. A great paradox surrounds the lives of Indian women. In spite of being carriers of life, culture, tradition and religion and considered symbols of honour, they become targets for revenge in conflict situations: communal violence, inter-caste rivalries and religious

strife. While woman is revered as the one who nurtures life yet she is allowed little space to develop her own life and its potentials.

7. Women bear the brunt of growing fundamentalism not only in religion but also in the field of culture, the world of politics and in a profit-oriented market economy. Thanks to globalization, glaring expressions of the feminization of poverty exist as in the plight of migrants, sex workers and those making up the unorganized sector. There is also a direct link between globalization and the intensified violence against women. In our increasingly globalized society, women's exploitation is on the rise due to insufficient laws to protect their dignity and ensure justice in employment situations.
8. The oppression of women is found in most religions. Through the use of patriarchal language and a selective interpretation of scriptures, myths, rituals and other practices, religions tend to validate and perpetuate the dehumanizing status of women. The clearly discernible religiosity of women and their loyal practice of religious observances are exploited to keep them in a state of dependency that relegates them to positions of compliance at the periphery.
9. Women experience marginalization in the Church by the fact that they are excluded from active and adult participation in its life. While being appreciated for their compliant service and passive presence in the congregation, they are barred from ministerial roles and decision-making processes. Token representation of women at the parish, diocesan and national levels adds a little to alter the subordinate status of women in the Church.

II. The Analysis of the Problem

10. Patriarchal culture that is deeply embedded in the Indian ethos has sanctioned an institutionalized system of male domination at many levels. Domesticated under the idealized labels of being caring wives and nurturing mothers whose sacrificing love sustains the home, women are—for the most part—excluded from public office and professions that include roles of leadership and equal partnership with men. Some philosophies even view woman as 'incomplete man' and portray her as underdeveloped, unfit to vote and exercise responsibility in affairs of the state. Having internalized the sex role stereotyping which has relegated them to the position of 'the second sex', the average Indian woman's self-image has become one in which social approval of her being, status and function depend on her compliance with, and submission to, male domination.
11. Religions too have played an extensive role in keeping women subordinate in the Indian society. While a woman is recognized as a source of immense power, the prescriptions of religion accord her an ancillary role in relation to her husband and see her potential realized when confined to domestic duties. Further, while in India feminine images of the Divine abound, in most spheres of life woman continues to remain under patriarchal control. Religious rituals and epics have been used to perpetuate the image of the ideal woman as one who accepts the superiority of the male and is submissive to androcentric

norms. By enlisting divine sanction to maintain the subordinate position of woman, patriarchy thrives and obstructs the humanizing processes in both women and men.

12. The special targeting of women during communal riots and social unrest follows from the patriarchal understanding that women are the property of men and hence men are seen to suffer dishonouring and violence by proxy. In recent times, fundamentalist organizations have co-opted women who have then engaged in communal violence against women of other communities considered hostile. These organizations have allowed women the space to participate in public life and to have political discussions with men, yet they demand from these women an uncritical conformity.
13. The distinctive feature of patriarchy in India is a system of domination-dependency that is found not only in sexism but also in other oppressive structures like casteism. Because of this system, women are sufferers of multiple forms of subjugation. The largest and worst affected groups are women who are dalits, adivasis and those belonging to the unorganized sector especially those living in urban slums. Hunger and increased poverty have led to an increase in trafficking among women and girl children. Globalization, which is at times an intense form of imperialism has affected adversely the number of women being employed and has contributed to increased inequality and exploitation.
14. As in other religions, patriarchal patterns—present in the hierarchical structures--also exist in Christianity and subjugate women in the Church. The Church today is impoverished and incomplete because it follows only one mode of being church, the patriarchal mode. Women encounter several restrictive barriers in their efforts to be Church. The ordinances surrounding the ordained ministry in the Church have excluded them from both mainstream Christianity and active participation in the Church. Like other marginalized groups, women may be consulted but their voice is conspicuously absent in decision-making. They are invited to catechize but not permitted to proclaim the word—as ordained men can—and thus share their unique God experience. Women are included in pastoral councils but excluded from active ministerial services, in spite of the clear shift in Vatican II from older patterns: "... with respect to the fundamental rights of the person every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent" (GS 29).
15. The text of the Bible was born in cultures and contexts that were patriarchal. Androcentric passages tell stories and construct social worlds that eclipse women, marginalizing their historical presence and contribution to salvation history. Some Biblical texts are so interpreted that they nullify women's contribution to mainstream religion; these texts are seen to foster a negative image of woman, judging her as evil and unclean and casting her in the role of temptress! Hence, women experience difficulty in appropriating to themselves the liberating vision of God's word in the scriptures.
16. In the course of religious socialization, women tend to internalise traditional religious practices and behaviour that are entrenched in a patriarchal worldview. As a result, they are alienated from their true-life experiences and even led to negate the God-given reality

of their bodies. Devaluing women's sexuality and bodily processes adversely affects their way of understanding the self, the world and even God; it inhibits their building up of healthy and fulfilling relationships with women and men, and renders their bodies acceptable targets for exploitation.

III. Towards a Theological Response

17. Humanity can be healed from the distortion of its true image and be restored to its original inclusive image only through an appropriate paradigm shift from the prevailing worldviews and value systems. It will also need the interventions of prophetic religious agencies. The contemporary liberation movements among the dalits, tribals and women show hopeful signs for a transformation that privileges the powerless peripheries. The feminist ferment and other subaltern awakenings are the silver lining on the horizon. These give hope that humankind will be spared of any bizarre and lopsided growth so that a holistic humanity can be re-constructed by conscious and concerted human efforts. The task before Indian theologians is to reconstruct a humanity that reflects the image of God. It will succeed when women are restored to their true personhood. We are challenged to weave new patterns into our theological imagination that compel us to be “friends of God and Prophets” in the daring adventure of articulating the knowledge of God with a new vision.
18. Feminist theology attempts this articulation by unfolding the story of humankind in which women and men are affirmed as human persons with dignity and worth. It is an experiential theology born in the context of women’s pains and struggles for a liberated existence. Feminist theology or women’s God-talk rests on the firm belief that both male and female knowledge and discussion about God are valid and important.
19. Christian feminists in India realize that they have the authority to reflect on God’s liberative activities in India and articulate their own theology through new myths, stories and symbols. This would necessitate a reinterpretation of the Scriptures and understanding traditional doctrines—especially Christology, Ecclesiology, Spiritual Theology and allied treatises—from a new perspective so that they are effectively freed from their patriarchal baggage.
20. Through a critical feminist interpretation, the Bible can offer a spiritual vision and resource in the struggles for women’s emancipation and liberation. By challenging androcentric modes of interpretation and deconstructing scriptural metaphors and symbols that are seen as intrinsically sexist, women will be seen as historical agents who have contributed and continue to contribute actively in the formation of Christian history, faith and spirituality.
21. By questioning accepted usage and meaning in religion and secular society, feminist hermeneutics unveils the silences that have prevented a true knowledge of the oppressive, social, political and religious conditions in which women have functioned both in the biblical and present day societies. By retrieving the unrecognized contributions of women

in the bible, we understand and appreciate the role played by women disciples in the origins of both the Jesus movement and early Christianity.

22. Women experienced wholeness in encountering Jesus. In the Semitic and Graeco-Roman context that saw women as subordinate to men, Jesus made a revolutionary option for women. Assuming the style of Wisdom imaged as a prophetess (Mt 11/28-30), he spoke as one who was manifesting the creative and all embracing goodness and graciousness of God. He respected women, speaking to them as individuals with spiritual understanding, and included them among the disciples who followed him in Galilee (Lk 8) and finally to Jerusalem and Calvary. When they were victimized he not only defended them but also challenged the injustice meted out to them (Jn 8, Lk 7). Revealing his messiahship to women (cf. Jn 4, 11) and making them the first announcers of His resurrected new life (Jn 20), Jesus entrusts women with his own mission making them partners in the realization of God's dream for humankind.
23. To fulfil the vision of Jesus calls for a new way of being church: a discipleship of equals. The communion ecclesiology acknowledged in the Second Vatican Council, paves the way for an egalitarian and participatory model that recovers the traditions of women's discipleship and leadership. Such recapturing seeks to engender both a church-praxis that emancipates and a theology that transforms the patriarchal ecclesial structures and culture.
24. To realize the vision of a participatory church as a community of collaboration and partnership for prophetic mission in our society today, we need an alternative model of authority and a new understanding of ministry that includes women. Servant authority as lived by Jesus and taught by him is transforming, integrative and empowering. It includes reciprocal relationship, dialogue and inter-dependency that would help build an inclusive community, a credible sign of communion to the world.
25. A new way of being church calls for a new spirituality that grows in harmony with the rhythms of the Spirit and in joyous abandonment to it. Transcending dualisms and going beyond the dominant-dependent hierarchical paradigms, feminist spirituality perceives life in terms of relationships. Attempting to rise above dichotomy, it weaves harmony among differences whether from gender, class, caste or creed. Born of pain and suffering that is endured, it commits itself to the common struggle against multi-faceted oppression. It invites us to live life intensely, deepening the experience of the sacred in the ordinariness of everyday life.
26. Feminist spirituality redeems women's bodies and bodily experiences and frees sexuality from degrading objectification. It embraces every aspect of relationship which human beings enjoy as embodied persons. Recognizing the inherent potential of human sexuality to affirm the other as person, feminist spirituality enables individuals to reconstruct community. It is a way of life that invites us to integrate the masculine and feminine energies within, while calling us to a greater sensitivity and harmony with all of creation.

27. Our theological response to women's concerns beckons us to heed the groaning of life at the margins. Choosing the margins as the site of theologizing activity enables us to witness closely the daily life situation of marginalized women and to see them not only as victims but also as agents who can take charge of themselves. As theological subjects, they are capable of experiencing and interpreting the action of God in their lives. They can see meaning even in the most difficult circumstances of life.
28. Our task as collaborators with the Spirit of God in this theological journey is to walk with marginalized people, especially women, and contemplate God who accompanies broken humanity. Taking human life seriously, men and women are challenged to identify and resist forces negating the well-being of women and to recognize their dignity, worth and contributions in all spheres of life.

Recommendations

29. To translate our prophetic responses into flesh and blood realities, we need a paradigm shift in our praxis which calls for crossing boundaries with renewed commitment. In order to address the burning issues that concern women, we recommend to all women and men of good will the following:

In general

- (a) To join hands with secular movements especially the feminist, ecological and other subaltern ones, that work for the dignity, rights and liberation of all the people and the earth.
- (b) To promote women's empowerment through education and other consciousness-raising programmes.
- (c) To mobilize pressure groups that advocate the cause of women against violence, sexual abuse and other forms of harassment.
- (d) To counteract the print and electronic media's efforts to make of women's body a commodity or an object for commercial exploitation.
- (e) To promote women's participation in the public sphere especially in the policy-making bodies of government and other social institutions.
- (f) To help organize self-help groups and women's cooperatives at the grassroots and ensure that they are not co-opted by vested interests.

In the Church's ministries

30. (a) To ensure adequate representation of women in bodies like the parish and diocesan pastoral councils, finance committee and CBCI/CCBI commissions.

- (b) To create structures that would involve women in the decision-making processes.
- (c) To empower women's commissions with adequate funds.
- (d) To ensure just remuneration for women's work in the ecclesiastical setup.
- (e) To promote the participation of women in liturgical celebrations so that they can share from their wisdom and experience in the breaking of the Word of God.
- (f) To use traditions and scriptural texts judiciously and discerningly by identifying anti-women texts and avoiding them in liturgy. Instead, use more pro-feminist and liberative passages introducing the assertive women of the scriptures: the Daughters of Zelophehad, Deborah, Judith, Queen Vasthi, the courageous midwives in Exodus 1, and others. Emphasize the place and importance of women like Mary Magdalene, the first witness and announcer of the Resurrection.
- (g) To present Mary, the mother of the Lord, as a liberated and liberating woman and highlighting her empowering potential.
- (h) To popularize inclusive language in conversations, liturgy, catechesis, and homilies.
- (i) To denounce discrimination and violence against women as sin from the pulpit and in faith education.

In Formation Houses and Seminaries

- 31. (a) To make conscious efforts to replace exclusive masculine symbols and vocabulary for divine-human realities with inclusive models.
- (b) To recognize the expertise of women in various ecclesiastical and secular disciplines and use their services for the larger Christian community by appointing women professors to seminaries and other formation programmes.
- (c) To appoint women councillors and spiritual directors to seminaries and theologates in order to help the seminarians develop a healthy interaction with and respect for women as equal partners.
- (d) To educate persons in formation on the positive aspects of human love and sexuality and highlighting their beauty and spirituality.
- (e) To introduce gender sensitization programmes and feminist theology into seminary formation, the ongoing-formation of priests and also in the formation of religious, in order to inculcate in them healthy attitudes towards women.

Conclusion

32. In conclusion we affirm that women's concerns are our concerns. They are concerns of the home and the village, of the church and of religion, of ethics and politics, in short, of the whole human community.
33. We have deliberated on these concerns in the context of patriarchal and hierarchic traditions of societies and cultures that have given rise to women's marginalization and oppression in different ways and degrees. The result has been the stifling of many a sprout, the dimming of many a light and the wilting of countless blossoms. We resolve to free ourselves from the entanglements of enslaving and dehumanizing traditions, and to unite ourselves to fashion a new world of solidarity, responsibility and mutuality.
34. Rejecting what is non-liberative, divisive and humiliating, we uphold and commit ourselves afresh to those traditions and teaching that enjoin and foster the dignity, rights, freedom and creativity of all people, women and men alike, irrespective of age, gender, race, caste, creed and culture. Thus can we make our own the vision of Jesus where there is no discrimination between Jew and Greek, free and slave, male and female (Gal 3:28).