

The Churches and Self-Reliance

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH

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As a nation, we Indians have only lately begun to see the implications of accepting foreign aid. We now know that it makes us soft and servile, subservient to forces outside, politically and ideologically; it saps the vitality of the nation, hampers the development of creativity and spiritual freedom. In times of acute food crisis we go around with a begging bowl, instead of foreseeing the crisis and cultivating our own back garden with a little more determination.

The process is the same in the Church too. It is always the agencies of churches outside India that worry about our famines and floods, ships or flies in material aid in large quantities for emergency relief. Our contribution at best is to receive these supplies and to distribute them, through church officials paid through foreign funds.

As Christian churches, we seem always to trail behind the nation in our relations to Christians outside our country. It is true that our relation to our fellow Christians abroad cannot be conceived on the same terms as our relations with our erstwhile colonial masters and their friends. These Christians abroad are our brethren in the Body of Christ. They are one with us in the fellowship of the Church. They are genuinely concerned to help us, sometimes with an obsessive paternal affection and care, but often with genuine warmth and love and sincerity. But the parallelism remains, uncomfortably reminding us that economic, political and human relationships between nations and peoples definitely affect their spiritual fellowship.

Most of our Christian churches are still heavily dependent on Churches in the west for money, personnel and ideas. The

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system developed in the nation during the colonial period. National freedom has not succeeded in liberating the churches from this debilitating bondage.

In the matter of personnel we certainly have made some progress. Credit for this however, goes mostly to the nation. The government's refusal to grant visas to all and sundry who wanted to come here as missionaries has largely reduced the number of foreign personnel serving in our administrative organs and institutions. Our pleas about minority rights and all the rest have fortunately fallen on deaf ears. The resolute action of the government in refusing visas to foreign missionary personnel whose work could well be done by an Indian did not spring out of communalist attitudes of the majority community so much as from the clear secularist policy of non-alignment. We should be thankful to God for the Government's resolute refusal to liberalize the visa restrictions. But for that stance our churches would have continued to be dominated by foreign personnel. There are literally thousands of semi-literate and spiritually mediocre Christians in the west who would love to bring the light of the gospel to poor ignorant benighted Indians! For some of them, it is a pressing psychological need to find people whom they can enlighten, since at home they find it difficult to find buyers for their superior spiritual wisdom.

Our churches by themselves would never have mustered enough courage to say to our erstwhile mentors and large scale benefactors: 'Please, brethren, leave us alone for a while. We need to develop our faith in God by depending less on your generous help.' We need to regain our spiritual identity and dignity. We can do that only by developing our own spiritual leadership, our own way of living the Christian life in a poor nation, our own thinking on the meaning of Christ's incarnation for our lives. Even if we ask you in a moment of weakness and temptation to give us your money and personnel, you should care enough for our spiritual health to say no to us'. In fact many of us are still not mature enough to say such things in all earnestness to our brethren in the west. It seems, therefore, that the Government restrictions have done what lack of integrity has prevented many of us from saying.

In the matter of financial and ideological dependence, however, we have scarcely started moving beyond the colonial era.

Our government has at least started to talk about self-reliance, even though we are still heavily dependent on other nations for pursuing our economic policies. It took deep political humiliation during the recent food crisis to make us realise how subservient and helpless we were. Only by refusing to rely on foreign assistance have we begun to overcome our recurring food crisis.

The churches have not yet learnt the lesson. Our Christian Agency for Social Action, Relief and Development related to the N.C.C.I. and the Roman Catholic Relief Services are still largely administered and financed by the Churches and agencies outside the country. The staff of these agencies have now become largely Indian. But their salaries are paid from foreign funds. The Indian contribution to the total operation which comes to millions of rupees every year is but negligible. If today the foreign funds are stopped by Government the whole machinery for relief and emergency aid as well as our food development programmes would virtually cease.

Estimates vary, but something like 100 million rupees flow into Church channels in India from abroad every year. It is true that a good deal of this money is used for the good of the whole nation. But other communities are justified in questioning the fairness of so much economic power being available to one minority community in the country. However responsible we may be in the actual purposes to which it is applied, it does help the Christian community in a special way by providing so many more employment opportunities, capital assistance to middle class farmers and others, assisting the Christian community to have bigger institutional influence in the country and so on.

But the jealousy and envy of the majority community is not the only reason for us to seek liberation from dependence on foreign funds. The present writer is much more concerned about the spiritual vitality of our churches. The principle of self-reliance translated into religious terms means dependence on God rather than on the wealthy western churches. We cannot develop a genuine expression of our dependence on God until these umbilical cords that connect us to the coffers of the west are snapped.

The World Council of Churches, in its division of Church Aid, Refugee and World Service, has recognised

principle at least in form. They insist, for example (a) that they would not support long-term projects and would prefer three-year projects, (b) that projects for capital assistance would be more welcome than projects mainly for running expenses, (c) that projects would merit support only if they can be shown to be able to become self-supporting within a limited time, and (d) that a third of the total funds necessary should always be raised locally. It will be a magnificent thing indeed if these principles could also apply to our service operations which are now becoming institutionalised without sufficient base in the support of the local churches.

These principles, however, have not been fully appreciated, and, in practice, these principles have been grossly violated. Besides, there are difficulties that prevent their implementation. In the first place only a very small portion of the foreign funds come through World Council channels or are controlled by them. Secondly even they do not find it easy to enforce these principles, because churches will find alternate sources through mission boards and then regard such funds as their local contribution.

The bulk of the funds and materials come through other channels like:

- (a) American food surplus imports coming in under P.L. 480 procedure through Church agencies like C.R.S. and C.A.S.A.
- (b) Direct grants and subsidies to churches from parent churches and mission boards abroad.
- (c) Funds received by church-related institutions (mainly hospitals and schools, seminaries and colleges).
- (d) Money sent in for support of para-ecclesiastical movements like Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A., S.C.M., A.I.C.U.F., N.B. C.H.E.I., Sunday School Union, Bible Society, Evangelical Fellowship of India, India Every Home Crusade and so on.

There is no single agency able to control all these channels except perhaps the Government. So long as the Churches are unable to exercise self-discipline, it may be inevitable that God will use the government to impose some discipline on the Churches. We should then perhaps prepare ourselves to accept

government imposed restrictions as from the hand of God, and get ready for a tomorrow without foreign aid.

Some Christian leaders have already begun to foresee this tomorrow and provide for it by seeking large scale endowments in India financed from abroad. These are to be invested in development projects that fit in with the national plan, and the revenue generated by them to be used for the running expenses of church related institutions and administrative structures, as well as for service projects now undertaken with foreign funds. One sees the wisdom of such an approach, but only to a point. It can help cushion the shock that must follow the endorsement of restrictions by the government on money coming in from abroad. (Government is reluctant to act mainly because they are afraid they may lose a considerable volume of direly needed foreign exchange.)

But it is not at all certain that large sums will be available for such endowment. Agencies abroad are reluctant to invest the pennies and dollars contributed by a very large number of ordinary Christians in the western churches in uncertain projects which may turn out to be total fiascoes. There is no guarantee that such funds will be responsibly administered by the churches in India when there is no longer any opportunity for western surveillance as for example today in Burma.

From the point of view of the health of the Indian churches, this proposed measure of revenue generating projects will defeat the purpose of developing self-reliance in proportion as these projects are successful. They may also create a group of parasitic ecclesiastics swarming around these investments like mosquitoes, if not for the money, at least for the power to be had in controlling these large funds.

Eventually there is no alternative to the shock which we must experience when the fund flow stops, if not today, then tomorrow. We need to help our own people to part with their naye paise and rupees for the work of the church. We must accept responsibility to make our own contribution to national development. It won't do for us to make someone else's contribution.

The present writer would like to propose something like the following as a basis for discussion. It is high time that we held an ecumenical consultation in India on the Principles of accepting

assistance from abroad; such a consultation should not be dominated by representatives of 'donor agencies' and those agencies of the church which receive and handle these funds. There should be a considerable number of sensitive and intelligent laymen free from the vested interests connected with such funds. They should consider, preferably in the presence of a significant number of high ranking but basically sympathetic non-Christians, among other things, the following possibilities:

(a) The Indian churches should begin to build up a large scale stewardship programme seeking to train Indian Christians to give more generously to their talents and wealth to the service programme of the churches and for the support of the inner life of the Church.

(b) Indian churches should relieve themselves of the responsibility of handling foreign food surpluses contributed by governments, except in clear cases of national or regional emergency.

(c) Institutions which are now dependent on financial assistance from abroad should be given a five year ultimatum to put themselves on a basis of self-support or support within the country for their basic running expenses. At the end of that period outside assistance for the basic budget should be completely stopped.

(d) As much of the assistance as possible now coming from outside to the churches should be channelled through two agencies in India (one Roman Catholic and the other N.C.C.-related) with two corresponding agencies abroad, so that certain basic criteria can always be faithfully observed in the selection of projects for support.

(e) The N.C.C.I. and the C.B.C.I. should show the way by putting themselves on an Indian supported financial basis for their general budget. Contributions from the churches should, of course, not be mere diversion of foreign funds directly received by them.

(f) No pastor, parish priest, or bishop in India should be subsidized with funds from abroad. The normal life of the Church should be brought on an entirely locally financed basis within the next five years.

(g) All assistance from abroad should be on a strict short term project basis with built-in provisions for assuring self-support at a given time.

(h) Foreign financed revenue generating projects should be limited to certain carefully restricted categories like food production, emergency relief, industrial mission, etc. Such investments should be administered by a group of predominantly lay people who are above suspicion, including a few distinguished non-Christians.

(i) We should begin organizing wide based Indian support for the relief and social mission of the Church in India. There are hundreds of thousands of Christians in India who would like to contribute 25 naye paise or 250 rupees annually to such a mission. At present there seems to be no organization to tap these potential expressions of genuine compassion on the part of Indian Christians for their suffering fellowmen in the country. The programmes of agencies like C.A.S.A. and C.R.S. should now begin to be oriented in this direction.

(j) The Churches in India and their agencies like C.A.S.A. and C.R.S. should now begin to think more clearly in terms of our contribution to national development through our own resources and personnel. We have hundreds of thousands of young people looking for an avenue of meaningful service. Our biggest contribution to India as Churches may not be in terms of the amount of money we can contribute, but rather in terms of selfless, dedicated and disciplined young people who could bring a new quality to our national programmes of community development, to the campaign against regionalism, parochialism, communalism and corruption, and to a disciplined programme of industrial and agricultural production.

The above ten point programme is presented only as a discussion starter and not as a panacea.