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KHRISTBHAKTA MOVEMENT: “DIALOGUAL” MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN INDIA*

Introduction – 1. The Sprouting of Khristbhakta Movement – 2. Who Are Khristbhaktas? – 3. The Growth of the Movement. Bhakti of the Cross – 4. Ritual Enculturation – 5. Bible and Khristbhaktas – 6. *Sagas*: Theology from Below; 6.1 Faith Appropriation; 6.2 Evangelization Vs Conversion – 7. Present Scenario – Conclusion

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Introduction

Indian Christians are happy about their presence and contribution in the nation building in the area of higher education and human formation and not only literacy. Such Christian witness, especially in the cultural ethos and of human freedom and dignity has left its mark for the last two millennia. It is right and just that Indian Christian history be revisited with renewed enthusiasm and zest while we speak of new evangelization. With a sense of *Children of the soil*, the Christian community has to reckon its contributions from the later part of the first millennium.

According to historians¹, the history of Christianity in India could be traced back to the time of its origin; from the time of St Thomas, the Apos-

† Father Jerome Sylvester IMS, passed away on October 27, 2020. The draft copy of the present article, submitted by Father Jerome, has been proofread by Prof. Elias Frank.

* The term “dialogual” is used in reference to the practice of a new way of engaging in dialogue in contrast to discourse and debating as dialogical. The article is based on this Author’s doctoral dissertation titled: *Hermeneutics of Khristbhakta Movement*, University of Madras, 2009, later published as: JEROME SYLVESTER IMS, *Khristbhakta Movement: Hermeneutics of a Religio-Cultural Phenomenon*, ISPCK, Delhi 2013.

¹ A.E. MEDLYCOTT, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, Santhome, Chennai 2011, 16; cf., *Acta Thomae*, Edessan Tradition, Ecclesial History, vol. III, 1 as quoted by C.B FIRTH, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, Indian Theological Library, ISPCK, Delhi 2005, 7.

tle of India, whose mission had three phases: the Sind Mission in the kingdom of Gondophares, the Malabar Mission and the Coramandal Mission.

The Church in Northern India has to recognize that the cradle of its faith is embedded in the early first century from the reign of king Gondophares (21-60 AD) whose name the Acts of Thomas and the Takht-i-Bahi stone inscription mention. The recent discovery of coins inscribed with his name² stands as evidence of St Thomas' connection to the region east of the river Indus³. This historical reference acknowledges the connection of St Thomas to the region prior to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15, before 50 AD). The controversy of the Gentile Mission and the Apostles gathering at Jerusalem to discuss the matter is also attested in history. So, St Thomas' mission in North India could be placed prior to 46 AD⁴.

The Malabar Mission keeps up the tradition of St Thomas, the apostle and the arrival of Thomas of Cana (345 AD) with his community of 300 families of Christian believers. Those Christian communities have rooted themselves in India ever since. The Coramandel Mission of St Thomas is evident with the Santhome Cathedral, Chennai⁵. Their adaptation to the cultural ethos of India was different from those who came during later times.

The so-called mission expansion from Europe and America had a gap of hundreds of years. Since then Church in India has had different phases and faces. In the later phase, the doctrinal and cultural differences of the European Churches and their allegiance to their polity were predominant and the Church in India was only a sprout of the West in all forms and manners.

The early phase of evangelization was succeeded by the interest of others who visited the region⁶. The following phase of Christian witnessing is

² [Gundaphara-bharata-putrasa] maharajasatratarsa Avadagasas, *Maharajasa rajatirajasa devavratasa Gudupharasa Sasasa*, in R.B. WHITEHEAD, *Catalogue of Coins in the Panjab Museum, Lahore*, Vol. I Indo-Greek Coins, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1914, 148; cf. MEDLYCOTT, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 18.

³ «For our purpose, it is sufficient to demonstrate that archeological science has proved, that there was a King Gondophares, contemporary of St Thomas, who ruled in India [...] the relations of St Thomas with King Gondophares rests up on a historical foundation». L.M. ZALESKI, *The Apostle St. Thomas in India*, Codialbail Press, Mangalore 1912, 58-59.

⁴ The story of the healing of the brother of the King goes along with it.

⁵ The Seven Churches in Kerala and three churches in Chennai, the Santhome Cathedral, Little Mount and St. Thomas Mount (*Parangimalai*), preserve such a tradition.

⁶ Cf. M.K. KURIAKOSE, *Christianity in India: Source Material*, ISPCK, Delhi 1982, 6; FIRTH, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, 11.

associated with the invitation of Emperor Jalal al-Din Muhammad, the Akbar (1542-1605), who sought the missionaries' presence and built the St Mary's Church of Agra for their use⁷. From the last part of the eighteenth century, the mission of North West India was called the Prefecture of Golconda. Today, it is known as the Ecclesiastical Region of Agra. It has grown in strength and vitality during the last three hundred years with the help of many religious congregations and the development of several dioceses.

The impetus for the establishment of local Churches came from the teaching of the Holy Fathers from the beginning of the twentieth century. With Leo XIII's clarion call – the encyclical *Tametsi Futura Prospicientibus* (01.11.1900) – a new missionary zeal was awakened, whereas the apostolic letter of Benedict XV – *Maximum Illud* (30.11.1919) – rejected the Europeanization of the mission. The encyclical letter *Rerum Ecclesiae* (28.02.1926) of Pius XI, the encyclical letter *Evangelii Praecones* (02.06.1951) of Pius XII, the decree *Ad Gentes* of Vatican Council II, and the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (08.12.1975) of Paul VI were milestones in the history of evangelization. The encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (07.12.1990) and the call for a "new evangelization" by John Paul II changed the attitude towards evangelization. In Northern India, in the past, while missionaries worked as educators and medical personnel, in recent decades, the approaches have been quite different.

The members of the Indian Missionary Society (IMS) have been working in and around Varanasi for many decades in a pioneering way through various ministries since 1941. The call of Pope St John Paul II for a new response to the emerging situation with a new approach and methodology impelled the missionaries with a new zeal for enculturation and to address massive poverty and religious aspiration of the oppressed masses. The response to this inspiration got translated into action and a powerful movement emerged in North India, especially in Varanasi, showing great signs of hope to the Church in India, with a phenomenally large number of Khristbhaktas⁸ flocking to Matridham⁹ Ashram and to other Christian Ashrams in many parts of Northern India.

⁷ Fondly known as Akbar's Church.

⁸ In Hindi, literally it means "devotees of Christ".

⁹ In Sanskrit it means "Abode of the Mother".

1. The Sprouting of Khristbhakta Movement

The Jan Sewa Ashram, Benipur Mission, in the diocese of Varanasi, began to organise prayers (*Satsang*) for the needy and seekers of Christ since Good Friday 1994. In the same year, Christmas Vigil was celebrated with a large number of seekers. In the following year, *Satsangs* were organised on Lenten Fridays and Easter Vigil was held at Benipur Mission. As it was becoming a regular feature, at the advice of the Bishop and Superiors, the prayer was held on every Sunday afternoon at Matridham Ashram, in Varanasi, since the Lenten season of 1995 – the ashram is a centre of Indian Christian spirituality, open to people of other faiths; it attracts many who are interested in spiritual renewal. In December of the same year, Swami Anil Dev began to organise outreach programmes in the villages. The Jan Sewa Ashram continued with its social ministries and organised lay volunteers to help the seekers. They also screened the film *Dayasagar* (“The Merciful” on the life of Christ) in many villages. Many from the villages began to attend the *Satsang* (for the purpose of *Changaiprarthna*/prayer for healing) on second Saturdays. Since the late nineties, many seekers began to visit Matridham Ashram. These devotees of Christ Jesus came to be known as Khristbhaktas.

2. Who Are Khristbhaktas?

Khristbhaktas are seekers and followers of Christ, who accept *Yesubhagavan*¹⁰ as their *Satguru*¹¹ and often draw spiritual nourishment from Christian centres. Most of Khristbhaktas are characterised by their liminal¹² po-

¹⁰ Jesus is addressed as *Yesubhagavan* (Jesus God) by ordinary people. The expression refers to *Christ of Faith*, in theological terms Lord Jesus-*Kurios*.

¹¹ The word is derived from Sanskrit *sadguru*; in Hindi it means: the True Master or One who has the Truth.

¹² Cf. V.W. TURNER, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, London 1974, 237; Id., *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1969, 107. Liminality could be a set of transitional qualities of “betwixt and between” defined as states of culture, and society. In his exposition of the theme, Victor W. Turner has tried to show that this liminal position in the society as living in the fringes or margins as *communitas* in permanent liminality to be a kind of prophetism. Liminality represents the midpoint of transitions in a status-sequence between two positions. Presently *Khristbhatas* are also liminal people.

sition between their ancestral faith and Christianity. There are thousands of them spread over many states of North India, from various walks of life, following a distinct *Way of Life*. During the last few decades, the number of Khristbhaktas has increased considerably in tens of thousands and it is now known as Khristbhakta Movement.

The social composition of the Khristbhakta Movement is an expression of the Indian social reality in transition. The Khristbhakta Movement has originated as a religio-cultural response of the poor and weaker sections of people in search of a new identity. Their struggle against caste and class can be well understood in the background of heterodox movements¹³ and anti-systemic movements¹⁴. Those who are at the margins negotiate the porous borders in their search for a new identity and empowerment mostly from their local religions to Christianity. Khristbhaktas negotiate the borders of faith and culture for empowerment against social exclusion and marginalisation from their liminal position of ancestral faith and Christianity. This fluidity distinguishes the Khristbhaktas from the established church. They begin as seekers, and in the course of time become devotees and followers of Christ. Some of them have received the sacraments and have become disciples and lead others to Christ.

The Khristbhaktas are at the periphery of established culture and conventional faith. The creativity of the movement is in its religio-cultural negotiation in modern times. Negotiating into permeable areas becomes essential for those who experience social oppression and exclusion, both in the cultural and religious realm. Culturally Khristbhaktas practice the traditions of their ancestors with modifications but negotiate other areas of faith for empowerment¹⁵. The Khristbhakta Movement is a social phenomenon with these religious and cultural roots and the sensibilities of incul-

¹³ Religious and cultural movements against the orthodoxy of hegemonic traditions.

¹⁴ Anti-systemic movement are discussed in the light of capitalism and the resistance based on class conflicts: cf. G. ARRIGHI – T.K. HOPKINS – I. WALLERSTEIN, *Antisystemic Movements*, Verso, London 1989.

¹⁵ Cf. D. KETTLE, *Believing without Belonging: Cultural Change Seen in Theological Context*, "International Review of Mission" XCIV (2005), 507-523; cf. G. DAVIE, *Religion in Britain: Believing without Belonging*, Blackwell, Oxford 1994. "Believing without Belonging" is discussed in the Western context as a moral choice in a given situation of the society. This choice is also seen as a strategy with an ethic of obligation to be practical and prudent.

turation and dialogue of life which is transformative. The new vision and vibrancy of the Movement is bringing changes in their identity and their social situation. These transformations happen in the way they appropriate the faith and the way they interpret the Bible in their today's life struggles. Their simple faith and devotion to Christ can be known from the following description.

3. The Growth of the Movement – Bhakti of the Cross

Apart from attending the monthly *Satsang* on the second Saturdays, thousands of Khristbhaktas fast and pray during the forty days of Lent. On Lenten Fridays, a few thousand gather for the Stations/Way of the Cross organised in an enculturated way. The route of the Stations of the Cross is arranged in such a way that the whole crowd is able to move around the Ashram as a *parikrama*¹⁶, a pilgrim walking around the Ashram by carrying the Lord in the heart, following the wooden cross carried by a few. It begins at noon and ends at 3 p.m. with a blessing. There are no pictures or statues to follow the stations. The priests, vested in saffron¹⁷ *alb*, pass on a six-foot tall, 6 cm in width, wooden cross from the dais to the people to carry and he himself leads the procession in silence. The prayers and singing are led from the dais till the Way of the Cross is completed. Even as the priest reaches back to the dais, one-third of the crowd does not even reach half the distance; such is the crowd and so long is the procession. But people return home only after they have completed their full-round.

Only those who kept the fast are authorised, by the Khristbhakta leaders, to carry the cross; though many volunteer to carry it. People bow, with their foreheads touching the ground, wherever they are at the concluding prayers. This devotion and meditation on the passion of Christ is an enriching experience indeed.

One of them giving testimony, said: «I am coming to *Satsang* from 1999. I fast some times during the *chalisa* [40 days]. I fast on Fridays. When I go to *satti* [vegetable market] I visit Ashram and spend some time in prayer. I have peace in my life... We pray every day at home for more than an hour.

¹⁶ From Sanskrit, circumambulation of sacred places to imbibe their energy.

¹⁷ It is the Hindu religious colour.

There were people who were against us for attending the *Satsang*, now they are in difficulties, they are suffering. But we pray for them also, because the Lord said... In my village we pray together, I mean there are twelve settlements in my village, we are about fifteen people who pray together. The Lord blesses us». The ethnographic narrative speaks louder than words. It is very important, for him, to follow the teachings of the Lord. Visiting the Ashram, fasting¹⁸ on Fridays and praying for the neighbours are some of his activities. He enjoys peace and health of mind and body.

On Good Friday, the *Satsang* is made more dynamic. The Way of the Cross starts with the enactment of the Judgement Scene around 11 o'clock in the morning. The cross is taken from the enacting Jesus by the crowd and carried by different groups through the same pilgrim route. Only those who keep the fast for forty days come forward to carry the cross on that day. At the twelfth station, crucifixion is enacted back on the dais and the seven words of Jesus from the cross are preached at length by different persons. The service ends with a long session of intercessory prayers. The songs sung during this service are much traditional in the theme set to local music. Some of them are heart-rending and emotive. The oft-repeated song, "*Oh, how strange is the way you loved, Lord*", expresses the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross¹⁹. Everyone participates in the veneration of the cross at the end of the session. No one could miss a deep religious experience in such a devout and meaningful *Satsang* of that day.

4. Ritual Enculturation

The practice of rituals among the Khristbhaktas is innovative and engendering a new cultural scenario in society. These new practices primarily ad-

¹⁸ On fasting days, they do not eat anything from morning till evening. In general people have only two meals a day, one in the late morning and the other in the evening sometime after the sunset. On the fast days they do not take the morning meal. It is said, they do not eat anything cooked on that day. They drink water and eat fruits. There are some who keep absolute fast, even foregoing water (*nirjalupavas*).

¹⁹ For example the song '*He aisa najeab kai le pyar haire masih*-Oh, how strange you loved *hai re* [expression of deep emotion] Messiah; these are sung in Bhojpuri, the native tongue: cf. E. DE CUNNA (ed.), *Mukti Bhajan Mala*, Diocese of Varanasi, Bishop's House, Varanasi 1989.

dress the issue of ritual lowness and social mobility among the subaltern people²⁰. Ritual lowness is a social issue in defining oneself, because it manoeuvres into social psyche. As long as there is ritual exclusion or ritual lowness, the person does not experience self-worth. When some people are not allowed into the temples and when no priest officiates their ritual moments, the present practice of prayer and blessing adds new importance to the subalterns and their identity re-gained in Christ²¹. The ritual negotiation by Khristbhaktas marks the beginning of a change in the religious sphere. The openness of the atmosphere where everyone hears the word of God and every religious leader addresses the common concern of humanity from the same platform during the inter-religious prayer are unique liminal moments at annual *Satsang*.

Transformative experiences of the Khristbhaktas are celebrated in known rituals like naming of an infant, marriage and the blessings they seek at different stages of life. Enculturation takes place through the celebrations of Deewali (celebration of light), Christmas and Easter; which have new meaning and symbolism. This new meaning of rituals among the Khristbhakta, hitherto, interprets human existence differently. The triangular relationship of God, Christ – the sacrament of God and human celebration of life events – leads to a new anthropological vision of rituals. The theology of rituals is understood only in relation to Jesus' life and death; the mystery of incarnation and resurrection is a universal symbol for every age and section of people. The celebrations of Deewali in honour of Christ as the light of the world among Khristbhaktas is simple and unbiased.

The faith in Christ among Khristbhaktas has brought a new meaning and relevance in the practice of life-cycle rituals. They have adapted to the changes from within the culture of their community without discontinuity in ritual practices and customs. This negotiation of rituals and customs can very well be called enculturation.

²⁰ Cf. SACHCHIDANANDA, *The Harijan Elite: A Study of Their Status, Networks, Mobility and Roles in Social Tra[n]sformation*, A.K. LAL – S.N. TIWARY (eds.), Thomson Press, Faridabad 1976.

²¹ Cleaning of the place of worship after the visit of certain members of the society or conducting enquiries after suspected pollution of the sacred premises are still in practice in India; e.g. Jagannath temple, Iyyappan temple.

5. Bible and Khristbhaktas

The Khristbhakta Movement drinks deeply from the word of God. The subaltern people have a great openness to hear the word of God. Some have even learned to use the Bible pretty well. Biblical verses are taught and used in *Satsang* and village prayer sessions. They use simple methods, that is folkloristic, for the interpretation of Christian scriptures. The genre of storytelling, so common to folklore, has been identified as an influential method in creating greater awareness for social change. The hermeneutics developed from the genre of storytelling and the parables from the Gospel have paved a path for people's hermeneutics within the oral traditions. The folkloristics tool to interpreting the Scripture is a key for empowerment, as it is based on the knowledge system of the people. The result is the subalterns' discovery of their agency for personal transformation and social change. The Bible and Christian teachings become the Gospel of the Khristbhaktas in a specific way. An example will make the point clear: in the parable of the Good Samaritan the focus is on the one who is lying on the ground half dead. The interpretation echoes the cry "I am the one" on the ground, exploited, excluded, outcaste, the one in need of help. So, the methods of folklore, such as Formulaic Theory and Performance Theory, are used in the biblical hermeneutics among the Khristbhaktas.

The Khristbhakta Movement makes use of endogenous knowledge patterns and cultural resources for its progress. The Movement interprets Christian scriptures and message in the social context and lives of its members. The interpretation happens within the oral tradition prevalent among ordinary people. These interpretations are articulated in the stories, songs, and prayers. These interpretations are part of the theologizing in the context of Khristbhaktas, as people's hermeneutics. Thereby, theologizing happens from below with the encounter of cultures in the oral tradition. The Khristbhaktas have a greater advantage than traditional Christians in the knowledge of the Bible. The easy availability of the Bible to the Khristbhaktas engages them to actively participate in the interpretation and expression of their collective consciousness²². These interpretations not only become starting points, but also rungs to reach particular religious ex-

²² Cf. M.A. RAJA, *Hermeneutical Engagement of Dalit Location with Biblical World*, "Vaihari" VIII (2003), 4, 22.

perience based on Christian Scriptures. They discover a discipleship within biblical understanding, and not as members of a particular confession.

6. *Sagas*: Theology from Below

The *sagas* are the interpretations of life in light of their experience as Khristbhaktas. The explanation they give for their life depends on their personal search. Those who find meaning in their interpretation of Christ experience, give life to a theological expression. These simple narrations are foundations to understand their society, their aspirations, and their experience in Christ. The *sagas* are simply narrative theology. They are experience-based God-talk. The oral traditions found in folklore have been used by the Khristbhaktas to enrich their religious experience with the use of the Bible. Now, these interpretations have entered the world of letters, though it remains still a part of the oral genre, a theology emerges from below.

Culling out certain articulations from the life story of Khristbhaktas, it is opportune to present a few reflections on their faith. These are new insights emerged from discussing with them on their religio-cultural experience. Some of them are important for the understanding of theology from the perspective of plurality of religion in India and how a distinctive thought pattern emerges from a particular context.

6.1 Faith Appropriation

Some Khristbhaktas give expression to their personal experience in Christ. Dullu Patel says: «I came with curiosity to see what was happening, but went back with peace, so I continue to attend»²³. Urmila Patel was ready to face the opposition to her going to the Ashram and she says: «In the early days of the *Satsang* the villagers were not respecting us, but, now they don't put any pressure on us»²⁴. Making a statement of deep faith, Prem says: «I have become one with the Lord»²⁵; and Rajwati states: «Yesu is my *Satgu-*

²³ Dullu Patel – G52MBCr [Interview identifier]. Cf. J. SYLVESTER, *The Co-pilgrims of Faith*, “Living in Faith” (2019), December, ebook edition.

²⁴ Urmila Patel – G56FUDp. *Ivi*.

²⁵ Prem – G89FUDp. *Ivi*.

ru»²⁶ (Jesus is my True Master); Meera Devi has found a new meaning for her suffering, as she states: «I have learned to bear sufferings. I conduct prayer in my house once a week»²⁷. Peace, respect, new identity, spiritual fulfilment are some of the points that keep these people with the Movement. There are many such testimonies of personal experience in Christ²⁸.

Many Khristbhakts are no more the same persons after their Christ experience. Urmila Devi²⁹ has a new-found identity and her outlook on life has changed. She has a new meaning and purpose in life³⁰. Many others have

²⁶ Rajpathi Devi – A305FSCp. *Ivi*.

²⁷ Meera Devi – G53FBCm. *Ivi*.

²⁸ Rama Devi – G146FSCp: *A Christocentric Ethic for Black Africa*, "Theology Digest" II (1982), 30, «I was sick and got healed. I pray, both morning and evening. It is five years now». Sita Kumari – G135FMBCp: «I have prayed and the Lord gave me the gift of praying for others. I am attending the Satsang for nine years». Prabhavatti – G139FMBCm: «I feel in my heart that I should be here longer and pray more. So, I wait every month for this day to come for the *Satsang*. I do prepare to for this day a lot». Rina Patel – G248FMBCp: «I was going for Satsang with friends without the knowledge of my Father. He was not a believer. He used to beat me. But, I did not stop. I was still coming for the *Satsang*. He knew about it. Once, he fell sick and I prayed for him and applied oil and he got well. Now he also joins the *Satsang*».

²⁹ "Urmila, mai ne thumevipathikibhatti me parishkrithkiyahai", "Vachan Sudha" X (2004), 3, May-June: «Urmila, the fifth daughter of a downtrodden family accepted marriage to a poor lame man in order to escape the hard realities of her family. Her marriage to him was only to save his social-face. Urmila never had any joy in this marriage; rather she experienced more isolation and poverty. Frustration and suffering were not alien to her. It drove her to attempt suicide. She tried it in vain over and over. She tried to immolate herself, drank phenol; even tried to jump into a river. But, even as she suffered, she claims that she heard an inner voice which prevented and encouraged her to go back home each time. One day, she left the house at mid-night, and sat at the foot of a tree that was believed to be haunted by evil spirits. She imagined that the evil ones would consume her and thereby end her sufferings. She narrates a different experience. 'An old man in white cloth advised me to go home and led me home, but he disappeared as we reached near my house. After a few days, a lady took me to Matridham Ashram for prayer. I prayed to Jesus at *Dharsan Bhavan*. I visited the place a few more times and spent time in prayer and listening to the Word of God in the Satsang. I began to understand the meaning of my suffering and how God was leading me. There was a total change in my life. I did not know that through these sufferings the Lord had been preparing my way to *Mukthi*' (freedom)».

³⁰ Since the year 2004, Urmila is a new person with a new found identity, and meaning in her life. When the author interviewed her she said that she helped others, and guided them to the *Satsang* at the Ashram. He had been keeping track of this respondent for the last few years in this field of study. She conducts weekly prayer at her home on Fri-

given up the bad habits and have experienced a renewal of life in the family and their society. All these are attributed to the experience of Christ in their life; not to any human power. These simple statements are a declaration of faith in Christ. Many of the promoters of the Khristbhakta Movement acknowledge that the faith of these people is not just “spiritual power-tapping”. They are sincere in their belief. It is clear from the number of years each one participates in the *Satsang* and the eagerness they show to attend it. This process of coming to know the power of Christ and growing in the Christian faith is called “Faith appropriation”.

The Khristbhaktas also go through a process of “disappropriation” of all that has stifled his/her self-worth and identity. The new understanding of self as true human person becomes liberating and emancipatory. It is a process of knowing, understanding, interpreting and re-interpreting the life events on the basis of their Christ experience and from their liminality of culture and faith. This faith experience of Khristbhaktas gives them a special identity, which they long for. This in fact *constitutes them into new persons*. This experience leading to emancipation and empowerment through self-understanding and self-transformation is called self-appropriation³¹. Achariya Anil Dev has acknowledged it in these words: «The bhaktas ascend to higher realms of devotion and they experience not only healing from various physical ailments, no matter how terrible and old they might be, but inner healings, freedom from psychological bondage, especially those that are created due to socio-creedal discriminations and oppressions [...] Consequently, they are freed from various superstitions»³². In the context of Khristbhakta Movement, the liminality opens up the possibility of new understanding of oneself from both Hindu and Christian heritage, and from the cultural resources. Khristbhaktas break away from the shackles of subjugated self into a liberated self through the foundational experience in *Yesubhagavan* (Christ God). Appropriation for Khristbhakta is the whole

days these days. The author heard her addressing a group of Khristbhaktas at the Adalpara village, on 15 July 2007. She spoke how she underwent a real and lasting transformation through the Khristbhakta Movement. She was quite articulate and spoke of an inner experience that always motivated her.

³¹ Cf. P. RICOEUR, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, ed. & trans. J.B. THOMPSON, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, 144ff.

³² A. DEV, *Khristbhakta Movement*. A paper presented in the FABC-OE Meeting, Thailand, July 8-12, 2008.

process of approximation of oneself with empowering faith experience in Christ³³. This appropriation – Christ experience of Khristbhaktas – leads to much further theological reflection in the direction of Christ as the Sacrament of God.

The Christ experience of the Khristbhakta is genuine and life-transforming. The faith appropriation among the Khristbhaktas begins from the liminal position of their religious and cultural outlook. The interpretation of the foundational experience in Christ is a religious experience leading to self-appropriation. This is a significant contribution to the field of theology. Through a process of appropriation of faith, the Khristbhaktas become also a challenge to the other religious traditions. It is not the case of a rupture from one religious universe and a move to a new one. It is not only faith of the people even the culture is getting transformed in light of their experience in Christ. The dehumanising values give way to social values of equality and peace.

The appropriation of self-experience by the Khristbhaktas shapes their identity and self-worth against centuries of wounded history. The sense of reconciliation experienced and expressed by the Khristbhakta helps him/her in social reconstruction, both at the family and societal level. He/she begins to experience certain amount of freedom from money lenders and debt, superstitions, which in due course add to new dimensions of social change. The reconciliation and peace ushered within the family and neighbourhood by the Khristbhaktas, in themselves become agents of social harmony. These changes are an invitation for theological reflections in the field of applied Christology.

Appropriation of faith and self is an alternative theological vision. This interpretation has deeper theological significance for people who search for meaning and purpose in life amid deprivations. In the context of the struggles of life the Khristbhaktas make faith as integral part of their quest for well-being. Their faith becomes more creative and responding to the issues of life. The process of theologizing carries along with it the moral commitment to an egalitarian society; to respect and promote every human person's well-being. This is a theological praxis emerging from the solidarity with poor and marginalised in Asia for social harmony and societal change.

³³ RICOEUR, *Hermeneutics*, 36-37, 158ff.

6.2 Evangelization vs Conversion

The research reveals that among the Khristbhaktas only a few are baptised. Some of them have been baptised by evangelical pastors³⁴. While some have received baptism in the Catholic Church, others in Ecclesial Communities, in the recent years. While some wish to receive *diksha* (baptism), many others feel more at home with the *Satsang* and the Ashram. This particular situation has to be examined critically. What is the role of evangelical movements and independent “churches” in baptising the local people? The fact is that among the many thousands of Khristbhaktas only a handful are baptised. Some of the Church personnel are anxious about their baptism.

One of the anxious questions many Christian missionaries ask is: «Will the Khristbhaktas be baptised?» Answering a similar question Achariya Anil Dev says: «Can we think of a Church without walls and structures, a Church that is Spirit-generated movement rather than an institutionalized religion? Can this be another possibility, *a new way of being Church*, especially in today’s religio-political situation of this part of India? We don [sic] not know. We are open to the Lord’s promptings, to the movement of the Spirit. For the present we would say as Paul says, “Christ did not send me to baptize. He sent me to preach the Good News (1 Cor. 1:17)”»³⁵. At another centre R.B. Lal asks this question: «Which comes first: the baptism of the Spirit or water? Very often it is the Spirit’s work and when people ask for it, I do give»³⁶. According to Fr Subhash, «There are some who get baptised. It may increase in the course of time. But the new way of spreading the gospel is coming from the Charismatic Movement, but I am not sure how long it will last»³⁷.

³⁴ G13MSCp Kishori Lal, age 65: He and his family were baptized by some evangelical pastor a few years ago in the river Ganges.

³⁵ A. DEV, *Khrist Bhakta Movement: Its Origin and Dynamics*, “Jeevadhara” XXXVIII (2008), 440.

³⁶ P337MUDr R.B. Lal 58, interviewed on 16/04/2006.

³⁷ P339MUDr Fr. Subhash 56, interviewed on 14/08/06.

7. Present Scenario

Khristbhaktas have a noticeable presence in the society during the last decades. They live a distinct life of faith and culture. They practise their ancestral rituals in the name of Christ, praying in the name of Jesus and using the Bible. There are community leaders known as *Aguwas*. They become the contact persons between the Ashram and the village *Satsangs*. As the number and enthusiasm increased among the Khristbhaktas, the Matridham Ashram began organising Sunday *Satsang* and three-day annual convention. Even baptised persons benefit from these events. The *Annual Samelan* (gathering) for three days is attended by many Christians from the neighbouring States. Christmas is being celebrated in the Ashram and in the villages. Indian feasts like *Deewali*, for Christ the light, *Gurupurnima* for Christ the *Satguru*, are also celebrated with lots of enthusiasm. Many more thousands participate in these festivities. Apart from the celebration and *Satsangs* there is a three-day *Sadhana* every month, which focuses on the training of the local leaders, *Aguwas*.

There are a considerable number of male participants in the Movement: many are young people (13-25 years of age 37.30%), but a large number is of middle-aged persons (26-50 years 50.70%). Many children too are growing up in the Movement for many years. Those above the age of 50 are just 11%. The future of the Movement looks bright from the point of this demographic profile.

A few dioceses in North India have opened new Ashrams to help these new seekers of Christ. Presently there are tens of thousands of Khristbhaktas in many parts of Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. Large presence of such members and their way of practising the faith in Christ Jesus makes them recognisable as a Movement.

Conclusion

The Universal Church and the Church in India, in particular, look at the Movement with great hope in the field of her "dialogual" mission, at a time when the Church is repeatedly silenced; preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ has become very challenging. Theologians call the Movement a new way of being Church and the Missiologists consider it a break-through in the mission approach of the Catholic Church in North India. It is akin to a new Pentecost.

Today, Khristbhakta Movement is not yet a well-known phenomenon. There are scholars and researchers who discuss and reflect about it. Hence it is a matter to be studied and reflected upon from different perspectives in order to enrich the Movement as well as the Church through the Movement.

Every time and everywhere the faith got implanted into a culture, the latter became anew. Indian religions have seen various forms of cultural adaptation for centuries. India has accepted Christianity from the time of St Thomas the Apostle and different rites and confessions too have played their role. Each has made this land its home with assimilation and incorporation of cultural practices, thus giving expression to life-cycle rituals, feasts and festivals, etc. Khristbhakta Movement is also a native response to Christian Message. The type of enculturation that happens among Khristbhaktas is from their own initiative and from their cultural practices.

Is the faith of the Kristbhaktas different from that of the Church? Can their faith lead them to liberation, salvation gained by Jesus Christ through his paschal mystery? What is their relationship to Christ Jesus, the universal saviour? Can faith-appropriation lead to self-appropriation without external articulation in signs and symbols? What can the Church do and how can she assist the Khristbhaktas in their search for universal destiny of humanity?

The answers to these questions can be drawn from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15 and the teachings of the Vatican Council II. For instance, when the early Church was confronted with new situations, like the expansion among the Greeks, Asia Minor and North Africa, new structures like Apostles, presbyters, deacons and preachers were created and various Councils addressed the issues and gave guidelines. Some of the ancestral practises gave way to the Holy Spirit and to the sacraments. Over the centuries, through many Councils, the Church was guided to adapt to the traditions of the place, she encountered.

The Vatican Council II is a moment of grace for our age, the third millennial Church. With lived experience and with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Fathers of the Council discerned the movement of the Spirit and drafted the sixteen documents. The document on dialogue with other religions and cultures is a breakthrough like the Council of Jerusalem. There is still a need to understand the spirit of mission in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* such as evangelical liberation centred on the kingdom values. «It cannot be contained in the simple and restricted dimension of economics, political, social

or cultural life; it must envisage the whole *human person*, in all aspects, right up to and including *its* openness to the absolute, even the divine Absolute [...]» (EN 33). It also should be followed with the spirit of unity of religions as spoken by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* on the topic, confession of faith and commitment to society; he states: «“God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual persons, but also the social relations existing between men [peoples]”. To believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds: “The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen knots of human affairs, even the more complex and inscrutable”. Evangelization is meant to cooperate with this liberating work of the Spirit» (EG 178). «The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care» (EG 200).

In the emerging situation of Khristbhaktas, the example of the growth of the good olive tree onto which the new shoot is grafted (cf. Rom 11,17-24; Eph 2,14-16) is an important metaphor to be grasped by the Universal Church³⁸. The Declaration *Nostra Aetate* further affirms that Jerusalem did not recognize God’s time when it came (Lk 19,42); some even opposed it (Rom 11,28) but when all people will call on God with one voice and serve him shoulder to shoulder (Is 66,23) it will be a challenge to be reckoned with³⁹. It is time for Christ’s faithful to understand this “dialogual” mission, to recognise it and nurture the new olive tree knowing Christ as God’s universal love and the source of all grace. The spirituality of dialogue that emerges from the Khristbhakta Movement forms the osmosis of faith and culture, and could be called as religious cosmopolitanism; for the Khristbhaktas respect not only the similarities, but the differences as well and play their role more responsibly toward the whole humanity.

Finally, to be sons and daughters of our Father in heaven, the whole humanity is urged to live in peace with one another (Rom 12,18). One must

³⁸ Cf. PAUL VI, Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (28.10.1965), n. 4.

³⁹ *Ivi.*

make every effort to come to know our other brothers and sisters-mothers, the sheep of the other fold of Christ (Jn 10,16a). To love and to share the grace and peace with them is also the mission of Christ, as it is the will of the Father of us all.

Jerome Sylvester IMS †
Requiescat in pace

ABSTRACT

**KHRISTBHAKTA MOVEMENT
“DIALOGUAL” MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN INDIA**

The article begins with a synopsis of evangelisation in Indian subcontinent, beginning from St Thomas the Apostle to the present time. The part that follows is a study based on a research conducted by the Author for his doctoral dissertation on a Movement known as *Khristbhaktas* (devotees of Christ), in northern parts of India. These devotees, who number in tens of thousands, do not seek baptism or intend to belong to an organised Church. The Author calls them “seekers”. The article explains the social background of the “seekers”, why they believe in Christ and how they live their faith in Christ. The evangelising method among the *Khristbhaktas*, according the Author, is “dialogual”, unlike other known forms. The Author sees the Movement as a new Pentecost.

**IL MOVIMENTO KHRISTBHAKTA
LA MISSIONE “DIALOGANTE” DELLA CHIESA IN INDIA**

L’articolo presenta all’inizio una sintesi della storia dell’evangelizzazione del subcontinente indiano, a partire da San Tommaso Apostolo sino ai nostri giorni. Segue poi un approfondimento basato su una ricerca che l’Autore ha svolto per la sua dissertazione dottorale sul movimento conosciuto come dei *Khristbhakta* (devoti di Cristo) che è presente nell’India del Nord. Tali devoti, il cui numero ammonta a decine di migliaia, non cercano il battesimo né intendono far parte di una chiesa organizzata. L’Autore li definisce i “cercatori”. L’articolo esplora il background sociale di questi “cercatori”, perchè credono in Cristo e come vivono la loro fede in Cristo. Secondo l’autore, la forma di evangelizzazione tra i *Khristbhakta* deve essere, a differenza di altre forme conosciute, “dialogante”. L’Autore vede il movimento come una nuova Pentecoste.

Parole chiave: inculturazione; appropriazione della fede; presa di coscienza della fede; posizione decentrata; basso profilo rituale