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FALLING JESUIT STANDARDS? TRIBAL AND DALIT VOCATIONS

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Despite his monumental contribution to the church, St. Francis Xavier, the great missionary and patron of the missions in India, is often criticized for his initial prejudices against native vocations. The locals, in his perception, were not fit to join the Society of Jesus.

Three centuries later, when the first missionaries came to North India, reports from various parts of the country suggest that this colonial mindset about the natives' inadequacy and incompetence had penetrated the missions. For instance, the Chotanagpur mission manifests a negative attitude towards anything 'tribal'. The missionaries invariably considered the beliefs, practices and mental capacities of the natives to be inferior. Their disdainful and contemptuous attitude towards non-Christians is encapsulated in the 'Report of the Chotanagpur Mission for the Year MDCCCLXIII', projecting the latter as heathens and infidels. They also found the native languages devoid of 'religious ideas', and hence inadequate and unfit for the church. To quote from the report, "Neither the *Umiri* nor the *Mundari* is fit to become a church language, as neither of them possesses any terms for religious ideas. These, with explanations, have to be supplied from the abundant stores of the *Hindoo*."³

The missionaries rejected outright such *adivasi* social institutions as the *aklima* (dancing yard) and *dhunukirin* (youth dormitory), which they saw as evil and immoral. The Christians' attitudes towards the religious component of the traditional culture were consistently negative, and, to quote Downs, given to "rejecting anything in the traditional culture that they judged to be religious or, to use their term, 'superstitious' in character."⁴ The superiority complex and 'holier than thou' attitude of the proselytizers and the converts were resented by those who had not converted. The supremacy of their ancestral religion, which they had practised for centuries, was being challenged for the first time. The intervention of Christianity thus brought about mutual discrimination, alienation and divisions between converts and non-converts within the tribal community. The missionary efforts of 'civilizing' the 'savages' who had not accepted Christianity continued.

To come to the present, there have been unprecedented changes in the church in the last 50 years. Indigenous clergy have replaced the missionaries in every field - spirituality, education, social work, vocational and professional training, management, administration, faith formation, pastoral activity, health. The biggest irony, however, is that the disdainful and contemptuous colonial attitudes to tribal culture seem to have been internalized by some of the Indian and indigenous clergy.

The disdainful colonial attitudes to tribal culture seem to have been internalized

Interestingly, while this inherited colonial disdain and contempt is still reflected in some aspects of formation, undercurrents of resistance against a negative attitude to tribal ways of life and tribal culture have emerged. These undercurrents find articulation in terms of various commissions, such as the Inculturation Commission and Formation Review Commission. The process of contextualization, vernacularization and inculturation is a positive step towards "restructuring and updating our formation."⁵ Nevertheless, despite various efforts made in light of the GC 34 mandate (D 4, n. 12) to discover the values, depths, and transcendence of other cultures, we have not been as effective as expected. While no one advocates witch-hunting, some soul searching as far as tribal and dalit vocations are concerned seems called for. Reflections on this issue in the context of the Social Apostolate would do well to take account of certain frequently expressed opinions. There is a perception that young Jesuits from an oppressed social background are unwilling to enter the social action field. Others have suggested that the entry of dalit and *adivasi* into the Society of Jesus is responsible for the lack of Jesuits with a solid background in social sciences. In other words, the quality of vocations has fallen due to the emergence of the subaltern. Is there a real crisis of leadership in the Social Apostolate and in the Society?

The first section of this paper will clarify some terms and notions relevant to an analysis of the problematic of quality formation. The second section, which is longer, examines whether there is a correlation between a depressed background and low quality. Finally, I will derive conclusions on the basis of the discussion and make a few suggestions.

1. Clarifications

The problem of leadership in the Social Apostolate can be analyzed in terms of the larger discourse on formation in general, and on inculturation and contextualization in particular, against the background of heterogeneity and multiplicity. An encounter between two cultures at any point of time has wide ramifications. The problem arises because the dominant culture tends to absorb the little traditions. In the process of understanding the multiplicity of cultures, one runs the risk of taking a partial view for the whole truth. For instance, Louis Dumont in his *Homo Hierarchicus* analyzed the Indian social reality from the Brahminical perspective. His treatment came under heavy criticism as being only a partial view of the complex Indian reality and based on a view that looks through the glass of purity-pollution principle alone, of high-caste and low caste social arrangements. The Indian reality, however, is much larger than that, and not surprisingly, it spawned an assertive 'Sociology of India' that challenged this analysis of the Indian situation from a Brahminical point of view, ignoring many other vital components.

The Church in India has gone through a similar process of assertion. When Vatican II made space for adaptations and negotiations with other cultures and

faiths, there was a new ray of hope. There was recognition and appreciation of native cultures as good. There was also a move for an Indianization/inculturation process in India followed by a contextualization process. In the course of time, there was an appeal for a liturgy of India, a theology of India, and so on. But an appeal for a 'formation of India' was always conspicuous by its absence. The appeal was for transforming the external trappings but not internal subjectivity formation. Language, costumes, rituals, festivals, clergy, all underwent a change, but there were no negotiations regarding the structure and culture of formation. Formation is one of the taboo areas, uninfluenced much by the process of negotiations. It has remained more or less static and monolithic except for a few cosmetic and erratic changes. Efforts were made to adapt but they were largely unsuccessful because structural change has not been easy. All were happy with the imported so-called 'quality' formation.

Quality formation is indeed desired by all. But quality or standard becomes a problem when some exclusively use their own yardstick to measure it. At this point, the sense in which I use certain notions has to be clarified.

- (1) **Perspective** is important in the quality discourse. Whether the understanding of 'quality' is from above or below, that is the question. What is this quality or standard that we are talking about and who determines it? Hence, the most important aspect of this debate is who sets the standard.
- (2) **Formation** is a medium and not an end in itself. It is a strategy to attain the goal. Formation is for/in mission and not simply for formation's sake.
- (3) **Context** - social, political, cultural, historical, ecological, spiritual, economic, geographical, philosophical (world view), theological, whatever - is important. The mission has to be realized in a context in concrete terms. A tribal/dalit context implies brokenness, land-alienation, deforestation, unemployment, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, migration, displacement and impoverishment.
- (4) **Focus in Diversity**. In a context marked by multiplicity, no one context is the determining factor. In a tribal/dalit context, however, the focus is the 'tribal'/dalit' aspect despite a multiplicity of other contexts. Other influences are very much part and parcel of the whole process.
- (5) **Identity**: the identity of the tribal and dalit Jesuit is important. Is he competent to be part of the universal Society, or he is excluded? There are two aspects in a tribal Jesuit's identity - one that belongs to the universal Society of Jesus, and one that is rooted in his local culture. While this is true of Jesuits worldwide, the identity of the tribal, so long oppressed, calls for stronger assertion.

Xaxa, in his paper titled "Is there a Tribal Intellectual Class in Jharkhand" argues that the tribal society had no intellectual class in the traditional social setting to compare with the intellectual class in traditional Indian society, which was restricted to Brahmins. The role of intellectuals was generally performed by a priest/shaman in the tribal society. Notwithstanding the fact that he enjoyed a higher rank than the others in the tribe, he was not set apart from others. Correspondingly, the priests/shamans did not emerge as a distinct class in tribal society.⁶ The hallmark of a traditional tribal knowledge system is its collectivity, where knowledge is generated and passed on from one generation to another collectively and not individually.

2. Correlation between Subalterns and the Low Quality?

Having clarified some of the notions above I will now try to address the problematic of this paper.

2.1 Has the Quality of Vocations Fallen Because of Dalits and Tribals?

Any discussion of 'quality' or 'merit' invariably makes me confront two issues: first, evaluation of institutes of higher education; and second, reservation. Universities, colleges, IITs, IIMs, medical colleges and other such institutions of higher learning across the country are evaluated by organizations engaged by the media, and the outcome of these evaluations is widely publicized through the media. The best institutions in India are ranked in terms of quality. In undertaking this evaluation certain criteria, such as infrastructure, qualifications, results, and placement, are followed. It is heartening to see quite a few Jesuit institutions among them: Loyola College Chennai, St. Xavier's Calcutta, XLRJ, Jamshedpur, to name just a few. The point however is that the criteria set up for such an evaluation are elitist and contestable to say the least.

The second issue, which makes merit a central factor in the debate regarding reservations for the Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), is one that I find particularly disturbing. 'Merit' figures largely in the debate on reservations while the question of equal opportunity is avoided. One of the main objectives of reservations as envisaged by the framers of the Constitution was to extend equal opportunities to the marginalized people so that eventually they could also come up to the status of the more privileged. However, the standard set for the admissions in the premier institutions of higher education named above are highly elitist and hence cannot reflect quality in the real sense of the term. The real challenge before such institutions will be, rather than recruiting the 'best' students to get best results, to cater to the less privileged students and engage in a 'churning' educational

process that will enable them to get the best results. The Society of Jesus is caught in a similar trap of judging quality from the elitist point of view and ignoring the ground reality. How do tribals and dalits fit into this frame?

The notion of vocation is holistic and not segmented or compartmentalized. A holistic spirituality takes into consideration relationships at three levels: social (community life), environmental (symbiosis with nature), and 'divine' (faith in God). A person with deep faith and commitment is usually 'magnanimous' of heart as well. But that is not enough. A Jesuit, by virtue of his outward orientation, needs to acquire skills to be a leader in order to relate to the people and to communicate what he has acquired. A professional touch in all that a Jesuit does is desirable whether it be language, spirituality, administration, teaching, training or social action. One need not be a dalit or tribal to be lethargic or mediocre. And if one is of the opinion that all mediocrity and lethargy has penetrated the Society because of dalits and tribals joining the Society, then this is nothing short of racism at its worst.

Such an attitude, namely that the entry of dalits and tribals into the Society has eroded its high standards, is betrayed in a recommendation that the provinces with homogeneous tribal vocations recruit candidates with cultural backgrounds from outside the region. It is argued that a heterogeneous group will 'enhance' the quality of the tribal vocations. Personally, I have been a staunch supporter of mixed vocations, but certainly not for this particular reason. In response to such an argument I suggest an examination of the correlation between quality and cultural composition of all the provinces in South Asia. I am in favour of mixed vocations for cross-fertilization of ideas, mutual enrichment, healthy competition and healthy growth. The non-tribal candidates should be ready to share their 'doing' and 'being' with the locals as much as they should be open to learn from their counterparts. But if such a venture aims at civilizing the so-called little tradition and enhancing its quality in terms of mainstreaming and assimilation into the broader culture, it may lead to further complications. There is, thus, no one-way traffic. If the particular culture of Europe in general can be good for everybody, why can what is good for tribal society not be good for everybody? The cultural specificity of 'quality' has not yet been acknowledged.

2.2 Can Language Be the Main Criterion?

The disdain and contempt for dalits and tribals in some quarters have been further promoted through English, the language of the colonizers. It seems as if the colonizers have gone but left their language for perpetuating enslavement of Indians.

Interestingly, the colonial hangover is best reflected in the framework of the Society through the symbol of the English language. The issue is not about the usefulness of English. I am of the opinion that every tribal/dalit Jesuit should

have mastery over English, or, for that matter, any other useful language. The truth is that tribal scholastics studying in various universities across the country have excelled and even won gold medals in different subjects, including English and French. Given such potential, if their quality and motivation are questioned, there must be something fundamentally wrong, which we should be open to examine. The real issue is whether English is acceptable as a yardstick of the totality of the young Jesuit's vocation.

The most tragic aspect of our Jesuit formation of late is to have reduced formation to proficiency in one language. There is no denying the fact that the language of the exploiters and the oppressors has today become a status symbol as well as the language for liberation of the marginalized. However, we should not overlook the fact that Jesuits, both tribals and others, whose proficiency in English is not very remarkable, have done much better academically and pastorally than many others with British and American accents. They have given leadership to the masses and strengthened people's movements.

2.3 Is There a Correlation Between an Oppressed Social Background and a Disinclination to Enter the Social Action Field?

Jesuit engagement with social action is nothing new although it has recently been endowed with the status of a separate apostolate, focusing on social issues like human rights violations, rights of the dalits and tribals. A survey of literature during the formative years of missions in India reveal that missionaries like Constant Lievens, J. B. Hoffmann and several others were involved in social action as well, which resulted in the conversion of many tribals to Christianity.

Why, with such a rich legacy in social action in tribal areas, do tribal Jesuits from tribal provinces seem uninterested in joining the social action field? This is intriguing. The relevant question to ask perhaps is what the mission vision of the province has projected in the last hundred and fifty years, and whether there is any orientation for young Jesuits to take the initiative and venture out in their own areas of interest. If the orientation of the province is towards maintenance of a conventional apostolate, there is certainly structural support for that. The problem appears to be structural, not motivational. There is, however, a serious theoretical problem: the question of who determines the ministry-- the Society/Province as an institution? Or the people/stakeholders? One of the goals of the Society as spelt out in CC 32 is the empowerment of the people,

especially the marginalized. Education is one of the means to attain this goal. Social action is another means of direct intervention for the assertion of rights of the marginalized. The social action field is more challenging in terms of identifying with the people and participating in their struggles. By contrast, security, comfort and status are attached to the conventional apostolate.

Granting the truth of all this, the perception that dalits and tribals are not interested in social action field seems far-fetched. Lack of interest in social action, if at all it exists, may be a trend across the Assiastancy. In fact, one of the reasons why scholastics are passive about their ecclesiastical studies is the perceived irrelevance of the subjects taught to social action. At present, a lot of emphasis is being given to social action and there is no reason to think that dalits and tribals will not be interested in it just because they come from a particular depressed social background. In short, there are as many tribals and dalits involved in social action as non-tribals and non-dalits.

2.4 Is the Paucity of Jesuits with a Solid Background in the Social Sciences Due to Dalits and Tribals Entering the Society?

The second proposition is closely related to the first. Whether or not a Jesuit is interested in the social sciences does not necessarily depend on his birth but on his environment. This depends on the orientation and the need of the Province. What percentage of non-tribal and non-dalit Jesuits have a solid background in social sciences? If tribal and dalit Jesuits are given the opportunity to study social sciences, surely they will study them. Young Jesuits have to make up their mind in accordance with the need of the province. Then again, if they have an aptitude for certain areas, they may be encouraged to specialize in those. Moreover, they probably lack the necessary exposure to understand how their specialization in one subject or the other might be of apostolic value in the future. Besides, Jesuit 'humility' may also deter them from expressing their opinion freely for fear of being banded as 'ambitious'. All these work in the young tribal mind, inhibiting him from articulating his own dreams and aspirations. Does the evaluation of Jesuit formation take into consideration these cultural underpinnings or is it judgmental to the point of insensitivity?

3. Conclusions and Suggestions

3.1 Symptoms and the Root-cause

Though it is claimed that we have "a clear vision and direction in our formation"⁷ there must be some problem somewhere if formation is a cause of concern. I believe there is need for a proper diagnosis of the malady. Some say that young Jesuits lack motivation. Others have serious doubts whether our young men are "competent".⁸ On the contrary, others are quite impressed by how, in different parts of the country, despite a diverse and complex reality, "young men respond to new challenges and handle responsibility, often with

inadequate preparation and in quite difficult circumstances".⁹ Yet another is of the view that "twenty five per cent of Jesuits in South Asia are the kind of men ... whom Ignatius would not have tolerated".¹⁰

The need is to find out the root cause of the problem and not treat merely the symptoms. The young Jesuits join the Society at a time when people of that age have dreams to become somebody and to do something in life. And if they have decided to join the Society, clearly there can be no lack of motivation. Why are these young people all of a sudden being branded as inefficient, incompetent and unprofessional? Formation is a process and not an end product. The Society's notion of formation is "ongoing". There is space for growth in competence, efficiency and professionalism in any field of formation.

3.2 Model of Formation

All forms of infrastructure and finance are important for the training of Jesuits, but these have to be in keeping with Indian realities. Ambrose Pinto's observation about a Jesuit University in India is very true for Jesuit formation in India as well: "It cannot be modeled on the Roman or American or European model. It should be situated in the context of India and address issues and concerns of the people of the land".¹¹ Our attitudes, choices, work culture and life style are not being shaped and transformed by our experience of the life of the people. The youngsters, not unnaturally, resent the "top-down" model.

There seems to be a contradiction between the attitude of dalit and tribal Jesuits who fight negative, anti-people forces (globalization saffronization, privatization, corporatization) intellectually and at grassroots level, and the fact that our institutions, however well-intentioned and committed to the dalit and tribal cause, function like big corporate houses controlled by the World Bank and the IMF. They appear not only to be 'privatized' but actually anti-poor in their approach, though they claim to be otherwise. The ideological conviction of the Church and the Society does not percolate down to the last man in the Society. This lacuna is very sharply reflected in the formation of the Society. People are exploited because they accept exploitation at the hands of the rich who do not want to share their riches. As Gandhiji said, "The rich cannot accumulate the wealth without the cooperation of the poor in society."¹²

3.3 Discrimination against Subalterns

Experience shows that there is indeed discrimination against dalits and tribals in India in general on the basis of birth. Cases are reported of dalits and adivasis being humiliated just because they were born into certain ethnic groups and considered as outcastes. Even the Church circles have not been able to go beyond these boundaries. The Society, which claims to stand for social justice, is not altogether free of this bias. The notion that the dalits and tribals bring down the quality of vocations seems to be influenced by 'market forces' not by a

genuine concern for formation. It is, in fact, this attitude, bordering on racism, that lowers the quality of Jesuit vocation and not the subalterns themselves. It is very obvious that those who hold this opinion are governed by values that are market-driven, values that uphold elitist structures and the privileged ones at the top. It is only when judged by the standards of an elite at home in the global scene that the vocations of tribals seem 'lower'.

3.4 Tribal or Ignatian Spirituality?

Ignatius of Loyola came from a privileged background and class in the feudal society of his day. The Society that we have inherited is thus a feudal Society with elements of feudalism. This background puts us in an awkward situation because the spirituality of Ignatius is individualistic and not communitarian as is the case in tribal society. It is ironic that, despite community life being the hallmark of the tribal community, the tribal finds community life in the Society difficult. The problem has to do with two different types of communitarianism. The type of community life that the tribal culture promotes is different from that of the Society. Ignatius' notion of community is 'individualistic' whereas that of the tribals is 'communitarian'. Hence, when a tribal joins the Society he has not only to de-school himself in his earlier tribal spirituality, he also has to be initiated into a new 'individualistic' spirituality through a process of socialization. There is a consequent experience of confusion and contradiction.

The individualism of the Jesuits is strengthened and reinforced by neo-capitalism and globalization. While there is no denying the fact that there is a movement in the Society for a genuine community life, it is equally true that there seems to be a gap between the community spirituality of tribals and the individualised spirituality of St. Ignatius. The aim of the Spiritual Exercises is to be in 'silence' from the rest of the world, a time when an individual can talk only to the retreat master. Thus the Ignatian retreat is not a communitarian experience and yet this is to be the foundation of the Jesuit community life. This may not be a problem in Europe as the society there is basically individualistic, but in Asia and Africa it is indeed a problem.

3.5 Transition

Formation does not happen in a vacuum. Jesuit formation is more influenced by 'Western' than by traditional tribal forms of democracy. A broader concept of equality comes from the broader society, and tribal values, which the candidates have imbibed before joining the Society, are affected. A new spirituality and new values are inculcated in the young Jesuits. Most of the new values which are inculcated are not in conformity with the traditional. The result is culture

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shock. Some may call it upward mobility. Even back home there is so much of media exposure; class formation is taking place; the economy is being diversified more and more. With education new classes emerge. Each class has a new value-system and vision.

3.6 Need to Update

Roman Catholicism has been very exclusive. It has a tendency to be hegemonic. It appears that its inability to recognize multiplicity is leading to its slow disappearance from Europe. It may survive in the developing world, but if it does not open up, it may die out there as well. With the Second Vatican council there was an attempt to throw open the doors but there were problems. The Church could have germinated new theologies, a new spirituality and understanding of the Gospels. Pluralism is today an ever-growing emerging, ever stronger phenomenon. If the Society is not ready to open up to the changing of the times it will have the same fate as the Church in Europe. We need to update ourselves "professionally, humanly, spiritually" says Lisbert, and adds "As our numbers from tribal areas increase, there is need to tailor our formation practices, which are still largely western in inspiration, to take account of the culture of our recruits."

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¹Uran' synonymous with 'Oran' and 'Uran' standing either for the Kurnah language or for the Kurnah people.

²The language of the Munda tribe

³Report of the Chotanagpur Mission for the Year MDCCCLXIII, 1964, pp.4-5.

⁴Javins, Frederick S. *Essays on Christianity in North-East India*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1994, p. 194.

⁵Thadavanal, Joe, "Common Houses of formation in South Asia" *JIVAN*, January 2004, pp. 7-9.

⁶Xasa, Virginius, "Is there a Tribal Intellectual Class in Jharkhand," Kujur, J. Marianus (ed). *JHARKHAND KE PANCH-VARSHE-SAPNA ALR SACHH* (Hindi), 2006, pp. 133-136.

⁷Thadavanal, Joe, "Common Houses of formation in South Asia" *JIVAN*, January 2004, pp. 7-9.

⁸Thadavanal, Joe, "Are our Young men competent?" *JIVAN*, September, 2005, p.9.

⁹J'Souza, Lisbert, "I make a plea for the professional training of Jesuits for leadership." *JIVAN*, August, 2004, p. 9.

¹⁰Fernandes, Julian, "What we need is faith sharing." *JIVAN*, August 2005, pp. 15-17.

¹¹Pinto, A., "A Jesuit University in India?" *JIVAN*, September, 2006, p.12.

¹²Quoted by Don Roy, "Between dogma and debate," a background paper circulated by the Documentation Centre of BUIJD, Bombay.