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Theological Education for Women in Bangladesh

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Christians in Bangladesh

Christians in Bangladesh constitute .05% out of a population of 150 million. Muslims constitute about 86%, Hindus about 12%, Buddhist about .6%. The major Christian denominations are Roman Catholic, Baptist, Church of Bangladesh (Anglican and Presbyterian), and Lutheran. Other denominations are the Assembly of God, Seventh Day Adventist, Methodist, Pentecostals and few free churches. The Portuguese missionaries first started their missionary activities in Bangladesh in 1576. They started their missionary activities mainly in Chittagong area, the second largest seaport of Bangladesh. Jesuit missionaries in Iswaripur established the first Christian church in January 1600. Father Francis Fernandez was blinded, tortured, and died in captivity in Chittagong on 14 November 1602. The first Protestant church was built in Dinajpur in 1796. The Holy Rosary Catholic Church in the Tejgaon area of Dhaka is the oldest existing church that was built in 1677. Approximately 500,000 Christians live in Bangladesh out of which 200,000 are Catholic. The British missionaries established the Baptist and the Church of Bangladesh. Most of the Bengali Christians are converts from Hinduism. Today majority of the Christians, perhaps a little over one-half, are indigenous tribal people.

Even though Christians are few in number they have made a great impact in Bangladesh through educational institutions such as colleges, schools, trade schools, medical service, development and self-help projects, literacy programs, and justice and peace efforts.² Irrespective of creed and culture, Christians have been serving all people through their institutions. Even though foreign missionaries in the beginning established the churches in Bangladesh, all these churches are indigenized today. There is a growing ecumenism among the churches in spite of denominational division.

The constitution of Bangladesh provides for religious freedom but the government policy always goes against the sentiment of the different religious communities, including Christians. As Sunday is made a regular working day, many Christians are unable to go for Sunday worship. Christians are always the target of attack whenever war and conflicts take place in the Middle East between western powers and Islamic countries. Christians are usually identified with western countries, thus posing a question of whether Christians are citizens of Bangladesh or foreigners in the country. During the Gulf War in 1991-1992,

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fanatics in Bangladesh who supported Saddam Hussein, the authoritarian leader of Iraq, attacked foreigners and Christian communities in the country. Individual missionaries or mission societies were asked to leave the country within 14 days without any reason. These are the usual incidents that Christians in Bangladesh have to face whenever a conflict takes place between western powers and Islamic powers in the Middle East.

While the constitution permits the propagation of one's own faith, the word 'evangelism' is highly suspected by the government. When foreigners apply for visa, the bishops of Bangladesh have to give a guarantee that they will not be doing any evangelistic activities among the indigenous communities in the country. There is a growing anti-Christian attitude among the Muslims. Even though Christians have also fought for the country's liberation in 1971 and contributed a lot in nation-building, they are not considered citizens of the country but are rather suspected to be agents of foreign countries. A few years back, a Christian worshipping community in Gopalgong district was bombed. There is a need to remedy this situation or Christian existence in the country will become impossible in the future. In this situation, we need to ask ourselves what our theological response should be.

The Struggle of Women

Traditional society is patriarchal and dominated by males, while women are relegated a lower social status. While the patriarchal culture gives importance to the motherhood of women, a husband can easily divorce his wife to marry a younger girl and get dowry. Physical torture, abuse, acid throwing, and murder of women for the reason that there is not enough dowry are common occurrences. Women have very little freedom in society. Legally women have equal status with men but there is a big gap between legal rights and social attitude. Therefore, women suffer from various forms of discrimination in society. The traditional attitude towards women still prevails in society. Hence, women cannot attend to social functions such as Eid prayer, Jumma Prayer, and other religious meetings. Moreover, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, resulting from exposure to conservative Islamic culture from other parts of the world, has brought a negative impact on the life of women. Most women in Bangladesh remain illiterate even though successive governments have been undertaking different packages for the education of women.

About 1% of women are engaged in modern occupations and 18.7% are in civilian labour. Female workers are paid less than their male counterparts for the same degree of labour. The exploitative payment system is more visible in the unorganized private sectors such as garment industry. Although modernization and industrialization have created new job opportunities, they have aggravated the deplorable life conditions of women. The use of women's body and its sexual appeal is done for commercial purposes – e.g. in advertisements. I always wonder about the so-called law keepers who very boldly speak about the dignity of women. Many times, while walking on the busy streets of Dhaka, I have been instructed by religious leaders to cover my head, wear a *burkha*³, put a *pardah*⁴,

³ Burka or burkha is a traditional garment that covers woman's body from head to toe.

⁴ Purdah is the traditional system of keeping women secluded. Pardah is a dress that covers all of a woman's body, from head to foot, with exception of her face and lower part of her hands (below the

but I have never seen these leaders protesting against the nude posters of women being advertised everywhere in the country, whether in villages or in the cities. Why are these people not educating themselves and their country folk to give respect to women? The physical beauty of girls is given preference in the hiring of airhostesses, receptionists, sales girls, models, tourist guides, etc. Domestic patriarchal relations, social compulsion of marriage, and the religious *fatwa* ostracizing women in the rural areas have been transferred to the global market. Women's visibility in the labour force has not altered the traditionally established gender relations. Multiple complexities are involved in the assertion of women's identity. In general, women suffer from divorce, dowry, *pardah* system, early marriage, malnutrition, diseases, social insecurity, religious ostracization, cultural hegemony, exploitative labour system, and dehumanizing market economy in Bangladesh.

Theological Education in Bangladesh

I have lived in Bangladesh for eight years now and even though Christianity has been in Bangladesh for sometime now, not much has been recorded about women being involved in theological education. I visited and contacted most of the theological education centers to get statistics of women being educated in seminaries but to my frustration no such data was found. What I have in this paper is my own theological journey in Bangladesh and the situation of women I came across and interviewed for this paper.

I came to Bangladesh on 10 September 1998. As a young seminarian I had a strong desire to work for the church especially for women and youth. I got a good opportunity to work with women as my husband got his first posting as a presbyter in northern Bangladesh. I thought that may be the church would make use of my theological training but to my disappointment I was appointed as an English teacher and warden of the Nursing Institution with a monthly salary of 1500 Bangladeshi Taka. The love for Christ helped me to shine for his glory. I organized Bible studies for the women's fellowship group and with the help and encouragement of my husband I started preaching in the local church. To my surprise people liked my way of preaching and invited me to conduct services on special occasions. The leaders were well aware of my work. I got very little chance to meet women theologians but I saw the living theology in the women. After a few years I went back to complete my theological training and then joined the theological college of Church of Bangladesh as a lecturer of "Ethics" and "Women and Church" at Dhaka. Here I got a better scope to meet with women from various backgrounds.

There are 8 theological colleges in Dhaka, each with its own curriculum covering Old Testament, New Testament, Christian Education, Mission and Evangelism, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Pastoral Psychology, Introduction to Theology, Women and Church, etc. One college is affiliated with the Serampore University in India; others to sponsoring churches. Most colleges admit students with a minimum qualification of class eight and some colleges a minimum of Secondary School Certificate. I asked some women why they study theology and 90% of them replied that their husbands are studying or that the college accepts couples for theological training, not single women. Some men and women said they

wrists), must be loose and not transparent and not an imitation of the dress distinctive of non-believing women.

entered the theological colleges because they are from very poor financial backgrounds by being in the college they don't have to worry about food and shelter for one year. Another 10% of the women said it is because they wanted to know what theology is all about. These 10% women are living in Dhaka, and out of this 7% are aged women and their husbands are influential people holding high positions in the churches. So these 10% women get a better chance of higher studies – i.e. up to Master of Divinity.

I have been trying to inspire and encourage young women graduates to go for B.D. (Bachelor of Divinity) and then M.Th. (Master of Theology), say in India. Somehow there is a lack of awareness of the large theological ocean. Many women do not know what they can do after completing theological education. The Church of Bangladesh ordained two women priests in 1997 and for the last 9 years, Bangladesh has only two women priests with stories to tell. I quote one of the ordained women: *"The authority at the church is a stumbling block for any change towards the full participation of women in God's ministry. The church is the body of Christ in the world today, but does it reflect the attitude of Christ? In Indian custom people made idols and worship them, whether as male god or female goddesses. In Islam, the book of Hadith says: "Beneath the mother's feet is the peace of heaven". But what about Christians? Christian society should also show respect towards women. Unfortunately respect towards women is lacking in the church especially for unmarried women"*.

As part of my survey I spoke with a Catholic Bishop who informed me that since 1950-60s Bangladeshi women were given theological education abroad to join the sisterhood. After independence (i.e. 1971) the Catholic Church has its own theological college in Bangladesh and the women are educated locally for the sisterhood. I spoke with a few sisters and they had their own stories to tell.

It is sad to note that there is hardly any college that emphasizes Asian feminist theology. Women who are working in the rural areas don't know of any theories of feminist theology, but they are sharing the good news through their works, the women's fellowship groups where no male is present. Women are showing a strong sense of ecumenism by praying for and with the Hindu and Muslim sisters. It is really a matter of joy when in one of my visits to a rural women's gathering a few women shared with me that Hindu and Muslim neighbors invited Christian women to conduct women's fellowship meeting in their houses. And these Christian women support the poor sisters of other faiths out of their *handful of rice* (a *handful of uncooked rice kept separately with the idea to be put together and sold*). I felt proud of these women who practice the theology of solidarity, Christian love and sharing in their day to day life, while the leaders were talking about dialogue and work with people of other faiths in air-conditioned rooms or in conference centers. The Bangladeshi women's theology like any other feminist theology is deeply rooted in experience, in affection, in life, life giving, life caring, life practicing and life sharing.

Towards a Bangladeshi Feminist Theology

What do I mean by a Bangladeshi feminist theology?

When I first came to Dhaka in 1998, I saw a poster in my house (at the church quarters) of a woman with ten hands doing ten different household chores and beside her was a strong

muscular man with a stick raised to hit her. Below the photo was written: "My wife does not work". As a young theologian and a newly married woman, I was quite curious what exactly this poster was trying to convey. Slowly I discovered that it was a real picture of Bangladeshi society. A woman is a giver of everything like birth, food, hygiene, nutrition, clothing, nursing, comfort, care for children, husband, and pets, etc. Yet, the husband claims, "My wife does not work". In this point of suffering what is needed is to name all forms of violence and injustice as sin. Women are silently realizing that there is an urgent need to transform the prevailing patriarchal system in order to build an egalitarian society. Many Bangladeshi women are hoping to see in Jesus' suffering, passion, death and resurrection a meaning and alleviation of their own suffering.

According to Mukti Barton, "the Pharaoh from whom today's Bangladeshi women seek liberation is their male-dominated society. Like Moses women know that the cries of the oppressed reach God and, like Moses, they know they have a responsibility to bring people out of oppression. The misinterpretations of their Scriptures are the shackles by which today's Pharaoh binds women in slavery. To untie these fetters women look deep into their Scripture to find resources that empower them in their work of liberation."

It is very true that the Bible empowers Bangladeshi Christian women in their campaign for justice in society. Through various workshops women are now reading texts with a new approach; they find inspiration in biblical women and see God as aligning not with patriarchy but with women in their struggle for justice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say that it is high time to act seriously for the empowerment of women at home, in church and also in the country. We need to develop an authentic liberative theology in Bangladesh, where liberation is sought not only by Christian women but also by women of various religious traditions and ideologies. The insights gained from the feminist or women's movement could be used for developing a liberative theology in the context of struggle of the women in Bangladesh. I also urge the churches and other Christian organisations who work for the promotion of theological education in Asia to see the possibility of installing a standard theological education in Bangladesh.

Resources

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