

THE POPULAR SAINTS OF INDIA AND THEIR MESSAGE OF LIBERATION *EMERGING MISSIOLOGICAL PROSPECTS*

Dr M.D. Thomas

INTRODUCTION

The human society, on the one hand, has always had established forms of selfishness, exploitation and bondage. But, there have always been, on the other hand, saints and sages, who emerged from the common folk as powerful prophets, whose life and message have immensely contributed to the on-going reformation of the human society. These saints and sages of India were not mere symbols of holiness but were unique agents of spiritual liberation and social renaissance. Their being born in to the society is a matter of great pride and blessing for the humanity. They remain perennial sources of inspiration and their message of liberation contributes immensely to the various details of life. The following lines, in brief, are attempting their story.

POPULAR SAINTS OF INDIA

Who is a saint?

A saint is one who is regarded as a holy person. Outward appearance or religious following, or even capacity to foretell future happening, does not necessarily make a saint. Professing a dogma and falling in line with certain so-called infallible traditions are not required either, in order to be a saint. Belonging to a certain religious community and practicing a system of rituals are not the signs of a saint, too. 'Being holy' is the mark of a saint. "True holiness is simply the presence of God reflecting itself in the goodness of a person's character and action".¹ That would mean to say, a saint has to be endowed with a good human nature, first and foremost. He or she needs to be characterized by a spiritual flavour of life. He or she ought to be recognized as a saint in terms of social relevance, i.e., the message of liberation he or she imparts.

'Saint' in different religious traditions

Different religious traditions have different understandings of a saint. For some religious traditions, saint is one who, having died, is among the blessed, i.e., one who has merited favour with God by the quality of religious living on earth. Accordingly, a

person is considered a saint when he or she is declared by the head of the community to have won a place in heaven and so is worthy of veneration on earth. Some other religious traditions do not consider it necessary for someone to be declared a saint by a certain official. While on earth, one can be accepted as a living saint by virtue of one's quality of living. The spiritual genuineness gives a glowing account of one's saintly existence.

The word 'saint'

The word 'saint' is understood in two ways – general and particular. The general understanding evolves from the basic meaning of the word whereas the particular understanding, from its sectarian application. The word 'saint' derives from the linguistic roots *sat, san and shaant*, which mean 'true', 'calm', 'still', 'serene' 'quiet', 'peaceful', 'silent', etc. Accordingly, the inherent features of a saint would be being devout, wise, truthful, gentle, pure, noble, generous, and serviceable as well as having faith, good conduct, and the like. ² The Hindi word *sant* almost tallies with the English word 'saint', in both pronunciation and meaning. The word 'saint' was used in this general meaning till it received a particular application later.

The sectarian application of the word

The word 'saint' was used in a sectarian sense beginning with *Gyaneshwar* of *Varkari* sect of Maharashtra in the 14th century. The sectarian understanding of the word developed in to its full capacity in the context of *Kabeer* in the 15-16th century. The 20th century literary criticism almost sealed this particular sense of the word. Now, it is not applied to the *sagun* devotee poets like *Tulseedaas, Soordaas, Meerabaayee*, etc. but to the *nirgun* devotee poets like *Kabeer, Ravidas, Dadoodayal* and the like. The sectarian use of the word accommodates the *Soofee* saints also, in a certain sense. Anyway, the word 'saint,' in our context, entertains a different and wide understanding of God, even wider than the traditional understanding of *nirgun* God. Quite many *sagun* sages have maintained various dimensions of broader thinking, too. Some aspects of their message also fall under the *nirgun* or beyond *sagun-nirgun* concept of being a saint. Having approached life from their own given situations, they have even re-defined the word 'saint' by the unique way they lived their lives. In them, the word 'saint' stands for various dimensions of continuing liberation in life. Key words like 'saint', 'saint literature', 'saint tradition', and 'saint vision' and 'saint sect' are discussed here from this perspective.

Popular Saints

These saints are known as popular saints, because they belonged to the people. Their popularity can be seen from various angles. Most of these saints hailed from the so-called lower strata of the caste-ridden society of the time and belonged to the discriminated lot of the general public. They represented the cries and sentiments of the 'voiceless'. They suited the tastes, needs and level of the masses. They shared the problems, struggles and life-situations of the ordinary people. They were liked by the common folk for their genuineness and were admired for their relentless search for the Higher Power. They presented a simple form of *bhakti* and spirituality to the common person and the same was highly appealing to them. They were appreciated for the liberative life they lived and for the inspiring message they communicated. They spoke in the dialect of the general public. In their discourses, the language was adjusted to the audience in hand. Their utterances were not only spontaneous but also poetical and musical. They preferred the simple, straightforward, colloquial, mixed, and the country way of speech, which was used by the common folk, to the refined, classical, polished, symbolic and systematic style of language that was used by the educated. At a time, when Sanskrit monopolized all knowledge and media of communication, to attempt the popular dialect for communication was nothing less than a crime, which wouldn't easily be pardoned. This was the revolution these saints pioneered. These saints could whisper volumes of spiritual message to the hearts of the general public. That is why, their lines are often found ready at the tips of tongues of people, especially of the general public. Though they had to face many odds in their respective life-situations, eventually they were accepted by the masses to the core, as great men--fully liberated and capable of facilitating liberation. In this sense, they were 'popular saints'.

A few names

Let me name a few of these saints from different parts of India

-- Kabeer, Ravidas, Tukaram, Gyaaneshwar, Namdev, Eknaath, Jaanaabaayee, Muktaabaayee, Narsee Mehtaa, Meerabaayee, Sree Naaraayan Guru, Sarvagya, Thiruvalluvar, Purantardaas, Jaitraam, Chattambiswaamikal, Basveshwar, Chaitanyamahaaprabhu, Ghaaseedaas, Guru Nanak, Raamdaas, Annamaachaary, Periyaar, Pothana, Molia, Thyaagraaja, Sundaradaas, Kutban, Manjhan, Bhaarteeyaar, Jotibaa Phule, and the like. Most of them were renowned poets, too. Their poems are available in the national and regional literatures. Translations, commentaries and research findings on them in the form of books and articles are found in Hindi and English, and also in many Indian and non-Indian languages.

Indian saints with a universal character

The popular saints of our interest here, definitely, belonged to the sub-continent of India. They had their birth in different geographical settings, at different times of

history. They are Indian not merely by way of their nationality, but because they were deeply involved in the concerns of the Indian society -- its traditions, values, struggles, problems, needs, ambitions and aspirations. Their hearts and minds were fully alive to the spiritual, cultural, ideological and behavioral patterns of Indian life. They were deeply committed to the diverse dimensions of the genius of Indian worldview, such as spiritual outlook, individual freedom, plurality, integration, philosophical concept, experiential approach, aesthetic attitude and poetic expression. They were Indian thus, through and through. But, to be Indian meant for them, in no way, a mind divided by linguistic, communal and national boundaries. Their life and message had ample implications for the whole humanity, even though their poetical lines were addressed to themselves, as they were rooted in their given contexts. Their 'being Indian' communicates a symbolic value for the welfare of the whole humanity. Its perennial value travels across the boundaries of caste, creed, profession and community. It has a universal bearing. But for this quality of universal application, their relevance as saints would have been insignificant. Their Indian character would have had hardly anything liberative, either. Their message is for all people and is for all times; and that is their uniqueness.

A powerful message

These saints have a powerful message for the humanity. Their message was not merely social, moral and religious tenets. It was not just processed in the mind; it evolved from their experiences of life. Their poetical expressions were not intellectual or verbal exercises. Their speech was the communication of a lived reality. These saints never relied on others' utterances or on pieces of hearsay. They counted on their own personal experience. Naturally, their sayings radiate genuineness. It is tested by the truth of life and would stand the challenge of time and space, too. Their message does not merely present good ideas. It is an invitation, which cannot be escaped from. It is an earnest request, which could not be denied. It is a teaching, which penetrates in to the heart of the listener. It is an inexhaustible treasure of inspiration for all ages to come. Their message speaks volumes, effectively so, to the one who is a seeker of human and spiritual heights.

Capacity for liberation from diverse forms of bondage

The life and message of these popular saints had a great capacity for the all-round liberation of the human kind. Liberation is setting someone free from slavery or bondage of any sort. Human society, often, gets stagnant in the realm of ideas, feelings or practices. The saints could not close their eyes against the rampant forms of enslavement their respective human society was afflicted with. There were bondages of understanding, like ritualism, fundamentalism, fanaticism, communalism and

terrorism. Attitudinal forms of slavery like prejudice, hatred, and ill feeling were strongly prevailing. Several wrong habits developed in to behavioral ruts. Discrimination based on caste, class, sect, office, social status, profession, language, region, etc., was the most commonly found social malady. Forms of enslavement were thriving in almost all areas of life. The saints attempted a campaign of liberation, in view of freeing the humans from the clutches of diverse bondages. Only the one who is liberated can facilitate another to get liberated. The saints possessed enormous spiritual powers, which they received from the Almighty. Their personal lives had a considerable in-built spiritual capacity for awakening reformation in societal life as well as spiritual transformation in personal lives. Their message of liberation was processed in their own social contexts, and it was in the light of the personal experience of the divine they were brimming forth.

The multi-sided **message of liberation** propounded by these popular saints could be analyzed under two heads – spiritual and social. The salient features of their liberative message will certainly highlight the quality of their saintliness and the universal character of its application to human situations, beyond temporal and geographical considerations.

MESSAGE OF SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

Religion is a doubled-sided phenomenon. On the one hand, it is a system of faith, which takes care of the spiritual factor in life. It is supposed to be an agent of all-pervasive liberation. But, on the other hand, it is a sad fact that the followers get enslaved to a certain perspective, an interpretation, a code and a ritual expression. It is a certain type of conditioning. It is intended to unite human beings. But nothing else has divided the human society so appallingly as religion. It takes the credit of all attempts at peace and harmony in the world. But the worst of the wars and tensions in the world have taken place in the name of religion. The pages of the world history go thus. No doubt, it has facilitated the humans in the search for the Divine. But the institutionalized and sophisticated details of the religious systems have made the spiritual journey of the followers not only bothersome but also next to impossible, in many respects. There is a large number of self-styled leaders, who claim to have been ‘anointed to rule over the people’. They have no scruple in manipulating the religious fabric in order to suit their private interests. Pseudo-orthodoxy and discriminatory attitudes based on caste, class, language, ideology, profession, sect, etc. gain undue power. No wonder, the general public feels suppressed and pushed aside. This is more or less the story of religion the popular saints found themselves encircled by, in their respective life setting. Most of these saints and sages had their roots in the discriminated sections of the society, but they emerged in different areas as extraordinary men and women. They had deep personal experience of the Divine and were

capable of a spiritual leadership. The positive character of their response to the situation evolved as a spiritual message. They were considered saints in terms of this message. Some of the salient features of the same are being discussed here.

Simplicity of Religion

The Saints understood religion in a very simple manner. Their spiritual insights were natural. They were accessible to all. They were more appealing to those who were downtrodden and alienated in the matter of religion. The texture of religion suggested by these saints included such simple threads, like remembering the Higher Power in any form that suits, entertaining sentiments of faith in that Power, singing *bhajan* or praises to that Power in one's own way, engaging in *satsang* (good company) or in acquaintances which are conducive to a divine atmosphere, being of service to the other, etc. These attempts at self-realization were coupled with values of social behaviour, too. The practice of religion was made simple for the common folk. Spiritual experience was brought within the easy reach of the general public. This form of religion, which was lived and highlighted by these popular saints, goes beyond the barriers of caste, creed, traditions, community, ideology and sect. This is an approach of religion, which incorporates all faith positions and perspectives of life, in some fashion or other. It is like a world religion for the humanity, which could easily be accepted by people of all times, with minor modifications. This understanding of religion, which is universal as well as simple, is capable of liberating the humans from the clutches of the prevailing system of religion, which is highly complicated as well as degenerated in many respects. This is, perhaps, the most significant message of liberation communicated by the popular saints.

Personal experience

Experience is personal by its very nature. 'Personal' pertains to the core of one's being. When processed by one's own personal involvement, experience becomes genuine and reliable. That is precisely what *Kabeer* means when he says *anbhai saancha*,³ i.e., experience is true, and true experience is personal. He does not rely on *lekhaa lekhee*, i.e., what is written or narrated by others, but on *aankhin dekhee*,⁴ what he has seen with his own eyes. He exhorts, 'you think for yourself (i.e., experience); then you will become wise'.⁵ According to him, 'seeing, hearing and touching the reality oneself, thinking and feeling it oneself, experiencing and knowing it oneself, gives one a joy, that is special'.⁶ He continues, 'the story of love is indescribable; hardly anything can be said about it; it is like a dumb person who has taken jaggery and is not able to express what he or she feels about it, but just smiles'.⁷ That would amount to say experience defies expression. God is a matter of personal experience, as love is; one has to know him for oneself. *Kabeer* proceeds to a mystical

experience and tells the Lord: ‘pondering you again and again I became you; now there is nothing left in me’.⁸ His experience of the divine reaches an exquisite culmination when he says, ‘I am so full of your presence; wherever I look you are seen’.⁹

The deeper the experience, the richer it is. Pearls are not found at the shore but at deep sea. The personal experience of *Meerabai* makes her affirm, ‘*Girdhar Gopal* is mine; I have no one else other than him’.¹⁰ About the depth of her yearning for the Lord, she says, ‘only the one who is wounded knows the pain of a wounded person’.¹¹ She exclaims, ‘O Lord of *Meera*, when will you come to me; I cannot live without you’;¹² ‘I am longing for you, O my Lord, make me your own’.¹³ *Ravidaas* expresses his personal relationship with the Divine in these words: ‘Lord you are *chandan*, I am water; you are lamp, I am the wick’.¹⁴ Similarly, *Tukaraam* expresses his deep God-experience: ‘God is now in my heart and mind, within me he does dwell. I see God’s face; I feel his presence near. I think of him and touch his feet so dear. As I gaze on this fantastic sight, all mental cares and spiritual woes depart... I live with him; he lives within my heart’.¹⁵ *Raaman Maharshi* approaches this mystical experience in silence, peace, stillness and perfect serenity of mind; and he attains self-realization, thus.¹⁶ The personal experience of the mystic saints goes to the point of ecstatic communion and is often expressed in striking analogy between ‘drop and sea’, ‘wife and husband’, ‘fish and water’, ‘bird and air’, ‘pea cock and mountain’, ‘*chakor* and moon beams’, ‘waves and sea’, etc.

This characteristic of personal experience highlighted by these saints could be compared to Paul: ‘for to me, to live is Christ’ (Phil. 1.21), and ‘I no longer live, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal.2.20). It can be paralleled with the experience of Thomas, who, having seen the Risen Lord for himself, exclaimed ‘My Lord and My God’ (Jn 20.28). The experience of Jesus ‘I and Father are one’ (Jn 10.30) seems to be a culmination of such sentiment. Jesus’ question ‘who do you say I am’ (Mt 16.15) further underlines the importance of the personal experience of the Ultimate Reality, without which religion remains almost untouched.

Purity of Heart

Purity of heart makes one eligible for attempting an experience of God. Since the Divine is pure, only a pure state of mind can assure an encounter with him. That is why *Meerabaai* prays, ‘make me pure as you are pure, beloved’.¹⁷ Purity of heart would mean simplicity. Simplicity is the absence of duplicity, which scatters the energies. It rules out crooked ways and advocates straightforwardness, too. *Kabeer* says, ‘One is capable of meeting the Ultimate Reality only when the mind clears its crookedness off’.¹⁸ ‘A sound mind is as pure as the holy *Ganga*’,¹⁹ says *Ravidaas*. *Meerabaai*

proceeds further in saying, 'externals do not matter, if but your heart is pure'.²⁰ Transparency is synonymous to purity of heart.

This fundamental characteristic of spirituality can be compared to the Jewish way of thinking. The Psalmist affirms, 'who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands, and a pure heart' (Ps 24:2-4)! Jesus puts it characteristically: 'blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Mt 5.8). Purity of heart is holiness and that is the starting point of spirituality, which is worth any name.

Indwelling of God

The presence of the Creator in the creation is a fact too obvious to be negotiated. This common belief underlines the constant awareness of his abiding presence in all the beings. *Nam Alvaar's* attitude to the Divine can be summarized thus: 'my lord of the celestials, thou hast made my heart thy tabernacle; so intimate and close is thy union with me. That I beseech thee never more to leave me, me so lovingly clinging to thee'! That is to say, the human heart is the special abode of the divine. *Gyaaneshwar* considers the whole universe as the home of God. All the man-made abodes of God on earth are compared by *Ravidaas* to the human body: 'the body is the Temple, *Musjid* and *Gurudwaara*'.²¹ *Meerabaayee* used to pray to the Lord to cleanse her of sin, so that she may be a worthy dwelling place of the Lord. Kabeer has many categorical sayings to establish the fact: 'as the whole subsists in the part',²² 'as musk resides in the deer',²³ so dwells God in every being; 'mind (man) is *Mathura*, heart (dil) is *Dwaarika* and body (*kaayaa*) is *Kaashee*'.²⁴

Similar spiritual realizations are found in the Bible: 'man is the temple of God / the Holy Spirit' (2 Cor 6.16, Cor 6.19, 1 Cor 3. 16-17) and 'man bears the image and likeness of God' (Gen 1.27, 5.1). The indwelling of God is materialized in an experience of self-realization, which is a personalized form of the universal presence of God. It makes the existence of the Divine real and meaningful. It permeates in to the diverse dimensions of life, making it effective to the details.

MESSAGE OF SOCIAL LIBERATION

The saints found themselves amidst staring contradictions of social life. Social behaviour was in stark incompatibility with the prevailing theories and policies. The general public was being crushed by the clutches of the hierarchical structure of caste and class. The ways of discrimination and exploitation were beyond any logic. Brahmins and high classes monopolized the religious, social and educational arenas. The low-placed people in the realms of caste and class found themselves dominated

over and deprived of their right, which was assured even by basic justice. The saints were products of their own respective social situations. Their spiritual insight enabled them to recognize the seriousness of their awkward social predicament and its tragic implications. They were charged with a great sense of social consciousness. They felt the pang of being challenged by the social evils prevailing around them. They experienced a passionate urge to respond to them positively and creatively. No matter how unjust and trying their situations were, they proved their spiritual mettle. Like lotus, which remains in dirty conditions but produces immaculate flowers, the saints rose to such spiritual height in life that their very presence became a living symbol of social resurrection.

The saints campaigned against evil forces like selfishness, hypocrisy, discrimination, exploitation, manipulation, suppression and fatalism. They were genuinely committed to reforming the society. They advocated the basic principle of equality in life pausing arguments like ‘the image of God is in all’²⁵ and ‘the divine power is present in all’.²⁶ Personal values like genuineness, honesty, sincerity, love, service and respect were emphasized, too. Their saintly way was ‘living up to this alternative value system’, which they themselves proposed. They propagated their message in a subtle poetic language. The values were applied to the respective life setting of the people. The saints placed a clarion call to the practice of social values. They were avowed to making the society a better place to live in. This reformative character of the message of the saints is like an ever-flowing fountain, which contributes immensely to better quality of life in the society.

Co-ordination between theory and practice

The most reliable test of one’s social fitness is the co-ordination between theory and practice. It is the proof of one’s genuineness in life. It reveals the level of maturity a person has achieved. The individual fruitfulness and social relevance of one’s life is hidden in this hard reality. The life of the saints has always stood the test of the theory they upheld. Their behavioral integrity was not only beyond doubt but was highly inspiring for others.

The poetical utterances of the saints shed light on the details of the problem of disagreement between theory and practice that prevailed in their respective society. *Kabeer* asks, ‘what is the use of that speech which does not correspond to action?’²⁷ According to him, ‘theory is empty, practice is the essence of life’.²⁸ ‘Many are those who say things but few are those who do accordingly’.²⁹ *Tulseedaas* also expresses the same idea, ‘many are those who give advice to others, but those who translate the same into action are very few’.³⁰ *Kabeer* appropriates a satirical approach to those who preach without practicing; ‘you haven’t got water with you; but you pretend to

distribute milk to others. Your own mind is not at peace; and you seem to be enthusiastic in consoling others'.³¹ *Dadoodayaal* adds another dimension to the argument, 'You aren't pure yourself, but you give advice to others!'³² *Rajjabdaas*, while realizing the double-sided play of the reality of speech and action, poses the basic predicament of spiritual attainment: 'to do is difficult, to say is easy; but without living the life yourself, how can you attain the Divine?'³³ *Kabeer* analyses the phenomenon further: 'the speech is sweet like jaggery, action is like poison; but if you leave speech and do action, then you will attain nectar, in the place of poison'.³⁴ He observes the sad plight of the learned and categorically suggests an effective treatment to the problem of disharmony between theory and practice: 'the world has (generations have) gone by perusing large volumes and no one has ever become learned. The one who learns the single word of love only will really become learned'.³⁵

Biblical ideas also highlight this crucial problem of life. Verbal expressions, if they do not correspond to what they imply, are a futile exercise. Jesus commands: 'not saying lord, lord, but doing the will of his Father is heaven is the ideal act, which merits the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 7.21). He also presents a paradox: 'one who does not translate the word in to practice is like a foolish man who builds his house on sand' (Mt 7.24-27). 'Faith has to be accompanied by action, otherwise it is dead', says James (James 2.14-17). He continues, 'one who does not care for action is like a person who sees his face in the mirror, but does not want to improve his look' (James 1.23-25). Jesus has a parable about the talent, which has the following implication. When received from God, it is just a theory; when invested upon and developed, it is practice that is worthy of appreciation and reward (Mt 25.14-30). John says, 'the one who claims to love God and does not love his neighbour is a liar' (1 Jn 4.20-21). Loving God is theory and loving one-another is practice.

Disagreement between theory and practice would mean having a divided heart. That is why *Tukaraam* says: 'a single-minded man can not hate another; if he sees God in all, his foe becomes his brother'.³⁶ Co-ordination between word and deed and as well as thought and action is the sign of integrity. That is why the saints condemned oral knowledge and appreciated behavioral knowledge. Their utterances are as if they are addressing themselves! They used to speak out only that which was experimented by them in their personal lives. They gave evidence to their own words by their actions. They presented the ideal before others through the witness of their own lives. Only the one who has practiced the message beforehand has the right to preach to the other. That which has come to one's own experience only is worthy of any importance. As the words interpret the action, so the action bears witness to the words. The conflict between theory and practice proves one's state of being disorganized in life, which is to be regretted. Moreover, word and deed are complementary to each other. They are like two sides of the same coin. The saints highlight co-ordination between theory and

practice as the most radical social message. This aspect of the saints' message of social liberation seems to be exceptionally relevant for the world of today.

Equality

The measure adopted by the saints to re-organize the society, which was scattered by discriminatory behaviours, was the ideal of equality. Different standards were being applied to individuals and communities; and superior-inferior attitudes were maintained in the society. The approach of the saints to this mentality of inequality and discrimination was basically spiritual. *Dadoodayaal* exhorts, 'contemplate the whole Divine (*Brahm*), then you will find all the individual spirits on the same plane; if you concentrate on the quality of the body, then you will see diverse colours'.³⁷ The quality of the spirit is to be imbibed in order to see the basic oneness. A non-dualistic experience is the basic requirement for equality. It is the divided mind, which discriminates on the basis of caste, colour, language, profession, class, creed, faith, conviction, ideology, nationality, etc. The foundation for human equality is faith in the same divinity. The characteristic of 'rainbow' inspires one to comprehend the mystery of divine oneness. The rainbow presents seven colours, one different from the other. The diverse colours expressed in the rainbow are all hidden in the sunlight. It is the same sun and the same sunlight at the root of all these colours. So is the divine spirit -- basically one in experience and different in expressions. The different colours are different expressions and they are not to be compared with and discriminated against each other. Each has its own singular quality. Together they radiate a beauty. This aesthetic outlook of life is the spiritual motivation for equality. This has been the subtle experience of the saints.

An awareness of the **common roots** elicits a sense of common belonging. By going deeper into the experience of the Divine, one comes to the realization that all beings essentially belong to the same Divine. That is the supreme truth *Dadoodayaal* expresses in these simple words: 'all beings are of the same God'.³⁸ All human beings are the children of the same God. All are members of the same family of God, the same family of humanity. All have the right to live. The differences are just artificial and they are superimposed. *Gorakhanaath* says, 'A Hindu approaches temple and a Muslim, *musjid*; but both contemplate and find the same Higher Power, that knows neither temple nor *musjid*'.³⁹ The high and low feelings are based on merely external differences. The quality of the human person is more important. The inner quality is the invisible basis of an attitude of equality. To be carried away by the visible world would mean to lead a life on the level of the body, which is not life proper. All beings share the same Creator and the same creation. 'All share the same water, the same air and the same light. It is because of one's foolishness one makes a difference between persons,' says *Rajjabdaas*.⁴⁰ Sorrows and joys, hopes and disappointments, sufferings

and struggles, successes and failures, dreams and achievements are a common experience for all. In fact, there is no reasonable ground for discrimination and unsociability. The basic reality of life is just equal for all. The so-called leaders of the society erected a system of classification of human beings, where they can satisfy their selfish interests. But, such a division has no logical basis.

A religion of **good social conduct** is *dharma*. Good behaviour towards one another is that which makes a real human society. Kabeer challenges the proponents of the caste system, who undervalue others and thus fall short of a social conduct, which is humanly dignifying. He asks in an ironical tone, ‘you *Brahmin*, why haven’t you taken another way to be born?’⁴¹ He means that if both *Brahmin* and *Shoodr* have taken the same way to be born in to the world, what is the difference between them? Both have blood of the same colour; both have hunger and thirst as well as needs and problems. Paltoosaheb settles this problem in his own way: ‘I have cancelled the whole system of castes and erected a basic path of devotion for all. I am now like a flower blossomed in the garden of *Govind*’.⁴² The system of caste-discrimination is a hindrance to a meaningful social life. What is important is a spirit of equality in the garden of life, which is created and maintained by the same God. That is why *Muni Devsen* conclusively and categorically affirms; ‘there is but one religion of good conduct and no *brahmin*, no *shoodr*’.⁴³

Such a morality of good behaviour to one and all establishes perfect equality among the humans. Unity of the human society is dependent on the behavioural equality in life. Equality takes care of the right approach to life. This attitude does full justice to the human dignity and to the dignity of life. It rules out all narrowness of thinking. It also proves one’s genuineness and nobility. Such an open, transparent and realistic disposition assures the right orientation to life. It liberates the humans from all that is unworthy of the human spirit and promises a healthy tuning to one-another. The welfare of the whole humanity (*Sarvoday*) is inherent in this elevated state of mind.

Integration of values

Integration is combining different parts to form a single whole. It is like bricks, stone and the other requisites brought together to erect a wall. It is like different letters fixed together to form a word in the block. It is like different words put together to make a piece of poem. It’s like a harmony of various notes to make music. It is like a body which functions as one unit while having many parts (1 Cor 12.12-31). The many parts exist as one. There is no contradiction between the parts; there is no discrimination among them. There is equal importance and dignity shared among the parts. There is mutual understanding and agreement. This is an example, which speaks volumes on what integration would mean. Integration, thus, is an existence in togetherness. It is a

holistic vision of life and can rightly be described in the terminology of Indian culture: ‘unity in diversity and diversity in unity’. It is like a family or a community, in whom the members exist in mutual communion. All the basic values of life merge in to this reality of communion. Integration is the positive outcome of the dynamics of human values, which make social life possible. A well-knit social life is dependent on the inter-play between the values the humans live by.

The saints not only underlined the need of integrating the values of social life but their own lives were a lofty example for the same. They were persons of great **integrity**. They were honest and upright in character. They were simple and straightforward in heart. They were fully committed to the society. The sole mission in their life was an all-out attempt at making the human society a better place to live in. They started this campaign with themselves. They proved themselves to be people of character – human and spiritual. The physical, mental, emotional and spiritual components of their persons fitted together well. It is this personal achievement of theirs which make them being remembered as inspiring models. *Shree Naarayan Guru* suggests a highly imperative single-doze medicine for the disorganized and disintegrated human society: ‘one caste, one religion, one God for the humanity.’⁴⁴ Only a person of sublime integrity can conceive such a concept, which can integrate all that the humans hold on to. For him, following a particular religious tradition or ideology, belonging to a particular social caste, class or community, holding a particular profession or position, etc., is not important. Becoming a good human being is the most meritorious achievement in life. Such an approach to life organizes life values into an integral whole.

A **qualitative approach** to life is the right perspective for integration. Quality and quantity are like two sides of the same coin. Both are equally important. Quantity stands for the body, while quality represents the spirit. Quantity elaborates the visible world, whereas quality searches for the invisible world. Quantity is the dimension of expression with regard to the reality, and quality is the dimension of experience of the same. Quantity is the external aspect, whereas quality, the internal. Since they are complementary components, the mutual equilibrium needs to be maintained. But the general inclination is to give priority to the quantity component. The saints realized that the sad predicament of the society was because of too much importance given to the quantity factor and too little importance, to quality. So they felt the need to stress the quality factor more. By doing so they did not mean to underrate quantity, but only wanted to re-establish the right balance between the two. This is what *Ravidaas* means when he underlines the importance of the quality of the mind in comparison to the ritual purity *Ganges* is believed to accord.⁴⁵ Moreover, the human society has accumulated a lot of junk in the name of tradition. Much of it is just a burden, a futile heavy weight, for the human being. There is a dire as well as a continuous need to

examine, discern and discard what is out-dated and irrelevant. *Kabeer* gives a categorical exhortation: ‘accept the substantial and reject the insubstantial’. ⁴⁶The primary things are to be attended first in comparison to the secondary things. The inner element has to get priority in relation to the outer. Quality should gain the first importance. That only can help life progress. That only assures a bright future for the human society. Quality takes care of a sense of perfection in life, which is the greatest human motto possible. The motivation for being perfect and the best model of perfection is God the Father, because he never discriminates between the good and the evil, witnesses Jesus (Mt 5.48). ‘The quench for perfection is life’s greatest adventure’. ⁴⁷ This divine characteristic of perfection can be imbibed only by an honest commitment to quality in life.

Integration of values is to be searched for in **the quality of concord** one maintains with the divine and with the other human beings. The Unseen is reflected in the seen. Creatures are the images of the one same Creator. The Divine is to be encountered in the human and in the natural. Commitment to the Creator is to be expressed towards commitment to the creatures. The latter is the measure of the former, too. That is what *Tulseedaas* says, ‘there is no religion like doing well to the other and there is no irreligion like doing harm to the other’. ⁴⁸ Doing well to the other is the right worship of the Divine. Jesus says, ‘whatever is done to the other is done unto me’ (Mt 25.25-40). To love one’s neighbour is to love God. To live in harmony with one’s co-creatures, especially the humans, is to achieve harmony with the Creator. This is the Truth of God and the God of Truth --the two-in-one. When Guru *Ghaseedaas* declares that ‘God is truth and truth is God’, ⁴⁹ he inter-twines the visible and the invisible dimension of the Higher Reality in an unparalleled way. This superb form of integration summarizes all values in life.

The Popular wisdom presents a basic ethic for all

A piece of popular wisdom is found being traditionally communicated to the younger generations of the general public. The texture of the message gives an impression that some popular saint has composed it. It is found in poetical form in Hindi and of late is available in cassette form with a musical rendering. It is like a formula of social values. It seems to be a lived reality of the saints. It highlights their value system, in an ironical rhetoric. It is an effective preamble to the practice of the values. The following is a free translation of the same in English.

Doing well to others is a noble ideal, but not doing harm to anyone is more noble an ideal. Being a flower to someone is meritorious, but not becoming a beast for another is more meritorious. Not being able to keep good conduct is a failure in life, but going into sin is a greater failure. Speaking truth is the golden motto, but avoiding telling a

lie is more golden. Silence is better than poisonous speech. Weigh before you speak. Open your mouth only when you have a kind word to speak. Building a house for someone is a gesture of generosity, but not burning another's hut is more generous a gesture. Bandaging someone's wound is an act of mercy, but not putting alkali on the wound of someone is much more a merciful act. Trying not to add to darkness is more important than becoming a lamp and burning for others. Consoling another in his or her misery is a heavenly deed, but not causing pain to anyone is more heavenly a deed. Hence, do not become a thorn to another.⁵⁰

EMERGING MISSIOLOGICAL PROSPECTS

The above analysis of the spiritual and social message of liberation of the popular saints invites one to pursue the immense missiological possibilities that emerge from it. Missiology, when not addressed to the context, is bound to fail. Its foundation cannot be just a dead message from a Scripture of the remote past, but it has to be founded on the recent past and more so on the present living realities of the society here and now. Missiological reflection in India should not entirely rely on the imported religious and cultural affiliations of the west, but has to draw the sap of life from the spiritual resources of the social milieu within the national and regional boundaries of India. It is encouraging to note that the recent centuries have witnessed a tremendous shift of emphasis in Missiology by way of thinking for Indian context. A lot of attempts have been made in missiological research in line with the cultural riches of the country of our inheritance. Several experts have evolved from several Indian disciplines of research and have specialized in related educational affiliations. They have immensely contributed to opening new routes in missiological application. But the above saints and sages bring us to a humble realization that missiological endeavour has miles and miles to go before it can consider itself sufficiently situated in the Indian context. It needs to open new avenues of understanding and living one's faith. These saints awaken a new taste in those who have a mission to perform for India. That would mean to say that missiological insights should spontaneously evolve from the spiritual and social heritage the above sages have experienced in their noble lives. The comprehensive message of liberation these saints have highlighted thus speaks volumes. It provides one with various valuable insights while in the mission. A disciple-like following of these sages will assure a deeper understanding of them. That will facilitate their life and message to inspire a continuing inter-action with one's own faith tradition, too. Such a missiological engagement, certainly, will open up new vistas of living one's Christian mission as well as theologizing on it, which is suited to the genius of our country.

A few missiological possibilities could be pinpointed, in response to certain emerging questions. The first question is: *does spiritual and social commitment necessitate a*

withdrawal from the normal course of life? Most of these sages were married men and women and were true to family responsibilities. They proved by their own life that withdrawing from life is not essential for a spiritual pursuit, even for excellence in the same. Their dedication to the task of reforming the society with regard to its unbecoming ways did not make it necessary to escape from life-duties, either. Combining successfully the basic life reality of sex, marriage and family life with a saintly and social career was an exceptionally meritorious achievement they highlight by their lives. Such combination gives a touch of realism and balance in processing one's life, too. It is noble to follow the motto—'one is called to be saint'. But, it is an undeniable fact that real saints aren't those who are alienated from life realities. Only those who are well integrated in the diverse situations of life can be thought of traveling a saintly track. The above sages present a living definition of who a saint is, in the right sense of the word. This dimension of the popular saints addresses the missiological thinkers on the compulsory discipline of the Catholic Church, which detaches the spiritual and social pursuit of life from the normal divine design of being a man and woman wedded to each other.

The second question is: *can any person or community place an absolute claim on the spiritual resources and service of the society?* The Creator has intelligently distributed the life resources among his creatures. Attempting to monopolize any item of the divine gift and to sideline others as less important is because of sheer selfishness. To think in a manner, which gives importance to one self seems to be natural for every being. Animals are inclined to be selfish by instinct, whereas human beings are so by virtue of their intelligence. But, when selfishness goes to the extent of suppressing other dimensions of life, the very purpose of intelligence stands defeated. Besides, one runs the risk of losing some of the best spiritual aspects of life. Spiritual pursuit is like an open book. All human beings have equal access to it. Imbibing the qualities of the Spirit and attaining spiritual excellence are the achievements of any individual or community who pursues that track honestly. No one can claim to monopolize the same. This is true about the service of the society also. To love and serve the other is part of the basic nature every human being is endowed with. It is an invitation addressed to all. It is the sacred duty of every individual, too. Discerning the same and acting upon it in a sublime manner is one's personal merit. Therefore, no single person, religious community or cultural group can make an exclusive claim on spiritual or social excellence. The popular saints belonged to diverse traditions and communities. The superb spiritual fruits they achieved and the reformative social contributions they have rendered are highly inspiring and elevating. The fruitful life and the powerful message of the above sages invite the traditional Christian community to revise the absolute claims placed on the unique heights of spiritual experience and social service. Appropriating a humbler disposition, even after doing the best in the above arenas, would be a better response.

The third question is: *how can harmony of life be maintained if any person or community refrains from relating to the other and being integrated to the other?* Harmony is the basic spirit of life, which affirms the commonalities of the origin, maintenance and destiny of life. The success of one's life is to be evaluated by the capacity for and the achievement of a spirit of harmony. Harmony in all aspects of life is inevitable. Special mention needs to be made of the harmony of different faiths and cultural streams. No religious or social tradition can afford to remain detached from the other and run the risk of being ineffective, it not fossilized. Such disintegration results in disharmony. Disharmony is present in our society today, much more than before. The life and message of the popular saints place a clarion call to the agents of ill will, hatred, violence and disorder, to rise above the petty and man-made boundaries and divisions in the name of caste, class, creed, language, ideology, profession, nationality etc. As these sages do not belong to any particular group, so are their poetic lines, which are addressed to all human beings of good will. Attempting anew a bridge building, which promotes good will, love, friendliness, service, cooperation and harmonious togetherness is the only way that does justice to the sublime life and message of the popular saints and sages. The above sages invite missiologists to advance anew the dialogical perspective of life, by involving in the life of the other persons and communities, by finding good in the other, appreciating the other, learning from the other and by promoting the other traditions, especially that of India.

The fourth question is: *can missiology claim any bright prospects for India without significantly incorporating the spiritual and social resources of the popular saints into the chunk of its reflection and practice?* Missiology is, in fact, reflection on the life of the humans of various traditions. Reflection makes full sense when applied to the context. The details of the context one lives in as well as the rich heritage one cherishes cannot remain untouched. Along with various field realities of India, the spiritual and social vision of these popular saints should become a significant basis of missiological reflection. Prayer habits are to be tuned in line with the superb poetical and spiritual lines of these saints. No spiritual and social endeavour worth the name is possible in India without experiencing, learning from and appropriating the sublime spirit of these sages. There is a good collection of books and articles available on these sages. Lot of research has been done in this area, too. Father Lesser, in spite of his non-Indian origin, has made a noble and praise-worthy attempt to popularize the message of these saints. The research on *Kabeer* done by Father William Dwyer and Father M.D. Thomas could be mentioned here as further efforts in this line. But, missiologists have to step in to this important field and have to experience for themselves these great sages. These sages will definitely add anew chapter in the direction of articulating an 'applied missiology' for India. A commitment o these saints and sages of India will certainly situate the missiological endeavour in a new way in the great spiritual and

social resources of the Indian context. Such a new trend in missiology is the need of the hour.

CONCLUSION

More than being a holy person, wise and enlightened, a saint is one who is oneself liberated – spiritually and socially – and has a powerful message of liberation for the humanity of all times, of all places. Such were the popular saints of India. They enriched the humanity by their being in it. They had the inner stamina to flow against the current. They struggled against the various forms of discrimination, slavery and abnormalities of the respective society they were born into. They not only expounded the real spirit of religion but also lived it. They were endowed with a special charism of being human as well as spiritual. Their life encompassed the diverse dimensions of spiritual and social liberation. Their spiritual and social message is a clarion call to liberation in the diverse realms of human life. They have highlighted a universal spiritual foundation for human integration. They have facilitated a revolution for renewal in view of promoting integrity and quality in social behaviour, too. The process of liberation initiated by them needs to be responded to with a whole-hearted commitment, by way of imbibing its spirit and promoting it. That will, necessarily, usher the world towards a more liberated family of the humans, which, certainly, will be more conducive for living. The spiritual and social message of liberation, lived and poetically uttered by the popular saints of India, present immense missiological prospects. Imbibing the spirit of the rich spiritual and social heritage these sages has left for the humanity will definitely guide the destinies of a ‘context-applied missiology’ for India. Thinking anew in this direction, along the logic of Incarnation will, I am sure, not only assure a new meaning to Christian existence and mission in India, but also set a new trend in missiological reflection in India.

END NOTES

1. Sir David Goodall, Farward, R.H. Lesser, Saints and Sages of India, Intercultural publications, New Delhi, 1994, p. xi
2. Dr Rajdev Singh, Shabd aur arth Sant Sahity Ke Sandarbh Mein, Nand Kishor and Brothers, Varanasi, 1968, pp. 51-53
3. Kabeer Granthavalee, Dr Shyam Sunder Daas (Ed.), Nagree Pracharinee Sabha, Varanasi, VS 2045, Saakhee 5.4, p. 10
4. ‘Too kehtaa kaagad kee dekhee, mein kehtaa aankhin kee dekhee’ – Kabeer
5. ‘Aap bichaarei so gyanee hoi’ – Kabeer Granthaavalee, Padaawalee, 52, p. 79
6. ‘Aap hee aap vichaariye, tab kaisaa hoi anand re’ – Kabeer

7. 'Akath kehane prem kee, kachu kehee na jai, goonge keree sarkaraa, baithe muskaai' – Kabeer
8. 'Too too kartaa too bhayaa, mujhmein rehee na hoom' – Kabeer
9. 'Jit dekhoom tit toom' – Kabeer
10. 'Mharo to girdhar gupaal, doorsaro na koi' – Meerabai
11. 'Ghaayal kee gati ghaayal janai' – Meerabai
12. 'Meera ke prabhu kab re miloge, ye bin rahyaa na jai' – Meerabai
13. 'Meim tere liye taras rehee hoom; he prabhu too mujhe apnee banaa le' – Meerabai
14. 'Prabhu too chandan, meim panee; too Deepak, meim batee' – Ravidaas
15. R.H. Lesser, Saints and Sages of India, Intercultural Publications, New Delhi, 1994, p. 67
16. C.C. Jung (Foreword), The spiritual teaching of Ramana Maharshi, Shambhala, London, 1988, pp. 48, 61
17. R.H. Lesser, Saints and Sages of India, ibid, pp. 22-23
18. 'Jab man cchod kutilaayee, tab aayee milei raam rayee' – Kabeer
19. 'Man changaa kasautee mein Gangaa' --Ravidaas
20. R.H. Lesser, Saints and Sages of India, ibid, p. 28
21. 'Sareer hee mandir musjid gurudwaaraa' – Ravidaas
22. 'Khaalik khalak khalak mein khaalik' – Kabeer Granthavalee, ibid, Padaavalee, 51, p. 81
23. 'Kastooree kundali basei' – Kabeer Granthavalee, ibid, Saakhee, 53.1, p. 64
24. 'Man mathuraa dil dwaarikaa, kayaa kaasee jaanee' – Kabeer Granthawalee, ibid, Sakhee, 23.10, p. 35
25. 'Jyoon bimbahi pratibimb samaanaa' – Kabeer
26. 'Ghati ghati rahyo samaayee' – Kabeer Granthaavalee, ibid, Padaavalee 18, p. 111
27. 'Kethne Kethee tou kya bhayaa, je kernee na thahray' – Kabeer Granthwali, ibid, Sakhee 18.1, p. 29
28. 'Kethnee thothee jagat mein, kernee uttam saar' – Kabeer
29. 'Kehtee to bahut milaa, garta milaa na koi' – Kabeer, Sant Sudhaa Saar
30. 'Dar updes kusal bahutere, je aacharahi te nar na ghanere' – Tulseedaas (Ramacharitmanas)
31. 'Paanee mile na aapko, auran baksat ccheer; aapan man nichal nahin, auran banthawat dheer.' – Kabeer, Sant Kavy, Parasuram Chatruvedi (Ed.), p. 241
32. 'Sodhee nahim sareer ko, auran ko updes' – Dadoodayal kee baanee, Swami Mangaldaas (Ed.), p. 117
33. 'Kernee Kathin re bandagee, kehne sab aasaan; Jan Rajjab rehnee bina, kehaa milei rehmaan' – Sant Sudha Saar (Rajjab), Part 1, p. 531
34. 'Kehnee meetha khaand see, kernee vish kee loy; Kethnee taj kernee karei, to vish se amrut hoi' – Kabeer, Sant Baanee Sangrah, Part 1, p 47

35. 'Pothee padi padi jag muvaa, pandit bhayaa na koi; ekei ashir peev ka, pade so pandit hoi' – Kabeer Granthavalee, *ibid*, Sakhee 19, 4, p. 30
36. R.H. Lesser, *Saints and Sages of India*, *ibid*, p. 62
37. 'Daadoo poorn brahm vichaariye, tab sakal aatma ek; kaayaa ke gun deshiye, to nana baran anek' – Dodoo dayal Granthavalee, *Parsuraam Chaturvedee* (Ed.), pad 27, p. 274
38. 'Sanyee ke sab jeev hain, keeree kunjer doi' – Daadoo Dayal Granthavelee, *ibid*, p. 161
39. 'Hindu dhyavei dehura, musman maseet; jogo dhyavei parampad, jahan duhura na maseet' – Gorakhbaanee, *Pectambardatt Badthval* (E), p. 25
40. 'Ekahi pavan ekahi panee, budhi bina beech bairtaa thaanee' – Rajjabdaas, *Sant Sudhaa Saar*, Part 1, p. 32
41. 'Je too banbhan-banbhanee jaayaa, to aan baat hvei kehee na aayaa?' – Kabeer Granthavalee, *ibid*, p. 79
42. 'Chaari baran metike, bhakti chalaayaaa moo; Guru govind ke baag mein, Paltoo pholaa phool' – *Sant Sudhaa Saar* (Paltoo Saheb), Part 3, p. 100
43. 'Ehu Dhamm jo aacharay, banbhanu suhuvi koi' – Muni Devsen, *Sant Sudhaa Saar*, *Viyogi Hari* (E), part 1, p. 4
44. Dr K. Sreenivasan, *Sree Narayan Guru*, Jay Sree Publications, Thiruvanthapuram, 1989, p. 97
45. 'Man changa to kasautee mein ganga' – Ravidaas
46. 'Saar Saar ke gahee rehein, thothaa de uday' – Kabeer
47. A French quote
48. 'Par hit saris dhamm nahin bhayee; par peeda sam nahim adhmayee' – Tulseedaas
49. 'Satya hee eeshwar hei, eeshwar hee saty hei' – Guru Ghaasidaas
50. 'Bhalaa kisee ka kar na sako tum' – Satsangee Keertan (cassette), Shishodia Electronics, Nagpur, Vol. 12

Dr M.D. Thomas

Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies

Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)

Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)

Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mdthomas53>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53>

Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/MDTHOMAS>