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## Developing Contextual Theologies: Challenges and Prospects in Dalit-Adivasi-Tribal and Minjung Theologies

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### Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to analyse the growth and development of Tribal Theology right from the beginning till today. The dawn of postmodern period gives room for different liberation theologies to developed including tribal theology. Tribal theology emerged in the context of tribal struggles and wide-ranging experiences of the people to become a better community as well as their practical involvement in the community of faith. This paper also examines the nature, growth and what tribal theology is all about. In the process of developing tribal theology there emerged enormous challenges like choosing the right term, diminishing of communitarian value which is the core of tribal way of life, emergence of the class society within tribal community, distorted tribal worldview, diminishing value of land which were once to most precious commodity of tribal society, less impact in the local churches, and so on. However, there is great prospects of tibal theology as it could offer important theological insights to the outside world. Most of this rich theological insights are accommodative, liberative and life affirming. Tribal theology as it is today has contribute immensely to the growth and development of eco theologies as well as other contextual theologies.

### Keywords

Tribal Theologies, Contextual Theologies, Communitarian, Christian Heritages, Theology of Liberation, Tribal Worldview, Adivasi, Indigenization, Inculturation.

## 1. Introductory Remark

The dawn of postmodern period in recent years offers valuable space with adequate rooms for different liberation theologies to develop in the middle of the twentieth century in different parts of the globe. This emerging situation not only help facilitating the growth of different liberation theologies but at the same time endorse a paradigm shift in the history of Christian thought. To state differently, it has benefitted diverse enterprises especially the faith communities to reconsider their theological reflection and articulations in their attempt to develop a theology meaningful and relevance to the local native context. Hence, the voices that have been silence, the experiences that has been disregarded, and the histories that have been ignored and the unsung heroes that have remained unnoticed for so long, till the end of the modern period found adequate spaces to raise their concern making their voice audible both in the theological and secular realm. This emerging situation and changing scenario offer suitable occasions and significant opportunities for tribal theology to develop making their voices heard and their presence felt in the theological debates and diverse theological platforms in the present day

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context. In the last few decades, Tribal Theology has gradually and steadily developing making in-roads in the theological field addressing diverse issues and challenges affecting the tribal people in different capacities.

## 2. Tribal Theology: Then and Now

The term “Tribal Theology” has come to be understood as a theology emanated for the tribal people, developed and nurtured by the tribal people for the need and welfare of the tribal people. It is a new theology that emerged recently in the last few decades in the context of the tribal people, emerging from their daily life struggles and wide-ranging experience as well as their practical involvement in the community of faith. But the moot question is how and when tribal theology developed? Is tribal theology is something new that developed in the last few decades? A closer look into the history of tribal Christian thought, portrays that Tribal Theology like many contextual theologies began to develop as a recognised discipline perhaps sometime in the late eighties when forerunners like Renthly Keitzer and Nirmal Minz venture out to start doing and formulating theology based from the perspectives and context of tribal people. This pioneer humble attempt to formulate theology generally based from the tribal context was successively fostered and promoted by other theologians like Wati Longchar, K. Thanzauva and many others. Tribal theology has been enriched and boosted by the launching Tribal Study Centre at Eastern Theological College in 1995 and Aizawl Theological College in 2000 coupled with organizing numbers of seminars, consultations, symposiums and others in different centres within Northeast India and outside. These engagement have contributed largely to the growth and development of tribal theology placing its position as it is today. Hence, tribal theology has already marks its presence in the theological realm and gradually develop taking into account certain crucial issues and challenges confronted by the tribal community in its theological reflections and articulations as it moves forward towards a better endeavour.

Though tribal theology as an academic discipline developed in recent decades, it is not wrong to say that an act of theologizing among the tribal people has perhaps developed as early as when tribal people began to translate the message of the gospel in their respective dialect and cultural practices making it reachable and access to different section of tribal population. Moreover, tribal theology began to develop when the tribal people in different locations response to the message of the gospel from their respective cultural context, making it relevant and meaningful in their daily life struggle and diverse life experiences.<sup>1</sup> In simple term, tribal theology originated out of the active and dynamic interface between the gospel and tribal way of life in their attempt to venture out towards a better future. But as a new theology envision for the good and wellbeing of tribal Christians, tribal theology not only able to delve into and employ the rich tribal cultural resources and Christian heritage for theological reflection, but at

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1 · Yangkahao Vashum, “Tribal theology: A Search for Relevant Theology and Ministry in Tribal Context” *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education & Relevant Ministry* edited by Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2009), 16-30.

the same time encounter increasing challenges emerged along the way.

Commenting on the problems and prospects of tribal theology B. J. Syiemlieh has basically categories three stages of progress related to the growth and development of tribal theology. That is, at the infancy stage (from its inception till the early nineties) where it has to struggle from the scratch searching for relevant and important sources, the second stage (mid-90s) when identifying sources is no more a problem but new challenges appeared concerning the appropriate model to be adopted, and in the third stage (Late 90s till the present-2006) where tribal theology has reached an adult stage but yet to be a matured adult. It is at this stage that several tribal theologians took the bold initiative to formulate theology from different aspect of life using different perspectives and approaches.<sup>2</sup> One may notes that since that time within these two decades certain volumes of research works, important articles, numbers of books and other literatures covering different aspects and approaches have been produced and published by different tribal authors in different part of the land. These valuable writings not only encompasses and embraces rich, in depth and diverse subjects of theological discussion, debates and articulations but also contributed largely towards the strength and progress of tribal theology. These important theological and secular literatures not only add essential values and necessary qualities to the concern theology, but at the same time help facilitating the intent readers interested on the subjects to understand and obtain better knowledge on what tribal theology is all about. Some of these significant but related areas of account taken by different tribal theologian that defines what tribal theology is and what tribal theology is all about are,

First, tribal theology is a theology of development. Theology of development is not to be understood merely in terms of economic development rather it embraces the concept of shalom where the holistic wellbeing or common good for all is maintained. This notion of development fostered and uphold the spirit of collective living and growing together aligned with the tribal communitarian way of living.<sup>3</sup>

Second, tribal theology endorses and advocates the importance of nature and the surrounding environment. Tribal Eco-Theology uphold the spirit of safeguarding the environment from the onslaught of diverse forces that brings harm and damaged the entire creations. Tribal eco-spirituality generally situates human as part of the total creation not apart of it. It tries to rediscover and reaffirm the intrinsic relationship that binds together God and the entire creation including humans.<sup>4</sup>

Third, tribal theology is a basically a theology of community as it makes serious attempt “to reflect and articulate the faith experience of the community of believers and their understanding of God-human-world relationship.”<sup>5</sup> Communitarian relationship within the community is not only the intent of God from the beginning but also fundamental for the growth and survival

2 · Brighstar Jones Syiemlieh, “The Future of Tribal Christian Theology in Northeast India: Possible Directions” *Tribal theology on the Move* edited by Shimreingam Shimray and Limatula Longkumer (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2006), 40-42.

3 · K. Thanzauva, *Transforming Theology: A Theological Basis for Social Transformation* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2002), 120-121.

4 · Barnes L. Mawrie, *The Khasis and their Natural Environment: A Study of the Eco-Consciousness and Eco-Spirituality of the Khasis* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications, 2009), 140.

5 · K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2004), 144.

of humanity. The main task of tribal theology underscores building a just, participatory, and harmonious community where all living beings can live in a safe and secured environment.

Fourth, tribal theology is a contextual theology. Like other contextual theologies it seeks to address critically on the socio-economic and religio-cultural life of the people within the community of faith. Taking creation as the starting point of doing theology it makes serious attempt to develop a theology that is contextually relevant, meaningful and empowering the people within the community.

Fifth, tribal theology may be considered as a theology of culture as it pursues to reflect faith experiences of the people while at the same time reclaim the liberative, accommodative and life affirming cultural values of the people for theological reflection.

Sixth, tribal theology is a theology of liberation and healing. As a theology of liberation and healing it consider seriously the liberative content of the gospel in formulating theology. Hence, it strive forward devoted itself towards integral liberation of persons and structures as it engage itself in the struggle of the marginalised section in their effort to fight for a just, participatory and better future in a transform society.

Seventh, tribal theology is a theology of identity as it focuses in reclaiming the tribal Christian identity that can be obtained only when tribal people ready to reclaim their histories that has been distorted, cultural values that has been ignored as part of building a relevant indigenous community of faith.<sup>6</sup>

Eight, tribal theology pursue adequate and earnest response to the challenges posed by globalization to the economic life and economic survival of the tribal people. It challenges the corporate forces and dominant structure that encroach the tribal land and exploited its economic and natural resources leaving the local native impoverished at the margin of economic survival.<sup>7</sup>

The above discussion depicts the growth and development of tribal theology since its inception till today. It may be noted that throughout the entire period of its history, tribal theology, despite encountering diverse challenges and perplexing problems, it has gradually developed making its presence felt in the history of Christian thought.

### **3. Tribal theology Today: Challenges and Prospects**

Like any contextual theologies tribal theology has its strengths and weaknesses while at the same time undergo enormous challenges and good prospect in its attempt to formulate a theology that is meaningful, useful and relevant to the daily life struggles and experiences of the people.

#### **Challenges**

Tribal theology as it is today has reach important and significant milestone with certain

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6 · Vashum, *Tribal theology: A Search for Relevant Theology and Ministry in Tribal Context*, 18-21.

7 · S. Hayong, *Tribal people and Globalization: A Theological Perspective* (New Delhi: Christian World imprints, 2018), 241-242.

achievement within the last few decades of its existence. However, despite several accomplishment in its endeavour it has also come across diverse challenges as its journey towards a better tomorrow.

### 3.1 Choosing the Right Term

Tribal people groups are in reality not homogenous group but belongs to diverse ethnic groups having their respective customs and cultural practices. For the people from outside the region like those living in the mainland India, it is difficult to differentiate the tribal people based on their ethnic identities. That is, they are generally labelled them as tribal people not by their specific tribes. However, tribal people are living together in the region since time immemorial upholding their similarities and differences. To state differently, despite having many similarities and commonalities that bind them together into one umbrella as tribal people, no one can deny that there are still numbers of distinctive qualities and cultural practices that each tribal group possess which are distinct from the other. No doubt it is these differences that enable them to identify themselves separately from the other. Some of the important points need to be discuss here

First, one may notes that the term “tribal” is not a term that originated form the people who are labelled as tribal or to use the constitutional term “scheduled tribe.” Native people of the region prefers to identify themselves to the outside world by their respective tribe as Nagas, Khasis, Mizos, Kukis, Bodos, Garos etc rather than tribal. This points to the fact that the term “tribal” is foreign to them where as their community names are more preferable and attach to them both within and outside their community. This preference is not merely superficial or at face value but it comes from within. It is well connected to their histories, their continuous struggle as a community, their customary and cultural practices and even to their respective geographical territorial boundaries. Having said that, one cannot deny that it is not that easy to come together and have one singular identity as tribal people.

Second, it may be pointed out that tribal from mainland India prefer to call themselves as Adivasi rather than tribal people. They even developed their specific theology term as Adivasi theology. Hence, the term “tribal” in tribal theology remain confined to the tribal in North Eastern Region of India. But till today, tribal theologians still have some prejudices related using the term “tribal” in their writings and developing theology. Many prefer to use the term “indigenous” instead of the term tribal or use both the term interchangeably. Tribal theologians still wrestle with the debate either the term tribal or indigenous which is more appropriate. Having said that one have to remember that the term “tribal” or “scheduled tribe” are not only constitutional terms but there are many social or economic benefits associated with them. That means replacing the term may perhaps resulted to losing all the benefits attached to it. Hence, whether one likes the term “tribal” or not it is here to stay.

Third, there is continuous debate among tribal theologians either to use “tribal theologies” in plural or accepted the singular notion of the term “tribal.” The former signifies acceptance and

recognizing the differences that are unique and distinct from each and every tribe. Whereas the latter means to have one common identity despite the differences and dissimilarities that exist between different tribes. However, a closer look and analytical evaluation of the two terms portrays that both the terms has their advantages and disadvantages that are either connotes positively or negatively not only to the tribe but to the entire region as well.

*Tribal Theology-* As stated above the term “tribal theology” in singular propose a common name or common identity for all the tribal group either big or small living in the region. One may argue that it is more binding, uniting, and pull together into one unit all the tribal groups in the region. It has the potentials not only to bring together different tribes into one single unit but to eventually unite them into one common platform as they identify themselves or expose themselves to the outside world. In reality, tribal people are becoming stronger and more resilient when they join together as one unit addressing their common issues that affects them rather than staying and confining separately distance from each other. In other words, their strength are more visible and felt and their voices are stronger and clearly audible whenever there is possibilities to raise their concern on behalf of the tribal people to the outside world.

However, coming together into one unit may hamper the growth and progress of distinctive cultural values and unique character each tribe possess. It may gradually erase the potentials and dynamic of respective cultural values as they have to sacrifices their differences and distinctiveness submitting their values to one common unit for mutual good and wellbeing. At the same time one may agree that each specific tribes has some customary practices that are not only applicable and appropriate to their respective tribe but at the same time may not be useful and meaningful to other tribes in general. Hence, there is a fear among many that coming together as one unit may resulted to the process of assimilation where the distinctiveness of each tribe may loss its value and importance,

*Tribal Theologies-* The term “tribal Theologies” in plural suggest the acceptance and recognition of different tribes with their respective cultural practices and territorial difference. It give rooms to each tribe to grow, to prosper, to thrive, to flourished, and to blossoms within their specific space. In turn, it enable the tribe to employ their potentials and dynamics that could not only strengthen their position but also exposed their uniqueness to the outside world as a tribe. Plurality is the intention of God since the beginning. It may be portrays as the beauty of different flowers blooming in one garden with their unique design, size, colour, types and so on. In sum, it could provide enough space for each tribe to develop their unique qualities thereby contributing towards the growth and progress of tribal theology.

However, as it was with the singular usage of the term, the plural aspect of the term has its respective difficulties. No doubt providing space to the tribe to enhance itself is appreciable and noteworthy. However, when each tribe are offered enough room to boost and heighten their position there is a tendency for any tribe to develop itself at the expense of the other especially the dominant tribe over the smaller tribe. This may not only resulted to hegemonic attitude of

one tribe over the other but also the progress of one dominant tribe may lead to the inactive existence and lesser contribution of the smaller tribe.

*From Tribal Theologies to Tribal Theology-* Amidst the problems and difficulties associated with choosing the right term the shift from tribal theologies to tribal theology is perhaps the only alternatives available. In other words, the move from “theologies to theology” signifies that one common identity is perhaps the better option than separate identity within one single unit. But this does not mean that tribal theology surpassing or being developed at the expense of tribal theologies, thereby erasing their unique contents and distinct characteristics. Rather different tribal theologies could serve as strong and rich foundational background for tribal theology to find its roots and blossom as a genuine theology relevant to tribal local context. In other words, when tribal theologies flourished and prosper within their specific space they have but contribute positively towards the growth and development of tribal theology. Daniel Thikir rightly argues when he said that “rather than unity in diversity which has the tendency to emphasize homogeneity over identities, heterogeneity/diversities to unity must be the methodic position because plurality is a sheer reality and that particularity is the unassailable root of one dignity- the image and grandeur of divine’s making.” The most fitting approach of formulating tribal theology is to realize the “distinctive identity come first, and is the basis of identity which would subsequently find ways for commonality and solidarity.”<sup>8</sup> Tribal theology are not supposed to take precedence over tribal theologies or it is not to be considered as superior to tribal theologies, for it may resulted to theological hegemony. Rather it is built up on a strong theological foundation laid by tribal theologies that could not only strengthen its roots but also facilitates its growth as one of the significant theology in the present day context. If tribal theology has to survive the test of time and continue to be a genuine and relevant to the need and aspiration of the people these significant challenges need to be taken into consideration.

### 3.2 Diminishing of Communitarian Life

Tribal society is well known for its communitarian way of living. The term “communitarian” is first coined in 1842 by John Goodwyn Barmby a leader of British Chartist movement to refer to the utopian socialist communal style of life. But it was only in 1980s that it start gaining its importance when it is associated with the work of small group of philosopher, mainly American. This group of philosophers use the term communitarian to illustrate the importance of “common good” in opposition to the “good for the individual.” It stems from the philosophy which believe that the person’s social identity and personality are generally shape by community relationship with little importance being place on individualism. Hence, the main emphasis is on common good and all the individual person are expected to contribute towards the larger good of the community. But this does not mean that striving towards the larger good of the community is to ignore the wellbeing of the individual, because it is believed that the greater the good of

8 · Daniel Thikir, “Tribal Theology Now and then: A Methodic Appraisal” *Contours of Tribal theology: Issues and Perspectives* edited by Lalramliana Pachuau, P. Mohan Larbeer and Wati Longchar (Kolkata: BTESSC, 2015), 5.

the community the better it is for the individual.<sup>9</sup> Commenting on the perspective of the tribal people the term “communitarian” may be understood as “a concept of life principle of the tribal community in which homogeneous people living together sharing their joys and sorrows in mutual love and care.”<sup>10</sup> Living together and sharing together may be considered as the backbone of tribal society. It is this philosophy that unites all members of the community to work together for the betterment and general welfare of the community. However, with the entry of external force like modernization, westernization, Christianisation and globalization that has impacted tribal society in different capacities this noble principle has gradually lost its value and importance. In the present day tribal society where the philosophy of materialism influence tribal society the value of individual is judge by the economic standard of how much he or she possesses. Many individuals seems to pay more attention to individual wellbeing at the expense of the community. This emerging challenges need to be address and taken seriously in an attempt to formulate tribal theology as a living theology relevant to the context of tribal people.

### 3.3 Emerging Class System in Tribal Society

Another notable but significant challenges appears within tribal society is the appearance of the so called class system that classifies tribal citizens between the rich and poor section. The process of globalization not only divide the countries of the world between the rich and the poor countries but within the countries it has divide the population between the rich and the poos section or to use in Marxist term “the haves” and “the have-nots.” Hence, tribal society which is considered as communitarian society (not to be confuse with egalitarian) is slowly turn into a class society.<sup>11</sup> Hence tribal society which was once categories as classless or casteless society is now slowly turn into a class society where the gap between the rich and the poor is widen. It is imperative for the tribal theology to consider this challenges and theologically response on certain issues that has crept into the tribal society.

### 3.4 Tribal Worldview

To formulate tribal theology one cannot ignore the importance of tribal worldview. Tribal worldview is holistic, they perceives things in a holistic perspective. This intrinsic relationship of God-Human-Nature relationship means that all realities are interconnected, interdependence and interrelated to each other. Tribal people understood this relationship not in terms of vertical or horizontal aspects rather percieved them in terms of a circle.<sup>12</sup> In a circle there is no biginning or end but all are interrelated and have have equal value.<sup>13</sup> This holistic view of reality portrayed that “there is no distinction between sacred and secular, physical and spiritual, earthly and

9 · S. Hayong, “Community Life among the Khasis in the Context of the Present Day Globalization,” *Tribal cultural resources for Christian Life and Ethics in North East India* edited by Alphonso D’Douza, R. Sashikaba Kechutzar and H. Lalrinthanga Rina (Guwahati: North Eastern Social research Centre, 2016), 223-224.

10 · Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making*, 136.

11 · Hayong, Community Life among the Khasis in the Context of the Present Day Globalization, 239.

12 · Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 199.

13 · A Wati Longchar, “A Critique of the Christian Theology Of Creation” *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources* edited by A Wati Longchar & Larry W. Davis ( Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1999), 73

heavenly. All together constitute the wholeness of life. If one is affected all other also affected. According to this vision of life all forms of life are interrelated to one another and they all constitute an organic unity.”<sup>14</sup> However, with the encroachment of external forces coupled with the influence of western worldview that perceive reality from a dualistic perspective thereby promote dichotomy in different aspect of life this beautiful concept of reality is being replaced by dualism. No doubt since the beginning of its existence, tribal theology has seriously addressed and theologically deliberated on this issue but its impact to the community especially the faith community till today is indeed far and wide. It is regrettable but true that western perspective of Christianity not only succeed in colonising the mind of the native people but also make them looking at reality from the western perspective. This has posed great challenges to the development of tribal theology in its attempt to formulate an theology that is more appealing and applicable to the tribal faith community.

### 3.5 Value of land: Present Day Perspective

For tribal people land is not only a place of habitat and a source of livelihood but it is something that give them identity and personhood. To have land means to have identity. Hence, selling of land means selling our identity.<sup>15</sup> This thoughtful concept is being preserved and maintained till the entry of colonial role but today the importance of land in tribal perspectives has diminished rapidly. The maxim “land is life”<sup>16</sup> and “one cannot become rich by selling land”<sup>17</sup> is no more uphold in the present day context where the value of land is perceived more from the economic and wealth accumulation aspect rather than its attachment to the identity of the people or not even for its ecological benefits and services. A clear case is selling of land over 3000 bighas in Karbi Anglong and Dimasao District by the Assam government to corporate bodies<sup>18</sup> exemplifies that traditional concept on the value of land is being exploited for wealth accumulation and economic exploitation. In other words, ecological value of land as well as sources of life is shifted to commercial value for economic benefit of few selected section of population. Moreover, not only those who have money power become rich by selling land but even the agency or land business agents are becoming rich by their involvement in land business. If this is the case, our theological formulation taking land as a point of departure need to be reconsidered with the changing perception on the value and importance of land. For tribal people who were once considered as the protectors and guardians of land are now directly or indirectly involved in the so called land business that has threaten their very existence and

14 · Yangkahao Vashum, “A Thangkhol Creation Myth: Implication of a Holistic View of Human Rights,” *Tribal Worldview and Ecology* edited by A. Wati Longchar and Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1998), 37.

15 · Hayong, *Tribal people and Globalization: A Theological Perspective*, 272-273.

16 · Nirmal Minz, “Tribal Perspective on Ecology” in *Tribal Worldview and Ecology* edited by A. Wati Longchar and Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1998), 4.

17 · A. Wati Longchar “Dancing with the land: Significance of Land for Doing Theology” in *Doing theology with tribal Resources: Context and Perspective* edited by A. Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davis (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1999), 117.

18 · Gauhati HC raps State over 3000 bighas of tribal land given to private company for mining, <http://www-thehindu-com.cdn.ampproject.org> (30-1-2026).

survival today.

### 3.6 Academic Discourse vrs Local Congregations

Another major challenges related to formulating tribal theology is the persistent gap that exist between theological institutions and the local congregations. So far there is a widening gap that separate Tribal theology and the local tribal congregation. One of the reason is that tribal theology did not originated from the local churches but from the theological institutions and seminaries.<sup>19</sup> Hence, there is a tendency that it is more incline to academic intellectual exercise rather than having pastoral content and appealing. Actually, the theological curricula as well as the syllabus are frame in such a way to bring a balance to both. But there is somewhere a communication gap that such an attempt lacks the thread that connect theological education and the local congregation which are indeed need urgent attention.

Members of local congregations are yet to realize the importance of theological reflection and the need of proper theological education for the growth and development of the Church. They may send candidates for theological education but after completing the course thing prove otherwise. Though theological graduates are well equip to confront and address any issues and challenges, many a times the system have no room for them to utilize and employ what they have learnt from the theological institution for the benefit of the members of local congregation. The knowledge they have gathered, the skills they have imbibed, their profound understanding on different issues coupled with the potential they have, emerging from the entire course of study seems to have less value if they cannot utilize and implement it in their ministry.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, there is a fear existed among the laity that theological education today is more liberal in its content and approaches and accepting them as they are may rather bring confusion and may even hamper spiritual nourishment for the believers. Actually, this attitude may be considered as unfounded fear that may evolved due to ignorant of the emerging new challenges that affected the society in general and the church in particular. For theological education and reflection to be authentic, genuine and relevant to the needs and aspiration of the Christians population it has to address every new challenging issues emerged that may affect the Church as well as the society.

It is reported that there are some senior pastors even tell the graduates that their knowledge gathered in their course of studies may not be helpful and relevant to the congregation which are very discouraging. It is not wrong to say that, till today the Church maintain its traditional conservative stance and not open to the new changes that affecting the society, the church and members of the congregation. But if the local congregations remain ignorant of the role and importance of theological education for the growth and development of the church there may come a time when the Church will become irrelevant to the need and aspiration of its

19 · Amit Kumar Goldsmith, "Tribal Theology- Some Reflection" *The Quest for harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspectives* edited by Alphonso D'Souza, Yangkahao Vashum and Lalrindiki Ralte ( Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2013), 107.

20 · S. Hayong, "Theological Education in the Tribal Context of North East India" *Indian Theological Journal*, 11/2 (2017): 75.

members especially to the young and intellectual section within the church. Commenting on the importance of theological education and to connect the same with the life and growth of the church Gnana Robinson rightly observe when he said,

The traditional goal of theological education in India has always been the training of candidates for the ministry of the Word and sacraments in the Church, and this still remains to be the expectation on the part of the established Churches. The Churches want pastors who would faithfully preserve the given traditions, and efficiently carry out their ecclesiastical duties....At the end of these training the candidates returned to the respective Churches where they were ordained immediately or after a period of probation. For the type of ministry that was expected from the Church at that time, I believe this time of training was adequate. But now the situation has changed and the demands on the church are manifold and different. A rethinking on education is therefore felt pertinent.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, this challenges entails serious consideration not only from the theological community but also by the local congregations. There is an urgent need to bridge the gap that separated tribal theology or tribal theological education and the local tribal Christian congregations. If the Church is to remain faithful to its calling both the tribal theological community and the tribal church need to come together to address this serious issue that may hamper both the parties.

### 3.7 The Process of Indigenization and Inculturation

The process of indigenization and inculturation has become an important concern and approaches to make the message of the gospel closer to life realities or “feel at home” to the local congregation in different parts of the globe. In line with this, with the emergence of tribal theology in recent years there is an urgent felt need to make tribal theology more indigenous, homely and relevant to the life, practices and diverse worship services of the local tribal congregation. The point to be noted is that, Christianity that we inherit today is developed in western context and transplant within the tribal context. Hence, it is right to say that the inherited faith we have today is wrapped in western clothes together with western worldview, western culture, western practices that are far different to the tribal way of life. Nevertheless, having succeeded in colonizing the mind of tribal people, tribal Christians consider anything introduce to them including faith experience as “west is best” and have to be accepted without a second thought. However, in due process tribal theologians came to realize that there are many element of worship and practices that are not relevance to the tribal worldview and tribal way of living. This makes implementing the process of indigenization and inculturation is more urgent than it has to be. In due course, the church began to do the same and the process of indigenization and inculturation is being implemented in different churches. But the challenges emerged how far we can go on this? Is there is a limit to the process of indigenization or inculturation? In case there is, to what limit as a church we can go? This posed certain challenges to tribal theology to wrestle with in their attempt to formulate theology that may become more

21 · Gnana Robinson, *A Journey Through Theological Education* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1989), 17-18.

relevant and applicable and appealing to the life realities of the tribal people.

## **4. Prospects of Tribal Theology**

Having discussed on the challenges that need to be taken into consideration in our attempt to develop a genuine theology relevant and acceptable to the tribal church it is the right time to also discuss on the prospects of tribal theology. No doubt tribal theology has come along the way and in this journey it has come across several up and down journeying in the difficult terrain of tribal context. Nevertheless, having reach thus far one may agree to say that despite all the problems there are also many prospects for tribal theology that need to be discussed.

### **4.1 Revisiting the Past**

To formulate any theology one need to reconsider the importance of the past. Theologians need to realize that they never start anything new, rather they are just continue what have been left by somebody, and somebody will continue what they have left. This hold true when one began to formulate tribal theology. The point to be noted is that, for tribal theology to be authentic it need to revisit the distant past of that community it intent to develop theology. Revisiting the past does not means to go back to the roots or returning to the ancient time. It does not mean also to bring back the ancient times to the present day society for that is not possible. But it means to rediscover those neglected and abandon element of the culture, reinterpret their meaning and inherent values, and reconnected them with the daily life realities of the people. Many among these ignored cultural traits that have been side-lined, disregarded and forgotten are liberative, transformative, life affirming, accommodative and inclusive. They may perhaps possess enormous volumes of life virtues and vibrant principles that merits wider recognition and acceptance not only within the tribal community but also to the outside world. Any sincere attempt to acknowledge their endearing and appealing qualities could not only help enriching tribal theology or take tribal theology to a higher level but also contribute immensely towards the betterment and wellbeing of humanity and the entire creation.

### **4.2 Rich Heritage**

Tribal theology developed due to the interaction between gospel and culture. The coming of Christianity to this part of the land give way for the tribal culture to have dynamic interface with the gospels. Such active and dynamic engagement resulted to the development of a contextual tribal theology. Like many contextual theologies tribal theology possess rich but important resources that could be employed in formulating theology. North eastern region is a home of diverse tribal communities having different cultural values and customary practices that may differ from one community to the other. Plurality is the gift of God and it is the intention of God since the beginning. Each and every community are blessed with diverse customs and cultural practices. Having said that, it does not mean that only differences persist. However, there are many cultural elements that are common or similar between the tribes that need to be uphold

and maintains. It may be noted that each and every tribe has rich resources to share that could enriched the development of tribal theology. However, if commonality and similarities could immensely contribute something good in formulating tribal theology, it is not wrong to say that the differences could also contributed well to enhance the prospects of tribal theology. In reality, it is the differences that could make tribal theology more unique in its nature and character. To state differently, these differences could make tribal theology distinct from other for there are many moral lessons and theological insights that could be drawn that are not common to others. If these differences are recognised they could not only making tribal theology rich but also offer diverse option for tribal theology to blossom.

### 4.3 Theology of Community

The essential character of tribal society is communitarian in nature. Communitarian way of living may be considered as the strength of tribal community. As a communitarian society every member are treated with respect and dignity. There is no discrimination to anyone irrespective of background, social status, position and so on. In a communitarian society all members live together sharing their joy and sorrow in mutual love and care.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the birth of a child brings joy not only to the concern family but also to the entire village. So also, if death occur in any family all members of the community would come and join together sharing the grief of the bereaved family.<sup>23</sup> Hence, there is no family or individual that are being left out or discriminated. In the present day era of globalization that divide the citizens in different capacities based on their status, position, achievement and the like, the one who is counted are those who are economically sound or stand higher in the economic and social ladder. This is not only unfair and discriminatory in nature but it is also against the intent of God for all members to live together with respect and dignity. It is also against the law of the land and the democracy of life. Hence, if that is to be corrected, tribal theology of community could offer a better option and alternatives to the present day world that there is something valuable and commendable to be learnt from the tribal society. At the same time if tribal theology has to be meaningful and useful to the present day world it task is not only to take this issue seriously but also to promote this important tribal cultural value in its attempt to offer something good to the present day society.

### 4.4 The Spirit of sharing

In a communitarian society sharing is one of the important component of communitarianism. In a communitarian society people share together not only in times of joy and sorrow but also they share what they have. In a tribal society a person can be considered rich are those who share their resource to the needy and those who are living at the margin of economic life. In the present day world where the spirit of individualism become the model to be followed and wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor and needy become the order of the day. Tribal theology of sharing offer a better principle of life which entails the necessity of sharing

<sup>22</sup> · Thanzaava, *Theology of Community*, 136.

<sup>23</sup> · Hayong, *Community Life among the Khasis in the Context of the Present Day Globalization*, 234-235.

the resources with the needy. In this regard, spirit of sharing is not only necessary but also mandatory. Addressing this issue in the present day world, Chennijan Patton propose “tribal kitchen as a paradigm of societal wellbeing.” Tribal kitchen portrays the spirit of hospitality to anyone in need in different capacities. It embraces “the spirit of communitarianism, tolerance towards others, inclusiveness, ability to accept others, and tolerance towards dissent and differences.”<sup>24</sup> It is the beauty of village life to share with others not only their agricultural resources or material resources but whatever they cook and prepare in their respective kitchen. That is, a family that cook anything special would not like to have it alone rather they will be happily share it with their neighbours and vice versa. Theology of sharing portrays that a responsible individuals will not like to see that neighbours are sufferings, become the victims of injustices, victims of poverty, and so on. But they would like to share their resources to all the needy and suffering so that all can have a better life to live.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4.5 Tribal Eco-Theology

Tribal are well known as keeper of nature. Having close attachment to wards nature and the surrounding environment around them they know better than any community concerning the dynamics of nature, its rhythm, its power to nurture life, and its capability to provide the things that living beings need. This gave them the intrinsic knowledge on how to preserve and conserve nature for the needs of all species and also to safeguard its bio diversity. Hence, they pay deep respect to nature and make all effort to preserve nature and its resources. For instance, Khasi concept of forest portrays the knowledge that people cannot live without trees nor land can live without trees. R T Rymbai, rightly puts it when he says “There must, therefore, always sufficient green cover of trees for mother earth to maintain balance of nature, in order to provide humans with their basic necessities for sustaining life- not only wood for building and domestic use, but also for pure air and water.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, they develop the concept of preserving the forest while at the same time allow the people to use forest resources with limited access according to their need. In this aspect, they developed the concept of *Ki Law Adong* or the prohibited forest that permit the use of forest resources with limited restriction according to their needs. At the same time, to help the earth maintaining the balance of eco-system they conceived the idea of sacred groves or *Ki law Kyntang*. In the sacred groves cutting a tree or even its branches is strictly prohibited. Hence, in the case of the former it is done with the understanding to meet the needs of the people while for the later it is strictly preserved for other ecological benefits and ecological needs of all creation.<sup>27</sup> In the present day context where ecological crisis loom large threatening all life in the plane tribal concept of preserving forest and sacred groves model could offer a

24 · Chennijan Patton, *Postcolonial Tribal Theology: Reading Poverty in Luke 6: 21*, (Bangalore: Omega Book World, 2020), 85. Hayong, *Tribal people and Globalization: A Theological Perspective*

25 · Hayong, *Tribal people and Globalization: A Theological Perspective*, 249.

26 · R. T. Rymbai, *The Traditional Ecological concept of the Khasi-Pnars*, *Tribal Worldview and Ecology* edited by A. Wati Longchar and Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1998), 17.

27 · Hayong, *Tribal people and Globalization: A Theological Perspective*, 276-278.

better option if we are to serve the earth from further ecological disaster.

#### **4.6 Interface with other Contextual theologies**

Another important prospects of tribal theology is the opportunity to interact with other contextual theologies. Interface with other contextual theologies is not simply means arranging meeting in different time and space as we have here now. But through this sort of interaction each and every theologies have the opportunity to learn from each other, sharing their resources for common good and work together for the betterment of the church and the society. In opposition to western theologies, contextual theologies never claim to be comprehensive like western theologies rather but they are very inclusive in nature. While western theologies focus on comprehensiveness but at the same time they are very exclusive in their content and nature. Whereas contextual theologies while rejecting comprehensiveness they are more focus on inclusivity and also very open for dialogue. It is through dialogue they could come together and join hand together to serve for the church and society. In other words, networking and working with others and join hand together for common cause and total wellbeing is not only the strength of contextual theology but it portrays its willingness to serve and commitment for the better welfare of the church and society.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Tribal theology like many contextual theologies emerged to serve the needs and aspiration of the tribal people and the church as well. In its journey towards that goal it has to confront immense challenges and problems. However, these encounter do not hinder its venture rather they are like source of inspiration for all tribal theologians in their endeavour to take tribal theology to a better position. Hence, these challenges are being taken as correction the mistakes, commitment for better service, willingness to serve the church and society in different capacities and opportunities available in their journey towards a better future.

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