

Political Participation and Governance: A Study on Christians in Karnataka

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INTRODUCTION

Establishing, seeing and living in a just, humane and egalitarian society is the dream of many humanitarian civilians. Efforts have been on over the centuries to establish such a world around us. One of the important actors in this effort is the role played by the state and politics. Politics plays a vital role in the life of contemporary men and women. This is more so in a democracy where the individual citizen becomes sovereign. Democracy can survive, grow and enhance itself when there is a healthy participation by the citizens.

However, we often hear people saying, I am not interested in politics or I am indifferent to politics because politics as well as the state which was supposed to be at the service of the people has become power hungry. People perceive and conclude that it is meant for corrupt people or for those who are involved in illegal means. We do notice many of our elected representatives being merely interested in securing ministerial berths or any important office so that they command respect and honour. At the same time a good number of people are interested in politics only during the election time. They confine themselves to voting, which they may do, but not out of any strong political convictions. Besides, there are others who are least concerned even about voting, because they think that whoever gets elected makes no remarkable difference.

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Political representation and participation is an important socio-economic indicator to measure the condition of a community within a society or a citizenry. Political participation is another indicator of a community's empowerment and a means for good governance. In a democracy, the legislature where people are represented could be considered the 'power' house.

Democracy or good governance has no meaning if all including minorities are not secure or do not get proper share in the economic, social and political development in proportion to their population. Socio-economic condition and political representation is an important indicator to measure the level of development of any community.

The relationship between Christianity and politics is a historically complex subject and has been a frequent source of disagreement throughout the history of Christianity. There has been a wide variety of ways in which thinkers have conceived of the relationship between Christianity and politics, with many arguing that Christianity directly supports a particular political ideology or philosophy, and others believing that Christians should have little interest or participation in politics or government (Christianity and Politics, 2009).

Christians have some of the best social indicators in India. According to the 2011 census Christians had sex ratio of 1023 as compared with the national average of 943, and literacy rate 90.3% as against the national average of 71.7% (Demographics of India, 2015). It is also third biggest religion in India. Despite these facts, Christians in India are a politically powerless community. They are under-represented in the parliament and state legislature and therefore, their voice goes unnoticed. Their under-representation in Indian politics has never been considered a problem.

In this paper an attempt has been made to see how Christianity, one of the minority groups in India and particularly in Karnataka, understands political participation and governance. The empirical data gathered by a group of theology students¹ gives the pulse of the Christian community. Though a substantial number of Christians were interviewed from different zones of Karnataka the number of Christian leaders remains too small who can give us the inside story of political space.

MEANING OF POLITICS, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE

According to Mircea Eliade, "politics is usually understood to refer to the accumulation, organization and utilization of power in a region, territory, or society, especially the power to

¹ Seven Theology students from *Jnana Jyothi*, Regional Theology centre conducted the survey in a few major zones of Karnataka, namely Coastal, Bengaluru and North Karnataka - on Christians and their Political Participation.

govern, to decide who controls the common institutions of society and on what terms” (Varghese, 2014).

Politics refers to the activity of the person in the state. Politics does not have any existence apart from the persons involved in it. It is the activity of accumulating, organizing and utilizing the power to govern society or the activity of deciding who has to control the common institution of the society.

The explanation of the term ‘political’ as perceived by Gustavo Gutierrez will help us further to understand the term better. For him, the term 'political' has two meanings: a broader and more inclusive, and a narrow and more specific. The broader use of the term 'political' points to the construction of the society in which people live in solidarity. It is a sphere for the exercise of a critical freedom. It is the universal determinant and the collective arena for human fulfilment. It is a field in which a person emerges as a free and responsible being, as a person in relationship with other persons, as someone who takes on a historical task. Politics is a way to exercise the emancipation and freedom through which human beings actualise their own potentialities and can be free agents of their own destiny. 'Political' in a narrow sense has to be understood as an orientation to power and this implies a particular party, particular political policy, and particular ways and means to realise the political ideals. "The word 'political' therefore must not be understood exclusively in its second meaning (Kozhimala, 2006: 459).

Therefore, politics can be seen narrowly as power politics or in a more comprehensive and inclusive way. It is in the broader sense we discuss political participation and governance. Political participation can also mean many other things. It is worth mentioning how people in different places of our survey understand political participation.

Definitions	North Karnataka		Coastal Karnataka		Bangalore		Other		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Faithfully voting in all the elections	28	18.1	36	20.1	49	23.7	4	10.3	117	20.1
Joining a political party	5	3.2	9	5.0	13	6.3	3	7.7	30	5.2
Empowering people	71	45.9	24	13.4	41	19.8	6	15.4	142	24.4

Becoming deeply aware of political scenario in the country	14	9.0	33	18.4	34	16.4	13	33.3	94	16.2
Acquiring positions in bureaucracy	-	-	1	0.6	1	0.5	-	-	2	0.3
All of the above	29	18.7	62	34.6	58	28.0	12	30.8	161	27.7
Any other	1	0.6	2	1.1	3	1.4	-	-	6	1.0
Total	148	95.5	167	93.2	199	96.1	38	97.5	552	94.9

In the North Karnataka zone ‘Empowering people’ receives the highest scoring (45.9%) followed by ‘faithfully voting in all elections’ (18.1%); in Coastal Karnataka ‘faithfully voting in all elections’ has the highest ranking (20.1%), followed by ‘becoming deeply aware of political scenario in the country’ (18.4%); in the Bangalore zone ‘faithfully voting in all elections’ has the highest ranking (23.7%), followed by ‘empowering people’ (19.8%); in the Other parts of Karnataka ‘becoming deeply aware of the political scenario in the country’ has the highest ranking (33.3%), followed by ‘empowering people’ (15.4%).

Understanding ‘political participation’ as ‘Joining a political party’ or as ‘acquiring positions in bureaucracy’ gets quite a low ranking in all zones. In the overall picture ‘empowering people’ gets the highest ranking (24.4%), followed by ‘faithfully voting in all elections’ (20.1%) and ‘becoming deeply aware of the political scenario in the country’ (16.2%). Though the definition of “political participation” among the respondents is multi-dimensional, it is worth noting that ‘empowering people’ is a rich concept in democracy and in a participatory governance. In other words good governance takes into account the opinion, hopes and aspirations of all people and gives them opportunities to actualise their own potentialities making them to decide their own future destiny.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A CONDITION FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

“*Sabke saath, sabka vikas*” was a common phrase in the 2014 elections. This catchy phrase was of a political party which had strong religious affiliation. It also indulged in ‘inclusion and exclusion’ politics for garnering votes based on religious sentiment.

Last few years we have witnessed a lot of problems faced by the religious minorities in India. Sometimes one's silence implies approval and in a democracy it is more so because democracy is a government by discussion. If there is no proper political participation and consequent representation, there can be decisions according to the whims and fancies of people leading to bad governance. Therefore, the only way of asserting good governance is by actively participating in the political processes.

The System theory of political science by David Easton may help us to understand the necessity and need of political participation for better governance. The social and physical environment in a political system generates demands and supports through political behaviour. The demanding and supporting groups stimulate competition in a political system leading to some decisions which he calls 'outputs'. Once some decisions are made, they interact with the social and physical environment and there is an 'outcome' as a result of governance. This outcome may generate new demands and supports forming a never ending cycle. Change is possible in a political system only when we either support or demand. If people, including Christians, are indifferent about this kind of political process, then the needs of such people will not be taken into consideration.

As far as the Christians in politics is concerned there are basically three schools of thought on the involvement of Christians in politics. The first, sectarianism, urges believers to isolate themselves completely from the process. The second, Christendom, teaches that the Church should seek to influence society for Christ from a position of political power. The third view, a position of balance, states that Christians individually may be involved in politics, but the Church as a body should abstain (Cheddie, 2001). However the focus here is not to build a communal representation, which is in fact bad for both secularism and overall development of society, but rather sufficient representation so that a community's needs are not ignored.

CHURCH'S UNDERSTANDING ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE

One of the often quoted texts from the life of Jesus with regard to the Divine and the Secular divide is "Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God" (Matthew 22, 21). This is the basic charter for the involvement of Christians in the political society. However the fact is that, what belongs to Caesar also belongs to God and what

belongs to God belongs also to our brothers and sisters, and hence has also a political dimension. Religion and politics meet from different perspectives at the service of the people (Fernandes, 2006:4). The aspect of common good and service to the people could be considered as the greatest contribution of Christianity to the political realm and to governance. Service should be the focus in any governance.

The stance of the official Church with regard to political participation of Christians is becoming clearer in the recent past. A quick glance through the Church's documents on social teaching brings to light the following facts:

Documents such as *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Populorum Progressio*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, *Centesimus Annus* while speaking about promoting common good mostly hold that it is the responsibility of the state. There is hardly any direct reference to 'politics' as such in these documents.

Pacem in Terris, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Octogesima Adveniens*, *Christifidelis Laici*, *Deus Caritas Est*, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* consider participation in public life (which could be interpreted as including political life) is the right and duty of all citizens (including Christians). Christians are advised to make their choices in the political field consistent with the Gospel teachings.

The CDF Document on Politics (24th November 2002) basically holds the view that it is the right and duty of all Christians to participate in politics to bring about a more humane and just society. It makes an 'interesting' observation in nos. 6 and 7 of the Congregation for Doctrine of Faith: the realms of the Church and State should not be confused with each other. It considers profession of faith, worship, administration of sacraments, theological doctrines, interchange between religious authorities and the members of religions as strictly 'religious activities' and therefore as outside the State's responsibility. But on the other hand the document sees the possibility of Catholic principles governing political decisions, especially those related to fundamental ethical questions.

From the church's social teachings we may draw the following conclusions:

- The Church urges all Christians to work towards common good. Hence she considers their political participation and participation in governance as their duty (and right).
- Active participation in public life implies playing an active role in politics.

- Playing an active part in politics is consonant with the dignity and nature of the human person.
- Each citizen has the right and duty to express his/her political will, at least by using his/her vote. Obviously this presumes a democratic structure of politics.
- The Catholic Church has high esteem towards politics and persons involved in it (Ukken, 2006: 468).

Even though the Church has seen the positive side of Christian participation in politics, the general perception of the Christians is that politics is dirty and an upright Christian can't survive in it. We may recall the great saying of the English Catholic historian, politician and writer, John Dalberg Acton: "*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*" This has been the experience of the Catholic Church from 4th to 15th century, when religious authorities used power for Institutional and personal gain. All the same, the view of the present head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, is truly surprising and is encouraging those who are serious about active participation in politics. On May 1, 2015 in his informal question-and-answer session with members of Italy's Christian Life Community, he said, "Catholics must get involved in politics even if it may be 'dirty', frustrating and fraught with failure." Christians have a duty to work for the common good in the world of politics, but that does not mean forming a Catholic political party. Further he also cautions them saying, it isn't easy, especially when there is so much corruption. "It's a kind of martyrdom" where one carries the cross of the ideal of the common good every day" without letting yourself be corrupted" or discouraged in the midst of failure. It is hard to be in the middle of it all "without getting your hands or heart a little dirty," he said (Glatz, 2015).

CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE IN KARNATAKA

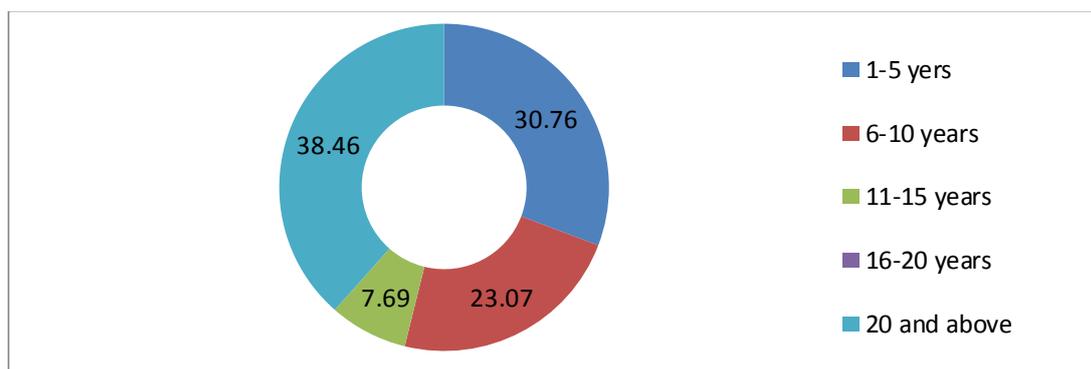
Christianity being a minority religion in India/ Karnataka does not form a direct 'vote bank' in any region except perhaps in Kerala, Goa and certain states in the North East due to its dispersed population. This is clearly reflected in the fact that many Christian political leaders and party workers feel that they do not have any significant say in the party. In this sense Christians do not seem to be having any significant 'political hold' in Karnataka.

However one can always speak of a different type of 'political hold'. This is exercised in terms of conscientization of those who benefit from Christian works, especially in and through their educational and social institutions. The question is: Can Christian institutions

stop being centers for producing agents only for the market economy and be centers for integral socio-personal transformation? If this important shift is made in a significant way, then certainly Christians would be able to see their institutions having a constructive political hold in the governance in this country, though so far Christianity in India has remained to a large extent ‘politically’ insignificant.

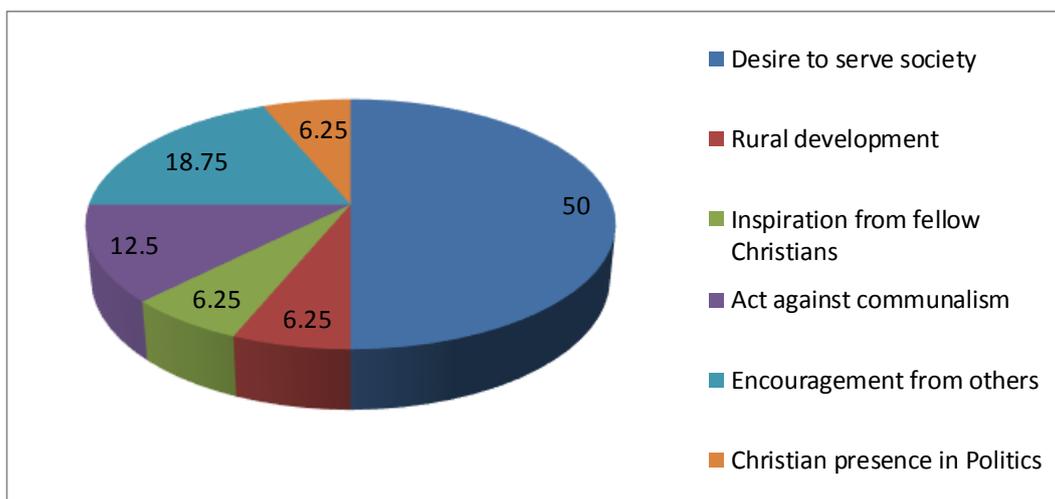
The interview with political leaders of Karnataka mostly at the panchayat, taluk and district levels reveals that there is an increase of people getting into party politics. This is a positive sign for the community irrespective of the party they have chosen.

NUMBER OF YEARS IN POLITICS



The number of years of experience of the political leaders in politics suggests that the largest proportion of them (38.46 %) fall in the category of “above 20 years”. The second largest category (30.76%) falls into the range of 1-5 years. The diagram reveals that the leaders with 20 years of experience make 62% and those with above 20 years make 38% of the total sample. This implies that Christian political leaders are on the increase in the recent 20 years. In fact those who entered the political field in the recent 10 years alone make about 54% of the total respondents. Most of the Christians in the current political field do not have a considerably long experience in that field.

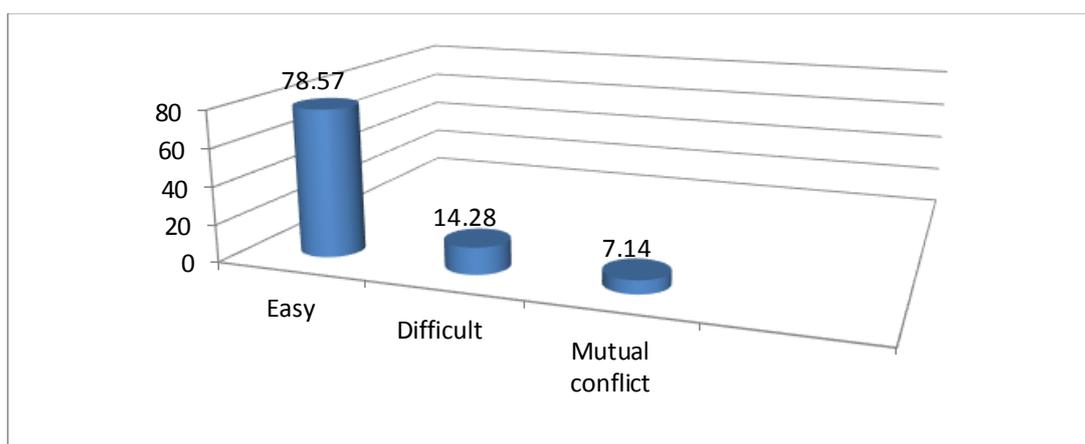
The Christian leaders were asked the reason for joining party politics and the various responses from them also reveal what prompted them to join.



While an overwhelming 50% of the respondents say that a desire to serve is the prime motif for their joining politics, the strongest motivation seems to be encouragement from others (18.75%). The rest of the reasons do not show any significant tendency.

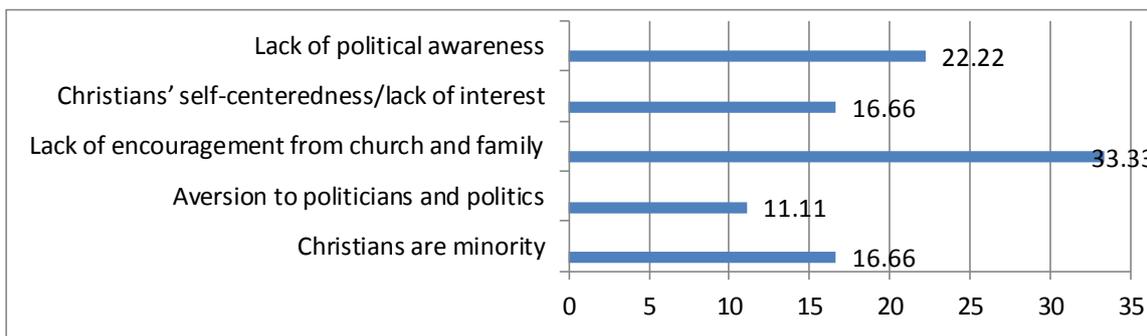
EASY/ DIFFICULT TO PRACTICE FAITH AND GET POLITICALLY INVOLVED

One of the reasons why Christians distance themselves from active politics is the fear of compromising their religious values in a political set up. Therefore, they say politics is dirty. When the Christian leaders were interviewed their responses seems to be quite the opposite.

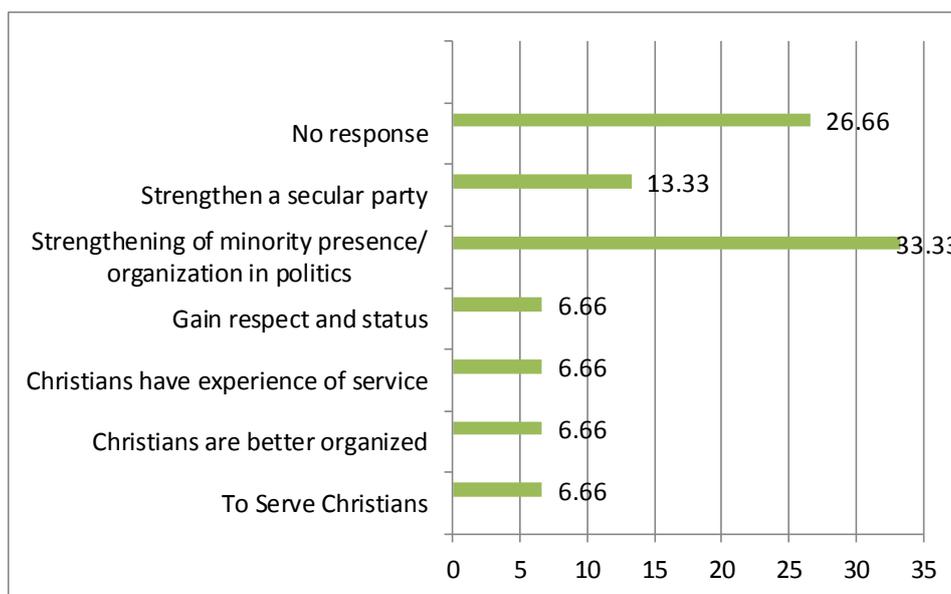


While an overwhelming majority (78.57%) finds political participation as no barrier to the practice of Christian faith, 14.28% find it difficult to manage both and 7.14% see a real conflict between political participation and practice of faith.

Among the leaders who were interviewed many strongly feel that more Christians must engage themselves in politics. Obviously there are very few Christians in politics and the interviewed leaders cite a few reasons for Christians being less active.



Let us also look at some of the reasons why Christians should be in active politics:



While an overwhelming majority of 92.3% feels that more Christians should participate in the political field a tiny minority of 7.6% feels the opposite. Among the reasons why there are so few Christians in politics ‘lack of encouragement from Church/family/community dominates (33.33%) and ‘lack of political awareness, experience and self-confidence’ ranks second.

Among the reasons why there should be more Christians in politics, ‘strengthening of the presence/ organization of minorities in politics is predominant (33.33%). One notices an inconsistency while comparing this data with earlier tables. For example: the overwhelming reason for joining politics is ‘service’; the predominant definition of ‘political participation’

is once again 'service'; but the reason why there should be more Christians in politics does not seem to be explicitly 'service of society'.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR CHRISTIANS IN POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

It may seem that Christians being a minority and dispersed population, not a politically influential community. Therefore it is necessary to trace some of the problems, opportunities and challenges to attend to improving their participation and involvement in governance.

The Faith Reality Dichotomy

Majority of the interviewed leaders at the grassroots level feel that political participation is not a barrier to practicing one's faith. Though quite a few of them have admitted to experiencing difficulties in this matter. From the responses we are not in a position to zero down to any solid explanation. But the point remains valid that at least in some cases Christian faith does make a critique of political participation an involving in governance. Hence we conclude, while on the one hand faith promotes and encourages political participation, on the other hand it guides the individuals to make correct choices in such participation.

A Felt Need for a Dialoguing with Others

India is a multi-religious society with a secular constitution. But in recent decades the seed of communalism is getting deeply rooted in our society which was known for unity in diversity. Communalism may be simply understood as organizing people for political interests along religious or caste lines. Communalism would involve not only calling other communities as 'the other', but also denying them their 'otherness'. Hence no party that exclusively depended on religion or caste for its membership could be allowed to engage in political activities (Chittinapilly, 2006: 426). Such a move would be really detrimental to the growth of a healthy democracy.

Communally based parties are as dangerous as not having proper representation in governance. Therefore there is a gradual realization among Christians that before a community becomes extinct of its identity one should make use of the promises that both democracy and the Constitution give us. The wise and prophetic words of Benjamin Franklin - "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately" - will

hold good for every citizen of this nation. The recent few murders of rationalists like Govind Pansare and Narendra Dabholkar, in Maharashtra and Kannada scholar M.M. Kalburgi show how slowly ‘culture of silence’ is creeping into our democratic set up. As responsible citizens one should have the freedom to air one’s views and demand one’s rights.

In this direction certain initiatives are being taken to come together at various levels such as – ecumenical, interreligious, minority forums, citizens’ forums etc. We find such interests reflected in the responses. They may simply be survival tactics or immediate felt needs. But they have opened up a whole gamut of possibilities for the future. We certainly need persons of vision, insight, daring and faith to seize such opportunities and to initiate peoples’ movements in collaborative modes. These are like soft diplomacy giving a cushioning effect to sort out petty differences which harm common good and better governance.

Lack of Lay Leadership

There can be a whole lot of reasons for lukewarm participation of the people in public affairs. It is surprising that Christian children and youth who get so many opportunities for leadership in their early childhood both in the Church and in the school fail to exhibit those talents as they grow up. Most seek a luxurious and comfortable life by going to gulf countries and earning quick money. This is a trend in coastal Karnataka. One of the reasons for less public participation among the Catholic lay people may be excessive clericalism. Presently in India, more than 70 per cent of Latin Catholics are Dalits, but the higher caste Catholics (30% by estimates) control 90% of the Catholic churches’ administrative jobs (Dalit, 2015).

The question is, can that 70% of the Dalit Catholic population enter into active politics unless they have a support system? They basically lack all possible economic, political and educational benefits besides a social status. In addition, there might also have been lack of encouragement from church leadership, especially in the past, in encouraging the laity in issues of public affairs and governance.

Christian Concept of Governance Calls to be Prophetic

Inspired by the life of Jesus and the Gospel the Church has a prophetic role to play in politics. At present politics in several countries has become a puppet in the hands of the so-called full-time politicians who work to attain the goal of their respective political parties. They always give priority to the goal of their party. They may not even consider the common good of

society as relevant in their political activity. If the Church does not play her prophetic role by finding out new ways and means to manifest her presence and influence the practical field of politics (not of any political party), she may be overcome by politicians with vested interests. This situation will certainly endanger the common good of society. Even if the Church has to undergo hard moments in this strenuous task, she has to safeguard the common good of society. By actively involving herself in the practical field of politics, the Church has to convince the people that it is possible for anybody to be very active in politics (Ukken, 2006:478).

Conclusion

Active participation and inclusion of all is a must in a democracy for good governance. However at the same time, misusing religious sentiments for political gain degrades and defiles democracy and the outcome of good governance. The strengthening of democratic institutions can take place when each individual is able to stand for one's own rights without having any kind of discrimination. Like Mahatma Gandhi we too must try to incorporate the good values and morals from religion to make politics rich. He dreamt of a *Ram raj* or Kingdom of God where *Dharma* becomes the centre of our political and social existence, and where public life, including the political life, draws its inspiration from religion to make it more enriching. Christianity, like all the other religions, certainly has a lot to contribute especially in the area of servant leadership.

The point however is the discrepancy between seeing faith as positively encouraging political participation on the one hand and on the other the hesitation when it comes to concrete application of such a conviction. One wonders whether such discrepancies are characteristic of Christians in general, when there is an apparently good intellectual clarity about a belief, but its practical applications are either not visualized or just shunned.

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