

Challenges and Opportunities for Theological Education in India: Insights from the Covid-19 Pandemic

Revd Professor A. Israel David

United Theological College, Bengaluru, India

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted and influenced every aspect of human life.¹ Education in general and theological education in particular have not escaped from the onslaught of Covid-19. This presentation highlights a few challenges that Indian theological education has experienced in the last two years i.e. from March 2020 till now. The pandemic is not yet over. Since these concerns emerge from my personal reflections of my personal experiences, they are subjective in nature.

In India, there are 74 institutions affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College (University), and around 125 accredited institutions and 61 associate member institutions with the Asia Theological Association. There are more than 300 other seminaries run by individuals and churches in India excluding the Catholic seminaries. Hence, I do not generalize my findings and do not claim to represent all of Indian theological education but just offer reflections as an Indian theological educator.

The paper aims to present the challenges that emerge from the Pandemic and the impact of these challenges on theological perspectives, revisiting the purpose of theological education in India by suggesting a few priorities and probabilities.

Pandemic: Lessons for Theological Education

Theological education has encountered many challenges in the past but continues to survive, contribute and stay alive.² The Covid-19 pandemic has been one such challenge that has brought many insights to TE as it continues its ministry in India. The following are a few significant experiences of theological education during Covid-19 pandemic.

¹ As on 3rd February 2022, there are 4,16,30885 Covid-19 positive cases, 497996 deaths and 39511307 recovered cases reported in India.

² “Theological education in India has a history of antiquity. It has passed through different missiological, denominational, ecclesiastical, sociological, geographical, and contextual phases.” Pratap C. Gine, “Proliferation of theological institutions in India,” in *Diversity of Theological Education in Asia-A search for cooperation and mutual enrichment*, edited by H. S. Wilson and Wati Longchar (Kolkata: PTCA and FTESEA, 2019), 179.

i. *Understanding Crisis*: When the announcement of the first lockdown reached the campuses of theological colleges in March 2020 most of them were caught unaware and unprepared to respond to the crisis.³ The unpreparedness of the colleges has exposed the very understanding of crisis. The crisis counselling classes have not adequately prepared both the students and the educators to respond to their own emotional ill-health and the society in which they are located. The panic, fear and anxiety rose to an alarming level as few seminaries and colleges had adequate resources to provide care for students. A few colleges had decided to call off the classes well before the lockdown was announced. There were a few colleges that quickly comprehended the situations and worked out care and support patterns to the Covid-19 positive students and community members. However, others even now do not have caring patterns and protocols at hand, leaving students to care for themselves resulting in anxiety among the parents. The new saying ‘Negative is positive’ seems to have brought relief to the leaders of the seminaries and colleges. The need for a campus health care system is felt by everyone. The certainty of uncertainty seems to be challenging the decision-making abilities of theological colleges. There is a great need to train, equip and prepare the theological community to comprehend human ‘crisis’ and to respond to the same in a healthy manner.⁴ The pandemic crisis is both personal and social in dimension.

ii. *The method of learning*: The Covid-19 has created space for new alternative ways and methods of learning in theological education. The colleges that were averse to online modes of learning were forced to switch over to online mode. However, the limited technical resources and knowledge have not helped the students and the educators. The attempt to transfer the in-person learning curriculum to the online mode has put a lot of stress on the theological community. The digital divide was visible among them and the Indian rural theological students have undergone and, even now, are undergoing depression emerging due to poor internet connection and non-availability of gadgets. There are incidences of students dropping out on the account of lack of access to proper

³ In India mostly the theological education is offered as residential programme; Bachelor of Theology, Bachelor of Divinity, Master of Divinity, Master of Theology and Doctor of Theology and Doctor of Philosophy are the prominent courses offered both under Senate of Serampore College (University) and Asia Theological Association (ATA).

⁴ The awareness of continually changing world and the readiness to respond to the changes has to be emphasised in theological curriculum preparation. Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “The role of theological education in transforming society: Is education liberating? In *Ministerial Challenges in Contemporary World-Towards a transformative theological education*, edited by Limuel Equina and Wati Longchar (Kolkata: PTCA and ATESEA, 2019), 31.

technological infrastructure. Further, it is argued that the ‘family physical spaces’ have been robbed by the online classes as there were restrictions of movement in homes during online classes. The privacy of family members has been hit.

iii. *The method of assessment:* The Indian theological fraternity struggled to develop a pattern of examination as the classes were conducted online and the examinations were to be conducted virtually. It is a new experience for the educators. Though many colleges have adapted the Open Book Examination (OBE) patterns, the learners found it difficult to comply with them. Moreover, attempting to evaluate the knowledge, skill and critical faculty of the learners from the OBE pattern based on the old pattern of question papers did not go well with both the students and educators. However, the new normal has forced a rethink of theological education in India and to chart out new creative ways of assessing. I personally consider that the Covid-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to revisit the very assessment of learning in India.

iv. *The field education, the praxis:* Another challenge that theological education has encountered during the pandemic is difficulty in equipping the ministers of God in ministerial practices. I strongly believe theological education is praxis oriented and Covid-19 has dented this aspect of learning to a greater extent. The experiences of people become the main source of theologizing. Since a majority of the students will be completing their education without grass root level experiences, there is a danger of limiting theologizing itself. The church services went online, thus creating new opportunities for the trainers and trainees to be relevant to the spiritual needs of the congregations and society. There was a lot of excitement among the theological community as many of them appeared on social media to preach the gospel for the first time. Further, certain theological subjects, such as pastoral counselling and mission have always set apart a greater portion of their syllabus for clinical exposure, but this has been denied by Covid-19 pandemic. Living and expressing faith in times of crisis is a great challenge.

v. *The community experience:* One of the major impacts of Covid-19 on theological education in India is the absence of community life experiences. It is believed that the Indian mind is community oriented and theological colleges’ campuses provide greater opportunity, not only with a sense of belongingness but by being sensitive to the ethos of various cultures and church traditions. With India being a pluralistic society in terms of religion, culture, language and faith, it is unimaginable that a theological student gets a

degree without encountering people of other cultures.⁵ The ‘online’ community has become the new normal and ‘Online Behaviour’ has become a new pattern in behaviourist psychology. But a “meaningful human community is a pre-condition for living theology and a test for authentic theology.”⁶

vi. *The formation dimension:* The true essence of theological education also lies in its sincerity in ministerial formation, namely theological, ministerial, academic, personality and spiritual formations.⁷ There are several methods and patterns⁸ followed by theological colleges to realize these formations. The ministry of formation happens both in personal and at collective levels and it reflects the educator-learner relationships too. The Covid-19 pandemic has heavily affected these aspects of theological education and colleges continue to struggle to invent new and alternative ways of ministry of formation.

vii. *The academic resources:* Most Indian students depend on hard copies of library resources, and the Covid-19 pandemic has reduced their accessibility to libraries. Both the educators and the students are forced to depend on the online sources, which is a new territory for many students, though it is not a concern for a small group of tech-savvy students. The unauthentic resources from online sources have occupied most of the space in a research/thesis work which has not enhanced the quality of academic work.⁹ However, the inability to collect data in-person has inspired the researchers to switch over to social media-centred methods of data collection.

viii. *The economic impact:* The economic impact of pandemic is felt both by the faculty members of the theological colleges in India and by the students. There are incidences of either no-pay or reduced pay for the faculty. The sudden loss of employment and non-availability of jobs has brought a lot of stress to the parents who were seeking concession in fee. The lack of inflow of funds to the sponsoring bodies have added to the crisis. However, the pandemic has brought to the light the ‘willingness’ of the

⁵ Contextualizing theological education in the multi-faith contexts is a significant aspect of training ministers in Asia. See, Dietrich Werner ed. *Training to be ministers in Asia-Contextualizing theological education in multi-faith contexts* (Kolkata: PTCA, 2012).

⁶ Andrew Wingate, *Does Theological Education Make a Difference-Global Lessons in Mission and Ministry from India and Britain* (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 23.

⁷ The spiritual formation in theological education should aim at a liberative spirituality. Samuel Amirtham and Robin Pryor ed. *Resources for spiritual formation in theological education* (NP: World Council of Churches-Programme on Theological Education, NY), 80.

⁸ Pastoral care groups, tutorial groups and care groups are few methods followed in different seminaries and colleges.

⁹ The ‘theological pride’ seems to have taken a hit by Covid-19 pandemic.

faculty members and their family members to accept the realities and respond to the situation accordingly.

ix. *The emotional impact:* The emotional impact has two dimensions that emerge from the unknown nature of Covid-19 and the inability to cope with the new educational conditions. Many students have tested positive for Covid-19 and they experienced fear, anxiety and loneliness. The death of a parent, priest and of theological educators, friends and relatives have put the theological community in India under tremendous stress. The experience in the isolation ward of hospitals added to their depression. In the midst of personal loss and anxiety the move to a new area of learning online has emotionally strained many. However, there are attempts by a few theological colleges who prepared certain protocols to respond to the emerging situation so that the impact could be limited.

x. *Social distance:* It is unfortunate to note that theological colleges have concentrated on self-care, campus-care and Christian-care during the pandemic with a kind of insensitivity to the needs of wider society. While a few seminaries distributed essentials to the community members they were charitable in nature, not being a 'neighbour' to the suffering. Many other faith communities opened their worship places and institutions for the migrant workers to stay, distributed food to them and even engaged in burial of bodies. Some of the buildings were converted as isolation wards. I never heard of any seminary building that was used as an isolation ward though a few church buildings were used. Probably we misunderstood 'social distancing' differently.

The aforementioned issues and concerns have tremendously affected 'theologizing' in India.

Perspectives: Divinity-humanity-ministry

At least three theological perspectives were the topics in the classroom and other conversations among the theological fraternity during the pandemic. They are perspectives on God, humanity and ministry. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a lot of space for the theological community to discuss these themes.

- i. *Perspectives on God:* The 'Theo' in theological education has been one of the major theological themes among learners. The gender of God, the nature of God and the actions of God have different meanings in various theological circles. In other words, it is interesting to know that God is not understood in the same way in all the theological class rooms. The major theological discourses on God during pandemic is related to

God as a ‘punisher’ or ‘the mystery of God’ or the ‘protecting and sustaining nature of God’ or ‘an angry God’ etc. Naming and re-naming of God to understand the nature of God and the identity of selfhood in a particular context is an ongoing process.¹⁰ The ‘father, mother and parent’ nature of God has been questioned and debated without finding an adequate response. The punishment for ‘sin of humanity’ by God was another theme that dominated the conversation, along with God as liberator, God as wounded healer and a vulnerable God. The incarnated God as revealed in Christ can be understood as the representative of suffering human beings, representing their pain and joy - becoming a talking point in most of the classrooms. It was emphasized that theological articulation has to be rooted in a ‘theo’ who cannot be isolated from the suffering of humanity.¹¹

- ii. *Perspectives on humanity:* Though human limitations are discussed widely in theology; the pandemic has brought humanity to the realization that its scientific knowledge is limited and the question is ‘how far we can trust science’ which is a product of human knowledge. The major expose by the pandemic is, however, the way in India the marginal peoples like the Dalits, tribals and women continue to be vulnerable in times of crisis. The pandemic has affirmed that theological education that deliberately avoids the experiences of these people is irrelevant in the Indian context. V V Thomas states that, “very often theological thinking was alienated from the reality of the majority of the Christian community in India namely the Dalits and the Tribal people.”¹² Further, the inability to respond to the needs of migrant workers who walked several thousands of miles from their work places to their villages confirmed the status of these human beings in India. Unfortunately, most of the webinars and seminars organized by the church and other Christian institutions have discussed the problems of ‘Work From Home’ rather than those who ‘Work For Home’ as I call the migrant workers. A people-centred paradigm of theological education is essential.¹³

¹⁰ Huang Po Ho, *Mission from the Underside-Transforming Theological Education in Asia* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2010), 38

¹¹ *Theological Education: Ploughing the Field for New Life to Sprout...* 148.

¹² V. V. Thomas, “The future direction of theological education in India,” in *Communion on the Move: Towards a Relevant Theological Education*, edited by Wati Longchar and Mohan Larbeer. P (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2015), 63.

¹³ See, Rene Padilla, C. ed. *New Alternatives in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Oxford Regnum Books, 1986), 33.

iii. *Perspectives on church ministry:* The ministry of theological education is a ministry by the church, of the church and for the mission of God.¹⁴ There are at least three categories of theological institutions in India. They are denominational colleges, colleges run by a union of churches represented in their college councils, and colleges owned by individuals representing various church traditions. In all senses I believe that the church should own theological education and the pandemic has only affirmed this belief. Any attempt either by the church to ‘quarantine’ theological education or any attempt by theological education to go for ‘self-isolation’ will not serve the purpose of theological education. Neither the church nor theological education can ‘hand wash’ their responsibility of fulfilling the purpose of theological education. Further, both cannot try to ‘lockdown’ each other within their boundaries. Though, the current paper does not attempt to ‘sanitize’ the relationship between church and theological education, it aims to find out significant ‘variants’ of the purpose of theological education to understand the challenges and opportunities in the Indian sub-continent in fulfilling that purpose. Israel Selvanayagam, a teacher of Religion, re-imagines theological education as enabling the church to happen¹⁵ and emphasises that the ‘Church-seminary relationship is vital not only simply for our survival but our relevance.’¹⁶ The relationship between the Church and theological seminaries gains its significance as the faith community’s mission of building holistic community.¹⁷ Howard Clinebell confirms that the church should become the caring-liberating community.¹⁸

¹⁴ A conscious participation in the ministry of Christ by those who engage in theological education is one of the aims of the theological education. *Theological Education in North-East Asia*, a report of the Seoul consultation by Theological Education Fund and study on patterns of ministry and theological education (Geneva: WCC, 1966), 15.

¹⁵ *Theological Education: Ploughing the field for new life to sprout...* 17.

¹⁶ Israel Selvanayagam, “Theological education and regeneration of the Church in India,” in *Communion on the Move: Towards a Relevant Theological Education*, Edited by Wati Longchar and Mohan Larbeer. P. (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2015), 43.

¹⁷ Samuel Meshack, “Theological education in the present context,” in *Communion on the Move: Towards a Relevant Theological Education*, Edited by Wati Longchar and Mohan Larbeer. P. (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2015), 107.

¹⁸ Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling...* 34.

Purpose: Humanization-A Process of becoming liberated

I believe that theological education is a liberative tool in the mission of God, thus emphasising the ministry of liberation.¹⁹ A survey of trends in the development of theological education in India by Samuel Amirtham, a pioneer in Indian theological education, further, points towards this purpose.²⁰ This view of theological education as a ministry of liberation was echoed by most of the presenters in a conference organized by BTESSC in 2013.²¹ Thus, the major purpose of theological education has remained being as a liberative tool in India.

If ministry of liberation is the major focus of theological education, its essence, according to Howard Clinebell, is the ‘freedom to become all that one has the possibilities of becoming.’²² Borrowing M. M. Thomas’ thought of humanization²³, I propose that the purpose of Indian theological education should be a process of humanization. In the beginning God created human beings and the promise of the gospel, the ‘new creation,’ is realization of that humanness which was made possible by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. The ‘becoming,’ for me is ‘becoming a full human’ which has been denied to the majority of the Indians who

¹⁹ Israel David A, ‘Theological education from a research student’s perspective,’ in *Theological Education: Ploughing the field for new life to sprout*, Edited by Lawrence Jabadoss and Mohan Larbeer (Bangalore: BTESSC & CLS, 2014), 219.

²⁰ Samuel Amirtham, in his attempt to understand how the purpose of theological education in India has evolved over the centuries, identifies that the focus of theological education, in the beginnings, was to prepare persons for pastoral and preaching ministry. He proceeds to state that in the middle of the 20th century the purpose of theological education finds its meaning in equipping people to find reason for their hope to state the gospel with confidence. He points out that there are three emphases in the purpose of theological education namely theological, ecumenical and missiological. The focus was on the “form of theological education to suit the needs of the ministry in the church.” Moving further, Amirtham, defines that the ministry includes India’s search for new meaning and new humanity especially in the context of leading the people of India from poverty both in urban and rural contexts. Amirtham concludes the trends in theological education in India with an understanding that theological education for a ministry of liberation. For him, it means, training the church to be at ‘points of human struggles and aspirations.’ “Theological-to help the student to grapple with and to understand the full implication of the gospel so that he (she) could effectively communicate the same. Ecumenical-to help the Indian church to make its theological contribution to the world Church. Missiological-to indigenize theology and so to make the eternal Gospel meaningful to the Indian situation.” Samuel Amirtham, ‘Some trends in the development of theological education in India,’ https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/25-3-4_197.pdf.

²¹ Most of the understanding emerged at theological educators conference organized by the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College in 2013 which was published latter as a book to which the current presenter too contributed a chapter. Dexter Maben, a New Testament teacher helps us to understand that if “education is a process of equipping to respond... theological education is therefore imperative, to the formulation and articulation of any theology, because, equipping to respond is essentially liberative and transformative in nature.” I. John Mohan Razu clarifies that “the outcome of the theological education is to bring about an impact on their wholistic perception of the society and church that would eventually make them to respond to the forces they face in their day-to-day existence.” S. Chandra Mohan in his article titled ‘Theological education: A liberative tool,’ emphasizes that “theological education should look at the suffering mass, the suffering on the cross, the disturbed God and the God with us.” Roy Lazer as he brings out the theological educational initiatives confirms that theology should become the cry for liberation of the marginalized. Lawrence Jabadoss and Mohan Larbeer ed., *Theological Education: Ploughing the field for new life to sprout* (Bangalore: BTESSC & CLS, 2014).

²² Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 28.

²³ M M Thomas is an Indian theologian who is also known as ‘secular pastor.’

are kept in the margins in many aspects. Hence, social justice, social healing and human rights need to be the focus in this process of humanization. The essence of the gospel can be found in this fact. Theological students at the margins can help to kindle this empowerment. This humanization can infect and influence the congregations, communities, individuals and the society at large.

However, the presence of resistances cannot be denied. There are cultural, religious, political, economic, emotional, spiritual, social and physical resistances. Covid-19 is one such resistance. Theological education has to recognize and create awareness about the ‘powerful resistances’ in and by the human beings and direct the learners towards realizing the ‘amazing resources’ that theological education can provide to overcome the resistances. The ministry of the church as a response to the experiences of the ‘people of God’ has to sincerely admit that there are three aspects of liberation namely *for, from and to*. It is liberation *from* those forces that attempt to block the freedom of becoming a better human, liberation *to* ‘abundant life’ and liberation *for* ‘life in the Spirit’ which is both personal and societal.²⁴ Humanization will empower the people to search and respond to the fundamental issues in India. However, the operational and measurable aspects of humanization as a purpose have to be discussed further.

Priorities and Probabilities: Hope

The lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic have taught that theological education in India can move forward with the purpose of becoming a humanizing process. This possibility will become a reality if the Indian theological fraternity reaffirms its commitment (i) to be sensitive to the challenges emerging from social, cultural, economic, religious, emotional, political, ecological, ecclesiastical, ecumenical and gender contexts; (ii) to view the crisis from a human rights and human dignity point of view; (iii) to aim towards humanization based on social justice, social healing and social harmony; (iv) to be part of nation-building with equality and dignity; (v) to be aware that theological education is a channel and tool in the mission of God in realizing fullness of human life; (vi) to affirm that theological education is the ministry of the Church; (vii) to be sensitive to the ecumenical nature of church and theological education;²⁵

²⁴ Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling...* 30.

²⁵ Inter-faith dialogue seems to be still relevant in the context of Covid-19 pandemic as there are conversations to connect the religion with the spread of the virus. This need was emphasised by Christy Lohr of Intersections Institute of Eastern Cluster of Lutheran Seminaries. Christy Lohr, “Navigating the New Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in Theological Education,” in *Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue*, Edited by David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell (Hartford: Hartford Seminary, 2009), 11.

(viii) to be open to the new alternative ways of education and not being rigid²⁶; (ix) to create adequate financial resources as a long term solution to support the rural poor and the marginalized; (x) to become not only a rational community but to be sensitive to the emotional aspects of the community members; (xi) to be aware of changing perspectives on God, humanity and ministry.

Theological education as critical engagement can be the channel of liberation of becoming what every individual and community can become - to experience the fullness of humanness. Theological education has the commitment to build up the church and to transform society.²⁷ For this to happen we need to accept that challenges will lead to changes and that making theological education a channel of hope for humanity is a priority and possibility.

²⁶ The curriculum revision has to be an ongoing process in theological education. Jesurathnam cites the example of United Theological College in Bangalore as an example how the need for a revision was felt by UTC after the discourses on Dalit experiences shaped the theological thinking in 1990s. Jesurathnam, K. "Challenges for the theological education in India: UTC, Bangalore a case in Point," in *Re-Imagining theological education in India*, edited by Lalfakzuala (Bangalore: Omega Book World, 2019), 57

²⁷ Dietrich Werner, *Theological Education in World Christianity- Ecumenical Perspectives and Future Priorities*, (Kolkata: PTCA, 2011), 43.