RTI Act 2005 - Questioning the Problem
Girls, Boys and the Census 2011
Spirituality of Discernment
When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.

*Proverbs 21:15*

**Drishtikone** is Hindi for Perspective or viewpoint. The magazine seeks to provide a space in which Christians can share their perspectives and points of view on wholistic mission in India.

Our Vision is that **Drishtikone** will motivate change in readers. That hearing the viewpoints of development practitioners, theologians, grassroot workers, and others demonstrating God’s love in a practical way, will encourage Christians to join the struggle for peace and justice in this country.

**Drishtikone** seeks to present a Biblical perspective on social issues and provide readers with news, personal profiles and information about wholistic concerns. It is a forum for reflection and dialogue on social issues in India.

**Drishtikone** is published three times a year by EFICOR in an effort to mobilise Christian reflection and action. Contributions from readers are welcome. Please join with us as we seek to include content that is alive and relevant to the world we live in.

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Contents

3 Cover story
RTI Act 2005 - Questioning the Problem
Mr. Kuldeep Singh

7 Stories of using RTI - 1
Advocating for the Poor in Lakhnour
Mr. Pramod Kumar Pal

9 Stories of using RTI - 2
Advocating for the urban poor
Mr. Thangkholet Baite

10 Christian Perspective on the Right to Information
Rev. Dr. Dominic Emmanuel SVD

12 Facts
RTI Ready Reckoner

14 Spirituality and Social Engagement
Spirituality of Discernment
Mr. C. B. Samuel
Ex Corporal S. Pandey* is a wounded war veteran of the 1965 Indo-Pak War. He had been randomly classified as disabled receiving a meager pension as per this category. Despite repeated representations which included letters to various officials, several trips to important defence offices and innumerable phone calls to correct this gross misrepresentation, there was no effect. One is appalled to imagine that such a fate awaits a service man discharged from duty on account of war wounds. However, this story has begun to see a turn around. What forty odd years and several representations failed to address is now moving at a good pace. Suddenly different offices are responding and grievances are being addressed. The case is well on the way of being redressed at the earliest. What made all the difference in evoking this fresh response? Well it is a couple of RTIs and also follow-up appeals. It did take the government tool to effect some sincere work from feigned business or busyness. Definitely the time is come when big stacks of files, huge desks or even the sentry at the door cannot stop the common man from questioning the government by way of asking for information. Rich and poor, pensioners and servicemen, literate and illiterate can all equally benefit from the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005. However, this is hugely dependent on each of us to create awareness and help people from all walks of life to use RTI.

This issue brings you an overview of RTI Act 2005 explaining its various nuances and also pointing to you instances where it has been helpful to communities and individuals in situations of need and vulnerability. Information is power as well particularly when an errant government official can be held accountable by way of seeking information. It has been observed that among the RTIs filed across the country 80 per cent are for individual interests while only 20 per cent are focused towards community needs. The call for us is also to scale up in helping communities access the provisions of RTI to bring about changes in the society. This issue also carries other features introduced earlier.

We hope you enjoy the rich coverage of topics to ponder upon and also motivate you to action.

* Name is changed.
RTI Act 2005 - Questioning the Problem

Mr. Kuldeep Singh

Introduction

Nafisha Khatoon was supposed to be getting 6 kilos of sugar at a very cheap rate with her Below Poverty Line Ration Card. While her Ration Card had recorded that she had been given the sugar, in reality she hadn’t received any. What had really happened was that, since Nafisha was illiterate, the Ration shop owner had deliberately filled out her Ration Card falsely to show that she was getting sugar and sold that amount of sugar for his own profit. The problem came to her notice only when a staff from EHA’s Sahyog project in Delhi met Nafisha and offered to help rectify the wrong. On 4th March 2011, Nafisha filed an application for information about her rations to the Food and Supply Department. Just two weeks later, the same Ration shop owner who had consistently defrauded her for months, personally came to Nafisha’s house and told her to come and collect her share of sugar, including the last six months arrears! How did this incredible turnaround happen? The answer - RTI!

It is to the credit of the Indian government policy makers, that the poor in India are entitled to various government benefits to alleviate their dire situation. Schemes include election identity cards, subsidized cooking gas, scholarships for SC/ST/OBC residents, sweepers to clean roads and supply of clean water. However, these privileges are often inaccessible to the poor either because they are not aware of them, or they don’t have enough identity documentation to access the services, or the officials concerned are too corrupt or lazy to implement the measures. Evidence demonstrates that slum dwellers collectively make a substantial contribution to urban and national

Consider these scenarios:-

- A child’s parents cannot apply for the Ladli Yojna which pays parents of girls to educate their girl child, because the child doesn’t have a birth certificate.
- A man has not been getting kerosene on his ration card for the last 6-7 months. When the ration shopkeeper is confronted, he either threatens or tells him that his name is not in the register.
- The community is happy that a school has been constructed in their neighbourhood. Six months later however, the roof collapses and kills six children.
- There is widespread malaria and dengue in the basti, but the malaria department has not done anything about it.
- There are no Anganwadi Centers in the community for malnourished children.
- The ANMs (Auxiliary Nursing Midwives) are not coming to the basti regularly as they should, so children are not being immunized. The health sub-center also is not functioning regularly.
- MCD sweepers aren’t coming regularly as they should. Garbage is piled up everywhere and drains are blocked, but the sanitation department is nowhere to be seen.
economies, and that many towns and cities would cease to function effectively without the people who live in slums. However, the situation in these slums is very depressing. Residents of slums live in constant fear of eviction or demolition. Police intimidate them, hospital and government offices neglect their plea, middle men in the community take advantage of them to get various government documents made through unofficial channels. What slum dwellers need in these and many other similar situations is the knowledge of the various schemes and the power to hold government officers accountable for the poor implementation of these schemes. ‘Active Citizenship’ has been defined as: “The knowledge about how a country and society works, why governments and institutions function as they do, where to get information and how to participate. It is about resolving disputes in a friendly and fair way, it is about negotiating and finding a common ground and it is about making sure that everybody’s rights are respected.”

What is RTI?

The contexts described above makes RTI or Right to Information a significant tool for the common man. The word **Information** is an important aspect of democracy. It is only when people have information about things happening around them, can they take good decisions. Not only is it a necessity for people; it is also an essential part of every good government. Bad governments need secrecy to survive. Information empowers poor people to claim their rights and better represent their interests. Therefore, it is imperative to educate people, not only the poor, but anyone who is not aware of his/her rights.

Though in 1976, the Supreme Court declared ‘Right to Information’ as a part of fundamental rights under article 19 of the constitution, it was only in 2005 the parliament of India passed the “Right to Information Act”. The Act mandates timely response to citizens’ requests for government information. **“Information”** includes “any material in any form, including documents, memos, emails, opinions, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, log books, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form.”

“The basic object of the Right to Information Act is to empower the citizens, promote transparency and accountability in the working of the government, contain corruption and make our democracy work for the people in the real sense.” The Right to Information Act is described as “the sunshine law” because it throws light on how the state governs. It gives the fundamental right to every citizen to ask for any information that they need about the Government and what they are doing with the citizens’ tax money! Any Indian citizen has the right under this Act to ask the Government any question about its work. “Why the roads haven’t been fixed?” “Why have you not received your “ration card” as yet?” “Why is there so much garbage in your area that is not picked up?” etc.
Under the Provisions of the RTI Act it allows any citizen the right to:
- Ask questions to the Government or seek any information
- Inspect any Government documents
- Take copies of Government documents
- Inspect any Government works
- Take samples of material from any Government works.

The only Exemptions include:
- Any information affecting sovereignty, integrity, security, strategic, scientific, or economic or other interests of the State, relation with foreign State or leading to incitement of an offence
- Forbidden by courts
- Affecting privilege of Parliament or Legislature
- Commercial confidence, trade secrets or intellectual property unless larger public interest so warrants
- Received in confidence from foreign government.

**Will RTI Work?**

Some have argued that there have been many good laws in this country but none of those laws worked effectively. So why would this law be different? This law is already working. It is because for the first time in the history of independent India, there is a law which casts a direct accountability on the officer for non-performance. If the concerned officer does not provide information in time, a penalty of Rs. 250 per day of delay can be imposed by the Information Commissioner. If the information provided is false, a penalty of a maximum of Rs. 25,000 can be imposed. A penalty can also be imposed for providing incomplete or for rejecting your application without reasons. This fine is deducted from the officer’s personal salary.

The most significant thing which was found great in RTI Act which also differentiates it from all other Act/law is that it directly holds the people concerned responsible (even bringing penalty) if information asked is not provided. Though there are still constraints in getting RTI filing for the illiterate and physically challenged persons (though section 6.1 of the RTI Act have special provision for these groups), RTI is still a very imperative tool to combat corruption and bribery.

**RTI Experience at Sahyog Project, EHA**

In a span of 5 years the Sahyog Project team has facilitated to file about 1500 RTI applications seeking various information which resulted in informed citizens on issues which were never disclosed to them for the last 63 years because of the Official Secrets Act (OSA 1923) prevailing till 2005. From my experiences of working with the community, the information obtained through RTI Act will help common citizens to avoid bribery at day to day work. As he or she uses this Act they are gradually confident to help others who face this problem.

In slums of Khajuri and Harijan bastis, where Sahyog Project is at work in Delhi, the community has used RTI application to collect information to:
- Regularize their residence in the slums
- Obtain Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards and Above Poverty Line (APL) cards for the people
- Get the Public Distribution System (PDS) work better
- Obtain birth certificates for their children, who were born in the home states from where they migrated
- Get repairs of bad roads/streets
- Appoint Urdu teachers in schools
- Know why Auxiliary Nursing Midwives (ANMs) do not come regularly to their area to provide healthcare.
The most significant thing which was found great in RTI Act which also differentiates it from all other Act/law is that it directly holds the people concerned responsible (even bringing penalty) if information asked is not provided.

Stories from Sahyog

Sandeep, a resident of Khajuri basti had applied for a Below Poverty Line Ration card in 2007. For 3 years, he was made to wait. He filed an RTI application with the help of Sahyog. The reply which he got stated that his ration card had already been dispatched to him in 2007. He filed a 1st Appeal letter to the PIO on 26th July 2010. A hearing was held on 17th August 2010. The commissioner ordered the FSO to dispatch the ration card as soon as possible. Sandeep got his ration card on 18th August 2010.

Sartaz is a member of the CBO (Community Based Organization) in Khajuri basti. His house is adjacent to the primary school. He observed that the school had only one gate in B block and students from the rest of the blocks had to go around the boundary to get into the school. It was a huge problem during rainy season. Sensing discrepancy in the planning, he filed an RTI application addressed to the Education Department in that zone for the map of the school and the sample, amount of materials used for constructing the boundary walls, number of gates under provision. After a span of 10 days, construction of a new gate at C block began.

Conclusion

Heralded as one of the most people friendly legislation ever, this act has helped not only in mitigating corruption in public life but also in alleviating poverty. It is helping India to become an accountable, interactive and participatory democracy. This Act promotes transparency and accountability in administration by making the government more open to public scrutiny. A citizen can question, audit, review, examine, and assess government acts and decisions to ensure that these are consistent with the principles of public interests, good governance and justice. The Act has also come handy for all sections of the society. The most benefited of course by this Act are the poor and disempowered. Mr. Wajahat Habibullah, former Chief Information Commissioner of Central Information Commission while speaking to a crowd in Kolkata in 2011 said that, “Slum dwellers were the major chunk of population who were making use of RTI Act the most.” He said 40% of the applications filed were from them.

There is a long way to make the citizens informed and responsible to participate in democracy for making a just and equitable society which God envisioned for us. As God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, we have a responsibility to spread the message of justice and equity. Even after 5 years of its implementation there is a very low awareness about the usage of RTI Act 2005 at grassroots level in rural villages & urban slums. Probably it’s time we make those around us aware of RTI and help them use it in their situations.

Mr. Kuldeep Singh works in Emmanuel Hospital Association as the in charge of Programme of Sahyog Project initiatives based in East Delhi.
Advocating for the Poor in Lakhnour

Mr. Pramod Kumar Pal

Advocacy work in Lakhnour, Madhubani district in Bihar has been both a very challenging and rewarding experience. The challenges have been on several fronts and rewards have added sustainability to our efforts in transforming communities. We have filed over 400 RTI applications ever since RTI based work was initiated.

In the targeted community about 90% of the people are part of the BPL category and of these about 60% of them are very poor, oppressed and marginalized. When we began our efforts only 2% of the people were aware of the Right to Information Act. The community was largely uneducated and it was extremely difficult to do advocacy work. Moreover the locality was also notorious for its utter lack of respect and value for life and dignity.

In the initial days it was hard to influence the poor and vulnerable community to speak before the government and ask for their rights without someone consistently motivating them and giving them inputs. The Mithilanchal area where our team initiated the work has been dominated by Brahmins. It has been just about 15 years or so since the lower caste communities have picked up courage to walk in front of the Brahmin people but not so much to be able to speak to them let alone ask for their rights. But Advocacy work has proved to be very helpful and obviously since it is a rights based approach there have been both a positive impact generally for the community at large but in terms of personal life and safety a not so welcome impact since the life of those who raise the issues is always under threat.

Initially our team visited the villages with local Community Organizers to interact with different people to understand the people, caste, culture and lifestyle also to know the history of the location. As we started the advocacy work we realized the need for assistance from a local person of significance to help us in awareness creation. So along with Mr. Ashok Kumar Singh an advocate we initiated work in the villages in raising awareness and organizing various trainings and workshops at both the village (tola) and Panchayat levels. During the early period it was difficult to file an RTI for any kind of problem. It was only towards the end of 2007 that we started filing RTI along with Mr. Nemi Kumar a Social Activist by visiting various villages together and discussing about the important needs in each of the villages. Initially hardly anyone showed any interest in filing RTI. However, 50 key persons were selected through the existing Disaster Management Committee and were motivated to join a workshop at the block level. These became the key people and they were trained and they went on to file a few RTI applications. Thus in the initial stage they received few good results as an outcome of our efforts.
Our team also organized various rallies and workshops focusing on RTI and other government schemes over the period with certain specific groups. In 2008 for the first time a rally was organized for men based on RTI & MNREGA Scheme in Madhubani - District head quarter, Bihar. A significant achievement in 2009 was the advocacy program for disabled people at Lakhnour Block and as a result 50 disabled people received disability certificates without spending any money, which was unheard of earlier.

"Though the process of RTI is simple, it does take a lot of effort to see through the full procedure however the final results make our efforts worthwhile."

A women’s rally was organized for the first time at Jhanjharpur at the sub-divisional level in history of Bihar with more than 300 women participating.

The community capacity on advocacy has been enhanced as a result of our consistent efforts. Our team’s one significant effort has been a programme on the theme, Right based community led Disaster Risk Management program in which all the Lakhnour Block Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) representatives were invited. This programme revealed that most of the PRI members are not very much aware of RTI. Therefore, there is a significant need to work at the micro level to bring changes which will really be sustainable with regard to the future.

Some of the key learnings include the need for motivation of the community to file RTI by themselves. Motivating and supporting the community from behind are essential. It is necessary to keep the record of RTI applications filed and all other correspondence till the final results are obtained. There is also a need to ensure that there are valid reasons and justifications while filing RTI. Though the process of RTI is simple, it does take a lot of effort to see through the full procedure. However, it is the final results that make the efforts worthwhile.

Mr. Pramod Kumar Pal works in EFICOR as Programme Coordinator (DRR Lakhnour and DRR Madhubani Projects).
Advocating for the Urban Poor

Mr. Thangkholet Baite

EFICOR has been working in Metro Vihar in Holambi Kalan, a resettlement colony, since 2006. The project is focusing on empowerment of people with a community based advocacy of accessing their rights using the Right to Information (RTI).

The communities resettled in this colony are migrants from various parts of India who moved in to the capital city in search of some livelihood opportunity. They are isolated physically from their workplaces within the city and from the services available for them from the government which is as such few and far between almost resulting in denial of even the most basic needs. Besides many people do not possess important documents like birth certificate, ration card etc. They have been filing applications in different government offices in order to get the documents but they failed to get them due to corruption prevalent in these offices. The community of Holambi Kalan is poor and voiceless and do not know how to ask for their rights. They are mostly illiterate and they find it difficult to express their problems in writing even though there are provisions for illiterate people in these offices. EFICOR’s involvement in Holambi Kalan focuses towards securing some of these services denied to the community.

EFICOR endeavors in facilitating communities to be self reliant and have a sustainable living. Providing awareness concerning RTI Act 2005, the process of filing and its relevance for the community to pursue their well being has been the project’s priority in its development intervention in Holambi Kalan. The project has facilitated the filing of several RTI’s on different community issues such as ration card, sanitation and drainage and Anganwadi (ICDS). In November 2011 the local MLA Mr. Jaswant Singh Rana had visited the NGOs working in Metro Vihar and assured the community of making the streets concrete and repairing the drainage. But for many days there was no sign of any work. The project facilitated to file an RTI on this issue with a query on the exact date of starting the work. They received a quick response on the date of initiation and now almost all the streets are concrete with better drainage system.

Mr. Bramhan Tiwari one of the residents of Metro Vihar, Holambi Kalan has observed that he is not getting the amount of ration that he was supposed to get from ration shop. Though he complained to the ration shop-keeper he evaded the issue by saying that Government is providing only limited amount of ration for every individual. Mr. Bramhan Tiwari filed an RTI application to Food and Supply Department, Shalimar Bagh and within one month received a reply with details of the amount of ration available for each type of ration card. He went to the ration shop-keeper and showed the letter. Now he and his community people are getting proper ration from ration shop.

Geeta is another resident of Holambi Kalan and works as a community organizer for EFICOR in Holambi Kalan slum project. However, while involving in the implementation of the EFICOR programs in Holambi, Geeta obtained the skills to assess issues facing the community she lives in through various trainings provided by the project.

Geeta was deeply concerned about the sanitation and poor drainage system in the colony. She filed an RTI in January 2012 to the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, Inderlok with the question; when is the construction work to be started at Metro Vihar? She obtained a reply within a month in February 2012 with the information that the work will be started very soon. And after two months the work began in April 2012 and got completed within the next 2 months. All the streets and drainages have been completed. The challenge now is to ensure that the drainage is maintained regularly by the MCD staff. She feels completely empowered to use the RTI Act as it ensures that the government renders its services for the people.

RTI surely has been an important tool for the poor and voiceless community in Holambi Kalan to draw the attention of the government to their problems.

Mr. Thangkholet Baite works in EFICOR as Programme Coordinator (Urban and Partner Projects).
Christian Perspective on the Right to Information

Rev. Dr. Dominic Emmanuel SVD

Introduction
In a separate lead article and other sections in this issue of Drishtikone, the unprecedented and revolutionary Right to Information Act (RTI) has been explained at length. In this article, I am expected to give a Biblical perspective to the RTI. But before I venture into that, let me make it clear that what I will do here will be only an attempt to find Biblical basis for RTI, because, let us be clear from the very start that RTI was not conceived and executed and indeed not being used by keeping the Bible or its perspective in mind in the first place. The campaigners and the eventual framers of RTI did not have anything to do with the Bible when they started the work towards it. Hence it might be more appropriate to say that the attempt here should be called more of theologizing of the RTI from a Christian perspective, whereby we can attempt to understand and find God’s hand and presence in the framing of RTI.

The main objective of the RTI
The main purpose of bringing in RTI was to make the government more transparent and accountable to public. This includes not only the central government but also each of the state governments starting with the person holding the highest authority to the lowest, including all the documents and decisions pertaining to the working of the government/s.

The rules and provisions of the RTI are rather simple and straightforward but one can easily say that ever since the RTI was passed in 2005, it has taken away the sleep of many government officials and ministers. That is not to say that the purpose of framing the RTI has been fully or even partially achieved.

Biblical Perspective
When we try to focus on the purpose of the RTI and look at its objective what strikes us immediately is that it is an effort to bring in honesty, albeit indirectly, in administration and the functioning of the government. And then suddenly we find that one of the things that the Bible consistently speaks of is honesty and truthfulness in our work and behaviour. There are several references in the Bible that point towards the fact that God wants his people to shun lies, dishonesty, cheating and falsehood and more especially when we deal with the poor and the oppressed. (Ex. 20:16, Prov. 6:12&19, Prov. 12:17&22, Prov. 19:5&9, Prov. 25:18, Matt. 15:19, Luke 8:15, I Cor. 13:6, II Cor. 4:2, Eph. 4:15, Heb. 13:18, II Pet. 2:3, I Jn. 2:21 and Rev. 21:27)

Honesty, Truthfulness and Transparency
The fact that honesty and truthfulness and anything short of it is abhorred by the Lord, it becomes incumbent on every Christian to abide by the Biblical precept of living our lives with utmost truthfulness. Hence honesty is a direct reflection of one’s inner character. Our actions are a reflection on our faith and reflecting the truth in our actions is a part of being a good witness. Learning how to be more honest will also help us keep a clear conscience.

Character plays a big role in where we go in our life. When we are faithful and honest, it shows. Luke the evangelist reminds us, “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much” (Luke 16:10). Again Paul in his letter to Timothy tells us, “Cling to your faith in Christ, and keep your conscience clear. For some people have deliberately violated their consciences; as a result, their faith has been shipwrecked” (1 Timothy 1:19).

While our honesty level is a reflection of our character, it is also a way to show our faith. In the Bible, God made honesty one of his commandments. Since God cannot lie, He sets the example for all of His people. It is God’s desire that we follow that example in all that we do. The framing of RTI and its execution is only an attempt in following the
examples set in the Bible. “The very essence of your words is truth; all your just regulations will stand forever (Psalms 119:160).”

Being honest is not always easy. As Christians we know how easy it is to fall into sin. Therefore, we need to work at being truthful. The world does not give us easy situations, and sometimes we need to really work to keep our eyes on God in order to find the answers. Being honest can sometimes hurt, but knowing that one is following what God wants for us will make us more faithful in the end.

The Bible also tells us, “Honesty guides good people; dishonesty destroys treacherous people” (Proverbs 11:3). Again in Psalms we are told, “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Savior” (Psalm 24:3-5).

It is important to note that besides what the Bible tells us about honest behavior in the eyes of God, some of the verses from it also clearly tells us about our honest and truthful behavior in administration. For instance it says, “Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another” (Leviticus 19:11). The following verse applies not only to physical measures of scales but also the criteria used in administration for different people, especially if they are poor. So the Bible says, “Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity” (Leviticus 19:35) and again, “You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you” Deuteronomy 25:15,16. “Withhold not good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it” Proverbs 3:27. And some other references for truthfulness in governance include, Proverbs 4:23-27, Proverbs 6:12-15, Proverbs 11:1, 3.

**Availability of Information and Accountability in the Scripture**

The book of Ezra (Chapters 4 & 5) records both the enemies of Judah and the men of Judah making references to the archives to check out information during the process of rebuilding of the Temple. This is evidence to the fact that meticulous records were kept during the reign of the various kings and the people were aware of it and could make reference to them to address their issue. In terms of accountability of government officials we find Nehemiah (Nehemiah 5:14-18) providing information about the conduct of the affairs of his house and honest administration to the people. Nehemiah also forgoes certain privileges as governor to reduce the burden on the people.

**Questioning the rights**

Take the example of Apostle Paul (Acts 16:35-39) having been beaten and imprisoned in the city of Philippi, questioned the violation of their rights as Roman Citizens and the administration was quickly responsive to the same and admitted their mistake.

**Conclusion**

The Bible not only tells us that it is important to avoid dishonest and untruthful actions but when we behave in an honest way, it also brings great joy. The Bible therefore says, “When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers” (Proverbs 21:15).

Similarly in the letter of St. Paul to the Romans chapter 14:17 we find, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit and his letter to the Ephesians chapter 5:9, he says, “for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth and finally in Galatians 5: 22 we have his words saying, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness”.

Rev. Dr. Dominic Emmanuel SVD is the Spokesperson of Delhi Catholic Archdiocese.
Apartment Process

- First appeal with the appellate authority
- First appeal to be settled within 30-45 days
- No response, go for second appeal
- Second appeal with the Information Commission
- Any complaints to be submitted to the Information Commission

Penalty

The Information Commission can also require the Public authority that has illegitimately delayed/denied information to compensate the complaint for any loss or other detriment suffered.

Who is a First Appellate authority?

Every public authority must designate a First Appellate Authority. This officer designated is the officer senior in rank to your PIO.
To,
The PIO
MCD (South Zone)
Gautam Nagar
New Delhi

Subject: Application under the Right to Information Act 2005.

Sir/Madam,

Provide the following information with respect to the sanitary conditions of the beat in which my house falls:

1. Provide the list of all the sweepers and sanitation officials with their addresses and contact numbers working in this beat.
2. Provide copy of attendance register for this beat for the month of January 2011.
3. Provide copy of muster roll for this beat for the month of January 2011.
4. Mention against each sweeper, his geographical and functional job responsibilities, for instance, which streets is a particular sweeper supposed to be working everyday and what is he supposed to be doing in those streets.
5. Provide the names, addresses of offices and their contact numbers of the supervisory officials of the above sweepers in this beat right up to the Sanitary Superintendent.

I have paid the fees of Rs. 10/- (Receipt No 2067/01)

Ram Kumar
24 B, Gautam Nagar, New Delhi

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**RTI Act allows you to:**

- Ask questions to the Government or seek any information
- Take copies of Government documents
- Inspect any Government work
- Take samples of material from any Government work
Spirituality of Discernment

Mr. C. B. Samuel

Of all the people in the Old Testament who were public in their engagement the prophets were unique. They saw their society differently from most of the others. The prophetic word included a deeper analysis of society and its problems, a vision of the future that was comprehensive and a call to engagement that was inclusive. What made the difference? In one word ‘discernment’. Webster defines discernment as ‘the ability to grasp and comprehend what is obscure. And obscure not because it is unreal but it is unseen’. As Paul writes: ‘...we declare God’s wisdom.....None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’. (1 Corinthians 2:6-8). A wisdom that perceives matters differently. Such is the wisdom that the prophets were endowed with as they lived their faith in the public sphere.

We live in a world of opinions – a world of knowledge overdose!! Almost everyone has opinions on almost everything under the sun. And the tragedy is when we strongly believe that our opinions are solutions and the only solution for all the calamities of the world. Unfortunately, as someone said, ‘today’s solutions can be the cause for tomorrow’s problems’. And this is so true in social engagement. Our lopsided solutions have been temporary and have long-term consequences. We don’t have to go far to see the truth of this reality as it is obvious from the world’s economic crisis. We need a new way of seeing – the seeing which is whole.

Spirituality of prophetic engagement was founded on a spirituality of discernment. It is interesting that often the prophets were asked the question ‘What do you see?’ (Jeremiah 1:11,13; 24:3) or were shown things (Jeremiah 24:1; Amos 8:1f; Ez 37:1) and asked to respond. Firstly, the seeing that enabled them to go beyond the surface. It is a seeing that slows the pace of activism to allow for deeper analysis. In some situations it opens the eyes to go beyond words and sight to see the cause of the problem and in other cases it invites the one who sees to go beyond the hopelessness to see the possibilities of God. It is easier, however, to choose to be politically correct and agree with either ‘the fore-tellers of doom’ or with ‘empty hope-givers’ than to act with discernment of God’s perspective. Secondly, the prophetic spirituality of discernment also meant to see the issues differently. For Jeremiah, who lived in time of national stability and religious renewal (during the time of Josiah), it meant exposing the shallowness of outward reformation (Jeremiah 7:3-4). He goes on to call the people to ‘really change your ways and your actions’ – a change which is real. Spirituality of discernment equips us to see society’s evil at its very root. Thirdly, the prophetic discernment enabled them to address sin in a comprehensive way. Amos identified sin in terms of national acts of ruthless greed in which Tyre, ‘sold whole communities of captives to Edom disregarding a treaty of brotherhood,’ (Amos 1:9) and Ammon ‘ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders’ (v13). Amos also saw sin in the life-style of luxury that was indifferent to the plight of the people. Fourthly, discernment enabled the prophets to be engaged in constructive rebuilding which calls both for repentance and restoration. Constructive engagement requires a spirituality of discernment both of our times and of our responses.

If there is one spiritual gift that is desperately needed for meaningful engagement in public sphere it is that of discernment. Especially in a world where truth has become a causality in the pursuit of economic growth and of strengthening the ethnic and national divides. Discernment contributes to courage in engagement and the willingness to flow against the tide.

Mr. C. B. Samuel is an itinerant Bible Teacher.
Pandita Ramabai

Mrs. Selina Samuel

Ramabai who was conferred the title ‘Pandita’ by the University of Kolkatta, was one of the first few learned Indian women of the 19th century. She was an exceptional Sanskrit scholar and an outstanding linguist. Orphaned by the age of 16, unmarried till the age of 19 (when 8 or 9 was the accepted marriageable age), married to a Bengali lawyer who was a Shudra, in defiance of the caste system, and widowed by 21, she defied all traditions that made a woman in such a predicament to be abused and treated like a slave both by the family and society.

Her parents and a sibling died of starvation and her husband succumbed to cholera. She had academic brilliance and a deep personal experience of pain. She sought for God very sincerely, studied the Hindu scripture most ardently and walked a very determined, lonely path for the social awakening of the society towards its women.

She was born in 1858, the era when women had no identity of their own. Ramabai holds the most unique place in our history for working against all odds to be a ‘woman social reformer’ in a totally man’s world. In 1882 she started the Arya Mahila Samaj for women’s education. It was her efforts that ensured there were women representatives in the National Congress where she gave her most famous speech to the Indian National Social Conference (the forerunner of the National Congress Party).

She shifted to England in 1883 both to study medicine and to teach Sanskrit. The Sisters of Wantage took her in. Their kindness, the study of both secular and religious matters and the spiritual influence left a great mark on her life. On seeing the care and dignity given to destitute and ‘fallen’ women by the Sisters of the Cross she began to study the Christian religion. Though she embraced Christianity as a religion that was intellectually more acceptable, it was only a few years later that she actually understood and accepted the true meaning of following Christ, of implicit faith in Christ and His atonement. She returned to India after about 8 years and started homes for destitute women and child widows in Bombay, Gulbarga, Calcutta and Pune. She established a Christian High school at Gulbarga and her daughter Manorama was the principal.

She established the Sharada Sadan which eventually blossomed into the present ‘Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission’. Mukti was open to all women in need. During a severe famine she rescued widows, orphans and destitute children and women, sometimes providing for as many as 2000 of them. In addition to housing, it had a kindergarten, schools, a hospital, a refuge for “fallen women,” 64 cloth-weaving looms, 5 printing presses, tailoring and handicrafts, a flourmill, an oil press, a laundry, a farm, orchards, and wells. The intention of Mukti was that it will be a place of empowerment and transformation of Indian women. Societal expectations, poverty, culture or gender were no excuses good enough to curb this young girl from working towards a better life for the women of our country.

She devoted 12 years of her life to the Marathi translation of the Bible because she believed that the key to India’s transformation was Christian women sharing their lives and the Bible with their fellow countrywomen.

Mrs. Selina Samuel is a freelance editor/writer.
Girls, Boys and the Census 2011

Mr. Raaj Mondol

The provisional results of the recently concluded Census of India 2011 show that the national child sex ratio (0-6 years) has come down to the lowest since independence at 914 girls to 1000 boys. Some of the states have even registered lower at 830, 846 and 859. In spite of all the awareness programs and schemes launched by the government and civil society organizations (CSOs), the declining child sex ratio is a matter of grave concern. This scenario in our country throws up important questions regarding some of the key assumptions and paradigms concerning development. It would be good to examine some of the key premises of Development and study their consequent results.

1. Population is the problem: Reducing the rising population is the only solution

Feeling threatened by the rising population in the Third world countries the developed nations had promoted population control as the best measure to ensure development in the poorer economies of the world. The 1960s and 70s witnessed large amount of Western funds channelled towards population control programs. Western planners felt that if a family planning approach could work in India then it would work anywhere in the world. The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) began the amniocentesis tests in 1975 to test foetal abnormalities. Soon it became a means to pin point the sex of the child in the womb. The doctors felt that the sex selection tests were a great boon for population control drive in the country. These tests were freely available at the government hospitals and were in great demand by parents desirous to have only a male child. By early 1980s it had become common and was commonly referred as “Sex tests” and the private doctors and clinics also started offering the service. With the coming of ultrasound machines the test procedures became even simpler and more accessible. The 2011 census has recorded 37.25 million less women than the male population in India.

2. Women’s Reproductive Rights = Right to Abortion = Women’s empowerment

In the 1960s and 70s the movement for women’s emancipation espoused for equal rights and justice for women. The right of the woman over her own body and her reproductive functions was one of the key demands. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971 through which abortion was legalized in India was thus hailed as a major victory in terms of women’s rights.

In a country obsessed with son preference this Act virtually opened doors for a widespread misuse of the provisions of the Act through sex selective abortions. The Census results in the ensuing decades have shown that in a largely patriarchal society the so called right of woman to have abortion has in fact become a handy tool in the hands of her husband and family to force abortion through foetal sex determination. It also poses a big question before us whether our concern about the genocide of females through sex selective abortions arises only because of the girl babies being eliminated or should our concern include the large scale killing of the unborn children in our land irrespective of their sex? The other question to ask is whether women empowerment is to be seen only in terms of a woman’s right to abort or her empowerment would also give her the right and decision making power to continue with her own pregnancy if she so desires and bear forth the child irrespective of the sex of the child?
3. Education and economic progress are keys to development

This is one of the most familiar axioms and premise of development practice around the world. Education and economic upliftment have been seen as the sure-shot panacea for all social problems and way towards development. The reality of female foeticide forces us to question this premise. Contrary to public perception, higher education or economic prosperity does not necessarily translate into gender sensitivity. More female foetuses are snuffed out in rich and educated homes. The most developed and prosperous states like Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Delhi have the worst sex ratios.

Rethinking Development

Therefore we need to rethink our assumptions and approach towards development based upon a Biblical understanding of life and society. The above mentioned developmental premises are borne out of a Secular Development Paradigm which is mostly a materialistic approach to development that leaves out God and the non-material sphere outside its purview.

According to materialistic philosophy matter is only what matters. People are viewed only as consumer of the material resources which are finite and depleting fast. Therefore growing population is seen as threat or a problem and solution is found in reducing the growing numbers. The Biblical perspective sees people not as problems but as part of the solution. Human beings are created in the image of God and are bestowed with creativity and intelligence to find creative solutions to the problems. Created world has infinite possibilities and potential if seen from God’s perspective. India’s large young population is therefore a great resource which has the potential to create and generate new ideas and inventions to lift people out of poverty and provide a big power house of human resources for the whole world battling with the threat of an ageing population. Championing the reproductive rights of a woman cannot exclude the right of the unborn child. It is not just a woman’s rights issue or question of women’s emancipation but it should in fact be viewed as a human rights issue. Each human life has value and dignity and all of us must fight to guard against its violation in any form. The life of the unborn child is one of the most vulnerable and voiceless. The Bible exhorts us to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves (Prov. 31:8). Mothers are specially gifted and endowed by God to be the best protector and nurturer of a new life through her reproductive functions. By giving birth to a child she protects and ensures the right of life to the newly born which is the basic right of all human beings. Both parents owe it to their child to be her first protector.

Education and economic progress is not enough: Transforming the worldviews and cultural mindsets are essential

Education and economic progress are not the magical wand to eradicate all social evils. Without a moral and ethical framework, education and economic progress will only produce more sophisticated and enlightened forms of greed, exploitation, cheating and corruption. Our interventions in development need to incorporate the task of changing mindsets and transforming worldviews of the people in accordance to the revealed truth in God’s word. These include respect and value for human life and dignity, equal treatment of both sexes, and the practice of doing unto others what we would like to be done unto ourselves. Our approach to development must be shaped by an integral understanding of God and his purposes, human beings and the rest of the creation as revealed in the common revelation of Creation and the specific revelation given in his Word.

Mr. Raaj Mondol is the Team Leader of Salt Initiatives an organization involved in community transformation through Biblical worldview and wholistic ministry engagement.
The Paradox of Poverty Measurement

Dr. Bonnie Miriam Jacob

The poverty line in India has mostly remained a contentious issue. According to the Press Notes on Poverty Estimates released in March 2012, the country witnessed a 7.3 per cent reduction in poverty in the last five years. From 37.2 percent of the population below poverty line in 2004-05, it was found that by 2009-10 it declined to 29.9 percent. When we translate these percentages to absolute figures we find that there are only 35.46 crore people below poverty line compared to 40.72 crore in 2004-05.¹ In other words, about five crore people were lifted out of poverty in just five years. Though this looked impressive in the face of it, it became a very contentious issue.

But why did the government come under sharp criticism particularly when we saw numbers drop? The main contention was on the fixation of poverty line. The Planning Commission fixed the daily consumption expenditure for an individual in urban areas at Rs. 28.35 and in rural areas at Rs. 22.42.² By fixing this amount as the poverty line the government has, in a quick sweep, lifted crores of people out of poverty. It was on account of this that the country witnessed vociferous outbursts against the government for this insensitive fixation. There were arguments on either side and the debate remained inconclusive. The primary issue was that the amount fixed was far too less considering basic needs of individuals and inflation. While each country has its own standards of fixing poverty line, international bodies like the United Nations has pegged it at $1.25 per day which amounts to roughly Rs.65. In comparison India’s poverty line fails to even reach a half way mark by world standards to meet basic needs of the poor.

How significant is the whole poverty line issue and the debates that surround the current dilemma? To put matters into perspective it will be good for us to understand the need for a measurement of poverty. Poverty measurement is significant in that it is indicative of development in the country, the extent to which the gains of economic growth have benefitted people and how policies and programmes have been effective in reducing poverty in the country. A Poverty Line marks a person’s expenditure on daily consumption and is used by governments to identify the poor in the country. Thus a fair poverty line is helpful in assessing the real state of the nation with regard to deprivation. Several committees such as the Lakdawala Committee, the Saxena Committee, the Sengupta Committee and more recently the Tendulkar Committee constituted by the Indian government over the years have worked hard with due credit to arrive at this fair amount including from where our current numbers are derived. And yet any discussion on their definition of poverty or recommendations is pointless considering that no major changes were made by any of these committees other than the basic oscillation of small number changes in terms of consumption level or consumption expenditure. Most have not even tried to enlarge the scope of what constitutes poverty. And therefore what we witness despite poverty reduction always being high in every government’s agenda is continued multiple deprivations with no significant change for the poor and marginalized except that from the governance perspective poverty figures seem to improve over the years. Moreover with inflation skyrocketing traversing between the lines does not even make a marginal difference in the lives of the poor who are the subject of all these committees and discussions.

The trickledown theory that has been so robustly advocated in the face contradicting realities of economic growth and intense deprivation has not been able to significantly reduce poverty. Therefore the current decline in poverty numbers cannot be the cause for

any exultation considering 65 years of independent India’s government providing focused poverty reduction interventions and over two decades of impressive and sustained economic growth. Though there has been infrastructure improvement, more employment opportunities for the educated urban youth, more disposable income per individual than we have ever experienced before, poverty reduction outcomes have not kept pace. Rather we have had inequality increasing meaning the rich have got richer while the poor poorer. This is revealed by the Gini coefficient, a measure used to depict equality/inequality basically in terms of income distribution. Measuring on a scale of 0-1, perfect equality is indicated by 0 while 1 is maximum inequality. During the last two decades when poverty declined marginally inequality rose sharply from 0.35 to 0.37.\(^3\) In such a context the controversy on poverty line is not something that can be addressed easily particularly when the scope of the arguments is confined just to consumption.

In such a context, it is better to consider alternative approaches to address the issue of poverty and inequality. In 2011 Human Development Report from UNDP chose MPI (Multidimensional Poverty Index) as a measure of poverty. The UN report said that India had the world’s largest number of multidimensionally poor, more than half of the population, at 612 million. MPI is an international measure of acute poverty covering 109 developing countries and measures serious deficits in health, education and living standards, looking at both the number of deprived people and the intensity of their deprivations.\(^4\) The MPI complements income-based poverty measures by reflecting the multiple deprivations that people face at the same time. It uses ten indicators across three dimensions, as shown in the diagram.

This whole effort of looking at poverty from all these dimensions affords more dignity to the poor and their basic needs which are often missing in our own discussions and debates. Considering only minimal requirements as essential benchmarks to measure poverty is taking a narrow approach. A major justification in the face of the low poverty line was the many government schemes and programmes available for the poor and marginalized which cover several of these indicators. But governance standards have only been falling with extremely poor delivery. A critical question with the new poverty numbers would be, have we narrowed our inclusive factors even further for those who are within the poverty brackets while broadening the possibility of exclusion. Is India quick to construct for itself numbers which are acceptable and in the process only reduce the number of poor and not reduce poverty per se? The basic requirements of the poor are most often not met despite all the government provisions. So it is all the more pertinent that even if the government offers welfare programmes for the people, the poverty line should be broadened.

Surely Indian policy makers need to arrive at a more realistic definition of poverty line for the country which appropriately factors in various dimensions of deprivations that people face. It is time India moved away from barely sustaining people to a more progressive measure of poverty and effect better ways of addressing it.

*Dr. Bonnie Miriam Jacob works in EFICOR.*

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\(^4\) MPI was developed by Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) for United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for Human Development Report.
A New Social Order

An unprecedented flood resulted in a new social order and hazard management style. The desert district of Rajasthan, Barmer has not only recovered from the flood devastation but also put in place a mechanism that would insure them from future hazards.

Welcome to House No. 301! It is the landmark of Sheo village in Barmer. Pushpa Devi, the proud owner of this house and a mother of two sons, symbolizes how Barmer district crawled out of the devastating flood of 2006 using local wisdom, solidarity and support. The smile on her face is reassuring: the district’s flood victims are confident of fighting this hazard again.

When she asked for a house under the Barmer Aashray Yojana (BAY) in January 2007, a joint rehabilitation programme of Sustainable Environment and Ecological Development Society (SEEDS India), Christian Aid and the European Commission Humanitarian Aid, the programme was nearing completion with 300 houses built and handed over to people who lost their homes in the flood. She came as a test for the programme’s social inclusion objective. The Village Development Committee (VDC), set up under the programme to manage the rehabilitation, vouched for her need. They took a collective decision to construct a house for her using left over materials, voluntary labour and free services from the masons. In the end they created a monument of their solidarity.

BAY OF HOPE

Barmer district is located in the middle of Thar Desert. The state’s desert areas got unprecedented rains on 21 August 2006. Barmer district received 577 mm of rainfall in three days, which is more than double of its annual rainfall of 277mm. The district had never experienced such high rainfall and there was no disaster management mechanism to fight flood. The thick gypsum layer beneath the soil did not allow the rainwater to percolate thereby causing water logging. So most of the villages remained submerged in water for more than a month. Out of the 100 villages affected by floods in the district, Kavas, Malua, Bhadaka and Shiv were the worst affected. In these villages 95 percent of the population became homeless and moved to higher sand dunes.

SEEDS decided to build intermediate shelter against temporary houses as these offered better living conditions and greater strength. In addition to it, these shelters could also be gradually altered by beneficiary families to permanent housing. The BAY (Barmer Aashray Yojana) focused on sustainable shelter provisions. Under this programme it constructed 300 houses in 15 flood affected villages within six months. The key objective was to provide immediate shelter to the marginalized and socially excluded families. Women-headed households and people with disabilities got preference under the programme.

SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Community participation was a key condition in the programme. To ensure this and more local supervision of the construction works in each village, a VDC was set up consisting of 6-10 villagers. The members of the VDC included community representatives, teachers, Sarpanch and some were chosen by the villagers by consensus. This team had the responsibility to keep the accounts and monitor the development of construction in each village. The beneficiaries
were finalized in consultation with the VDC. The beneficiaries also actively participated in the construction of their houses. They supervised the construction work and also got engaged in some of the works like digging at the site and bringing water for the construction.

Local architectural style and environmental factors were deciding factors in designing the houses. Traditional houses were made of mud, circular in design and had thatched roofs, whereas new houses were mud stabilized with five percent cement, circular with interlocking blocks, proper foundations, structural bands for strength, and thatched roofs for thermal comfort. More precautionary features were added to insure the houses from future hazards. The traditional circular structure of houses in the district is to withstand sandstorms which are frequent in the area. The door of the house opens outside rather than inside because in case of any disaster, this kind of door makes escape easier and frees some extra space inside the house. The composition of the blocks used in the house construction enables the wind to pass through and keep the house cool. In the low-lying areas platform of the house was raised to a safe height so that water does not enter the house.

The programme aimed not only to provide shelter but also to rebuild local livelihoods. For the massive construction works, the programme used the flood victims by training them in specialized masonry works. Local masons were identified from the area and trained in masonry skills along with technical knowledge on the safe construction (flood and earthquake resistant houses) and block making. The masons were also given tool-kits. Community workers managed five manual machines and four strategically located block fabrication units. There was a team of highly skilled construction workers which guided them throughout the construction work.

New houses and an unexpected hazard have scripted a new social life. Rewant Singh and Chutada Ram, two residents of New Kotra village, are happy to be recognised as the best masons in the region. Earlier they used to work individually and take up little construction work in the village. Today they work with their own team of workers and can take up big construction assignments. Rewant Singh is involved in construction work for Suzlon, a multi-national company that is setting up windmills in the area. Chutada Ram is taking up construction work for the government and has even gone to Orissa to help construction there in cyclone prone areas.

New Kotra has also emerged as a model village. It is the only village which has been relocated out of the 15 villages under the programme. The residents from Jalela village were relocated to this new village. SEEDS built 65 houses for equal number of families in the village. With a new village, a new social order has been engineered. New Kotra villagers decided to do away with caste segregation in village habitation planning. Keeping with the SEEDS campaign of safe construction practices and culturally and environmentally friendly houses, the foundation of the houses are built in ascending order of height from the roadside to keep it in proportion to the sea level. This means that the houses are better protected from natural disasters, such as floods.

(Adapted from the book ‘Turning the Tide: Good Practices in Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction’, published by EFICOR and Sphere India, 2010, p.49-51).
**BOOK REVIEW**

**Dr. Varaprasad**

Biography or even an interpretative study of a personality highlighting the role and contribution of an individual to the social, economic and political transformation of his nation in his generation is an excellent bridge between the present and the past. A balanced analysis of a persona belonging to the exploited communities is even more imperative and interesting as it brings to light the struggle for justice vis-à-vis the power structures of the dominant. Moreover, every new study adds its color to the rich tapestry of our perspective of the individual. Jonathan Rieder’s depiction of Martin Luther King Jr.’s life does just that besides being an addition to the monumental studies by David Garrow, Taylor Branch and Clayborne Carson in addition to a host of others.

Rieder maintains that this book is neither biography nor history nor even theology but an interpretive effort to understand a complex man - not the deep thinker or the inspiring doer, but the fluent speaker who did inspiring things with his words (p.3), thus perhaps the title—*The Word of the Lord is Upon Me*. Underscoring that his approach of understanding King through sermons, speeches, confessions, and lamentations is risking an impression that there was no “real” King, Rieder acknowledges that King exhibited remarkable constancy in all of them. Reviewing Rieder’s work on King is thus as interesting and complex as the very life of King for its depth and breadth as it delightfully unfolds one of the most multifaceted lives of not only the twentieth century but of all times.

Using Martin Luther King Jr.’s reflective and philosophical statement that “I am sorry, you don’t know me” as a backdrop, Rieder raises a pertinent question of who exactly was King and proposes the following in the opening pages of the book: An apostle of agape love; An angry prophet who chastised America that it has lot of repenting to do; A fierce Moses who led liberation of African Americans, an Uncle Tom who zealously turned the other cheek; A silky smooth ambassador to whites decorously translating the black experience into familiar terms that might gently stir the white conscience; Or the black preacher whose intensities could not be masked by the refinements of white theology. He goes on to posit that besides being a bit of all these, he is much more: an exhorter, a guide, translator, therapist, emissary…who had an uncanny ability to glide in and out of black, white and other idioms and identities in an elaborate dance of empathy. Straddling audiences, he blurred not just the lines between them but their very meaning. Equally importantly for Rieder, King blended all sorts of oppositions—black and white, raw and refined, sacred and secular, prophetic and pragmatic. He even goes to the extent of stating that King was a Christian warrior and a prince of peace who made the word of freedom flesh.

Reider then sets the stage for a splendid journey through the life of King with the following insightful description: “Despite all the efforts to grasp ‘the real King,’ that King was never reducible to this or that idiom, source, or inflection. The key lay in the substance of his argument and the commitments that animated it. Ultimately, words were not as important as the Word. The constant lay beyond language, beyond performance, beyond race. The
core of the man was the power of his faith, his love of humanity, and an irrepressible resolve to free black people, and other people too. This was the basic truth that no fancy scholarship can improve on. The best we can do is plumb that truth in its artful intricacy.”

After providing a brilliant backdrop focusing on King’s artistry of argument, his life is delineated in four parts, each one highlighting a major dimension such as inside the circle of the tribe, son of a black preacher, King in the mass meetings, and crossing over into the beloved community. And each of these parts is further divided into fine chapters. The book goes on to describe the amazing life of King with panache and finesse beginning with how he made a decisive choice to be committed to his identity and brotherhood.

King’s encounter with racist slurs in his formative years left a deep impact on his commitment to his community. The geometry of belonging, as Rieder calls it, to his community grew in its intensity from his school days when, at the age of 13 he spoke on “Race and Constitution” in a competition and thereafter as he moved from Morehouse College in Atlanta to Crozer Seminary in Rochester, New York and then finally to Boston University. During this period he straddled the worlds of race and real men, immediate and the universal brotherhood and backstage and blackstage as Rieder puts it.

As the son of a black preacher he did not confine his commitment to his folks but transcended to reaching out to the whites as he strived to strike a fine balance between the “raw” and “refined”. King brought the voices and struggles of his community right into his preaching with a purpose to motivate them and to create a political, social and economic space.

The King in mass meetings, beginning with the pulpit and moving to the podium and finally to the political rallies, narrowed the gulf between the spiritual sermons and political sermons. At the heart of all his speeches is his beloved community, which he viewed as a people who had the courage to stand up for their rights. The core of the physics of deliverance, as Rieder rightly posits, is God whom he brought not only into Afro-American history but also from the churches to the streets and citadels of power.

In doing so, King motivated his people to be audacious; meet the physical force with spiritual force and; be willing to bear the cross saying that there can be no crown without the cross. In all this he led them from the front.

Furthermore, for Rieder, King’s forte was his ability to console and provoke his community and convince and inspire the dominant community as he practiced what he preached. He went on to advocate that black spiritual power is the only solution for white moral incompetence. Rieder keeps the best of King’s artistry of argument for the end where he unpacks “I Have a Dream” speech in the closing pages of the book distilling all that King advocated throughout his life: The single garment of destiny, where everyone is equal and interdependent; Not the color of the skin but the content of character that matters; We will not be satisfied until justice rolls like a stream; Not to wallow in the valley of despair but to hew a rock of hope out of a mountain of despair and finally ending with the prophetic hope of “Free at last, free at last.”

Is there any lesson for the Indian Christian community from King’s life? One important lesson that the Indian church can draw from his life is to emulate this rarest of the rare pastors, who went beyond the parish into the public domain and bridged the great chasm between the spiritual and the social, and personal and political realms through his speeches, writings and civil liberties movement.

Indian Church desperately needs its own King who can instill the idea that all Indians are equal and must have equal access to educational, social, economic and political spaces and lead a movement to ensure that we are indeed “free at last and free at last” from the scourge of retrograde social evils that continue to subtly plague contemporary India.

Dr. Varaprasad is a teacher.
Cosmic Catastrophe and Caring for Creation

Rev. Kennedy Dhanabalan

The last Bible Study in ‘Right to Food’ issue looked at “Caring for Creation” where God wants us to be good stewards and keepers of creation (Shamar approach as found in Genesis 2:15). This study will look at specific passages, used by proponents at the other end of the spectrum who insist that this world is going to be destroyed, so caring for the earth is a waste of time. We will look at the scriptures as well to understand that destroying the earth is a serious violation of God’s plan.

I. “There are people who regard it as frivolous and some Christians think it impious for anyone to hope and prepare for a better earthly future. They think that the meaning of present events is chaos, disorder and catastrophe; and in resignation or pious escapism they surrender all responsibility for reconstruction and for future generations. It may be that the Day of Judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case, we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before.”

- D. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. E. Bethke (1953), 16-17

1. What is your reflection of this statement?
2. What is the Biblical basis for Bonhoeffer to make such a statement?

II. Read Romans 8:19–23.

Jonathan Moo says, “Paul’s understanding of the cosmic new creation….is fundamentally the same created world that finds its purposes fulfilled and its hopes realized when it is released from its slavery to ruin and brought into the freedom of the glory of the children of God”.

A standard view often expressed is that “The earth is going to be destroyed so why should we care for the earth?”

1. Compare and contrast these two views.
2. How does our understanding of new creation inform and influence our thinking and action in caring for creation?

III. Read II Peter 3:10–13.

Verse 10 reads, “the outer heavens are torn away, the intermediary heavenly bodies are dissolved with fire, and then the earth and all the deeds of human beings are laid bare before God, being ‘found’ before him, with nothing to separate them from the testing of fire of his judgment.” (Translation by Jonathan Moo taking into consideration translation of Anchor Bible, Pillar New Testament Commentary, Abington New Testament commentaries and Theophilus of Antioch).

The meaning derived from the above verse is that the earth bares itself before God, to reveal everything as it is, and to leave human beings and their works without any place to hide. Al Wolters commenting on II Peter 3: 7, 10, and 12 says, the fire must be envisioned as a purifying fire that destroys human evil but leaves everything else intact or renewed.

1. Do you agree with the statement? And why?
2. Reflect from Bonhoeffer’s statement and the translation given here. Is there a similarity in understanding?

The passage in Peter clearly explains that fire does not destroy the earth, but human evil does. Revelation also reveals that those who destroy the earth will be judged (Revelation 11:18). The imagery of the redeemed earth as explained in Zechariah 8:12 shows abundant produce of fruits and crops. If this has to be realized then the mission for us will be to work towards making this earth a better place. Climate Change looming over our heads, causing drought, floods and other disasters it is important that we care for the creation eventually leading to the realization of the Lord’s rule.

(Adapted from the paper “Environmental Unsustainability and a Biblical Vision of the Earth’s Future” by Jonathan Moo.)

Rev. Kennedy Dhanabalan is the Executive Director of EFICOR.
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Ideas for Action

As an Individual

- You can help the poor and the needy with the issues they face in their daily life by accessing information from the Government using RTI.

- Support a Christian person or organization working in a slum or with other marginalized community. Meet them, find out their needs and offer help if filing RTI would offer a solution for the community.

- You can get people involved in exercising their rights by helping them in filing RTI.

- You can share information about procedures of filing RTI to the wider community.

As a Church

- You can pray for social needs and urban problems in your neighbourhood and city in your Church Prayer/cell meetings.

- Invite a person involved with the urban poor to share his/her experiences in your Church.

- Consider ways in which your Church could respond to the needs of slum communities nearby or support an existing Christian project in a slum.

- As church leaders you may challenge youth in your church to file at least one RTI for a needy person.

- Organize workshops/documentaries/short films to create awareness on RTI and portray the success stories of using RTI for the poor communities.

- Your church can start an RTI cell that could function to identify the needy ones like – widows, physically challenged, the aged, etc who were deprived of their due share of Government welfare schemes.

- Like blood donation camps, your church may organize an RTI filing camp for the poor and the needy.

- Display on the church notice board information of PIO’s (Public Information Officer) and their related departments so that people will be aware about who to approach.

- Sponsor the cost of register posts and postal orders for the very poor and needy people who are filing RTI.