Jesuit Higher Education in Southern India: A Revolution in the Making

John Izzo, S.J.
JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN INDIA: A REVOLUTION IN THE MAKING

By John Izzo, S.J.

The option is a direct challenge to casteism, and this creates a dangerous environment for the Jesuits and their work, both from without and from within. Since 1978, at least 18 nuns, brothers, and priests, including five Jesuits, have been murdered working with the Indian subcontinent’s poor.

Liberty to captives

While the Indian subcontinent undergoes seismic social reconfigurations, emerging into the twenty-first century as a major economic, political, and spiritual force, Jesuit higher education in Southern India is reconfiguring itself to challenge India’s multi-dimensional structures of social injustice and spearhead new educational models for India and other parts of the world. According to Madras’s Jesuits, they have shifted the paradigm away from traditional educational models to match today’s needs.

“We’re starting a revolution here,” Fr. Xavier Alphonse, S.J., exclaimed after a grueling 14-hour workshop. Xavier Alphonse is the founding director of the Madras Centre for Research and Development of Community Education (MCRDCE) in Tamil Nadu, India’s southernmost state, and home to the Madras Jesuit Province. MCRDCE, which sponsored the workshop, is one arm in the multi-dimensional transformation taking place in Madras’s higher education system. On the surface the Jesuit colleges and universities do not appear revolutionary. They seem quite ordinary, much like their American counterparts. But appearances say little of their radical policies or the oppressive underbelly of Hindu conservatism that threatens the process—threateners not only the schools but the Jesuits themselves.

The province of 574 men runs four university-colleges, a teacher-training college and a community college among its more than 30 apostolates. The five colleges...
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The colleges attracted the well-to-do, mostly higher-caste Yankees, and prepared them to succeed in business, education, and politics. "The best came in," wrote Francis Xavier, "and left as the best. [But] What have Bhanus done to change the face of India? Our influence, though education, has been minimal. In times of crisis how many stood with us or raised their voices? Anti-conversion bills (seek anti-Christianism) were introduced with little or no opposition. How many registered their objection? We helped them come up in life, climb the social ladder. Have we instilled in them a spark of fire for social concern or for socio-religious harmony? Have we formed them to be the voice of the voiceless? In fact, to the Catholic schools' chagrin, their graduates have been among those leaders cutting off funding for Catholic schools and promoting anti-conversion laws to curtail the Church's work.

While Indian law guarantees schooling to the age of 14, many Dalits and Tribals are denied part or all of their education. A Dalit Joshi with a B.D. in Economics tells how, as a 15-year-old, his parents were chastised at their thatched-roof mud house by caste villagers for allowing him to read. The last thing traditional caste people want is for Dalits and Tribals to become educated, self-sufficient, and demanding of their rights. These Dalits and Tribals, over 25 percent of India's population, are the most disadvantaged of India's 1.1 billion people. Traditionally they have been the most poorly represented in Jesuit schools.

Dalit Catholics are the worst off of all. As Christians, they are technically outside the legal caste system and not eligible for government aid. But as Dalits they are oppressed and exploited by caste people. And within the Church they are cheated and exploited by caste Catholics, denied equality within parish communities, refused full participation in religious celebrations, until recently excluded from seminaries and religious orders, and denied responsibility in Jesuit colleges.

Caste and the colleges

French Jesuits founded India's first Catholic college at Tolly Town in 1661 to educate poor Catholics for upward mobility and responsible citizenship. Their goal was to overcome ignorance, illiteracy and superstition. But in time college admittance became dependent on examinations and school records, excluding those who could not afford private schools.

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Rumbles and reactions

The winds of change blew over the Madurai Province with the 53rd General Congregation," wrote Dr. Rajamuthum, S.J., Madurai Province Coordinator of Higher Education. The worldwide 1960s-and-70s awakening of Jesuit
The motto: Towards Liberation Together with the poor/Dalits

Ready or not, in 1991 Fr. Provincial Athanasios Imucasan promulgated a province-wide policy on higher education, binding on all five colleges and universities, but it took another 10 years before the “policy” became effective. It was revised in 1998, and again in 2001-02, and now, after more than two decades of active and passive resistance, Madurai is aggressively implementing it. The Policy details a preferential “Option,” in the light of the Gospel and Ignatian Magis, meaning the colleges will preferentially, not exclusively, admit and minister to the poor, especially Catholic Dalits, and the Jesuits will cast their lot with them.

Policy points

- strive for academic excellence—where excellence is defined as maximally developing the latent potential in each student
- form men and women integrally as agents of social change working to establish a just society, focusing on the excluded and the marginalized
- impart religious, moral, and ethical values
- Catholics study doctrine, other Christians Bible study; and non-Christians ethics
- all exposed to human rights and social analysis
- classes take multi-day field trips to Dalit and Tribal villages; work for the urban poor
- faculty lead and accompany students, and make annual two-day retreats
- engage in research and work for the improvement of the environment and the betterment of the poor and disadvantaged
- outreach extension centers for the urban and rural poor within each school’s locale
- Spiritual direction and instructional programs for alumni/ae—to raise awareness and engender deeper faith commitment to the Option

Admissions

- no Catholic Dalit or Tribal undergraduate denied admission
- student body at least 5 percent Catholic
- preference to first-generation applicants, local and rural students
- 25 percent reserved for poor
- 50 percent for minorities
- Order of priority for undergraduates:
  - Catholic Dalits and Tribals
  - Catholic non-Dalits or Tribals

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• other Dalits or Tribals
• non-Catholic lower castes
• others
• 25 percent graduate seats reserved for Catholic Dalits
• 25 percent graduate seats reserved for Catholic women.

In hiring faculty, preferences are given to Catholics, Dalit Catholics, first-generation learners, rural residents, locals, and for those having a Jesuit vision. The non-teaching staff is appointed according to the same preferences as for student admissions.

Road blocks

The Policy’s implementation has uncovered problems. Many Dalit and Tribal students, even the brighter and better-schooled, are not prepared emotionally, socially, or psychologically for university life. They come from backgrounds where there is no hope or expectation of higher education, professional training, salaried employment, or careers. The Policy calls for extensive tracking, counseling, remedial programs, and tutoring, but this is not enough. Upon graduating, some do not know what to do. They have no experience with job-hunting, interviewing, etc. They return to their villages—educated beggars. Throughout India there are about 45 million educated unemployed. Tamil Nadu alone has about 5 million.

Reaching beyond — People’s Colleges

Even with the Option, Madurai’s colleges reach only a few of their targeted population. Nationwide, of 160 million first graders, six million reach college. Of almost 100 million aged 14 to 24, about 7 million have dropped out of school or never attended. In 1995-96, 26 million Indian children dropped out of grades 1–8, and most became child laborers. In Tamil Nadu 50 percent of girls drop out by high school. Dropout rates are highest among Dalits. While general literacy rates in Tamil Nadu are close to 60 percent, literacy among Dalits is about 40% (almost 8 million illiterates), and below 30 percent for Dalit women (4.5 million illiterate Dalit women). But Madurai’s Jesuits are committed to making value-based higher education available to all.

The Madras Centre for Research and Development of Community Education (MCROCE) has created a new community-based higher education model specifically designed for the uneducated, undereducated, and unprepared for education. MCROCE’s community college is an alternative holistic system, formed in collaboration with neighboring communities and local industries. The program is work-oriented and success-oriented. At base it emphasizes living skills—personal skills for self-acceptance, self-esteem, motivation and goal-setting, problem-solving and decision-making, time and stress management; it helps students develop mechanisms for coping with sexuality, loneliness, depression, fear, anxiety, HIV/AIDS, alcohol and substance abuse, failure, criticism and conflict. It provides
training in team work and leadership, and work-environment experience.

As of 2004, 81 community colleges had begun in India, with 35 more planned. To date, they have served about 35,000 students, over 70 percent of them women. Seventy-five percent of the graduates have moved into employment, and 16 percent to higher education. Xavier Alphonse was invited to present the ICE model to South Africa.

Threats from without

The Option is a direct challenge to casteism, and this creates a dangerous environment for the Jesuits and their work, both from without and from within. Since 1978, at least 18 Jesuits, including five Jesuits, have been murdered working with the Indian subcontinent's poor. It is estimated that over 30 have been arrested, tortured, or abused. In September, 2004, in Kerala, five Missionaries of Charity were viciously attacked with iron rods and chains on their way to a Dalit community. In Tamil Nadu one Jesuit has been arrested four times, tortured and accused of attempted murder because he is helping Dalits whose land was stolen by caste villagers.

The fundamental problem is economics. In Tamil Nadu, where 66 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture for its living, land owners need cheap dependent labor. This need is addressed by the caste system which enables a tiny minority to control the rest of Indian society through successive layers, each of which dominates the groupings below itself, with Dalits at the bottom. The only occupation most Dalits are qualified for is coolie-work, agricultural day labor. Over 80 percent of Dalit workers are agricultural laborers, but only about 54 percent of the available workers are employed. Tamil Nadu male coolies work about 150 days per year, earning Rs50/day (81.10), barely enough for rice and vegetables. Caste traditionalists and land owners are frightened by the prospects of losing control over this work force.

The principal threat to the Jesuits is the RSS (National Volunteer Force), a militant fascist group, and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), the RSS's political wing which controlled India's Parliament from 1996 to 2004. These fundamentalist forces have been behind India's anti-conversion bills which are used to curtail Christian social workers among the Tribals and Dalits—whether or not there is evangelizing. These anti-conversion laws can give legitimacy to political violence in the eyes of caste people. When the RSS attack Christian workers, the implicit message is: "The Dalits should be untouchable to you too. Leave them alone!"

"We hate the Jesuits," a Tamil Nadu diocesan priest said. "The Jesuits organize the Dalits and they start demanding their rights. There's more hatred now than ever. Maybe so, but there are many parishes in Tamil Nadu where Dalits are not afforded their full legal and canonical rights. Christians are supposed to be outside the Hindu caste system, but the reality is, caste-consciousness has been part and parcel of the Catholic Church for as long as the Church has been part of India."

The main threat to Madurai's Option may be the Jesuits themselves. "One of the powerful obstacles to the option was caste loyalty," wrote former provincial, Michael Jeyaraj. By the 1990s, Jesuit casteism was pushed into the open. "With a whiff of wind," wrote Aloysius Irudayam, "the lid was suddenly opened and laid bare the contradictions, and put us in an embarrassing position. The genie of caste kept tightly sealed for years frightened us."

A 2001 Province poll documented the issue:
- 92 percent said Jesuits take part in caste associations;
- 77 percent said casteism plays a covert role in the province; and most Jesuits operate on a caste basis;
- 52 percent said the Dalit option leads to casteism; 50 percent felt the Dalit option was thrust upon province by a small group;
- 38 percent felt it was too narrow an option, 21 percent said the Dalit option is unchristian.

Today, Madurai Jesuits fall roughly into three categories: Dalits and those who strongly support the Option,
- those who criticize the Dalit Jesuits, their supporters, and the methods by which the Option is implemented,
- those in the middle, Jesuits at either end are hurt, angry, disillusioned, militant, and sometimes mean-spirited. Those in the middle either say nothing, or express cleary.

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confusion, or depression. A “we-them” dynamic has evolved, and there is a noticeable breakdown of trust and communications. Many speak openly only with members of the same caste or sub-group. Faithful in this is, some see it as a sign of force. The problem is in the open, the colleges have changed, and Madurai is paying the price.

Challenge to U.S. Jesuits

When many U.S. Jesuit colleges were founded in the mid-to-late 19th century, there was a need to provide quality education in a Catholic environment for immigrants and their children. But where is the need today? Are there population segments that are not able to take advantage of our present educational system? Could a paradigmatic shift in Jesuit educational thinking open doors of opportunity for today’s marginalized Americans? What if our colleges and universities reached out preferentially to the most disadvantaged and underprivileged, and centered our curricula on a course of studies designed to best help them?

Today, Jesuit colleges and universities provide our students with wonderful opportunities in urban and rural outreach programs, cultural immersion groups, pre-justice activities, volunteer

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Tribal orphans from a Jesusian mountain orphanage.

(Photos credits for this article, John Izzo, S.J.)

service projects, and much more. Our students do exemplary work and discover deep personal rewards for their efforts. But for the most part, these opportunities benefit youth who are able to gain admission to our schools, many of whom are already on path to success when they enter our campuses.

Could an adjunct educational system, analogous to Missionary work, help reach those societal segments for whom finishing high school is a challenge and higher education an unrealistic expectation? Examples of these segments might be found in backwater geographical areas, often rural and less developed; inner cities; gangs; migrant groups; Native American reservations; prisons; certain immigrant communities.

No one in the United States with the desire and ability to better him or herself should be condemned to a life of fear, crime, mediocrity, or misery because traditional educational opportunities appear out of reach or irrelevant. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau statistics, approximately 24 million Americans have no high school diplomas, and another 21 million have high school diplomas but no college. There may be at least 50 million undereducated, unemployable, or underemployed Americans, either for insufficient education or social conditions that do not support a higher education.

Can we justify giving residual attention to these disadvantaged with the argument that we give it a first-class education to some 150,000 of the brightest and most advantaged in society? Can we afford to not offer the best of our talents and resources to those needier people? Should we satisfy ourselves with the belief that we are waiting for them with open arms—if only they will meet our requirements—when the Gospel challenges us to go to them with open arms and meet their requirements. Can we, in conscience, simply shun our shortcomings in response to St. Paul’s challenge to be all things to all people?

And finally, are we willing to pay the price with our students with our alumni and almoners with society-at-large with our faculties and staffs with our fellow Jesuits?