CHAPTER FIVE

HERMENEUTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE LETTER TO PHILEMON
IN THE CASE OF BONDED LABOURERS IN INDIA

Introduction

In the previous chapters we have analyzed the situation of bonded labourers in India. There are various factors that contributed to the pathetic situation of bonded labourers in Indian society. The chapter that dealt with God and human rights elaborately discussed the theme that human person is ‘created in the image and likeness of God”’, and this is the origin of the dignity of every person. Since every human beings are created in the ‘image and likeness’ the bonded labourers also shares the same dignity as ‘creatures of God’. In the modern period through unequal social-economic-cultural systems the dignity of bonded labourers are forgotten or are being put off through various exploitative measures.

This study is meant to analyze the dignity of bonded labourers in India and to apply the hermeneutical implications of the letter to Philemon in the case of bonded labourers. The case of Onesimus, discussed in the letter to Philemon, provided Paul with an opportunity to test his theology against the empirical reality of a concrete situation. This concrete situation presented Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon within their own social and cultural arena, where the circumstances required a consistent theological evaluation (Johnson, Noel 39-40). In the letter to Philemon, Paul shows his unwillingness to consecrate the social roles of his cultural environment. Paul is determined instead to give priority to the familial structure of the church and to the transformation of relationship between persons.

In the letter to Philemon, Paul address a serious issue of class demarcation, and the relationship of the Gospel to such issues. In the letter Paul proposes in the letter the gospel values of love, forgiveness and reconciliation as a remedy to overcome class demarcation in Philemon’s house church. This letter is a source of inspiration for Indian society to overcome or abolish discrimination (social, economic, political and religious) in the form of bonded labour.

98 Hermeneutics may be defined in a broad sense as the theory of interpretation. The contemporary hermeneutics is not concerned with theories of interpretation, rather with the understanding of ‘understanding and its operations’, especially in their relation to the interpretation of the text (Mathew 13).
In this chapter, we will analyze the hermeneutical implications of the letter to Philemon in the case of bonded labour in India, which exploits the poor and the downtrodden. This system of bonded labour needs a response from the part of the church. In this chapter, we will analyze what would Paul of Tarsus say to us today about the issue of bonded labour. To understand the Pauline view on the question of bonded labour the letter to Philemon serves as an instrument.

5.1. Communication of the Bible Message to the Indian Society

Disillusionment with historical criticism\(^99\) which locks a text into the past and prevents it from speaking to our concerns today, has led to the exploration of new and more contextualized ways of reading the Bible (Sanders 3). These shift attention from the author to the text and the reader. Modern hermeneutical theory sees the text not simply as the repository of a static ‘author meaning’, but as an intelligible linguistic structure, with an autonomous ‘text meaning’ of its own. A text has, as Paul Ricoeur has said, semantic autonomy (29-30). Once a text is written down it has a life of its own, and is independent of what the author intended to say. A text will outlive its author, the people for whom it was originally written, the situation it originally addressed. It will go on communicating new meaning to new readers in wholly new situations (like the readers of Indian society).

With a religious text like the Bible its capacity for communicating meaning is augmented by the fact that its language-structure embodies an ordinary experience of the “Absolute” which is inexhaustible, and which can be actualized in many different ways, none of which can claim to be definitive. If every text has a ‘surplus of meaning’ (a capacity to communicate new meaning in new situation well beyond what the author may have intended to say), a religious text like the Bible has this, to an eminent degree (Ricoeur 31-32).

The ‘surplus of meaning’ which a text has is actualized by its readers, each of whom brings to the text his or her own particular perspective and his or her own

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\(^{99}\) Historical criticism, which had emerged as part of the great intellectual revolution of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe in which the modern world was born, was then the dominant, indeed the only academically respectable method of biblical interpretation in use. And historical criticism does not allow for cultural variants. It is a ‘scientific’ method which, like science itself, is objective, free from all cultural particularity. It claims to offer are objective, neutral way of reading a text independent of cultural prejudice or denominational bias. Properly applied it should lead always and everywhere to the ‘true’ meaning of the biblical text which, as historical criticism understands it, is its ‘author meaning’, that is what the author intended to say.
particular concerns. The meaning of a text emerges from the interaction of the text and the reader, so that the paradigm for biblical interpretation is no longer archeology but dialogue. To interpret the Bible does not mean digging out an original author-meaning supposedly hidden in the text under layers of subsequent interpretation; it means entering into a conversation with the text (Gadamer 321-24).

It is along the lines of such hermeneutical conversations between text and the reader, where each one is open to and respects the claims of the other, that an Indian reading of the Bible is to be attempted. An Indian Christian reading will be a reading of the Bible by an interpreter sensitive to the Indian situation and true to the Biblical text. It will be, that is, a true-to-text reading made with an Indian pre-understanding and responsive to Indian concerns.

An Indian reading of the Bible will respect both the historical distance of the text and the specificity of the religious experience it seeks to communicate. An Indian reading of the Bible will not replace an historical criticism reading the text but compliment it.

The complex social reality of India is defined by three conspicuous features: massive poverty, religious plurality\(^\text{100}\), and the oppressive social structure of caste (Murickan 42). These factors are closely related. Poverty in India is not just an economic category, it is a religious value as well. Caste, even in its most degrading form of untouchability, is legitimized by India’s dominant religion and tolerated by others. The social immobility which caste engenders is a major cause of India’s poverty.

An Indian interpretation of the Bible must be attentive to these determinative factors of the Indian situation. In India, a long, self-conscious hermeneutical tradition, unparalleled for its sophistication until the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics in post-Enlightenment Europe, has always maintained that the interpretation of scripture is a religious act whose goal is the enlightenment or liberation of human person. The interpretation of the Bible in India therefore, must be attentive to the above mentioned concerns of Indian society.

Attention to these concerns must be governed by the sensibilities which are Indian. An Indian interpretation of the Bible presupposes an “Indian mind”. There is a

\(^{100}\) All the great religions of the world flourish in India, along with a large number of aboriginal tribal religions and a profusion of psychedelic new cults offering instant salvation, which are mushrooming in a bewildering variety of forms in every corner of the country.
certain ‘attitude to life’, a certain way of experiencing reality, which is distinctively Indian. This Indian mind is the fruit of a long cultural tradition that has shaped Indian civilization. Indian thinking always sees things as part of a whole. Everything is bounded by a context without which it cannot be properly understood (Ramanujan 41-58). A human being is not perceived in isolation, but always as situated in the social context of his or her family and caste. Humankind does not stand alone, but must always be understood as part of the totality of the cosmos. Indian thinking is thus inevitably cosmocentric not anthropocentric.

In its ideological aspect, communication is an encounter where the ideology and identity (self-image) of the communicator and the communicated meet. How efficiently communication take place, depends not only on the communicator but also on the destination of the communication process which is complex in itself. The destination includes first of all the receiver and his capacity to perceive and grasp the ideology and the ‘self-image’ of the communicator. Secondly the destination implies the receiver’s own self-image, his ideology and life situation. Communication realizes itself if the ideological implication of the message is accepted and interiorized by the receiver as he or she decodes it.

It has been stressed that communicating the Word of God should relate itself and be relevant to the joys and hopes, anxieties and despair of men in each social space and time, where it tries to penetrate. This truth has been beautifully brought forth by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* where he relates evangelization to the modern world. “It is impossible to accept that in evangelization one could and should ignore the importance of the problems so much discussed today, concerning justice, liberation, development and peace in the world. This would be to forget the lesson which comes to us from the light of the Gospel, concerning the love of our neighbor who is suffering and in need” (no. 30-31).

It is this stupendous task of adapting the Word of God to existing socio-cultural situation that makes the role of evangelization and catechesis ever challenging.

Here, we must ask what conditions the adaptations of evangelization and catechesis as acts of transmitting the Bible message in a given historic socio-cultural context remains authentic, that is, maintains the fidelity to Christ and his Good News.

It has been mentioned that the communication of the Bible message is universal and universalized. Cutting across centuries and countries, races and
societies, this communication was both creative and influenced by structures. In this process, theology and Christian ideology, while retaining their essentials, underwent changes in their expression and interpreting. Hence we come across various theologies, corresponding to changing times such as Patristic, Scholastic or Dogmatic, Kerygmatic and now we meet with the Liberation Theology in Latin America. How successfully the content of the Christian message is translated and secured feedback depends on how well the ideology hidden within the respective theologies is incorporated into catechesis, liturgy and life witnessing.

5.2. Dignity of Bonded Labourers in the Light of Paul’s Letter to Philemon

The reading of the letter to Philemon assumes that Paul’s primary purpose in writing the letter is to return back Onesimus, the runaway slave to Philemon and to preserve the status quo. Whatever may be Onesimus’ mistake, Paul is ready to compensate for it so that Onesimus can go back to his master. On this reading, Paul validates and sustains the hierarchical order present in the society. But Paul’s purpose in wiring this short letter was not to ensure that a slave could go back to his master but that a Christian in a vulnerable position would be treated as a brother in Christ by another fellow Christian. Such treatment follows not Roman law or social convention but the demands of Christian conduct. In other words, Paul writes primarily to effect reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus, not as master and slave but brothers in the Lord (Thompson 198-99). Indeed, in the letter Paul never speaks of Philemon as a “master” of Onesimus, and of all the others mentioned in the letter. Paul did not seek to restore the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus to its previous status but to redefine their relationship on the entirely new status of the Gospel. Paul does not therefore send Onesimus, the slave back to Philemon, the master; he sends Onesimus, as a ‘brother in Christ’ to Philemon who shares the same dignity.

Defining Onesimus’ identity is important for understanding Pauline theological perspective on slavery within the first century ethos. The status Paul attributes to the insignificant slave within the Christian community is important to understand the dignity of bonded labourers in Indian society. The bonded labourers in Indian society are denied their right to live a dignified life and are subject to discrimination, abuse and economic and social ostracism. Most of the times they do not have their own identity and are forced to live and work for the employer. The first step to understand the dignity of bonded labourers is to help them to find their own
identity. The relationship between Paul and Onesimus is an eye open to look into the issue of bonded labourers in India.

Paul in his letter to Philemon, introduces various designations for Onesimus. He describes Onesimus as “my child” (Philem. 10), “my very heart” (Philem. 12), “a beloved brother” (Philem. 16). These expressions hint at who Onesimus is or may have become for Paul. Examining these expressions, one will be able to learn or gather that Onesimus might not be regarded as a slave anymore in the Christian community. Also, the relationship between Paul-Onesimus and Philemon-Onesimus will show clearly the identity of Onesimus in the Christian community, no more a slave but a ‘brother’.

Furthermore Paul says that Onesimus was ‘useless’ before, but now he is ‘useful’ because he has received a new life and dignity in Christ through baptism and he is also useful for the preaching ministry. Here, one can assume that Paul is trying to insist on the dignity of Onesimus as a new freed person. In the social sense, although Onesimus was a slave as defined by the Roman law, the same Roman law also allowed slaves to obtain their freedom. It is the sacrament of Baptism that gained Onesimus a new status as a freed person. From Paul’s theological viewpoint, Onesimus, a being ‘in Christ’, is no longer a slave. In addition, in Paul’s theological perspective, he refers to spiritual freedom in the first instance rather than physical freedom. The suggestion regarding the actual change of Onesimus from ‘slave’ to ‘brother’ would be proposed to the Christian community based on the principle of the social law on slavery and manumission. Of course, there are some premises for the practice of manumission of a slave. In order to be manumitted from slavery, the slave holder’s consent is required. In Onesimus’ case Paul would request Philemon to free Onesimus. When Onesimus becomes a freed person, he would accomplish the preaching ministry without restriction, thus better than before. Consequently, for Paul, the freedom of Onesimus concerns both a social side and a theological side. In the social side Onesimus changes his status from ‘slave’ to ‘brother’, and in theological sense he becomes the ‘slave of Christ’ and it is no more Philemon who is the master of Onesimus but Christ.

Many scholars today in evaluating the letter to Philemon might not appreciate Paul’s call for universal brotherhood, which was the key demand in the letter. Taking such a gracious stance might have had deleterious social implications. The principal coordinates of Christians are Christ’s lordship over them, which entails their faithful
enslavement to Christ, and God’s fatherhood, in relation to which they are all brothers and sisters in one another.

The identity of Onesimus as “brother” and “useful” is a deciding factor to find out the identity and dignity of bonded labourers in India. Millions of people in India are working as bonded labourers. They do no freedom to choose and live the priorities in their life, instead they are forced to live their life for others, in inhuman conditions. For bonded labourers who live in these exploitative environment the ‘identity’ and ‘dignity’ are not there at all. In the bonded labour system persons are treated as ‘commodities’, who do not have any worth other than as an instrument for work. In this situation the Catholic Social Teachings come to our rescue which affirms that “all have the same human dignity”, irrespective of caste, gender and religion. The sacredness of human dignity emerges from the first pages of the Bible where it affirms that the human person is created in the “image and likeness” of God.

Bonded labourers are also created in the “image and likeness” of God and they have a dignity as “children of God” which have to be respected. According to John Paul II, the person is made in the image and likeness of God and endowed with the precious gift of reason and freedom that are unique in all of creation (CA no. 44). The dignity of bonded labourers as “children of God” gives them the right to life, which is a universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right, and is necessary for the enjoyment of all other rights envisioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The right to life includes: “the right to live with human dignity and all that goes along with it, namely, the bare necessities of life such as adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter, and facilities for reading, writing and expressing oneself in diverse forms, freely moving about and mixing and co-mingling with fellow human beings” (Chunakara 22). Along with the ‘right to life’ bonded labourers have the other non-negotiable rights such as ‘right to physical integrity’ (prohibition of torture and similar treatments or punishments), prohibition of slavery and servitude. The Indian Constitution in Article 21 also secures the right to life of all Indian citizens in all encompassing manner (Tumkur 144-147).

Human rights are indispensable to live one’s own identity as a “children of God” and as a citizen and the denial of such rights leads to the denial of one’s identity and dignity. Unfortunately in the cases of bonded labourers in India, they do not even know their identity and their worth as human persons, mainly because the unjust social system of bonded labour which do not allow the bonded labourers to enjoy their
It is useless to admit that a person has a right to the necessities of life, unless we also do all in our power to supply him or her with means sufficient for his or her livelihood.

As in the letter to Philemon, Paul became an intermediary to show to Philemon and to his household the dignity and identity of Onesimus, as “brother” and “useful”, toddy it is the task of the church to become an intermediary to intercede for the bonded labourers to discover their identity and worth. The church fulfills this mission through her social teachings and social action to implement the teachings.

The Catholic Social Teaching affirms the radical dependence and relatedness of human persons to God that gives a human person the great freedom to be what he or she ought to be. “Our personhood attains its fulfillment in full communion with God” (Peters 126). The relationship means that the human person in reality participates in the life of God. This would involve a life that is lived in reconciliation, forgiveness, solidarity, and equality, and embracing everyone in love and communion. These are the same values that Paul describes in his letter to Philemon as basis for receiving Onesimus as a ‘brother’. Only the values of reconciliation, forgiveness, solidarity, and equality can gain freedom to the bonded labourers and as a result help them to regain their identity as “children of God”.

5.2.1. Reconciliation

Reconciliation is “the heart of the Christian message” (Philpott 135). Most New Testament translations contain some fifteen instances of ‘reconciliation’ or ‘reconcile’, derived from the Greek katallage and katalloso (Philpott 135). The two Greek terms can mean either “an exchange of goods or money or a transformation of enmity and alienation between persons into a state of friendship and peace – that is, right relationships. Both of these meanings converge in the New Testament, which describes God exchanging places with humanity, taking human’s sin upon himself, and defeating it through his death on the cross, thereby freeing humanity to enjoy right relationship with God and with one another.

Paul deploys reconciliation as his central metaphor for expounding the Christian gospel. Paul’s most developed passage on reconciliation is the Second Letter to the Corinthians. According to Paul, God reconciled humanity to Him in Christ, and whoever is reconciled in Christ becomes a ‘new creation’.
The cardinal virtue of reconciliation is mercy. Mercy is the virtue that animates the process of reconciliation, peace is the concept that corresponds to the state of being reconciled. Pope John Paul II declares in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* that “mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission”. For him, mercy is “manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and human person (DM).

At places, John Paul II refers to justice and mercy as being different but complementary. By justice, he often seems to mean equality, rights, just distribution, and deserved punishment. Justice is what is ‘due’ needs to be corrected and tempered by mercy.

In the New Testament, righteousness, justice, and mercy converge to describe the process by which God reconciles His people to Himself and then calls His people to reconcile with one another. Two other New Testament concepts that describe the state of right relationship that results from this reconciliation are Kingdom of God and peace (Philpott 139).

In an ethic of political reconciliation, the transformation of relationships through the redress of wounds is a pursuit that is properly political, though in some ways also properly limited by the political (Philpott 183). Mutual recognition is not only a feature of the justice of right relationship in the present but a mode of repairing right relationships that past wrongs have wounded. In willing the improvement of what is broken, the restorations are matters of mercy. The resulting condition is one of greater peace.

Building socially just institutions is entirely fitting a component of political reconciliation. Building socially just institutions guarantee and uphold human rights. Yet even if victims’ rights were restored, a failure of political orders and its members to recognize their wounds constitute still another wound.

Even when rights are restored in laws and institutions, instances of their violation may well remain forgotten, ignored, or surpassed. Redressing this social ignorance is the goal of the second practice: ‘acknowledgement’. ‘Acknowledgement’ is “an action by which a political official or a body of officials, speaking on behalf of..."
political order, recognizes the victims as having suffered a political injustice, as having been wounded by this political injustice, and as being full citizens again” (Philpott 181).

What acknowledgement accomplishes is a political version of solidarity with the suffering. When the victim receives this recognition, his or her condition of social isolation is alleviated. The most reparative forms of acknowledgement are those in which political officials and onlookers exercise the highest degree of empathy for the victim and provide support for the victim. The acknowledgement offer long term support for the victim’s healing, and encourages integration of the victim into a community from which he may have become alienated.

One of the important wounds that acknowledgement redresses is the lack of human rights. Acknowledgement assists in building socially just institutions by encouraging recognition and legitimacy for human rights.

Along with the restorations, the reparations are also part of the political reconciliation. Reparations are defined as a transfer of money, goods and services to a victim in response to the political injustice. Both government and individual perpetrators can supply reparations. Reparations as conceived here include most of the types outlines in the Basic Principles and Guidelines approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005:

They are first, restitution, which involves restoration, to the degree that it is possible, of liberty, human rights, citizenship, property, and employment to the condition that the victims enjoyed prior to the violation of the human rights; second, compensation in the form of financial payments for any ‘economically assessable damage”; third, rehabilitation, which includes medical care and psychological, legal and social services (Philpott 191).

Punishment is part of the ethic of political reconciliation. Punishment may be justified as the stat’s communication of censure to a perpetrator on behalf of the community’s values. Such a censure invites a broad restoration of the person and relationships that the perpetrator has wounded through his or her act of political injustice. Understood restoratively, punishment is a dimension of the justice that is embodied in reconciliation, animated by mercy, and aiming at peace (Philpott 208).
5.2.3. Christian Solidarity

Solidarity\(^{102}\) is not a vague feeling of compassion. It is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and each individual because we are all responsible for all” (John Paul II, *SRS* no. 38). The term solidarity connects is related to peace and collaboration, in fact, the notion of solidarity lies at the very heart of human development. John Paul II maintains that genuine development must be understood in terms of solidarity (*SRS* no. 33) and recommends the virtue of solidarity as the antidote to sinful and unequal structures.

In the modern world the church promotes Christian solidarity as a means to overcome the various exploitative systems, especially the bonded labour system. Bonded labourers are socially degraded and are subjected to exploitations by the employers. Christian solidarity aims to develop a friendly relationship between workers and employers, because “solidarity as a moral virtue and social attitude that corresponds to the global interdependence”. Each person is connected to and dependent on all humanity, collectively and individually (Irudayam 29). Christian solidarity consists in making ourselves responsible for the welfare of other people with whom we live. In the relationship between the labourers and employers there should be a relationship based on trust. In relationship based on Christian solidarity the employers give benefits to labourers (provide the basic conditions to live a dignified life, create conducive working conditions, and provide a just wage) and the labourers reciprocate with increased response towards the employers by doing justice to their work.

According to Vatican II the basis of human dignity is connected with the principles of solidarity (*GS* no. 25). Solidarity refers to the social responsibility of human beings and implies a rejection of individualism. As a moral agent, people are invited to embrace interdependence and accept responsibility for each other’s well-being. At the heart of this solidarity is the belief that every person is a child of God and a fellow sojourner. The principle of solidarity calls for individuals to put the interest of the larger communities ahead of their own interests. It paves the way for the promotion of the social good that creates a nurturing environment of freedom and humaneness (Verstraeten 133).

\(^{102}\) The term solidarity was not a traditional ecclesiastical concept (Verstraeten, *Solidarity* 133). It was first used in the second half of the 18th century when Adam Ferguson, in his Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767), showed that the division of labour created togetherness or solidarity among people with various capacities or functions in the labour process (Verstraeten, *Debt* 21).
Ironically many programs, that are called ‘development’ are not in line with promoting the authentic and integral development of the human person, especially in the case of bonded labourers. Instead very often they become the source of big and serious challenges resulting in many ways of exploitation, dehumanization, and marginalization of the poor and the bonded labourers. Sometimes they are not actions of individuals; they come from unjust structures of social, political and economic life. In the Indian society there should have programs that promote the integral development of poor and bonded labourers. We need to have the courage of a new solidarity, capable of taking imaginative and effective steps to overcome both dehumanization and the exploitation of bonded labourers.

5.2.3.1. Solidarity and Integral Human Development

The fathers of the Vatican II understood human developments in terms of economic development to which governments all over the world were committed (Gaudium et Spes). They later set out to correct and expand this concept, to produce a more integral and balanced concept of human development. The notion of human development in terms of economic development is quite inadequate. To limit development to its economic aspect alone leads to a subordination of the human person to “the demands of economic planning and selfish profit” (John Paul II, SRS no. 33.2). Pope John Paul II insists that human development is essentially a ‘moral’ matter, not merely an economic one, therefore human development should be built around ‘respect’. And this respect has to be exercised in two distinctive levels: first, there must be respect for the individual person; the person has needs and values that go beyond the purely economic sphere. Secondly, there must be also respect for the cultural identity of whole communities – each ‘people’ as well each ‘person’ (Baum, Ellsberg 144).

For Paul VI, genuine human development includes not only the good of the total person but also the good of all persons (PP no. 14, 42). The link between the individual and the wider society is provided by him when he includes among the criteria of genuine development and increased concern for other and a desire to cooperate with others for the common good (PP no. 21). This is an awareness of ‘radical interdependence’, a realization that persons everywhere are ‘linked together by a common destiny’, and this will motivate people to help each other for the realization of genuine development (John Paul II, SRS no. 26.5).
According to John Paul II interdependence means that we live within a system that determines how we relate to each other in the economic, cultural, political, and religious spheres (SRS no. 38.6). The person who recognizes human interdependence and want to act in an appropriate moral way is called to overcome the distrust of others and to ‘collaborate with them (SRS no. 39.8).

The virtue of solidarity is an ‘attitude’ of commitment to the good of one’s neighbor, coupled with the readiness to sacrifice oneself in the service of the other (SRS no. 38.6). Therefore the virtue of solidarity transforms the interpersonal relationships of individuals with the persons around them. It causes the more powerful to feel responsible for those who are weak and makes them ready to share what they have with them. It leads those who are weak or poor to claim their own rights and work for the good of all (Baum, Ellsberg 148-9). A society that lives without solidarity has “disastrous consequences” for the weaker sections of the society. For example the presence of large number of bonded labourers in India is due to lack of solidarity in the country. A small group of landlords desire profit and power, and create ‘sinful structures’ like bonded labour system to exploit others at any price.

The relationship between the nations are fundamental for the integral development of persons. Nations, like persons, are linked in a system that makes them dependent on each other. Within this international system, the powerful and wealthy nations are morally bound to resist the temptation to dominate, oppress, or exploit others.

The virtue of solidarity provides the foundation for constructing new structures in society, that are based on love, justice and peace. Solidarity gives persons the ability to oppose the desire for profit and power and enables them to work for the good of society as a whole.

5.2.1.2. Solidarity and Co-responsibility

The most important characteristic of a person is that of being created in the image of God nourished by His love. Human beings’ relationship to God must produce effects in their reciprocal behavior. That means one must be realized in the other. The love of God has to find its concrete and most appropriate realization in the love of neighbor. Love of neighbor must therefore animate the growing interdependence between members of a community (Liku Ada 40-43).
Gaudium et Spes (no. 25) emphasizes the unity and interconnection of persons and society. In reality, the personal existence of an individual and society belong so closely together that they intrinsically determine one another. The nature of human person is social and, conversely, human person’s common life in society is realized by consciously and deliberately leading a common life. The fact is, rather, that the realization and development of his personal life require mutual interaction of life in society (Liku Ada 43).

Second chapter of Gaudium et Spes emphasizes quite strongly the fact that the community must allow the person to develop towards his or her fulfillment, this must not be understood in an individualistic sense. The person is also at the service of the community, must share the burden of responsibility for the community, and as far as possible should also share responsibility on the political level. Gaudium et Spes gives a concise statement of the Christological basis of community and of common humanity. In Christ, God calls us to be a community of brothers.

Society is a place where humanization process takes place. Human persons themselves are the immediate source of humanizing effort and its immediate goal. The process of humanizing the world must serve to make human beings more human. Technical progress as such is not the ultimate goal of human life. The real goal of human beings should be justice, brotherly love and a life worthy of human dignity.

Regarding solidarity and co-responsibility, the role of the church is important. The role of the church in setting solidarity in motion has been twofold. First, in a more instrumental way, the church has played a positive role in helping others come to recognize the tragic situation of the poor present in our society. In this way the church has been an instrument for giving voice to the cry of the poor majority, who by their very existence proclaim that today one cannot be human being and disregard the sufferings of millions of other human beings. Secondly, to the extent that the church has itself become a church of the poor, it has become a real symbol of the poor (Sobrino 11). A church incarnate in the world of the poor, that defends their destiny and shares in their lot of persecution and death.

In this way the church shows how it can and must be church today and what its identity is. But it also shows how one can and must be human today and which road leads toward united humankind: it begins by turning to the poor and bearing their poverty (Sobrino 12). The church helps to dissolve isolation between the world of the poor and the world of those who live in affluence.
5.2.3.3. Solidarity and Bonded Labourers

In India the liberation of bonded labourers requires special attention. The solidarity that is proposed in the letter to Philemon is based on the radical freedom of life in Christ. It is the new life in Christ that made Paul abolish the unequal social relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. The solidarity that is based on the person of Christ motivates us to work to liberate Indian society from whatever oppresses and degrades human life and creation (Rogers 180). Our journey with Jesus, serving the poor, enables us to assist in the liberation of the materially poor, of scheduled caste or scheduled tribes, migrants, victims of misguided economic and political development, victims of divisions etc. By living Christian solidarity a person will be able to assist the bonded labourers in the their integral development and liberate them from many dehumanizing and oppressive situations and help them find out their rightful place in the society.

5.2.4. Equality

Human person does not take his or her origin from his or her own individual or collective action, but from God, who created human beings in His image and likeness. Human beings are not equipped with everything they need for developing their bodily and spiritual life. They need others. There are natural inequalities, which are unavoidable such as physical inabilities, intellectual or moral aptitudes, etc. There exists also ‘sinful inequalities’ that affects millions of men and women. These are human made inequalities, which are created by the sinful selfishness of human beings like caste system, colour, social conditions and economic inequalities. These sinful inequalities can be avoided by living a life based on Christ’s gospel.

It is the duty of the church to fight against the inequalities and bring equality in the world. Witness of Christians is an important element to bring about equality in the world. Witness consists in the supreme commitment of a person to the truth which he attests. The duty of the Christian is to take part in the life of the church to proclaim justice and equality. Witness is a profound transmission of faith in words and deeds (Muppala 30-31). There are many ways of being witness to social justice suggested by innumerable documents of the church and other sayings of the Popes. Following are some of the suggestions to promote equality in society.
5.2.4.1. Material and Human Resources

Material resources are meant for all, with the principle of human and supernatural brotherhood (GS, no. 69). This highlights the responsibility of the rich towards the poor, because all the surplus goods must be used in a socially responsible way (Mater et Magistra, no. 161). Operation of material good in a socially responsible way, may exhibit more useful for the welfare of one’s fellowmen. This calls to use one’s excess possessions for the good of society.

It indicates that no one may annex surplus goods solely for his or her own private use when others lack the basic necessities of life (Populorum Progressio, no. 23). Our thought must be concentrated on the scandalous split between an extremely rich, powerful and overfed minority, and an utterly poor, helpless, under nourished majority. Faced with such an unjust distribution of the world’s resources, the church should motivate her members and others to use material possessions in such a way, that through them social justice is practiced.

An equitable distribution of human resources is another way of giving witness to social justice and equality. It is a well known fact that the human resources in the world are not distributed properly, and every human persons do not benefit from them. In a just society priority has to be given to those in greater need. It is the responsibility people those who have been blessed by God with special abilities to use their talents to uplift the downtrodden in society.

5.2.4.2. Elimination of Poverty

Poverty is always a threat to social stability, to economic development and ultimately therefore to peace. Elimination of poverty is an important issue to bring relief and hope to the millions who today live in shameful an unworthy conditions. Poverty is of human making and therefore, it can be undone by different kinds of praxis – more just and humane in relationship and sharing of resources (Muppala 20).

5.2.4.3. Eradication of Caste System

Caste system suppresses individual freedom and denies liberty. In caste system this freedom is limited because there are so many regulations on social contract like marriage, occupation, etc. In general many are slaves of caste system and have lost the freedom which they have a human beings. The church engages herself to
fight against the caste system mentality to protect everyone’s dignity and to establish equality and brotherhood among believers and non-believers.

5.2.4.4. Equality and Bonded Labourers

The question of equality serves as the connecting link and common ground between the question of bonded labourers and the letter to Philemon. In both cases there is an inequality, and this imbalance has to be rectified. As regard to the bonded labourers, the Government is obliged to make available to all its citizens equal opportunities guaranteed by the Constitution of India. From time to time the Government comes up with programmes which will benefit the common people, especially those who are below poverty line (Bonded Labourers). In spite of such efforts, statistics show us that the widening gap between the rich and the poor has not declined but on the contrary, with all the influences of globalization it is only on the increase.

5.2.5. Letter to Philemon Promotes a Civilization of Love and Peace

Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. By His law God does not intend to coerce a human person’s will, but to set it free from everything that could compromise its authentic dignity and its full realization. Basic Ecclesial Communities that help their members to live the Gospel in a spirit of fraternal love and service are a solid starting point for building a new society, the expression of a “civilization of love” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 25).

Church has a mission to reach out to all men and women without distinction, striving to build with them a civilization of love, founded upon the universal values of peace, justice, solidarity and freedom, which find their fulfillment in Christ. He showed what the civilization of love consisted in when he dais that the love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future.

In today’s world of uncertainties, it is necessary to develop a culture of peace. Second Vatican Council emphasizes the importance of peace when it states:

“Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Nor is it brought about
by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called “an enterprise of justice”. Peace results from that harmony built into human society by its divine founder, and actualized by men and women as they thirst after ever greater justice” (Vatican II, GS, no. 78).

Paul VI also in his encyclical Populorum Progressio expresses the idea that excessive economic, social and cultural inequalities arouse tensions and conflicts, and are a danger to peace. Being influenced by Second Vatican and Paul VI, John Paul II further developed these teachings on peace. His main aim was to develop a culture of peace in the minds and hearts of the people, especially among the youth and the children.

Today the promotion of peace and human rights, the protection of ethnic minorities and immigrants, the safeguarding of the environment, the battle against terrible diseases, against political and economic corruption are the main issues that need to be faced globally. Since they concern the entire human community, they must be resolved through common efforts at the international level. It is needed to find a comprehensive and common language fostering the spirit of dialogue. The encounter between faith and reason, between religion and morality, can provide a decisive impulse towards such dialogue and cooperation between peoples, cultures, and religions.

God is the source of peace, and peace is fullness of life in this world and in the world to come. It is a life that is long and deep and based on love, respect and brotherhood.

5.3. Bonded Labourers and their Structural Reforms

The authorities of the East India Company carried out a number of social reforms in Indian society. The Indian Slavery Act (1843) was the first measure which aimed at checking the evil practice of agrarian serfdom (Tiwari 12). Subsequently, before and after independence, different provinces in India enacted

103 Act V of 1843 by which East India Company proclaimed slavery to be illegal within Indian territories. The essential dynamic underlying the decision to enact Act V of 1843 was embarrassingly righteous evangelical drive to abolish slavery wherever it was perceived to exist. With little knowledge or experience of conditions in India, dogmatic reforms who petitioned Parliament and Government ministers would be satisfied with nothing less than a law which proclaimed the end of slavery in India. They paid no heed to the Company’s revenue collectors and magistrates who insisted that slaves in India were often better treated than hired labourers. As a result of parliamentary pressure, the President of the Board of Control, J. C. Hobhouse had no choice but to demand legislative action against slavery (Gardner Cassels 59-87).
legislation on the subject of debt bondage\textsuperscript{104}. The problem of bonded labour received serious attention of the Government and Parliament, before whom were placed Annual Reports of the Commissioner for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from 1951-1974-75, which gave instances of the practice of bonded labour system in one form or the other in various parts of the country (Tiwari 12-13).

In this background, the Government of India in 1975 decided to enact Central Legislation to abolish bonded labour system (Tiwari 12). The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Ordinance was promulgated on 24\textsuperscript{th} October, 1975 and was later replaced by the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act on 9\textsuperscript{th} February 1976. An Act to provide for the abolition of bonded labour system with a view to prevent economic and physical exploitation of the weaker sections of the people (Bishnoi). This Act is a comprehensive piece of legislation which not only defines the practice of bonded labour in broad terms and see to abolish it, but also provides for the cancellation of bonded debt. A notable feature consists in the provisions relating to the rehabilitation of freed bonded labourers (Tiwari 13).

The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act abolished the system of bonded labour and the bonded labourers were freed and discharged from any obligation to render any bonded labour and their debts were also extinguished. With regard to the well being of the bonded labourers the Union Government brought out a Central Legislation, but many States were reluctant to implement the Act. This subsequently led to the emergence of activist groups in some of the States, which tried, to some extent, to bring out the plight of bonded labourers through public interest litigations in the Supreme Court and in High Courts (Tiwari 13). The Supreme Court also took bold decisions by appointing Commissions to verify the existence of bonded labourers and to seek rehabilitation of such labourers. The rehabilitation efforts have till date not proved adequate and effective.

Legislation is an important tool of social and economic engineering. However in India many times, legislation is hastily drafted, and there is no proper means for the effective implementation of the laws. Setalvad blames the government, legislators, pressure groups, etc. for the present state of the laws and their implementation, and he

\textsuperscript{104} The problem of bondage and its prevalence in the country in the post independence period was highlighted by various commissions, committees and surveys set up by the Government of India in the field of agricultural labour. The Report on Forced Labour (Government of India, Summary 35-45) pointed out the problem of debt bondage. The report observed that though some state governments enacted legislation to check the practice of debt bondage so as to relive the debtors from the clutches of the creditors, it has not been completely eradicated (Tiwari 3-12).
calls such laws “paper laws”. He calls them paper laws either because they are incapable of implementation or because no proper steps are being taken to implement them (Thorner 58). Similarly in the opinion of Gunnar Myrdal, “many of these laws were intentionally permissive” (276), which make the implementation of the law ineffective.

Vigilance Committees\textsuperscript{105} are set up at the district and sub-divisional levels as the main instruments for the enforcement of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act. Although the Vigilance Committees are a very potent mechanism, they have however not been able to function effectively\textsuperscript{106}.

\textbf{5.3.1. Identification and Rehabilitation of Bonded Labourers}

Regarding the identification of bonded labourers in Karnataka, it was observed that in different regions within the State, work of identification was not done with equal vigour:

Probably there were differences in interpretation – especially because of the uncertainty over whether to classify those on annual contracts as bonded or not. Some other factors also played a role. Social workers and elected representatives in Shimoga district were responsible for creating awareness about the Act. The administrative machinery had to take cognizance of the bonded labourers in this district. The absence of such movements at many other places is probably responsible for low enumeration (Kulkarni 101-102).

Related to the problem of misinterpretation of the Act was the problem of communication gap. In almost all the states, the field functionaries were not fully aware of the Act. This lack of comprehension of the Act hampered its enforcement to a considerable extent. Except in the case of Andhra Pradesh, where the State Labour Department brought out a comprehensive note on the identification of bonded labour

\textsuperscript{105} The main functions of these Vigilance Committees are to help: 1) in the timely detection of fresh cases of bondage; 2) in monitoring prompt release of the bonded labourers after their identification; 3) effective rehabilitation of released bonded labourers at various stages, namely, pre-identification, during identification and release, during rehabilitation and during post-rehabilitation periods; 4) in creating mass awareness using a variety of methods and media regarding various provisions of the Act and the schemes for rehabilitation; 5) the Vigilance Committee could effectively replace dependence on individuals and provide continuity to the attempts of the state and Central Governments in implementing the various provisions of the Act and the rehabilitation Schemes (Government of India, \textit{Study L-23}).

\textsuperscript{106} The ineffective functioning of the Vigilance Committee is due to various reasons: 1) The Committees are constituted for a short period (couple of years); 2) Irregular meeting of the Vigilance Committee; 3) No fresh identification of the bonded labourers; 4) The persons who are nominated to the Vigilance Committees often represented the employers of bonded labourers.
through a set of questions in simple and workable language, no other state tries to explain such provisions of the Act to its field functionaries (Tiwari, 89).

There have been reports of inordinate time lags between identification, release and rehabilitation and there have been very few cases of prosecution of persons who keep labour in bondage. The process of identification release and criminal prosecution of the employer of bonded labour should as far as possible be simultaneous activities.

The official assessment regarding the rehabilitation of released bonded labourers started immediately after the commencement of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Ordinance. It was felt that a systematic strategy for the economic rehabilitation of bonded labourers was necessary. The program for the rehabilitation of the bonded labourers has to be an education-cum-economic programmes. The state governments integrated the rehabilitation scheme of bonded labour with other ongoing poverty alleviation schemes. As a result, the rehabilitation package for the freed bonded labourers includes the following:

Allotment of house-sites and agricultural land; land development; provision of law cost dwelling units; animal husbandry, diary, poultry, piggery, etc.; training for acquiring new skills; developing existing skills; wage, employment, enforcement of minimum wage, etc.; collection and processing of minor forest products; supply of essential commodities under targeted public distribution system; education for children; and protection of civil rights (Government of India, Annual 67-68).

Whenever the implementation of the Act has been implemented, it has been done in a most half-hearted manner. This gives rise to the involvement of the NGO’s and social activists in a number of states of the country. As a matter of fact, it was because of the involvement of these NGO’s that some progress could be made in the enforcement of this law.

The failure of the enforcement of this statute also raises questions about the place of the poor in the democratic set-up. It is a matter of common knowledge that

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107 Recently the Supreme Court while hearing a public interest litigations regarding the exploitation of bonded labourers, observed that not a single offending employer had been convicted by way of imprisonment. While stating that the petitioners had sensitized the court to the deplorable conditions of bonded labourers in India, the bench has also taken note of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) report that 2,780 cases involving about one lakh bonded labourers have been registered. It has also ordered a fresh survey by the states to find out the total number of such people still to be rescued from employers (Radhakrishnan, SC). Up to 2008, under the Act, 5893 prosecutions and 1289 convictions have been reported by the states (ILO 38)
the political parties in India have not been able to mobilize the poor to participate in the political process. Besides, the Indian state has also not been able to socially mobilize the poor, with respect to economic development and modernization. This has not taken place in the true sense of the term. It is extremely relevant to quote Mahatma Gandhi’s observations on the question of debt bondage:

“We may plead a thousand excuses for their existence in the days gone by. But in these days of enlightenment, awakening and insistence on swaraj, we have no excuse for tolerating the atrocity. Congress workers have to take up the excuse of these communities wherever they are found. They should try to enlist the sympathy and co-operation of those who ‘own’ these men and women. Swaraj is the sum total of all the activities that go to build up a free and vigorous nation conscious of the strength that comes from right doing. The existence of slave communities is a terrible wrong and must therefore be a hindrance in our march towards goal” (52-53).

A report prepared by the ‘Planning Commission of Government of India’ on ‘Bonded Labour Rehabilitation Scheme under Centrally Sponsored Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act’ 1976 in the States of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. The report was based on the interviews with to some of the rehabilitated bonded labourers in the above mentioned States.

5.3.2. Eradication of Poverty and Bonded Labourers

Poverty has been described in various ways and with increasing sophistication. It is important to articulate our view of poverty because our view of poverty strongly influences our solutions. Poverty can be defined as a deficit of something that are missing (Myers 113). Poor people do not have enough to eat, a decent place to sleep, or clean water. Their land is poor, there is no water for irrigation, roads are inadequate, and there are no schools for their children. Those who belong to these categories could be freed from poverty by providing food, low-cost housing, and water.

Another kind of deficit has to do with things people do not have or skills they do not have. Poor people may not understand the basics of nutrition, the need to boil water, the importance of child spacing, how to read the instructions on the packet of improved seeds etc. They do not know about sustainable agriculture, running small businesses, and the importance of saving money. This view of poverty invites programming that features education and non-formal learning (Myers 113-4).
Robert Chambers defines poverty by using the household as his point of departure. He describes the poor as being entangled in a “cluster of disadvantage” (Rural 103-39). The household is poor in terms of assets and is physically weak, isolated, vulnerable, and powerless.

**Material poverty:** The household has few or no assets. It has very limited or no savings or livestock. Its housing and sanitations are inadequate. It has little or no land.

**Physical Weakness:** The household members are weak. They lack strength because of poor health and inadequate nutrition. The majority of the household are women, the very young, and the very old.

**Isolation:** The household lacks access to social service and information. It is often remote – far from main road, water lines, and even electricity. It lacks access to markets, capital, credit, and information. Children do not have access to quality education.

**Vulnerability:** The household has almost no buffers against emergencies or disaster as it cannot afford to save. The family is vulnerable to cultural demands such as dowry and feast days, that soak up savings.

**Powerlessness:** The household lacks the ability and the knowledge to influence the life around it and the social systems in which it lives (Chambers 110).

Apart from the above mentioned categories of poverty the ‘spiritual poverty’ is also important. The household suffers from broken and dysfunctional relationships with God, each other, the community and creation. Its members may suffer from spiritual oppression in the form of fear of spirits, demons, and angry ancestors. They may lack hope and be unable to believe that change is possible (Myers 115).

Taking into account the above mentioned definition of poverty we can analyze the poverty in India. The poor in Indian society face the following problems: 1) social discrimination and social condemnation, 2) housing, and 3) subculture of poverty (Ahuja 46).

The employers, the rich, the officials, even the government look down upon the poor. They are considered inefficient and a burden on society. They are harassed, humiliated and discriminated against at every level. The hostile attitude of society at every stage thus, lowers their self-image, creates in them a feeling of inferiority and curbs their efforts of gaining means to help them.
Lack of housing, overcrowding, and slums are serious problems in Indian society. The houses of the poor are not only over-crowded but lack privacy. Poverty forces living in the substandard houses and leaves little for the prerequisites of decent living. Deficient housing contributes to the weakening of family solidarity.

When poverty is transmitted over generations, it becomes a culture. Although the membership of the poor changes to an important degree over the generations, successive generations resemble each other in behavior and values as a product of the common experience of being poor and of being subjected to similar social pressures. The subculture is seen as the effect of poverty, that is, it refers to the similarities in the behavior and thinking patterns of the people (Ahuja 47-48).

Extreme poverty is one of the causes for the creation of bonded labourers in Indian society, therefore, the eradication of poverty occupies and important role to rehabilitate and integrate the bonded labourers back into the society. Indian government have undertaken various steps to eradicate poverty.

5.3.2.1. Eradication of Poverty and Unemployment

The right to employment is an important right of every individual. Without employment a person cannot live a dignified life. To create employment for the citizens is an important responsibility of the State. Indian government is bound by its constitution as well by international treaties to create employment for its citizens (Falgun).

The 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) guarantees a minimum 100 days of paid employment available, the living conditions of the rural poor will improve.

For the right to work to be effective, the program under the Rural Development Employment Act needs to ensure that jobs are made available in a context where poor people find them attractive. On the edge of survival, the costs of taking a job need to be considered carefully. In the absence of child care facilities, women with children might not be able to take the guaranteed jobs even if the additional income is much needed. The Act stipulates that, when needed, work sites must have child care facilities. It also calls for work sites to provide drinking water, shady places for resting, and first aid kits. Without these amenities, poor people might not find it advantageous to take these guaranteed jobs. Also important is the fact that the act specifies that work must be provided within a 5-kilometer radius of village; if
work takes place at sites that are further away, transportation costs must be added to the worker’s wages.

In addition to job creation, the Act also seeks to increase productivity in agriculture, improve the management of the environment, and facilitate access to markets. The Act specifies that work made available must fall within the following categories: (1) water conservation and water harvesting; (2) drought proofing, including plantation and afforestation; (3) irrigation canals, including micro and minor irrigation works; (4) food control and levees; (5) land development and; (6) rural connectivity.

Social inclusion and gender equality rank high among the Act’s objectives, under which one-third of the jobs should be made available to women. An Act that gives a right to work and promotes social inclusion aims to pay the same wage everywhere. It also aim deprived groups, such as the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. However, the Act does not specify a target rate for the participation of these groups. Instead, it takes two action paths: It promotes wide dissemination of information and transparency in its implementation and it requires that the participation of these groups in the program be regularly reported. Furthermore, it specifies that minor irrigation, horticulture, and land development projects can be undertaken on the lands of deprived population groups.

Empowering the poor and halting corruption are two closely linked actions that lead to the alleviation of poverty. Drawing from India’s extensive experience, the Act takes steps forward to empower the poor and aims to halt the corruption that has plagued the country’s social policies.

An important aspect of the poverty reduction impact of the Rural Employment Act is its ability to raise the payment that poor workers receive for their work. The wage under the Act has raised the local market wages for casual labour in agriculture. The poor workers not working under the Act’s program also benefit from the higher wage provisions of the program. Studies indicate that local wages have increased since the inception of the Act. Even if not fully guaranteeing employment, the Act might be helping to improve the lives of the poor even when workers do not directly engage in the program.

The ability of the program to sustainably reduce poverty largely rests on the adequacy and quality of the assets it creates. Building higher quality assets ensures a
stronger and longer lasting impact on agricultural productivity, which might increase poor people’s consumption of food and also raise their living standards.

Village studies also indicate that asset creation is an aspect that needs more attention. Studies indicate that assets under the Act are often built with a short term perspective, do not last long, are of low quality, and are not properly maintained. But studies also indicate instances in which assets are considered valuable by villagers, improve crop yields, and have long-term positive environmental effects.

5.3.2.2. Eradication of Poverty and Microcredit System

Poverty is not an individual issue. It is a societal issue. The microcredit approach suggests that individuals have to accept responsibility for their outcomes and be self-reliant. Unemployment is couched as a problem of welfare dependence rather than a deficiency of jobs. Microcredit attempts to break this welfare dependency by shifting responsibility from government to the individual.

As originally conceived, microfinance (or microcredit as it is also known) is the provision of tiny loans to poor people who establish or expand a simple income-generating activity, thereby supposedly facilitating their escape from poverty (Bateman).

5.3.2.3. Sustainable Development

The term ‘sustainability’ was first used in the context of social and economic activities, especially the use and depletion of environmental resources. One of the earliest statements capturing the essence of this notion came from the United Nation’s Brundtland Commission, which referred to sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Fisher 338). This concept of sustainable development is based on satisfying human needs and at the same time preserving the ecosystem for future generations. It draws attention to two important points: a) the need for everyone to establish a relationship at biological, ecological, and social levels; and b) the growing awareness that the world is a closed system, with practical and theoretical limits in space and time (Irudayam 109).

The resources of our planet are limited. But the demands upon its resources are increasing daily in an exponential manner. Sustainability is about ensuring that the demands made do not exhaust human patrimony. It proposes a change in the attitude
of the persons and pattern of production and consumption. The concept and meaning of sustainability, according to the developed countries, are aimed to achieve their objectives at the expense of the poor nations and individuals. This tendency encourages the powerful to exploit the poor and the weaker nations and individuals. In the history of humanity the poor nations and poor people are victims of such exploitation, which leads to the creation of unjust social institutions like bonded labour system in India. Therefore it is necessary to have both national and international policies to promote sustainable development.

5.3.2.4. Agrarian Reforms

Agrarian reform in its dual contributions to direct relief of poverty and democratizing effects enables other pro-poor reforms to work. In the Indian context the surest way to poverty reduction in most rural societies is reformation of the property system. Though there are other roads to government action to alleviate poverty, all are subject to distortions induced by inequality, a major component of which is skewed distribution of poverty (Irudayam 111). The land reforms abolishes the classic landlord-tenant system, in which land is held by a small minority of the population and the landless are economically dependent and politically powerless.

John Paul II’s social teaching is very clear on this point, stating that agrarian reform is one of the most urgent reforms and cannot be delayed: “In many situations radical and urgent changes are therefore needed in order to restore to agriculture – and to rural people – their just value as the basis for a healthy economy, within the social community’s development as a whole (LE no. 21). He launched a particularly dramatic appeal to members of the Government and large landowners. It is effective to carry out effective measures – at local, national, and international levels.

5.3.2.5. Risk Management

Risk management is an essential tool for development because people in developing countries are exposed to many risks, and an inability to manage those risks can jeopardize development goals, including economic growth and poverty reduction. The majority of the developing countries are exposed to various types of shocks such as natural hazards (flood, drought etc.), health risks and employment risks. Large shocks can also cause serious long-term damage to human, social, and physical capital, especially of the poor.
Natural disasters are an impediment to international programs for the eradication of poverty, and most of the time the disasters cause reversals in progress in reducing poverty. They drop back people into poverty if they have escaped, or they add to the make people newly poor. The negative impact of natural calamities, of course, is very high amounts of economic loss. The cost is high both on the state, in terms of lost revenue and assets, but also on households. The impact there is that poverty reduction fails, inequality in terms of income increases, and there is a setback to development progress (Krishna). This is one of the main reasons for the increase of bonded labourers in India. Due to the economic loss of the poor people they are forced to borrow more money for high interest rate and as a consequence they end up as bonded labourers.

The goal of risk management should be to increase the benefits as well as decrease the losses that people experience when they face risk. To achieve that goal, risk management needs to combine the capacity to prepare for the risk with the ability to cope once a risk has materialized. Preparation includes a combination of three actions that can be taken in advance: acquiring knowledge (gathering information and making judgment about risk); obtaining protection (to influence the likelihood and magnitude of the risk); and obtaining insurance (to transfer resources between good and bad periods). Thus once a risk materializes, people need to take action to cope with the situation (Risk Management). It is the responsibility of the state and central governments to prepare people for the risk through awareness of ‘risk management’.

5.3.3. Food Security and Bonded Labourers

Currently, according to the National Service Scheme of India (NSSI), approximately 15 million rural families in India have no land – instead, they are working as tenant farmers or crowding into another family’s plot. A new bill on the table in India, the National Right to Homestead Bill, may provide micro-plot to many of India’s poorest rural citizens. Land ownership and access is linked with a number of positive outcomes, including improved nutrition and food security and increased income and social status. Rural poverty is principally caused by lack of access to land, but that can be ameliorated even by a small parcel of land about one-tenth of an acre, popularly known as micro-plots. Micro-plots are not intended to provide for an entire family, but rather to be a supplemental source of income and food, as well as a boost in social status, especially for women. The Landesa Rural Development Institute, in
partnership with the Indian national and state governments, has already undertaken an initiative to provide micro-plots for 2 million landless families in India.

The Food Security Bill aims to provide cheap food grains to 82 crore people in the country, ushering in the biggest programme in the world to fight hunger. The Ordinance will guarantee 5 kg of rice, wheat and coarse cereals per month per person at a fixed price of Rs. 3, Rs. 2 and Rs. 1 respectively (Food). The Scheme is likely to cost 1.3 trillion rupees ($19.7bn; £12.6bn) every year (India Upper).

Proper implementation of the Food Security Bill (FSB) will lower spending on food grains by below poverty line (BPL) households, and free up resources for spending on other goods and services, in particular health, education, and food supplement. According to Crisil Research (CR) estimates FSB could generate additional savings of around Rs 4,400 this year for each BPL household that begins to purchase subsidized food. This savings equals around 8% and 5% of the annual expenditure of a rural and urban household, respectively (Mahambre, Saraf).

At present, while all BPL households are entitled to purchase subsidized food grains from Public Distribution System (PDS), a significant portion of them are being denied their entitlement. Take for example of Raghuvir, who works at a construction site in rural Bihar. Despite being BPL person, he does not have a ration card and therefore, cannot purchase subsidized food grains from the PDS. Raghuvir’s case is not an isolated one. Only around 16% of rural BPL households in Bihar purchased rice under PDS in 2009-10. In Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh less than 35% of rural BPL households have access to rice from PDS. Similarly, in Rajasthan only 27% of rural BPL households have access to wheat from PDS. At all India level, less than half (around 43.5%) of BPL households purchase rice under PDS and only around one-third of them purchase subsidized wheat.

Therefore BPL households are likely to shift to PDS once the FSB is implemented. Once BPL households that currently do not have access to subsidized food receive an appropriate identity proof, they will be able to purchase food grains at the subsidized prices instead of at the higher market price. Therefore, they will save the difference between the market price and the subsidized rates on their monthly food grain entitlement.

As the FSB will provide households with additional disposable income, households will in effect move up the income bracket. An analysis of the household consumption pattern across different income brackets throw some light on what items
this additional money is likely to be spent. In the case of rural households, spending on education and medical expenditure is seen to increase as income increases.

In the case of urban households, poor households increases their expenditure on protein-rich food and fresh fruits as their income increases. Their spending on medical expenses and education tends to rise even more sharply than that of rural consumers. Among the urban poor, spending on conveyance and rent also rises with the increase in income (Mahambre, Saraf).

Although the FSB entitles 67% of India’s households to subsidized food grains, it does not throw light on how these households will be identified. The welfare benefits intended in the FSB can only be realized if all poor households are correctly identified and receive access to subsidized food.

India’s welfare schemes have long been dogged by leakages, corruption and poor delivery. For example, less than 50 per cent of food provided by the Public Distribution System (PDS) is reaching the targeted beneficiaries. To improve efficiency in delivery and the value of subsidies, the Government has finally implemented a Direct Cash Transfers (DCT) scheme covering 20 districts and seven welfare schemes as of 1st of January 2013. While the DCT was originally intended only to cover 51 districts and 20 schemes, this is still a big step forward.

There are two important leakages in food subsidy expenditure. The first leakage is in the quantity of food grains the Government (FCI) states it has delivered to people, rich or poor, versus what the people actually receive. Both in 2009-10 and 2011-12, this leakage amounted to Rs. 30,000 crore (with quantities valued at market prices of food grains). Leakage suspects include theft, food rotting, food diversion to non-ration shops etc. The second leakage is food going to the non-poor. In 2011-2012, the non-poor receiving a food subsidy were at an average percentile level of 64 per cent. In the second leakage one that accounted for Rs. 22,000 crore in 2009-10, and much larger Rs. 31,000 crore in 2001-12 (Bhalla).

5.4. Social Integration of Bonded Labourers

It has been observed that over the period of time programme of release and rehabilitation is improving. The gap between release and rehabilitation has been significantly reduced. Still there is scope to make the programme more efficient and

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108 Expenditure means a leakage is defined as expenditure that does not reach the intended poor beneficiary.
effective to have better impact on the livelihoods of the released and rehabilitated bonded labourers. The released bonded labourers have the right to be part and parcel of the society. Therefore the social integration of the bonded labourers occupy a prominent place in their lives.

5.4.1. Bonded Labourers and “People Centered Development”

According to Korten the world at the end of the twentieth century was suffering from a threefold crisis: poverty, environmental destruction, and social disintegration (114). He defined development as “a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations” (67). Development is a continuous process. This process, according to Korten, should be driven by three principles: sustainability, justice, and inclusiveness. By “sustainable” Korten means that any good development must sustain and nurture the environment. By “justice and inclusiveness” he addresses the problem of social disintegration and disenfranchisement that accompanies poverty and the fact that governments and social systems are biased in favour of the powerful. Finally for Korten, “consistent with their own aspirations” means that the people should decide for themselves what improvements are needed and how they are to be created. The development programs must not come from the outside.

Korten addresses the spiritual aspect of development in an interesting way by acknowledging a role for religion. He acknowledges that “questions relating to the uses of power, values, love, brotherhood, peace and the ability of people to live in harmony with one another are fundamental to religion and to the role of the church in society (168). Korten seems to understand that value change is hard work and that it is the work of religion. He argues that, while religious institutions do not always have the best of records living out their own values in these areas, they are nonetheless the most likely candidates to help on this transformational frontier.

5.4.2. Humanization of Bonded Labourers in Society

Personality and individuality can be nurtured and developed only in society. Only society can promote the good of persons, individually and collectively. For this every individual requires “freedom” and “responsibility”. Freedom cements the
individual’s relationship to God as a person, and responsibility guarantees other people’s freedom in an individual’s dealings in society.

For the humanization of bonded labours in society, therefore, responsibility and love are key elements. This makes human persons forsake selfishness and dedicate themselves to the needs of their fellow beings. This requires the practice of justice and peace, and respect for the dignity and rights of others, recognizing fundamental equality of all people.

The ‘powerlessness’ or ‘unfreedom’ of the bonded labourers is the “result of systematic socio-economic, political, bureaucratic and religious processes (systems) that disempower the bonded labourers (Christian 335).

5.4.3. Freedom of Bonded Labourers and Right based Approach

Human rights are those which enable a person to live as a person, developing him as a human person. Human rights are those things that human beings need or ought to have, to realize or actualize the possibilities that they have to achieve the fullness their potential. Through awareness and educational programs bonded labourers should be trained to grasp the importance of human rights and participate in them.

What we are witnessing in today’s world are dramatic changes. More and more countries are opting for democratic forms of Governments arising from people’s movements and initiatives. These changes are happening from a deep desire and hunger from the masses to establish a just, humane and equitable society. It is from these movements and upheavals that the United Nations took the inspiration to establish Human Rights and Children’s Rights. The insights contained in the Conventions have brought about path breaking changes for the benefit of marginalized communities. As a consequence, we have moved away from a welfare approach to a sustainable development right-based approach. Thus, as we see now, the basic needs of people like – food, shelter, education etc. have become the rights of the people. Also, as regards children, the realization has come that all children especially the marginalized children can be brought up only in a child right-based approach. Listening to children’s aspirations, needs and concerns is the hallmark of the child right-based approach.
5.4.3. Recovering the Identity and Discovering the Vocation of Bonded Labourers

It is part of the rehabilitation of bonded labourers to enable them to recover their identity and discover their vocation (Meyers 341). How we treat and listen to the bonded labourers can be the beginning of recovering their identity. Along with helping the bonded labourers to discover their identity, we must help the landlords as well to discover their identity and vocation. They should be enlightened to recognize the dignity of others, especially the bonded labourers. We need to help the landlords to explore and identify their own “poverty” in respecting to the right and dignity of others and treating others in a human way.

5.4.3.1. Just and Peaceful Relationship

True transformation occurs when people know their identity and their vocation and live in just and peaceful relationships. This means enabling the bonded labourers to establish a fivefold relationships: relationships with God, self, community, other, and the environment.

As Paul asked Philemon to welcome back Onesimus into the household, respecting his identity as the “slave of Christ”, bonded labourers also should be helped to find their place in society. Once the bonded labourers begin to discover their identity and vocation, they need to give expression to these. This change takes place, first within the household. The freed bonded labourers should be helped to live a renewed life (Maldonado 196). This means to help the bonded labourers to come out of their bad habits, like alcoholism, use of drugs etc. and base their life on the values of justice, peace and love.

The second level is the social system. People who have discovered that they are children of God, with value and voice, are less likely to be passive in the face of political structures. Such people begin to demand their rights and that politicians take them and their views more seriously. When people change, everything else around them come under pressure to change.

Vocational training in villages promote literacy among the rescued bonded labourers. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of work, the equality of the sexes, the elimination of prejudice, and the dignity of the individual. Through training in both practical work and moral principles, the freed bonded labourers become better equipped to play leadership roles in their villages. It enables them to undertake their
own development programs and projects, and to maintain a degree of self reliance and self-sufficiency. Persons who receive training at the Institute are encouraged to return to their communities and share what they have learned, whether reading and writing, health and hygiene techniques, or, even, how to make better decisions as a group. Through the training programs we try to imbue them with self-confidence, so that they know they are very important as individuals, and that they can play an important role in improving their own homes and helping their villages to grow and develop.

5.4.3.2. Promotion of Human Stewardship

The letter to Philemon abolishes the social barriers between the master and slave, because both master and slave are called to serve Christ, and both of them enjoy equal dignity. Christian witness means a call to exercise leadership as “stewards” who think more highly of others than themselves. Leaders with a biblical world view know that all power belongs to God and they exercise power only as stewards, not as owners or masters.

The term ‘steward’ denotes oikonomos (Gk.), a household manager or ‘the office of one who is entrusted with the properties of the other (Hall 358). Thus as the etymology of the term suggests, a steward is someone who is entrusted with the task of supervising and administering the affairs of the household, having the powers and insight to ensure the requirements and fulfilling the goals of the household.

The stewardship that is entrusted to the human person is something that follows from the dignity of the human person as the image of God. Since human persons are created in the image and likeness of God, they are called to be co-creators with God in the Creation (Hefner 27).

Accepting this commission to be viceroys of God in Creation, human beings are expected to be just, honest and responsible in their stewardship. Human stewardship is a responsibility that asks for accountability because it is an exercise of ‘dominion’ qualified by the recognition that there is a higher ‘dominion’ or sovereignty of God (Hiers 49). It is a responsibility towards respecting and enhancing the integrity and wholeness of life (Schweiker 32-33).

5.4.4. Empowerment of Bonded Labourers

Empowerment is a process such as enabling, motivating, and promoting and increasing capability. Empowerment also include participation, education, community
organizing and enabling political voice. The essence of empowerment is that there is some kind of process of social exchange directed by the people themselves by which people, as individuals and as groups are able to shape their own lives in ways that they choose.

Parker and Price define empowerment in an organizational context as ‘the belief that one has control over decision making’ (911).

Empowerment involves giving subordinates resources and increasing their sense of worth (Conger and Kanungo 471). The practice of empowering subordinates is a principal component of organizational effectiveness. Effectiveness of workers increases when employees share power and control with their subordinates.

Social exchange theory serves as a basis for understanding the relationship that develops between employers and labourers. According to this theory the employers give benefits to labourers and the labourers reciprocate with increased responsiveness towards the employers. In the opinion of Blau social exchange relationships are based on trust. That is, when an individual does a favour to another, they do so trusting that the other party will reciprocate. Therefore, unlike economic exchange, social change is not an explicit, contractually based agreement.

Social exchange has emphasized socio-emotional aspects of employment (i.e., feelings of obligation and trust), while economic exchange has emphasized the financial and more tangible aspects of the exchange relationship. In the economic exchange relationships trust and investments are intertwined. In social exchanges, both parties invest in the other with some inherent risk that the investment will not be repaid, requiring trust. The social exchanges require a long-term orientation, since the exchange is ongoing and based on feelings of obligation. Economic exchange does not imply long-term or open-ended such as pay for performance. Thus employee expectations about the ‘duration’ of the exchange, as long-term and open-ended (social exchange) or narrowly defined financial obligations without long-term

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109 Social exchange theory is a social psychological and sociological perspective that explains change and stability as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties. The theory has roots in economics, psychology and sociology. Social exchange theory was introduced in the 1960’s by George Homans. The social exchange perspective argues that people calculate the overall worth of a particular relationship by subtracting its costs from the reward it provides. Worth = Rewards – Costs. If worth is a positive number, it is positive relationship. One the contrary, negative number indicates a negative relationship. The worth of a relationship influences its outcome, or whether people will continue with a relationship or terminate it. Positive relationships are expected to endure, whereas negative relationships will probably terminate. Social exchange involve a connection with another person; it involves trust, not legal obligations, it is more flexible and rarely involve explicit bargaining.
implications (economic exchange), is a critical distinction between these two forms. A final distinction is the emphasis on ‘financial’ (e.g., pay and benefit) as compared with *socio-emotional* (e.g., give and take, being taken care of by the organization aspects of exchange).

In leadership situation, superiors make investments in their subordinates by providing with support for self-worth and negotiating latitude in making decisions and changing their job. Subordinates reciprocate by aligning their behavior and performance in accordance with supervisory preferences. When subordinates perform in accordance with supervisory preferences, they perform their tasks in a manner that satisfies that particular superior.

Superiors benefit from empowering leadership practices. Subordinates who receive supervisory benefits reciprocate by performing in accordance with supervisor’s preferences. Satisfied with their subordinates’ performance, superiors reciprocate by providing additional negotiating latitude and support for self-worth thus continuing the cycle of exchange. In this sense superiors and subordinates are interdependent.

Support for self-worth is measured by the following three items: a) the superiors have confidence in subordinate’s ability, b) superiors pay attention to subordinates’ feelings and needs, and c) support subordinates’ actions and ideas.

In consumerist and individualistic societies people often forget the just relationship between master and servant or labourer and employee. The relationship between the labourer and employee should be based on the perspective of gratitude. In this concept there is a mutuality of gratitude between employee and labourer. Doing service in gratitude for the remuneration that enables a labourer to be what he or she wants to be. Receiving service and giving remuneration as a gratitude for the service received enables an employer to be what he or she wants to be.

### 5.4.6. Transformation of Bonded Labourers as “Responsible well-being”

Well-being is a quality of life. Well being applies to all levels of life, social, psychological, and spiritual as well as material. “Responsible well-being” is also applied to landlords who need to change their behavior and behave responsibly towards the poor and the bonded labourers. There should be a pedagogy of the landlords that will work to enable them to become self-critically aware of their roles and their potential for enabling a more inclusive well-being for all.
There are two things that are basic to responsible well being: livelihood security and capabilities by which livelihood security and responsible well-being are achieved. Livelihood security means adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs and to support well-being. Security refers to secure rights and reliable access to resources, food and income and basic services. People’s capabilities are enlarged “through learning, practice, training and education”, the outcome being “better living and better wellbeing”.

The principle of “equity” and “sustainability”, should guide the process of increasing capabilities and ensuring livelihood security. Equity includes “human rights”, intergenerational gender equality. Sustainability is important as well: “to be good conditions and change must be sustainable – economically, socially, institutionally and environmentally.

5.5. Church and the Bonded Labourers

Here we are primarily concerned with the missionary dimensions of the local church in India. When we speak of the local church, it is not to be understood merely as a sociological or administrative entity. The focal point of the church is its theological content; it is to be understood as a living cell of the people of God, reflecting and actualizing the life and mission of the universal church in a particular context (Motte 22). The particular context in India as a whole is so varying in different parts of the country that it is difficult to speak of the Indian church as one local church.

It is the task of the church in India, in fidelity to Christ, to work out its own distinctive patterns to meet the exigencies of the local situations. In other words, the mission of the local church is to find its expression in an ongoing process of evangelization. In order to understand the various missionary expressions or the dimensions of the Indian church, an analysis of the present missionary situation of the Indian church is necessary. Among other things the following could be mentioned: a) Indian church faces a plurality of religions; b) India is a subcontinent of teeming masses; c) In India social injustice and inequalities are prevalent; d) India’s Christian population is extremely small (Motte 23-24).

In Indian society people are engaged in numerous struggles, with so many aspirations. There is a growing consciousness among the people to fight against injustices of an unjust social order. People try to affirm their dignity and worth and try
to eliminate the discriminations and injustices that violate the dignity and rights of the people. The church in India engages herself to liberate people from the various forms of injustice and discrimination. In certain difficult situations in India, the church carries out its mission by its Christian presence and witness to Christ’s message of love, thereby becoming a sign of joy and hope to the people.

The church in India is active in accordance with *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in promoting an interior transformation of society by bringing about an awakening among people, and trying to achieve a liberation from all kinds of evil present in society. Hence the evangelization of the church means “the progressive penetration of liberating Christian values into the thought patterns, customs, and structures of Indian society (Motte 25-26).

Our concern here is the role of the church in the liberation of bonded labourers in India. We have seen in detail the previous chapters the pathetic situation of bonded labourers in India. In the letter to Philemon, Paul was an intermediary to bring about the liberation of Onesimus and to transform the master-slave relationship in a Christian household. In the modern world the church and Christians have more opportunity to take the role of Paul in responding to the issue of bonded labour in India.

Paul in his letters use the ‘redemption metaphors’ to explain Christian freedom. According to Elert it would be better to view Paul’s use of redemption metaphors against the background of the practice of *redemption ab hostibus* (Lat.:) as reflected in Roman law. According to Roman law, anyone captured during a war became a slave and lost all persons rights. This situations of the captives could be reversed legally by the *redemption ab hostibus*. The law provided the provision to the slaves that when someone else could raise the money to purchase them from his or her owner, the slave could be freed. In such a case a slave was freed, but remains in debt to the person who freed him or her until the money was returned (Elert 266-270).

Paul’s use of “redemption metaphors” goes against the practice of sacral manumission as it was practiced in antiquity. According to this practice a slave would deposit the money for his or her manumission at the temple. Then the owner of the slave would take him or her to the temple, where the slave was “purchased” by God when the money deposited by the slave was given to the owner. As a result the slave would become the “property” of God and he or she would be free (Watt 247).
The above mentioned “redemption metaphors” are unacceptable in the New Testament for the following reasons:

a) In the sacral manumission the focus was on the rights of the owner, but in the New Testament the focus is on Christ as the “buyer”.

b) The situation according to which some freed slaves in practice remained bound to the previous owners. This practice is not known in the New Testament.

c) The final goal of sacral manumission is liberty, that is ‘to belong to oneself’ where as the New Testament view of the matter is that the goal of redemption is to belong to Christ.

d) In the sacral manumission no personal relationship exists between the slave, God and the owner. In fact, God is usually totally absent and there is almost never any indication of any thanksgiving to God after the act of manumission. This differs totally from the context in which the metaphor is used in the New Testament (Watt 249-50).

The Pauline use of metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23 focus definitely not on manumission or even on the “status improvement” of the slave. Paul focuses on the idea of ownership: that the slaves have become the property of someone else, thus the change of owner (Martin 65-66).

Paul recommended his Christian slaves to remain in their own status, because they are freedmen in the Lord, and those who were free should keep in mind that they are slaves of Christ. Paul’s advice to those who are free, shows that Paul’s advice to them actually represents a lowering of status. The masters should consider themselves not free, but as slaves of Christ. This represents a considerable lowering in status for free people. As Martin points out, Paul even places them on a lower level than slaves. The slaves are regarded as freed persons in Christ (65).

Here Paul’s use of slave metaphors indicate salvation can once again be identified as a radical (positive) status reversal, expressed in terms of the movement from spiritual slavery to spiritual sonship.

The Pauline use of slave metaphors has important impacts on the life of bonded labourers and their owners:

a) The desperate and inhuman conditions of bonded labourers could be changed by Christ. Christ has gained freedom for whole humanity through his death and resurrection. The freedom gained by Christ is a ray of hope for bonded labourers
to escape from their desperate situation and experience a totally different spiritual experience.

b) New status reversal leads to new obligations. Paul never focuses on human beings in an individualistic sense. Rather, he always views in terms of social relationships to other people. In this metaphor Paul stresses a movement from slavery to sonship (Pilch 79-84).

The bonded labourers are to be freed from “commodity consciousness”, where the owners treat them as commodities and gain them freedom as “children of God”. In the modern world it is the duty of the church to carry out Christ’s message of freedom and salvation to the bonded labourers and to the masters. This should be done through dialogue with both the masters and bonded labourers. On the one hand the church through her evangelization needs to educate the bonded labourers to know their dignity and rights and on the other hand educate and motivate the employers of the bonded labourers to respect the dignity and rights of bonded labourers.

Conclusion

The social evil of bonded labour system continues to disfigure the social and economic life of Indian society. Every human person has a right to live a ‘dignified life’ and the right to defend one’s own dignity. The system of bonded labour violates the dignity of human persons and human rights. Therefore the process of rehabilitation of bonded labourers consists of returning to the labourers their material assets as well as giving them the possibility to live a dignified life.

The letter to Philemon, which deals with the issue of Onesimus, a slave in Philemon’s household serves as model to find a solution to the problem of bonded labour in India. The letter underline the importance of respecting the dignity of Onesimus, arising from his being in Christ. Paul also speaks of the material compensation in the letter. Hermeneutical reading of this letter helps us to find a solution for the problem of bonded labour in India.

Getting the bonded labourers identified and freed is the statutory obligation of the State Governments but, from November 1987 onwards, the voluntary organizations also came to be authorized both for identification and rehabilitation.
GENERAL CONCLUSION

As a Historical Document, the letter to Philemon throws unusual light on the Christian conscience in regard to the institution of slavery in the ancient world, and so complements and corrects what we find in the so-called rules of the household in the other New Testament letters. From these traditional teaching-patterns Paul draws the framework of his instruction, but he injects a moralistic tone with his reminders that the slaves are ‘serving Christ’, that the owners have a ‘master in heaven’ God who deals impartially, and that both slave and owner are bonded-servants of Christ.

In the case of bonded labourers, they are enslaved under an owner and denied of freedom. In this system a person or a group of people are enslaved for a longer period or even for life. This system does not help the persons to live a dignified life and realize their human capacities. In this situation the Christian vision of human person comes to the rescue of many people who are enslaved under the system of bonded labour.

In the Christian vision the dignity of human person originates from the fact that human person is created in the “image” and “likeness of God”, and every human being has to live a life worthy of his/her dignity. The fundamental element of human dignity is freedom. A person can live a dignified life only when he or she possesses freedom.

“The joys and the hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (Gaudium et Spes, n. 1). The Catholic Bishops, gathered in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), expressed this conviction about the responsibilities of the followers of Christ. We are to “take on” the joys and hopes and the grief and anguish of our times. Our mission is to bring the good news of the gospel to those who are suffering, neglected, hungry, and in poverty and to those who are threatened by various forms of violence and injustice (Krier Mich1).

What does it mean to “take on” the issue of bonded labour? How do the followers of Christ respond to the various complex problems of bonded labour?

The letter to Philemon makes concrete proposals to liberate bonded labourers from their slavery. The letter to Philemon has its origin from the fact that the members of Christian communities belong to Christ and this union with Christ transforms the life of the believers. The union with Christ is the basis for the responsibilities that
believers bear for one another. “It is a sense of belonging to Christ, indeed, but of belonging together with others, with the obvious implication that one without the other would make the whole unbalanced and unhealthy” (Campbell 381). The body metaphor also provides a brilliant means through which Paul teaches of the importance of unity and diversity within the people of God. For Paul, unity in the body of Christ does not mean the sameness of all the members; it means the solidarity which can endure the strain of differences – the different gifts and different weaknesses.

The use of Paul’s body metaphor asserts that the believers are united with Christ who “died for” them. And by virtue of their solidarity with Christ, the believers are also united with each other (Powers 55). Believers live out their Christian existence in the organic unity of the one body of Christ. All else flows from this claim.

Ethics of the believers is the central point in Paul’s thought. He believes that whole law is summed up in the command of love. The law of love is the law of Christ. The life and unity of Christian community is based on the commandment of love. Paul stresses the unity of the community and the interdependence of its members in doing the work of God.

In the letter to Philemon, Paul underlines that both Philemon and Onesimus are members of the body of Christ, therefore they should consider themselves as brothers. It is the commandment of love that fosters the bond between the members of the Christian community. It is from this commandment of love that the church starts her mission to give witness to Christ, by serving the poor and marginalized in the society. The Pauline thought and inspirations we find in the letter to Philemon are being transmitted to the modern world through the medium of Church. It is the responsibility of the Church to take initiative to start the liberation and the rehabilitation of the bonded labourers.

The Catholic Church does not have an official “mission statement”. If it did, these words from Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical Deus Caritas Est (God is Love) would be a good starting point: “The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God, celebrating the sacraments, and exercising the ministry of charity. These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable (Deus Caritas Est, no. 25).
The Church’s response to the social issues is articulated in a body of thought known as Catholic social teaching. The foundation of that teaching is the great commandment of the Bible: “to love God and to love our neighbor”. The Church sees this work as part of God’s work of salvation and the coming of God’s reign “on earth as it is in heaven”. Bible demonstrates that God intervened in the life of people through prophets in the OT, and Jesus continued that liberating work of God when he announced his ministry in Nazareth. He was sent to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free (Lk. 4:18). The Church continues that ministry of Jesus, the work of God, led by the Spirit. This is the tradition that the Catholic Church continues in our day when it proclaims the gospel, celebrates the sacraments, and cares for the needy.

In 1971, the Synod of Bishops state the Church’s mission for the “redemption of the human race” in these terms: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (O’Brien, Shannon 289).

In the encyclical Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI clarified the role of the Church as neither trying to “replace the State” nor staying on the “sidelines in the fight for justice”: “The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet, at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice” (Caritas in Veritate, no. 28).

The “Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church” links the “conversion of hearts” to work for the “healing” of human institutions and structures.

“It is from the conversion of hearts that there arises concern for others, loved as brothers and sisters. This concern helps us to understand the obligation and commitment to heal institutions, structures and conditions life that are contrary to human dignity. The laity must therefore work at the same time for the conversion hears and the improvement of structures, taking historical situation into account and using legitimate means so that the dignity of every man and women will be truly respected and promoted within institutions (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 552).

The Catholic Social Teachings invite its members to build “a new culture of life”. The starting of this “new culture of life” would be “in forming conscience with
regard to the incomparable and inviolable worth of very human life. The culture of life would include “the courage to adopt a new life style consisting in making practical choices – at the personal, family, social, and international level – on the basis of a correct scale of values: the primacy of being over having, of person over things (Krier Mich 75).

The recent document from the New York State Catholic Conference, Pursuing Justice, points out how the dignity of human person becomes the basis for the Catholic involvement in the spectrum of social issues. It is likewise the basis for our support for the bonded labourers: just wages with decent working conditions, and health care and education for the freed bonded labourers.

The church is an instrument of transformation in the society. The members of the church participate in God’s process of transformation towards the kingdom, which Jesus had already inaugurated. Any Christian who is working for the development and upliftment of the bonded labourers and the poor must take this fact seriously and accept that God has already put a living sign of God’s kingdom in the community.

The church works for the development and transformation of the poor and bonded labourers through sustainability. It is God through Christ who sustains our life. Therefore the church becomes an instrument of sustainability

**Physical Sustainability:** This dimension of sustainability includes all the basics that people need to live: food, water, health, livelihood, and a sustainable environment. Adequate food and nutrition requires sustainable agriculture. Here the physical sustainability implies enhancing the productivity and life-supporting capacity of the local environment in ways that ensure its future.

Physical sustainability also means people who are able to manage their own health care to the greatest extent possible. This means a community based approach in which bonded labourers are empowered to do what they can for themselves, utilizing local indigenous knowledge and traditional sources of health care, with minimal dependence on high cost, expensive healthcare system.

Physical sustainability means enabling the freed bonded labourers to create wealth. And to teach bonded labourers to run small business and to save money. This sort of savings provides buffers against shocks from bad weather and natural disasters that destroy the limited assets base of the poor and labourers.

An adequate environment is necessary to develop the sustainability in terms of health, agriculture, and economics (Weaver, Rock and Kusterer 233-58). We must
thank God for the gift of wonderful environment given to us, and it is our responsibility to protect it. It is the responsibility of the church to enable the bonded labourers to respect the environment as good stewards would.

*Mental Sustainability:* We must seek the healing of the marred identity of the bonded labourers. We must treat them as valuable human beings, made in the image of God, loved by God. We must listen to them as if they have something to contribute, because they do. We must encourage the belief that God is for them and that God has given everyone something to contribute.

Releasing people’s capacity to learn is also a critical element of mental sustainability. Helping people to discover that they can study and make sense out of their world is also part of mental sustainability. Teaching people how to evaluate their efforts and to codify their experience is an empowering experience that sustains continuing transformation.

The liberation of bonded labourers depends on their belief in themselves. The true transformation of bonded labourers takes place when they come to the awareness that they themselves are the instruments of development. This makes them to be autonomous and do not create dependency in their life.

*Social Sustainability:* Social sustainability must include establishing or supporting the development of local organizations with social agendas (de Waal 219). People need to develop a sense that, as part of a larger political community, they have rights on which they should insist – to development, to sustainable livelihood, to respect for civil and political rights. The bonded labourers have the right to expect that humanitarian law and human rights apply to them (8).

From the Christian point of view social sustainability in the case of bonded labourers will require a theology of civil society that defines the roles and responsibilities that bonded labourers should play in the society in which they live. Social systems, including civil society, are the domains of what Paul called the principalities and powers. As a result of their fallen nature, principalities and powers work within the social system to devalue or degrade life. The result is a materialistic view of social system and a distortion of their mission.

Working for civil society and for extending social power will bring us up against spiritual forces that do not want bonded labourers and poor empowered. Building civil society that supports social sustainability is a spiritual task that requires spiritual tools.
Enhancing civil society also presupposes the “freedom to develop” (Weaver, Rock and Kusterer 220). Development in societies in conflict must be done in a way that decreases tensions and that nurtures local capacities for peace.

*Spiritual Sustainability:* While the community needs to believe passionately that it is not dependent on the development agency, it must also believe passionately that it is dependent on God. No one is independent; we are all dependent on God.

Another dimension of spiritual sustainability has to do with the contribution of faith-based organizations in the community. Churches, mosques, and temples are the location of value traditions without which human society cannot function. It is the value change that most often finds its roots in the transformative power of faith traditions. At the heart of this kind of change is repentance and forgiveness, the twin foundations of reconciliation. At its best, this is the work of the religious community.

For Christians, it is hard to believe in sustainable transformation in a community in which the church is not acting as the sign of the kingdom, of God’s better future. There are several critical contributions to transformation development that only the church can provide. First, the role of the church in transformational development is the same as ours: to love the community and to serve it with a spirit of encouragement, not to be its judge.

Second, the church should be a source of holistic practitioners who are serving the well-being of the whole community. People who are reading and living the Word of God under the discipline of the Holy Spirit should be a significant source of inspiration to work for life and peace.

Third, the church can play a role as a civil society organization, working to enlarge people’s access to economic and social power.

Fourth, the church can be a pastoral presence. The bonded labourers and poor need love and care in the midst of their pain. The church is the one place they should always be hearing the message that they are loved by God, have been given gifts by God, and have contribution to make. The non-poor need to be loved too, and part of “tough love” for them is being challenged by the word of God and hearing the truth about who they are really meant to be. Finally, the church can be the source of community and a spirituality that sustains those who are trying to facilitate transformation development.
Fifth, the church can be a prophetic voice addressing those who refuse to see and do not want to hear the cry of the oppressed bonded labourers. Sometimes the prophetic voice needs to be directed at the non-poor in the community or elsewhere.

Finally, the church is the hermeneutical community that reads the biblical story as its story and applies this story of the concrete circumstances of its time, place, and culture. This is the community within the community from which the word of God is heard, lived, and revealed. This is the community that, because it knows the true story, can and must challenge the injustices that are found in the society.

The problem of slavery in the early Christian community was dealt with a great Christian sensibility, especially in the Pauline writings. Paul did not intend to rebel against the existing social system or to abolish the existing social system but he propagated a gradual evolution of the existing social system, especially the social system of slavery, in the spirit of Christian solidarity.

In the letter to Philemon, while dealing with the reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon, Paul adopted non violent method. Paul’s method of reconciliation was based on the non-violence and faith in Christ. Paul had in mind a non-violent dimension of social vision.

Working for peace and non-violence is a religious imperative for all believers. The Christian calling imposes on every Christian to work for a non violent social order. Non-violent faith-vision immediately touches on the question of the bonded labourers. A non-violent social order is the true faith-response to enforced poverty. Various forms of violence obstruct genuine dialogue, dialogue between the persons and person with the social institutions.

From the biblical perspective, one could argue that biblical revelation included unmasking of violence, and gradual revelation of a non-violent God, and gathering of a new people of God based on righteousness, peace and love (Pattery 69). The process of revelation takes definitive form in the person, ministry and life of Jesus, in and by whom all forms of individual and collective violence are fully unmasked, and transformed into the boundless love and peace. Faith vision of a non violent social order invites dialogue with other utopias, faiths and visions. Such dialogue involves a dialogical, non-violent attitude towards others, life and reality. It is a holistic way of looking at real and everyday problems.

In the letter to Philemon, Paul adopts a non-violent, dialogical method to bring out the reconciliation between slave and slave owner. This is an example of Christian
way of responding to the problems of injustice and discrimination in the world. To find a solution to the problem of bonded labourers in India, we too need to use a non-violent, dialogical method, a method that is based on boundless love and peace.