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Editorial: Beyond the Colonial Past (pp. 3-4)

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Abstract: The 500th anniversary of the arrival of Vasco da Gama in India gives us an opportunity to assess the impact of colonialism on the life of our people.

Colonialism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon.¹ It is first of all a political reality: the conquest of and rule over alien peoples and their territories. Its original purpose may have been the protection of the lucrative trade of the colonial powers. Gradually it developed into a large-scale economic exploitation of the colonized lands. It also began to exert considerable influence on the socio-cultural life of the colonized peoples. A paternalistic effort to “improve” the life of the people also became part of the programme of the colonial masters. There was, of course, a difference of opinion as to the kind of “improvement” the colonized people needed.

Keywords: Jnanadeepa, Colonialism, Postcolonial theology.

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Editorial

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Colonialism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon.¹ It is first of all a political reality: the conquest of and rule over alien peoples and their territories. Its original purpose may have been the protection of the lucrative trade of the colonial powers. Gradually it developed into a large-scale economic exploitation of the colonized lands. It also began to exert considerable influence on the socio-cultural life of the colonized peoples. A paternalistic effort to “improve” the life of the people also became part of the programme of the colonial masters. There was, of course, a difference of opinion as to the kind of “improvement” the colonized people needed.

It is not easy to determine the impact colonialism had on the Church in India. Directly or indirectly colonial rule affected the life and activities of the Church. There was often a close link between the colonial rulers and the Christian missionaries. This was quite manifest in the case of the Portuguese. It was more subtle, and somewhat invisible, in the case of the British.

In an analogical way one can speak of ecclesiastical colonialism. To the extent that a foreign Church – be it Persian or Roman – did not respect the legitimate autonomy of the churches in India, but rather imposed its rule over them, to that extent it can be considered colonial. And if, in addition, modes of worship, patterns of ministry, forms of spirituality and models of theology, developed elsewhere, were forced on the Christians in India that, too, smacks of colonialism. According to the ancient tradition of the Church, the local churches have the right to formulate the faith, organize worship and structure the ministry according to the socio-cultural situation of their people.²

It is possible that the colonized people have in some way benefited by their interaction with the colonizers. And it is true that a few from among the colonizers raised their voices in protest against the excesses of the colonial rule. All this, however, does not and cannot conceal the fact that colonialism has caused enormous harm to the colonized people. Not only did it oppress and exploit the people, it also deprived them of their freedom, dignity and the right to shape their life and destiny according to their wish. Besides, it robbed them of their creativity and fostered in them a slavish and dependent mentality. In a way, colonialism led to the loss of their soul.

It is against this background that we discuss the question of colonialism and decolonization in the Church. Hence our theme: *Beyond the Colonial Past: Journeying to the Future*. Our focus here is on decolonisation.

Two of the articles in this issue examine the phenomenon of colonialism from historical, theological and philosophical perspectives. Three others investigate the impact of colonialism on the churches of Goa, Kerala and Chotanagpur. The remaining papers deal with the decolonization of the life and activity of the Church – mission, liturgy, spirituality, religious life, theology and formation. We believe that a radical process of decolonization, that is, the removal of the vestiges of colonialism, is necessary for the emergence of a church that is truly Indian and genuinely Christian.

Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ

1. See Partha Chatterjee, "Five Hundred Years of Fear and Love", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (1998) 22, pp. 1330-1336.
2. See Kurien Kunnumpuram, "The Autonomy of the Indian Church", in Kurien Kunnumpuram and others, *The Church in India in Search of a New Identity*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1997, pp. 155-176, and the bibliography given there.