

Basic Ecclesial Communities as a New Way of Being Church in India

A Study in the Context of the Synod on Synodality

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Introduction

Concept: A new way of being Church – neither a new Church, nor a parallel Church, rather rediscovering the inner dynamics of being “ecclesia.”

Being a communion of communities locally taking into consideration the local realities and living the Christian faith in the culture in which the Gospel is proclaimed.

It is a form of inculturation- speaking the language of the culture and announcing the Gospel in the categories understood by the local people rather than trying to introduce concepts and ideas foreign to them.

Accepting what is good in the local culture and perfecting it with Christian values.

What are Basic Ecclesial Communities?

- These are groups of Christians who, at the level of the family or in a similarly restricted setting, come together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to a common commitment. These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelisation, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a civilisation of love. (JP II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 2)

Theological foundations in Vatican II

- Theology of the People of God
 - Each believer has a significant role to play in the Church by virtue of baptism
- Rediscovery of the importance of particular churches
 - Not a monolithic ecclesiology
 - Catholicity as an identity in diversity
- Communion ecclesiology
 - universal church and local churches: two dimensions of the one true Church of Christ

Origin of BECs

- The Council's insistence that the Church is the people of God produced many implications for the Church life on both a global and a local level. A major implication of this image is that the **creation of authentic and loving relationships is central to becoming Church.** The people of God are formed by their joyful experience of the saving power of God's love, made most visible for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Transformed by our relationship with God, we are called to be a sign and sacrament to the world of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humankind. (Barbara J. Fleischer, *Facilitating for Growth: A Guide for Scripture Study Groups and Small Christian Communities*, 18)

Latin America

- No precise date can be traced
- 1956 Bishop Agnelo Rossi of Barra do Pirai initiated an evangelisation movement
- “On the eve of Christmas, three Protestant Churches were illuminated and full of people. We could hear them singing [...] while our Catholic Church was closed without illumination because we did not get a priest for the Mass.”
- It was a challenge to the bishop, and he decided to train community coordinators in Barro di Pirai: “to do everything a lay person can do in God’s Church in the ecclesiastical discipline. At the least, these catechists will gather the people once a week for religious instruction. Normally they will also celebrate daily prayer with the people. On Sundays and Holy Days, they will gather the people from all over the district for a “Massless Sunday,” or “priestless Mass,” or “Catholic worship” and lead them spiritually and collectively in the same Mass as is being celebrated by the pastor in the distant mother Church. They will recite morning and evening prayers with the people and novenas, litanies, May and June celebrations, etc.” (Leonardo Boff and Robert R. Barr, *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, 3)

- Radio schools in Natal- people gathered to “listen” to the Mass and catechism
- Better World Movement paved way to create a national pastoral plan
- First National Pastoral Plan (1965-70)- Our present parishes are or ought to be composed of various local communities and “base communities.”
- Adapted as the Joint Pastoral Plan for South America- renewal of the Church through BECs. Each conference set different accent corresponding to the ecclesiological vision of the locality.
- Three important conferences of Latin American Bishops (CELAM): the first at Medellin/Colombia in 1968, the second at Puebla/Mexico in 1979, and the third at Santo Domingo/Dominican Republic in 1992 played significant roles in the establishment and spreading of base communities.

- At the Medellin Conference, the Bishops affirmed:

The Christian [Ecclesial] Base Community is the first and fundamental ecclesial nucleus, which on its own level must make itself responsible for the richness and expansion of the faith, as well as of the cult, which is its expression. The community becomes then the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelisation, and it currently serves as the most important source of human advancement and development. (“Joint Pastoral Planning,” no.10 in *Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Conclusions* 185)

BECs in Africa

- 6th Plenary assembly of Zaire episcopal conference (1961) approved a pastoral plan to promote “Living Ecclesial Communities” (also called “Living Christian Communities”). **The bishops opted for these communities to be more important than the well-known mission structures** (church buildings, schools, hospitals). These Living Ecclesial Communities were said to be the only way **to make the church more “African” and closer to the people**. So, the very first Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Africa started in DRC in 1961.
- The founding fathers of AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa) and other Episcopal Conferences in Africa had a vision that focused on the communion (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) aspects. They developed Small Christian Communities as a concrete expression of, and realisation of, the **Church as a Family Model**. African SCCs have developed mainly as a pastoral, parish-based model.

BECs in Asia

- Asian colloquium in Hong Kong, 1977 – Bishops wanted to bring BECs under their supervision to ensure adherence to the local church and to form uniform policies.
- In some areas, a form of Christian community living has developed, which is termed the “Basic Christian Community.” It must be said that these small communities operating at a still lower level than the parish, allowing for even deeper human and Christian relationships, are the **most fundamental ecclesial realities**, provided they too are equipped with proportionate services and ministries, including the priestly ministry. This amounts to saying that, while these communities need to be linked to the ministry of the bishop, they nevertheless embody the mystery of the Church in their own right; they are, in a true sense, “local Churches.” In reality, the closer to life, the more “local” the Church is. Incomplete, therefore, as Christian communities at the grass-roots level may be, they are nevertheless the most basic reality in the Church’s life. In this sense, the term “basic communities” by which they are called is not without theological significance. (FABC, “Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church: Conclusions,” no. 40).
- In 1982, the FABC decided to promote Basic Ecclesial Communities. It is to be noted that even before the FABC decisions, the bishops of the Philippines had given pastoral priority to the formation of Basic Ecclesial communities.

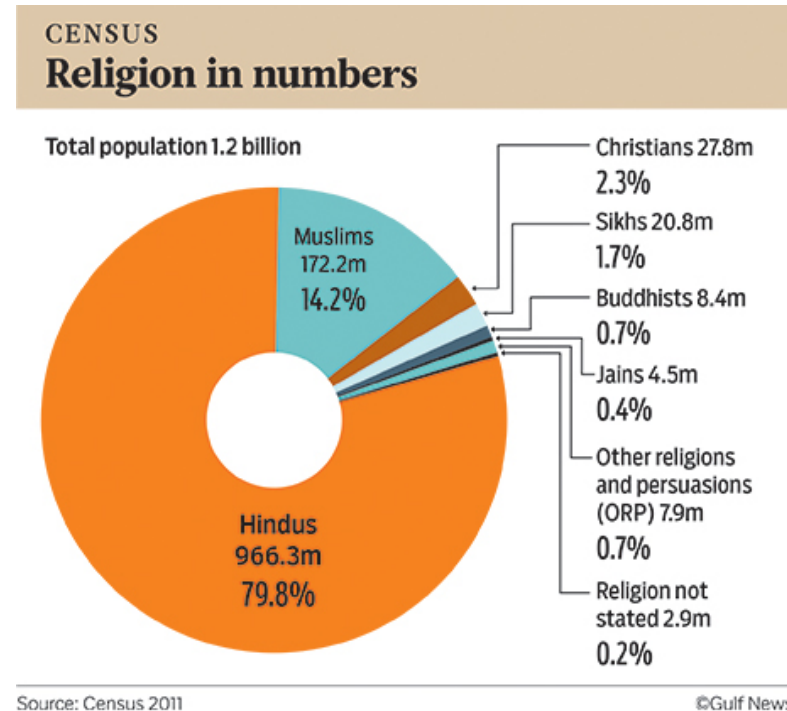
Europe and other developed countries

- Church in developed countries is much more institutional in nature, as we can observe. In the evaluation of Basic Ecclesial Communities, we observe that Europe cannot simply imitate the Basic Ecclesial Communities of Latin America. Europe has a legitimate and meaningful hierarchically organised Church that is still important.
- There exist several BECs in these countries, though not based on the traditional family model.

BECs in India

Indian Context: Land of diversities

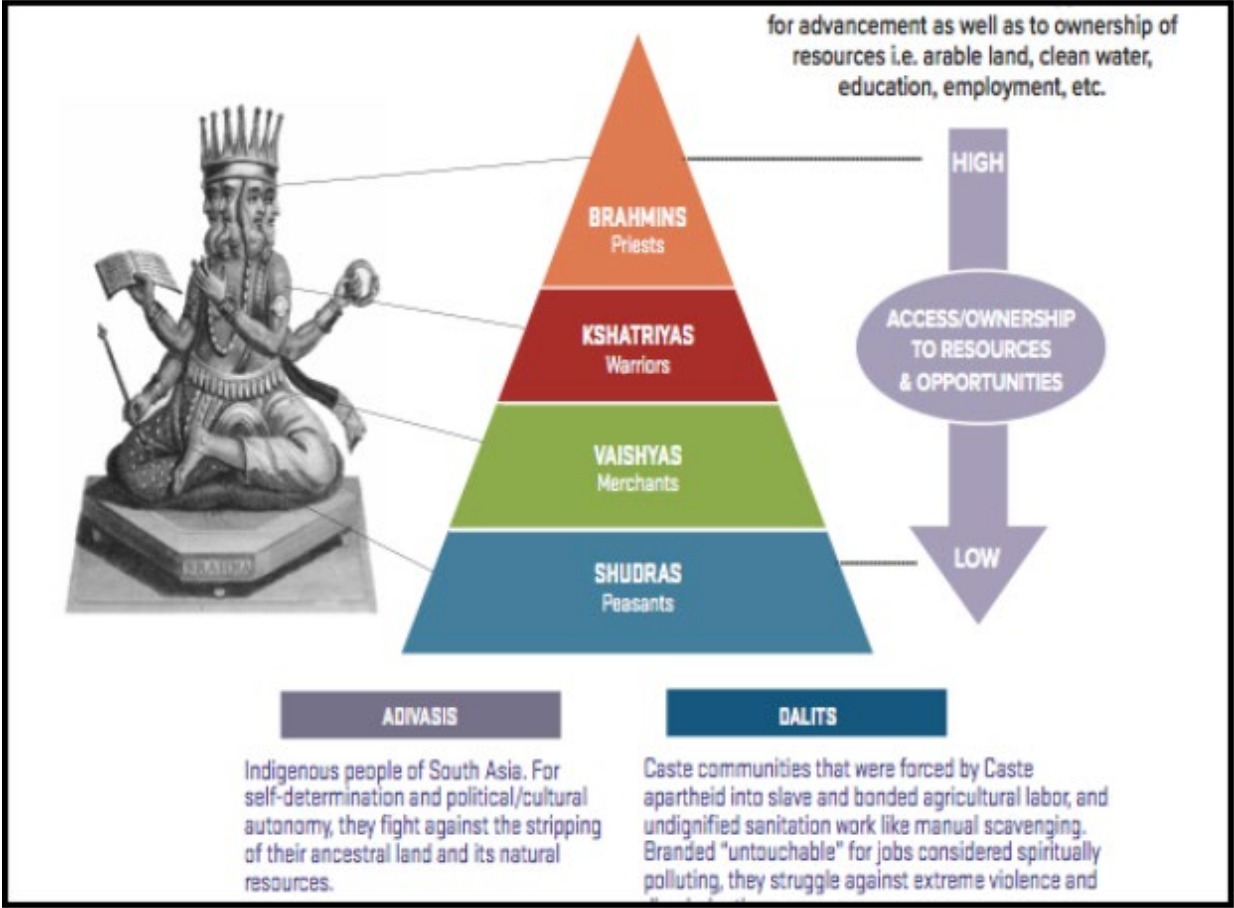
- Religions: All of the world's major religions have followers in India.



- Language:1562 mother tongues, ten writing systems, and 76 languages out of 2000 codified languages in the educational system. Schedule eight of the Indian Constitution recognises 18 languages spoken by 98% of the country's population.
- Largest democracy in the world
- Second fastest-growing economy
- Still, majority of the people are poor. Wealth disparity between the rich and the poor is frightening.

Caste system

- Caste may be defined as a group of families internally bound together in a compact entailing eating, drinking and marriage restrictions on their members. By the same regulations, they keep themselves aloof from other groups. It is an endogamous group; each caste is a social unit by itself. Admission to an established caste is by birthright.
- 4 castes and outcasts.
- Untouchability is a result of the caste system.
- When the Gospel was first preached in this society, this discriminatory caste system was not sufficiently challenged with the result that even Christians continued to belong to their caste and the social discrimination existing in the Hindu society was continued in the Christian communities too. In other words, some Christians in India have tolerated the caste system. (Paul Puthanangady, The Mission of the Church in the Indian Context- Integral Liberation)
- Casteless Indian Church



Christianity in India

- History of 2,000 years
- St. Thomas tradition: 52 AD
- Connections with the Persian and Mesopotamian churches
- No solid documentations until the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498
- Inter-ecclesiality: Roman Catholic Church, Oriental Orthodox churches, and other traditional and contemporary Protestant churches coexist.
- In India, there are several different Protestant denominations. They fall under the more general categories of the Church of South India, the Church of North India, the Mar Thoma Church, and the independent churches. The Syro-Malankara, Syro-Malabar, and Latin Rites make up the Catholic Church.

Catholic Church in India

- The Indian Catholic Church is constituted of three different rites, namely the Latin, the Syro-Malabar and the Syro-Malankara. Roman Catholicism (Latin rite) arrived with the Portuguese missionaries in 1498. Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites claim to be the followers of St. Thomas, who is believed to have brought Christianity to India in 52 AD.
- The Latin Catholics in India spread over 132 dioceses all over India. Population 16 million.
- In the Catholic Communion today, the Syro-Malabar Church ranks second among Eastern churches in communion with Rome and is home to the majority of St. Thomas Christians. 31 eparchies are now in existence. Population 5 million.
- The Syro-Malankara church has about 500,000 members, most of whom live in India, especially in the southern state of Kerala. The Church has 12 dioceses.

Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) – Bandung Conference (1990)

- The theme of this assembly was “The Emerging Challenges for the Church in Asia in the 1990s: A Call to Respond.” The Church in Asia should be a communion of communities, which was the felt need during this conference. The laity, religious and clergy have to accept each other as sisters and brothers, and the Divine Word calls them together to form Small Christian Communities like neighbourhood communities. It is in communities that they pray and share the Gospel of Jesus. From these communities emerge solidarity with other people in society, leading to the establishment of other social groups that work together to defend human rights. (Arevalo, For All the Peoples of Asia, 278)
- The Sixth Plenary Assembly of FABC (1995): a new way of being Church through small Christian communities.
- The Seventh Plenary Assembly of FABC (2000): There is a movement towards an authentic community of faith... **expected to extend beyond purely religious sphere.**

AsIPA and its Features

- Asian Integrated Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) is the outcome of the consultation initiated by the FABC Office of the Laity and Human Development after the challenge posed by the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC in Bandung to promote a new way of being Church in the 1990s.
- AsIPA General Assembly II (Thailand, 2000). The theme of the assembly was “A New Way of Being Church in the New Millennium.”
- The assembly rightly pointed out that **restructuring the parishes as “a community of small communities” is the renewal of the local Church**. In these small communities, the clergy, consecrated persons and the laity are engaged in a dialogue of life and heart sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Final Statement says that the SCCs are a leaven for social and spiritual transformation and that it also acts as an agent of change. Therefore, the networking and action of SCCs in a parish setting expresses solidarity with the poor, the weak and the suffering. (AsIPA General Assembly II, *A New Way of Being Church in the New Millennium*, 8-9).

Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI)

- 1992: recommended establishment of SCCs as the best means to tackle the pressing needs of the Church.
- “The ideal parish/diocese is a community of believers, where all the sections of the people of God, gathered in small groups, are involved in planning, decision making and execution of various activities of the Church. Each diocese and region have planned such a participatory Church.”
- Again, in the annual meeting at Calcutta in 2001, the Council made a policy that before the end of 2001, BCCs have to be formed in all the dioceses.

Developing Indian Integral Pastoral Approach

DIIPA Vision

- In the sharing of the word and the commemoration of the self-giving of Jesus that we celebrate in the Eucharist on Sunday, we shall continue to live out his spirit of loving and sharing in our neighbourhood.

DIIPA Mission

- Transform all parishes in India into a communion of small communities.
- Design and conduct awareness programmes in order to propagate the Small Christian Community way of living.

Basic elements of BECs

- Neighbourhood
- Gospel sharing (seven-step method)
- Mission
- Union with the local church

Positive impacts of BECs

- Participation of laity in the Sunday liturgy
- Meaningful Celebration of Sacraments
- Emergence of Lay Leadership
- Enabling Participatory Church
- Increased Commitment towards Neighbour
- Social Commitment

The impact of the BECs is well expressed by Bishop Julio Labayen in the Philippines: I feel I have stumbled on a vein of gold. I have seen the faith of our people deepen, commitment to one another grow, minds and hearts open up, prayer intensify, and community life form... the BCC movement has touched our people's lives far deeper than any other of our church programmes in the past. (Julio X Labayen, Basic Christian Communities, 142).

Difficulties and Challenges

- Tendency to Fall in Line with Pious Associations and Movements
- Lesser Participation of Men
- Caste Issues
- Lack of Training
- Challenge from the Local Church

BECs in the Context of the Synod on Synodality: Communion, Participation and Mission

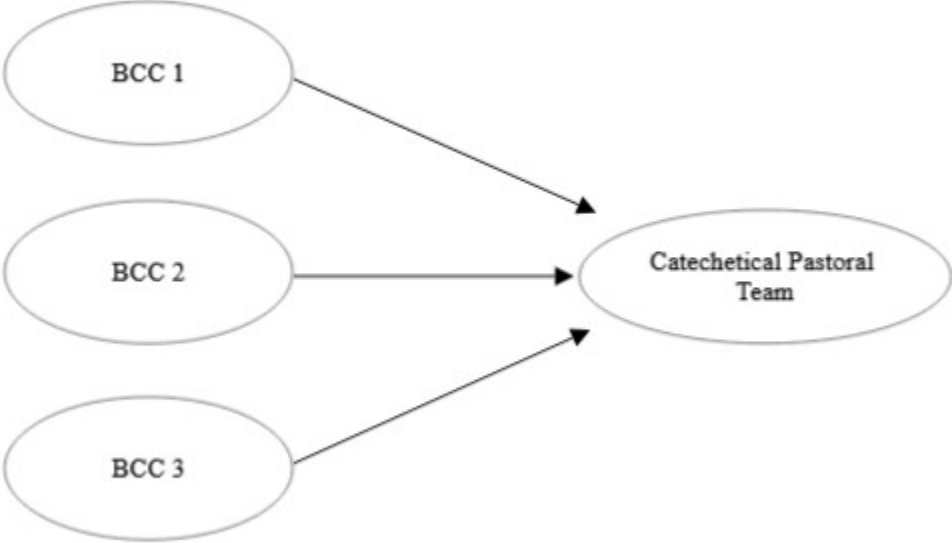
BCCs as Driving Forces of Communion

- Communion with God
- Communion among the Members of the Community
- Communion with All

Participation

- It has been observed that when most parish activities are centralised in the Church campus, most parishioners are gradually led into passivity, apathy, inertia and non-involvement. They experience a dichotomy between what happens on Sunday in the church and what happens during the rest of the week in the areas where they live. Hence parish life should move more and more away from the centre to the neighbourhood communities, where we find the vitality of daily life and the matrix in which the talents of the parishioners can be discovered and utilised (Penha, “The New Way of Being Church,” 31)
- BCC Leaders in the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC)

Formation of Pastoral Teams from BCCs



Mission

- Mission is perceived as “the Church’s witness in faith to certain constants – the person and work of Jesus Christ, ecclesial existence in eschatological hope of a salvation that embraces the whole of humanity and of human culture – always within particular and ever-changing contexts.” (Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, 249).
- There are two different views concerning mission: first, considering mission as the planting of the Church and second, mission as the building up of the kingdom of God.
- With regard to Asia, as the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) clearly states, mission needs to be done in a **threefold dialogue: with the poor, with cultures and with other religions.**

Way forward?

- Christianity facing challenges: difficulty in mission- mission misinterpreted as a way to proselytisation
- Government takeovers of mission establishments such as schools, hospitals, homes for the sick, orphanages etc.
- Christianity vs Hindutva
- Anti-conversion laws

Response through BCCs

- Maintaining Christian Identity
- Communal Harmony
- Christian Unity
- Social Engagement
- Political Engagement

Basic Human Communities: An Indian Pastoral Need

- Basic Human Communities (BHCs) are grassroots organisations that aim to address the social, economic, and political needs of a specific group of people in a particular geographic area. They are made up of individuals who share common values, interests, and goals and who come together to address their needs through collective action.
- BHCs as an Extension of the Mission of the Church
- BCCs provide the necessary platform to establish BHCs

Relevance of BHCs among BCCs

- BHCs provide a space for non-religious activities
- BHCs foster relationships outside of the church
- BHCs encourage inclusivity and diversity
- BHCs strengthen the sense of community
- BHCs are means to fight the evils of the caste system and other oppressing structures
- BCCs can use BHCs to plant the seeds of the Kingdom of God