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Original Article

Toward an Authentic Indian Theology: Inculturation, Liberation, and the Cry of the Poor in the Light of *Dilexi te*

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Abstract

This study explores the emergence of an authentic Indian theology rooted in inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor in the light of Dilexi te (I have loved you). It argues that theology in India must move beyond inherited Western frameworks and become a contextual, lived reflection shaped by religious plurality, cultural diversity, and socio-economic realities. While significant contributions have been made by Asian theologians and ecclesial bodies, a clear research gap remains in integrating inculturation, dialogue, and liberation within a unified theological framework grounded explicitly in the primacy of divine love. By engaging this gap, the study proposes a holistic vision of theology as transformative praxis, revealing Christ within Indian contexts and responding to the cry of the poor through love, justice, and solidarity.

Keywords: *Inculturation, Indian Theology, Interreligious Dialogue, Liberation, Preferential Option for the Poor*

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Introduction

The Church in Asia will be a Church of the poor, a Church of dialogue with Asia's cultures and religions. The local Church is deeply rooted in the community, reflecting both indigenous and inculturated characteristics. In Evangelization in Modern Day Asia, the Church engages in a continuous, humble, and loving dialogue with the living traditions, cultures, and religions of the people. Essentially, the Church connects with all aspects of life in the areas where it is present, embracing the community's history and experiences (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1974, no. 12). This foundational vision, articulated by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, provides a compelling starting point for reflecting on the task of doing theology in contemporary India. It challenges theologians to move beyond mere repetition of inherited Western traditions or abstract doctrinal formulations, and instead calls for a living, dynamic theology deeply rooted in the realities of Asian, particularly Indian, life.

The task of doing theology in India today is both a profound challenge and a vital opportunity. In a context marked by religious plurality, socio-economic inequality, and complex cultural dynamics, theology cannot remain a repetition of inherited traditions or abstract doctrines. Rather, it must become a living reflection that engages the concrete realities of the people. The historical shaping of Christianity through Western missionary and colonial influences has at times led to its perception as foreign, highlighting the urgent need for a theology rooted in the cultural, spiritual, and social fabric of Indian life.

At the same time, India's rich religious heritage provides fertile ground for theological reflection. In this setting, theology must be contextual, dialogical, and liberative, engaging diverse religious traditions while responding to the cries of the poor. The insights of Asian theologians, along with the vision of the Second Vatican Council and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, emphasize a theology rooted in lived experience and oriented toward transformation.

In this light, *Dilexi te* offers a unifying foundation by affirming the primacy of God's love as the source of all theology. As the document reminds us, the Heart of Christ is the living sign of that love which is at the origin of everything and which transforms our lives (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 103). This profound insight situates theology not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a response to the dynamic and transformative love of God revealed in Christ. It calls for a lived praxis that integrates inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor. Thus, this study proposes an authentic Indian theology that is deeply rooted in local realities, in which theology becomes a transformative journey revealing Christ in the cultures, religions, and struggles of the people and contributing to justice, dignity, and human flourishing.

Discussion

The Importance of Theology in the Indian Context

Indians live in a profoundly multicultural and multi-religious context. Although Christianity originated in Asia (today's West Asia), and several Asian Christian communities trace their origins to the apostolic age, Christianity in India has largely developed through Western missionary activity. Consequently, the proclamation of Christ has often been perceived as a Western imposition, closely associated with colonial structures and cultural alienation. For a long time, ecclesial

leadership and missionary initiatives remained under foreign control, thereby embedding a colonial ethos that distanced the Church from the lived realities of the people.

This sense of “foreignness” is not merely because Christianity originated outside India, nor because it professes a distinct faith. Indian society has historically embraced religious diversity, as seen in the acceptance of traditions like Buddhism across Asia without perceiving them as alien. Rather, Christianity has often been viewed as foreign because the local Church, at times, failed to sufficiently identify with the cultural, social, and historical experiences of the people. During the Portuguese missionary period, Western ecclesiastical practices were frequently imposed, and indigenous traditions were discouraged or suppressed, particularly during the Synod of Diamper (1599), widening the gap between faith and culture (Neill, 1984, pp. 230–245).

As John L. Allen Jr. observes in *The Future Church*, “Southern Catholics also tend to believe that the theological agenda set in the West sometimes doesn’t address their pastoral concerns” (Allen, 2009, pp. 2–3). This insight highlights the urgent need for a theology that arises from the Indian context itself, one that resonates with the people’s aspirations, struggles, and religious sensibilities.

India’s long spiritual heritage, as the birthplace of major world religions, reflects a continuous dialogue with the ultimate mystery of God. In such a context, theology cannot remain abstract or imported; it must become contextual, dialogical, and experiential. Asian theologians have consistently emphasized that inculturation and contextualization are not optional but essential for the Church’s mission. The Gospel must encounter cultures in a mutually enriching way, allowing faith to take root in local traditions. Contextualization, or inculturation, in the Indian context is often referred to by Indian theologians as the “Indianization of Christianity.” The term ‘Indianization’ was coined following the example of African theologians who speak of ‘Africanization of Christianity’ when addressing the issue of Inculturation in the African context (*African Ecclesiastical Review [AFER]*, 1975, pp. 322–328). This process calls for a theology that is deeply rooted in the life, culture, and values of the Indian people.

In this regard, the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* (2025) by Pope Leo XIV offers a significant contemporary affirmation. The document underscores that divine love is inseparable from concrete solidarity with the poor and marginalized, especially in the face of new forms of poverty and widening economic inequality. It reiterates the Church’s call to a preferential option for the poor, insisting that authentic Christian witness must be embodied in compassionate action and justice (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 39, see also 98). This teaching strongly resonates with the Indian context, where poverty, social exclusion, and inequality remain pressing realities.

Furthermore, theologians such as Aloysius Pieris and Samuel Rayan have emphasized that theology in Asia must integrate religious depth with commitment to the poor. Pieris speaks of the need for theology to pass through both the richness of Asian religiosity and the harsh reality of Asian poverty, while Rayan insists that God’s self-revelation is encountered in the struggles of the people for dignity and justice (Pieris, 1988, pp. 71–85; Rayan, 1978, pp. 203–231). The vision of *Dilexi te* deepens and universalizes this insight by grounding it explicitly in the mystery of divine love.

Thus, the importance of theology in the Indian context lies in its ability to become a living, liberative, and incarnational reality, one that bridges faith and culture, dialogue and proclamation, contemplation and action. Only such a contextual theology can overcome the perception of foreignness and enable the Church in India

to truly participate in the life, struggles, and hopes of its people, becoming a genuine sign of God's love in history.

The Indian Cultural Context and the Impact of the Missionaries

India is a profoundly pluralistic and multicultural society where diverse faiths and belief systems shape the daily lives of its people. Over centuries, numerous religious traditions, both indigenous and foreign, have not only taken root but have flourished in dynamic interaction. Religion is not merely a private reality in India; it is an integral dimension of cultural and social identity. As a secular state, India's constitution upholds the equal dignity of all religions, fostering an environment where plurality is not only tolerated but also respected.

This rich diversity makes India a privileged context for theological reflection. The Indian people's long-standing engagement with the ultimate mystery of God provides fertile ground for a theology that is dialogical and experiential. However, despite Christianity's ancient presence in India, the faith has often been perceived as foreign due to its historical association with Western missionary expansion and colonial structures. The imposition of Western cultural forms, especially during the Portuguese period, led to a rupture between faith and indigenous traditions, thereby alienating Christianity from the people's cultural life (Neill, 1984, pp. 230–245).

In response to such historical realities, the need for a contextual and inculturated theology has become increasingly evident. The Second Vatican Council marked a decisive turning point in this regard. The Council emphasized that the Church must engage deeply with the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of the people, recognizing that divine revelation unfolds within human history and culture (Second Vatican Council, 1965, no. 1). This vision calls for a theology that is not imposed from the outside but grows organically within the life context of the people.

Building on this vision, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has consistently emphasized the need for a threefold dialogue: with cultures, religions, and the poor. In the Asian, particularly Indian, context, theology must emerge from this dialogical engagement, recognizing the presence of God already at work in the religious traditions and struggles of the people (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1974). Similarly, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has stressed that the Church in India must become truly indigenous by promoting inculturation, interreligious harmony, and a preferential option for the marginalized.

This theological direction finds a powerful contemporary affirmation in the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* by Pope Leo XIV. The document highlights that the love of God is inseparable from concrete solidarity with the poor, especially in a world marked by growing economic inequality and new forms of exclusion. It calls the Church to renew its commitment to the preferential option for the poor, insisting that authentic faith must be expressed through justice, compassion, and transformative action (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 101, 110). In the Indian context, where caste-based discrimination, poverty, and social marginalization persist, this teaching becomes particularly urgent and relevant.

Contemporary theologians further deepen this perspective. Aloysius Pieris insists that Asian theology must be rooted in both the spiritual heritage of Asia and the concrete experience of poverty, while Stephen B. Bevans affirms that all theology is necessarily contextual, shaped by culture and history (Pieris, 1988, pp. 71–85; Bevans, 2002, pp. 3–15). These insights resonate strongly with the vision of *Dilexi te*, which grounds theological reflection in the lived experience of divine love manifested in service to the marginalized.

Therefore, the Indian cultural context, marked by religious plurality and socio-economic challenges, calls for a theology that is inculturated, dialogical, and liberative. Such a theology moves beyond inherited Western frameworks and becomes a living expression of the Gospel within Indian realities. In fidelity to the vision of Vatican II, the FABC, the CBCI, and the call of *Dilexi te*, Indian theology must embody God's love in action, becoming a transformative force that bridges faith and life, and that reveals the presence of Christ in the cultures, religions, and struggles of the Indian people.

The Problem of Foreignness in Indian Christianity

The problem of foreignness in Indian Christianity is deeply rooted in the Church's historical and cultural experience in India. Although Christianity is traditionally traced to the apostolic mission of St. Thomas the Apostle, its later development was significantly shaped by Western missionary movements, particularly under the influence of the Portuguese Empire. During this period, the proclamation of the Gospel became closely associated with colonial power structures, and converts were often expected to abandon their indigenous customs and adopt Western cultural forms. This created a profound divide between faith and culture, leading Christianity to be perceived not as a faith rooted in Indian soil, but as an imported and alien tradition (Neill, 1984, pp. 302–305). The prolonged foreign control over Church leadership and theological formation further reinforced this perception, distancing Christianity from the lived experiences and cultural identity of the Indian people. While Western missionaries played a significant role in bringing the Gospel to India, many hold that authentic spirituality must be indigenous, deeply rooted in the soil, culture, and lived realities of the people themselves (Athyal, 2003).

However, the sense of foreignness cannot be explained merely by Christianity's external origin or its doctrinal distinctiveness. Indian society has historically demonstrated a remarkable openness to religious diversity, as seen in its reception of Buddhism across Asia. The real issue lies in Christianity's failure, at certain points in history, to sufficiently engage with and incarnate itself within India's cultural, social, and historical realities. As John L. Allen Jr. observes, many Christians in the Global South experience a disconnect between theological frameworks developed in Western contexts and the concrete pastoral realities they face (Allen, 2009, pp. 112–115). This highlights the urgent need for a contextual theology that emerges from within the Indian milieu and resonates with the aspirations, struggles, and spiritual sensibilities of its people. Without such a rooted theology, Christianity risks continuing to be perceived as foreign, regardless of its long-standing presence in the country.

In this context, the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* (2025) offers a significant theological and pastoral turning point by providing a pathway to overcome this enduring challenge. Rather than addressing foreignness merely at the level of external adaptation, the exhortation proposes a deeper method of inculturation grounded in lived experience. By calling for a Church that is fundamentally “for, with, and of the poor,” it shifts the focus from inherited institutional forms to the concrete realities of people's lives. Its emphasis on listening to the “cry of the poor” and recognizing the marginalized as active subjects of theological reflection invites the Church to rediscover its mission at the very heart of society. By her very nature, the Church stands in solidarity with the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, and all those considered outcasts of society, embodying this mission as an essential expression of her identity and vocation (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 111). This vision is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where poverty, caste-based exclusion, and social

marginalization remain pressing concerns. Many of those most affected by these realities, including Dalits and tribal communities, are also among those in whom Christianity has taken deep root; yet they continue to bear the stigma of foreignness. India's independence from British rule and the departure of Western missionaries coincided with a growing effort among Indian theologians to shed this label and to discover an authentically Indian face of Christ. In this context emerged the profound recognition that the Christ reality transcends the boundaries of formal Christianity, that Christ is present, though often unacknowledged, within the religions and cultures of Asia, thereby opening new pathways for inculturation and interreligious dialogue (Abraham, 2012, p. 43).

By rooting itself in the struggles, hopes, and cultural expressions of these communities, the Church in India can move beyond the legacy of colonial associations and become authentically indigenous. In this way, the problem of foreignness, the need for contextual theology, and the vision articulated in *Dilexi te* are not separate concerns but interconnected aspects of a single theological journey. The exhortation ultimately offers not just a response to social issues but also a transformative framework for inculturation, enabling Indian Christianity to emerge as a faith deeply rooted in its own context while remaining faithful to the universal message of the Gospel (Amaladoss, 1990, pp. 45–52).

Pluralism, Poverty, and the Call to Love: An Indian Theological Reflection in the Light of *Dilexi te*

India's uniqueness lies in its profound religious plurality and spiritual depth. It is the birthplace of several major world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and has been a fertile ground for the growth of Islam and Christianity. In this context, religion is not merely a private or individual affair but an all-encompassing reality that shapes culture, identity, and social structures. The Indian worldview is deeply marked by openness to the transcendent, expressed through a rich diversity of rituals, philosophies, and spiritual practices. This pluralistic ethos invites dialogue, mutual enrichment, and a search for truth that transcends exclusivist boundaries (Amaladoss, 2003, pp. 62–65).

However, this spiritual richness exists alongside stark socio-economic realities. India continues to struggle with widespread poverty, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and systemic marginalization. Millions are deprived of basic human dignity, and social hierarchies often perpetuate injustice and exclusion. The contradiction between deep religiosity and persistent injustice poses a serious challenge: how can a society so spiritually inclined tolerate structures that deny the fundamental dignity of human persons? (Wilfred, 2000, pp. 45–47)

In such a context, theology in India cannot remain abstract, speculative, or disconnected from lived realities. Rather, it must become a dynamic reflection on faith as lived in history. Indian theology is called to listen attentively to the “cry of the poor” and to interpret the Gospel in ways that respond meaningfully to the suffering and aspirations of the marginalized. This gives rise to a contextual and liberative theological approach that seeks not only to understand God but also to participate in God's transforming action in the world (Soares-Prabhu, 1999, pp. 112–115).

The vision of liberation finds renewed depth when viewed in the light of *Dilexi te*, the recent theological reflection attributed to Pope Leo XIV. As Pope Leo XIV emphasized in *Dilexi te*, all Christians are called to recognize the profound connection between Christ's love and the summons to care for the poor; thus, the document underscores the primacy of God's love as the foundation of all Christian life and mission (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 3). Liberation, in this perspective, is not merely

socio-political emancipation but a holistic transformation rooted in divine love. In this light, the Church emerges as a true mother of the poor, a compassionate community that offers welcome, protection, and a space where justice is actively pursued (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 39). Rooted in the love of Christ, the Church is called not only to console but also to transform social realities. God's love, revealed in Christ, is both tender and demanding: it reaches out in mercy to the suffering while at the same time calling for justice, reconciliation, and the full restoration of human dignity. Thus, the Church's mission becomes a living expression of this divine love, embodying both care for the marginalized and a prophetic commitment to justice.

In the Indian context, *Dilexi te* challenges theologians to ground their reflection in a spirituality of love that is both contemplative and active. Liberation theology, therefore, must avoid becoming purely ideological or reductionist. Instead, it must remain anchored in the experience of God's unconditional love, which empowers believers to stand in solidarity with the poor and to work for structural change. In this view, if the Church genuinely wants to be Christ's Church, it must become a Church of the Beatitudes. This means creating space for the marginalized and walking alongside the poor in solidarity, giving them a special place of honor, as emphasized in Jas. 2:2–4 (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 21). The love of Christ thus becomes the motivating force behind the struggle for justice, transforming it into a sacred mission rather than a mere social project.

Furthermore, *Dilexi te* invites a rethinking of interreligious dialogue within a framework of love. In a pluralistic society like India, liberation cannot be confined to a single religious tradition. The recognition of God's universal love opens the possibility for collaboration across religious lines in the pursuit of justice, peace, and human flourishing. Indeed, to the extent that Christ reigns within us, the life of society itself becomes a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace, and dignity. Both Christian preaching and Christian life are thus called to have a transformative impact on society, as they participate in the realization of (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 97). Thus, theology becomes not only a reflection on Christian faith but also a bridge for dialogue and cooperation in a diverse society.

In this light, the Indian context of pluralism and poverty calls for a theology that is both deeply rooted in spiritual tradition and courageously engaged with social realities. In the light of *Dilexi te*, liberation is understood as a response to God's loving initiative, a call to transform the world through compassion, justice, and solidarity (Gutiérrez, 1988, pp. 173–175). Such a theology does not merely interpret reality but seeks to change it, embodying the Gospel message in the concrete struggles and hopes of the people.

In such a context, theology cannot remain abstract or detached. It must engage with the concrete realities of life, particularly the suffering of the poor and marginalized. Theology must become a reflection on faith as lived in history, responding to the cries of the oppressed and the search for meaning in a pluralistic society.

Contextual Theology: Inculturation and Dialogue in the Light of *Dilexi te*

The emergence of contextual theology represents a significant shift in theological methodology. Theology is no longer understood as a static body of doctrines but as a dynamic process that engages culture, history, and human experience. In the light of *Dilexi te*, this shift can be seen more profoundly as a response to God's loving initiative in history, where theology becomes a living reflection on how divine love encounters diverse human situations (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 2–3).

As Stephen B. Bevans affirms, all theology is inherently contextual, shaped by the particular social and cultural realities in which it is articulated (Bevans, 2002, pp. 3–5). However, recognizing this inherent contextuality is not the same as engaging in theology that is consciously and explicitly contextual. As Angie Pears observes, since the mid-twentieth century, theological reflection that intentionally draws on specific situations, cultural settings, socio-economic conditions, and political experiences as sources for doing theology has emerged as a more prominent and active strand within Christian theology (Garner, 2014, p. 21). This insight resonates deeply with the vision of Pope Leo XIV in *Dilexi te*, where the universality of God’s love does not erase cultural differences but rather embraces and transforms them (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 10–12). It challenges the dominance of purely Western theological frameworks and opens the way for authentic expressions of faith rooted in local cultures.

In the Indian context, contextual theology finds concrete expression in inculturation and interreligious dialogue. From the perspective of *Dilexi te*, inculturation is not merely a methodological adaptation but a living manifestation of divine love entering the heart of a culture, affirming what is good, healing what is wounded, and purifying what is unjust. In this light, unjust structures must be both recognized and transformed, not through coercion but through the compelling power of the good. This transformation calls for a renewal of mindsets and attitudes, as well as the responsible use of science and technology in shaping effective policies that promote authentic and lasting societal change (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 97). The Gospel, when incarnated in local traditions, becomes a living and transformative presence, revealing Christ in ways that are meaningful to the people.

Similarly, interreligious dialogue assumes a deeper theological significance in light of God’s universal love. *Dilexi te* invites Christians to recognize that divine love is not confined to the visible boundaries of the Church but is mysteriously at work among all peoples and religions. This vision is reflected in the First Epistle of John 3:17: “How can God’s love remain in anyone who has the world’s goods, sees a brother or sister in need, and refuses to help?” (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 28–30). Such a perspective fosters a spirit of humility, openness, and mutual respect, where dialogue becomes an expression of love that seeks truth together, rather than a confrontation of differences. This perspective fosters a spirit of humility, openness, and mutual respect, where dialogue becomes an expression of love seeking truth together rather than a confrontation of differences.

The vision of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, particularly its concept of the “triple dialogue” with cultures, religions, and the poor, finds a renewed theological foundation in *Dilexi te* (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences [FABC], 1974, no. 12). This approach reflects the conviction that God’s love is encountered in the concrete realities of life, especially among the marginalized. Thus, theology in Asia must emerge not only from intellectual reflection but from a compassionate engagement with people’s lived experiences.

In this light, contextual theology becomes a theology of love in action, one that listens, dialogues, and transforms. Rooted in the vision of *Dilexi te*, it calls the Church in India to embody a faith that is culturally meaningful, interreligious in spirit, and deeply committed to the dignity and liberation of all (Amaladoss, 2003, pp. 70–72).

Liberation and the Preferential Option for the Poor in the Light of *Dilexi te*

A central dimension of Indian contextual theology is its enduring commitment to liberation, understood not merely in socio-political terms but as a profound participation in God’s saving love within history. Theologians such as Aloysius Pieris

and Samuel Rayan have consistently emphasized that theology in Asia must hold together deep religious experience and an uncompromising commitment to the poor. Pieris famously argues that Asian theology must pass through both the “Jordan of Asian religions” and the “Calvary of Asian poverty,” a metaphor that captures the dual challenge of engaging religious plurality while confronting the harsh realities of socio-economic injustice (Pieris, 1988, pp. 70–72; Phan, 2016). Likewise, Rayan insists that God’s self-revelation is encountered in people’s struggles for dignity, justice, and liberation (Rayan, 1978, pp. 25–30).

From the perspective of *Dilexi te*, this commitment to liberation is rooted in the very nature of divine love, which is never abstract or distant but always concrete, compassionate, and transformative. God’s love is revealed most clearly in closeness to human suffering, especially in the lives of the poor and marginalized. In a Church that recognizes in the poor the face of Christ and in material goods the instrument of charity, the thought of Augustine of Hippo remains a sure and enduring light. For Augustine, the authenticity of Christian faith is measured not merely by doctrinal correctness but by the practice of love expressed in concrete acts of service. From this perspective, patristic theology was profoundly practical, oriented toward shaping a Church that is both poor and for the poor. It reminds us that the Gospel is rightly proclaimed only when it leads us to touch the very flesh of the least among us, and that doctrinal rigor without mercy risks becoming empty, lifeless discourse (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 45–48).

This insight naturally leads to a deeper theological affirmation: the preferential option for the poor is not simply a sociological concern but a constitutive dimension of Christian faith. Rooted in the very heart of Christ, who identifies himself with the least and the marginalized (cf. Mt. 25:40), this option calls the Church to embody a love that is both contemplative and active. Thus, the Church’s mission is fulfilled not only in proclaiming truth but in living it through compassion, solidarity, and a transformative commitment to justice that makes visible the love of Christ in the world.

Seen in this way, the same theological vision naturally extends into the insights of liberation theology and Indian contextual theology, where this commitment to the poor finds a deeper grounding. The transformation of unjust structures becomes an expression of participating in God’s own loving action in the world. Love, therefore, stands as both the source and the goal of liberation, challenging injustice, healing brokenness, and restoring human dignity. Consequently, theology is not limited to interpreting reality but is called to actively participate in its transformation, guided by a love that is both contemplative and committed.

Magisterial Foundations: Vatican II, FABC, and CBCI in the Light of *Dilexi te*

The vision of contextual and liberative theology is strongly supported by the magisterium of the Church. The Second Vatican Council marked a decisive turning point by emphasizing the Church’s engagement with the modern world. *Gaudium et Spes* calls the Church to share in the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of humanity, thus situating theological reflection within the concrete realities of human life (Second Vatican Council, 1965, no. 1). Building on this vision, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences has consistently emphasized the importance of inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and solidarity with the poor. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India has similarly called for the Indian Church to become truly indigenous and pastorally responsive to the lived realities of its people

(Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1990; Catholic Bishops' Conference of India [CBCI], 1969).

This trajectory finds further affirmation in the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI, who, in his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, underscores that “in order to foster this participation, provision may be made for a number of adaptations appropriate to different contexts and cultures” (Benedict XVI, 2007, no. 54). See also Eballo (2022, p. 10). In this way, the call for inculturation and contextual adaptation emerges not merely as a pastoral strategy but as a continuation of the Church's conciliar commitment to engage authentically with diverse human situations. These developments reflect a growing recognition that theology must be rooted in lived experience and oriented toward transforming society.

From the perspective expressed in *Dilexi te*, this magisterial vision can be understood more deeply as grounded in the primacy of God's personal and initiating love. God's love is not abstract or distant but intimately addressed to each person and community, entering into their history, culture, and struggles. This divine initiative becomes the foundation for the Church's mission: to mirror that same love in its engagement with the world.

Thus, the call of the Council, the FABC, and the CBCI is not merely pastoral or sociological but profoundly theological. The Church's commitment to inculturation, dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor flows from its experience of being first loved by God. In this light, contextual and liberative theology emerge as concrete expressions of responding to that love, seeking to make it visible in diverse cultural settings and in the struggle for justice and dignity. Theology, therefore, becomes a living response to *Dilexi te*, where the Church, having received God's love, is sent forth to embody it in history through solidarity, compassion, and transformative action.

The Contemporary Relevance of *Dilexi te*

The Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* offers a compelling contemporary affirmation of the Church's enduring commitment to love as the foundation of all theological reflection and action. It underscores that divine love is never abstract but is always embodied in concrete solidarity with the poor, especially in the face of new forms of poverty, economic inequality, and social exclusion (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 9, 12). In continuity with the broader tradition of Catholic social teaching, the document highlights that love must take visible form in justice, compassion, and active concern for the marginalized.

In a globalized world marked by widening disparities, *Dilexi te* calls the Church to renew its commitment to the preferential option for the poor. It insists that authentic Christian faith cannot remain confined to personal piety or doctrinal affirmation but must be expressed through transformative engagement with the realities of suffering and injustice. Each Christian and every community is thus called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and inclusion of the poor, attentive and responsive to their cry. As the Scriptures make clear, God continually hears the cry of the poor, and this divine attentiveness becomes the foundation and urgency of the Church's mission (Francis, 2013, no. 187). In this sense, the exhortation deepens the insights of contextual and liberation theologies by grounding them explicitly in the primacy of God's initiating love, *Dilexi te*, which calls forth a loving and responsible response from believers.

In the Indian context, this teaching acquires particular urgency. The persistence of poverty, caste discrimination, and various forms of social marginalization demands a theology that goes beyond reflection to active transformation (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India [CBCI], 1969, secs. 3–5). The

vision articulated in *Dilexi te* resonates strongly with the concerns of Indian contextual theology, reinforcing the call for a Church that is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the people. It invites the Church in India to embody a love that is contemplative and liberative, standing in solidarity with the oppressed, challenging unjust structures, and working toward the restoration of human dignity (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1990, pp. 12–14).

Thus, *Dilexi te* serves as a vital contemporary lens through which the Church's mission can be understood anew: as a participation in God's own loving action in history. It calls theology to remain grounded in love and oriented toward liberation, ensuring that faith becomes a transformative force in the pursuit of justice, peace, and human flourishing.

Conclusion

The journey toward an authentic Indian theology is both a necessary and ongoing task, shaped by India's unique religious plurality, cultural richness, and socio-economic challenges. This study has shown that theology in India cannot remain confined to inherited Western frameworks or abstract doctrinal expressions. Rather, it must emerge as a living, contextual, and transformative reflection deeply rooted in the lives, struggles, and aspirations of the people.

The persistent perception of Christianity as foreign highlights the urgent need for inculturation, an engagement in which the Gospel genuinely takes flesh within Indian cultures. At the same time, the reality of poverty, caste-based discrimination, and marginalization calls for a theology that is not only reflective but also liberative. In this regard, the insights of Indian and Asian theologians, together with the vision of the Church expressed through Vatican II, the FABC, and the CBCI, provide a strong foundation for a theology that is dialogical, participatory, and oriented toward justice.

In the light of *Dilexi te*, this theological task finds its deepest unity and meaning in the primacy of God's love. Divine love is not an abstract principle but a dynamic and transformative force that calls the Church to be in solidarity with the poor, to engage in genuine dialogue with other religions, and to incarnate the Gospel within diverse cultural contexts. Inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor thus emerge not as separate concerns but as interconnected expressions of responding to God's initiating love.

Ultimately, an authentic Indian theology must become a theology of love in action, one that listens to the "cry of the poor," enters into the richness of Indian spiritual traditions, and courageously confronts structures of injustice. Such a theology does not merely interpret reality but participates in its transformation. Rooted in the love of Christ, it enables the Church in India to move beyond the legacy of foreignness and to become truly indigenous: a living sign of God's presence, compassion, and justice in history.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The author acknowledges the use of AI-assisted tools, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly, to enhance the readability, grammar, language clarity, and overall presentation of the manuscript. These tools were used solely for editorial and language improvement and did not influence the study's original ideas, data analysis, interpretations, or conclusions. The author confirms that all analyses, interpretations, and scholarly judgments were conducted independently and are the sole responsibility of the author.

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