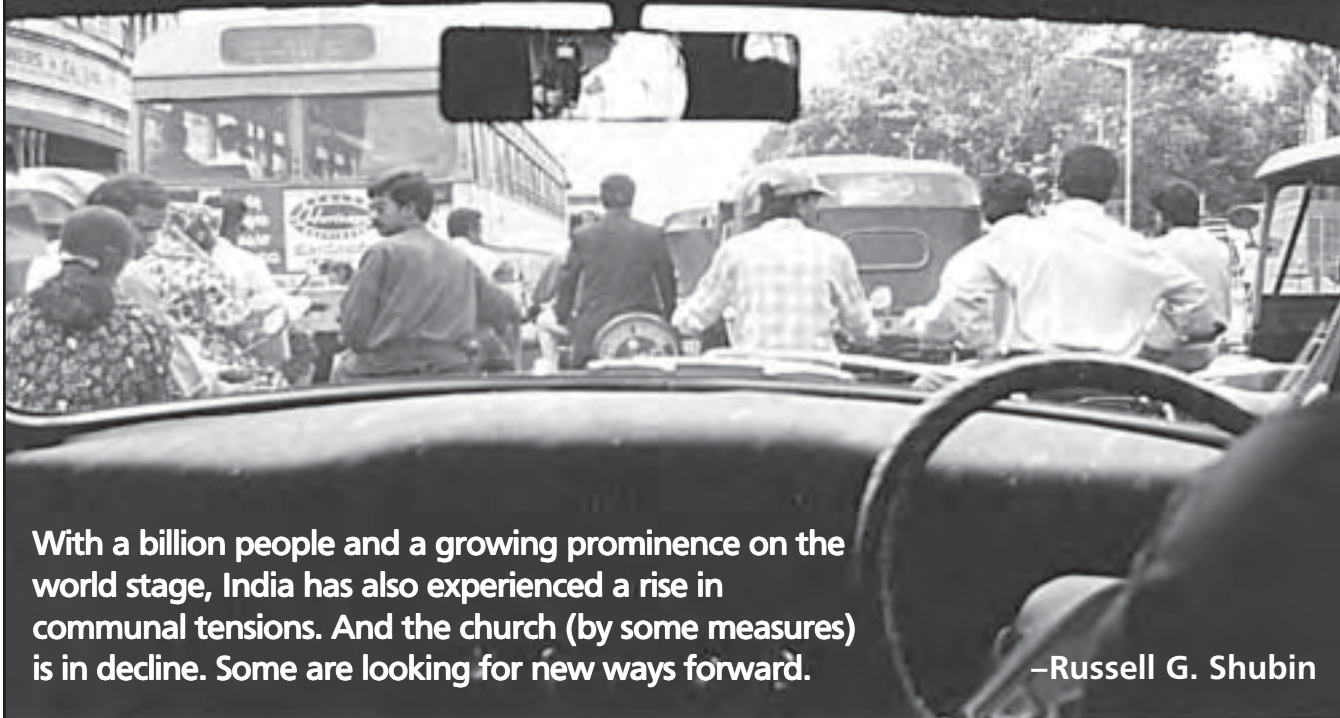


# Looking for a Way Forward



With a billion people and a growing prominence on the world stage, India has also experienced a rise in communal tensions. And the church (by some measures) is in decline. Some are looking for new ways forward.

—Russell G. Shubin

**I**N RECENT YEARS, India has been quickly earning a more prominent place on the world stage. Though geographically it is only one-third the size of China, the Indian subcontinent now shares a special honor with the giant of the East: They are the two nations whose populations exceed one billion. While China is still some 200 million ahead of India in population, India is gaining ground—growing at twice the rate of China, forecasted to surpass it in population between 2030 and 2050.

Whatever way you choose to look at it, India is crowded. Their average of 1,088 people per square mile is almost three times the density of China and over 12 times that of the United States, whose average is just over 88 people per square mile.

When India demonstrated its strength with nuclear arms tests in 1998, their flexing of military muscle was directed largely at Pakistan. But the entire world woke up to take note. India also made headlines last year with a visit from the Pope (though the outcry from protestors incensed over the Pontiff's visit arguably stole the show). And earlier this year Bill Clinton made the first diplomatic trip to India by a U.S. President in 22 years. According to *Outlook* magazine, "he cajoled, persuaded and seduced a diffident India." Though the visit is still subject to scrutiny, a number of analysts sensed a discernable shift in U.S. foreign policy—towards India and away from Pakistan.

So India, long-time a quiet figure on the international scene, is growing in prominence. More recently, it was the celebrated birth of the billionth Indian when little Aastha was born in New Delhi on May 11.

But some are not altogether enamored with India's growth. One *India Today* writer may represent the sentiments of many in the title of a recent piece, "A Billion Problems."

Whatever sphere you choose to look at, growth brings problems and challenges. India's population growth has been particularly challenging as the

nation attempts to come to grips with the foundational issues of poverty, pollution and lack of natural resources, to name just a few.

But at least one thing in India is not huge. And, as a percentage of total population, it is not growing. It is the Christian church. The January-March 2000 *India Church Growth Quarterly*, reports that Christians in India went from 2.6 percent of the population in 1971 to 2.34 percent in 1991. K. Rajendran, General Secretary of the India Missions Association (IMA) notes that among the total number of Christians in India the portion of that is evangelical is very small indeed. "Does India have a viable church, overall speaking? No," he says. And when you look at it in terms of unreached peoples, India tops the Joshua Project Least Reached Peoples List—with 170 unreached people groups (followed by Indonesia, 125, and China, 120).

Maybe more striking than the size and direction of movement of the

church in India is the tension that has been highlighted in recent years with growing violence and a war of words against Christians. In the weeks leading up to the Pope's visit last fall, the headlines gave daily testimony to the sentiment of a vocal if not growing portion of the Indian populace: "Pope urged to announce freeze on conversion," "Hindu associations protest against conversions," were common front-page fare. But the most poignant may have been the protest where a symbolic Pope was burned in effigy.

Though all official estimates indicate that the Christian population is in decline, the agitation comes in part from a strong sense among Hindu fundamentalist groups that, in truth, the Christian population is really expanding quite rapidly. The vice president of the Hindu group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) told *Outlook* magazine that the numbers do not accurately reflect what he calls, "Crypto-Christians. They hide their religion but have actually converted. Don't be fooled. There are many more Christians than the official numbers. They are limited to pockets where the media doesn't go."

An obvious hot-button issue, conversion has been at the center of a number of discussions, with some questioning whether the current government would actually attempt to legislate against it in an effort to guard a vision of *Hindutva*—literally Hindu-ness but increasingly used in reference to a Hindu nation.

By and large, the Christian community has held on to the term "conversion." But, according to H.L. Richard, an author who previously served in India with Operation Mobilisation, the word itself is riddled with confusion and prone to misinterpretation. To the Indian, he says, "conversion means cultural and sociological and communal change." While to some in the Christian community it carries the positive connotations of regeneration, in the public sphere, conversion is perceived

as a snag or even a tear in the fabric of a somewhat delicate social order.

"Whatever term carries that sociological baggage you have to get rid of and adopt a different term with a focus on spiritual change," he says.

Some feel that the understanding of conversion as a change in outward affiliation with a given community has inflamed the very real tensions of communalism: the pitting of one cultural or religious group against another. In the past, conversion in India would entail a change of name—the adoption of a Western, Christian name. Though not so common today, change of dress and outward affiliation are still quite common.

The principal of one evangelical Bible college says, referring to conversion, that "those who have held on to that word have probably held on to it on principle—as defending the freedom of expression." But, he admits, the word itself is a problem. "Those who are actually engaged in mission would do well to avoid that word altogether.... Rather than making converts we ought to make believers in Jesus, followers of Jesus."

He points out that much of the opposition to the word conversion is a

reflection of a real or perceived cultural war. The sense is that, "This Western, Christian culture is trying to overcome, suppress and destroy our national, ancient cultural identity of Hinduism." Contributing to this sense that the church is a threat from the outside is the earlier correlation of colonial rule and Protestant mission effort. "Unfortunately," he says, "Protestant mission was at its peak at the time the British were in power. So, both are perceived in some ways as vestiges of colonialism."

H.L. Richard points out how the colonial era has frequently been painted as all black or all white. And while much of the Indian mainstream has tended to paint the colonial era as all black, the Christian community's general approach has been to paint it far whiter than it should be. "It is a thoroughly gray subject matter that has to be dealt with as thoroughly gray."

"What you had was a real effort to supplant Hindu civilization and establish a superior civilization—which failed, clearly. But what it left us with was pockets of a very Westernized church—which is isolated, socially and culturally, from the mainstream of Indian society," Richard says.



**THE FACE OF THE UNREACHED:** India tops the list of Joshua Project's unreached peoples list. The believing community it does have has been subject to the greatest violence since independence.

Some Christian workers in India have a growing conviction that the nature of some of the practices of evangelism and mission may be doing more to compound the problem than making real progress toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission. In an interview weeks before his death last November, George Ninan, former Director of the Centre for Communication Skills, said he was convinced that the multitude of posters picturing the American evangelist in town for a three-day series of meetings may have been most successful in fostering the image

banners and décor of an Islamic group. Following them, there was a short-term group of evangelicals, with new banners, showing the *Jesus* film. After making a video of the confessions of faith at the close of the film, they returned home. When food, medical help and clothes are being distributed, Ninan saw in slum dwellers a remarkable agility to alternate between faiths, depending on who was present at the time. The problem is that not nearly enough people stick around long enough to understand the impact—or lack of impact—their ministry is having.

established Christian church. One movement, for example, has made a determined effort not to meet on Sunday mornings—lest they give unnecessary excuse for being ostracized from those whom they care about reaching the most: their families.

Reports of house churches in various parts of the country have begun to increase. In fact, Indian believers have recently traveled to China for ministry training from house church leaders. In a private letter, written over 16 years ago, the late Dr. Donald McGavran may have foreshadowed at least this component

of the recent mission thrust. He wondered whether those who are making efforts to reach caste Hindus might “constantly publicize the fact that becoming a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ can be done without joining an existing church? That is what happened in China. That can happen in India.”

A number of efforts have begun that seek to worship through song, teach and disciple in ways that are faithful to Scripture yet more natural to a person from a Hindu background. The term “Christian” is sometimes avoided in order to dissociate from the

“Christian West” and the baggage it entails. Increasingly, the terms believer, Christ-follower or even Christ *Bhakta*—a devotee or disciplined disciple of Jesus—are used to denote one’s spiritual affinity and submission to Christ.

But those who are making efforts to work outside the assumed parameters for mission to the Hindu world are faced with a number of obstacles. Dr. Siga Arles, professor of missiology at Serampore College (near Calcutta), believes that the church itself may be a major hindrance to these mission



**A HINDU NATION?** India is 75 percent Hindu. A vocal minority, vehemently opposed to conversion is perceived as being in accord with the leading party in India’s governing coalition, making some question the depth of India’s commitment to religious freedom itself.

of the Christian faith as the religion of the white man. “Today in India, Islam is growing faster than any other religion. When the Muslims have their conventions, they don’t bring a great man from Saudi Arabia to preach,” he said “Why do we need to do that?”

And with the explosion of short-term teams coming from the West, Ninan was troubled by how it fosters Western dominance and ineffective mission work. As an example, Ninan described a slum that received frequent visitors from the outside. For several days, he witnessed the Muslim

“If you were there for five years you could see what is happening,” he said. “We have to understand that if I come to America, it is going to take me *how long* to understand your ways, your systems, your social nuances, your cultural behavior patterns? I can’t go there and do something for fifteen days and say, ‘Wow, I’ve evangelized Texas!’”

As social tensions in India increase, there is a growing conviction among many mission workers—from both India and the West—that efforts to reach the unreached may be better done outside the bounds of the

efforts. He admits that, “this whole thing would not sound right to those who think of ‘bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves’—bringing the converts into the ark. The ark is the church. You bring them in; if not they will stifle and die out there. So evangelicals would not be too keen on what they are saying.”

He has found the discussion on recent efforts to reach Hindus a bit prone to elevate earlier Indian—or Hindu—culture. “My real concern in terms of indigenization, reaching to the real India, is that we often make the mistake of ‘oldenization’ and [elevating] the old culture and therefore, Indian Christian theology becomes Sanskritization or Brahmanic culture enforced on Christian theology.”

Indeed, urban Indian society at large is becoming increasingly global and has a Western influence that can be seen in everything from Indian MTV to Bollywood—the Indian film industry centered in Mumbai (formerly Bombay)—to the fight for who holds the mantle of India’s Silicon valley. The growing middle class shows little outward affection for traditional Hinduism: they are dressed well—but not often in traditional Indian clothing, they have discretionary income and spend it freely on all types of entertainment.

So the Westernized Indian church may be a perfect fit for the urbanized, modernized India that is growing. Yet the Bible college principal observes that Indian culture is very resilient. “If you go to one of these young people who seem very Westernized on the surface and you probe deep inside, at the core of their being, they would be very, very, Indian.”

H.L. Richard adds that, “Middle class India is running after Western ways. Except religion. They are absolutely adamant: No foreign religion, no foreign religion. That is as repulsive to the Hindu today as it was a hundred years ago, as it was a thousand years ago—maybe even more repulsive today. So, these cultural trends are not an aid to the Gospel in that sense.”

Rajendran recognizes a reticence

to change on the part of the church. “I think the church has to change, there is no question. I think the church is too Western in their practices.... The fear has always been that we become syncretistic. That is the fear. Because of fear, we are paralyzed to experiment with anything. We have not experimented with anything at all in terms of contextualization,” he says.

The attempt to grapple with the issues of caste and culture and acculturation in relation to the Gospel is certainly not a new development for India.

Indeed, since it is difficult to find any time in the history of



Christians in India when this has not been a burning issue, this both remained and still is *the* enduring problem for all Christians in India.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is one that, in the current context, is simply receiving the attention it deserves. Sam Kameleson, currently serving as the president of one of India’s larger mission organizations, the Friends Missionary Prayer Band, is convinced that the people of God are a people of power. What he questions is the means by which the Christian community seeks to demonstrate its power. “These three-day, four-day power conferences seem to come in to please the improper ego, misunderstanding a phrase

concerning the people of God being a people of power. It not only distracts, but it brings out all that is negative from the environment,” he says.

What he saw as a more appropriate demonstration of power was the response of Gladys Staines to the brutal death of her husband and two sons. Like Christ in the Garden, she obviously would have prayed not to have to go through the horrific ordeal. Yet when she was faced with it, she approached it with a dignity and virtue that caused India to respond, “This is true spirituality.”

Kameleson argues that it is this kind of spirituality that binds the strong one. “It seems to me that the power that would be irresistible would be the power that Gladys Staines expressed and Mother Theresa expressed. And there are a whole lot of lesser people, who are all Indians, who have never made any big noise. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh the sands will one day reveal how many young men have been killed and buried quietly. Nobody made a case of it. They went and never came back, for the sake of the Gospel.”

Kameleson is particularly hopeful as he looks at some of the research in a number of cities that supports what he has seen: a growing attraction to the person of Jesus and a desire to follow Him—but a hesitancy to don Western clothes and pass through the doors of the established church. Noting this increased affection for Christ, Kameleson says, “Obviously, going to church was not as attractive as following Him, which should be so,” he says. In places where there has been a move to faith, he has seen other peoples ask, “Is this Jesus only for them, or is He for us also?”

Admittedly, any effort to understand God’s work in all of India by the numbers is a confusing task. Kameleson takes comfort, “I think my greatest note of optimism is the fact that the Kingdom has become irresistible in India.”

1. R. E. Frykenberg, “India,” in *A World History of Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 182.

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