

Understanding Christward Movements in India

By DR. ANON

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It is becoming clear that spontaneous, Christward movements are emerging and impacting India. The first witness to Christ arrived nearly 2,000 years ago. Protestant expansion in this region can be classified into four eras, spanning three centuries.

History of Christward Movements

The first era is roughly 1706–1947, from the first entry to independence from colonial oversight. This is the era of foreign witness. The second period (1947–1970) was a post-independence, stabilizing era. From 1970 to 2000, we saw a third era with tremendous growth of indigenous, spontaneous mission movements.

The first two eras formed ministry strategies and approaches based on the assumptions and attitudes of Western workers. Almost all of them were based in urban centers and exclusively focused on urban and upper-caste people. Sadly, even after investing much time and effort, the results were very meager. Therefore, in the later part of the 1850s, a significant paradigm change took place, which enabled Protestants to move from the urban, upper castes to a rural, outcaste, and tribal focus. Mass movements during that era began mostly among Dalits and tribal communities. The next six to seven decades were the era of mass movements.¹ The number of Christians and churches mushroomed throughout the country, especially among outcastes. The period from 1920–1947 was a stabilizing period with a decrease in mass movements to Christ.

¹ A large listing of these is found in Waskom Pickett, *The Mass Movements in India* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow, 1933).

The caste structure has four major segments. The Brahmin are priests. Kshatriyas are the warrior caste. Vaishya represents the business caste. The Shudras are peasants and artisans, often designated as “Other Backward Castes” (OBCs). Finally, the outcastes (“Dalits”) and tribal groups are considered lower and outside the caste system.

The Forgotten Middle Castes

To this day, the majority of Christian missionaries and churches still focus consciously and deliberately on the outcastes. However, if you count all outcastes together, they are not more than one-fifth of the population. So, about 80% of the population is still untouched by the gospel in any significant way. In fact, there seems to be no evidence that the gospel was preached to the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras at all, except in a few exceptional cases. God has blessed the church in India by bringing many Dalits and tribal people to himself, and we are thankful for that.

In the third era (1970s to 2000), an interesting phenomenon emerged. Today, there are some 250 indigenous missionary societies in the IMA (Indian Mission Association). These societies have mostly started in South India and now send workers to the north, making them cross-cultural workers (as the languages and cultures are very different). Between 50,000 to 70,000 national cross-cultural missionaries are at work.

Since 2001, we’ve witnessed many Christward movements emerging in South Asia. Christianity constitutes 2.3% of India’s population, roughly 20 to

30 million people across the country. Yet, 80% of them are in South India and 15% in Northeast India. The major urban centers also have sizable Christian populations. Chennai is more than 10% Christian; Mumbai is 7% and Bangalore is 6.7% Christian. Furthermore, strong pockets of Christians are seen in South Gujarat, Punjab, Chhattisgarh, and Bihar. Still, most areas of India have little to no gospel witness.

Many readers may not be aware of several demographic features of the Indian church. For example, we have the original Syrian Orthodox Marthoma Christians. We also have Anglo-Indian Christians (i.e., mixed race between the British and the Indians). While Christians from the upper caste are very few, they definitely exist. Some Christians have dual identities. In the government record, they remain Hindus (or whatever caste they belong to), but in Christian records, they are still Christian. There are also anonymous Christians, secret followers of Christ, or non-baptized believers. In addition, new groups have emerged that do not call themselves “Christians.” Accordingly, when the census records the number of Christians, they overlook such people.

Christward movements often have surfaced in history. So, they are not new. But these indigenous expressions of faith are bringing huge numbers of people to Christ. Christward movements are initiated by the Holy Spirit. He draws people to Jesus Christ and makes them his followers, without detaching them from their socioreligious context. The Spirit enables followers to worship, fellowship, and witness within their own contextual setting.

A Closer Look

Let’s look at three major movements (not named for security purposes). Most people found in these movements (50–65%) are OBCs. They are agitated with Hinduism but have not found a way out of it.

These movements are providing an avenue for them to become Christ’s followers. Some come from middle castes. Very few belong to forward castes. Others are Dalits.

What factors contribute to people turning to Christ in these movements? The first includes personal encounters with Jesus Christ through healing, miracles, power encounters, signs, and wonders. We talked with them and asked, “What brought you to Christ?” and “Why do you follow him?” They say they had a personal encounter with Jesus. Secondly, people are influenced by family and clan. Many turned to Christ along with their family or extended family, either together or in different phases. Most Indians are very family-bound and want to retain that family culture. This manifests in house



churches, where family members, individuals, and relatives also make personal commitments to Jesus. It's spreading almost like fire. If one person in the family follows Christ, it significantly impacts other family members. After coming to faith, they are forming faith communities with their own families, extended families, clans, and, sometimes, neighborhoods and friends. This is an important observation. Why are they not joining churches? Why do they not become part of the Christian culture? They consciously make a decision not to do so. Instead, they're found in different kinds of gatherings, some consisting of hundreds of people who worship together. They continue to impact their kin, clan, caste, and neighborhood because they remain where they are, often triggering a chain movement amongst their extended community. Homogeneity and heterogeneity are simultaneously at work. Many Christ followers have mixed ethnicity and are easily accepted. Traditional Christians keep castes and talk about it. However, in these movements, we see higher caste Jats, Yadavs, and outcaste Chamar coming together. That's unheard of! Normally, upper caste, middle class, or even lower caste people would never touch an outcaste. But they rejoice in doing that. So, we see mixed ethnicity with little discrimination. Uniting in Christ, they demonstrate his love.

There are fewer identity crises for those coming to faith. This is extremely noteworthy. People who become followers of Christ often struggle with their identity. Yet, these Jesus movements exert no pressure to change one's social or religious identity, nor even to take an exclusively Christian identity. How can they retain their religious identity? Most of them do not identify as "Christians." The word "Christian" is not part of their communal life. They don't even call themselves Isai or Masih, words used in North India. They identify as devotees of Christ: Jesus' truth gatherers, members of Jesus' royal court, and followers of Jesus' path.

A major reason why these movements spread rapidly is because of the authentic witness. They are spontaneous, vibrant, and contextual, impacting people's own family, neighbors, and caste. They are urban or semi-urban movements, taking place in the peripheries of cities. Therefore, the movements are spreading on the periphery of different castes. Prayers

for healing and experiencing miracles are a central phenomenon. Also, people are encouraged to share their life testimony and encounters with Christ.

These movements are not initiated by any Christian church or mission organization. They are spontaneous and natural movements to Christ. No one has forced them to become Christians. There are reasons people do not want to join traditional churches. The Christians in those churches largely (70–80%) come from Dalit backgrounds, creating a social stigma. Many of those [caste level] people do not want to be identified with those churches. So they are beginning to have their *own* spontaneous and natural movements to Christ.

Ongoing Challenges

What are the challenges? The first is the danger of syncretism. How do you believe yet remain in your own social, religious, and cultural context? By modifying expressions and meanings of religion and culture? Several forms, like bhajans and worship, have been adopted by these communities. Also, movement leaders wrestle with how to balance dual identities. What does it mean to be followers of Christ? How long can they retain that dual identity?

Of course, there is always a danger of nominalism and stagnation. No movement is an exception. In addition, superficial teaching and a lack of biblical instruction can be a real problem. Lack of proper leadership training is another challenge. And then there is the risk of a personality cult. Many of these movements are centered on a person. Sometimes, leaders lack a vision beyond their own movement.

Conclusion

In India's changing context, the church is facing increasing pressure to align with the country's social culture and religious ethos. Traditional ways of propagating faith and converting people to Christianity are viewed with suspicion. In such a context, Jesus movements are providing a fresh avenue for people to believe, worship, and follow Christ. Therefore, the emergence of Christward movements is a strategic way for India's frontier people groups to know Christ. 