

# Break the Christian Cocoon— Let Hindus See Jesus

—Premkumar Dharmaraj

**I AM CONCERNED** with how little focus is given in our mission planning to target the Hindus in India and overseas. There are about 746 million Hindus in the world and they comprise 13.3 percent of the total population of the world. About 706 million Hindus live in India and they make up about 80 percent of the population of India.

## The Problem—Indifference or Inadequacy?

Patrick Johnstone (in *Operation World*) indicates that evangelicals make up 1 percent of the population of India. That means there are some 8.3 million evangelical Christians in India—though I believe there are many more. These are Bible-believing Christians, people sincere in their personal Christian life, faithful to their church and to missions. They want to see the Hindus come to Christ. But most of them never attempt to communicate the Gospel to their Hindu friends and neighbors. I believe the problem is not really indifference, but rather inadequacy! It's as if Christians are trapped in a

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“Christian Cocoon,” isolated from Hindus. They need our help to break free! They must break free if Indian Hindus are to be reached.

## The Program—Evangelical or Evangelistic?

There are many churches in India that can be classified as evangelical. Too often their ministries and programs are confined to the denominational and traditional structures maintained by the leaders and the members of those churches. They serve the purpose of shoring up the faith of their members rather than seeking to reach out to the Hindu community in that part of the country. Thus many of these churches and their programs are of course evangelical, but they are not necessarily evangelistic.

There are also a good number of parachurch organizations in India that are identified as evangelical. But most of these organizations are busy in reviving and helping the churches to maintain their evangelical faith. The question is: Are we only interested in enabling the churches to be evangelical? Or, are we interested in equipping and mobilizing the evangelical churches

to be evangelistic in the context of the Hindu world around them?

## The Principle—Priority or Pragmatism?

Again referring to the statistics presented by Johnstone in *Operation World*, there are 198 mission agencies in India and only about 50 percent of them are involved in cross-cultural work. And of these, more than 90 percent work among the tribal people (who comprise only about 7 percent of the population of India), who are not Hindus. Maybe it is the result of missionary pragmatism: Tribal people are often more receptive to the Gospel than the Hindu community. Reaching Hindus also requires more research and preparation. As a result, many agencies have preferred to concentrate their work among the tribals.

Of course the tribal mission must go on. But it must not be done at the expense of ignoring our priority in reaching 80 percent of India.

## The Purpose—Conglomerating or Communicating?

We can find pockets of Hindu communities—and Indian Christian communities as well—in countries all over the world. Particularly in 18 countries around the world, there are communities of Hindus which number over 100,000.

Sadly, not much is done to communicate the Gospel to them. The overseas Indian Christians have been preoccupied in establishing themselves and their families in a foreign country. Preserving their cultural, traditional, and spiritual values has been their primary concern, trying to maintain their

identity and security as part of Indian Christian society in a strange land and culture. They are not equipped and mobilized to take up the challenge of communicating the Gospel to the Hindus around them.

**The people of India have seen enough of empires in the past. They need to see the reality of the Kingdom of God.**

## The Need for Training the Laity

Over the years, I have personally listened to hundreds of Indian Christian believers speaking with much regret and frustration, "I want to talk to my Hindu friends about the Lord Jesus, but I just don't know how to communicate to a Hindu." This is because these believers are third and fourth-generation Christians and they do not know Hindu thinking. They have never been trained and equipped to share the message of the Gospel with confidence and clarity in the context of Hinduism. The problem is two-fold. On the one hand, they are ignorant of the concepts of Hindu thought. On the other hand, they are equally ignorant of the Christian concepts that could help them

make a meaningful presentation of the Gospel in the context of Hindu thinking. So they feel intimidated when they think of sharing the Gospel with Hindus. This means we should seriously think of providing a proper Lay Training Program if we are sincerely concerned about communicating the Gospel to Hindus.

## The Need for Developing Strategies

We need to recognize Hinduism at different levels. The Hindu tradition accommodates varied religious concepts. It is not so much one religion as a conglomeration of religions. We also need to identify numerous Hindu unreached people groups as they exist

in different levels according to the caste system of the Hindu society. So we cannot follow a stereotyped method to communicate the Gospel to all Hindus. There is a great need to do serious research in order to produce proper tools and appropriate strategies to make the message of the Gospel meaningful to Hindus at different levels.

## The Need for Partnering with Proper People

There are credible indigenous mission agencies, churches, and individuals that are doing good work in India. However, we need to motivate them to focus on reaching the Hindu communities and enable them to accomplish the task by

# Ten Tips for Ministering to Hindus

—H.L. Richard

**F**riendship evangelism is usually easy to initiate with Hindus. Most Hindus esteem religion in general and are free and open to speak about it. A sincere, nonjudgemental interest in all aspects of Indian life will provide a good basis for friendship. Personal interaction with Hindus will lead to a more certain grasp of the essence of Hinduism than reading many books.

A consistently Christ-like life is the most important factor in sharing the Gospel with Hindus. The suggestions that follow should help to break down misunderstandings and help to build a positive witness for Christ. But learning and applying these points can never substitute

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for a transparent life of peace and joy in discipleship to Jesus Christ.

### 1. Do not criticize or condemn Hinduism.

There is much that is good and much that is bad in the practice of both Christianity and Hinduism. Pointing out the worst aspects of Hinduism is hardly the way to win friends or show love. Criticizing Hinduism can make us feel we have won an argument; it will not win Hindus to Jesus Christ.

### 2. Avoid everything that hints of triumphalism and pride.

We are not the greatest people with the greatest religion, but some Hindus are taught that we think of ourselves in this way. We do not have all knowledge of all truth; in fact we know very little (1 Cor 8:1,2).

We do not desire all India to become "Christian." (Think of what that means to a Hindu—India like America or Europe!) But we do desire all India to find peace and joy and true spirituality.

### 3. Never allow a suggestion that separation from family and/or culture is necessary in becoming a disciple of Christ.

To insist or even subtly encourage a Hindu to leave his home and way of life to join the "Christian" way of life in terms of diet and culture, etc., is a denial of Biblical teaching (1 Cor. 7:17-24).

### 4. Do not speak quickly on hell, or on the fact that Jesus is the only way for salvation.

Hindus hear these things as triumphalism and are offended unnecessarily. Speak of hell only with tears of compassion. Point to Jesus so that it is obvious He is the only way, but leave the Hindu

to see and conclude this for himself, rather than trying to force it on him.

### 5. Never hurry. Any pushing for a decision or conversion will do great harm.

God must work, and the Holy Spirit should be given freedom to move at his own pace. Even after a profession of Christ is made, do not force quick changes regarding pictures of gods, charms, etc.

Be patient and let a person come to fuller understanding and conviction in his own mind before taking action.

### 6. Work traditional Hindu (and Biblical) values into your life, like simplicity, renunciation, spirituality and humility, against which there is no law.

A life reflecting the reality of "a still and quiet soul" (Psalm 131) will never be despised by Hindus.

**Center on Christ. He alone can win their hearts' total loyalty to Himself.**

providing necessary tools and resources. We can accomplish great things for God if the churches, agencies, and the Christian believers in the West would enter into proper partnership that will be productive in terms of building up the Kingdom, and not helping some people to build their own empires in India. The people of India have seen enough of empires in the past. They need to see the reality of the Kingdom of God.

### The Need for a Mobilization Program

If we are really serious about reaching the Hindu world, we need to think of mobilizing people at various levels to reach out to Hindus. We



must equip and mobilize the leaders and members of the church, university and seminary students, Christian workers and missionaries in India, and overseas Indian Christian workers. We should also equip and mobilize the people in the West who want to be involved as short-term missionaries, non-resident missionaries, and partners with the national workers in reaching the Hindus.

I am convinced that we must carry on this mission of reaching the Hindus, but we cannot do it without help from God and His people. You can have a very important place in this mission. We invite you to join hands with us. Feel free to contact us for further information and involvement. 🌐

#### 7. Know Hinduism, and each individual Hindu.

It will take some study to get a broad grasp of Hinduism and patient listening will be required to understand where in the spectrum each Hindu stands. Both philosophical and devotional Hinduism should be studied with the aim of understanding what appeals to the Hindu heart. Those who move seriously into work among Hindus need to become more knowledgeable in Hinduism than Hindus themselves are. Some study of the Sanskrit language will prove invaluable.

Remember the Biblical pattern from Acts 17 of introducing truth to the Hindu from his own tradition, and only secondarily from the Bible. For example, the Biblical teaching on sin is repulsive to many modern Hindus, but their own scriptures give an abundance of similar testimony. Bridge from Hindu

scripture to the Bible and Christ.

#### 8. Be quick to acknowledge failure.

Defending wrong practices in the church and Western Christianity only indicates we are more concerned for our religion than we are for truth.

**9. Share your testimony,** describing your personal experience of lostness and God's gracious forgiveness and peace. Don't claim to know God in His majesty and fullness, but share what you know in your life and experience. This is the supreme approach in presenting Christ to the Hindu, but care must be taken that our sharing is appropriate. To shout on a street corner, or share at every seeming opportunity is offensive. What God does in our lives is holy and private, only to be shared in intimacy to those who will respect the things of God and his work in our lives.

**10. Center on Christ.** He alone can win their hearts'

total loyalty to Himself.

In your life and speech so center on him that all see in your life that God alone is worth living for. Hinduism is often called "God-intoxicated," and the Hindu who lives at all in this frame of mind is put off by Christian emphases on so many details to the neglect of the "one thing that is needed" (Lk. 10:42).

A Hindu who professes faith in Christ must be helped as far as possible to work out the meaning of that commitment in his own cultural context. Often a new follower of Christ is ready to adopt any and every practice of Western Christians, and needs to be taught what is essential and what is secondary in Christian life and worship. For example, it can be shown that the Eastern practice of removing shoes in a place of worship has strong Biblical precedence despite the fact that shoes are worn in Western churches.

A new believer should be warned against making

an abrupt announcement to his or her family, since that inflicts great pain and inevitably produces deep misunderstanding. Ideally, a Hindu will share each step of the pilgrimage to Christ with his or her family, so that there is no surprise at the end. An early stage of the communication, to be reaffirmed continually, would be the honest esteem for Indian/Hindu traditions in general that the disciple of Christ can and does maintain.

Approaching Hindus on these lines does not result in quick conversions and impressive statistics. But a hearing will be gained from some who have refused to listen to traditional Christian approaches. And new disciples of Christ can be taught to deal more sensitively with their contexts, allowing them to maintain an ongoing witness to their family and society. As the leaven of the Gospel is allowed to work in Hindu minds and society, a harvest is sure to follow in God's own time. 🌐

# 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.”

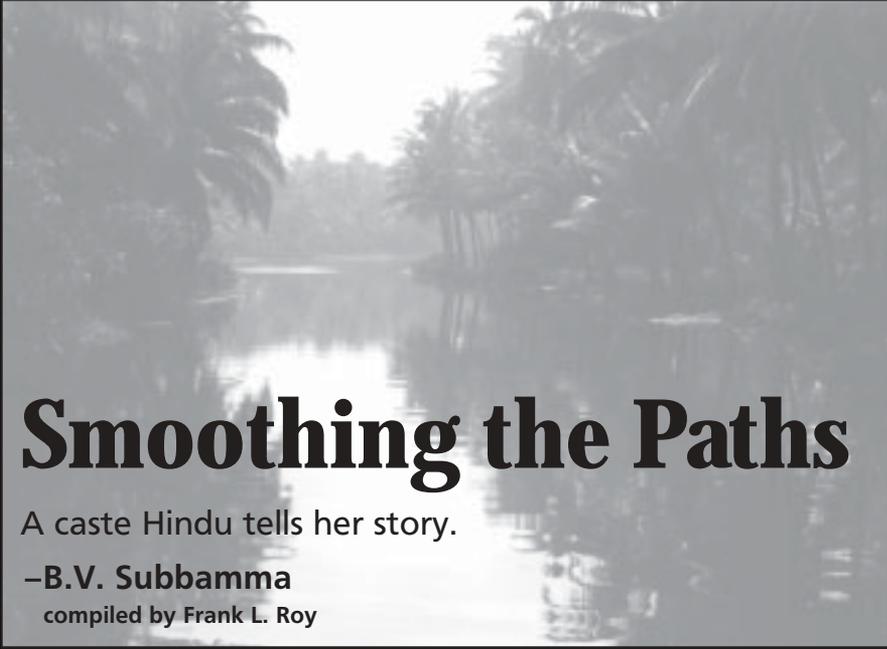
Kameleson argues that it is this kind of spirituality that binds the strong one. “It seems to me that the power that would be irresistible would be the power that Gladys Staines expressed and Mother Theresa expressed. And there are a whole lot of lesser people, who are all Indians, who have never made 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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# Smoothing the Paths

A caste Hindu tells her story.

—**B.V. Subbamma**

compiled by Frank L. Roy

**D**URING the five years that I attended a Christian school, I learned a good deal of the Bible. But my caste pride was a roadblock to accept its truths. Christianity for me was the religion of “the outcasts.” I did not even want to touch the Christian children so I sat in a separate corner. Naturally, I was teased for my orthodoxy.

All during these years, the feeling that Christianity belongs only to the Harijans [outcastes, Dalits] crippled my inquiry into further investigation of the truth. This feeling has been and is the common experience of many Hindus.

During my senior high school days, Mr. Rajagopal Ayyangar influenced me to value the Holy Bible. He was a devoted Hindu and on every Saturday observed fasting and silence, but read the Christian Scriptures. In our classes on Saturday, he gave us written work and spent the

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*Excerpts of her story are taken from New Patterns for Discipling Hindus, B.V. Subbamma, William Carey Library 1970. This article initially appeared in Mission Frontiers, Sept. 1996.*

time reading the Bible. When I discovered that, I determined to read the Bible for myself. It was unbelievable how my attitude toward it changed. Until then, because Harijan Christians had introduced it to me, I had been doubtful about the greatness of the Bible. But now the same Book in the hands of a caste man captured my interest.

During that time [after obtaining a Bible] such amazing changes took place in my heart. The name of Jesus became so precious to me that I could hardly believe it. When I first decided to pray to the supreme God, I had considered Jesus a Harijan god—the lowest of all gods in rank. Before I knew it, however, I was praying through the name of Jesus. This happened quite unconsciously as a miracle. I was supremely happy, having the assurance that Jesus Christ had suffered for my sin and had forgiven me and blessed me with salvation.

But the question of baptism disturbed me. I was definitely not prepared to leave my own Kamma [caste] people and join some other community. At the same time, I longed to be baptized since I understood one

had to be baptized if he wished to be a disciple of the Lord.

Meanwhile, I completed high school. In the environment of the Christian college, my desire for baptism increased and I had great inner struggle. It is often said that in discipling Hindus, the crux of the problem lies in baptism.

This is not true for the rite of baptism itself. The water, the complete dedication to a special deity, the words—all of these are common in Hinduism. The crux of the problem lies in one significant detail only—that baptism is believed to entail leaving one community and joining another. And this it does only at the beginning of any movement to Christ. No Harijan today joining the Lutheran Church leaves his people. Rather, he joins the advance guard of his ethnic unit. But every Hindu joining the Lutheran Church apparently has to leave his own people and “become a Christian” which means not merely the rite of baptism but the abandonment of one’s own culture and kindred.

Of course, all my family and relatives were terribly upset; some of them came and pleaded with me not to identify myself with the Harijans. They did not have any objection for my believing in the Lord, but they could not see me leaving the Kammass and joining another community.

My mother had interest in the Gospel. But since they thought they could not join the Church and remain Kammass they had never made a bold attempt to know the complete revelation of the Lord. This is the case with thousands of Hindus. In view of the supposed necessity of becoming a Christian by way of joining the Church, they deny themselves the privilege of knowing the Gospel at all. They avoid coming under the power of the Living Word by believing it does not belong to them.

I passed through that kind of thinking and struggle, but the power

of the Gospel which I could not possibly escape enveloped me. I insisted that I must be baptized.

[On March 23, 1942 Miss B.V. Subbamma was baptized. But she did not marry into the Harijan community. After some years she was finally able to clarify to her family that she was still loyal to them and, one by one, many of them became believers. In time, hundreds more came to faith within the same Kamma community. A movement developed which did not fit into the existing Lutheran church which consisted of a distinctly different community. Here are some lessons we can learn from Miss Subbamma (compiled from her book in her own words).]

In presenting the Gospel to the world, the main problem the Church has to deal with is how to present Christ so that men can truly follow Him without leaving their kindred.

The main issue is that the Harijans and the caste Hindus are in two different homogeneous units (as we have explained). Church growth theory affirms that to attempt to plant one large conglomerate Church composed of a few Christians from each and every subculture, arguing that brotherhood demands it and insisting on integration first whether the Church grows or not, is both a self-defeating policy and not required by Biblical faith.

If we want to communicate the Gospel in a natural way and in an effective manner, house churches—at least in Andhra among caste communities—are the fitting means. For example, at one time, I questioned a Christian lady (a caste Hindu convert) asking her whether she had any objection to go to what her neighbors called “the Harijan Church” for Sunday worship. I shall never forget her

reply. She said that for her own spiritual benefit she would be glad to go to the Church, but if she did so, many of her Hindu intimates who worship with her would be deprived of the privilege of praying to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is true. If she wants, she can attend the existing Harijan residential area church. But she deeply desires to bring the Gospel to her many friends and relatives and her house is a church for them. It is my conviction that she is doing right and her experiment should be deliberately multiplied.

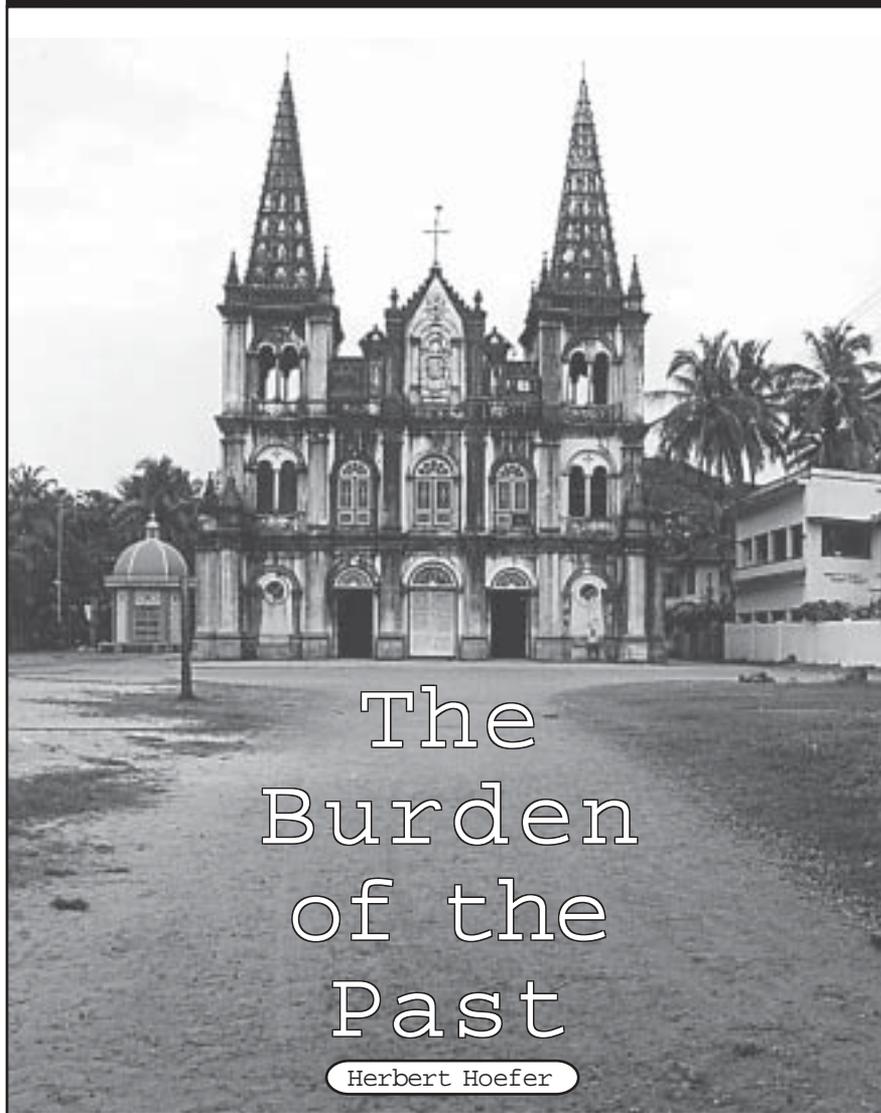
Note that Hindus often do not object to a person’s believing in the Lord Jesus and praying to Him. The great obstacle is joining a church of a despised segment of Hindu society.

Let me say that I have no desire to

perpetuate caste exclusiveness and caste pride. My people are wrong in their attitude toward the existing churches and existing Christians. But merely to say this does no good. The question is how to change this sinful attitude. The best way is not—I am certain—to force every new Christian to convert culturally in order to join a church made up of Christians of another ethnic unit. The way is to smooth the path which leads to joyful Christian discipleship. The way is to lead hundreds of thousands of India’s fine sons and daughters to accept the Bible as their rule of faith and practice. Separate Sudhra congregations will help this occur naturally. That is why I advocate them as a provisional and temporary measure, a step in the right direction. 🌐



**The name of Jesus became so precious to me that I could hardly believe it. ... I was supremely happy, having the assurance that Jesus Christ had suffered for my sin and had forgiven me and blessed me with salvation.**



# The Burden of the Past

Herbert Hoefler

Cochin, Kerala

India has been a key mission field for Western missionaries for decades. Yet it remains, at best, 3 percent Christian. In examining the causes, Dr. Herbert Hoefler addresses the effects of the missionary heritage.

**I**T WAS MY FIRST SUNDAY in India. My wife and I had enrolled in the Tamil language school at the United Theological Seminary. Looking forward to the opportunity to experience Indian Christianity first-hand, we went to the Lutheran church nearby.

It was 1968. I was looking forward to getting away from the drab, boring liturgy on which I had been raised in the States. But, as some of you might guess, what we experienced was all too similar to what I had left—only it was sung yet more slowly and yet more unenthusiastically. In sum, it was the same liturgy, but worse!

I thought, “Well, this is an urban congregation. Things will be different in the villages.” When we finally got to visit remote villages and join in their worship, what I found was more of the same. But at the end of the worship there was one moment of real enthusiasm and strong singing; it was when they began the Tamil-lyric songs.

Historically, the Western missionaries had passed on what they knew, both in the Gospel *and* in the cultural forms. It was not done with an agenda of destroying or even displacing Indian culture. They wanted to share the classic, proven heritage of the church through the ages. Our Missouri Synod missionaries honestly felt the Western liturgy was a treasure to be shared.

To my even greater surprise, this had happened not only in my Missouri Synod’s mission history but almost across the board. I know of one exception in the area of worship forms: the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church. They had received the blessing of a talented musician among their early converts and far-sighted missionaries who had him cast the traditional Lutheran liturgy into indigenous forms. I have not had the privilege of participating in their worship, but hear it is an inspiring experience.

But something even more surprising about those early experiences hit me. In spite of all the drabness and slowness in the liturgy the people come to worship! What a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit among these people, I thought—and still think. While pastors in the West experiment with ever-new forms to try to attract people to worship, in India they come in flocks even when it is the same form Sunday after Sunday. One stands in awe of the Indian church. Certainly there are significant forms which the Indian church itself has created, such as processions and funeral forms and *bhajans* (traditional antiphonal chants between a guru and his disciples). However, these have not displaced the decidedly Western form which was established initially by early missionaries.

## In Culture

This early experience of worship forms was, of course, just a foretaste of things to come. Let’s take the matter of food. Christians are renowned in India as meat eaters. In fact, it is a standard expression at pastoral conferences that “We haven’t really eaten unless we’ve had meat.”

Where did this habit come from? Certainly there was meat eating in India before the missionaries came on the scene. The poor of the land would eat anything just to survive, and most of the converts came from the poor. But vegetarianism was the general cultural standard—and considered the ideal. Christians, by and large, have rejected that standard, seemingly following the lead of the Western missionaries once again.

What this represents is *not* Western cultural imperialism. On the one hand, we have Westerners who were simply following their own preferred eating habits. On the other hand, we have people convinced of the freedom of the Gospel. There is no reason that people cannot eat meat. God had specifically allowed it in the new covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:3). He had specifically confronted Peter with it in the vision at Joppa (Acts 10:15). The Christian faith is a spiritual celebration of freedom, not a religious obedience to laws and superstitions.

Within the church in India, meat eating also came to be linked with baptism. A Hindu convert might be expected to eat beef before she would be baptized. Why? To demonstrate that she was free from old superstitions connected with anti-Christian beliefs like reincarnation. Similarly, Muslim converts might have to demonstrate their rejection of their previous faith by eating pork.

Such cultural insensitivity was true not just a century ago among the early, “unreflective” missionaries. I blush to relate another incident I experienced 25 years ago. Our Missouri Synod had a long tradition of Muslim missions. I was sitting on the verandah with a long-term missionary to Muslims. We happened to be eating pork. When one of the rare Muslim converts came by, this senior missionary beckoned the young man to join us, urging him to eat some pork. When the convert hesitated, he mocked him. I vividly recall the confusion on this young man’s face.

Here was the revered father in the faith who had brought him to the

Lord. His spiritual mentor was insisting that he do something that clearly made him sick to his stomach.

Was this a test of faith? Was this the next, necessary step in true submission? To my joy, the young man steadfastly yet politely refused and soon went on his way. However, I had experienced in person what I had long read about in theory: the destruction of culture in the name of Christianity.

### **In Community**

Let me pursue this sad story to illustrate another aspect of the great problem we missionaries have created for the Christian community. Even after his baptism, *both* the Christians and the Muslims continued to see the young man as a Muslim. For the general Muslim community, he was an embarrassment and an insult—an infidel who had degraded the holy faith before the world. His experience of social exclusion would not be limited to his past religious community. The Christian community had no place for him either. Missionaries likely gave him employment as an evangelist—but he had no real friends. He was a Muslim among Hindu converts. Only the missionaries would receive him, though with increasing impatience. Finally, scandal arose: No Christian family could be found to give him a bride, so he went out and arranged a Muslim bride for himself. How could the church continue to employ him? How could he be an evangelist? Shouldn’t some sincere, true witness to the Gospel be put in his place?

In a publication from Hawaii called *Hinduism Today* there was a challenging article by Swami Dayanandan entitled “Conversion as an Act of Violence” (*Hinduism Today*, November 1999, page 52). His comment is quite apropos to this young man’s situation:

Religious conversion ... is an act of violence because it hurts deeply, not only the other members of the family of the converted, but the entire community. ... When the hurt of the religious becomes acute, it explodes into violence.

Once again, we have the biblical mandate. Our Lord Himself has told us that He did “not come to bring peace but a sword... and to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.... Anyone who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of me.... And anyone who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:34-37). It would be unfair to call the violence of conversion a form of cultural imperialism. It is the inevitable result of the Gospel call. But what changes are mandated?

Consider the case of marriage and the family, which are orders of God’s creation. Every society strives to keep these foundations intact. Any time we undermine an order of God’s creation we violate His good intent for that society. Therefore, Paul teaches the Corinthian congregation, “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.” He goes on to assert, rather mysteriously, that such respect for God’s order of creation has saving implications: “For the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (I Cor. 7:12-14).

Culture is another of these orders of creation which we are called to keep intact. In the Old Testament, certainly the sinful aspects of Canaanite religion were to be rejected, such as idol worship and temple prostitution. But archeologically we recognize that the Israelites learned from—and replicated—the Canaanites’ temple architecture. Strikingly, the apostle Thomas seems to have done the same thing in India with Hindu temple architecture, judging by the famous St. Mary’s Church, located outside Nagercoil.

Similarly, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 affirmed that Gentile converts did not have to become cultural Jews. Gentile culture was to be affirmed in anything that did not contradict the Gospel.

## Limits of the Missionary Heritage

### Lack of a Theology of the Kingdom

The Kingdom of God is more than the Church, local or global. The work of God is bigger than the work of the Church. We Protestants lack a theology of the Kingdom as the broader context for our theology of salvation. We would do well to learn from the ancient churches—both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions are more advanced in this area of thinking and action.

Why couldn't we have used bhajans instead of Western liturgy? Why couldn't we have built temples and *mandapams* (covered rest areas in front of a temple)? Why couldn't we cite great Hindu poets? To do so would be to acknowledge the greatness of God.

Why can't Christian men wear the *veshti* (skirt-like cloth) and Christian women the *tilak* (decorative dot on the forehead)? Why can't we be vegetarian, as God had ordained in the original creation (cf. Gen. 1:29)? Why do we have to have pastors and

bishops and elections and committees for everything under the sun? There is no reason the Indian church cannot be Indian, or "Hindu" in the cultural sense.

But the Indian Church is a Westernized community, from dress to worship style to the way we organize ourselves. It is the burden of *our* past. We cannot escape it. Yet we do not have to drag others into it. We can rejoice that followers of Christ might yet be freed from the cultural entrapments of the missionary era. We ought not seek to replicate the Western church in India. It just doesn't fit the culture—and vast numbers will never join it.

Instead, we ought to release a discipleship of Jesus that flows smoothly along the highways and byways of this great land. Rather than

hymns which are heavy with doctrinal theology, we would do well to consider lyrics which bounce with simple praise. Instead of congregational activities, the emphasis ought to be on private family and individual devotional practices.

### Lack of a Theology of Experience

Of all Protestant church bodies, in my opinion, the one that comes the closest to the heart of India is the Pentecostal. Admittedly, they are often the most offensive in their evangelistic methods and cultural restrictions. But they have a central emphasis in their theology and practice which reaches right to the heart of Indian religiosity.

Traditional Hindu religiosity emphasizes three sources of authority in discovering religious truth:

- *srti* or ancient writings;
- *yukti* or rational thought;
- *anubhava* or experience.

The purpose of using *srti* and *yukti* is only to get to one's own *anubhav*—and only then, Hindus believe, do they know the writings and teachings are true.

Of course, this emphasis on *anubhava* is central to Pentecostal

theology and practice as well. An Indian seeker will commonly want confirmation through visions, miracles, answered prayers and healings. Most other denominations are uncomfortable with all this subjectivity. They prefer to remain at *srti*—in this case the Bible—and *yukti*—the dogma; but the Indian drive is for *anubhava*. The Pentecostals will gladly and skillfully lead them there, by the Holy Spirit.

### Lack of a Spontaneous Spirituality

Another area where I feel our Pentecostal brethren are closer to the general religious culture of India is in their selection of clergy. We have formalized, structured, and centralized the appointment of spiritual

leaders. In contrast, among the Pentecostals one must gather a new congregation of believers and thereby become recognized and ordained as a pastor. People come because of the attractive spirituality of the leader—similar in some ways to a Hindu guru.

In contrast, we non-Pentecostals train our future pastors in seminaries and assign them to congregations—and they may or may not be spiritual leaders. They may be more like *pujaris*, simply performing religious rituals for the people. They are leaders by training and assignment, not by popular acclamation as with a guru.

Likewise, our congregational life is a structured spirituality, quite unlike the traditional pattern of Hindu spirituality around us. We have membership rolls and times and days of worship. At other times, our worship centers are locked shut, quite in contrast to the spontaneous pattern of worship typical around India.

In this respect, Roman Catholic churches have structured themselves more closely to the cultural pattern than the Protestant churches. Worshipers can come and go, even on a Sunday morning, and no one particularly notices. Roman Catholic church buildings also are often kept open, at least during the day, and many have a roadside shrine besides for those who feel moved to worship more spontaneously during the week.

### Lack of an "Evocative" Theology

Western theology is based upon Western philosophy, particularly Western logic. It is deductive and systematic. Its goal is logically arranged syllogisms and dogmas. Theology is reduced to rationalism.

Indian religious philosophy is much more varied, employing logical systems drawn from the paradoxical character of ultimate realities. So, what are seen as logical contradictions in Western philosophy are appreciated as profound truths in the Indian mind. In Indian thought, religious truth must be integrated with all other thought—for truth can only be one.

There is also the conviction that

Why can't we be vegetarian, as God had ordained in the original creation?

religious and ultimate truth must not be reduced to simple dogmatic statements. Religious truth is not merely rational. It also is never irrational. It has been referred to as supra-rational.

In order to convey these insights which are beyond rationality, Indian religious philosophers used evocative theology. What I mean by this term is the goal of evoking spiritual insight, not through hard logic but through creative insight. The religious philosopher frequently uses stories and parables and allegories and “koans” to stimulate insight. Typically, it is an “Aha!” experience.

Indeed, this non-rational approach to religious teaching is arguably much closer to the writings of the Bible. Prophets used allegories and symbolic acts to convey their message. Wisdom literature abounds in allegories and imaginative, evocative imagery. Jesus used parables and hyperbole. Paul used mystical language (e.g., being “in Christ,” “dying and rising” with Christ, Christ living “in me,” etc.).

Actually, theology begins and ends in mysticism. Rational argument guards against error. It does not embody the truth. It must lead to faith and commitment and inspiration. Any theology which does not evoke such a spiritual response is lifeless and purposeless.

In my opinion, the one theologian of India who expressed the Biblical message in truly Indian forms was Sadhu Sunder Singh. He had only minimal exposure to Western theological training. He quickly freed himself from that misorientation and deculturalization. His message was continually conveyed in provocative and evocative parables, stories, and allegories. Similarly, the most powerful village preaching I have heard is in simple telling of Bible stories—as it reaches the heart. This is where the Holy Spirit can work faith and repentance and renewal of life.

### **Role of the Church in the Kingdom**

Our goal is not to replace the church. As an organization, it is here to stay. It is its own cultural group,

among the wide array of sub-cultures in India. Indian Christians should be allowed to worship and organize as they wish. In my interviews for the initial research for the book, *Churchless Christianity*, I found that the Christians really didn’t want high caste non-baptized believers in Christ in their churches. That would change all the social dynamics. They would lose all their positions of status and power in the organization the moment a traditional village leader joined.

The existing church is primarily a forum for the *dalits* (lower castes). We should recognize this fact—and let them have that base. They deserve this opportunity to develop and exercise their potentialities. The mass conversions to Christianity, especially in the South and among the tribes, was, in large part, a movement of social liberation. They were rejecting the despised role they had endured for so long within Hinduism. Christianity was a marvelous way out, and it still is for many.

However, we must never let the theology of the church become the theology of the Kingdom. Dalit theology must speak out against the caste system and all it has done to oppress and suppress the poorest and weakest. But a theology of the Kingdom calls us to reflect further. Is the caste system of itself sinful? Is it more sinful than any other system of social organization? Its abuses must be opposed, but its benefits also must be affirmed in a theology that affirms culture as part of God’s Kingdom work.

A century ago the conversion to Christianity brought social prestige and financial benefit. I remember asking one of the first converts in a village congregation why he originally decided to become a Christian. He said, “I saw the missionary wearing shoes, and I thought I’d like to wear shoes too.” There were incentives and expectations at that time.

However, the movement was far deeper than that. It was a movement of the soul, and it still is.

We know it is no longer the case that there are economic advantages

for a dalit to convert in fact, just the opposite. Yet the conversions among the dalits continue. Why? Because downtrodden people need the opportunity to assert their self-dignity. It may cost their stomach, but they will save their soul.

The church will assert its dignity as the child of God in terms of the issues it faces. The culture of India was not the culture of the dalits. They were excluded from it, so, of course, they want to replace it. They should have a theology of righteous anger.

The cultural experience of most in India has been different. These will be moved by the same Spirit to assert their identity as children of God in terms that fit their cultural situation. Each must hear and affirm and trust the other. In a country as culturally diverse as India, there must be theologies and approaches to truth as different as those James and Paul, of Jesus and the author of Hebrews, of John and Jeremiah. Yet, they are part of the one faithful witness.

We must affirm the role of the Indian church, the Westernized church, in the mission of God. The Indian church can reach the 20 percent dalit population. However, God is not limited to the existing church. There is so much more to do that this church with its burden of the missionary past cannot carry forward. God’s Kingdom work is far greater than the Church’s work. Will the Church serve the Kingdom beyond its borders? Will we?

As we become more aware, God is moving beyond. He has moved beyond. The Spirit blows where He pleases (Jn. 3:8). The only question is if we will be keeping up with Him. 🌐

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*Dr. Herbert Hoefler is a former missionary to India, serving from 1968-1983 with the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. He currently is professor of theology at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon. This excerpt will be included in the forthcoming expanded edition of Churchless Christianity, to be published by William Carey Library. This article initially appeared in Mission Frontiers, Dec. 2000.*

# Christ-Followers in India Flourishing— But Outside the Church

A review of *Churchless Christianity*, Herbert E. Hoefler.

—H. L. Richard

*A Missouri Synod Lutheran missionary, Herbert Hoefler, made a careful study some years ago, describing it in a small book entitled Churchless Christianity. But it was not hailed at that time as the landmark study which it truly is. H.L. Richard then wrote up a 15-page review of it. Provided here is a condensed version of that review.*

— The Editor

**I**N STRIKING research undertaken in the mid-eighties and published in 1991, Herbert E. Hoefler found that the people of Madras City are far closer to historic Christianity than the populace of any cities in the western Christian world could ever claim to be. Yet these are not Christians, but rather Hindus and Muslims. In their midst is a significant number of true believers in Christ who openly confess to



*H. L. Richard has been researching issues in South Asian religion and culture for the past decade. He has written Following Jesus in the Hindu Context (William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1999) and edited R. C. Das: Evangelical Prophet for Contextual Christianity (ISPCK, Delhi, 1995). He contributes regularly to the journal To All Men All Things (www.paonline.com/jkearns/tamat.htm). This article initially appeared in Mission Frontiers, March-April 1999.*

faith in fundamental Biblical doctrines, yet remain outside the institutional church. It was the locating and understanding of these that especially motivated Hoefler's research.

Fundamental questions on the nature of Christianity and the Church are raised by this study. The colonial legacy of Christianity as a foreign religion is taken seriously, and steps toward transcending the constrictions of this heritage are suggested. Dr. Herber Hoefler, author of *Churchless Christianity*, knows he is treading new ground, and so is careful to document his facts and conclusions while allowing that his views are far from definitive, but rather only exploratory.

## A Brief Background

In October of 1980 Hoefler surveyed pastors in three Lutheran as well as five Church of South India dioceses regarding their knowledge of unbaptized believers in Christ. That study identified 246 believers, more than 80 of whom Hoefler proceeded to personally contact. Though these people were traditionally thought of

as "secret believers," Hoefler notes that just 6 percent of the pastors queried indicated that they felt the people were denying Christ by not taking baptism. "In most cases the pastors also reported that the non-baptized believer welcomes him and other church workers to his/her home. Their faith in Christ is public, and their relation to the church is as close as possible" (xii).

It is important to note that throughout his study Hoefler is careful to maintain a high definition of what constitutes a believer in Christ. He describes a meeting with some Hindu families who had a high view of Christ (as an *avatara*, but not sinless), and pride in their stand for religious harmony and learning from the best in all religions. He comments:

Such people—who are, of course, very numerous—I do not classify as non-baptized believers in Christ. They have neither orthodox belief nor devoted practice which is expected of a follower of Christ. Jesus has no special place in their spiritual life, and they have made no break with their Hindu pattern of worship. (9)

It is demonstrated that low-caste unbaptized believers are often outside the church due to political and economic pressure. The church is composed, largely, of lower-caste people, and cultural change in joining the church is, for them, minimized. The largest problem in embracing Christianity and the Church for these low-caste people is the loss of government benefits involved in any legal change from Hindu to Christian religion. For the high-caste non-baptized believer in Christ (NBBC), however, the issue is social. His family and social group are far removed culturally from "Christian" society, and cannot understand conversion in anything but sociological terms. Hoefler summarizes the impossible predicament of the high-caste NBBC by pointing out:

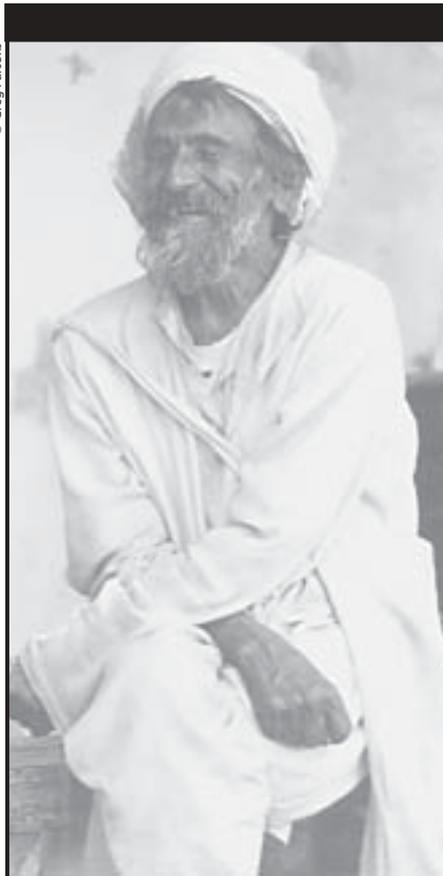
We cannot ignore the close association in Indian tradition

between religion and culture. The NBBC is caught in a predicament where he wants to distinguish between these two in his life, whereas neither most of his Hindu kinsmen nor most of his Christian co-believers are able to. The common Protestant reaction to the close association of Indian culture with Hindu religion has been to develop a separate culture for the new religion: differences in devotions, festivals, names, appearance, lifestyle, worship, gestures, etc. If you are to join this religion, you must get accustomed to its culture. This is the basis for all the accusations about a 'forsaking' of the family heritage.

The NBBC is trying to change religion without changing culture, even to the extent of asserting that he's not really changing religion at all. Unfortunately, he suffers from suspicion and rejection on the part of both Hindu kinsmen and Christian co-believers. Even if one is baptized, but does not participate in the mores of the Christian "culture," he will not be accepted. Sometimes the only way he can assert his cultural identity is by keeping aloof from the Christian community—which doesn't really know what to do with him anyway. The tragic consequence of this strategic aloofness is that the Christian community can then self-righteously judge the genuineness of his faith, and the NBBC ends up even more isolated and deprived spiritually (52).

Hoefler is rightly sympathetic to people in this situation, and demonstrates that their religious activity, while centered on Christ, often follows a Hindu rather than traditionally Christian pattern. That is, the church building is used like a temple for occasional visits when the need is felt; a picture of Christ is central to their devotion; they attend large Christian conventions rather on the

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**The real move toward an indigenous Christian faith can never come from the Christian community. It must grow out of the churchless Christianity, with the help and encouragement of the church.**

pattern of taking a pilgrimage; and they follow an *ishtha devata* theology of Jesus as a personal, chosen deity among many gods, if not in abstract theology, at least in practice in their highly pressurized situations. Interestingly, Hoefler comments that "these spiritual seekers are on the Indian quest for *shanti*, and they have found it in Christ. They are still Indians, they haven't yet become Protestants" (62). His highly appreciative closing summary must be quoted in full:

The general portrait of the non-baptized believer in Christ in rural Tamil Nadu, no matter

from what background he may come, is an encouraging one. He is a thoughtful and sincere person who takes his spiritual life seriously. He responds with gratitude and faithfulness when he has reached conviction about the love and power of Christ. Most often this conviction comes in some experience of healing, but it also often derives from the experience in a Christian school. The strength of his relationship with the church depends on whether the local congregation is of his own caste background or not. He clearly needs this relationship because of the financial, social, and spiritual problems he faces. In spite of all these problems, however, he/she presents us with a clear Indian experience of Christ as the fulfilment of the traditional spiritual quest for peace of mind and a clean heart. The non-baptized believer of rural Tamil Nadu is an admirable person. Thanks be to God (64).

Having become convinced of the quality of faith of the NBBCs, Hoefler sought a way to gauge their quantity. A survey of Madras City was the simplest way to get solid data on this, and had the advantage of providing an urban counterpart to the less scientific rural study. As the Department of Statistics at Madras Christian College had previously done political surveys, it was equipped for a broad-based analysis. Hoefler explains:

We decided to broaden the Madras City study in order to give us an idea of the place of Jesus Christ in the faith and practice of the whole population, not only the NBBCs. For our theological understanding and practical planning it is important to know the general background of which the non-baptized believer is a particular phenomenon. The questionnaire was designed in order to give us a clear idea of how Hindus and Muslims are already related to Christ and how we might best reach them (69).

No unbaptized believers were identified among the Muslim sample population. But “our primary problem seems to be lack of effort rather than lack of results. Once again, the sociological differences between the Christian and the Muslim community are the major barrier” (99). Among the Hindu population the results were striking indeed. “In Madras City our regular church ministries are reaching primarily 12 percent of the population, the Harijan community,” he notes (95).<sup>1</sup> Yet Hoefer found the number of high-caste Hindus who worship Christ equal to the entire Protestant population of Madras! It must be noted again that Hoefer employed a high definition for an NBBC. He points out that “even if we take the ‘hard-core’ figures of those who worship only Jesus, in terms of numbers the Hindu Harijan worshippers are only one-half of the total [NBBCs]. There are as many Protestants wholly devoted to the worship of Christ as there are people of all castes outside the church. The ‘churchless Christianity’ is a diverse group but certainly united in firm devotion to Christ under most difficult circumstances” (98).

### Sorting It Out

“What does all this mean?” asks Hoefer as he begins his final section evaluating all the data. He again carefully warns against taking his suggestions as anything more than tentative. God has done an unexpected work and we must continue to observe and learn from it. The primary point, without which all discussion of the subject will be misdirected, is to see that the “problem” of these believers staying outside the church has nothing to do with theology but rather with sociology. As Hoefer says:

The issue is the sociological distortion of theology in practice. If baptism and the church were carried out in practice as our theology conceives them, there would be no problem and there would be no non-baptized believers. It is clear, furthermore, that the communalized nature of the

church exists quite apart from baptism. Even among the non-sacramental churches where baptism is considered unnecessary (e.g. the Salvation Army) or merely symbolic (e.g. the Baptists), the church is just as exclusively communal as among those churches who emphasize the necessity of baptism. The character of the church is formed by the struc-



**It is important for the church to share its inner experience and “mysteries” in a manner which is acceptable to those it seeks to reach.**

ture of the society irrespective of the theology or practice of baptism.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the primary questions raised for us by the phenomenon of non-baptized believers in Christ around us are not about their authenticity but about ours; about our recognition of sociological realities in ecclesiastical structures and mission planning and about developing a style of church fellowship

which makes the call of Christ and gift of His Spirit available to all in the fullest possible freedom and power (150).

In the final chapter Hoefer considers implications for the future. New structures are needed as well as new missiological insight. This is especially imperative in light of the irrelevance of present Christian activity:

It is important for the church to share its inner experience and “mysteries” in a manner which is acceptable to those it seeks to reach. Most of the 80 percent of India around us feel no need for what we have to offer. They are quite proud of their own spiritual heritage, even if they have never drawn upon it seriously themselves. (197-198)

At issue is really a matter of fundamental mentality, not merely a change of candles to oil lamps. Can Christianity really be absorbed into this totally different religio-cultural environment? Certainly, it cannot be done by the church, but it has already begun among the non-baptized believers as we have seen in our survey. Christianity grew out of Judaism because Christ was incarnated there. However, when He was “grafted into” a totally new tree, we must only expect a new hybrid, a Church of Gentile customs and a theology of Gnostic and mystical ideas. Only then will Christ “of whom and to whom and through whom are all things” be “all in all” among the varying cultures of the world.

However, some might argue that this [the “smothering embrace of Hinduism”] is the danger with the *ishta devata* strategy I am proposing. It will lead not to an indigenous Christianity but to a Christianized Hinduism. Perhaps more accurately we should say a Christ-ized Hinduism. I would suggest that really both are the same, and therefore we should not worry about it. We do not

want to change the culture or the religious genius of India. We simply want to bring Christ and His Gospel into the center of it.

The real move toward an indigenous Christian faith can never come from the Christian community. It must grow out of the ‘Churchless Christianity’, with the help and encouragement of the church (207-210).

One leaves Hoefler rather gasping for breath as his vision stretches so far beyond our normal parameters of thought. Our emotional ties to historic Christianity and its cultural forms inevitably give birth to feelings of uneasiness as we think of “Christ-ized Hinduism.”<sup>3</sup> But Hoefler has wrestled with the complex and disturbing rise of what Robin Boyd called the “Latin captivity of the Indian church.”<sup>4</sup> He confesses to having learned a great deal from Hindus and high-caste NBBCs regarding the fact that Christ is “captivated” within the Indian church. He says he writes on behalf of numerous Christian workers, of whom “many are bending and ignoring missiologically frustrating church practices in order that the call and nurture of the Gospel can readily go beyond the church walls. Their greatest frustration and anger is directed not against the non-baptized believers but against the rigid church rules and rigid congregational attitude which hinder the free flow of the Gospel into the community. They want to be servants of the Kingdom, rather than servants of the church” (xiii).

Nonetheless, one must question whether Hoefler in the end is either too traditionally attached to the church or just not careful enough to define what he means in saying that this churchless Christianity needs the church. Did Gentile Christianity need the Jerusalem church? Arguably, it needed to be protected from that

church. It needed sensitive apostles from that church, and this seems the parallel to today. India’s NBBCs need to be guarded against a great deal of trouble that Christians will cause them (clearly enough demonstrated in Hoefler’s study), but they certainly need help. May all potential helpers be as careful and quick as the apostle Paul to renounce oversight and insist on immediate leadership from within the local context! Herbert Hoefler’s study documenting the existence and vitality of faith in Christ outside the institutional church may well be the most significant missiological publication related to India to have appeared in the second half of the



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**God has done an unexpected work, and we must continue to observe and learn from it.**

twentieth century. On the basis of experiential findings, followed up with careful research, Hoefler challenges the assumptions and practices of established church and mission structures. He calls for a paradigm shift

in thinking about service for Christ in India, and for radical adjustment of ministry models to deal with a significant but ignored work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. In eight years since the publication of *Churchless Christianity*, little notice seems to have been taken, debate has not been stirred and, most tragically, ministry strategies that affirm and empower the NBBC have not been born.

Yet this is a book that demands debate and response. But where and by whom might this begin? Hoefler’s is yet one more voice against the “captivated” Christ of the Indian church. What hope lies in his plea that “what we desperately need is that these mumblings of frustration

become a rising chorus of objection which we can no longer ignore” (xiv)? After a century of refining its ability to ignore just such “mumblings of frustration” and “anger against church rules and rigid congregational attitudes,” one wonders if even a “rising chorus of objection” would be greeted by institutional leaders with anything other than rebuke as for lack of humility and ungodly impatience. Rather than vainly objecting to the church, the need is for pioneer ministries within Hindu contexts to be born—movements to empower NBBCs and help them forward in Biblical and contextual discipleship. As a new reality in discipleship to Christ emerges, the existing churches will adapt or die. Thus it happened in the first century as the Gentile churches overtook the Jewish; herein lies the hope of India in the 21st century. Herbert Hoefler has given a foundation for hope and a direction for planning; who now will take action?🌐

1. Terminology related to caste is almost as controversial as caste itself. Hoefler at one point is careful to point out that by speaking of “high” caste he is merely using traditional terminology and does not at all accept that there are higher and lower people. His chosen term for what are traditionally called “outcastes” (or Pariahs or panchamas or Scheduled Castes) is the Gandhi-coined term “Harijan,” meaning people of God. This is now for many as unacceptable a term as those previously mentioned as it is considered condescending. The politically correct term of the hour is Dalit, which means “the oppressed.”
2. It seems strange that in his long and helpful discussion of baptism Hoefler never refers to the complex legal issues involved therein, which most strikingly demonstrate that the baptism of non-Christians in India involves decidedly extra-Biblical (if not anti-Biblical) elements. (On this see Saldanha, J., *Conversion and Indian Civil Law*, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 1981.) Further, he makes no concrete suggestions on the line of reconceptualizing baptism in terms of the initiatory rites (often involving water) of numerous schools and sects of Hinduism. Omitting these rather obvious points is the only major flaw in his study.
3. Hoefler does not seem to be careful enough in defining this striking terminology. At this point he is clearly viewing Hinduism as primarily cultural phenomena. On this point see the striking analysis of Hans Staffner in *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community* (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1988). Staffner argues that, “Hinduism is a culture that has room for many religions,” and “Christianity is a religion which can become incarnate in any culture.”
4. Boyd, Robin H., *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1974.

# Can *Hindutva* Survive the Persecution of Christians in India?

A personal analysis and some recommendations.  
—Vishal Mangalwadi

*Interpreted literally as “Hindu-ness,” Hindutva increasingly carries connotations of a radical vision for a Hindu nation. Provided here are excerpts from an open letter to India originally published in April 1999 in the aftermath of the gruesome death of Graham Staines and his two sons.*

—The Editor

April 12, 1999 – London

**T**HE PRESENT PHASE of persecution, at its roots, is a testimony to the effectiveness of the work of the missionaries at the front lines, most of whom are located in South and North-East India. They, therefore, need our prayers and support as they seek to bless also the northern parts of India at tremendous personal risk and cost.

Most front-line missionaries don't seem to understand the power of their own work. They don't realize that their work is an historic threat to the socio-economic power equations that have existed in India for over 2,000 years—ever since Hinduism marginalized the

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lower castes and tribals. Hinduism has kept these people by force as marginalized, ignorant, and vulnerable to oppression and exploitation. The missions are giving them a new identity, self-respect and new principles for individual life, family and social organization.

## Can Hindutva Survive in India?

Providence has polarized the public opinion in India as a clash between Hindutva and Christianity. It will be tempting for many Christians, especially the nominal Christians and new converts whose worldview remains Hindu/animist, to retaliate in self-defense. I would urge Christian leaders to prepare them not to retaliate. They need to understand that in the present phase of persecution, at stake is not the question of the existence of the Church in India. It is Hindutva's survival that is at stake—and no one understands this as well as the Hindutva's leadership. If we choose the way of the cross—the way of self-sacrificing love in the midst of suffering—if we continue to love, serve and preach fearlessly, irrespective

of the cost, we will hasten the end of the last ideological challenge to the Gospel in India. Gladys Staines has given us a tremendous model. Many of us, through our personal cross bearing and tragedies, will need to reinforce that perception of true Christianity. The nation needs to see that all religions are not the same; that the Gospel and Hindutva, Gladys Staines and Dara Singh, stand as opposites. If we follow Christ and Gladys Staines, the light of the Gospel will shine even brighter when the religious violence does turn into political violence of fascism.

At present, it seems to me that much of the Church is trying to take shelter under the cover of “secular” parties. This, I believe, is a serious mistake. Hindutva came to power precisely because secularism had already failed.

**Therefore, my first strategic recommendation** is that we need to resolve to take the bull of Hindutva by the horns, and allow the issue to remain as Gospel vs. Hindutva instead of making it secularism vs. Hindutva. (India needs to remain a tolerant and pluralistic society. But it is the Gospel, not secular political parties, that will provide the real, solid basis for building a tolerant, pluralistic society where every individual's right and conscience is given equal respect. I have argued this point in my book of letters to Arun Shourie, *Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Postmodern Hindu*. Here I only need to remind us that the Sikhs and Muslims rejected the Congress party because they rightly perceived that it was not as “secular” [pluralistic] as it claimed. Its obsession is with power, not with principles.)

## Needed: A Theologically Informed Vision for India

As I have shown in my books (e.g., *India: The Grand Experiment*), from Charles Grant and William Carey up to the time of Stanley Jones there was a distinctly Christian vision for building a great India. It was Christianity, not the Gandhian struggle, that gave us the rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights, universal education and health

care, corruption-free administration, equality of sexes and castes, economic freedom, opportunity and infrastructure and religious and journalistic freedoms that we enjoy at this moment. From the very first advocate of a missionary movement for India—Charles Grant—the missionary movement had a “singular focus”; but contrary to what Arun Shourie says, that focus was to bless India, not to count how many bodies had been ducked under baptismal waters. The “battle” between Hindutva and the Gospel is a battle between fascism and freedom. This Christian vision for a great India did indeed become weak as the large part of the Church gave up the biblical worldview in the 20th century, by a surrender either to liberalism or to an anti-intellectual, individualistic, privatized, pessimistic, un-Biblical evangelicalism. This evangelicalism has weakened the Gospel by perverting it. Allow me to help us recover the focus:

What is the Gospel? Is it a message about my soul going to heaven, or is it a message about the Kingdom of Heaven coming to this earth in the person of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords? Is the Christian battle for heaven? Or does God already rule in heaven, and therefore, the battle is for this earth? Who will rule on this earth, God or Satan? If it is the latter, then should the passion of our lives be to go to heaven—and take others there—or should it be “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in India as it is in heaven”?

**So my second recommendation** is that as the nation flounders we need to articulate a clear Christian vision for India. Such a vision will include a vision for an “Akhand Bharat”—a United States of South Asia (USSA). The logic of Hindutva seeks to unite South Asia with the help of nuclear weapons, because the Hindutva has no spiritual resources to lead the subcontinent towards repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The Gospel is capable of creating a united India, a “USSA”—the greatest nation on earth.

It is necessary to articulate afresh a



**While the hatred has to be countered by love, and force by suffering, the propaganda must be countered by a fearless presentation of the truth.**

Christian vision for India because the language of the “spiritual warfare” movement has become the main justification for the present persecution. (If a tiny section of the American church has declared India to be an “enemy territory” that has to be “conquered,” surely the target group has a right to defend itself.) Is our mission driven “by the love of God that constrains us”? Is God seeking to bless India or to conquer it? The Indian church needs to have theological maturity to stand up to the teams of naive young missionaries from America who today assume they are the ones to define what “spiritual warfare” is all about. Their naivete derives from a theology of spiritual warfare that is

neither from the Bible nor from Church history, but from Frank Perretti’s excellent fiction. Understandably, it does confuse the focus of some Indian Christians.

### **Taking the Bull by the Horns**

The BJP government will not like engage in overt persecution in the immediate future. Because of this, it is imperative that we do not allow each other to go off to sleep. The next phase of attack is not likely to be against the missionaries and new converts; it is already directed against Christ and the Christian faith.

**Therefore, my next recommendation** is that we turn that attack into an opportunity to expound, defend, and commend the faith. While the hatred has to be countered by love, and force by suffering, the propaganda must be countered by a fearless presentation of the truth. The evangelists, church planters, and social workers get honor, recognition, and funding. The Indian Christian tradition has little space for apologists. But this is their moment. We need well-crafted letters to the editors in responses to what writers such as Arun Shourie write.

To begin with, as Professor Guptara argues, such letters need to correct the terminology being used today. The press is wrong when it talks of “Hindu fundamentalism” or “Hindu zealots.” There are no “fundamentals” in Hinduism to which Hindutva can lead Hindus. A good Hindu can choose to be a strict vegetarian, but he can also choose to be a tantric that kidnaps and sacrifices a neighbor’s child. Hindutva is about zeal for demolishing mosques and burning Bibles, but it is not about a zeal for Hindu spirituality. The appropriate terminology, therefore, is “Hindu fascists” or “fascist Hindus,” because Hindutva is about incorporating Italian fascism and German Nazism into Hinduism.

We are seeing seeing hundreds of articles in the media and millions of pamphlets circulating against our faith. These should not be ignored. We need to study them, debate them, formulate thoughtful responses, write and publish.

We need a feature film on the martyrdom of Graham Staines that explains Christian service, the Gospel and conversion to the Indian masses.

We need well-produced documentaries on what the Gospel has already done for the tribals in Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and other parts of India.

We need well-documented TV documentaries on what the Gospel has done for the untouchables in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

We need a feature film on Pandita Ramabai—not to raise money for the Ramabai Mukti Mission, but to counter propaganda with an effective presentation of the truth.

The above is to say that as demonstrated in my various books, the Gospel has already done more for India than all other ideologies put together. The nation is forgetting it because the leadership of the Indian Church has not honored, encouraged and supported the creativity of her young people. Many of our professors of Church History teach only what they learn in the Western seminaries—so, sadly, even our own pastors and preachers do not know what the Gospel has done for India. However, it is obvious that the challenge of today—the challenge of providing a fresh hope to India—cannot be met without discovering fresh talent and supporting it.

Incidentally, the negative factors have to be watched too; a prominent leader of the National Council of Churches in India [NCCI] has already gone on record in the press with a statement that the mainstream church in India does not believe in conversions. Obviously, I cannot fully rely on what the press says about a fellow Christian. Depending on what is understood by the word “conversion,” I may even agree with the gentleman. Some Christians may be sincere in their opposition to the word “conversion” and we can respect them even if we do not agree with them.

**Hinduism—whatever its strengths—has singularly failed in strengthening the moral muscles of our society.**

However, some in the “mainstream” are so addicted to corruption that they cannot be committed to any kind of conversion—even when the word means a turning from sin to God. These church leaders will create great problems for the brothers and sisters on the front lines, as their counterparts did during the Third Reich in

Germany and under communism in the Soviet block. For the sake of their positions and security they would be willing to legitimize an oppressive regime that tortures and persecutes God’s faithful servants.

We need to stand up to these church dignitaries now and expose their hypocrisy, since they may be in effect implying that their forefathers who turned from their sins to the living God were fools. The tribals and lower castes today, like their forefathers who may have genuinely “converted” to righteousness in Christ, believe that they need the Gospel. Some of the tribals may be assuming that in the interest of their personal and eternal future, and in the interest of their future generations, they need to get out of a false, enslaving and exploitative socio-religious system.

We may even disagree with the understanding of “conversion” that the potential converts have. But surely, neither the Sangh Parivar, nor the church dignitaries can be allowed to keep these folk in their present moral, cultural and philosophical bondage. No one, except for those committed to corruption, would deny that spiritual/moral transformation is the greatest need of a nation as corrupt as India. Hinduism—whatever its strengths—has singularly failed in strengthening the moral muscles of our society. As I have shown in my book, *The World of Gurus*, the mainstream Hindu philosophy cannot provide even a framework of moral absolutes, let alone the power to regenerate our sinful hearts.

## **Needed: Structures for Countering Persecution**

For years the National Council of Churches had a “Secretary for National Issues” based in Delhi. Hardly anyone knew of the existence of such an office. Now that the need is really acute, the NCCI has not been able to fill the vacancy! In September 1998, about 200 of us helped launch the “National Forum for Reconciliation, Religious Liberty and Social Justice,” under the umbrella of the Evangelical Fellowship of India. So far, its performance has been disappointing and some of my friends are beginning to wonder aloud if they were merely used for public relations and fund raising purposes. Nevertheless, the EFI does need to dispel the suspicions that are beginning to surface. This may well be the last opportunity the EFI has to save its profile in India. The India Missions Association (IMA) is doing from Chennai (Madras) what it can do, but they are not yet structured and equipped to meet the challenge of this magnitude.

Consequently the most vigorous leadership in countering persecution so far has come from John Dayal, a Catholic and the convenor of the United Christian Forum for Human Rights. In a meeting in New Delhi on Easter Sunday, he expressed some of his needs to build a proper documentation and analysis center. It would be unwise for me to put some of his felt needs in a public document such as this report.

However, if you want to know what are some of the needs for prayer, or would like to help, you could write to me or directly to him.

The needs are immense, the challenge is great, risks are fearsome—but the rewards can be unimaginable. We need courage and wisdom because this persecution has raised a serious question—not about the survival of the church in India, but in the short term about the survival of the rule of law and democracy in India, and ultimately about the survival of Hindutva as an ideological force. And, I repeat, Hindutva is the last remaining ideological rival to the Gospel in India. 🌐