

The Church in India

In the midst of all these changes, what is the situation for the church? Even though the pressures are increasing, the church is growing more rapidly than ever before, despite what the census statistics indicate. And not only are churches multiplying, but so are indigenous Indian mission agencies, sometimes with only three or four workers, but often with dozens or even hundreds. Over 20,000 indigenous missionaries are serving in India, about half of them in cross-cultural work.

a. History

Tradition traces the beginning of Christianity in India to the arrival of the apostle Thomas in 52 AD. But there is little doubt that Syrian Christians had become established in Kerala by the fourth century. Roman Catholic work began in Goa in the sixteenth century, and Protestant missions began in the eighteenth century. Indian Christians recently celebrated the bicentennial of William Carey's arrival in 1793. Yet despite this long tradition, the percentage of Christians recorded in the 2001 census was still less than 3%. Of these Christians, 39% were Protestants, 27.6% were Independent, 29.2% were Catholics, and 3.8% were Orthodox.¹

b. Streams in the church

Indian leaders commonly refer to two primary streams in the Protestant church: the mainline churches (including the Church of North India, the Church of South India, the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Methodist Church of India) and the evangelical/charismatic churches. We could define "evangelicals" as those who hold to the full authority of the Scriptures, who believe in salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and who emphasize the need to share the gospel with those who have not yet heard or believed. We could define "charismatics" as those who believe in the full operation of the New Testament ministries and gifts in the church today, though there are varying degrees of emphasis on speaking in tongues, or on a separate experience of baptism of the Holy Spirit.

These categories are of limited usefulness, however, because many of the mainline churches have significant numbers of those who are evangelical in theology, while in some regions traditionally "evangelical" churches like the Baptists have been strongly influenced by non-evangelical theology. Lines between charismatics and non-charismatics are increasingly indistinct, especially in newer fields. There is also growing fellowship and cooperation between charismatic Catholics and evangelical Protestants in places like Mumbai and West Bengal. In fact, Bible-believing Catholics and Protestants often find much

¹ Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, Operation World (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster USA, 2001), p.310.

more in common with one another than either find with the non-evangelical wings of their own groups.

Many of the mainline churches have been sadly weakened by limited vision, political struggles, the drain of expensive institutions inherited from the missionaries, endless lawsuits involving church property, and theological pluralism. Although there is evidence of evangelical awakening in many parts of the mainline churches, the great bulk of evangelism, missions initiatives, and church-planting efforts are coming from the evangelical and especially the charismatic streams. Both OM India and SAIACS (South Asian Institute for Advanced Christian Studies) say that 60% of their recruits or students come from charismatic churches.

c. Distribution of the Church

The Christians in India are distributed very unevenly by region and by caste. Seventy percent live in the South, and 25% in the Northeast.² Only 5% of India's Christians live in the entire North of India, and half of them (2.5%) are from the non-Aryan Northeast.³ Furthermore, more than half of the Christians have Scheduled Caste background, and another quarter are from tribal origin. The Syrian Christians of Kerala, the Goans of Goa and the Anglo-Indians together comprise 12%. Only about 25% of the Christians come from the Backward Castes, Other Backward Castes, and Forward Castes, even though these groups make up 60% of the Indian population.⁴

d. Growth of the church and mission agencies

Whatever the official government statistics may say, it is evident that definite growth has been occurring in the last decade. In some regions, the church has been exploding. For example, in 1992, in all of Madhya Pradesh (a state in central India with population of over 66 million) there were only 500 churches. By 1998 there were over 2,000. And just two years later, the number of churches was more than 3,000! In Punjab, the home of the Sikhs in northwest India, one pastor saw his group more than double from 19 churches in 1997 to 40 churches in 1998. The church in Punjab as a whole nearly tripled from 1991 through 1998.

Even though the census of 2001 shows only 2.3% Christians, most Indian Christian leaders think the percentage of Christians is actually closer to four percent, or perhaps even more, if you include all the secret believers.⁵ But all

² Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, Operation World (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster USA, 2001), p.315.

³ Ebe Sunder Raj, in private correspondence, September 25, 2001.

⁴ Rev. S. Vasanthraj Albert, Executive Director of the Church Growth Association of India, in Unreached Mega Peoples of India (Chennai: India Missions Association, 1999), p.6

⁵ Rev. S. Vasanthraj Albert estimates in Unreached Mega Peoples of India (Chennai: India Missions Association, 1999, p.6) that there are 45 million Christians in India, in addition to 10

agree that in many regions of the country, and in a number of people groups, the churches are growing at an unprecedented rate.⁶

And not only are churches multiplying, but so are indigenous Indian mission agencies, sometimes with only three or four workers, but often with dozens or even hundreds. In 1998 the India Missions Association was estimating that there were about 300 indigenous mission agencies in India. But since then new groups have continued to spring up. The 2001 edition of Operation World reports 440 agencies. Many of these churches and missions have no ties with any Western denominations or agencies.

e. Ministry in a context of persecution

Much of the growth of the church has been coming through cell groups (networked together as part of larger worshiping congregations) and house churches (in which the cell performs all the functions of a church). The cell and house church models have drawn increasing attention, not only because of their rapid multiplication, but also because of their suitability for apprentice-style leadership development, their ease of cross-cultural adaptation, and their ability to survive and even thrive during times of persecution.

The combination of local agitation as well as government-level harassment and media attacks fomented by Hindu fundamentalists have prompted Indian Christians to rethink their strategies of evangelism. In many places public meetings and street preaching have become nearly impossible, though in some areas well-publicized evangelism and healing services can still be conducted without interruption. However, in general there is a growing emphasis on friendship evangelism, home meetings, and practical service (e.g. health, literacy, AIDS prevention, environmental initiatives) that plainly benefit the entire community (non-Christians as well as Christians) and that win a hearing for the Christians. The two most common criticisms leveled against the Christians by Hindu fundamentalists are that (1) they are outsiders, not true patriots, mere agents of the West, kept alive by foreign money; and (2) all their “good works” are simply dishonest ploys to “convert” (i.e. to rip away from their community and their culture) the ignorant.

In many areas, the growing persecution of the church has fueled the zeal of the young believers. As one prominent Baptist leader in Orissa expressed it:

Persecution is an emerging grace. Because we have been terrorized, wisdom comes to us. The big fish may take us, but they cannot digest us.

million crypto-Christians or secret believers. As stated earlier, the World Christian Encyclopedia (2nd edition, 2001; Vol.1, p.360) estimates 40.8 million Christian adherents and 21.5 million crypto-Christians.

⁶ Not only have believers multiplied, but so have denominations. The World Christian Encyclopedia (2nd edition, 2001; Vol.1, p.838) says there are 1,327 denominations in India.

They will throw us [like Jonah] out on the beach where God may best use us. The churches are growing like anything. There is no stopping it.

f. New partnerships and collaboration

The last decade has brought a noticeable increase in the desire of Christian leaders, especially younger leaders, to network with one another and to partner together, e.g. to focus on a particular people group, region, or city. The recent pressures on the church from Hindu fundamentalists have accelerated these movements toward collaboration. The time is ripe to encourage broad-based, cooperative leadership development initiatives.

Another encouraging trend is the increasing awareness and involvement of the overseas Indian community in mission work, church-planting and leadership development in India. For several decades the Indian community in North America and the U.K. seemed to be concerned primarily with making a better life for themselves. But now there is a noticeably accelerated and coordinated movement among overseas Indians to contribute to the multiplication and strengthening of the church in India.

The India Leadership Study itself has sparked a very exciting new cooperative development: the formation of the India Leadership Development Commission [describe in more detail]. Last January in Delhi I presented a summary of the India Leadership Study to a group of about 40 top-level national leaders. The response to the study was very positive and enthusiastic. The leaders decided to translate and publish the India Leadership Study, with their responses, in 10 different Indian languages, and to organize regional conference to discuss the implications of the findings. They also established an ongoing India Leadership Development Commission to coordinate research and action regarding the need for leadership development in India. They are working in a new partnership with Pat Macmillan and Team Resources to develop contextually appropriate resources for organizational development as well.