Inquire, Introspect, Involve:
The Inquiry 2020 and Christian Missions in India

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Abstract

This brief article attempts to capture the current realities of Christian missions in India, with reference to the historical past, contemporary context, and future mission challenges. The research that was done through India Inquiry 2020 is also analysed for understanding the health and struggles of the Indian Church.

Key Words: catalyst, India, Inquiry, mission, movement

Introduction

As this article is being written, the world is gripped by the Corona Virus Pandemic that has affected India greatly, with very high numbers of infections and deaths, loss of livelihood, high unemployment, dislocation of people, and a ruined economy. The International Monetary Fund has downgraded India's growth. India has also slipped to seventh position in the global economy. A recent *Indian Express* report states, "Bangladesh is set to beat India in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in the calendar year 2020, says data from the IMF World Economic Outlook" (Singh 2020).

Christianity a failed project?

Dilip Mandal has written an article that portrays Christianity as a failed project in India (Mandal 2020). The article states that right-wing propaganda that 'Hinduism is in danger, because of Christian missionaries' need not be heeded or believed. In fact, the percentage of Christians in India has dwindled, even though the Christian faith has been in this land for 2000 years. The author provides five important reasons for his claim.

First, Christian faith in India has never developed an appropriate 'liberation theology'. Hence, doing social work, helping people, and spending money has all been to induce them to convert – which is not 'moral'. According to the author Social working, helping people and spending money has failed miserably.

Second, "Christianity in India never played any role like the Black Church played in the Civil Rights Movement or as in the case of Latin American Church where priests who became part of the anti-colonial struggle there. In its early days, Christianity was perceived as the religion of the colonialists and the oppressors."

Third, "Christianity failed to transcend the barrier of caste. Becoming Christian does not absolve an Indian from the shackles of caste." Sadly, there is discrimination based on caste within the church. In that sense, the church has failed to be a model of biblical values of equality and fraternity.

Fourth, initial converts were Brahmins and other upper castes. The author writes that they dominate the church and lower castes do not feel comfortable since their caste leadership is not sanctioned by the Christian faith, as that of Brahmins in Hindu faith.

Fifth, Christian education institutions did not empower the poor, but instead educated the elite, who become oppressors. Christian schools "largely became the hub of social and

economic elites of the country. In most of these schools, located mainly in urban areas, poor kids can't enter."

The yardstick of the approach by the author is about numerical growth and lack of social impact on a large-scale on the nation of India. Yes, Christianity made certain national impacts in the past before India's independence in 1947. However, the author did not discuss those aspects.

Church Growing and Thriving

In the year 1998 the first "Inquiry" was conducted in India. Various Christian leaders – pastors, mission leaders, Bible college professors, and others – were requested to complete a questionnaire to help formulate vision, strategies, projects, and projection targets for respective ministries. The exercise was repeated in 2003 and again in 2020. The church leaders' documents of from Inquiry 1998, 2003, and 2020 provide brilliant statements, reports, and vision of faith. The main focus has been church planting in all three inquiries.

There have been several catalyst movements that enabled the church to get the vision of planting churches. Many young people were inspired by such movements that had specific, time-bound targets. Here are ten movements that made an impact on individuals, missions, and organizations and also gave birth to new church planting movements:

1. *Saturation Church Planting*: According to this approach, the idea of having a church for everyone thousand population would complete the Great Commission task. So, in every district, there were attempts to mobilize the 'Harvest Force' to the 'Harvest Field'. When there were not enough 'Harvest Force' laborers, missions from outside were requested to come and help.

2. *DAWN*: Discipling A Whole Nation also conducted vision seminars to think beyond disciple-making and church planting to engaging the whole nation.

3. *AD 2000 Movement*: This movement inspired mission agencies to work out a plan so that the Great Commission would be completed by AD 2000. Many Christians were inspired in the 1990s to strive towards this goal.

4. *10/40 Window*: The vision of reaching out to people groups that are within the window of 10 degrees and 40 degrees north of the equator provided a compelling image, and many of those people groups happens to be in India. That image gave passion to many people.

5. *4/14 Window*: This vision showed that in the western world most people came to Lord Jesus Christ when they were between 4 and 14 years old. Hence reaching that age group became strategic. However, as noted below this demographic trend has not been true in India, yet there was great interest in this focus.

6. *People group thinking/movement*: This movement tried to help people to get a vision to reach various people groups. The approach should not be just geographical progress but penetration progress, reaching all people groups.

7. *Transform World*: This is another global movement that made an impact in India also. Many leaders caught a new vision and worked innovatively to reach out to people.

8. *Movement Day*: Urban missions celebrated Movement Day in various cities. Those events helped to see what God was doing in cities and gave new vision for city transformation.

9. *Networks*: Working together as a network became a buzz word. Earlier it was more about partnerships. However, missions were more comfortable with networks. Several networks were formed: city networks, state networks, regional networks, and national networks.

10. *Prayer movements*: Undergirding all these efforts were prayer networks, including national, regional, denominational, and state- or city-wide prayer networks. Some were highly influential, for example the National Prayer Network.

Inquiry Research Details

Regarding the number of survey respondents, for an overall population of 1.38 billion people, assuming two percent are Christians the Christian presence is 2.75 crore (27.5 million). The latest Inquiry had only 1016 respondents, which is inadequate for such a large population of Christians. The survey was done between August 2019 and March 2020. The following organizations participated and partnered in this survey: EFICC (Evangelical Fellowship of India Council of Churches), EFI (Evangelical Fellowship of India), IMA (India Missions Association), Seva Bharat, and the Caleb Institute. The regional response to the survey was as follows: 8% South India, 24% West India, 17% North India, 17% Central India, 13% Northeast India, and 21 % East India.

With specific regard to gender, the Inquiry exemplified how Indian Christianity is dominated by male leadership, with low representation for woman: there were 80% male respondents while just 20% female respondents.

The ages at which individuals have come to faith in Jesus Christ is very vital research information that could help Indian churches to develop effective strategies. Globally the 4/14 Window movement has received wide attention. However, as noted earlier the research data from India does not follow the trends in the West. A majority, i.e. 68%, have come to the Lord between the ages of 15-29, while 23% have come to faith between 0-14 years of age. Only 7% came to know Christ when they were 30-50 years old, with 1% when they were over 50.

Furthermore, the survey results show that 88% of those who had accepted Christ between the age of 0-14 were from a Christian background, where both parents were Christians. Another 7% had Christian mothers while 4% had Christian fathers. In other words, almost all respondents (99%) who came to faith by the age of 14 were influenced in their homes to accept Christ, which questions the relevance to India of the 4/14 Window approach. As noted above, the Inquiry's results shows that first generation Christians were more (68%) from the age group of 15-29 years.

As for external threats or challenges, in the 1990s India joined the global economy with several changes in economic policies of the government. Indian economic policy right after Independence was of Fabian socialism, tended towards protectionism, import substitution industrialization and state intervention. The economic liberalisation occurred in 1991 with the goal making India more market and service oriented and expanding the role of private and foreign investment (S 2018). India's was dubbed as a 'liberal' economy. There was also the Information Technology (IT) revolution that catapulted India as an IT soft power, driven by English education in the southern states. These two factors helped spur Indian economic growth that also saw large scale urbanization, migration from rural areas to urban areas. Getting richer was the goal of many young people. As a result, materialism began to dominate people's thought process. Rightly, the 2003 Inquiry identified 'materialism' as a

major external threat. It distracted the churches and especially young people to be focused on material benefits.

In the year 2020, the major external threat mentioned is persecution and political oppression. The intelligentsia of India have moved from 'central' political views to 'right-wing' political views. This rightward shift has become evident in academics, media, bureaucracy, government policies, and political discourses.

As for internal obstacles or threats, in 2003 the survey results (20%) identified unhealthy churches that do not reproduce as the foremost threat. According to the 2020 survey, the foremost problem (10%) is lack of vision and understanding. Unhealthy churches also lack vision and perspective about missions, hence they are unhealthy.

With respect to future focus, In the 2003 survey 27% wanted to focus on reaching unreached social groups. In 2020, 13% of the older leaders wish to set goals and pursue the target, while 14% of the younger leaders want to be engaged in personal evangelism.

In the 2003 survey, 15% had a vision of a church for every people. In the 2020 survey, 11% of older respondents would like to have the goal of the 'Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World'. Younger leaders, about 11%, want to see 'Power, Presence and Peace of God for all'.

In 2003, about 22% of leaders wanted to have a place and opportunity to do missiological reflection. In 2020, leaders desire inspiration and prayer networks (11% general and 12% youth).

As for catalysts for faith, in the 2003 survey 55% felt that an invitation to receive Christ at a special place was the catalyst for their faith. In 2020, 9% state that reading the Bible is the main catalyst for their faith while 7% who are below 25 years get inspiration from their parents.

Contemporary Challenges

There are many changes happening around the world at an accelerated speed. Technology has greatly enhanced human communication. At the same time, the world is vulnerable to pandemics like corona. India also faces several challenges that force the church to rethink its mission and to conceive relevant strategies.

Divisive ideology presents one challenge. Soutik Biswas writes: "Also India's shift to the right is not unique to India - it's happening with the new right in the Republican Party in the US, and the central ground of French and German politics has shifted rightwards. India's rightward shift is clearly part of a wider trend where the nature of nationalism is being redefined and cultural identity is being given renewed emphasis" (Biswas 2019). India has been polarised with 'majority' politics. This has led to a 'trust deficit' in the society. Minorities, Dalits, and Tribals are marginalized, and the majority resorts to victim blaming. Instead of love and compassion, hatred and bigotry dominate the mindscape of India.

Another challenge is downgraded business. India's GDP plunged by a record 23.9% in the April-June quarter of 2020.

Analysts say millions of workers lost their jobs and businesses suffered due to the lockdown, but the government has refuted any large-scale unemployment. Even before the pandemic struck, the Indian economy was amid a slowdown as a crisis in the shadow bank sector hurt new loans and took a toll on consumption, which accounts for some 60 per cent of the country's GDP (PTI 2020).

This 2020 economic downturn has been a historical contraction, and it may become even worse in the coming days. Devyani Madaik writes: "This is considered to be the worst contraction in the history of the Indian economy. The majority of this is attributed to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic" (Madaik 2020).

Recovery from this situation is going to take a long time. In this context, there will be immense suffering as people will not be able to meet their basic needs.

Demoralized youth constitute yet another challenge. 'Demographic Dividend' (Thakur 2019) was a great advantage for India. With a huge young working population, India had potential to become a formidable economic power. This aspiration triggered youngsters who have seen their dreams shattered. Young adults with an engineering degree or MBA are trying to get manual labour jobs initiated by government of India for the poor in rural areas. Niha Masih and Joanna Slater write in the *Washington Post*: "During the nationwide lockdown, more than 120 million jobs were lost, most of them in the country's vast informal sector. Many of those workers have returned to work out of sheer necessity, often scraping by on far lower wages (Masih and Slater 2020). Economist Jayati Ghosh states that the 'Demographic Dividend' will turn to 'Demographic Disaster' if there are not enough jobs for young people (Sampath 2020). A youth bulge in population without a robust economy will create violence.

As for women in India, they face many obstacles. Violence against women is increasing day by day. Harassment, oppression, dowry deaths, discrimination, rapes, and molestation are daily news. "The Government of India acknowledges women's safety as a matter of concern and measures such as use of information technology for women's safety, introducing self-defence as a part of the school curriculum, making police stations women-friendly, setting up of all-women police stations, etc. have been initiated" (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation 2016, 35). Laws alone cannot protect women. Only a transformation in the thought processes and paradigms of people and of government policies can bring transformation.

Deadly pollution and dying environment also present massive challenges. India faces the challenge of air, water, soil, and noise pollution. Many districts are perennially 'flood-prone'. Some rural areas experience drought year after year. Waste management is not properly done, simply left to individual efforts of 'rag-pickers' and others. Water scarcity is increasing as ground water-level has gone down. "India is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, with hydrological (water-related) disasters being among the most frequent and having high morality and damage costs" (Bagai 2020). The government of India is having to spend about 20,00,00,00,000 rupees to clean the river Ganges, which Hindus consider as holy (PTI 2019).

Children in India are often denied opportunities for fruitful living. A nation is esteemed by the way the children are treated. Gender bias leave thousands of unborn girls disappear even before birth or soon after birth by criminal negligence. "India is the only large country where more girls die than boys, with the inverse sex ratio at birth being 900 girls born for every 1000 boys. Globally 7 per cent more boys die under the age of 5 compared to girls but in India, 11 per cent more girls die under the age of 5" (UNICEF n.d.). Furthermore, "In 2013, India was the top among 5 countries with the highest rate of child abuse" (Save the Children 2016). Children are also abused physically, verbally and sexually. Crime against children has increased in the recent years.

Children from rural areas, slums and urban poor families, scheduled castes, tribal communities and other disadvantaged populations suffer from multiple deprivations

related to poverty, malnutrition, access to quality health services, child marriage, poor school attendance, low learning outcomes, lack of sanitation facilities, hygiene, and access to improved water (UNICEF n.d.).

Another challenge is disappearing discourses and increasing violence. Ramachandra Guha states that India has remained as a democracy and united only as a miracle. He also states: "There was also an intolerance of criticism not only among the political class but also among various communities and linguistic groups" (IANS 2017). Mallika Bhagat writes:

Why do we as a nation promote the culture of intolerance? Books have been banned; writers roughed up for progressive criticism. A myriad of social factors, coupled with political complexities have made the political scenario unaccepting of voices of dissent. Freedom of speech has limits which make it hard, nay, impossible to voice opinions without hurting sentiments (Bhagat 2017).

Intellectuals are branded as 'Urban Naxals' and also with an 'anti-national' tag. "Agnihotri defines an 'Urban Naxal' as an intellectual, influencer or activist who is an invisible enemy of India. He has expounded on this idea in his book titled *Urban Naxals: The Making of Buddha in a Traffic Jam,* released on 27 May, 2018" (Agarwal 20218). Rachel John writes that reading certain books worries many people about being branded as anti-national (John 2020).

Dingy governance is yet another challenge. Moral responsibility of government is not taken seriously. Bureaucratic corruption, judicial incompetence, lack of political will, and non-state actors doing unlawful activities are all banes on India. Ramachandra Guha writes:

India is in danger of becoming an 'elections-only democracy'. Every election is free and fair. Yet other instruments of democratic accountability remain imperfect. Parliament meets rarely -- when it does, it resembles a wrestling pit more than the stately chamber of discussion it was meant to be. The criminal justice system is in a state of near-collapse. The state is weak and incompetent when providing basic services such as education and healthcare; but savage and brutal in its suppression of discontent (Guha 2018).

Poor infrastructure presents another challenge. Homelessness is a great problem. Sriram Mahadevan writes:

The lack of available housing options, combined with limited income and minimal access to home finance for low income borrowers, means that millions of Indian households currently live in cramped, poorly constructed houses/slum areas/shanties. They lack access to a clean and healthy environment, with even basic amenities such as sanitation, clean water, sewage, waste management and electricity often absent (Mahadevan 2015).

Moreover, public transport is not adequate. There are traffic jams in all cities.

Regarding the challenge of "Digital India,"(Digital India is a flagship programme of the Government of India with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy.) there are three factors to be taken into account regarding the Digital revolution. First is uninterrupted electricity service; second is an effective Internet network; and third is affordable devices. Rahul Sapkal, Ashok Chikte, and Upamanyu Sengupta write:

A nationwide survey of villages by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-18, showed that 16 percent of India's households received one to eight hours of electricity

daily, 33 percent got 9-12 hours and only 47 percent received more than 12 hours of power supply daily. Erratic power supply only exacerbates the existing digital divide, which is evident across class, gender, region and place of residence (Sapkal, Chikte, and Sengupta 2020).

An editorial in *The Economic Times* warned about digital inequity: "This overwhelming shift, driven by necessity, from physical to electronic mode, has highlighted the digital divide in the country. There is a need to invest in digital capability — hardware, software, spectrum — to ensure that fight against Covid-19 does not exacerbate yet another form of inequity" (ET Editorial 2020). Kundan Pandey writes:

> Education is just one area that has highlighted the digital divide between India's rural and urban areas during the lockdown. The trend is evident everywhere — telemedicine, banking, e-commerce, e-governance, all of which became accessible only via internet during the lockdown. The divide exists despite the rise in the number of wireless subscribers in India over the past few years (Pandey 2020).

Digital defeat? Digital India is sharply divided. Many teenagers have committed suicide, because they could not afford smart phones and are missing online classes.

Challenges Create Opportunities

In mission we cannot simply observe challenges and rest. Indeed, we are called to act. To act, we need to look with new eyes or a new perspective. Challenges are then seen as God-given opportunities for mission. Providing food for five thousand plus was a challenge, but it was also an opportunity for a boy to be generous and God to miraculously multiply resources (Matthew 14:13-21). A person was born blind so that the 'glory of God' could be revealed (John 9:3). Friends of the person paralyzed looked at obstruction through horizontal entrances as a challenge and created a way from the roof for their friend to reach Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 5:17-26).

There are, in reality, several strategic ideas for ministry in India. Strategic ministry of chaplains in hospitals, army, and industries in the history of mission could not be overestimated. Today, the IT sector needs chaplains as does the hospitality industry. Seminaries should train personnel to be 'online chaplains'.

Today India needs a great army of counsellors. Schools, colleges, and other educational institutions are strategic mission areas, searching for counsellors. "The Madras High Court has directed Tamil Nadu government to consider creating trained full-time counsellors in schools as a long-time measure" (PTI 2016). In West Bengal also, the Calcutta High Court ordered appointment of counsellors in all one hundred thousand schools, because of increasing child sexual abuse (Bora 2018). This need is an open door for the churches to mobilize their young people to get into educational institutions.

Content creators are also strategic. The world of media has changed, mainly because of the digital revolution. Social media has opened immense opportunities for innovative communication. With a good smart phone and access to a stable network, any individual could create viable content for a global audience. In this context, young Christians should be encouraged to engage media. "For many, WhatsApp, is the first (and preferred) channel of communication and transmission of information of all kinds. As many as one out of three voters in India is reportedly using the platform" (Sam and Thakurta 2019, 32).

There is also a need for godly men and women to champion various causes, be they children's rights, Women of Worth, education for all, equality for all, or various other

matters. Christian advocates and awareness creators can serve in such areas of social life as drug addiction, digital addiction, and pornography. Dignified discourse, courteous behaviour, public hygiene, traffic sense, and safe environments for woman are just some of the other causes that should be promoted by disciples of the Lord to enhance inherent goodness in the society.

There is also a need for creative methods in evangelism, disciple making, leadership development, and mentoring emerging leaders. Fun, food and fellowship is a successful strategy developed by some youth groups. Similar creative methods are urgently needed.

In the past, wars and lack of medical development created many destitute orphans. Children's home were run by Christians to provide care and support. Today, other kinds of marginalized needing Christians' attention include unwed mothers, single mothers, abandoned elderly, alcoholic fathers, and abandoned children.

The Church in India must raise change-agents to transform society. William Carey fought against Sati, Amy Carmichael fought against the *Devadasi* system (Temple slave prostitution), and Pandit Rama Bai fought against child marriage. New social reformers and community transforming agents are needed.

Challenge and Conclusion

Since its beginning two millennia ago, the Church in India has survived regular attempted attacks of compromise (syncretism), persecution, exile, and even annihilation. Even so, the Church has actually grown stronger and with great dynamism. With a clear and sharp vision, strategies to match myriad challenges, a steward mindset, a servant attitude, and passion for the relevance of the gospel in all walks of life, the Indian Church will greatly serve the great nation of India to make it even greater through incorporating biblical values into the national fabric and ethos.

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