

Challenges of contextual mission "in a world torn apart by conflicts"
an Indian perspective

In this brief paper I limit myself to the challenge of mission in India today. Since 2014 India has been ruled by a right-wing Hindu nationalistic party called the BJP under the leadership of PM Modi. It is the political wing of the RSS, founded in 1925, which is the progenitor of a large body of Hindu organisations called the '*Sangh Parivar*' (or the RSS-family). Today the RSS is present in almost every facet or aspect of Indian society as it has been working tirelessly and with determination for the past 97 years to reach every Hindu. '*To be Indian is to be Hindu*' is the basic idea or premise according to which it operates. Anyone who is not a Hindu is a foreigner who does not belong to India. In fact, one of its founding members, M.S. Golwalkar stated: "*Christians and Muslims may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, ...not even citizens' rights!*"

This has posed a tremendous challenge to Christianity (and Islam) in the country.

Today the RSS rules the hearts and minds of most Hindus. The popular perception of Christianity is that it was introduced by Western traders and missionaries, basically white European colonialists. Therefore, it must be fiercely opposed by all Hindus as the religion of imperialists. What they often forget is that Christianity in India is almost as old as Christianity itself, having been possibly introduced by the apostle Thomas in 52 AD. But apart from the state of Kerala, most Hindus do not subscribe to this view.

I have been a missionary for over 20 years of my life, and many of these years I spent in India, the country in which I was born. Earlier it was easier to speak of and share my faith with others, but gradually it has become almost impossible, as there are severe penalties for doing so, even the risk of being lynched by the mob, despite constitutional guarantees of free speech and propagation of one's beliefs.

The clarion call of the '*Sangh Parivar*' is 'one nation, one culture, one people!' It is part of what is called *Hindutva* (being Hindu in every respect). Christians are seen as those who want to destroy Indian culture, who try instead to impose Western culture, traditions and values upon Indians, totally disregarding the fact that Christians are Indian in every respect, born and bred in India, and having been in existence in India for almost 2000 years!

The forces of *Hindutva* are attempting to rewrite the constitution of India as well as Indian history itself, glorifying its Hindu past and denigrating Muslims and Christians as enemies and 'invaders'.

Religious persecution is rife in many parts of the country and missionaries and pastors are often singled out for lynching and other forms of brutal punishment. Churches, especially in rural areas, are demolished or burned while the government usually turns a blind eye to the problem. Foreign funding of Christian institutions and organisations has been severely curtailed and discouraged, if not outright banned.

So how does one continue to be true to our calling and purpose as Christians in India?

Firstly, Christians, especially those with any influence or power, need to speak up. We must affirm that Christianity is not Western, but Eastern in origin, not 'white' but rather 'brown' (i.e., from Palestine), and is older than both Islam and Sikhism.

Secondly, highlight the contribution of Indian Christians to both the independence movement before 1947 and nation-building thereafter in the civil services, armed forces, industry, education, healthcare, the media, sports, entertainment, etc.

Thirdly, Christians need to emphasise their Indian cultural roots, languages and traditions.

Fourthly, Christians must be careful in the use of rhetoric. Some evangelical missions use inflammatory jargon such as heathen, pagan, non-believers, conversion, crusades, etc., which is prejudicial and discriminatory. Derogatory references to Hinduism and other Indian religions must be avoided as far as possible!

Fifthly, we must be more united. When Christian churches and missions criticise one another or declare that only they are right and all others are wrong, it only leads to the common misconception that Christians are a disunited lot and therefore cannot be genuine.

Apart from the above, I believe Christians should be active in journalism and politics and not just hide their heads in the sand. We need to motivate the younger generation to participate in nation-building and service, perhaps even join the ruling party to emphasise their patriotism and try disseminating correct perceptions and knowledge of Christianity and Christ's teachings from within.

While developing perhaps a new missiology for India, we need to come together to work unabashedly for the growth and development of the nation, for justice and fair play in all aspects of society, and to be the peacemakers that Christ has called us to be!

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Romesh Modayil