
Historical Background and Reflections on the State of the Rural Church in Southern Asia and Eastern Asia

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The history of Asia can be seen as the collective history of several distinct peripheral coastal regions such as East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East linked by the interior mass of the Eurasian steppe.

The most cherished beauty of the Indian sub-continent is its harmony and coherence of different cultures, colors, races, religions, traditions, dresses, food, and languages. Politically, this region is an amalgamation of different dynasties and kingdoms. From the Northwestern region through Afghanistan came Aryans in eighth century BC who invaded the Dravidians, native inhabitants of the land, who were driven to the southern parts of India and even to south Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Malaysia. India is the largest democratic country with a population of **1,438,232,604** as of March 2024.

History

By 600 BC, India had been divided into seventeen regional states that would occasionally feud amongst themselves. In 327 BC, Alexander the Great came to India with a vision of conquering the whole world. He crossed northwestern India and created the province Bactria but could not move further because his army wanted to go back to their families.

Shortly before this invasion, Chandragupta Maurya began to take control of the Ganges River and soon established the Maurya Empire. The Maurya Empire was the most geographically extensive and powerful empire in ancient India, ruled by the Mauryan dynasty from 321 to 185 BC. It was one of the world's largest empires at the time, stretching to the Himalayas in the north, what is now Assam in the east, beyond modern Pakistan in the west, and annexing Baluchistan (and much of what is now Afghanistan) at its greatest extent.

The Maurya and Gupta Empires are called the Golden Age of India and were marked by extensive inventions and discoveries in science, technology, art, religion, and philosophy that crystallized the elements of what is generally known as Indian culture. The religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, which began on the Indian sub-continent, were an important influence on Southeast Asia.

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independent country dominated by three dynasties: the Pandean, Cholas and Cheras. During the medieval period, the Eastern world empires continued to expand through trade, migration, and conquests of neighboring areas. Gunpowder was widely used as early as the eleventh century; moveable type printing was being used 500 years before Gutenberg created his press. Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were the dominant philosophies of Far East Asia during the Middle Ages. Marco Polo was not the first Westerner to travel to the Orient and return with amazing stories of this different culture, however, his accounts, published in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, were the first to be widely read throughout Europe.

The Turco-Mongol residual states and domains were formed by the fifteenth century. The Mongol Empire conquered a large part of Asia in the thirteenth century, an area extending from China to Europe. Medieval Asia was the kingdom of the Khans. Never before had any person controlled as much land as Genghis Khan.

British and Dutch Colonization

The European economic and naval powers pushed into Asia, first to do trading, and then to take over major colonies. The Dutch led the way followed by the British. Portugal had arrived first but was too weak to maintain its small holdings and was

largely pushed out, retaining only Goa and Macau. The British set up a private organization, the East India Company, which handled both trade and Imperial control of much of India. The commercial colonization of India commenced in 1757 after the Battle of Plessey, when the Nawab of Bengal surrendered his dominions to the British East India Company in 1765 as the company was granted the *diwani*, or the right to collect revenue, in Bengal and Bihar, and in 1772 when the company established a capital in Calcutta, appointed its first Governor-General, Warren Hastings, and became directly involved in governance.

The Dutch East India Company (1800) and British East India Company (1858) were dissolved by their respective governments, who took over the direct administration of the colonies. Only Thailand was spared the experience of foreign rule, although Thailand itself was also greatly affected by the power politics of the Western powers. Colonial rule had a profound effect on Southeast Asia. While the colonial powers profited much from the region's vast resources and large market, colonial rule developed the region economically to a varying extent.

From the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, large regions of India were gradually annexed by the East India Company, a chartered company acting as a sovereign power on behalf of the British government. Dissatisfaction with company rule in India led to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which rocked parts of north and central India, and led to the dissolution of the company. Afterward, India was ruled directly by the British Crown, in the British Raj. After World War I, a nationwide struggle for independence was launched by the Indian National Congress, led by Mahatma Gandhi, and noted for employing nonviolence. Later, the All-India Muslim League would advocate for a separate Muslim-majority nation state.

In August 1947, the British Indian Empire was partitioned into the Union of India and Dominion of Pakistan. In particular, the partition of Punjab and Bengal led to rioting between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in these provinces and spread to other nearby regions, leaving about 500,000 dead. The police and army units were largely ineffective. The British officers were gone, and the units were beginning to tolerate, if not actually indulge in, violence against their religious enemies. This period also saw one of the largest mass migrations anywhere in modern history, with a total of 12 million Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims moving between the newly created nations of India and Pakistan, each of which gained independence on 15 and 14 August 1947 respectively. In 1971, Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan and East Bengal, separated from Pakistan through an armed conflict sparked by the rise of the Bengali nationalist and self-determination movement.

Multi-lingual

With the world's biggest population, India is divided into twenty-eight states and eight union territories; it is the seventh largest country in the world with distinct geographical entities—the Himalayas on the north and oceans on three sides. The states are divided predominantly based on language and culture.

The big development in India is the rapid expansion of a prosperous middle class increasingly dictating the country's political and economic direction. Estimated at 300 million people—more than the entire population of the United States—this new vanguard, straddling town and countryside and all religious communities, is mobile, driven, consumer-oriented, and, to some extent, forward-looking.

The Republic of India is home to hundreds of languages (the SIL Ethnologies lists 424 living languages in India). Even among small rural agricultural populations, people speak different languages. To overcome this problem a three-language formula is imposed on every student in rural as well as urban schools that affirms one's mother tongue, Hindi as the national language, and English as an international language. Thus, interstate travel, agricultural trade, and communication have become viable.

Class struggle

Nearly 70% of Indian population lives in rural areas where caste and class affiliations overlap. Large landholders are overwhelmingly in the upper caste, and small-scale farmers in the middle class, while the Dalits (landless laborers) typically belong to the lowest-ranking castes and class. These groups tend to form a three-level class system of stratification in rural areas; members of the groups draw together within a village across caste lines in order to enhance their life together based on compensating mutual services. In cities, class lines adhere less obviously to caste affiliations, as vested interests strongly crosscut caste boundaries. This is a salient feature of rural and urban distinctions in India.

When looking at India as a whole, defining classes is a difficult task. According to various estimates, the upper classes include about 1% of the population, or some ten million people, encompassing wealthy property owners, industrialists, former royalty, top executives, and prosperous entrepreneurs. Slightly below them are the many millions of the upper middle class. At the other end of the scale is approximately half of India's population, including low-level workers of many kinds, as well as hundreds of millions of extremely poor people, who endure grossly inadequate housing and education and many other economic hardships.

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Caste system

Social inequality exists throughout the world, but perhaps nowhere has inequality been so elaborately constructed as in the Indian institution of caste. Castes have existed for many centuries. Castes are ranked, named, and endogamous (in-marrying) groups, membership in which is achieved at birth. There are thousands of castes and sub-castes in India, involving hundreds of millions of people. These large kinship-based groups are fundamental to South Asian social structure.

Caste membership provides a sense of belonging to a recognized group from whom support can be expected in a variety of situations. According to Indian terms, the caste groups are identified by their Varna (Color) appearance and walk of life, which refers to four large categories (and includes numerous sub-castes): Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra. The Dalits are out-caste; they have no caste, no religion, nor God. They are untouchables. They live in isolation away from the main inhabitants of a village. The Christian missionaries founded an isolated untouchable church in most every village and provided a God for them. This may be the reason why 90% of Christians in India belong to these alienated Dalit castes.

Many castes are associated with traditional occupations, such as priests, potters, barbers, carpenters, leatherworkers, butchers, and launderers. Members of higher-ranking castes tend to be more prosperous than members of lower-ranking castes, who often endure poverty and social disadvantage. The so-called “Untouchables” were traditionally relegated to menial tasks. Since 1935, “Untouchables” have been known as “Scheduled Castes,” and Mahatma Gandhi called them “Harijans” (Children of God).

Today Dalit groups make up some 16% of the population. In past decades, Dalits in certain areas had to display extreme deference to high-status people and were barred from most temples and wells. Such degrading discrimination was outlawed under legislation passed during British rule and was repudiated by pre-independence reform movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and BhimRao Ramji (B.R.) Ambedkar, a Dalit leader. After independence in 1947, Dr. Ambedkar almost single-handedly wrote India's constitution, including provisions barring caste-based discrimination. However, Dalits as a group still suffer significant disadvantages, especially in rural areas.

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Other groups, called tribes (often referred to as “Scheduled Tribes”), are also integrated into the caste system. Mostly these tribal communities of India make their habitat on the hillocks and in forests and earn their livelihood by selling forest products to the nearby towns and villages. Missionary activities also have been held among tribal villages.

Within castes, explicit standards are maintained. Rules of marriage, diet, dress, occupation, and other behaviors are enforced, often by a caste council (*panchayat*). Infringements can be punished by fines and temporary or permanent out casting. Individuals and caste groups can hope to rise slowly in the hierarchy through economic success and adoption of high-caste behaviors, the process of which is called sanskritization. However, it is virtually impossible for an individual to raise his own status by falsely claiming to belong to a higher caste; a deception of this kind is easily discovered and isolated. In rural areas, many low-caste people still suffer from landlessness, unemployment, and discriminatory practices. In the growing cities, however, caste affiliations are often unknown to casual associates, and traditional restrictions on intercaste interactions are slowly fading. In some urban circles, intercaste marriages joining mates of similar class status have become acceptable. Correlations between caste and occupations are declining.

In recent years, key changes have occurred in caste observances. It is now legally and socially unacceptable to openly advocate for any caste's superiority or inferiority, and lower caste groups are flexing their political muscle. Even as traditional hierarchies weaken, caste identities are being reinforced, especially among disadvantaged groups with rights to special educational benefits and substantial quotas reserved for them in electoral offices and government jobs. In protest against Hinduism's rigid rankings, thousands of Dalits have embraced Buddhism, following the example of the B.R. Ambedkar. Equally, the Dalits have embraced Christianity.

Christian missions to Indian subcontinent

Christianity is India's third-largest religion with about 26 million adherents, making up 2.3% of the population in the 2011 census. The written records of Saint Thomas Christians mention that Christianity was introduced to the Indian subcontinent by Thomas the Apostle, who sailed to the Malabar region (present-day Kerala) in 52 AD. Eventually, the Thomas Christians formed the Mar Thoma Church. Scholarship documents that a Christian community had firmly established in Malabar by 600 AD at the latest. Following the discovery of a sea route to India by the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in the fifteenth century AD, Western Christianity was established in the European colonies. Christian missionaries introduced the western educational system to the Indian subcontinent. Missionaries also encouraged many Hindu social reforms, such as the end of "*sati*" (by which a widowed woman would sacrifice herself upon her husband's funeral pyre), child marriage, and the dowry.

The first Protestant *missionaries* were two Lutherans from Germany, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, who began work in 1705. W. M. Carey was a Baptist missionary—considered the "father of modern missions"—who came in 1791. He settled in Serampore, where he organized schools teaching the Christian faith, as well as reading, writing, and accounting, to deprived children, including Dalits in the local area. He also set up a university of divinity in Serampore and campaigned to end the practice of *sati*. He also translated the Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Hindi and Sanskrit and the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, into English.

In 1856 the Methodist Episcopal Church from the U.S. started a mission in India. The roots of the Methodist Church in India originate from American Methodist missionary activity in India, in contrast to the British and Australian conferences of the Methodist Churches, which joined the Church of South India and the Church of North India (formed as a result of the ecumenical merger of the Methodist Church of Great Britain, Church of India, Burma and Ceylon [Anglican] and other Protestant denominations).

Church Union Movement

Right from the beginning of the twentieth century, the leaders of different denominations in south India were stirred up by the prayer of Jesus that his followers be one (John 17:21). At different levels, negotiations started for the union of churches. As the country was achieving independence in 1947, church leaders also were able to celebrate the inauguration of the Church of South India in St. Georges Cathedral in Madras on 27 September 1947.

The Church of South India was formed from the union of the South India United Church (a union of churches from the Congregational Presbyterian and Reformed traditions); the southern provinces of the (Anglican) Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon; and the Methodist Church of South India. The reconciliation of Anglican views with the other uniting

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denominations on the doctrine of apostolic succession (the historical episcopacy) at the formation of the Church of South India often is cited as a landmark in the ecumenical movement, described as a second Pentecost.

The series of consultations, with a view to Church Union in North India, began in 1929. Eventually, through negotiations, a plan of Church Union was drawn up. A negotiating committee was constituted in 1951 by the participating church bodies, which were the United Church of Northern India; the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma, and Ceylon; the Methodist Church in Southern Asia; and the Council of the Baptist Churches in Northern India. In 1957, the Church of the Brethren and the Disciples of Christ also joined the process. The plan reached its fourth and final edition in 1965. On that basis, the Church Union in North India was inaugurated on 29 November 1970 in Nagpur. At the last moment, the Methodist Church in Southern Asia decided not to join the union. Subsequently, both the British and Australian Methodist Churches have joined the Union. The Church Union of North India now has 2.2 million members, whereas the Church of South India has a membership of 4 million.

Indian Christian theologians have made remarkable efforts to help Indians understand the religious plurality and make India a celebrative culture to coexist with mutual respect and dignity. Bishop of Thirunelveli AJ Appaswami has been called the father of Indian theologians. Raymond Panikkar, Bishop Victor Premasagar, AJ Samartha, Bishop VS Azariah, Russell Chandran, and Dyanchand Carr, alongside the Srilankan theologians DT Niles, Wesley Ariyaratna, and many others have helped Indians to understand what Christ means in an Asian context, particularly in India.

Kothapalle Wilson, KC Prabhakaran, Kanchala Rajaratnam, Bishop Devasahayam, and others have brought Christian values into a context of oppression, alienation, and exploitation of Dalit Christians by the dominant Hindu caste system. They have given importance to individual dignity in the context of poverty. Dalit theology, liberation theology, feminine theology, pedagogy of the oppressed, ecological theology, and lifegiving agricultural realizations have emerged to make the church relevant to the Indian context to address lower-upper castes, rich-poor

classifications, and rural-urban privilege discriminations.

Recent developments

The corona pandemic brought a new feature called virtual worship. Churches have learned many lessons due to the pandemic. Believers are growing in their spiritual maturity through the disaster of millions of people losing their lives by no fault of their own. Some are disillusioned about the challenge of amassing wealth for future generations. Many individual believers are increasing in their dependency on God because of the growing fragility of life or their fear of the fast-approaching unknown enemy of death. Individuals are feeling the heat of urgency to prepare for the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is realizing the need for openness as the house of prayer for “all nations.” Many caste churches are emerging. An independent church movement is rapidly growing. Programs such as “Run for Jesus” have become a general event in all towns and cities. The “United Christian Prayer for India” is yet another movement with an emphasis to reach the nation in our lifetime. Over the past decade, Christian communities have made visible progress in their standard of living, education, and economics. Other religious groups in villages and towns are finding comfortable relationships with Christians as the churches show openness to them. More fanatical groups also are emerging with unfortunate support from political parties, creating religious tensions and destruction in the country.

Conclusion

The church has to enter into a new fabric of ministry in the post-pandemic period. New challenges for the church emerge as the changes occur in people’s growing social status. Church programs and ministries are being contextualized to help the poor and the needy more than before. On the other hand, the church is struggling with internal problems of property management, stewardship of finances, tropism, litigations, and court cases. These leave impressions that digress against Christian witness. An

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atmosphere of discouragement can cloud the faith of members due to perverted leadership. Impersonal digital groups are emerging that provide digital sermons as a private option. Denominational loyalties among members (both for good and for ill) are getting relaxed. For many members the Sunday routine has become a personal obligatory satisfaction. At the same time, many churches are overflowing; existing churches are expanding while new church buildings are mushrooming.

Modernization and urbanization have brought opportunities for jobs as well as labor. The middle class is becoming better off with opportunities for earning and saving as well as through relatives working abroad. Politics at all levels in the country seem to be compromised with infrastructural developments that ignore corruption, crime, perfunctory duties, and exploitation of the weak.

Improved transportation and communication have brought a new phase of technology and optimum facilities to make life easy. In the context of globalization, South Asia and East Asia are gaining more and more prominence in terms of growing science and technology. The arena of military inventions, trade and transport, stock market, and Indian Diaspora portend unexpected importance. In spite of religious fanatics, economic exploiters, and natural disasters, the South Asia and East Asia regions remain peace-loving regions of the globe.