

Why are Christians Persecuted in India? Roots, Reasons, Responses

by Herbert Hoefer



e reap what we sow.” (Gal. 6:7)

“I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” (Mt. 10:34)

“If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also.” (Jn 15:20)

The fierce attacks on Christians in India have been reported nationally and internationally. Both Christians and Hindus have been taken by surprise by the breadth and ferocity of these recent developments. What are the roots, reasons, and responses?

Roots

Pre-Colonial Mission Work

If one surveys Christian mission history in India, it is remarkable how little violence missionaries faced. Fierce attacks were a fact of life in most mission work around the world, from Asia to Africa. However, Christian missionaries and converts were generally absorbed into the Indian society.

(In this article I will be referring to mission experience among the 82% of the Indian population that is Hindu. Mission experience among Muslims is entirely different. The Koran explicitly mandates the death of apostates from the faith.)

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Kerala has a strong tradition that Jesus' own disciple Thomas came to India and founded their church. His place of martyrdom and grave site are still publicly identified in Chennai City, Tamil Nadu. We know for certain that there was a Christian community in Kerala, as reported by Syrian traders in the 4th century. Some theorize that these traders founded the church.

For our purposes what is noteworthy is that this Christian community thrives till today. It has been accepted as one of the castes of that region. Generally, they do not do much evangelistic activity outside their ethnic group. A reform movement, the Mar Thomites, split off in the late 19th century under the influence of Protestant missions, and they are evangelistically active.

Dr. Herbert Hoefer is a former missionary to India, having served from 1968-1983 with the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. He currently is professor of theology at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon. This article originally appeared in Missio Apostolica, November, 1999.

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For several centuries from the 8th century onwards, the Indian subcontinent was in upheaval because of the Muslim invasions. One of the cardinal principles of Islam is the removal of idols. They attacked and destroyed Hindu temples as they conquered the land. Of course, Hindu leaders fought back and eventually regained some hegemony in the land. When the British arrived and conquered in the 19th century, they dealt with both Muslim and Hindu kings.

Even during these tumultuous times, several Christian mission efforts went on peacefully. The great early missionary of the Jesuit Order, Francis Xavier, converted fishing communities all along the southwestern coast of India, and they remain as Christians to this day. Another famous Roman Catholic missionary was Roberto de Nobili, who presented himself as a Christian Brahmin in the 17th century and taught among the priestly castes around Madurai and its ancient temple. His work ran into much more opposition from rival Roman Catholic orders than from Hindu leaders.

Finally, the Protestant missions entered the India scene on the eastern coast of South India through the work of Ziegenbalg at the beginning of the 18th century. These Protestant missionaries learned the Tamil language and translated the Bible, gaining the respect of all levels of the society. William Carey's pioneering work around Calcutta in the north similarly was accepted and respected by social and political leaders. Carey's group also worked in Bible translation and education.

A common thread here absorption and accommodation. The Christian missions did not seek to change the Indian society but to add to it. Conversions were not a major issue, as the converts remained within the traditional social structures of the land. The missionaries worked

within the political and social structures, which accepted them as contributors to the general welfare of the society. Conversions did not spread across the society so as to become a threat to established structures and leaders.

Colonial Period

Just as the Hindu community resisted the conversions associated with the Muslim invasions, so resistance developed during the British colonial period: 1800–1947. Local peoples around the world resented how white missionaries came in and gained the trust of the people. Then other white people came in and exploited their trust. The expression of colonized peoples around the world was "The Bible first, then the guns."

Of course, there was high tension between the missionaries and the exploiters in all these countries. Nonetheless, missionaries also used the protection and advantages of the colonial governments to advance their activities, including their conversion activities. People converted because it was economically advantageous in the colonial empire.

Missionaries were no longer vulnerable and powerless. They were politically secure and economically powerful. Conversions increased, especially among the marginalized in the society, but so also did resentment and opposition.

Missionaries also carried an aura of cultural superiority during this era. Just because their governments were militarily superior to other nations, they viewed themselves as culturally superior. Easily, their teaching of Christianity spread into a moral critique of the local culture. In India, the major moral attack was on the caste system, particularly its hierarchical character and the practice of untouchability.

The latter issue of untouchability (outcastes) struck a nerve. The critique was

accepted by many Hindu religious and political leaders. Mahatma Gandhi is renowned for his attempt to elevate the outcastes in their own eyes and in the eyes of the society by naming them "Harijans" ("children of God").

Harijan caste leaders sprang up around the society, demanding social and religious reforms. A famous leader was B. R. Ambedkar. He decided that the Harijan community would never gain respect within the Hindu community. He debated whether to lead his mass of followers in Maharashtra State into Buddhism or into Christianity, since neither accepted caste. He eventually chose Buddhism, primarily because of its roots in Indian soil.

However, especially across southern India, masses of Harijans converted to Christianity. It was a social protest movement of liberation, which also had economic benefits within colonial India. Converts would often get educational and employment benefits from the missionaries. The missionaries also provided most welcome social services to these neglected and oppressed parts of the population, through schools and hospitals and economic uplift efforts.

Hindu reaction was a mixture of guilt and resentment. On the one hand, they could hardly defend their millennia of mistreatment and disrespect toward these citizens of their land. On the other hand, they felt they were being lured into an unwitting partnership with their country's enemies. We'll find these same mixed feelings evident in contemporary India, as a historical root of current violence against Christians.

Hindu Revival

The Christian critique of Hinduism provoked a good deal of honest soul-searching and rethinking among Hindu leaders. When India achieved Independence in 1947, the Hindu politi-

During the Independence struggles against the British, very few Christians sided wholeheartedly with their fellow countrymen. Many dalits felt quiet glee that their long term oppressors were now getting oppressed themselves.

ical leaders enacted many social reforms derived from Protestant social critiques. Entry to temples could no longer be restricted, except to non-Hindus. Untouchability was banned, as was any discrimination on the basis of caste. In keeping with traditional Hindu tolerance of religious differences, the new Constitution's approach to secularism was to encourage all religions equally. For example, even today the state governments pay the salaries of teachers in all schools, whether run by the state or by any religious group.

In addition, the government set about remedial work among the historically oppressed sections of the society. Roughly 16% of the society are outcastes. Therefore, the government reserves 16% of all seats for higher education for these applicants, as well as stipends during elementary school, free high school hostels, and scholarships. Similarly, 16% of all government jobs must be allocated to this section of society. It is a highly courageous and generous "affirmative action" program which elevates the oppressed economically—though it does little to change social attitudes, of course. Another 6% is allotted to people from tribal backgrounds, as they also are oppressed and neglected populations. Together, these populations have given themselves a new name: "dalit," a title for all the long-oppressed peoples in the country.

In 1980, this uplift program was expanded to include over 3000 low caste groups (called "backward castes"). In

total, over 50% of the population now qualifies for these government benefits to some degree or another. Of course, there has been some resentment among higher caste youths, but the program has basically remained in place.

As Hindu leaders set about cleaning house, they also rebutted the religious critiques. Hindu religious leaders like Ramakrisna and his disciples Vivekanda confronted Christianity's presumption of superiority and assertion of exclusivity. Instead, they argued the traditional Hindu concept of universal salvation: "All rivers lead to the same ocean."

These arguments found ready acceptance in the liberal philosophical climate of Europe at the beginning of this century. Max Mueller's translations and explanations of Hindu philosophy gained a large, influential following. The Western world's affirmation of basic Hindu tenets, also in the spread of Theosophy by Annie Besant and even in Christian Science by Mary Baker Eddy, strengthened Hindu leaders in their assertion of Hinduism back home as well.

The Hindu critique extended also to Christian conversion activities. If all religions are different approaches to the same Reality, then why are conversions necessary? Indeed, Hindu leaders would point out that the vast majority of conversions from Hinduism took place only among the culturally weak sections of the society. Missionary work hardly dented the castes. Caste Hindus would

attend Christian schools for the sake of the excellent education through dedicated teachers, but very few would ever convert. Instead, they would accuse missionaries of "getting their numbers" by preying on the less educated and enticing the poor with "inducements" to convert.

Furthermore, Hindu revival leaders accused Christian missionaries of converting their people to Western culture as well. Religion and culture had become so intertwined over the millennia in India that the simplest day-to-day activities could be viewed as "Hindu." The easiest solution was to instruct converts to reject all these "Hindu" activities. Women had to dress and decorate themselves differently. Converts had to give up their "Hindu" names (often the names of different gods) and take new names (usually Western or Biblical names). Hindu converts had to eat beef and Muslims pork before they would be accepted for baptism.

Especially in the North where isolated individuals converted, converts were brought to the missionary compounds for their physical and spiritual safety. There they adopted Western ways and became known disparagingly as "compound Christians." These converts were lumped together with the Anglo-Indians (converts from Indian-British marriages and relationships), as cultural victims and fools.

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countrymen. Many dalits felt quiet glee that their long term oppressors were now getting oppressed themselves. How could they “bite the hand that fed them?” Many feared for their safety once the British left the country. Their allegiance was seen to be with their missionaries and his people, rather than with their own people. To this day, that stigma remains.

We see that distrust of the Christian population yet today in the central government’s profound uneasiness over the mass conversions of tribal populations in Northeast India. This remote, vulnerable area borders China and Bangla Desh, both countries with which India has had border disputes and wars. American Baptists have publicly urged their church members to fight hard to preserve their faith and culture. But some local tribal leaders, deeply resentful and suspicious of their longtime mainland oppressors, have moved beyond that and called for outright secession.

Would Western church leaders try to persuade the US government to support such a movement? In the event of border conflicts in their area, might these Christian tribal groups move to provide a sympathetic base of operations for an invading army in hopes of gaining independence? No wonder the government tries to curtail Christian conversion activities but allows nationalist Hindu groups freely to work for reconversions.

Reasons

These historical roots shoot up stems, which bear fruit even today. Politically, socially, and religiously we still have these historical tensions. These are the reasons cited today for persecution of Christians in India.

Socio-political Movements among the Oppressed

As noted above, most mission work—both evangelistic and social service—

was done among the poor of the society. They were the ones who were responsive and in direst need. Whether they converted or not, they gained a new self-image through the proclamation of the Gospel and the critique of Hinduism. The formerly untouchables now were “harijans,” children of God.

This new self-respect resulted in social and political movements against their historic oppressors. Part of the movement was religious, as noted above. With a democratic form of government in the newly independent country, came the possibility of new political power. No longer would the oppressed quietly accept that they deserved their plight because of bad karma in previous reincarnations. The mission work had sown seeds of social revolution. Those in economic power in the land had reasons to oppose the spread of this “dangerous” thinking.

With political elections conversions were no longer just a religious matter. Conversions changed constituencies. A convert from Hinduism would be far less likely to accept his previous Hindu political leaders. Politicians do not want changes in the constituency which elected them. They had political reasons—though couched in religious terms—for inhibiting conversions as much as possible.

People with new self-dignity and new urgency for social justice organized themselves politically. One can note that the areas of the country with the longest history of Christian presence (Bengal and Kerala) are the ones with the strongest Communist influence. The Christian Gospel gave the new sense of dignity and urgency, and the Communist Party enabled those aspirations to be realized politically.

Similarly, dalit movements, primarily in the South—where Christian influence once again is the greatest—have man-

aged to elect dalit-dominated state governments. In these states of strongest Christian influence, there is little expectation that the Hindu-dominated, traditional parties will gain hegemony in the foreseeable future. These socio-political effects of Christianity are not unnoticed by threatened political powers in the land.

One current counter-reaction by Hindu landlords, especially in the North, has been to forcibly put down dalit socio-political movements. They have organized their own armies like Middle Age feudal lords in Europe. If any dalit leader or group rises up to assert their rights, these armies attack some remote dalit village away from government scrutiny or police intervention. Dozens of men, women, and children are indiscriminately killed, simply as a means of intimidation. Of course, the dalits claim that the government does nothing to protect them because they are controlled by these same Hindu landlords.

As we will see, Christians are known to be peaceful and non-violent. However, the spread of Christian teachings and critiques does have revolutionary socio-political ramifications. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when He said, as noted at the start of the article: “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” These broader effects are very difficult to control and direct. One can understand why those in power would want to stop Christianity’s spread.

Religious Movements among Caste Hindus

Of more significance evangelistically, are the anti-church religious movements among two-thirds of India in the Hindu caste system. I have intentionally used the term “anti-church,” as these pious religious seekers make a clear distinction between Christ and the church. As described above, the church is seen to be a product of the colonial period with all

the despised vestiges of Western culture and influence.

One of my major research efforts while at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, was among what I termed “non-baptized believers in Christ” (published as “Churchless Christianity,” 1991). I interviewed 83 NBBCs around Tamil Nadu, and we did a random sample statistical survey of Chennai City. We found about 200,000 people (mostly caste Hindus) in the city whom we identified as NBBCs. I would refer you to the book for details of this research.

At this point, I want to highlight how these people intentionally desire to keep themselves separate from the organizational church. They want to identify with their families and their culture. As long as this cultural commitment is clear, there are accepted within their families and castes. If they would take baptism, however, they would most likely be excluded.

I was back in India for two months earlier this year, and I had the opportunity to meet with a group that is working now with such NBBCs. These people call themselves “Jesu bhaktas,” devotees of Jesus. Within Hinduism, one is free to choose the god one wishes to worship, so such Jesu bhaktas are simply accepted as such devotees. One will even find pictures of Jesus in Hindu ashrams and temples, especially those associated with the Ramakrishnan movement. Of course, from the Christian standpoint, we would have questions about such religious syncretism; however, we do need

to recognize a very significant “Hindu” pattern of turning to Christ.

This Hindu pattern also involves a very strong rejection of the church (therefore, the rejection of Baptism). I hope to publish my several experiences in this matter from this last visit to India, but let me share a couple of items from the one group discussion. An itinerant Jesu bhakta who shared the three principles he advocates as he meets his fellow

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believers around the country:

- 1) If anybody asks, tell them you’re a Hindu (understood culturally in this case).
- 2) Never go to a church (they will come after you right to your home, embarrassing you and your family).
- 3) Do not go into full-time religious work (stay within one’s family and carry out one’s social responsibilities as a witness there).

Furthermore, the group listed 20 specific reasons why caste Hindus feel uncomfortable with church life and want to stay away from it.

The point for our purposes here is that Christianity in India is popularly viewed as repugnant to Indian culture. Baptism is viewed as an allegiance to a group and an organization allied with the West. The vast majority of India lauds spiritual training and social work, but conversions are opposed. The roots of these

attitudes and the reasons for the present persecution of evangelists are clear.

Hindu Nationalist Movements

Such deep feelings will also produce political expressions. Just as the historic grievances and religious tensions in Northern Ireland have spawned the IRA in Irish Roman Catholicism, so has the religious history of India. For more than a millennium—ever

since the Muslim invasions—the vast Hindu population of India has been fighting to maintain their culture.

The Hindu attitude is one of tolerance and non-violence, rooted firmly in their basic doctrines. However, they have had to fight fire with fire, against often overwhelming military powers. Therefore, the militant nationalist groups of today are directly linked historically with the guerilla heroes of India’s past.

These groups were the ones who worked the streets on behalf of the Hindu nationalist political party, the BJP, which currently heads the coalition national government in Delhi. They have protectors in high places, also at the state government level. They are generally identified as the perpetrators of the church burnings, attacks on seminarians and nuns, murder of missionaries (until recently only Indian missionaries), harassing of evangelists, opposition to church constructions, etc.

These violent activities are justified by their leaders as necessary to stem the tide of conversions in the country. They publicly warn that soon most of India will be Christian and the great Indian civilization will be lost. Such warnings

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strike a tender spot in Hindu thinking, as one can imagine from the history recounted above. As much as Hindus are repulsed by the violence, they also are sympathetic to the goals and fears these groups express.

In addition, this Hindu nationalist thinking has been expressed in official government policy ever since Independence. No new foreign missionaries were to be allowed into the country, especially for evangelistic work. Government benefits made available to the dalits were denied to Christian dalits (on the basis that they do not observe caste; therefore, cannot be listed as one of these favored castes). Nationalist groups use these government inducements to promote reconversions to Hinduism. Informally, at the village level, Hindu landlords treat Christian field laborers as “the last hired and first fired.”

Political commentators have observed that the upswing in violence against Christians has coincided with the ascendancy of the BJP also for international strategic reasons. One of the first actions of the militant Hindu groups after the BJP’s election success was an attack on Muslims. They dismantled a mosque built centuries ago by Muslim conquerors at Ayyodhya, then the site of a Hindu temple commemorating the birthplace of the god Ram. Muslims around the country rioted, and the international Islam community (with all their oil power) rose in protest. The BJP soon experienced national and international repercussions that jeopardized the whole Indian economy—and their fragile hold on power.

Soon after that the militants turned their attention on the Christian community as the archenemy of Indian culture. In an excellent article on these developments in “The Christian Science Monitor” newspaper of Oct. 5,

1998, a Christian leader in Gujarat (a state where churches were burned and Christian workers attacked) is quoted: “They are going after us because we are an easy target and unlike Muslims we don’t riot.”

Western countries also do not band together to protect fellow believers abroad, as Muslim countries do. Such nationalist movements must have an enemy to fight. “The heat is off the Muslims; it is now on the Christians,” states a scholar from the Jawarharlal Nehru University in the article.

Responses

At the beginning of the article, I quoted three Bible passages. The passage from Galatians 6 is intended to summarize how the mistakes of the past, primarily by foreign missionaries, have reaped serious consequences for the life and witness of Christians in India today. The above historical summary has illustrated how past roots have reaped current reasons.

What is remarkable, however, is how Indian Christians have risen above the consequences of the past. Already at Independence, Christian leaders refused to press for a reserved minority representation in the central parliament, as the Muslims had insisted on. Those Christian leaders admirably and courageously committed the small Christian community (2%) into the hands of the nation. They wanted to disassociate Indian Christianity from the colonial past and identify themselves wholeheartedly with the national cause.

Opportunity for Self-Reflection

Similarly, these recent attacks have caused some soul-searching among Christian church leaders. The accusation of disloyalty to the nation has deep historical roots, as we have seen. During my recent visit, I heard leaders question why we don’t play the national anthem at church gatherings,

for example. Do we promote patriotism in our schools and congregations?

There also was self-critique concerning some missionaries’ evangelistic techniques. The criticism I heard was directed primarily at the independent Pentecostal Indian missionaries, who often have very little formal education. Their public sermons can be harshly critical—often quite ignorantly—concerning Hindu religious practices.

We are not called to ridicule others, but to proclaim the Gospel. Ridicule can only build up defenses against the message. Ignorant and offensive ridicule deserves to be resented and opposed. Jesus said we are blessed when we are persecuted and maligned when it is “because of Me,” not when it is because of our arrogance and belligerence. (Mt. 5:11)

I also found a far greater respect for the non-baptized believers in the country. When I first researched and advocated a sympathetic relationship with them, I experienced strong opposition in Christian circles. Now I found the most sympathetic were the Indian missionary organizations. They have accepted that Western church structures are alien to traditional Indian culture. They are looking for a positive proclamation of the Gospel, which enables people to follow Jesus while affirming their cultural heritage.

Opportunity for Witness

These developments have thrown the national spotlight on the Christian community. They welcome this. They agree that no one should be induced or forced to convert, and they welcome that such alleged abuses be investigated. They argue that none can be found.

Indeed, throughout the past decades when the inducement is rather against converting—and for reconvert—Harijans still join the Christian community and very few ever have reconverted. The Hindu community realizes the eco-

nomic sacrifices the Indian Christians make for the sake of their faith, for higher education and government jobs are the one clear way out of overwhelming poverty for a Harijan family. The Christian Harijans' religious loyalty draws clear attention to the meaning and strength they receive, and Hindus are strongly drawn to authentic spiritual experience.

Similarly, I was discussing with a Christian leader who had gone to Gujarat on behalf of the National Council of Churches of India to show solidarity with them and to pressure the state government leaders to give them protection. He said the Christians' adamancy and resilience were remarkable. They are simple tribal people, but their faith is an inspiration to all: "God is with us; what can man do to us?"

During the time I was in India, the tragic attack on the Australian missionary, his two sons, and companions took place. In fact, I was in a meeting with Indian Christian leaders of the organization Graham Staines served. When the news of the murders came, I was first of all struck at how matter-of-factly it was announced. Such attacks, especially on missionaries in the north of India, had become commonplace. Many of their Indian missionaries had been attacked and some killed; now it was a foreigner. I was reminded of Jesus' warning to His first disciples, as I cited at the start of the article: "As they persecuted Me."

I was also reminded of the early church's response to the attacks of the Jews as recorded in Acts 4. The leaders here also did not pray for protection or escape. They knew that persecution was inevitable in mission work. I've recounted above how even political movements and repercussions are an inevitable response to the new self-dignity which the Gospel brings. Instead, like the early

Christians, they prayed: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." (Acts 4:29)

That prayer was answered remarkably in the public witness of Mrs. Gladys Staines. Newspapers across India reported her answer to reporters when they phoned her at home the very day she heard the news. She witnessed that Jesus taught us to forgive our enemies and to pray for those who persecute you. She also thanked God for the many years her husband had been granted to serve the needy in the land.

As mentioned before, Hindus resonate wholeheartedly to deep spirituality, and they immediately acknowledged Ms. Staines as "a realized soul." "She is an example of divinity in a human being," wrote one Mr. Hanumantha Rao in a letter to the editor printed in "The Hindu" daily newspaper of 28th January 1999. The spotlight of the nation was on her, and the Holy Spirit used her to proclaim the Good News clearly and powerfully. To the great credit of India's Hindu population, their leading religious spokespersons immediately praised the Christian and condemned their own misguided Hindu thugs.

These events also raised to national attention Christian work on behalf of the poor and needy around the country. Once again, Hindu religious writers came to the defense of the Christian workers and their converts. One should not be surprised, said editorialists, that people who have been oppressed by Hinduism for millennia should convert to the religion of those who serve them so devotedly. For example, Mr. Dhiraj Kumar wrote in his letter to the editor in the "India Today" magazine (February 22, 1999) the following call to fellow Hindus to introspect rather than attack:

"Those who feel threatened by mass conversion should ask what they have done for the tribals and downtrodden other than exploiting them and denigrating them as untouchables. At least in the name of religion the missionaries have provided such people with opportunities for education and health care. The solution for saving Hinduism lies in retrospection and not in employing violence."

Christians have bonded together in response to their hostile environment. However, they have gathered to pray and march in silence, rather than to riot or retaliate. They have carried the Gandhian mantle in this situation, to the admiration of the Hindu population. Ironically, in the name of protecting and preserving Hinduism, the descendants of those Hindu nationalists who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi continue to desecrate their own heritage, while Christians enact it.

We pray that through all of this God's Spirit can bring a new reputation for the Indian Christians in the land. We pray they can be accepted and respected as the pre-colonial Christians were because of their vulnerability, sincerity, and spirituality. As in the original Jerusalem congregation, they will be seen "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people, and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47) **IJFM**