

A Message to the West: India Needs You

by Satya Shodhak

Satya Shodhak is a Christian activist in central India. He began working with farmers through social and political activism in the 1980's, and has spent time in jail on several occasions for their rights. He moved into church planting work in the early 90's for which he was imprisoned twice. This movement has created great momentum among dalits and lower caste in central India and has resulted in hundreds of thriving churches. Satya envisions India to be on the verge of a mass conversion to Christianity, and wants to mobilize churches in the West to become involved.

While the message of the cross and redemption through Jesus was most likely first received in India by the high caste Brahmin (in the state of Kerala),¹ they mostly kept it to themselves. Not until the 14th century, when Catholic missionaries came to this coastland area, did the message of the Gospel begin to travel to the fishermen and the lowest of the lower caste and to the untouchables.

Many on the coastland received these white missionaries with great awe, but the high castes viewed them with suspicion as 'agents' of some foreign 'system.' In time the Western effort moved inland and was joined by Protestant forces who also attempted to interact with the high castes. Dr. Shillander (one of the great missionaries of the past century) has well said that when the Gospel first arrived in India, the initial response of these high caste was to refute the message, saying, "It's not true!"²

Still people continued to convert, so the Brahmin changed their response. Instead of saying, "It's not true," they began to say, "It's not new!" To support this they pointed to their own great saints and literature, re-writing and interpreting their scripture to respond to the Christian Gospel. They generalized and glorified their own religious history, trying to steer the receptive people away from Christ.

Despite this opposition, Western missionaries continued to make progress, the Gospel having its greatest influence over the lowest of the lower castes. In response, the Brahmin's third and final attack was, "It's not you!" "Your Christ is good and easily accepted," they said, "but the followers of Christ are nothing but hypocrites, so we reject Christianity totally."

As people continued to convert, Brahminical attacks became stronger and more strategized. They began to divert people's attention away from the enemy of Brahmanism (Christianity) in order to focus on the evil of Western rule. To this end, they portrayed the nation as "Bharatmaata" (goddess mother of India) and the Indian culture (popular lower caste culture) as a religion.

Historically, it can be seen that man is always looking for a better system, but God continues to bring people to Himself. Throughout nations and cultures, people feel more comfortable and secure following a system of beliefs, but God wants people to be drawn to Him, not to a system.

In time Ghandi became the sure “saviour” of the nation. The lower caste were always shackled by their color, language, and work. Because they were not of the ruling caste, their “Dharma” (obligation) was to serve the “head” (which is Brahmanism). This they accepted as a reality because it was in accord with the Sanskrit, the scripture of the Brahmins. Thus for these low caste, real freedom, which was social justice for all, remained in the background.

Prior to the British Raj, the “Peshwas” (Brahmins) ruled, through religious control, in much of India. After the British became established, these Peshwas began to unsettle the British Raj by sowing hatred against the culture, law, and Christian religion of the British. Finally, when British rule failed, the Brahmins were able to get back in power in the name of Hindu.

Currently, the government in power in India is doing everything possible to make “conversion” illegal. This is in essence an attack on the freedom of choice guaranteed by India’s constitution, and upon which the constitution is based. This government is attempting to rewrite the constitution to advance its own agenda. Recently, to consolidate the Hindu vote, the government launched a hate campaign against Christian missionaries, Christian institutions and anything to do with Christ. These Hindutwa forces, mostly run by Brahmins, represent a very small segment of the Indian population.

In response, a small portion of the Indian church is trying to defend

the cause of Christ in India against the accusations and ploys of the Brahminical forces. The attacks are many. One of the most recent is the move to force the Indian church to sever all ties with the Western church. They want to segregate the church from the West and weaken her to the point that she has no voice.

Over the years, Brahmins have created many “church-like” organizations to address peoples’ spiritual and physical hunger, while remaining loyal to Brahminical Hinduism. With few exceptions, almost everything done in the name of Hinduism is written in Sanskrit, which is the spiritual language of Brahmins. Very little has been written in Pali, Tamil, Marathi, Gurumukhi and others. The Sanskrit language was created by the Brahmins. Through the years, this small percentage of India’s culture has been able to convince the world that India is a Brahminical Hindu nation.

In spite of the mistakes of missionaries and the Indian Church, Christ still remains attractive to many and continues to pose many challenges to the existing religious system. One great social reformer who understood Brahmanism for what it was and spoke reverently of Christ and his teachings was Mahatma Phuley. He prophetically stated that if the evil discriminative scriptures (speaking of scriptures used to subjugate the low and no castes) are not destroyed by the Brahmins, someone else will rise up and burn them. This came to pass on December 25, 1940 when Dr. B. R. Ambedkar publicly burned the Brahmin scriptures. He chose the birthday of Christ to point people to the true liberator and proclaimed freedom from religious slavery for the untouchables. Because of this historical association with Christmas, the untouchables and Shudras now look to Jesus Christ with respect and hope.

Service to lepers and people affected by other fatal diseases has been the hallmark of Christ’s love in India. Although no one can speak against this service, Brahmins have tried to undermine Christian involvement by giving glory to Gandhi through observing his death anniversary as a day to honor leprosy service in India. The work of Mother Theresa, however, has presented the biggest challenge to those who are trying to defend the Brahminical Hindu faith. No one dare challenge the love and power of Christ that flows from the example of her life and service to India.

How Can the Western Church Help Effect Change?

India is looking toward the West for resources. The free market economy has opened India’s doors for money to come in, but the lower castes are being adversely affected by these changes. Their hopes for employment decrease as Westerners enter the country. One of the prevailing thoughts among western Christian leaders is that India should be moving toward financial independence. This thought has no Biblical basis. Indeed, I believe that one of the biggest ways the West can help is through their abundant resources.

Another way the West can help is by sending many more Western missionaries. The church within India has been long divided by caste, color, geographical location, language barriers, and culture issues within the country. Our nation needs to see the global church come together in spite of all their differences and model unity within the body of Christ. We need to see others working without discrimination. If the Western church ministers in India, we see that it is possible to share the love of Christ without moving in the discrimination and prejudice that has held us captive for so long.

Due to the caste system in India which has been in place for centuries and largely based on color, Indians respect light skin. Although this has been a stumbling block to the spread of the Gospel, the body of Christ can turn it into a stepping stone. The Indian church has not been able to break through caste barriers to minister to those of the upper caste, but Westerners may have a much better opportunity to gain the respect of upper caste people simply because of their color. Any Indian would listen to someone who came all the way from a Western country to share something with him.

The organized Indian church has many problems, and has lost its hunger of earlier years. However, there is a movement outside the church consisting of various mission and para-church organizations created to help fill in the gap. The Western church could help assist in prayer for revival, as well as bridge the gap between the existing church and the para-church organizations.

There is a philosophy spreading through the church that Westerners should not come, but just send their money. Statistically speaking, their resources could go so much further and their presence would simply be a distraction anyway. *This thought could not be farther from the truth.* More recent policy based on this idea has created a major hindrance to the spread of the Gospel in India. Indians are very attracted to the idea of belonging to something that is global. Christianity connects Indian Christians by family to people from all over the world. Meeting together with brothers and sisters from the West is essential to the missions movement in India.

The proper use of wealth can help. Wealth attracts those who are poor. I have never met a person who initially came to Christ with entirely pure motives. We come with our needs.

There are some in the body of Christ today who view many third-world converts as “rice Christians” (in other words converting on the basis of what they will receive), while the rich and healthy who convert are “genuine believers.” This idea dishonors God. We are not here to judge the motives of anyone who says they desire a life with Christ. We are called to give and serve those who are in need.

E. Stanley Jones, in his book *Songs of Ascents*, describes three basic human needs: the need to belong; the need for significance; and the need for reasonable security. “These needs” writes Jones, “were created in us by a God who loves us and wants them met. Christianity in Christ provides all needs through the body of believers. Human need has always been the open door for the Gospel – just serve the need.” (p. 302)

Below are two true stories which exemplify how the Lord is using Westerners in a powerful way to bring Indians into the kingdom. I’m sure the stories are countless, but these particular two happened to me.

While traveling to a village in Maharashtra, I approached an old and tired looking woman. I looked into her eyes and spoke, “You remind me of my grandmother. What is your name?” “Mang,” she replied. “No, I didn’t ask you the name of your caste, I asked your name. The God I worship has no caste,” I said. She grabbed my arm excitedly and said, “Which God do you worship?” Eagerly I replied, “I worship Jesus Christ.” She said, “I do too! When I was a little girl nearly 60 years ago, two white single missionary ladies came to our village. They told stories about Jesus and taught the children a song. I asked Jesus in my heart that day and memorized that song, and from that day to this you are the first Christian I have met.” I had tears in my eyes as I

listened to her speak. She continued, “I have been a village midwife, and in all these years, not one baby has died. Even if women had a doctor, they always wanted me to be with them. They thought I had some kind of black magic, but I knew the doctor was inside me—Jesus living in my heart. Now you are here to share the joy.” Her name was Banabai, and she became a dear and honored friend. The Holy Spirit was her teacher all her life. She didn’t need our mission strategies or church doctrines. She had Jesus, and he met her needs.

The second story happened while I was working among the Jaat community near Delhi. I met a hungry and disillusioned man while standing in a line in New Delhi. He was an educated man, but had faced a life of much sadness. He had heard the Gospel before, and now hungered to speak with someone who walked with Jesus. We ended up talking throughout the night, and he accepted Christ. However, his family had little interest in the Gospel because they associated Christianity as a religion for the poor and untouchables. Then some of our Western friends helped our witness with my friend’s family. And when Jesus invaded the life of this family through our Western brothers and sisters, they became followers of Jesus. In time, they also realized the futility of their beliefs held so strongly in regard to the caste system and accepted their lower caste brothers and sisters as well. His grace is sufficient!

Hindus can remain culturally Hindus by following Christ, but cannot afford to observe untouchability, which is a sin against God and a crime against the Indian constitution. No one will freely admit the truth that casteism remains an issue in India among Christians and non-Christians alike. However, especially with regard to eating and marrying, the divisions remain. There is a

need to address this issue on an international platform.

I feel that India needs all ethnic groups from all over the world to share the Gospel. The foundation has been laid, the bridges have been prepared by the Lord throughout history. The seeds have been sown, and we need labourers from everywhere to serve the neglected and lost sheep without a Shepherd. Nearly half of India is ready and waiting to receive the King of Kings.

Potential Dangers

As always, there are potential dangers

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and caution is needed if the Western Church is to help India. For example, it would be a hindrance to enter into India without an understanding of the many cultural issues we face. I am not saying we need to be scholars of the popular culture, but sensitive that Christianity will look very different in India than in the West and it is our love for Christ rather than the organization of 'the church' that will hold us together.

It is not helpful to come to serve in India if one thinks that all the answers come from the West. Trying to organize religion or legislate morality will not be helpful, but service and love through the power of Christ should be the banner of the West. Jesus Christ is not *A* church but *THE* church, and that truth needs to be conveyed. The beauty of the church is the privilege of being a world Christian, not a nationalist Christian. Our calling should be to embrace our

differences while working together with love and respect for each other.

People don't have to be addicted to drugs or have AIDS to listen to the Gospel. The Dalit and lower caste movement of today is the outcome of missionary work among the poorest of the poor through education and hope. Millions of lower-caste Indians and Dalits are crying for freedom and dignity. There are multiple movements going on in India because the needs are so overwhelming. The Lord Almighty heard the cry of His people in slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:23). God is asking the church today to be

Moses for the people of India. His body can help rescue the lower-caste Indians from the bondage of Brahmanism which has held them for so long.

The history of India is filled with conversion from Hinduism. As early as 500 BC, a lower caste tribal leader, Sidartha Gautam (known to the world as Buddha), left his throne to serve the people and seek the truth so he could respond to the spiritual need to those he served. Around 321 BC, Chandra Gupta Maurya (who was from a lower-caste tribe) could not be satisfied with Brahminical Hinduism. He became a Jaina monk, and asked people to follow a moral code of conduct. After his death his grandson, Emperor Ashoka, came into power and strongly believed in one God. He embraced the Buddhist code of conduct, and expressed his loyalty by giving all of his wealth to further spread the message of Buddha. Then came the Sufi saints who spread the

belief of one God and equality for humanity. From this movement came Islam, Christianity, and Sikhs—all recognizing the need and great hunger for one God.

There is only one response needed to meet the heart cry of the Indian people. It is seen in the example our Saviour gave in the midst of his betrayal. He took a towel and basin and washed the dirty feet of his disciples. Love and service has always been the key to Christ. Jesus has empowered us to respond through the power of His Holy Spirit to let the peoples of India also see His love and glory where they will find true peace and joy, and where they will finally end the Indian search of the centuries. **IJFM**

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