

Indian Religions: Challenge and Outreach Models

Revelation 7:9-10: After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

India is the land of spirituality and philosophy. It is considered to be the birthplace of many religions. Indian religion is varied in approach and different in meaning. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism have their birth place in the Indian subcontinent.

Religion adds meaning and purpose to the lives of the Indian people. It is actually the practice of each religion in India that enhances the beliefs of a direct communication with God. That belief is in one or more deities. It is incorporated with rituals, ceremonies, ethical guidelines and life philosophies. Indian people are more conscious today than ever before of the need of keeping their traditions and customs handy so the future generations would not lose their religious heritage.

The history of religion in India today has taken various shapes & turns. Some of those shapes & turns have been due to the media hype, political propaganda to get mileage and a new sense of revival to religious identity. These changes have created a new sense of adaptability, ownership, fundamentalism, fanaticism, extremism and passion. Moreover these shapes and turns have given birth to numerous special religious movements in the country. Religion mixed with post modernism has extended space for newer forms of religiosity. Hence we witness various new forms and mixture of religion in India today.

Though religious pluralism is a daily affair of life yet it is to be noted that this pluralism influences & affects the human mind, religiosity, daily lifestyle and even personality. Our people suppress their real deepest spiritual needs under the complexity of their lifestyle, philosophic views and scientific post-modern concepts.

I saw a young administrator at the school. He was wearing an attractive sport coat, dress shirt and necktie – and faded blue jeans and athletic shoes! My first reaction was, "The bottom half of him does not fit with the top half!" This gave me a realization that I had a reaction based on the idea that there should be consistency in one's dress, as well as in one's thoughts. This is so true yet so complex in the daily life of our people today.

To our people several religious aspects are nonnegotiable. They all admit their religion is 'Sanatan' (Eternal or Universal) and it is Universal though the practice of religion differs from one to another. They are all not the same. It is wrong to say that their religion does not meet their inner needs. It may not meet all their needs but it does meet some needs.

Though it is complex in all its forms & formulas, yet let me draw up a definition which would help us to have some kind of understanding of the person inside. With all its complexity, I believe the person inside the personality is one who needs the Gospel. The Gospel transforms the person inside out.

Indian Religion is a coherent system of beliefs and practices based on a supernatural beings, forces, places or entities, resulting in behavior and welfare varying from different degrees and is reflected in private & public lives.

Let me pull out three thoughts in the context of this definition;

A. Beliefs and Practices: Indian religion & religiosity is known by the people's beliefs & practices. Sometimes beliefs direct their practices yet some other time practices reveal what they believe.

- Philosophic Beliefs and Practices – They can philosophise anything & everything like the Existence of God, Sin, Salvation, etc.
- Religious Beliefs and Practices – They can follow every ritual very promptly. It is indeed because of a sense of fear.
- Popular Beliefs and Practices – They are open to new ideas. They love to taste, learn and experience the new.
- Mystic Beliefs and Practices – They follow after the millions of GURUs for mystical experience. To them 'GU' is darkness and 'RU' is the light. They believe that their GURUs will bring them from darkness to light.
- Secular Beliefs and Practices – They believe that their religiosity will not bring food to their tables. Hence they are ready to practice a double-standard lifestyle. When it is required, we shall call our deities for help. Some of them practice communism and religion at the same time.
- Sectarian Beliefs and Practices – In each of the Indian religions, there are countless numbers of sects. These sects are so dissimilar to the others in the same religion. Hence their beliefs & practices create conflicts and these conflicts make them sectarian.
- Animistic Beliefs and Practices – These are the ones who believe that their deities are super-sensuous but can be represented in matter. Hence their deities can exercise control over the natural world, human welfare and human destiny.

B. Syncretistic Disposition: Indian religion would not be complete without a syncretistic component. Hindus have hundreds of superstitions. Jain will not kill a mosquito because a deity may be present inside. In all the Indian religions there are myths which seek to explain strange phenomena.

For example, Hindus have ten mythological avatars (incarnations). They are Matsya or Fish Avatar, Kurma or Tortoise, Varaha or Wild Boar, Narasimha or Half Lion - Half Man, Vamana, the Dwarf like Man, Parasurama, Sri Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki.

A more saddening aspect is that these lead our people to more deceptions and bondages. Therefore the Indian 'Rishi' (Seer) had 3 prayers.

1st Prayer is for TRUTH - "asato ma satgamaya" - From unreal, lead me to the truth.

2nd Prayer is for LIGHT - "tamasoma Jyotirgamaya" - From darkness, lead me to the light.

3rd Prayer is for IMMORTALITY - "mrtyorma amrtamgamaya" - From death, lead me to immortality.

C. The Unfinished Task: We would have finished the task of disciplining our nation had we been a little more creative. However the mission is still POSSIBLE. There are several factors to the unfinished task that can be finish-able.

- Inadequate Understanding of who a Hind or Sikh or Jain or Buddhist is. Just to say that the person is a Hindu or Sikh or Jain or Buddhist means nothing today irrespective of religious lifestyle. Indian religiosity can be multi-dimensional. A person's inner man does not depend on the religious outward identity. However some of these would help us to discover who the person is in the inside. Some of those dimensions are: Ritualistic, Experimental, Doctrinal, Ethical, Social & Institutional, Material and Mythical.

- Inadequate Strategies in reaching the religious people of India. We Indians love short-cuts. We love to follow the old missional modus operandi like 'Reach the reachable' or 'Win the winnable.' We are still comfortable with the old methods or approaches taught to us hundreds of years ago. Our pre-made notion is that everyone is a sinner going to hell. Therefore we just have to attack the people with the sin approach. Without any understanding of the Task Field or the challenges ahead, we move in to evangelize & disciple our nation.
- Inadequate Outlook in the area of the gigantic tasks of bringing 1.2 billion Indians to the saving knowledge of Christ and discipling them to be a follower & a witness. We do win souls but fail to make them soul-winners. Our church planting movements have become 'miles wide but inches deep'. Many have succeeded greatly because they have followed properly the SATURATION PRAYER BEFORE VENTURING OUT (Matthew 12:29, Mark 3:27); PEOPLE RESEARCH TO IDENTIFY THE DEEPEST SPIRITUAL NEEDS & WORLD VIEWS (Acts 17:17-21), INDIGENOUS APPROACHES (Acts 17:22-28) and a TRAINED & FOCUSED TASK FORCE TO REAP THE HARVEST.
- Inadequate Mindset is another area where we need to correct ourselves. It seems we are always in a hurry, we want results, we want to please our donors and our minds are not occupied with long & lasting results. The less important take the most important roles in our mission endeavors. We need to have a shift from the old paradigm to the new.
 - From building walls to building bridges! (Matthew 5:13-14).
 - From measuring accomplishments to measuring impacts. (Matthew 13:33).
 - From encouraging the new converts to live for Jesus to equipping them to win at least 5 people each year! (Ephesians 4:11-12)
 - From "serve us" to service—from inward to outward focus. (Mark 10:45).
 - From duplication of ministries to partnering with other ministries in the accomplishment of the Great Commission! (Ecclesiastes 4:9).
 - From just fellowship to functional unity!
 - From condemning the work or a worker or non-responsible people to blessing them and praying for it.
 - From being a minister in a congregation to being a minister in the marketplace! (Lk 19:41).

We need to be a 'Tilting Glass' in order to disciple the 1.2 Billion Indians. When our life is poured out and the more it is poured out, the less will be beneath us. Tokyo 2010 is the time, the glass is ready to turn & fall to the ground. May we become that tilting glass in our nation! This is because the Gospel has the capacity to impact our nation. I call this 'Mosquito Bite Effect.' Each of us is to be one mosquito.

Powerful Models: The interesting aspect of these models is that all of these begin with sharing of the Gospel and end with discipleship that leads to multiplication.

- One on One model – It is necessarily effective because of the personal touch aspect. This is simple and every Great Commission Christian must be involved in it.
- Marketplace model – This is to witness in our workplace. It is believed today in India that every Christian is a missionary in their workplace, society and family. Hence more & more are getting involved in sharing of the Gospel and bringing colleagues, neighbors, friends and family to the saving knowledge of Christ.
- Friendship model – This model is powerful in the urban areas. In this a Christian starts friendship with a specific person, sincerely maintains the friendship and does everything possible to show the Agape love which is completely foreign to the other person. Many Christian families organize special parties (like birthday, wedding anniversary, Easter, Christmas etc.) and consciously invite non-Christian families to their homes for the occasion in order to share their faith in a meaningful way.

- Literature model – India is no longer illiterate today. We are the largest English speaking nation. More people are educated today than ever before. The love for literature was there before and is still growing. Evangelism through literature has not lost its hold. Appropriate Gospel books, journals, tracts and literature have been effective. More & more writers & producers are bringing out need-based literature. Such literature which is focused to be thought provoking, convicting to the soul and enlightening to the mind & heart, is being produced & distributed in India daily.
- Orality model – This is used to help people who are physically challenged. Special Braille literature for the blind, evangelism through dance & drama, JESUS film and gospel CDs & cassettes have been very effective in reaching the 23 million people.
- Apologetics model – Our Christians are getting better in learning apologetics and confronting people of other faiths. Through various training, we have learned to win the hearts of people through giving them a proper understanding of life, sin, faith and salvation.
- Creative model – More and more creative models are being discovered by our people today. However these creative methods are applicable to certain groups of people and could not be copied to reach out to others. They are, such as, reaching out to the Call Center Employees, IT professionals, Indian Elites, etc.
- Small Group model – Due to growing opposition to the Gospel, reaching out to the masses effectively through the crusade model is almost fading away. Our people are now focusing on smaller groups where they can reach to the hearts of the people directly.
- Socio-cultural model – This model is used differently from place to place, region to region and culture to culture. For example, in some of the areas in northern India where Bhajans are the attraction, the Gospel is presented through Bhajans. Another interesting model is called 'Langer' in Punjab where people are invited to a simple meal. After the meal they anticipate a meeting where something new would be told to them.
- Holistic model – India is getting tighter due to opposition, militancy and persecution. Our people are using holistic care methods more. The Gospel is being shared through medical aid, educational assistance, self-help projects and emergency reliefs.

Conclusion:

From Kashmir on the north, Gujarat on the West, Arunachal Pradesh in the East and Kanyakumari, Lakshadweep & Andaman Nicobar Island in the south, Indian mission history is unique. The Edinburgh 1910 movement took shape in a huge way only after Indian Independence. However the last 64 years, the Indian missionaries have experienced different forms of change. There were many new initiatives formed. The results were witnessed in the multiplication of disciples, churches, missions & missionary movements. The growth of Christianity (unofficially is up to 6%) is derived because of the following:

1. Indigenous approaches & strategies based on people's research.
2. More Christians are witnessing today than ever before. It is due to constant motivational initiatives like Marketplace mission, Tent-making mission, etc.
3. Greater desire for relationship & networking.
4. Stronger opposition and threats by the anti-Christian elements.
5. Emergence of non-formal missionary training that focuses on the effectiveness & creative approaches.
6. Birthing of many new missions, missionary churches and mission movements.
7. More cross sections of people are being reached like the middle class, influencers of the country/state/city, film industry, politicians, many hidden groups of people in the country like eunuchs, disabled and prostitutes.

8. Intensive prayer movements that have changed history in different parts.

Hence the best is yet to come! The vision of John will be fulfilled. A billion Indians will be found before the throne. The spirit & movement of Edinburgh 1910 will come to pass. Now let us rejoice in the work of the Lord. As we celebrate the Edinburgh 1910 movement, let us recapture the spirit of Edinburg and together disciple the nations in our generation.