The Big Business of Evangelizing
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Christians Spend U.S. $165 Million Every Year to Convert India's Hindus

"One hundred thousand children die every month in India! We must rescue them. There are thousands sleeping in the streets in total destitution," exhorts Spiros Zodhiates to the American donors of his Christian missionary organization. Advancing the Ministries of the Gospel. And rescue them he does, taking in thousands of Hindu orphans and placing them with Christian foster parents or in Christian orphanages, Hindu faith, nearly all will become Christians. It's an example of what Dr. S.M. Ponniah, Advisor to the Malaysia Hindu Sangam, meant when he acidly noted, "Christian missionaries pray on their knees on Sunday and prey on Hindus the rest of the week."

One billion US dollars, that's how much American Protestant Christian organizations spent last year trying to gain converts from other religions, and the Catholics spent an equal amount. According to official Indian government reports US $165 million is sent to Christian missions in India each year. The bewildering variety of programs it goes to include preaching, relief work, orphanages, leper colonies, foster homes, radio shows, literature distribution, Bible translation, rallies, medical work and more.

HINDUISM TODAY has conducted years of research on the missionary organizations based in America. These US organizations account for 80% of all money raised worldwide for missions. In this report we'll summarize that research, explaining: 1) the various approaches to missions; 2) the methods of fund-raising and the programs supported in India; 3) the theology behind the missions; 4) the degree of success; 5) the problems caused for Hindu society; and 6) the rethinking of proselytization ethics now occurring among the western religions.

Conservative vs. Liberal Missionaries

Not all Christians think alike about missions. In particular, there is a wide range of opinion on two subjects: how aggressive should an evangelist be, and what is the place of social service in a missionary program? To better understand this range, HINDUISM TODAY interviewed Dr. Dean Gillilant, Professor of Contextual Theology at California's Fuller Theological Seminary.

Dr. Gillilant explained that there are four positions on aggressiveness and social service, usually described as:

1) Extremely Conservative: In this view, social work is unnecessary, even undesirable, in missionary work. The missionary's entire focus should be on teaching the Gospel only.

2) Conservative: The conservative position. Dr. Gillilant said, considers social service programs "a wedge, a foot in the door." In this view, he said, one should "have medical patients in one end [of a mission hospital] and Christians out the other." The conservative missionary will aggressively work to convert anyone who comes under his social service programs.

3) Middle-Road: The middle-road position according to Dr. Gillilant is that "Social work is not enough without verbalization of the call to Christianity." These missionaries will run extensive social service programs, make sure that everyone in their care hears the Christian teachings, but will not proselytize as aggressively as the conservative missionary.

4) Liberal: The liberal position is that the mission should limit itself to social work as a demonstration of Christianity charity and accept what converts come naturally.

Over the last twenty years, there has been much rethinking among Christian missions, with most organizations now falling, according to Dr. Gillilant, in the middle-road to liberal positions.

Six Mission Organization Profiles

Mission organizations tend to specialize. Some operate enormous social programs and relief efforts. Others run schools and orphanages. Others hire itinerant preachers and yet others distribute literature to millions of people. Based on its particular programs, each mission will formulate a campaign in America to raise money. These appeals often contain highly selective, distorted or false descriptions of Hinduism. Here are brief profiles and samples of fund-raising appeals of six Protestant organizations.

1) With a 1984 income of $136.5 million dollars, the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest single missionary group in the world. Their fund raising appeal is theological in nature: "The evidence of the power of Satan in these masses [in South Asia] adds to the anger and frustration of a missionary under the mandate to 'turn them from the darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God' (Acts 26:18)."They go on, "Each of the major world religions, offering futile and unsatisfying alternatives to knowledge of the true God, dominates in one or more of the countries of South and Southeast Asia. This power of Satan is a living, palpable and visible reality in everyday life. If one can make a distinction between religions, surely Hindus would be next to the animists in the darkness in which they dwell."

Following the middle-road approach to missions, the Baptists run schools and medical services. They also fund local churches and individual missionaries. The charitable services thus provided to Hindus are, according to brochures, "highly effective instruments of evangelism."

2) Advancing the Ministries of the Gospels (AMG) is typical of the conservative organizations which are not directly associated with a major church. Their monthly newsletter pleads, "Pray for the children of India. [When I was in India], my heart broke as I saw some we have been unable to admit into our Abode of Love [a 1,000-child orphanage] pick up the rice kernel by kernel from the banana tree leaves on which the children of our institution had eaten. How I long to take them all in." AMG also cares for lepers: "Can you imagine yourself suffering from leprosy, being blind at the same time, and yet knowing that your eyesight can be restored for just $35?" With such appeals AMG raises $3,000,000 each year.

AMG's India programs, all directed at the Hindu population, include nine leper colonies with a total of 10,000 lepers, 8,000 sponsored children either in orphanages or placed with Christian foster parents, two homes for crippled children, a 2,000-student school and Bible correspondence courses. They claim 95% of the children in their care become Christians.

3) Some Indian organizations have discovered they can set up fund-raising institutions in America which are tax-exempt for American donors. The American Council of the Ramabai Mukti Mission of Kedgaon, Poona, is one such example. This hundred-year-old organization not only has an American Council raising $200,000 a year; it has councils in Holland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Scotland and England raising money, too. With this support they run an orphanage and foster-parent homes for mainly Hindu girls, and modest social, medical work, agricultural and evangelistic programs.

4) The Christian Nationals Evangelism Commission. Rather than send missionaries from America to India, CNEC recruits Indian nationals as missionaries. Not only is this vastly cheaper - $1400 a year to pay and equip a national against $25,000-$65,000 for an American sent overseas with his family - it alleviates the shortage caused by India's reluctance to grant visas for any more foreign missionaries. In addition to supporting missionaries, CNEC supports a spectrum of indigenous programs run by nationals. In 1984, CNEC raised $2.9 million.

"India - land of 330 million Gods" is spread in large letters across CNEC's India brochure. In addition to the 24 evangelists under the direction of Rev. Thomas Cherian in Cochin, Kerala, they're proud of "several Christian kindergartens where Hindu children have the opportunity of hearing the Gospel." Besides CNEC, many other organizations support nationals, at prices ranging from $300 to $1400 a year. For example, Gospel For Asia in Dallas, Texas, supports 700 nationals on a budget of $700,000 a year.

5) New Tribes Mission is an "extremely conservative" group. Neo-Dr. Livingstons, they work in remote tribal areas of the world under the most difficult of conditions. Their missionaries are trained in jungle survival and enough linguistics to reduce the Gospel to writing in an unknown language.

A New Tribes Mission brochure describes the experience of one of their missionaries who had just arrived at a remote tribe. A tribesmen had died the day before and this missionary attended the funeral. He wrote, "While I stood there, something gripped my heart. This man they were burying never had a chance to accept or reject Christ...Shocking was the realization - a Christ-less grave before my very eyes. And far too often this was happening the world over because the message of salvation came too late."

7) For real economy in spreading the word, Every Home Crusade (also known as World Literature Crusade) cannot be beaten. "Do you know that for $15/month you can reach a village in India where 1,500 people live! Can you think of a more economical way to reach that many people with the Gospel?" asks their brochure. Each paid EVC worker visits 200 homes a day, six days a week with gospel messages for adults, and children. Their most ambitious plan is to produce 450 million New Testaments (in the appropriate language) and mail one to every postal address in the world at a cost of $2.00 each.

What you've read above is a sample of what HINDUISM TODAY has on file from 33 of the 155 organizations. It is likely that the descriptions of Hinduism in these fund-raising materials (which are sent out by the millions) are an unrecognized but major factor in the American Christian's often negative image of Hinduism and India.

Motive for Missions

The New Tribes Institute gives their understanding of the Christian's purpose: "There is only one reason why we as Christians are not taken immediately home to be with Christ. We have been left here for a purpose - namely to finish the work that Christ has given to us to do. Before God's purpose for this age can be completed, the Gospel must be preached among all nations." Christians call this the "Great Commission." It appears in Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the Kingdom of God shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come."

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, there are 9,000 such "nations" to witness. They define a nation as a people group bound by a common culture,

language, race, etc. The WCE estimates that 7,000 have been adequately evangelized, leaving 2,000 to go. Dr. Gillilant said there is a massive effort underway right now to reach these 2,000 by the year 2000.

Some Christians, however, believe the gospel must be carried to every single individual to fulfill the Great Commission - hence such organizations as the Every Home Crusade. Fulfilling the Great Commission does not require converting everyone, only giving each the opportunity to accept or reject Christ.

Depending upon the line of thinking, as soon as the last nation is evangelized or everyone hears the gospel, "The end comes." The "end" is the Second Coming, the return of Jesus Christ, when the elect shall be taken to heaven and the rest shall perish. To the fervent Christian, his personal salvation and entrance to heaven is dependent upon the successful fulfillment of the Great Commission. Hence the energy and urgency which goes into missionary work.

Not all Christians, possibly not even most, accept this interpretation of the Great Commission. Many will say that their only duty is to demonstrate their Christian charity through relief work, the "liberal" position on missions.

How Successful a Campaign?

P.J. Johnstone in his book on evangelism. Operation World, states that "There are only about 200,000 converts out of Hinduism [1 in 3,000] in India living today [1980]." The World Christian Encyclopedia, considered even by Christians as very optimistic in its estimates, says there were 177,000 converts to Christianity in India between 1970 and 1980. Whichever figure is correct, careful reading of the missionary literature confirms that the evangelism programs in India generally are dismal failures. For example, the Mission Handbook laments, "How are we to explain the pitifully small dent that has been made on the 600 million Hindus of India?"

Such programs are not examples of fiscal efficiency. If the missionary investment for 19701980 was, say $100 million a year, the WCE's estimated 177,000 converts

cost nearly $6,000 each to acquire - the price of funding one national worker for six years or, for the average Indian, 50 years of wages!

Why Evangelism is a Problem

The small number of converts doesn't mean the missionaries don't cause difficulties for Hindu society. There are a litany of complaints, but six major problems may be singled out:

1) Evangelists denigrate Hinduism, for example, by calling it the "work of Satan."

2) The use of social work in conjunction with evangelism creates converts by bribery.

3) New converts are taught to convert the rest of their family, usually by a constant disruption and onslaught against all of the family's Hindu practices.

4) Hindu children are adopted for the purpose of converting them.

5) Political upheaval has come in the wake of missionary activity. The ongoing revolts in Nagaland and Mizoram are just two examples in India. In South America, Protestants and Catholics alike are involved in instigating and helping various insurrections.

6) Also in the wake of successful conversion of remote tribes comes what a New York Times 1983 investigative report called "the sudden exposure of formerly inaccessible areas to the exploitation and mercenary attitudes of the outside world [bringing] alcoholism, corruption and debt to the region."

A Beacon of Hope

These problems, which occur in many non-Christian societies, are not being ignored by all Christians. The Interfaith Conference of Washington, D.C., comprised of leaders of the Islamic, Jewish, Mormon, Protestant and Roman Catholic faiths, issued a "Statement on Proselytism" in 1987. It reads in part, "We support the right of all religions to share their message in the spirit of good will. It is inappropriate, however, for one faith group openly to demean or disparage the philosophies or practices of another faith group as part of its proselytizing...Deceptive proselytizing efforts are practiced on the most vulnerable of populations - residents of hospitals, old age homes, confused youth, college students away from home. These proselytizing techniques are tantamount to coerced conversions and should be condemned."

The Hindu teaching that "Truth is one, paths are many" has touched many in the world, causing a needed rethinking of the ethics and side effects of attempts to gain converts to a religion.

1984 World Mission Expenditure for the Top Twenty US Missionary Organizations With Operations in India

Southern Baptist Convention US $136,43,351

World Vision $83,647,492

General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists $70,155,000

Assemblies of God, Foreign Missions $56,799,964

Churches of Christ $52,000,000

Wycliffe Bible Translators $36,815,000

United Methodist Church World Program Division $23,155,592

Campus Crusade for Christ International $20,000,000

Church of the Nazarene World Mission Division $17,589,000

The Evangelical Alliance Mission $16,597,341

Christian Churches/Churches of Christ $15,598,000

Map International $14,180,651

Trans World Radio $13,600,000

Compassion International $13,417,125

Presbyterian Church USA Program Agency $13,104,468

Christian and Missionary Alliance $12,416,451

Baptist Bible Fellowship International $12,407,803

Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society $12,307,902

Lutheran World Relief, Inc. $11,170,396

Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Mission Services $10,801,563

Note: The US dollar amounts are for their total 1984 world programs, not just for India. The above information is from the 13th edition of Mission Handbook, published by MARC, Monrovia, California.

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