

Submission to Oppression in India: Lessons from History

by D. D. Pani

You are standing in the faint haze at dusk at the confluence of India's two most holy rivers. In the background you hear the eerie and continuous beating of drums. All around, and seemingly echoing in the distance, are the shrilling sounds of holy men blowing on large conch-shells. Behind you are the mysterious camps of thirteen Sadhu sects, the master ascetics of the Hindu faith. While the entrances to most of these camps are veiled and closed to the public, some are open to the steady queues of devotees coming to receive a blessing from one of these naked, long-haired men. The wind is blowing and the air is frigid, yet stoned on opium these demon-possessed holy men sit unfazed and oblivious to the near freezing elements, using only ash to partly cover their birth suits. As they mark the foreheads of each expectant devotee with a reddish-orange colored paste, they keep uttering ancient blessings from their scriptures. They seem very detached.

The wind picks up, causing you to turn. Something on one of the floating foot paths stretched across these wide rivers catches your eye, then quickly vanishes. By the light of the moon, you find yourself mesmerized by the steady streams of humanity slowly crossing these rivers on these floating paths. They seem to be coming from everywhere, all converging on this most sacred site. You are at the "Sangam," the place where not only the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers—but also the mythical Saraswati river—all join. You are told that this is the most auspicious day of this historic feast. Again you feel the pulse of this literal sea of humanity, all slowly walking forward while chanting the same ancient Vedic mantras used by earlier generations, some even possibly 3000 years ago.

According to reports, some 50 million are in the area. Of this, some 30 million (3% of India's entire population) are simultaneously attempting to converge, on this most auspicious of days, on this spot to take their once-in-a-lifetime holy dip at the location where these three rivers meet. *If these reports are true, you realize that you are standing in the midst of the single largest gathering of humankind in the history of the world.* Later you learn that actual numbers were even bigger, possibly 70 million. You know that such a single gathering as this will not occur again for another 12 years.

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And you wonder, Why are all these enduring the cold, the darkness, the stench, and the pushing of the crowds? Old women and men. Young and middle-aged. In all manner of dress. Chanting. Pushing. Freezing. Waiting. Lining the far banks as far as you can see in every direction. People. Members of Adam's fallen race.

Why are they all here?

Then you are reminded that the reasons for this presence—the individual human dramas that have brought each pilgrim here—are almost as many as the numbers themselves. The astrologers had predicted that it is this date that offers the highest chance for one to find release from the endless cycles of life, enabling one at the end of this life to re-merge with the Cosmos, or what they call “god.” By bathing in these muddy and most highly polluted waters, many believe their sins will be washed away.

20,000 police are on duty round the clock to keep order and direct the crowds. As soon as one finishes bathing, he or she is quickly urged to move out by another route, so that others may come. On the faces of many, as they emerge from the waters, you see the earlier expressions of expectation replaced by stares of disappointment. As one of the very few Christian observers at this scene, you at once feel that these endless rivers of lost sheep are instead going to their death.

You begin to feel like you have just stepped back in time. Yet the digital watch on your wrist reminds you that it is the year 2001, January 24. You remember what the late Hindu Iqbal once wrote, “The Roman, the Egyptian and the Greek civilizations have all vanished, but there is something in us that makes sure we don't get destroyed.”

Then a uniformed official nudges you to keep moving on yourself.

Is the preceding account simply dramatized fiction? Or could it be a very accurate re-creation of the impressions of a follower of Christ attending the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad this past winter?

I wish it were just fiction.

Indeed, the myriad of facts accurately depicted within this imagined description point to the high degree of vitality found today in Hinduism's many streams. Many other examples could easily be given.

Why the Final Frontier

Why is it that *without either* Western funds or the presence of foreign missionaries inside its borders, the Church in China grew from about one million (in 1950) to over 80 million believers in less than 50 years?

On the other hand, why is it that in India during this same period *with both* foreign missionaries and abundant Western funds, the growth rate of Bible-focused Christians has only slightly exceeded the population growth rate (PGR) in India, and is less than the PGR in North India?

Why is Hinduism growing stronger in India today?

Finally, despite the incomprehensibly massive effort by the Western Church to reach India in the past three centuries, why does India remain the Final Frontier of missions?

Resilience of Hinduism

Despite a series of seemingly insurmountable challenges, India remains the last of the world's great classical cultures that still strongly follows various forms of its ancient pre-supposition systems. Brahmanism (the ruling ideology of India today) had earlier faced the internal Buddhist threat (600 BC–300 AD) and the external Moslem threat (1200–1757 AD), and had prevailed. But perhaps the greatest challenge to India's

religious and social order occurred during the period 1757–1900 AD, when Indian society was under heavy of Western influence and European colonization. Yet rather than witnessing a complete shift in the peoples of India toward these new and extremely powerful influences, we see Brahmanism bounce back once again.

Instead of finishing off Brahmanism, Christianity (combined with other Western ideals) injected tremendous regenerating power into an Indian society left stagnant by centuries of oppressive Moslem rule, and more than half a millennium of decaying Hinduism. During the Hindu renaissance that resulted from this foreign infusion of enlightenment, India also witnessed a revival of its Brahman priesthood and a renewed sense of national pride. [1]

At the root of this renaissance lay the challenge of the gospel of Christ to the vigor of Hinduism itself. After the social reforms and contributions facilitated by such great Western Christians as William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, Hindu renaissance groups began to rise up all over India. Though these groups arose primarily in reaction to the gospel, they invariably adopted Christian teaching and ethics—but without Christ. So for the first time in India's Brahman history, democracy and social justice became chief concerns among the Hindus. [1]

The shock presented by the threat of the gospel to Hinduism worked to revive Indian philosophy. Many of the philosophical ideas that these groups borrowed from the Bible were then attributed to their own scriptures instead (such ideas including their intellectual focus on the one formless God, which many Hindu leaders began to equate to all the variant “gods” of their worship).

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Using much of what they had learned from the Christians, many of these groups—in the name of Hinduism—even became successful in imitating nominal Christianity to their own satisfaction. [1]

Fruit of Dependence

This is not to say that the missionary movement from the West did not see fruit, but that most of the fruit came from low-caste and no-caste groups, those who had something to gain materially and in terms of social status. Many were literally enticed into the “faith” by food and other commodities (so-called “rice Christians”). I’ve observed in my dealings with many Indian Christians whose heritage is from these ranks that they still primarily view God in terms of what He can do for them. They want His provision, His healing and His solution for their problems in life, but they are not interested in His Lordship and His Commission. Their devotion often seems to retain much of the “tit-for-tat” mentality seen in most all streams of Hinduism. To date there has been little real impact on the upper-castes, who for the most part dominate the country. These upper-castes remain the main initiators and controllers within all levels of Indian society.

Thus, not many of India’s “Pauls” (men and women capable of moving beyond a dependence relationship with Christ to a relationship of unselfish service) have been raised up. This sad condition follows in part from the fact that the Western missionaries in India were

(and still for the most part are) incapable of truly engaging the core of Hindu culture. In general, they have disdained Hindu culture, viewing it as evil. Consequently, their ministry has remained primarily peripheral to the culture, the main response being from only the low- and no-caste. Those Indians who have responded have normally been forced into Western structures of worship and education. Thus the church that has arisen in India is essentially Western, clustered into a number of separated communities with cultures that are quite different from their cultures of origin.

From Inflating the Costs: Addition Only

In India today, seekers wanting to embrace Christ must be willing to literally change communities. Tragically, this required change is far more radical than can be imagined, as it involves rejecting one’s former culture and adopting a completely new one. As mutual rejection is normally involved, all bridges to past relations end up being painfully and disastrously destroyed in the process. As a result, there is little-to-no multiplication of the kingdom—merely addition. The high-castes that do occasionally come to Christ are most always prevented from becoming Pauls. With each new addition many, many more are turned off and polarized against the foreign religion known to them as “Christianity.” This partially explains why the gospel is going backwards in

so many regions of Northern India and advancing very slowly in the South.

A Tragic Testimony

An Indian friend shared the following testimony. As a college student on a vacation in a different state in India, he met a U.S. missionary. Although a staunch high-caste Hindu himself, after extensive interaction with this missionary, my friend believed in Christ. A week or so later, when he phoned his family to tell them he had “become a Christian,” they promptly asked him not to come home. They were concerned they would never be able to find mates for their daughters if their community learned that he had sold out to this foreign religion.

The missionary who helped him find Christ also encouraged him not to go home. Today my friend is a pastor who runs small schools in several villages in India. Many years ago he took an Indian Christian wife and he is now completely westernized. In the approximately two decades since embracing Christ, he has never gone back to his native home.

Many would call my friend’s life a success story; I consider it a great tragedy.

Why couldn’t he have been encouraged to simply tell his family that “he had taken a new guru” and would not be home for awhile? Then, once his faith had become strong, he could have been sent home to demonstrate his zeal for—and his commitment to—his family, his community, and his own culture.

Being a private matter, he would not have been forced to reveal the identity of his guru and could have continued to make periodic sorties back to his spiritual parents for training. After a long time, once his family and community were totally convinced of his zeal for them and excited about the positive changes they saw in him, he could have revealed that his new guru was in fact

Jesus Christ. As people could see that his commitment to his community and to Hindu culture had not changed, the proof of his life would have quelled all concerns. With proper follow-on discipling he might also have been able to start a people movement in his own state. He might now be seeing great multiplication for the kingdom, rather than the extremely slow addition of his present village work.

Sadly, in these villages, he is—and always will be—viewed only as an outsider.

Some would argue that to let him return home would have been to risk his reversion back into Hinduism. This follows from a flawed view of what constitutes the unadulterated essence of following Christ. Had my friend been trained and empowered to follow this essence while keeping his own culture, there would have been little real temptation for him to forsake his divine Master. But (if both to him and his mentors) reverting back to his culture means forsaking Christ, then certainly the temptation would have been high. In reality this temptation is really only the artificial creation of his Western mentors.

Further, because he abandoned his people, his family and the people of his home locale have become further polarized against the gospel. They view him as a traitor. And with respect to them, is he not a traitor? Because of him they have not considered, are not considering, and probably never will consider Christ.

The Conquest of Romana

Over the last three hundred years the long siege of North India by the West in the name of Christ has been conducted largely without respect for the fact that India remains one of the world's great classical civilizations. Rather than consider the conclusive lessons from history for dealing with classical cultures, the

West has not taken seriously its need to properly relate to Hindu culture.

Further, the Western Church has not sufficiently empowered the fruit of its efforts in India (the Indian Church) to become an inexorable leavening force. Had the West only taken instruction from its ancestors over the last three centuries, the current outcome in India might be very different.

Whereas their own spiritual ancestors relied primarily on the regenerating and leavening effects of the gospel to win the Roman Empire to Christ, the Western Church of the past three hundred years has relied (as we will see) more on reform tactics and power-control approaches in its (unsuccessful) attempt to reach India.

Roman Oppression

Christianity was initially ignored in the Roman Empire as a Jewish sect. However it soon became viewed as a treasonable innovation and was forbidden. Following on the heels of Jewish abuse, Christianity quickly found itself being slandered and persecuted from many sides. Adopting this new faith carried with it the possibility of punishment by confiscation and death. It was not until Constantine's edict in 313 AD that Christianity's existence in the Roman Empire finally became legal. Thus, during the first three centuries of its existence, Christianity found itself precariously launched into the most unfavorable of earthly circumstances. [2]

Christianity's unwavering demands for repentance and renunciation (of both self and the world) kept many from joining its ranks. Compared to the competing religions of the time (many of which promoted the love of pleasure), Christianity offered few tangible earthly favors. Its Jewish origin, combined with the poverty and relative anonymity of the majority of its followers, were deeply offensive to the proud Greeks and

Romans. Indeed, Celsus scoffed that, "weavers, cobblers, and fullers, the most illiterate persons" proclaim the "irrational faith," and are especially good at acclaiming it "to women and children." While his derision of Christians contains some truth, there were initially some (though not many) from the higher and educated classes.

Nevertheless, from the middle of the second century on, there were numerous church fathers (such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement, Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian) who surpassed—or at least equaled—the most eminent of their pagan contemporaries in both talent and culture. [2]

In spite of many difficulties Christianity continued to advance, its unstoppable progress furnishing stunning evidence of its divine origin and power to satisfy the deep inner needs of man. Further, the moral sincerity and authenticity of the Christians stood in stark contrast with the widespread corruption of the age. While the vulgar and frivolous could only be repelled, the deepest and noblest of the Empire could not fail to be impressed. The partiality and passion of the poor and oppressed for the gospel only further confirmed Christianity's comforting and redeeming power. Thus, in the hands of God, these tremendous hindrances became some of the very means of advancement. [2]

Fruit of Submission to Oppression

Far too often persecution led to martyrdom, which in turn led to attraction. Rather than deter seekers and followers alike, public executions served to motivate observers toward an ambition of the "noblest and most unselfish form." Every genuine martyr became living proof to the truth and holiness of Christianity. [2]

History reports no mightier, longer and deadlier conflict than the war of exter-

mination waged by pagan Rome against the defenseless Church. "It was a most unequal struggle, a struggle of the sword and of the cross; carnal power all on one side, moral power all on the other." Because concession was impossible, eventually one of the two participants would have to surrender. It has been observed that:

... no other religion could have stood for so long a period the combined opposition of Jewish bigotry, Greek philosophy, and Roman policy and power; no other could have triumphed at last over so many foes by purely moral and spiritual force, without calling any carnal weapons to its aid. This comprehensive and long-continued martyrdom is the peculiar crown and glory of the early church. [2]

As this battle progressed, Tertullian boldly exclaimed to the pagan challenger:

All your ingenious cruelties can accomplish nothing; they are only a lure to this sect. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the Christians is their seed.

By the middle of the second century this progress was extended to all parts of the empire such that Tertullian could also say in his *Apology*:

We are a people of yesterday ... yet we have filled every place belonging to you—cities, islands, castles, towns, assemblies, your very camp, your tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum! We leave you your temples only. We can count your armies; our numbers in a single province will be greater.[3]

Summary of the Victor and His Tactics

In time the war of attrition between the pagans of Rome and the church came to a conclusion. What began in Rome under Nero in 64 AD, ended near Rome at the Milvian bridge under Constantine on Oct. 27, 312 AD. Whereas Tertullian did not see the end, his observation that "the blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church" provides a perfect description of the reason the defenseless and submissive could conquer so powerful a foe.

Taylor gives a summary description of the humble opponent responsible for the successful 300 year siege that eventually conquered the pagan Roman Empire:

The church of this period appears poor in earthly possessions and honors, but rich in heavenly grace, in world-conquering faith, love, and hope; unpopular, even outlawed, hated, and persecuted, yet far more vigorous and expansive than the philosophies of Greece or the empire of Rome; composed chiefly of persons of the lower social ranks, yet attracting the noblest and deepest minds of the age, and bearing, in her bosom the hope of the world; 'as unknown, yet well-known, as dying, and behold it lives;' conquering by apparent defeat, and growing on the blood of her martyrs; great in deeds, greater in sufferings, greatest in death for the honor of Christ and the benefit of generations to come. [4]

The final victory of Christianity over the mightiest empire of the ancient world can be attributed, not to physical force, but to the moral powers of patience, perseverance, faith and love. This is truly one of the most awe-inspiring spectacles of human history. [2]

Lessons from Romana's Conquest

First, it must be noted that the conquest of the Roman Empire did not start with Christians demanding or promoting religious freedom and human rights; rather it concluded with these results.

Based as they were upon the absolute authority of the state, ancient Greece and Rome often mercilessly trampled the individual rights of many of their inhabitants. In terms of personal belief, however, the individual in Greece and Rome enjoyed almost unlimited liberty of expression, not only in conversation, but also in their writings and on stage (even if their sentiments were cynical or irreverent).

Nevertheless, a sharp distinction was made between liberty of private thought and conscience (which is inalienable and beyond the reach of legislation) and the liberty of public worship. It is true that the Roman senate and the Emperor would, by special edict, usually allow conquered nations and peoples the freedom to worship and to practice their religion—even in Rome. Yet this policy did not flow from a regard for the sacred rights of conscience; it was a pragmatic policy derived from the need to keep the Empire more manageable. Included in these edicts was the express prohibition of making converts from the state. [2]

But Christianity was not the religion of a nation. Instead it claimed itself to be universal and the only true religion. It attracted Greeks and Romans in much larger numbers than it did Jews. Its converts were from every people and sect. Of more concern to Rome was that it refused compromise with any form of idolatry.

Further, their refusal to pay the emperor (or his statue) divine honors; their aversion (not all) to imperial military service; their general disregard for politics, civil concerns and temporal affairs (as compared to the spiritual and eternal);

and their unusually close associations and frequent gatherings—all these drew upon the Christians not only the suspicion of hostility, but the unpardonable presumption of conspiracy against the state. As such, it directly threatened the very existence of the Roman state religion. The all-absorbing political interest of Rome dictated that even limited toleration of this novel movement could not be granted. [2]

Seeds of Religious Freedom

It was the Christian apologists of the second century who “first proclaimed, however imperfectly, the principle of freedom of religion, and the sacred rights of conscience.” Tertullian boldly tells the heathen that:

everybody has a natural and inalienable right to worship God according to his conviction, that all compulsion in matters of conscience is contrary to the very nature of religion, and that no form of worship has any value whatever except as far as it is a free voluntary homage of the heart.

Justin Martyr expressed similar views. [3].

Lactantius, wrote at the close of this period:

Religion cannot be imposed by force; the matter must be carried on by words rather than by blows, that the will may be affected. Torture and piety are widely different; nor is it possible for truth to be united with violence, or justice with cruelty. Nothing is so much a matter of free will as religion.[5]

And when, in early 313 AD, Constantine issued his new edict of toleration, he:

provided the world with the first proclamation of the great principle that every man had a right to choose his religion according to the dictates of his own conscience and honest conviction, without compulsion and interference from the government.[2]

Thus, it is the blood of persecution that became for the West the seed of civil and religious liberty.

We must emphasize that the individual rights and religious freedom granted the Roman world by Constantine did not come as a result of three centuries of the Christian Church demanding these commodities. Instead these gifts resulted from both the submissive willingness and the supernatural ability of the Christians of the empire to continue on without these commodities in such magnificent poise for a very lengthy period of time.

Throughout these long centuries each generation would teach the next to submit with dignity and courage to the injustice and persecution of their brutal oppressors. Thus, during this extended period of almost constant aggravation and persecution, the Christians remained the most peaceful subjects in the empire. They never participated in the frequent insurrections and rebellions that served to destabilize and undermine the empire. Instead they proved themselves to be the empire’s best patriots, as by the power of their personal virtue, they helped renovate Roman society from within. [6]

Secondly, we observe that many of the evils of oppression in the Empire were dissolved—not through the external process of reform—but through the gracious endurance of these evils by the Christians.

Perhaps the best example of this comes through the profound testimony

of Christian slaves. When converted slaves:

... with the full sense of their intellectual and religious superiority still remained obedient to their heathen masters, and even served them more faithfully than before, resisting decidedly only their immoral demands (like the beauty Potamiaena [who was martyred], and other chaste women and virgins in the service of voluptuous masters)—they showed, in this very self-control, the best proof of their ripeness for civil freedom. [2]

The ancient Greek and Roman republics had no concept of the general and natural rights of men. They existed by the absolute dominion of a minority over an oppressed majority. They only regarded the free-born rich and independent citizens as men (in the full sense of the term), denying this privilege to foreigners, laborers, the poor, and slaves. Further, they considered it their natural right to go to war with any foreign nation (without distinction of race) in order to bring it under their iron rule. Consequently, during the time of the early Church, the greater part of humanity living within the borders of the Roman Empire lived under the hopeless and brutal plight of slavery.

This evil was so thoroughly woven into the domestic and public life of the heathen world that even the greatest philosophers (like Aristotle) regarded it as both natural and indispensable. Even to these great thinkers the abolition of slavery was considered among the impossible. Christianity during the persecutions had no influence over the state; thus, in early days the abolition of slavery was utterly out of the question. The enormous number of slaves alone (half the empire) dictated this.

The world was far from ripe for such a giant step. [2]

The Pursuit of Endurance and Its Fruit

Yet to this end Christianity labored from its outset:

... not by outward violence, nor sudden revolution; this, under the circumstances, would only have made the evil worse; but by its moral power, by preaching the divine descent and original unity of all men, their common redemption through Christ, the duty of brotherly love, and the true freedom of the spirit.

In her persecuted condition, the Church operated outside the machinery of the state and was not in any position to influence civil legislation. With her focus on eternity and her hope fixed on the soon return of Christ, she had little concern for earthly freedom or temporal happiness. [2]

Ignatius, writing to Polycarp, counsels that servants should serve all the more zealously for God's glory so that they might receive higher freedom from God. He urges that no slave should seek redemption at the expense of a Christian brother, so that they don't become slaves of their own impulses. [7] Tertullian declares outward freedom a worthless commodity without the soul's ransom from sin's bondage:

How can the world make a servant free? All is mere show in the world, nothing truth. For the slave is already free, as a purchase of Christ; and the freedman is a servant of Christ. If thou takest the freedom which the world can give for true, thou hast thereby become again the servant of man, and hast lost the freedom of

Christ, in that thou thinkest it bondage." [3]

Later, aided by a concurrent movement in philosophy, the church began to see the fruit of their labor. Improvements in the slave-code of imperial Rome must be attributed both to Christianity and to later Stoic philosophy. But it was the triumph of Constantine that brought the most important improvements in this period.

For example, under Christian influence Constantine issued a law in 315 AD forbidding the branding of slaves on the face "to prevent the disfiguration of the figure of celestial beauty (i.e. the image of God)." In 316 AD he facilitated the emancipation of slaves by an edict requiring only a written document, signed by the master. This was instead of the earlier requirement for a ceremony in the presence of the prefect and his licitor. Often when a slave owner and his slave became Christians, the nature of the old relation virtually ceased:

... both came together to the table of the Lord, and felt themselves brethren of one family, in striking contrast with the condition of things among their heathen neighbors as expressed in the current proverb: 'As many enemies as slaves.' [2]

Thus we see once more that it was through the endurance by the Christians of the evil of slavery, coupled with their teaching of Christian truth, that this oppression was reduced. It would be many centuries before this particular evil would finally be eradicated in the West by the long-term leavening effect of the gospel.

Thirdly, we observe that the Christians were deeply engaged in the culture at most all levels and did not seek to secede from it—even in times of persecution. For this reason, as the Gentile Church expanded

into new areas, it remained vulnerable by not forming separate communities (which would have caused it to become isolated from the cultures and communities of the areas into which it was moving).

While the Christians of the empire labored to not be of the world, they remained in the world. Tertullian writes: "We are no Brahmins, nor Indian gymnosophists, no hermits, no exiles from life."

He continues:

We are mindful of the thanks we owe to God, our Lord and Creator; we despise not the enjoyment of his works; we only temper it, that we may avoid excess and abuse. We dwell, therefore, with you in this world, not without markets and fairs, not without baths, inns, shops, and every kind of intercourse. We carry on commerce and war, agriculture and trade with you. We take part in your pursuits, and give our labor for your use.[3]

Though it is true that monasticism did begin to develop in the third century, its effects (both negative and beneficial) did not become pronounced until later.

Their High Degree of Cultural (and Community) Involvement

In relation to profession the early church followed the instruction of Paul: "Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called." [8] No respectable pursuit was forbidden, proving the universal application of Christianity and "its power to enter into all the relations of human life and into all branches of society, under all forms of government." [2] Indeed, of the total involvement of Christians in the cultures and communities of their habitation, the unknown

author of the Epistle to Diognetus writes:

For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. ... But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. ... They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. [7]

It is clear then that the Christians of the Roman Empire remained a vital part of the communities and cultures where they lived, even in persecution. Rather than withdraw, they continued to penetrate their communities in all walks of life. So when they were persecuted, the testing of their faith had more impact. They were not unknown, but rather well known; their lives were an open book.

Fourthly, responsibility for the growth of the Church was not handed over to full-time professionals, but rather remained in the hands of the people.

Remarkable as it may seem, for work within the Roman Empire following the era of the Apostles, we can point to no great missionaries' names until long after this period. In the Roman Empire there were no missionary societies or missionary institutions or even organized efforts.

Christianity once established was its own best missionary. It grew naturally from within. It attracted people by its very presence. And while there were no professional missionaries devoting their whole life to this specific work, every congregation was a missionary society, and every Christian believer a missionary, inflamed by the love of Christ to convert his fellow-men. Every Christian told his neighbor, the laborer to his fellow-laborer, the slave to his fellow-slave, the servant to his master and mistress, the story of his conversion, as a mariner tells the story of the rescue from shipwreck. [2]

Lastly, Christianity had several other unique advantages during this period that helped attribute to its rapid growth:

1. The prevalence of the Greek language and culture;

2. The early translation of the Scriptures into the various languages of the Empire: Latin (2); Syriac (2); and Egyptian (in three dialects);
3. The order and unity of the Roman Empire;
4. The undermining of popular religion and public morality by a skeptical and materialistic philosophy;
5. Comparatively safe and easy communication within the empire and extensive commerce;
6. A pervading sense of hopelessness.

Parallels for the Last Great Classical Culture

Whether the fullness of time has come for India—as it did for the Roman Empire some two millennia ago—has yet to be seen. Already most of the unique advantages available to the gospel in the Roman Empire during the first three hundred years of Church history also now exist within India. Only two languages dominate the subcontinent (Hindi and English) and the Scriptures have long ago been translated into all of the main regional languages. Secular democracy still reigns and provides order, though its continued duration may be tentative.

The invasion of India by secular Western culture and its values is rapidly undermining the moral fiber of the nation, and because of weaknesses in India's own ancient presuppositional systems, rampant corruption sickens all levels of the culture. Modern telecommunications technology and the world's most extensive rail system nicely connect the country. For most, the future provides many worries and major uncertainty.

Additional advantages exist for India. To date there has been much genuine

demonstration of Christ in India by both the West and the Indian Church. Consequently, most people now living in urban areas (and many living in the rural areas) have heard of Christ, and many have a deep respect for him.

Along with the advantages, there are many parallels in the hindrances facing the advance of the gospel. Just as the early Church posed a threat to the state religion and was under deep suspicion, so now Biblical Christianity poses the greatest threat to the agendas of the Hindu Fundamentalists movement currently in political control of the land. Because of the insensitivity of the Western missionaries (past and present) to Hindu culture, suspicion abounds. In many areas, those turning to Christ are viewed as traitors—sellouts to the West. Finally, the constituency of present day Church in India is very similar to that of the first century Church in the Roman Empire—not many rich, not many free, not many mighty, not many noble. [9]

Whether the fullness of time has come for India may now perhaps depend on how the Indian Church soon chooses to respond to the growing oppression and persecution by Hindu fundamentalist forces.

Many questions now remain:

Will the Indian Church respond with the spirit of the modern West, that is, in protest and defiance? Or will it be submissive and humble, like the Early Church?

Will Indian Christians judge and resent their oppressors while openly demanding their rights? Or like the silent Christ and the Empire's many martyrs, will they allow themselves to be proved worthy?

Will the Western Church allow the Indian Church to be tested? Or will it attempt to maintain control of the situation through finances and power-tactics?

Will—in order to reach this classical culture—the Indian Church and the assisting

Western Church continue to take their lead from the Protestant Reformation? Or will they decide to take their cues from the example of the Early Church?

For three centuries now, this reform-oriented approach has continued to fail. Why? Because it is not a starting strategy for an ancient classical culture. Reformation tactics are effective for making mid-course corrections in a predominantly Christianized culture. We cannot reform that which has not first been regenerated. What is currently needed in India (which is far from being Christianized) is regeneration—not reformation.

Conclusions

The lessons learned from the Early Church's successful siege of the Roman Empire—and their applications for India—are obvious and logical.

For the *fullness of time* to come to India, both the West and the Indian Church must develop a completely new stance.

Until now a substantial portion of the Evangelical missions effort in India has been aimed at facilitating the combined temporal and spiritual liberation of the Dalits and the other disadvantaged peoples. Meanwhile, little attention has been given to the other segments of the population. Often the temporal side of this liberation effort has been aimed at freeing these peoples from the oppression of the existing social order through various forms of external social reform. This dangerous course is nothing less than an Evangelical version of Liberation Theology.

The focus of the Dalit Christians (and others who have been brought into the kingdom in this way) remains on the temporal. By viewing the "temporal oppressors" as "the enemy" (rather than viewing the Evil One as our prime foe), we end up assailing the higher castes. They too (the high caste temporal "oppressors") need spiritual libera-

tion, not abuse from Christians. Instead, the very militant Hindu forces—which our earlier tactics served to revive and energize during the previous three centuries—are being further enraged by our abuse (and empowered by their rage). Thus, it is they who are now persecuting us. Our own blood and the blood of our Indian Christians may soon be on our own Western heads.

For many the question still remains: What now should the Western and Indian Churches do in the face of the intensifying oppression and persecution of the Church in India? Rather than continue to ponder this question, let all who seek to serve the cause of Christ in India now submit with great joy to the difficult lessons of history responsible for the heroic and humble conquest of Romana. **UFM**

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