

An Indian Constantine?

by Vishal Mangalwadi

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Rebucadnezar was God's servant although he was sent to destroy God's temple (Jeremiah 25:9). Cyrus—a pagan Emperor—was God's "anointed servant" who directed and funded the demoralized Jews to rebuild God's temple in Jerusalem (Isaiah 4:1, Ezra 6:1-12). Cyrus (or Darius) was moved by Daniel's fasting and prayer. He was stunned by Daniel's dramatic deliverance from the lions' den, but he also had political reasons to appease religious minorities.

Constantine the Great (AD 274-337) began experiencing the Lord Jesus in a vision in 312. He co-issued the edict of Milan (AD 313), which legalized Christianity and made it acceptable and respectable in Europe. He had probably become a believer in Christ by the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325, but he still tolerated Paganism. The man who played a historic role in Europe's Christianization did not himself become a baptized Christian until May 22, 337, shortly before his death.

None of these leaders fit our normal conception of "God's servants." It is not surprising that many Indian Christians cannot make sense of Mr. Ram Raj, a Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax in New Delhi, who is planning to lead a million Dalits ("oppressed") to abandon Hinduism and become Buddhists. If you meet Ram Raj in person you might be tempted to ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Some Christians are suspecting, if not rejecting, Ram Raj. However, I believe historians may judge him to be India's Constantine.

In order to appreciate Ram Raj's significance we need to understand the current ethos in the North Indian church as well as the mood of the lower caste Hindus. A few years ago three Hindus, who called themselves Ambedkarites, went to my (evangelical) pastor in Madhya Pradesh. They asked him to disciple and baptize them. Later they met me and told me that the pastor had said, "I don't care for Ambedkar. If you want to become Christians, you'd better find an evangelist. Converting someone is not my job. I am a pastor."

Last week our son-in-law and his associates received serious threats from militant Hindus for baptizing 21 people in one village over the past year. The first

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reaction of some pastors in their town—some of them “evangelicals”—was to distance themselves from the frontline evangelists. Eventually 50 Christian leaders met together to affirm their solidarity, though some argued that conversions ought to be stopped.

Happily there are still courageous Christians left in North India who will risk their lives to disciple and baptize seekers. Sadly however, numerous threats, beatings and murder by Hindu radicals have prompted even “Bible-believing”, “evangelical” theologians like Rev. Valson Thampu to publicly call for a “Moratorium on Conversions.” My guess is that a majority in the North Indian Church would agree with that proposal.

It is this climate of fear and compromise that makes Ram Raj so fascinating a character. He is asking—and in fact, challenging—Christians to baptize at least 20,000, if not 200,000 Hindus in his rally. His crowd of one million Neo-Buddhists, he says, will stand there to defend the Christians' right to liberate those most oppressed by the Hindu society.

Ram Raj is reminding the Church of a truth it brought to the Indian sub-continent, that conversion is the most effective antidote to oppression. It was the British politician William Wilberforce who injected this truth into Indian consciousness during the battles in British Parliament (1793-1813) to permit Christian missions in British India. Ram Raj subsequently learned this truth from Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's writings.

Wilberforce was Charles Grant's mouthpiece for India, who argued in his

Observations (1792) that “light is the true cure for darkness.” Grant had lived in India long enough to experience its darkness—spiritual, moral, intellectual, and social. Yet he had experienced God's power to enlighten the darkness of his own heart, and had witnessed the power of the Gospel through John Wesley's work to reform a nation as corrupt as England. Grant believed that there was hope for India, and that this hope was in the Gospel. As a member of the Clapham Sect, a Member of Parliament, and the Chairman of the East India Company, he worked with Wilberforce to promote the cause of missions in order to bless India and to lead Hindus from darkness to light.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar became the first “untouchable” to receive a Ph.D. (in Economics) from Columbia University in New York in 1916. He returned to serve as a minister to Maharaja Gaikwad of Baroda. Dr. Ambedkar found that his education and professional status did not earn him the respect that he deserved. He could not even rent a room in Baroda. Those of his caste had no rooms to rent and the upper-castes refused to rent out their rooms to him. They even had him evicted from a hotel room rented to him by a Parsi gentleman.

In disgust Dr. Ambedkar left for Bombay (now Mumbai). He then went to London to study law, returning to India with a second doctorate. By 1930 he had become a public figure. By 1932 he was the undisputed leader of the “depressed” classes in India. Yet, by 1935 he realized that the highest education, employment, money, social activism and political influence were

insufficient to liberate him from the indignity associated with having been born a “low caste” Hindu. Consequently he made his famous declaration: “I was born a Hindu; I had no choice. But I will not die a Hindu because I do have a choice.”

After India gained Independence in 1947, Dr. Ambedkar was appointed Chairman of India's Constituent Assembly. He helped write India's democratic Constitution that “abolished” untouchability and codified human equality. He then served as a minister in India's first government under Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru—only to find that neither Constitution, nor democracy, nor political power were sufficient to liberate India's oppressed people from Hinduism.

Four decades of public life and reflection drove Dr. Ambedkar to conclude that Grant and Wilberforce were right: more than anything else what India needed was conversion. He explained his position in his little book, *Annihilation of Caste*. He argued that Hindus do not ill-treat their fellow Hindus because they are worse than other human beings. They are as good or as bad as any other people in the world. They practice “untouchability” because it is central to their religion. Therefore, the only way to annihilate caste is to get out of Hinduism. In 1956, shortly before his death, Dr. Ambedkar publicly led over 300,000 of his followers in abandoning Hinduism and becoming Buddhists.

Sri Kanshiram, the founder and president of the Bahujan Samaj Party, revived the cult of Dr. Ambedkar in our generation, being inspired by the book *Annihilation of Caste*.

Kanshiram began his public life by establishing the “Buddhist Research Foundation;” he subsequently concluded that Buddhism was inadequate to help India’s oppressed.

Kanshiram therefore chose an exclusively political path to “salvation.” He succeeded in awakening the lower castes, but his path led them into a dead end. As a result many Ambedkarites have been knocking at the doors of Churches, often to be disappointed by fearful shepherds, concerned for their own safety, rather than caring for Jesus’ sheep. As a consequence, Ram Raj is now mobilizing a million Dalits (“oppressed”) to follow him from Hinduism into Buddhism.

The lower castes in India (including “Scheduled Castes”, “Scheduled Tribes” and “Other Backward Castes”) are at least 400 million people, of which about 200 million are often called “Dalits”—the most oppressed. They are victims of Hinduism and have no reason to remain Hindus. About four million of these have been educated and employed by the central, state, and local governments but continue to face humiliation because of their birth. Many of them agree with Ambedkar that they need to convert.

However, many also agree with Kanshiram that there is no salvation in Buddhism. Ram Raj says to such people:

If you cannot live without worship of God or rituals then you should choose another faith like Christianity instead of remaining in the caste system.

Because Ram Raj represents a politically influential group many politicians are supporting him hoping to encash his appeal, or at least to divide dalit votes between Kansiram and him.

Recognizing that many Dalits are already inclined toward Christ, Mr. Ram Raj has endorsed my evangelistic

book “Touch Thy Neighbor: Stories and Reflections on Untouchability.” (Please preview the text at www.VishalMangalwadi.com). Ram Raj is also supporting the plan of *Bibles For The World* to distribute a million copies of the Gospel of John in his rally. He has asked us to bring as many reporters, intercessors and volunteers as possible from all over the world to publicize, pray, distribute the Gospel of John, and my book in his rally.

Ram Raj’s appeal has a vital component that deserves our support. For two centuries Christians have spent their resources on educating the upper castes—many of who are now opposing, if not persecuting Christians in India and propagating Hinduism in the West. Ram Raj is therefore urging the Church to launch a vigorous educational effort for the lower castes, including establishing a Christian university. Incidentally, this was the very goal for which Charles Grant and Wilberforce had worked. It took them two decades to get the British Parliament (1813) to force the East India Company to spend Rs.100,000 per year for educating Indians.

Ram Raj’s rally could trigger India’s cultural revolution, launching a tidal wave of Dalits and lower caste Hindus out of Hinduism. Many see the potential for conversions at an unprecedented scale. To me, Ram Raj’s movement offers the possibility of turning a cultural revolution into a “Reformation.” India’s cultural revolution will fizzle out as did the Chinese. Lasting blessings can only come from rebuilding our nation on biblical foundations. The question is would the church respond with vision, wisdom, speed and sacrifice? **IJFM**