

Asian mission movements from South Asian contexts



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Cross-cultural mission is part of the DNA of South Asian churches. George Melel arrived in Germany in 1977, sent from India by the *Divya Jyothi Mission India*, based in Kerala. When he first arrived, people asked him 'Who invited you here as a missionary?' He replied 'Who invited Bartholomew Ziegenbalg or William Carey to come to India as missionaries?' 19 years later, he is still there, working with people of all ethnic backgrounds. Mission happens because you are sent out by the call of the Holy Spirit and the prayer and recognition of the church (Acts 13.1-4).

It's exactly 120 years since the foundation (in 1888) of the Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association, the first mission movement in the modern Indian church. The Indian Missionary society (1903) and the National Missionary Society (1905) were both founded just over 100 years ago, by the same person, Bishop V S Azariah. He was inspired to start the IMS by the missionary vision of Christians in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. In the 1920s Sadhu Sunder Singh is believed to have died while evangelising in Tibet.

The first 50 years of the 20th century focussed on the large scale people movements, the independence struggle and efforts for church union. After the colonial era, and the partition of India, there was a flourishing of Indian missions from the mid 1960s, with groups like the Indian Evangelical Mission, the Friends Missionary Prayer Band, Operation Mobilisation and a number of Pentecostal and independent groups. Today the India Missions Association represents 210 Indian mission organisations, agencies and Church groups and about 40,000 Christian workers within India and beyond.

IMA (Indian Missions Association - founded in 1977) is "the national federation of missions in India, which assists Missions and Churches in the proclamation of the Good news and in making disciples of Jesus Christ among all peoples, languages, and geographical areas through members who partner to share resources, research, and training by their effective accountability and care of their personnel."

Its website (<http://www.imaindia.org>) has a list as long as your arm of programmes, working groups, structures and issues. It represents the growth, complexity and maturity of the missionary movement in India. And it is only a part of the evangelistic and church planting movements taking place at this time.

Each of the other South Asian countries has its own history of the development of cross-cultural mission, along the same lines as India, though they are less widespread and complex. There is the same mixture of inter-denominational, denominational, local church and individual initiatives. There is also the same progression:

1. The emphasis on outreach to people within the country, from the same background and then from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. St Andrews Church in Lahore, for example, had the 'St Andrews Sending Fellowship' in the 1970s, bringing together young graduates with a vision for mission, who are now leaders in mission organisations both within Pakistan and outside.

2. The impulse to follow the diaspora movements to other countries. In the early 1970s, for example, Vivienne Stacey, a Bible teacher with Interserve in Pakistan, began visiting the Gulf to minister to the Pakistani Diaspora Christians there, with the vision to strengthen their discipleship and equip them for outreach to their host communities.

As South Asians settled in the UK, attempts were made to minister to Christians and reach out to others. Some were initiated by mission agencies - for example Wilfred Paul was invited

by Interserve to come from India to work in Bolton, and GI Ebenezer came from India to work with Tamil people, in partnership with Indian Evangelical Mission. Some were members of Christian families who had migrated for work, or came independently, like Pastor Massey, who started the Oxford Asian Christian Fellowship. Others were themselves converts in the UK, like Kuldip Rajo, who worked with Clive Thorne, an ex-OMer, to start the Southampton Asian Christian Outreach (now Lighthouse International Christian Church).

The civil strife in Sri Lanka has sent hundreds of thousands round the world, including Christians who have either been part of the migration or have joined it for ministry. Nepalis have always migrated in large numbers, both to neighbouring countries and beyond. There are said to be over 100,000 in the USA, with the prospect of another 65,000 visas allocated for those displaced from Bhutan. Civil strife continues to be a powerful factor in migration and mission.

3. Sending missionaries to other countries to reach out to the local population. This was relatively simple between some South Asian countries, for example India, Nepal and Bhutan, but more difficult or impossible between others, for political reasons.

Going further afield was problematic, primarily for economic reasons, either because it was relatively too expensive, or because of foreign exchange constraints. Tentmaking was one possibility. In the 1990s a few Indian and Pakistani tentmakers were working in some Central Asian countries where business opportunities were available. The other avenue was through partnership with an international organisation. Indian Evangelical Mission had partnership agreements with OMF, Interserve and other organisations to send workers to Fiji, Thailand, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Opportunities and challenges today

Today, with the explosion of opportunities for professionals, as well as the growing economic prosperity of South Asia, there are South Asians everywhere, and opportunities for mission within any population.

Looking at mission in and from South Asia, there are 3 directions to keep constantly in mind

- **To** South Asia: reaching the unreached there
Working with churches and missions in S Asia
Working with diaspora South Asians who are reaching back to their 'home' people
- **To** the diaspora: reaching unreached South Asians there (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and others)
- **From** South Asia and the Diaspora to the rest of the world

When South Asian Concern began we had a vision called 100/100/100. This stood for 100 new workers to South Asia; 100 new tentmakers working within the countries; 100 going to work in other countries. This was in large part fulfilled – though not in exactly the way we had expected.

The opportunities are unlimited. The challenges are the same as they have always been: economic imbalances, distortions from the colonial period, different styles of leadership and management, cultural differences. In 1993 Dr L.N. Tluanga and I (both working at that time with Interserve India), were asked to write papers on this topic for the 1994 United Conference of Interserve. The issues we listed are all relevant today. Dr Tluanga's suggestions for moving forward are also familiar:

1. *The goal must be clear*
2. *We must do it step by step*
3. *We must count the cost*
4. *It is an on-going process*
5. *We start by evaluating our resources*
6. *We need to pray together and give together)*

What are some of the key tensions - or creative opportunities – in the South Asian context?

Here are a couple of examples:

(a) *Finding the balance between the corporate organisational structures* that have been very effectively used by Western churches and missions (and by others - look at the structures set up by India Missions Association) *and the more relational family type structures* used by many South Asians.

Many of the South Asian Christian fellowships in the UK have links with North India and Pakistan, where their members originate, and they are keen to use these, both to strengthen the churches and to reach out. So they each have their 'family' mission structure and activity, some with officially registered trust/charity status, others informal. The style is family based and entrepreneurial. For example, a woman who came to the Lord in the UK has given land back in her home village, where there are no Christians, to build a church.

'Mainstream' churches and mission organisations are looking to recruit South Asians to go and work in South Asia, but sometimes find it difficult, even with the younger generation, who have grown up in the more corporate, multi-cultural environment.

Perhaps it is easier to see the need for this when seeking to work in a third culture or country.

(b) *The diversity of cultures between South Asian communities.* The 'Jewels in His Crown' conference, for example, which brings together ministries among South Asians in the UK, is very much a cross-cultural enterprise, not just between Asian and non-Asian, but between Asians. This also makes corporate activities and partnerships harder, but also, in many ways, more relevant.

How do we respond? This is a re-phrasing of the suggestions made by Dr L.N. Tluanga and discussed in the 1994 conference.

1. We need to clarify the goal of partnership

Our goal is to work together to reach the unreached. It is not partnership for its own sake. It is not just exchange of personnel, though that is valuable. It is recognising that we can and must work together and share resources in order to be more effective in reaching out. Churches from different cultures, geographical, economic and spiritual backgrounds have different resources to contribute.

George Melel, William Carey, and Bartholomew Ziegenbalg would need to qualify their answer to the question '*who invited you?*'. They were sent by the Holy Spirit, but would recognise the importance of relating to the local churches and other Christians, if they existed where they were going. (Ziegenbalg's mission was a classic example of partnership – a German sent by the king of Denmark through an English mission society to India).

2. We need to confront the obstacles to partnership

These are primarily economic and socio-political, linked to the colonial past and the current unequal structures of our globalised world. In a word, they are linked to power and inequality.

We need to acknowledge and face them with a regained Biblical perspective: one world, created and redeemed by the One God, needing to hear the message of redemption and transformation through his church. Mission is not just from 'here' to 'there'. It is in all directions. This is all the more relevant and possible in our age of large-scale diaspora movements, which have re-written geography and added to the complexity and richness of our task. We all have the privilege and responsibility not only to engage in this ourselves but to encourage, challenge and facilitate each other.

*Authentic partnership is actually between two crippled partners - **the blind and the lame** - who cannot go on a journey unless the lame person provides eyes for the blind and the blind person provides legs for the lame. Most partnership is not worked out by sitting and talking about it. It is worked out by setting out on the journey. [1]*

The apostle Paul showed himself fully aware both of this biblical mandate and the complexities of fulfilling it. We see him going as a pioneer himself, encouraging the new churches to be involved, picking up a multi-cultural team from the new churches, maintaining good communication with the sending churches, recognising economic issues by taking finance where it was needed, and inviting the church in Rome to finance and support his proposed mission to Spain. [2]

3. We need to commit ourselves to work together for the long haul.

This includes

- showing mutual respect
- looking for ways to share, facilitate and make connections
- giving space and freedom: don't always offer to help or intervene
- accepting different styles of working and management
- building multi-cultural leadership
- talking openly and frequently to each other (use the appropriate style of communication – is it email? phone? letter? face to face meeting? a combination?)
- recognising that situations are constantly changing and developing, as cultures change

Relationships are the key, as each situation may demand a different approach. And relationships take time and effort for trust to develop.

Conclusion: is it worth it?

Is it worth going beyond our own structures and cultures to spend the time and effort to understand and work with people of other backgrounds? Don't we have enough to do already? There will be misunderstanding and tensions. We will have to spend time to sort these out. We will have to say "sorry", not once but many times. Is it worth the effort? Why not work separately in our own cultural and social groups?

Robert Warren describes the questions when a new leadership structure was introduced in the growing church of which he was minister:

"Will this make for twice the strength, or double the hassle? Our early experience would suggest that it will do both." [3]

Partnership will involve us in extra effort, extra cost. But it will double or triple our effectiveness in mission. We need to make conscious attempts to change our thinking and attitudes, our terminology and expectations. If we think it is complex, that is how the world has become today. Our inter-twining relationships can either become bureaucratic and choke us, or they can be rich and creative, enabling us to do what we never expected before.

We all need to rethink and restructure ourselves and our organisations, so that we can enter fully into God's multi-coloured plan.

Showing Christ as Universal Lord

We live in a world which has become a marketplace of ideas and values. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Marxism, materialism - and many others - compete for the hearts and minds of the whole world. The multinationals have spread the Gospel of Coca Cola to the corners of the planet. Petrodollars have helped to export and establish Islam from West to East - in Regent's Park, Hong Kong or Meenakshipuram. Each of these faiths and ideologies wants to be seen as the universal faith.

We have discovered the truth in Christ, or rather we have been discovered by Him. We know that He is the Way for all people. But for many, Christ is a Western figure, for Westerners; as Buddha, Krishna and others are for their own people. They will acknowledge Him as universal Lord only when they see Him incarnated and brought to them by men and women from all races and cultures.

*It is beginning to happen today, on a world-wide scale - a fulfilment of God's plan to demonstrate His "multi-coloured wisdom" to the whole universe through the church (Eph 3.9f). If this means anything it surely means that God intends the gospel not only to be **received** by people of every colour and race and tribe and language, but also to be **carried** by them. This will be a demonstration of the universal lordship of Christ.*

Appendix: some practical possibilities

1 strategic partnerships

These bring together individuals or groups who are seeking to reach a particular place or people. They agree to focus together on evangelism and church planting among that people or in that place, and to share resources for this. This kind of partnership is also described as a "Vertical Partnership". ("Horizontal Partnerships" bring together people in the same speciality - e.g. literature or radio or medical work - spread over a variety of places). These strategic partnerships are very powerful and effective. But they require effort and the will to work together and face the problems of relationships, structures and policy on the ground.

2 sharing personnel through secondments, joint projects or exchanges

Kachhwa Transformation Ministries, working in wholistic ministry in a large rural area in North India, is inviting other organisations and churches to join with them to take responsibility for a part of the area. They will share infrastructure, orientation, training and other key resources, but will have freedom to start and care for the churches in their part of the area.

3 cross-financing

- a mission in the UK provides finance to a group of missions in India to send missionaries to a third country.

- using business to generate finance for evangelistic work:

4 prayer networking

For example, encouraging prayer conferences for world mission. In the early 1980s Love Maharashtra organised some prayer conferences, in partnership with Interserve and other groups. They helped to give people a broader vision and resulted in sending missionaries.

"Adopt-a-People" is a powerful way for a local church to be involved effectively and strategically in world mission - in partnership with others. In India this is called "Serve-a-People". (Details from the India Missions Association). It provides information about unreached groups and about churches, agencies and individuals that are seeking to reach them. A local church or fellowship commits itself to pray specifically for the needs of that

group; to find out about the Christian workers there and encourage them; to seek to send workers from their church. They commit themselves to serve the people of that group through prayer, giving, sending or going.

5 creative training

Facilitate exchanges of personnel for training. Send missionaries to another country or culture for training. Japanese students came to India in the 1960s in order to prepare for cross-cultural mission in India and other countries. If this is done creatively, it can be a powerful way to facilitate partnership in all directions – the opposite of the usual "brain drain" to more affluent countries.

6 build missionary movements, not just churches

Encourage churches to reach out from the earliest possible opportunity. This will naturally follow the stages mentioned in Acts, beginning from home. But be prepared for surprises and willing to "leap-frog" to people of different cultures or further away, if this is appropriate and God's Spirit guides in that way.

Send personnel to another country to be a catalyst for joint mission. For example, the Brazilian Baptist church sent a worker to India to work with Baptist churches there to get involved together in mission to unreached groups.

7 develop multi-cultural leadership

There is a definite place for mono-cultural groups with their own leadership. It is much simpler and can be effective. But for cross-cultural ministry there is a lot to be gained by working consciously at multi-cultural leadership. It is a part of our message.

8 encourage team ministry

Encourage team ministry - take people with you for evangelism and ministry. This is the most practical way to begin. Consciously ask yourself whom you can involve with you in this way. The Ministry Fund of Interserve could be a source of extra funds to cover expenses for this.

This also needs to be encouraged by mission leadership:

- for our own sakes, because this is a Biblical pattern.
- as a way of working more effectively. Try to place people in teams rather than alone.

Encourage them to link up with other workers in the same place. The arrangement can be formalised by secondment, if appropriate. For example, EFICOR workers co-operate closely with other missions in Bihar and Orissa.

Footnotes

[1] Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, quoted by Stanley Davies, 'Can We Work Together?' in *The World Christian*, St John's Extension Studies, Nottingham, 1991, p 89. This is a useful summary of the issues of partnership.

[2] Luis Bush, *Funding Two Thirds World Missions*, Paternoster, 1990 has a sensitive discussion on the potential and pitfalls of money in developing partnerships.

[3] Robert Warren, *In the Crucible*, Highland Books, 1989, p 211.

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