

## RESPONDING TO POLARIZATION AND DIVISION: THE MISSION OF THE INDIAN CHURCH TODAY

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the mission of the Indian Church in an era marked by political polarisation, religious nationalism, and social division. It underscores the challenges arising from the perception of Christianity as a foreign import and the current socio-political environment that marginalises religious minorities. The author suggests both outward strategies—such as adopting a low profile, enhancing social responsibility, and building mutual relationships—and inward approaches, including cultural translation of the Gospel, personal holiness, and community development. Emphasising holistic engagement and sustainable witness, the article advocates for a renewed, contextually aware mission that mirrors the resilience and integrity of the early Church.

**Key Words:** Indian Church mission, polarisation, religious nationalism, holistic engagement, contextualisation, home Church, Christian witness

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## 1. Introduction

The concepts of mission and Church are fundamentally rooted in the life and vocation of the disciple—one who has discerned and embraced the divine call of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Jesus Himself did not frequently employ the terms “mission” (*missio*) or “Church” (*ekklesia*) in His teaching. Yet through His life, ministry, and praxis, He defined their essential character and theological purpose. The Gospels consistently portray Jesus as the one sent by the Father (Jn 3:17; 6:38), and His earthly ministry is best understood as the embodiment of that divine sending—*missio Dei*, the mission of God. As David Bosch observes, “Mission is not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God”.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’ mission is explicitly revealed in His inaugural sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, where He quotes Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” (Lk 4:18–19; cf. Isa 61:1–2). This declaration articulates the core of His public ministry—holistic in scope, integrating proclamation, healing, liberation, and restoration. His ministry is therefore not merely soteriological in the narrow sense but encompasses the full breadth of the Kingdom of God.

Though Jesus rarely used the term “mission,” He imparted its substance to His disciples, culminating in the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Mt 28:19–20). This missional mandate constitutes not only the climax of His earthly instruction but also a Trinitarian framework: sent by the Father, Jesus sends His followers in the power of the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:21–22).

This theological vision is echoed in Vatican II’s *Ad Gentes*, which affirms that “the Church on earth is by its very nature missionary, since, according to the plan of the Father, she has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> The Church is therefore not a passive institution but an active participant in the ongoing mission of God—what Christopher Wright calls “the whole Church taking the whole gospel to the whole world”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, 390.

<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (ed.), Austin Flannery, Vatican Council II, Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1975, §2.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010, 25.

Jesus' own practice exemplified this. Every healing, every teaching, every act of compassion served to announce and embody the Kingdom. Even when responding to physical or material needs, His ministry remained Spirit-anointed, holistic, and purpose-driven. His stated mission—"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk 19:10)—emphasizes salvation not only as a future hope but as a present, transformative reality.

Moreover, Jesus' frequent use of terms like coming and going subtly communicates the dynamics of sending, reinforcing that mission is inseparable from being chosen, formed, and commissioned. In Johannine theology especially, to be "sent" (*apostellō*) implies both divine initiative and relational obedience (cf. Jn 17:18). This missional identity is foundational to the Church's existence and activity. As Darrell Guder puts it, "The Church does not 'do' mission; the Church is mission".<sup>4</sup>

Mission entrusted to each baptized is a function that the Lord himself wants to accomplish. In other words, we can say that the Church is commissioned by the Lord to go for the mission or be the mission. Philip Ryken calls mission explicitly as, "A clear, unambiguous statement of [the Church's] mission to the world."<sup>5</sup> Or to put it more effusively, "The mission of the Church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into communities, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father."<sup>6</sup> And this mission continues to exist in various contexts of which human beings are essential parts.

We Indians, live in a land of multicultural and multi-religious context. Although in the first century itself Christianity came to India, for centuries Christianity in India, by and large, has been the outcome of foreign missionary activities. Hence, today the witnessing of Christ in India has been often labelled or some people deliberately attribute as a foreign agenda linked with colonisation. The leadership of the Church and the mission of the Church for a long time were taken care

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<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Guder, (ed.), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Graham Ryken, *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church*, Chicago: Moody, 2003, 129.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001, 62.

by the foreign missionaries and consequently the colonial tenet was associated with it. Indian Church has to bear the stigma of foreignness even today because we failed to revive the identity of Indian Christianity and Christian mission. Though over the centuries we have been making efforts to bring forth our own identity, still in many perspectives, ecclesiastical traditions and mission endeavours of the Church are very much prejudiced by the historical past. The integration of Gospel values into the local, cultural and indigenous roots is in a snail pace. This passive movement is hindering meaningful and relevant Christian mission and witness in India's multi-religious context. Besides, the ruling governance polarizes us and tries to desert us in the name of foreign identity on the basis of weird ideologies. The recent State Assembly election results have triggered a fear in us and the agendas and the ambience that are foreseen for the forthcoming Union election surely send us a message of death-warrant. Hence, it is the time for a wake-up call.

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of Christian mission and witness in India's multi-religious context, with particular emphasis on the present era marked by increasing polarization and social division. It seeks to rediscover Christian identity and rearticulate the purpose of Christian mission within India's pluralistic society, aiming to develop a mission strategy that is both contextually relevant and theologically grounded.

## **2. The Indian Context**

India is a land of diverse religions and a rich cultural heritage. It is home to eight major religions and recognizes 22 official languages. As the world's largest democracy, India has a population of over 1.4 billion people and is comprised of 28 states and 8 union territories. The Indian tradition is profoundly spiritual and it recognizes the supreme value of religion. Christianity came to India in the very first century itself. This country accommodated the new religion and let it spread. From times immemorial, India has always been a country with complex culture. Today India is characterized by modern scientific developments, rapid social change, stark poverty and inequality, cultural and religious pluralism and many more other aspects. Inequality in India is qualitatively different from inequality in other societies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jacob Parappally (ed.), *Theologizing in Context: Statements of the Indian Theological Association*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2002, 147.

The social and political situation of India is heart-breaking. Although India can be proud of her modern scientific developments and achievements, the first priority for most people here is still the struggle for survival. For the majority there has been no substantial improvement. The image of poverty appears to be primarily rural, yet this would be misleading because there is massive poverty in the cities. The domestic economy is integrated with the global economy, which exercises excessive and aggressive trade exchanges sucking out much of her assets.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, economic structures characterized by dependence, exploitation of labour, destruction of resources, ecological crises, unfair trade practices, illiteracy, exploitation of women, child labour, landlessness, fragmentation of land holdings, poor working conditions, inadequate salaries, unemployment and under employment. The quantum of atrocities committed against the poor and marginalized have been increasing day by day and are no longer 'news'. Visible signs of poverty and unemployment are hidden by the temporary walls to show case the good image before the world leaders when they visit our nation. Print and visual medias are silenced to evaluate and report the incumbent deficiencies to people and are compelled to make exaggerated campaign for the government.<sup>9</sup>

In India there is a strong bond between the culture and religion. There are ethnic and communal conflicts taking place due to religious fanaticism. The recent riot that has escalated in Manipur is the latest one to illustrate as an example. Everything here is sought to be given a political colour. Anything given a religious texture is easily vendible and for the same reason today almost everything is politicised and falsified. Some state governments favour a particular religion. Religious fundamentalism has been turned as an easily accessible ideology to the multifaceted nature of socio-political life. Religious fanaticism served in a 'nationalistic' dish declares to be the best 'flavour' to win the favour of the common people. Hindu nationalism instrumentalizes religion not only to retain political power but as well to weaken the very democratic principle by which India boasts of secularity and religious tolerance as the pillars of a multireligious,

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kuncheria Pathil, "Theological Reflections on the Church from India," in *Asian Horizons*, Vol. 6, no. 4, December 2012: 677-706.

<sup>9</sup> Dhinakaran Savariyar, "Hindu Nationalism and Indian Christian Response", in *The Journal of Social Encounters*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2022, 20.

multilingual, and multicultural Indian polity.<sup>10</sup> Politicians compromise their ideology and integrity just for vote and vested interests. As Rudolf C. Heredia rightly points that the religious nationalism and caste factionalism dominate Indian politics while the real economic needs, basic civic rights, genuine political participation and other legitimate demands of people are side-tracked or hijacked.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless religion is regularly and generally considered synonymous with charitable assistance for the poor in society.

The Indian democracy is unique in the world. It is as much a by-product of institutional design as it is an unintended consequence of societally based opposing forces. With an uneven track of success and failure, India's political parties serve as a forum for various societal influences. Their adaptation and agility have kept daily politics alive. Politicians' entrepreneurial spirit and routinization of politics operate as a safety valve against any form of political culture attaining hegemonic status. Furthermore, India's civilisational diversity means that no electoral majority is set in stone, and no ideological hegemony can last. The ongoing blending of India's heterogeneous set-up will continue to develop opposing tendencies and safeguard our system's democratic balance.<sup>12</sup>

India is an example of the global democratic recession, with her present transition to a hybrid regime, has had a significant impact on the global autocratization. Violation of democratic values demonstrates how democracies die today through fully legal harassment of the opposition, media intimidation, and executive power centralization. The autocrats have learned to talk more democratically while walking autocratically, preserving a legal pretence of democracy while harassing opponents and narrowing space for loyal dissent. By linking government criticism with treason to the nation, the current administration is undermining the fundamental notion of genuine opposition.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dhinakaran Savariyar, "Hindu Nationalism and Indian Christian Response", in *The Journal of Social Encounters*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2022, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf C. Heredia, "Mission as Text in Context: Religious Conversions in Contemporary India," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, Vol. 73, no. 7 (2009): 486.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dhinakaran Savariyar, "Hindu Nationalism and Indian Christian Response", 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dhinakaran Savariyar, "Hindu Nationalism and Indian Christian Response", 2022.

The constitutional vision upholds "free profession, practice, and propagation of faith".<sup>14</sup> According to Felix Wilfred, "If religious freedom is, on the one hand, immunity of a religious community from unwarranted intervention by the state or other social and political actors or by the majority religious community, it is also, on the other hand, an issue of the protection of the identity of minority groups".<sup>15</sup> In the same way, "Religious freedom has to do with the recognition of religious identities and the establishing of the necessary socio-political conditions for a peaceful and harmonious coexistence".<sup>16</sup> Religion and temples are used as the means of polarization and division. Numbing the intelligence of people with the name of religion, the governments maintain the majority and present their leaders as saviours. The inability of the majority to react in such kind of situation leads to utter chaos and the violation of the fundamental rights. The saddest part of the situation is such that highly educated persons in the society, religious leaders, civil servants, economists, editors and such kind of elite ones in the society are either brain washed or are serving as the mouthpieces of extremists. It is at this juncture that we as people who are revealed the truth through Jesus Christ to take certain steps to maintain the equity and dignity of people. Let me mention a few possibilities as Christians that we can do. I would call them as Outward and inward strategies.

## **2.Outward Strategies Applicable for Today's Mission**

There are certain things that we can do as external strategies at this time of polarization and division. Some of them are:

### **2.1. Shifting the Spotlight: from High Visibility to Low Visibility**

It is an undeniable fact that the Church in India has a high visibility due to her Institutionalization. The contributions that our Institutions rendered are beyond imagination. No one will disagree that if our society has grown to this level in the realms of education of all kinds, health and hygiene, social and spiritual upliftment in all regards, it is because of the Institutions and the committed and concerted efforts of renowned Christian missionaries. At the same time this visibility of palatial buildings and structures and systemic organizing by minorities like Christians have created some kind of fear in the majority group. That fear is also one of the reasons that they are behind us in designing the syllabus and enquiries made by ED, CBI and IT officers. It is well known that approximately forty years ago, Christian communities in India had fewer

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<sup>14</sup> *The Constitution of India*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Felix Wilfred, *Theology for an Inclusive World*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2019, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Felix Wilfred, *Theology for an Inclusive World*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2019, 74

visible institutions and structures, and the nature of their work—as well as the majority's perception of them—was markedly different. In this context, adopting a posture of low profile and reduced visibility may shift public attitudes, thereby creating space for the continued presence and mission of the Church in the country.

## **2.2. Embracing Social Responsibility in a Changing World**

The Church's mission to promote the Kingdom of God necessarily entails active engagement with the socio-economic and political realities of Indian society, with the aim of transforming them through the values of the Gospel. This implies that the Church must collaborate with secular and democratic forces committed to the well-being and dignity of all people. A practical starting point involves identifying key areas of struggle, establishing clear priorities, and developing a strategic plan of action. Though our normal tendency is to react only when we are attacked all the activities of the Church should be concentrated on the struggle movement of the Indian citizens in general. Such involvement in the struggles of the people and deeper study and analysis will certainly lead to new experience in the Indian church which will be the starting point for new ways of theologizing in India.

## **2.3. Sustainable Relationships through Mutual Trust**

At its best, mission is inherently relational and mutual. It calls for intentional collaboration that grows into deep-rooted cooperation and meaningful partnership. A biblical example of such an approach is found in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John (Jn 4:1–26). In this narrative, Jesus crosses significant social and cultural boundaries by asking a Samaritan woman for a drink—an act that defies prevailing Jewish norms. His unexpected request invites curiosity and opens the door to a profound theological dialogue, demonstrating a model of mission rooted in respect, vulnerability, and mutual engagement.

Because Jesus is willing to ask help of a woman who would have been considered beneath him, he is able to share the gospel with her. She is rewarded for her open heart with a new life in Christ, the ultimate gift. Transformed by the interaction, the Samaritan woman spreads the Word that Jesus is the Messiah among the Samaritans. And they believe in Jesus because of her testimony. Even Jesus, who gives us far more than we can ever give him, uses mutual relationships to further his mission.



## **2.4. Engaging the Whole Person, Empowering for the Long Haul**

We all are aware holistic engagement is essential. Caring for physical needs first is often the best way to reach someone. Jesus himself modeled this with his healing ministry. As Dara Vanden Bosch, a missionary in Mozambique, puts it: "dealing with a person's physical needs is often a necessary first step to prepare the soil for God's Word." This approach to mission is sometimes called holistic ministry.

Think about what we can do to give people the tools they need for locally sufficient, supported, and sustainable transformation in the communities and lives. Here, too, we are looking to Jesus's example. He showed his disciples how to make disciples and taught them his gospel so that they could share it with others. Then his followers went on to plant seeds of the gospel that could be sustained in local churches once they moved on to their next call. By design, the mission should multiply as new people carry it to new places.

## **3. Inward Strategies Essential for Today**

Along with the external strategies there can be a few inward approaches. We are now just like in a situation of the first century Christians where the civil governance is against us and more drastically when they make all efforts to hate us, hurt us, isolate us, and send us away from this homeland herself. They do not want to make any compromise with us. They present before us either to go with them or go away from this nation. At this juncture what shall we, Christians do? I think it is a time to imitate the first century Christians. They had a strong home Church before it was spread to Rome Church. Hence it is a chance for us to practice the lifestyle of home Church. A few of them that we can do are:

### **3.1. Making the Gospel Understandable in Every Culture**

We are called to live in harmony with diverse societies, cultures, and traditions. As Christian witnesses, we are to respect, honor, and seek to understand the intrinsic value of other cultural and religious expressions. The apostle Paul exemplified this approach in his missionary engagement with Gentile communities, where respect for and understanding of Greek culture were central to his strategy. Paul carefully observed and adapted to the cultural contexts he encountered, recognizing that spiritual transformation through the Gospel did not require the adoption of Jewish customs. His willingness to let go of these cultural markers enabled the early Church to transcend ethnic boundaries and laid the foundation for the global spread of Christianity.

In the Indian context, however, despite the presence of Christianity for nearly two millennia, the Church continues to bear the stigma of being a foreign entity. This enduring perception is, in part, due to the Church's historical failure to fully translate and embody Gospel values within the rich and complex fabric of Indian culture. While contextualization presents significant challenges, it remains essential for authentic and credible Christian witness in a pluralistic society like India.

### 3.2. Growing in Faith, Walking in Holiness

For the first century Christians public worship was something unimaginable, at the same time in the personal holiness they concentrated more and more and thus we have a lot of saints and martyrs in the first century. Growth in faith and personal sanctity were prime concerns for the first Christians. They were true followers and had taken resolutions to follow Jesus radically and were ready to do any sacrifice, even to die. We too have similar situation now in our country. We do encounter somewhat similar challenges. Earlier, the challenges made the first Christians strong in faith and courageous in witnessing. In the same way we have to consider that this is a chance for us to introspect into our spiritual life closely and to grow in virtuous life. In the first Century, amidst the challenging situations when a group of people were living a true, holy spiritual life, that became reason for so many people to be part of their group. And that is how the Church could be built on a strong foundation. Today the affluence of life and secular elements that crept into the religious and spiritual life of the followers are discouraging the younger generation from the true following.

### 3.3. Living as One: Strengthening Gospel-Centered Community

In the first century, early Christians, often forced to gather in caves or hidden places due to persecution, lived as a distinct and marginalised community. Yet this very context nurtured stronger communal bonds, marked by visible expressions of unity, mutual care, and sacrificial love. They embraced a spirit of *koinonia*—sharing, caring, and bearing one another's burdens (cf. Acts 2:42–47; Gal 6:2)—demonstrating that their lives matched their message. As Tertullian famously observed, outsiders remarked, "See how they love one another!"<sup>17</sup>, affirming the power of Christian community as a witness to the Gospel. This authentic living of faith enabled the organic transmission of belief to the next generation, who encountered not only doctrinal teaching but also embodied love—

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<sup>17</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. T.R. Glover, in *The Apologetic Fathers*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 39.7.

both vertical (toward God) and horizontal (toward neighbour) (cf. Mt 22:37–40).

By contrast, the contemporary Church in India often struggles to reflect this unity. The Church, which is called to be a visible sign of reconciliation and oneness (cf. Jn 17:21–23; Eph 4:3–6), frequently becomes a symbol of fragmentation. Divisions based on rite, ritual, liturgical language, regional identity, and – most grievously – caste and notions of “purity of blood” not only weaken internal fellowship but become counter-witnesses to the Gospel’s inclusive vision. As St. Paul affirms, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Ultimately, each of us plays a small yet essential role in the larger mission of the Church. Just as Jesus sowed seeds that He entrusted to His followers to nurture and grow (cf. 1 Cor 3:6), we too are called to collaborate across cultures and generations in fulfilling the Church’s mission. This mission requires moving beyond models of dependency and paternalism toward fostering interdependent, Christ-centered communities. These communities should aim to be spiritually sufficient, mutually supportive, and sustainably faithful, rooted in the Gospel and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The transformation of the world begins with the intentional witness of Christians in their daily lives. We gratefully acknowledge the profound contributions of missionaries who, often in hidden and difficult places, have labored to sow the Gospel across the length and breadth of our nation. Yet, the task of advancing the Kingdom of God is not theirs alone – it is a responsibility entrusted to every believer, carried within the heart of each Christian (cf. Lk 17:21).

Like Mary, who bore Christ and responded to God’s call with humility and obedience (cf. Lk 1:38), we too are invited to lead lives marked by personal holiness and self-giving charity. Such a life does not merely proclaim the Gospel but embodies it. It naturally resists and overcomes forces of division, polarization, and exclusion – just as the early Christian communities did through their radical unity, love, and witness (cf. Acts 4:32–35). In a fragmented world, the Church is called to be a reconciled and reconciling community, a visible sign of God’s love for all.