

asian missions advance

79

Spring 2023 | Volume 29 | Issue 2

ISSN 2765-0936

Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association *published by*
the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development

THE FUTURE OF MISSIONS IN INDIA:

A perceptive glance at missions in India and a roadmap for the India Missions Association

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INTRODUCTION

India is one of the largest mission fields in the world as a nation. Out of the 1.4 billion Indians only 2.3% identify themselves as Christians and this percentile figure has remained unchanged for the past 60 years. While the Christian population remained static the nation has galloped forward as an emerging economic power and her opinion is sought after and respected in the global political arena. But of late the political radicalization and its treatment of the minority especially the Muslims and Christians has also become a grave political and social concern.

Therefore, in the midst of such developments what is the future of missions in India? This article introduces three general trends that defines Indian mission and four opportunities for missions in India.

THE FUTURE OF MISSIONS IN INDIA

Three General Trends that Affects the Cause of the Gospel in India.

1. Indian Socio-Political Climate

The present climate of open opposition to the spread of the Gospel and targeted intimidation of Christian workers will continue. However, we should do well to be reminded that this is not the first time that Christians in India are facing such opposition. The so-called "Freedom of Religion Act" law is enacted in several states since 1967¹, an act legally disguised to persecute any religious conversation targeted especially at Christianity. But the fact of the matter is that of late the persecution has intensified in various forms. The Open Doors' World Watch List

that profiles countries where it is most difficult to profess and practice the Christian faith, had ranked India in 28th position in 2014 but in 2022 it has risen to 11th position.² Open Doors estimated that in 2021, an average of 73 Indian Christians per day experienced some form of persecution. Such reports can easily be corroborated by any mission leader within the country, leaders who can share testimonies of interruption of Sunday worship service or house prayer meetings under the fabricated charge of forced conversion or attempt to convert with alurement or that they have no permission to conduct public

². <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>

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1. For further reading: <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/anti-conversion-laws-in-india-states-religious-conversion-1752402-2020-12-23>

worship in private homes, etc. When such incident happens the bewildering part is the action rather the inaction of Police personnel. They will either turn a blind eye to such commotions or at best arrest the victims, that is the Pastors or Christians leaders under “protective custody” but take no action against the perpetrators of the hate crimes.

But despite such opposition it is very encouraging to note that the spirits of believers, more so, that of the grassroots workers are not dampened nor does it impede the work of the Holy Spirit in our country. This is perhaps, because we understand that persecution for the sake of the Gospel is not a new thing for the followers Christ and that this is what our Lord has already foretold.

Having said this, we should be like the sons of Issachar who, “understood the signs of the times and knew the best course of action to take” (1 Chronicles 12:32). As our Lord Jesus says we should be “wise” and “walk circumspectly” in our witness. This means that we may need to re-strategize and look at new and innovative ways of doing missions: Ways and means whereby we will earn the goodwill of the people around us rather than their wrath, like the believers of the early church who “enjoyed the favor of all the people” (Acts 2:47). Gone are the days of door to door evangelism, tract distribution or open air witness, now we need to innovate ways of effective witness.

I do believe that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Therefore, we should not despair rather take it as an opportunity to know God's ways and experience his leading afresh.

2. Financial Situation

There was a time when resources were readily available for “missions and evangelism” but the situation is fast changing. Globally there is less resource available, nationally receipt and utilization of funding from overseas sources is being scrutinized more intensely. Further, the new directives under the FCRA³ regulation stipulates that money received from overseas can be utilized specifically only for the designate program for which the funding is received and there is also a cap on the percentage of donation an organisation can spend on administrative overhead.

However, this does not mean that funds are not available nor does it mean that we are not allowed to receive any funding from outside the country. It means that, firstly, we need to be more accountable in managing our resources and programs. Gone are the days when we can use the money we received in any way we see fit, and spend large expenses on administrative overhead including salary, etc. Secondly, it is now prompting us to look at mobilizing resources from within the country, this indeed is a positive development – a step in the right direction

3. FCRA = Foreign Contribution Regulation Act

for self-sufficiency of the church of India. We do acknowledge that there are many mission agencies that raise the bulk of their budget from within the country but more need to be done until we can come to a position when we can all stand on our own feet even and reduce our dependency on overseas contributions.

3. Challenges From Within

However, many Christian leaders in India will agree with me that the greatest challenge to the growth and flourishing of Christian faith in India is from within the Church. The first challenge is the lack of unity amongst the faithful. In reality India is not a homogeneous nation but a conglomeration of nations with diversity of cultures, customs, language and religion. And even within the Christian faith, inadvertently, there is diversity in terms of denominations, and language. There has been attempts for unity with the formation of the Church of South India (CSI), the Church of North India (CNI) and the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) but these have not been able to bring about the desired unity. The effort for unity is compounded by the emergence of the independent and autonomous churches. They are primarily among the ‘mission fields’ among the newer believers. So now we have the divide between the so called traditional Churches and the new and emerging churches.

Another challenge within the church, is the issue of integrity among the leaders of the church. The arrest of the Moderator of CNI on fraud charges, on 12 September 2022,⁴ is just the tip of the iceberg of the cases where church property is being used for personal gains by those appointed to judiciously administer God’s property.

Thirdly, the nominalism especially within the traditional church members is another cause of concern. Statistically, the percentile population of Christians in India remain in the region of 2.3% for the past 60 years. There are many Christians who choose not to witness to their neighbors or friends because of the apprehension that they are antagonized and lost their friendship, hence, they prefer to maintain cordial social relations to active witness in obedience to the Great Commission.

However, all is not lost. Because these challenges are being vocalized in the churches and more importantly, there is the “seven thousand”⁵ faithful, though a minority and from the marginalized community are ardent in their faith in Christ Jesus and zealous in their obedience to fulfill the great commission.

Opportunities and Missional shift for the 21st Century India

The India that is marching into the 21st century

4. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/madhya-pradesh-bishop-pc-singh-arrested-from-nagpur-airport/article-show/94147159.cms>

5. cf. 1 Kings 19:18

is a confident India with growing economic and political clout in the world arena. And as the country progresses the mission challenges also evolves therefore, the church need to keep abreast of the evolving mission scenario and prepare herself to effectively meet the challenges, not as challenges but as opportunities. Below is the list of some of the prominent challenges.

- 1. Rural to Urban:** The population of India is shifting from rural to urban rapidly. The 2011⁶ Indian Census indicated that 32% of Indians live in urban area and by 2030 it is projected to increase to 41%. There was a gradual increase of population in India since the last census enumeration in 2001. The urban population in 2001 was 286.1 million, residing in 5,161 urban settlements. By 2011 the urban population had increased by 91 million to 377.1 million, an increase of 31.81% and urban centers raised to 7,935, an increase of 2,774 or 53.75%. India has eight cities among the list of 50 most populated cities in the world. However, roughly 80% of our current mission activity is in rural areas and among the least privileged peoples groups. In the coming years our mission strategy need to take into account the shifting population trends, and proportionately spread our resources both human and financial to address this challenge.
- 2. Youth of India.** India is a young, for 54% of the population is below the age of 25 years and the percentile increases to 70% when we factor in persons 35 years and below. It may be noted that the Government of India consider youth as those 35 years and below for their policy planning. The youth are the future of our nation yet only 0.8% of its population professes to be Christian. Further cursory survey indicates that fewer than twenty national level mission agencies has a dedicated youth outreach ministry department. They may have youth ministry department that caters to the youth of the church but specifically on outreach to youth is missing. Similarly the youth ministry department of the churches focuses primarily on nurture and discipleship of their own members and consider outreach simply as a program. In view of this statistics missions and churches need to develop ministries specifically for youth outreach keeping in mind the mindset and culture of Gen Z post-modern generation.
- 3. Women: Harnessing Power of Women** within the church: 48.5% of Indians are female and amongst the Christian the percentile raises to 53% (3 million) with a men-women ratio of 1000:1009. However, while the womenfolk are relatively successful in the spheres of politics and corporate world the same cannot be said

6. India rely on a decadal Census calculation for all its official programs. The last Census was conducted in 2011 and due to the Covid-19 pandemic the scheduled 2021 census is yet to be conducted.

of the church. The CNI diocese of Kolkata ordained the first women as priest only in 2015, 200 years after the birth of the Church, while the Church of South India ordained the first women priest in 1987. Thus far in the history of the Indian church there is only one woman bishop, Bishop Pushpa Lalitha and was ordained by CSI in 2013. In 2021, out of 286 member Mission of the Indian Mission Association (IMA) only 17 Mission agencies were led by a female a mere 5% leadership representation. As such, though women are a large influential bloc in the church and potential mission mobilizers yet they remain untapped. If women of the churches could be mobilized and trained they could be a potent force in church life and for missions. Not only can they reach their peers but also they can be effective resource mobilizers for missions as evident in the North-Eastern Indian churches.

- 4. Influencing the Influencers⁷** is another mission trend of the future that is slowly gaining ground. Without diminishing our current focus on the “least among us” we need to accelerate our mission to reach the “influencers” of the nation: people who are the decision makers and “movers and shakers” of the nation. Only when we reach these “peoples group” can we see effective transformation of attitude and influence in our society, corporate world and government space and policies.

In the light of the present socio-political scenario and a perceptive look in the future, the time has come for Indian Missions to review and re-strategize on the way we do missions. We will need to review our methods of mission and re-orientate our target groups. While maintaining the good works being done in the rural area with emphasis in church planting, the time has come for us to broaden out mission outlook be it in terms of geographical area of ministry or the nature of ministry focus. We should not allow the present climate of intimidation and harassment by a few radical groups to dictate our ministry, rather using this as a pivot we could retrospect on past performances and re-envision and accelerate our future mission endeavors.

The India Missions Association: Needs, Challenges and her Relevancy⁸

The Indian Missions Association was established in 1977 with five members; currently there are 296 missions organizations and Churches as members. During its long history IMA has always been in the forefront of missions in India as its catalyst and

7. a phrase coined by Rev. Susanta Patra, former General Secretary of IMA

8. This section is included as directed by the editor to “write something about India Missions Association while under your leadership”. It is an edited and redacted version of policy paper – a decadal road map, presented in 2018 to the general assembly.

mentor. Indeed, in many ways IMA has fulfilled its objectives and has nurtured many leaders and mission agencies.

But in the course of the 40 plus years journey, the dynamics of the very nature, purpose and function of IMA has evolved.

Forty six years ago, when IMA started there were fewer than 10 credible Missions Agencies in India and mission awareness in the churches and amongst believers was just emerging. It is for this reason the leaders then felt the need for unity and fellowship and an umbrella body to represent them both nationally and internationally. Thus the India Missions Association was conceived during the annual meeting of the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) in January 1977.

Originally six Missions came together to initiate the formation of IMA, it increased to nine by the time it was formally registered as a Society. Now we have 296 Registered members, with about sixty member Missions who are actively participating in all its activities.

Then, the IMA members were young, majority still at its initial stage, struggling in every way – financial, personnel and connections, and even in terms of proper skills for the Task. Now, many members have matured in every way with properly articulated policy, financially stable, adequate member of missionaries, able leadership, etc.

Currently, we can broadly categorize our members into three groups:

1. Matured and Actively supporting IMA ministries.

Perhaps about 30% of IMA membership will fall under this category. They are members who are matured, and well structured and well governed. In many ways they do not need the help of IMA anymore, rather they prepared to extent help to IMA and its members when needed.

2. Fellowship Members: There are some members who are with IMA primarily for the sake of being part of the national grouping and for fellowship.

3. Dependent: Then there are members, in fact, the majority members who are desirous of help from IMA: assistance in the form of monetary resources and trainings. In fact, there are many more out side of IMA in this category who would want to join if they are able to see the benefits of being members of IMA.

The Role of the India Missions Association in the next decade: The Future of IMA, her Relevancy and Role

Often, doubt arises as to whether IMA has a role to play in the future of missions in India. Doubt arises, because many members of IMA have matured with sufficient funds available, organizations are functioning commendably, so much so that often they are able to function independently relying on their

own network of supporters. But when we see the magnitude of challenges that faces us we realize that we cannot do it alone, we need to come together for in unity there is strength and only through collaborative action can we overcome the challenges. If we remain united and would work together, we can be synergized and these challenges can actually become opportunities.

The India Missions Association began as an umbrella, providing a protective shelter to all those engaged in mission. Today it has evolved from being not only an umbrella but also more importantly a neutral platform where one and all can come for fellowship, network and for collaborative re-envisioning and equipping.

Below are some of the areas that is identified after a thorough study of the past and present accomplishment of IMA and that we as an Association can and should do in the future.

1. Networking

One of the Objectives of IMA is “To be a Facilitator for cooperation, partnerships & networks through sharing resources.

Networking has been and will continue to be one of the major activities of IMA. Networking can be both within and without our national boundaries. Networking result in collaborative endeavors, such as the Bandhu Seva Network, India Mission Researchers Network, Church planters network etc.

Networks help Missions for collaborative efforts, share information and resources and also results in comity arrangements. These efforts are vital if we are to reach the majority of our fellow countrymen at the earliest possible time. IMA as an association thus has no conflict of interest with any of the member missions and therefore is able to provide a neutral platform for such networking activities.

2. Research, Strategic planning, and Vision Casting

Another objective of IMA is “To be a Catalyst in evolving corporate vision, ethos & strategy”.

I believe this is one of the key mandates of IMA as an association. While every mission develops and focuses on their own vision as per their organisation Vision statement and ability, IMA become the clarion voice to rally the Christian organizations and churches involved in missions to look at the larger picture, that is India, and act collaboratively.

Research is important to study the current realities and assesses the needs and gaps in missionsfields and opportunities for missions. As such, research will be one more area where IMA can continue to actively involve in order to effectively steer the Indian missions. Research needs resources and manpower and it is for this purpose the Indian Mission Researchers Network (IMRN) has been formed where majority of Indian mission researchers both of individual and organization has joined hands. IMRN’s objective is to cooperate and share resources for all research needs and more importantly, make it

available to genuine Mission organizations without charge.

Vision Casting and Strategic plan will be possible when we garner credible data and have it analyzed. This will enable us to understand the contemporary reality and its needs and thereby be able to plan ahead for the future. Thereafter, once we have the information in our hand we will be able to assist and advice our member missions on the future directions of missions.

3. Leadership Empowerment

Leadership empowerment is an area where IMA has performed well in the past, and we plan to continue to provide this service to the member missions.

Need-Based training and consultation will continue to be one of the flagship programs of IMA wherein studying the need of the hour, consultations or trainings will be conducted. Joint programs with other like-minded organizations will also be conducted.

Advance Mission Leaders Training (AMLT), has benefited many upcoming mission leaders in the previous edition. Therefore, we perceive that it is time again to re-introduce it, albeit a revised curriculum.

Training of Trainers for various ministry specific programs will continue.

4. Missionary Orientation

Missionary training was one of the founding objectives of IMA. In pursuance to this founding objective, the Indian Institute of Inter-Cultural Studies (IIICS)⁹ was established, and continue to provide services to the marginalized mission agencies and mission workers. However, preparing missionaries just prior to deployment is still a need that is expressed by several Missions. Most larger Mission agencies have their own training and orientation programs but the smaller ones lack such facilities. In response to such feedback, the executive committee has approved in principle to conduct a short-term Missionary Orientation programs.

5. Persecution Care

Persecution care is one area where IMA has thus far delegated it to those others who have dedicated ministry on this issue, like the EFI Religious Liberty Commission (EFIRLC), Persecution Relief, Open Doors etc. This was done primarily to avoid duplicity, conflict and confusion. But we are realizing that many of our members are in the front-line and are either highly vulnerable to or already affected by persecution. Therefore, study is being made to establish a "Persecution Care" desk at IMA headquarters. The task of this desk will be (1) to educate our frontline ministers of their legal rights at the same time how to exercise caution and restrain in our ministry. (2) Secondly, to provide for spiritual and emotional support and care to the affected, and (3) thirdly, when necessary to provide material relief to

9. also known as Indian Institute of Missiology (IIM)

the affected.

CONCLUSION

During its long history IMA has always been in the forefront of missions in India as its catalyst and mentor. Indeed, in many ways IMA has fulfilled its objectives and has nurtured many leaders and mission agencies. But the dynamics of IMA and its relationship with member missions have evolved, and the needs and challenges of India mission is continually changing. Therefore, unless IMA also keep in step with these changes, its relevancy will diminish and there is a danger of even becoming redundant. This opinion is not a negative critic on the past performances but a bold acceptance of the present reality. Such bold acknowledgement and course alignments will enable IMA to continue to play the role of a catalyst and one that come alongside each member mission.

It has always been my conviction that as the General Secretary, I should not bring my own vision to the India Missions Association because, IMA being an Association, the Vision of IMA should be the collective Vision of its members. The general secretary may take the role of a catalyst, guiding the members mission to envision a vision and purpose and thereafter may take the lead role to implement the vision. But the members need to take ownership of the Vision and mandate of the India Missions Association.

As Henry Ford has said, "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress; working together is success", let us continue to work together so that we will take IMA into the 50th year with renewed vision of purpose and with zeal.



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