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REVISITING MISSION STRATEGIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF INDIA

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1. Introduction

India is a pluralistic and democratic nation in which religion, culture, politics, caste, ethnicity, and national identity have continually interacted and contested one another. Since independence, Indian nationalism has developed through competing visions of the nation, particularly between constitutional-secular nationalism and forms of Hindu nationalism that have increasingly been articulated through the ideology of *Hindutva*. In this changing context, Christian mission in India cannot be understood merely as a religious enterprise concerned with evangelism, conversion, and church planting. Mission is inevitably shaped by the political, cultural, and social environment in which the Church exists. The contemporary rise of religious nationalism, debates over conversion, anti-conversion legislation, restrictions on foreign funding, and increasing suspicion toward Christian institutions have created a new context in which traditional missionary strategies require critical reassessment. Mission in Acts is therefore not merely geographical or numerical expansion but involves witness, resistance, negotiation, boundary-crossing, community formation, and public engagement.

2. The Historical Development of Mission Strategies in India.

The history of Christian mission in India spans nearly two millennia and reflects changing political, cultural, and religious contexts. Although missionary strategies changed across different historical periods, evangelism, conversion, and the formation of Christian communities remained an underlying thread. *ἔσθε θεοὶ μου μάρτυρες*—"You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8 NRSV)—captures this basic missionary vocation as Christian witness.

The arrival of European powers introduced a new dimension to Christian mission through colonial patronage. Under the Portuguese Padroado, missionary activity was closely connected with Portuguese political authority, creating an institutional relationship between colonial power and the expansion of Christianity. Under British rule, missionary societies benefited from the wider colonial environment through access to education, printing, transportation, and institutional networks. The Charter Act of 1813 marked an important shift in the legal environment for missionary activity and provided for the promotion of education. Although missionary organizations were not simply extensions of colonial government, their proximity to colonial structures contributed to the perception of Christianity as a foreign religion and conversion as connected with Western political and cultural interests. Thus, colonial patronage created both opportunities for mission and a fundamental tension between Christian witness and its association with European power.

Christian institutions provided education, healthcare, famine relief, and alternative forms of social organization, creating spaces in which marginalized communities could pursue new forms of social identity and opportunity. At the same time, caste discrimination persisted within sections of the Church, revealing the tension between the liberating claims of conversion and the continuing presence of caste within Christian communities. This tension became particularly significant as Dalits and Adivasis entered Christian communities in different regions of India. Their conversions cannot be explained simply in terms of

missionary influence. Conversion was often connected with aspirations for dignity, equality, education, social mobility, and liberation from caste oppression. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries therefore witnessed increasing efforts to address the problem of Christianity's foreign association through indigenous leadership and contextualization. Indian Christian leaders such as V. S. Azariah and K. T. Paul emphasized the need for an Indian Church rooted in Indian leadership, resources, and methods.

After independence, mission increasingly moved toward a holistic understanding in which evangelism was connected with social justice, education, healthcare, human dignity, and liberation. Dalit and tribal theologies further challenged missionary models that were insufficiently attentive to caste, culture, land, identity, and marginalization. Within this context, conversion became more than a question of religious affiliation. If conversion is understood merely as the numerical movement of people from one religious community to another, it can easily be interpreted as religious competition and intensify suspicion in a pluralistic society. A more comprehensive understanding recognizes the personal, social, cultural, and political dimensions of conversion. For marginalized communities, conversion could involve questions of dignity, identity, caste, citizenship, and social belonging. Consequently, Dalit conversion cannot be understood simply as a change of religion; it may also represent a search for an alternative social identity and resistance to structures of exclusion.

The historical development of mission in India may therefore be understood as a movement in which evangelism and conversion remained central, while the means and social location of mission changed. Colonial patronage enabled the expansion of Christian institutions but also contributed to the perception of Christianity as foreign. The subsequent emphasis on indigenization, contextual theology, and social engagement represented an attempt to disentangle Christian witness from colonial dependence. The contemporary challenge is therefore not simply how to persuade people to become Christians, but how to build Christian communities that embody equality, dignity, justice, and solidarity. Where conversion is proclaimed without corresponding transformation within Christian communities, particularly regarding caste and social exclusion, the Church risks contradicting the liberating message of the gospel.

4. Hindu Renaissance, Nationalism, and Hindutva.

The growth in Christian mission activities have also invited challenges and resistance. This resistance should be seen as polemic and dialectic. This resistance has been from the Hindu faith in various form. Hindu responses to colonialism developed through several forms such as religious, cultural, and intellectual renewal. Figures such as Ram Mohan Roy's Brahmo reformism, Dayananda's Arya Samaj reform, Vivekananda's neo-Vedantic universalism, Besant's Theosophical and nationalist work, and Aurobindo's political-spiritual, contributed in different ways to the recovery and reinterpretation of Indian religious and cultural traditions. These movements emerged partly in response to Western education, colonial rule, and Christian missionary criticism, although their theological and political orientations differed considerably.

A further development was the emergence of a more explicitly political understanding of Hindu identity. V. D. Savarkar's formulation of *Hindutva* represented a significant stage in this development. In *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923), Savarkar presented Hindu identity primarily in cultural and national rather than merely theological terms. His conception of Hindu belonging was closely associated with the ideas of *Pitribhumi* (fatherland) and *Punyabhumi* (holy land), thereby linking territory, ancestry, culture, and religious heritage in the definition of national identity. Subsequently, K. B. Hedgewar established the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925, seeking to organize Hindu society around a conception of cultural and national solidarity. M. S. Golwalkar subsequently developed more systematic formulations of Hindu cultural nationalism, particularly in *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939). Political leaders and organizations later translated elements of these ideas into electoral, social, and institutional forms.

After the 1980s, and particularly during the 1990s, the political influence of Hindutva became increasingly significant. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the electoral expansion of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) substantially transformed India's political landscape. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement demonstrated how religious symbols, historical memory, territorial claims, and political mobilization could be brought together in the construction of a Hindu nationalist political identity. These developments also had significant implications for religious minorities and for the public perception of Christian mission. In some contexts, Christian evangelism—particularly among Dalit and Adivasi communities—has been interpreted not simply as an exercise of religious freedom

or an expression of individual religious conviction, but as a challenge to established Hindu social and cultural identities.

This creates a fundamental problem for Christian mission. Christianity is perceived as foreign, conversion is interpreted as a political act against the nation rather than as a matter of religious conviction and freedom. The Church must therefore distinguish clearly between Christian faith and foreign political or cultural identity. Indian Christianity must demonstrate that Christian commitment and patriotic citizenship are not contradictory. At the same time, The Church's loyalty to the nation should instead be expressed through service, justice, constitutional values, protection of human dignity, and solidarity with vulnerable communities. Such an approach enables Christian mission to participate in the life of the nation without identifying the gospel with any particular ethnic, cultural, or political ideology.

5. The history of the Anti-conversion laws.

Restrictions on religious conversion in India predate independence and reflected concerns about changes in social, cultural, and political identity. After independence, these concerns entered constitutional debates through Article 25, which guarantees freedom of conscience and the right to “profess, practise and propagate” religion. The Niyogi Committee on Christian Missionary Activities (1954–56) intensified these debates by associating missionary activity with inducement, material benefits, foreign influence, and threats to social cohesion. Subsequently, Odisha (1967) and Madhya Pradesh (1968) enacted laws regulating conversion through force, fraud, or inducement. In *Rev. Stainislaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (1977), the Supreme Court upheld the state’s authority to regulate forcible and fraudulent conversion while distinguishing propagation from a fundamental right to convert another person. The Arunachal Pradesh legislation of 1978 further connected conversion with the protection of tribal religious traditions.

The later development of anti-conversion legislation in Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka expanded these regulations to include coercion, undue influence, allurement, misrepresentation, and, in some cases, conversion associated with marriage. Thus, the history of anti-conversion legislation reflects not only concerns associated with Hindu nationalism but also wider popular anxieties about religious change, cultural preservation, tribal identity, family, and social cohesion. At the same time, these laws raise continuing constitutional questions concerning the balance between individual freedom of conscience and religious choice and the state’s authority to prevent coercive or fraudulent conversion.

6. The Political Challenge before the Church.

The contemporary Church operates within a constitutional framework that affirms equality, religious freedom, diversity, and pluralism. Christian mission should therefore support constitutional principles that enable diverse communities to live together. The rise of majoritarian politics has, however, intensified concerns about minority loyalty, foreign influence, missionary activity, and funding. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), enacted in 1976 and subsequently amended, has increasingly regulated foreign contributions, while the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 proposes further provisions concerning assets when FCRA registration ceases. Although the FCRA applies to all eligible organizations, its impact has been particularly significant for Christian institutions, exposing concerns about financial dependency and the need for greater accountability. These developments call for greater financial transparency, institutional responsibility, and indigenous self-reliance. The Church’s response should be responsible public engagement grounded in justice, peace, human dignity, and the common good.

This context requires a course correction in mission strategy. The Church must become more indigenous, self-reliant, socially engaged, politically responsible, and culturally sensitive. Foreign funding and leadership have contributed significantly to Indian Christian mission, but excessive dependency can weaken indigenous agency. The principle of “Indian men, Indian money, and Indian methods” therefore remains relevant. Indigenous leadership should mean more than replacing foreign personnel with Indian personnel; it should involve developing an Indian theological imagination capable of responding to India’s social, cultural, and political realities. The wide spread Christian presence in various parts of the country, with institutions, establishments, and human resources, the Church should have made her presence felt in

7. Biblical foundation for future mission.

Among the books of the Bible, Acts of the Apostles speak of Mission methods. David J. Bosch's understanding of the New Testament as a missionary document provides an important starting point for reconsidering Acts. Bosch does not treat mission merely as one theme among many in the New Testament. Rather, the New Testament itself emerged within communities whose existence was shaped by their participation in God's mission. Acts can therefore be read as a missionary narrative in which the gospel moves across geographical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political boundaries.

Warren Carter's emphasis on the Roman imperial context further demonstrates the importance of reading the New Testament within the political and social realities of the first century.⁶ Acts presents the Christian movement within a world structured by political authority, economic inequality, religious institutions, citizenship, ethnicity, and imperial power. This makes Acts particularly significant for a contemporary Indian reading of mission because mission does not take place outside political reality.

8. Resistance, Negotiation, and Alternative Community in Acts.

Acts present at least three important missionary patterns that are relevant to contemporary India: resistance, negotiation, and alternative community.

First, Acts presents resistance to unjust or competing claims of authority. At Pentecost, people from different nations hear the gospel in their own languages (Acts 2:1–13). The event presents a multilingual and transethnic community rather than a community built upon cultural uniformity. Peter and John resist the command of the authorities to stop proclaiming Jesus (Acts 4–5). Stephen's preaching challenges established religious assumptions (Acts 6–7). Paul and Silas experience conflict at Philippi (Acts 16), while the proclamation of Jesus as king produces political suspicion at Thessalonica (Acts 17). The conflict at Ephesus demonstrates that the Gospel can also disrupt economic inter-connectedness with the religious institutions (Acts 19). Resistance in Acts is therefore, not primarily of violent resistance it is prophetic, communal, theological and public

Second, Acts presents negotiation. The early Christian community did not simply reject every existing institution. It negotiated its identity within complex social and political structures. Gamaliel's intervention in Acts 5 provides an early example. Peter's encounter with Cornelius in (Acts 10) represents a dramatic negotiation of Jewish-Gentile boundaries. The Jerusalem Council in (Acts 15) demonstrates the community's willingness to deliberate over questions of identity, Torah, circumcision, and Gentile inclusion. Paul's use of Roman citizenship demonstrates that resistance and negotiation can operate together. The Christian community maintains its distinctive identity while strategically engaging existing structures.

Third, Acts presents the Church as an alternative community. (Acts 2:42–47) depicts shared worship, fellowship, meals, prayer, and mutual care. (Acts 4:32–35) describes economic solidarity and the sharing of possessions according to need. Acts 6 demonstrates that the community is not free from inequality but possesses mechanisms for recognizing and addressing internal injustice. (Acts 8) shows how persecution and displacement become opportunities for mission. (Acts 10–11) expands the boundaries of the community through Gentile inclusion. Thus, the Church is not simply an institution that seeks to expand itself; it is a community that embodies an alternative social vision.

These three dimensions—resistance, negotiation, and alternative community—provide a valuable framework for contemporary Indian mission. The Church needs to resist injustice without becoming politically sectarian, negotiate responsibly with public institutions without surrendering its theological identity, and build communities that demonstrate equality, solidarity, and justice.

9. Toward a Course Correction.

The contemporary political situation in India requires the Church to undertake a serious process of introspection, repentance, and course correction. The question is not whether the Church should continue its mission, but what kind of mission is appropriate in the present context. A mission shaped primarily by foreign resources, institutional expansion, numerical growth, and conversion may increasingly fail to

communicate the gospel effectively in a context marked by religious nationalism and suspicion of foreign influence.

Acts offer a different and more comprehensive missionary imagination. The early Christian community was a community of witness. It resisted unjust authority, negotiated difficult boundaries, crossed ethnic and cultural divisions, cared for the vulnerable, shared resources, and developed alternative forms of community. Mission therefore could not be limited to converting people outside the Church; it also required the transformation of the Church's internal structures.

10. Examining Conversion and Church Planting

Contemporary missionary strategy also requires a reconsideration of the relationship between evangelism, conversion, and church planting. Organized missionary activity in India expanded significantly through state and institutional patronage, beginning with initiatives such as the Danish mission at Tranquebar in 1706. Later missionary societies established churches, schools, hospitals, printing presses, and translation centres. These institutions made important contributions to Indian society.

However, contemporary mission can sometimes become overly focused on numerical growth, conversion statistics, church planting, and institutional expansion. The expression “Great Commission” itself is not found as a title or designation in the biblical text; rather, it is a later theological description of Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples. In (Matthew 28:19 NRSV), the central imperative is *μαθητεύσατε* (*mathēteusate*), “make disciples,” while the surrounding participles describe going, baptizing, and teaching. the commission, therefore, should not be reduced to the numerical expansion of Christianity or the establishment of churches. The New Testament contains numerous teachings and commands of Jesus concerning discipleship, love, obedience, service, humility, and following him. Mission should consequently seek not merely religious affiliation but the transformation of life, relationships, communities, and society.

This does not mean abandoning evangelism or conversion. Rather, evangelism must be restored to its broader biblical context. Conversion should lead to discipleship; discipleship should produce a transformed life; and transformed lives should produce transformed communities. The credibility of mission therefore depends upon the Church’s ability to demonstrate in its own life the values it proclaims. Mission is not simply the transmission of a religious message or the multiplication of institutional structures; it is participation in God’s transforming mission in the world.

11. Identity, and Crypto-Christianity.

The contemporary context also requires greater attention to the complex relationship between conversion and identity. For many marginalized communities, religious identity is intertwined with caste, legal status, social mobility, education, employment, and access to constitutional benefits. Consequently, conversion cannot be reduced to a purely private religious decision. But the irony is that the churches where the converts enter, do practice caste.

The phenomenon described as crypto-Christianity, or hidden Christian identity, illustrates this complexity. Individuals may affirm Christian faith while retaining an outward identity associated with another religious or caste community because of social pressure, family relationships, employment, political circumstances, or access to reservation benefits. The existence of such identity’s challenges simplistic assumptions that religious identity is always publicly visible and socially uncomplicated.

This situation also exposes a weakness within Christian mission. If becoming Christian does not necessarily remove caste discrimination or social marginalization, then conversion alone cannot be presented as the complete answer to oppression. The Church must become a community in which marginalized people genuinely experience dignity and equality. Otherwise, people may seek Christ while remaining institutionally distant from the Church.

12. Indigenous Mission and Ashram Models.

One important resource for revising missionary strategy is India's own history of indigenous Christian experimentation. Christian Ashrams sought to communicate the gospel through Indian cultural forms, including the *āśrama* model, Indian music, dress, prayer, contemplation, simplicity, and community. Figures such as Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, and E. Stanley Jones demonstrated that Christianity could engage Indian cultural forms without abandoning Christian identity.

Similarly, cross-scriptural engagement has been an important part of Indian Christian history. Missionaries and Indian Christian thinkers engaged Indian languages, philosophical traditions, and religious texts in attempts to communicate the Christian message contextually. However, an important correction is necessary: earlier approaches often privileged Sanskritic and elite Hindu traditions while neglecting Indigenous, folk, Dalit, and tribal religious traditions. Contemporary contextual mission must therefore expand its dialogue beyond elite traditions and listen to the voices of marginalized communities. Important to know that these Hindu philosophical categories alone were considered, but the popular faith of people are a majority in the form of folk stories, tales, custom, traditions and belief systems have been ignored. All have to be taken together for consideration.

13. Mission and Nation-Building.

Christian mission in contemporary India should contribute positively to nation-building. This does not mean that the Church should seek political power for itself. Rather, it should participate in the common life of the nation by promoting justice, peace, freedom, equality, responsible citizenship, and the dignity of every person. The Church had contributed to nation-building through education, healthcare, social development, environmental responsibility, interreligious dialogue, peacebuilding, and advocacy, for vulnerable communities, but the unquestioned and rapid conversions by various organizations and churches and concerns about coercion, inducement, cultural change, or external influence, have invited resistance to a great extent.

The statement associated with V. S. Azariah, "Indian men, Indian money, and Indian methods," can therefore be reconsidered as a contemporary missiological principle. The Indian Church must develop indigenous leadership, financial responsibility, theological creativity, and culturally appropriate missionary practices. Mission should no longer be perceived as something imported from outside but as participation by Indian Christians in God's mission within Indian society.

The Church's contribution to the nation is strongest when it strengthens rather than undermines social cohesion. In a religiously plural society, Christian mission must avoid triumphalism and cultivate dialogue. The Church should demonstrate that Christian identity is compatible with responsible citizenship and that religious conviction can contribute to the common good without demanding political dominance.

Contemporary Christian mission in India therefore needs to move from foreign dependency to indigenous agency; from proclamation alone to embodied witness; from church expansion to community transformation; from domination to participation; from cultural assimilation to contextualization; and from political withdrawal to responsible public engagement. Such a mission would neither retreat from society nor seek political domination. Instead, it would participate in the *missio Dei* by serving the nation, defending human dignity, promoting justice, and creating communities of reconciliation.

14. Conclusion.

In spite of all the missiological efforts of the past twenty centuries, India has not responded to the Gospel at large per se. The resistance to the Christian missions needs to be seriously addressed. The colonial patronage, the constitutional safe guards and modern methods have not yielded great results. One has to be aware that the force of resistance grows (in the form of Hindutva) as the aggression to evangelise and convert is on the spree.

The challenge before the Indian Church is ultimately a theological and missiological one. The Church must ask whether its missionary practices embody the gospel it proclaims. In the context of contemporary India, the future of Christian mission will depend not simply upon how effectively Christianity is propagated, but upon whether Christian communities can become credible witnesses to justice, equality, reconciliation, and human dignity. Revisiting the mission strategies of Acts therefore offers not a return to the past but a way of imagining a more indigenous, contextual, participatory, and transformative mission for contemporary India.

