

# Church Leadership Development in India

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*Shekhar Singh, professor of ministry, South Asia  
Theological Research Institute, Pune, India*

**W**e all live in a broken world where economic disparity, poverty, gender bias, conflict, civil wars, refugee crises, displacement of the poor and marginalized, and natural and man-made disasters are present realities. These disparities also impact Indian society, which is pluralistic and complex. K.L. Sharma aptly describes India as,

A grand synthesis of customs, cultures, religions, and languages of the people, belonging to different castes and communities, even social, economic, and political inequality. This is the real structure and picture of Indian society. The main reality is diversity; diversity not only in regard to racial compositions, religious, and linguistic distinctions, but also in patterns of living, lifestyles, land tenure systems, occupational, and professional activities and practices.<sup>1</sup>

Indian society is not simply a collection of various ethnicities, religions, linguistic groups, castes, and regions; it is also quite complex in terms of how these various cultural dimensions intersect with each another. The church in India has often been accused of a passive response to this changing context, focusing on its own internal activities, which serve to sustain its age-old structure, turning a deaf ear to society's cry for justice, peace, and equality. This article describes how the church in India has

<sup>1</sup> K.L. Sharma, *Indian Social Structure and Change* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2007), 1.

developed leaders in response to the complex challenges of its context.

## The Indian Context and the Church's Response

The acknowledgement of context is critical to leadership development. I will highlight relevant aspects of India's larger social, religious, economic contexts in which the church exists, followed by how the church has responded to these contextual realities, both positively and negatively.

**Social context.** Indian society is hierarchical. The caste system has divided society for centuries and is deeply entrenched. At the top of the four original castes (called *varna*, or class) were the Brahmins, the priestly class, believed to have been created out of the mouth of god in order to lead worship and rituals and to advise society. The Ksatriyas, the warrior class, were created from the arm of god to serve as warriors, defenders, rulers, and administrators. The Vaisyas were created from the belly of god to be merchants and farmers, contributing to the economy. The Sudras were created from the feet of god to serve as laborers, servants, and menial workers. A fifth group, previously referred to as "untouchables," falls outside of the *varnashrama*. Gandhi referred to this group instead as "Harijans," or children of God. B.R. Ambedkar rejected this term on religious and social grounds. He instead coined the term "Dalit," which stems from a Semitic root "dal," meaning underprivileged, oppressed, and marginalized.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Indian churches are divided by castes in addition to denominations, following the prevailing societal context. Instead of coming together as one church, caste divisions result in little real fellowship and unity among congregations. This creates tension and divisions within and among the local churches.<sup>3</sup>

Indian society is also patriarchal. In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy as "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power."<sup>4</sup> Jesudason Baskar Jeyaraj comments that "the consequences of the patriarchal system on society are so serious that it is impossible for Christian ministry to ignore this marginalized and oppressed group of the society. Women are treated as

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Jesudasan Baskar Jeyaraj, *Christian Ministry: Models of Ministry and Training* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2002), 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

inferior to men because of misconceptions on their sex and gender.”<sup>5</sup> Gender discrimination persists as a sociological problem in India today.

**Religious context.** India is religiously pluralistic. Hinduism is the majority religion, followed by Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Additional tribal religions are practiced, which are broadly animistic. Because of India’s religious pluralism, many ethnic groups have emerged around religious convictions belonging to Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> What kind of leadership should the church develop in this situation? Who can bring peace and reconciliation among various religious groups?

**Economic context.** India is a developing country in which resources are distributed unequally across society. Indian society is governed by industrialists, bankers, large business owners, and some politicians because of their wealth and power. Since the social structure itself is under the control of the wealthy, the landless peasants, agricultural laborers, and daily wages workers remain under the bondage of powerful landlords. Though they work day and night, wages are not regulated, and benefits are regularly denied.<sup>7</sup> This structure perpetuates poverty and widens the gap between the rich and the poor.<sup>8</sup>

Materialism jeopardizes human community. Relationship can flourish only when people treat each other as human subjects rather than as objects. When relationships are mediated through consumer culture, people can hide behind possessions and fail to see each other’s uniqueness. Materialism increases the desire for privacy, as money gives people the power to control their own lives. Some people spend money to save time while others spend time to save money. The problems of loneliness, alcoholism, drug addiction, and divorce can be found in wealthy communities. The church must engage itself in addressing poverty through nation building.

**The church’s response.** The church in India is responding to its complex context in both positive and negative ways as we seek to develop Christian leaders. In most Indian churches, pastoral ministry is the work of a single minister. The concept of leadership is often viewed as priestly work, performing rituals on behalf of the people. By contrast, the biblical view of leadership is shepherding, which involves guiding, protection,

<sup>6</sup> William K. Kay and Paul C. Weaver, *Pastoral Care and Counseling: A Manual* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 1997), 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–64.

caring, and loving. Leadership development is negatively impacted to the degree that it is driven by caste, regionalism, gender bias, or denominationalism. Indian churches and church leaders are often blamed for their division along castes. Those who have become Christians from higher castes have difficulties attending worship services attended by lower caste Christians—even though Jesus came into the world to break down the barrier of caste. Regionalism has also plagued Indian church growth and leadership to the extent that leadership of the church has developed in few pockets of the Indian continent. Gender bias also impacts church leadership development, as women are marginalized and not given leadership opportunities in the church. Many congregational churches do not ordain women. Some of the mainline churches that do permit women's ordination do not provide opportunities for ministry.

On the positive side, the urban church is experiencing rapid growth as people migrate from rural to urban areas in search of jobs, education, and other opportunities. This prompts people to look for churches that can provide spiritual care. This urban migration can lead people to find new faith in Christ and join the church. Varying paces of population growth across regions has led to differences between urban and suburban congregations, new and long-established congregations, and congregations with varying age profiles. The present generation is comfortable with new technologies that allow people to relate in new ways. The Indian churches have been very traditional in worship, prayer, preaching, and conducting rituals. The information technology sector has opened new avenues for ministry in India, enabling churches to reach thousands of people with the gospel. Yet church leaders are still reluctant to use new technologies in evangelism, preaching, and other ministry opportunities available to the church.

The church and seminaries must make use of distance education as one of several viable options. More members of the congregations are interested to learn the word of God and desire theological training but lack the time to attend seminary for two to four years, with heavy financial requirements. The church and seminaries must be open to provide theological education by distance. Short-term leadership courses would be very useful in the present context. Congregants are looking for short-term certificate course and diplomas in leadership. Short-term courses could also be offered in biblical preaching, counseling, worship, music, and children, women, and youth ministries.

## A Whole Gospel for Whole Persons

Romans 1:16 describes the gospel of Christ as the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. The gospel creates a people, and these people may or may not erect a building. They may organize a variety of institutions with a multitude of administrators, but neither the building nor the institutions and their administrators establish the church. Only the people called together by the Holy Spirit through the gospel are the church.

Proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repent in all areas of their lives. Social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. The task of the Christian leader is to demonstrate that the church is indeed the communion of the saints, the setting where we serve each other and the world. It is the only real brotherhood and sisterhood, for within the church all are brothers and sisters, closely bound together so that a greater unity could not be imagined. Though Protestant churches lack the structure and hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, they do not lack any of the elements essential to the existence of the church of Jesus Christ.

Proclamation and social involvement are distinct activities, but both must be addressed in mission. If we ignore the world, we betray the word of God, which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God, we have nothing to bring to the world. M.M. Thomas recognizes God's wider *koinonia* in the world, a "secular fellowship" outside the church, as a sign of Christ's redemptive activity; he recognizes too the existence of a "Christ-centred fellowship" within other religions and ideologies.<sup>9</sup> Based on this "wider ecumenism and open secularism," a Christian can cooperate with non-Christian neighbors of "faith or no faith" in order to experience spiritual communion, social community, and material communism.<sup>10</sup> This understanding significantly shaped Thomas's definition of the church. In his thinking, the church is not the only sphere of Christ's activity: as Lord over society, Christ is active in other religions and ideologies as human beings are released from the false absolutes they have created for themselves.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> M.M. Thomas, Leslie Newbigin, and Alfred C. Krass, "Baptism, the Church and *Koinonia*," *Religion and Society* 19, no. 1 (1972): 72.

<sup>10</sup> M.M. Thomas, "An Ecumenical Approach to Development," *National Council of Churches Review* 100, no. 2 (1980): 69.

<sup>11</sup> Siga Arles, *Theological Education for the Mission of the Church in India: 1947–1987* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 199), 88.

It follows that openness is participating with Christ in others' deliverance from oppression to a liberated, happy life. "A church which is closed to the world which God has loved and redeemed also closes itself against God's spirit. Openness is the very fundamental characteristic of the church of Christ, and its form should be such as makes this double openness in Christ to God and the world an abiding reality."<sup>12</sup> In Christ, the church breaks down the barriers of human socio-economic systems that separate a person from cultures, ideologies, and religions.<sup>13</sup> Such view enhanced Thomas's concern for Christian participation in nation building through action groups for common humanity and social justice.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Mission of Jesus**

Some Christian traditions dichotomize evangelism and social responsibility. In this view, because evangelism relates to people's eternal destiny while social responsibility relates to temporal needs, evangelism is prioritized. This hierarchy is a remnant of the reaction against the so-called "social gospel," which identified the kingdom of God with the construction of society on a Christian basis<sup>15</sup> and was seen by some to imply that human beings can establish the divine kingdom by themselves. However, an openness to social engagement is critical for the mission of the church in India today. As Thomas states, "Evangelism has meaning at depth only as a word coming out of a church engaged with all people in their struggle for personal dignity and social justice....A partnership in nation-building between Christians and non-Christians is the proper context for evangelization."<sup>16</sup> In his view, even the Lord's Supper will be efficacious only when it is actualized in the participant's life and witness in the world; otherwise, it is mere routine.<sup>17</sup>

The church's mission should be modeled after the mission of Christ himself. S.J. Samartha understands the mission and ministry of the church as largely determined by its Christology. Samartha's concept of the "unbound Christ" in his first work on Christology, *The Hindu Response*

<sup>12</sup> M.M. Thomas, "The Open Church," in *The Church: A People's Movement*, ed. Mathai Zachariah (Mysore: Wesley Press, 1975), 62.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> M.M. Thomas and Paul David Devanandan, *Christian Participation in Nation Building: The Summing Up of a Corporate Study on Rapid Social Change*, Social Concerns Series 9 (Bangalore: National Christian Council of India, 1960), 112.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

to the *Unbound Christ*,<sup>18</sup> expresses the idea that “Christianity belongs to Christ, Christ does not belong to Christianity.”<sup>19</sup> That is, Christianity does not exhaust the person and work of Christ. The bulk of this book shows how select Hindu thinkers have responded to Christ from outside the Christian church. Samartha suggests that these make up an “un-baptized koinonia” of a Christian fellowship that extends beyond the bounds of the established church.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the apostles, and thus to the church, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21). Samartha prefers the term “witness” to “mission” because it does not imply proclamation but instead “sharing with our neighbours the hopes, the conflicts, and the ambiguities of human life.”<sup>20</sup> The rethinking of mission includes the recognition that, in a pluralistic world, other faiths may also legitimately have their own missions. He defines mission as “God’s continuing activity through the Spirit to mend the brokenness of creation, to overcome the fragmentation of humanity, and to heal the rift between humanity, nature and God.”<sup>21</sup> In witnessing the kingdom to the world, Samartha believes that the church should look for new ways of witnessing. He points out that the church should act as a catalyst for the transformation of society. He hopes that the church by its deeds can influence neighbors of other faiths to share in the blessing of the kingdom, for “the blessings of the kingdom are offered to all.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Christians “can no longer think of themselves as isolated entities moving into the future along their separate ways.”<sup>23</sup>

The church must reflect the life of Jesus who become human and sacrificed himself as God. Therefore, the church must empty itself for the sake of the kingdom to reach out to all people to enter the kingdom. “The followers of Jesus are called to be the ‘light’ of the world. They are to be salt of the earth. What is demanded is not to convert into a salt mine but just be a salt and watch out not lose their saltiness.”<sup>24</sup>

God seeks a world in which all relationships are loving and just. A

<sup>18</sup> Based on a series of lectures delivered at UTC in 1963, this was first published in German as *Hindus vor dem universalen Christus* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1970) and subsequently in English as S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> Samartha, *Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>22</sup> S.J. Samartha, “The Kingdom of God in a Religiously Plural World,” *Ecumenical Review* 32 no. 2 (1980): 163.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

pulpit that is silent on social issues frustrates the purposes of God. Many Christian individuals and some Christian communities are left without a distinctive Christian compass to guide their moral reflection on social issues. If the Christian community is to witness adequately to God's unconditional love and call for social justice, Christian preachers must engage in frequent, honest, and careful reflection on social issues. The local church must become salt and light to the suffering masses through integral mission.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.