

How Revival is Transforming the Largest Hindu Nation

Christianity is growing rapidly in the world's largest Hindu nation. Charisma looks at how the Holy Spirit is changing lives in India.

A few years ago on a hot, humid evening in Warangal, a city in southern India, about 8,000 locals gathered in a giant sports field while what seemed like 100,000 insects buzzed in the night sky. Most of the people were Hindus, but this did not stop them from visiting a Christian event hosted by a local evangelist, Harry Gomes, who is based further south in the city of Coimbatore.

As the dark-faced crowd gathered, billowing saris sparked a riot of turquoise, pink, saffron, green, aqua and red. The women in these flowing garments reclined on a huge piece of yellow fabric that covered half a football field. Men sat in white plastic chairs or stood near the edges of the field, where towering floodlights bathed the scene in a harsh glow.

Gomes, who has sponsored more than 200 outdoor evangelistic crusades in India since he began his ministry in 1996, was seated on the stage with his head bowed, oblivious to the noises from the audience or the blaring music coming from a praise team standing next to him. Accompanied by a drum machine and synthesizer, four women from Gomes' Bible college sang Indian choruses in Telugu-one of 29 major languages spoken in India today.

After a litany of announcements and more songs, an Indian minister in a black suit announced it was time for Gomes to preach. The restless crowd settled down while the dark clouds grew menacing. The bugs provided a strange soundtrack, crackling and sizzling as they hit chairs, sound equipment and

light bulbs.

A small rug was rolled out on the stage, and Gomes knelt on it, clutching his Bible in one hand and a microphone in the other. In his deep, resonating voice-obviously created for preaching-he began his brief sermon, all in perfect Telugu. (Gomes also speaks Hindi, Tamil and other Indian languages.)

After the sermon the action began. Still kneeling, Gomes began to recite a list of sicknesses and ailments. Arthritis. Tumors. Blindness. Heart problems. Skin disorders. People in the crowd began to stand. To the left of the giant stage, a woman-obviously demonized-began to scream. Two members of Gomes' ministry team ran to help her.

Gomes kept his eyes shut throughout his 15-minute prayer for the sick. He does not lay hands on people in his meetings but simply prays that Jesus Christ will reveal Himself to the Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims who come to hear him.

"It is Jesus who does the healing," he told *Charisma*. "We only need to believe and pray."

So far, about 12.4 million Indians have come to Christ in Gomes' meetings, but that is a small number compared to the total who have embraced Christianity in India in recent years. This nation of more than 1 billion people is on the verge of a spiritual upheaval.

New Testament Miracles

For Gomes and other church leaders *Charisma* interviewed, miracles are fueling much of the church growth in India.

Just ask Meshek Manepally, 46, a shop owner from a town in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. In late 2007, while attending one of Gomes' events in Pratipadu, he collapsed and began foaming at the mouth. His family had no idea what was

wrong with him, but they panicked when he stopped breathing. His skin turned darker and his body became stiff.

Manepally's son, Varaprasad, loaded his father in a three-wheel car to take him to a hospital. But while the family waited to maneuver the vehicle out of the crowd, Gomes' staff alerted him to the problem. He walked over to the car, crawled inside and prayed for the man.

Within a few minutes, Manepally was revived, and his son committed his life to Jesus after witnessing the miracle.

Said Manepally: "They told me, 'You were dead but now you are alive!' " His wife, Laxmi, said people in their village who heard about the resurrection spread the news. "For 10 days they came to see him. They treated him like Lazarus in the Bible," she says. "They told us, 'Your God is the true God.' "

Evangelist V.A. Thampy and his wife, Mariamma, witnessed a similar miracle 10 years ago in another village in Andhra Pradesh. A Christian woman named Maria had died, and locals would not give her a proper burial because her family had no money. She had been dead two days, and ants were crawling all over her corpse.

"She was ice cold," Mariamma says. "But after we prayed for her she came back to life. She still has the scars from the ant bites on her body. But she travels with me now, telling the story of what she saw in heaven while she was dead."

The Thampys, who lead an evangelistic ministry called New India Church of God, say signs and wonders have triggered thousands of conversions since they began their work in the southern state of Kerala in the late 1960s. Despite waves of persecution from Hindus and traditional Orthodox Christians, they have planted more than 2,000 churches in 23 Indian states and seven other countries.

"One hundred percent of Indian people are sick and possessed

by demons,” says V.A., who started his ministry by preaching from a coconut tree. “When we preach the gospel, they are instantly healed.”

“Most Indian gurus are possessed by demons,” Mariamma adds. “When we pray for them the demon manifests and comes out. We have many former gurus in our churches today, including one who was deaf and dumb and was healed.”

Similar outpourings of miracles have occurred in Punjab, in far northern India near the Pakistani border. Pastor John Howell, 62, has planted hundreds of churches in villages there—often after an instance of healing. In one town near Firozpur, south of Amritsar, about 50 curious Hindus attended a church service held outside the tiny home of an 18-year-old woman who was healed a week earlier of an incurable heart condition.

“After she was healed, her parents threw away their Hindu idols,” Howell says. “Now everyone in this village is visiting the church to see her.” That church, planted in 2006, grew to 75 members after the first week—in a region where Hindus enforce strict laws about food, sacred cows and proper worship.

Miracles are not always welcome in India. On more than one occasion, Hindu radicals insisted that Gomes prove his healing power. Witches and Hindu priests also have opposed him.

In one town religious fanatics registered a case against him, claiming that he was practicing medicine without a license. “But on the very first day of the crusade,” Gomes says, “the Lord healed many crippled people and they started walking. The police who witnessed this ended up asking for prayer.”

A Legacy of Persecution

It’s no surprise that India is a dangerous place to preach the

gospel. (Many historians say the apostle Thomas was either lanced or stoned by angry locals after he landed in Kodungallur, in the state of Kerala, in the first century.) The Pakistani terrorists who bombed hotels in Mumbai in November 2008, killing 173, reminded the world that religious and political tensions are seething under the façade of India's booming economy and technological progress.

The Mumbai incident captured headlines around the world. But the media paid little attention to the religious violence that erupted in late 2007, and again in the summer of 2008, in Orissa, an economically depressed state in the north central region where Christianity has been growing rapidly.

One of the most widely publicized incidents of martyrdom in recent history occurred in Orissa. Australian missionary Graham Staines, who worked with Indian lepers, was murdered there in 1999 with his two young boys. Crazy Hindu militants set Staines' vehicle on fire and burned the three alive.

Hindu mobs, energized by the radical Bharatiya Janata political party, went on more rampages last year-burning churches, leveling homes, raping nuns, and, in some cases, cutting Christians to pieces with machetes or burning them alive. As many as 118 died in the recent Orissa attacks, and local government officials were slow to quell the unrest. The violence spread to other states, including Karnataka and even Kerala, which has India's largest Christian population.

John Dayal, an Indian activist who founded the All India Christian Council, says what happened in Orissa is part of a 50-year hate campaign waged by nationalistic Hindus who draw inspiration from the Nazis of Germany. They believe India is a Hindu country, and they will go to any means necessary to defend the Hindu caste system-which keeps poor people locked at the bottom of society.

"The violence in August and September 2008 has been the worst

in our 2,000-year history in India," Dayal says. "More than 50,000 [Christians] were homeless and more than 30,000 were hiding in forests, chased like animals by fanatics who were forcing them to become Hindus or die."

Why the harsh violence? Indian church planter P.G. Vargis told missionary journalist John Lindner in August that the attacks against Christians were retaliatory strikes-aimed at wiping out the churches in Orissa because of extraordinary growth in recent years. Vargis said that when his ministry, the Indian Evangelical Team (IET), first went to Orissa there were hardly any evangelical churches there.

"Today it is difficult to travel 50 miles in this part of Orissa without encountering an IET church," Vargis says. "As of 2007, we had planted more than 1,000 pioneer churches in Orissa."

Other church leaders confirmed that the number of Christians has grown exponentially in Orissa, and they accuse the Indian government of hiding statistics. "Orissa was once completely unreached, but today as many as 28 percent of the people are Christians," one pastor told *Charisma*.

Jeet, a 29-year-old pastor, knows what it means to be persecuted for his faith. He grew up in Orissa's capital, Bhubaneswar, but his parents kicked him out of his home at age 17 when they realized he would no longer make sacrifices to a Hindu snake god. He finally admitted that he had converted to Christ through the influence of a friend.

Jeet's father told him he could return home when he was ready to renounce Jesus. The young man has not been home in 14 years. He started a church in a nearby village, and he has a goal of evangelizing the 56 unreached tribes in the region. He has been threatened numerous times by Hindu mobs.

Says Jeet: "They tell me, 'There is no need to preach Jesus here! We are all Hindus!' And I tell them, 'It is the

commandment of Jesus Christ that I preach to all people!’ “

Larry Derstine, an American who has ministered with his wife in north India since 1989 (and was forced to evacuate in September because of the Orissa violence), said almost all Christians he knows there have been persecuted. It is simply the price they pay to follow Jesus.

“They are resilient,” he says of these brave believers. “They are crushed, but they bounce back. We give them just a little bit of training and they go a long way.”

Dismantling the Caste System

Christianity is unraveling a foundational tenet of Indian culture-the idea that people are categorized by caste. Hinduism teaches that there are four castes-Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (rulers), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (laborers)-and that below these people are the Dalits, also known as the “untouchables.”

Today the gospel is extremely attractive to these 360 million Dalits, who for centuries have been denied social privileges, including access to water. The poorest of the poor, they have been told they are less valuable than animals. Although discrimination based on caste has been officially outlawed in India, most Dalits still lack educational and economic opportunities.

Radical Hindus want to keep Dalits in their place to preserve traditional social order. But in recent years, hundreds of thousands of Dalits have found Christ-and in the gospel they discovered the self-empowerment, personal liberty and human dignity that Hinduism denied them. As the Dalit Christian movement grew, radical Hindus tried to prevent conversions.

Indian missions strategist Joseph D’Souza, director of Operation Mobilization in Hyderabad, says the amazing trend of Dalit evangelism is single-handedly transforming his nation.

“The Dalit struggle for freedom is gaining strength, and their oppressors do not want them to go free,” D’Souza says. “India will soon go through a massive spiritual change, and this will match what God is doing in China.”

D’Souza also directs the Dalit Freedom Network, which has raised global awareness of Dalit oppression. He says church growth among Dalits is not only upsetting upper-caste Hindu extremists but also some Christians in the south of India who are “caste infected.” Some Christians, he says, “do not see that the gospel and caste cannot go together.”

Throughout India today, growing Pentecostal and charismatic churches are trumpeting the biblical idea that all people are created equal. It’s a radical concept in this ancient land shaped by caste values.

“In Christ there is no Brahmin or Dalit, literate or illiterate, no rich or poor,” says Shekhar Kallianpur, pastor of the New Life Fellowship in Mumbai. A former Hindu Brahmin himself, he was converted to Christ 30 years ago and is a thorn in the side of Hindu extremists.

Says Kallianpur: “A Dalit’s decision to follow Christ brings the kingdom value that there is no Greek or Jew, Brahmin or Shudra, black or white, but we are all one in Christ. This powerful transformation, spread through word of mouth, has become a major movement in our nation.”

Paul Thangiah is pastor of the 15,000-member Full Gospel Assembly of God Church in Bengaluru (Bangalore), India’s third most populous city. He compares the caste system to the problem of racial prejudice in the United States and believes the Indian church is overcoming it.

“Caste has strong and deep roots in the very being of India,” Thangiah says. “But Pentecostal churches in India, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, do not support or encourage the caste system. The gospel transforms people from different

castes into one caste.”

A Bright Future

Secular economists and politicians agree that India is doing more than just producing Bollywood films and taking technology jobs outsourced from the United States. Its upwardly mobile population, entrepreneurial spirit and democratic ideals could turn it into the world’s next superpower.

And while many of the world’s developed countries have negative birth rates, India is one of the youngest nations on the planet—with 47 percent of the population under age 20. That’s what prompted Indian-American evangelist Sujo John, 34, to launch an ambitious church-planting strategy that will, beginning this year, target youth in the major urban centers of India, including Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and Calcutta.

“These young Indians will be very dominant in world affairs,” says John, a native of Calcutta. “They really don’t hold to their parents’ faith. They are saying, ‘We have tried everything and we are empty.’ Soon I believe there will be an army of Indian young people who will go to the ends of the earth with the gospel.”

Pastor Kallianpur agrees. “We have a prophetic word over this nation that India will be a platform for the glory of the Lord to the nations,” he says. “Hinduism was born here. Buddhism was born here. Sikhism was born here. Jainism was born here. New Age was born here. All these religions went to the nations. Now the time has come that India will proclaim the message of the Ageless One to the nations.”

D’Souza believes India will demonstrate “the full transformational power of the gospel” in coming years, particularly as the struggle for Dalit freedom gains strength. He says that there are four “waves of the Spirit” that the Indian church is riding: (1) the wave of proclamation

(aggressive evangelism); (2) the wave of compassion; (3) the wave of signs and wonders; and (4) the wave of social justice.

Churches and ministries that embrace this four-pronged gospel “are the ones that are growing in India,” D’Souza says. “Those that try to box God in their own world are not growing.”

Perhaps D’Souza and other Indian leaders will eventually bring their message to the American church. One thing is certain: Indians make up one-sixth of the world’s population, and they are a force to be reckoned with. Before it is all over, the spiritual explosion happening on the other side of the world will affect us all.

J. Lee Grady *is the former editor of Charisma. He conducted interviews for this article during visits to the Indian states of Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Bihar.*