



THE SOUNDING MEGAPHONE

Issue 6, April 2018





Hello and welcome to another issue of the Sounding Megaphone. India is one of the densest populated countries in the world. How are people treated there? How are Christians and other minorities treated there? This month we will discuss it. God bless you. Shawn Stevens.

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THE SOUNDING MEGAPHONE 6

INDIAN APARTHEID

When people hear the word “apartheid,” immediately they think of the social policies put in place in South Africa by which Blacks were relegated to a lower class than the white population. There have been many who have spoken out against apartheid in South Africa. However, there is another system of apartheid currently in place in the country of India. It is called the “caste” system. The caste system is a system of social stratification and social oppression which affects the lives of millions of Indians. It has existed for centuries and is implemented on such a massive scale that it dwarfs anything that was ever done in South Africa.

The caste system comes out of the Hindu religion. In this system, there are four official castes. At the top of the system are the *Brahmins* who claim to be born from the mouth of God. Below them are the *Kshatriyas* who claim to be born from the arms of God. Below them are the *Vaishyas* who claim to be born from God's belly. Below them are the *Shudras* who claim to be born from the feet of God. Lastly, there are the *Dalits* who are officially without caste. They are also called *untouchables*. One thing that a person's caste dictates is what kind of work they will be allowed to do in a lifetime. Those without caste are given unhealthy or unpleasant jobs to do. They live in extreme poverty and are segregated from the other castes. They are not even allowed to draw water from the same source as those who are in caste. In fact, if someone from a high caste came into social or physical contact with someone who was outside of caste, the caste member will bathe himself to clean himself from this impurity.

How much are India's lower castes and uncasted population suffering? It has been estimated that India has one third of the world's poor living within its borders. The *Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative* has claimed that eight Indian states have a higher number of poor than twenty-six of the poorest African nations

combined. The *Arjun Sengupta Report* claims that 77% of Indians live on approximately fifty cents a day. 1 The *Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative* reports that there are 645 million Indians living in poverty. While it is true that India's economy is growing, it is also true that India's rural economy has suffered massive collapse and most Indians are engaged in India's rural economy. There has been a wave of farm suicides and, between 1997 to 2007, nearly 200 thousand Indians died in this way. India has seen farm incomes unravel and the public investment into agriculture has bottomed out. A further collapse of employment has aggravated the situation. Large numbers have left their farming communities in search of work in cities and towns. However, few jobs are to be found. According to P. Sainath, in excess of 85% of rural households are either marginal, sub-marginal, small farmers or landless. 2, 3 The *New York Times* estimates that approximately 42.5% of India's children suffer from malnutrition.

Both Hindu religion and Christian faith have lived alongside each other in India for many centuries. However, there has been a great deal of persecution directed toward Christians as a direct result of Christianity confronting Hinduism and the caste system. It is believed that Thomas, one of Christ's twelve apostles, journeyed to India and was martyred there. Thomas' witness in India evidently led many Indians to Christ. A Church sprung up and has existed for many centuries. Beginning in the 16th century and to the present, many Christian missionaries have gone to India and served God in this foreign land. Christianity has spread in India to an amazing extent. However, Christianity poses a challenge to Hinduism and the caste system. Christian faith teaches that all mankind was created in the image of God and it rebukes social oppression. What has been the response from many practising Hindus? Sadly, many times there has been a response of violence.

One example of a violent response is the

treatment of the Staines family. Mr. Graham Staines and his wife Gladys served as effectual missionaries in India. Many Hindus turned away from Hinduism to Christian faith as a result of their witness. In January 1999, Graham and his two sons were resting in their station waggon. Militant Hindus surrounded the vehicle and set it on fire. The mob surrounded the car, ready to attack should any of them try to escape from the burning vehicle. All three lost their lives in the flames.

On August 24, 2008, a leader of a Hindu tribe was killed. The person responsible for his death was a Marxist and the man claimed responsibility for this terrible crime. Even though the murderer had nothing to do with Christianity himself, the Christian community in that place was blamed. A Hindu mob attacked the Christian village, burning homes and beating those occupying them. One Christian woman whose husband was killed was Monalisha. She says:

My name is Monalisha. (Some were) scattered here and there ... 121 people dead. There was no food, no water, nothing was there (in the jungle). Even when we saw the tigers, they were running in jungles but they did not attack us. But these people, they were trying to attack us. We were hiding in the jungle. I have been living in the camp ever since the 29th of August. Since then, my faith has become stronger. The word of God has made my faith stronger. The (teachers) used to preach about persecution, how to become strong, to keep a strong faith in God. By listening to all these messages I am becoming very strong. There are preachers in the camps that are talking about persecution, and they're talking about how to be strong in your faith ... I am not angry with God for letting this happen. Sometimes I get angry with the Hindus, sometimes I don't get angry. Those who killed my husband would talk to me. They would greet me, saying, 'How are you? How are your children? How are you living?' At first, I was angry, but slowly, slowly,

(forgiveness) took a process and now I am not (angry). I prayed for them. I said, 'God, You forgive them and help them to come to you.' I also tell my children to pray for them. 4

Why do militant Hindus have such animosity towards Christians? This animosity has existed for centuries and, in many ways, is related to the breakup of the Hindu social order that occurred in Indian Christian communities. Christians have reached out to Indians of every caste and also to those without caste. From the 19th century, and beyond, large numbers of Dalits have converted to Christian faith and have been given equality with others within the Christian community. The overturning of the caste system, no matter how small the Christian community, has led to a partial unravelling of the Hindu system. Many within India have seen this as a negative development.

For many years, India was under the rulership of England. This rulership was hated by many Indian nationals and much pressure was put upon Britain to withdraw from India. In 1947, Britain did grant India her independence. A number of movements came to the forefront around this time. One of them was the *Rashtriya Swayamsevel Sang*, (RSS). The RSS held and promoted an ideology called *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* is an ideology aimed at purging India of everything but Hinduism. *Hindutva* literature called for violence in establishing their goal. The RSS formed the *Jan Sang Party* and they later changed their name to the *Bharantiya Janata Party (BJP)*. They have had significant political representation. However, in 2004, the BJP lost federal control in India. They blamed the Dalits for their loss. The RSS formed their own army and, as of 2006, it is estimated to be comprised of three million Indians. The RSS, their army and the BJP continue to exercise a great deal of pressure upon the people of India, working very hard to promote Hinduism and the caste system and to eradicate conflicting faiths such as Christianity. The BJP have since regained control of India's government.

One tool which Hindutva advocates have used in India has been anti-conversion legislation. Such legislation forbade Indians from converting to another religion. In the late 1960s, two parliamentary bills (*Orissa Freedom of Religion Act* and the *Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act*) were passed and also in 1968 the *Freedom of Religion Act* was passed. Despite the titles of these Acts, they did not help the spread of religious freedom in India. Such legislation was said to be in place to protect people against forced conversion. In reality, what it really meant to do was to prohibit people from converting to another faith. These Acts were aimed at keeping the low caste Hindus within the religious/social stratification system of Hinduism. The lower castes were, in fact, the backbone of the country, fulfilling the labor and farming needs of the country.

The presence, and expansion, of Christianity in India has worked against Hindutva efforts to keep the Dalits in subjection. One writer has said:

Recently, indiscriminate terrors and persecution have been unleashed on Indian Christians because they are helping the untouchable and poor to get rid of the caste system, ignorance and poverty. ... Christians and missionaries in India are opposed particularly when they help India's aboriginals who were forced to become the 'lower castes.' In fact, all who try to help the downtrodden are opposed by the 'upper castes.' 5

Another author has said of the trend towards Christians liberating the lower classes:

Opponents of anti-conversion legislation see this trend ever increasing as large numbers of Dalits turn to Christ. In fact, a majority of Christian conversions are happening among the Dalits, more so than among the upper castes, with more than seventy percent of all Christians from Dalit and tribal communities. Some also view anti-conversion laws as a means to force the masses to accept

humiliating conditions without protest. They also view conversion as a way for those in low castes to protest their status and have a life of dignity and hope through Jesus Christ – something they can't obtain as a low-caste Hindu. 6

While, probably, every society has had, within its past, examples of mass oppression by one class upon another, many societies have cast off this oppression in its most severe forms. Such casting-off has been the result of courageous and heroic individuals and movements bringing to light injustice and showing society a better way. Why has India remained entrenched for centuries to dehumanizing ideologies such as the caste system? No doubt, there are powerful forces within that country which fight to preserve the social status quo. They fight to maintain the privileged status that they have long enjoyed. They fight to maintain their own betterment at the cost of the deep suffering of others. They fight to uphold India's apartheid. The caste system and anti-conversion laws deny Indians the freedom to follow their heart and conscience and to, also, become upwardly mobile. One writer has said; "Freedom of conscience is about every citizen's right to seek what is true and noble and discard what is false, evil, or less than noble in his life, worldview and culture." 7

Christianity in India is upsetting and overturning the caste system in many corners. Its gospel of hope and love is bringing change to individual hearts. Changed hearts result in the forming of changed communities. Changed communities begin to bring change to the larger society. Indian governments and Indian legal systems have not given Christians enough protection but, yet, Christianity remains arguably the most dynamic force within India in overturning the caste system. May India's Christian communities continue to make a positive difference in this great land. Pray for them as they overturn Indian apartheid.

Shawn Stevens

ENDNOTES :

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_India

URI:

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2. Sainath, quoted

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3. Ibid.

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4. Monalisha, quoted in, Riley K. Smith, *India – Tales of Glory* (Bartlesville: Living Sacrifice Book Co., 2009), 42-43.

5. Riley K. Smith, *India – Tales of Glory* (Bartlesville: Living Sacrifice Book Co., 2009), 99.

6. Ibid., 100.

7. Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Quest for Freedom & Dignity – caste conversion & cultural revolution*. (USA Willernie Mn: South Asian Resources, 2001), 99.

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INDIA

"The Republic of India, in South Asia, is the seventh-largest country by area, the second-most populous with over 1.2 billion people, and the most populous democracy in the world. A country of 28 states and 7 union territories, it is a pluralistic, multilingual, and multiethnic society where more than 400 languages are spoken. India has become one of the fastest growing major economies in the world (as in industry and services), and is a nuclear weapons state. While having one of the world's most diverse and modern healthcare systems, India faces several health-related challenges. The country contains the largest concentration of poor people in the world. Illiteracy, corruption, and the (constitutionally illegal) caste system are continuing realities." 1

According to India's constitution, there is full religious freedom in India. That may look good on paper, however, the rise of Hindutva extremism has resulted in a hate campaign against Christians and Muslims (considered "foreign" religions) in the 1990's. Persecution levels have varied depending on the strength of Hindutva groups from one state to the next. Hinduism is the world's third largest religious system, and is adhered to by over 74% of the population of India. Muslims are over 14% (the third-largest Muslim country in the world). Those who claim to be Christians may be as high as 9%. Sikhs are ~1.86% of the population.

Most people are unaware that India is a country with a large Christian population. Christians in India suffer much persecution. They are fiercely resisted by Hindu and Muslim extremists. Christians are often falsely accused, harassed, attacked and even killed. In 2017 there has been a huge increase in reported incidents of persecution of Christians. In the first six months of 2017 there have been 410 incidents reported. Attacks on Christians are often brutal and leave those victims who survive with injuries. Perpetrators know that it is very unlikely that they will be brought to

justice by the court system for this abuse. Christians are sometimes boycotted. Open Doors in August 2017 reports 34 incidents where Christians were forced to leave their homes, 14 of which they were forced out of their villages or cities entirely. The Government of India at present is run by the religious BJP party. Its prime minister in a television show denied any knowledge of the burning of churches or other types of persecution. The BJP party is considered by many to be the political wing of the RSS Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (radical Hindu group), although they deny this and they are officially separate organizations.

On August 15, 2010, police from Mandya district, Karnataka, arrested a pastor and another Christian worker, as well as ten other believers. A house meeting was in progress when a mob of thirty people entered the house and began attacking the Christians. After the attack the police arrested the twelve Christians just mentioned. More recently, a 17-year-old Christian woman, Nirupama Pradhan was raped and killed after school on May 12, 2011. The woman's father has named a suspect but, according to Asian News, police have not acted towards finding the killer. Police have also refused to supply a post-mortem report to the widow of a Christian preacher who was killed on January 10, 2011. Some Hindu radicals have confessed to the murder. On May 8, 2011, Pastor B. Vijaya Kumar and his family, as they were walking home from a prayer meeting, were intercepted by Hindu radicals and detained for three hours. Police attended the scene and responded by telling the pastor and his family to leave the area and that they would not accept responsibility for anything further happening to them. Another pastor, Shivraj Maravi, in Madhya Pradesh, was prevented from renovating his home where he occasionally held church services. He was hindered by Hindu extremists whose accusations led to a police arrest in which he was charged with conducting forcible conversion under the state anti-conversion act. In the Indian state of Maharashtra, the construction of a

church building was stopped and a social boycott was placed on the Christians in the area. The boycott disallowed Christian vehicles from transporting vegetables to market. This cut off the believer's means of livelihood. The Christians were also told to leave the village and that their children would not be allowed to attend the local school.

What has been Canada's relationship with India? Canada views India as a vital trade partner. In recent years, steps have been taken to intensify trade and economic relations between Canada and India. Canada has invested much into India and the countries have worked together on science and technology projects and energy initiatives. In 2014, (sorry this is the most recent statistics I could find) Canadian exports to India totalled 2.8 Billion. Canadian imports from India in that year totalled 2.9 Billion. While Canada and India are becoming stronger partners and allies all the time, it is time for Canada to begin calling for action on the part of India's leaders to correct human rights abuses in their country. Real protection needs to be made accessible to religious minorities such as Christians. Situations of harassment and persecution towards Christians, such as those mentioned above, need to be investigated by the authorities and justice measured out. Freedom of religion must be defended and the neglect of it not ignored in this country. It is not enough to merely have freedom of religion in India's constitution; freedom of religion must become the actual experience of Indian citizens. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and the government of India needs to place priority on it. Laws against supposed "forcible conversion" are really being used to squelch and to destroy Christian expression and Christian practice. Changes need to be made to India's legal system to protect minorities such as Christians and to protect the right to hold services, to practice and to spread their faith in India.

Pray for our brothers and sisters in India. Pray that they would have courage to persevere in spite of very difficult circumstances. Pray that they would receive protection from God, from

government and from local authorities. Pray for the Christians in India, that they would be able to forgive their persecutors. It is challenging for any of us to forgive the smallest acts of injustice perpetrated upon us. How much more challenging would it be to forgive horrific human rights atrocities perpetrated upon oneself or one's family. Yet, Jesus Christ forgave even to this extent. Concerning Jesus as He was being crucified; "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots." (Luke 23.34). To follow Jesus in this kind of forgiveness is the greatest witness that a Christian can show to an unbelieving world. Forgiveness can be given and, still, with it call for human rights reforms.

Write to your member of Parliament and express your concern for Indian Christians in India. Canada and India have a strong partnership and a strong economic alliance. It is time for Canada to use the influence that it has to call India to a higher standard of human rights. May India's future be a bright future of human respect and freedom.

Shawn Stevens

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