

## Edinburgh 1910    Roots and Fruits

### Western India, the Church and I !

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“Western India” is a Church of Scotland Overseas Mission term and is an unconscious irony, for it reveals a western view of India. No such term is ever used by Indians!

What on earth is a “mission strategy”? Surely it ought to be a simple response to people’s cry for help in meeting their needs - material and spiritual, as communities and as individual women and men? Instead, it can be the rationalisation of an organisation’s existence and a justification to ask for money!

I went into 121 in 1966 as a New College student and offered my services abroad, to be told there was little call for divinity graduates (in the current mission strategy). There had been, however, a recent urgent call for a geologist in “Western India” to help with a well project in a drought-prone area. I informed the astonished Duncan Fraser that I was such a one! By September 1967, my wife, our three children and I, aged 30 and newly Licensed to preach the Gospel by the Presbytery of Edinburgh, set off for Bombay, capital of the Indian State of Maharashtra. I hoped that we were going out to help some people in the Jalna area, 300 miles east of there to find a better life than they presently had. I believed that this would happen through the local activities of the Protestant part of the Christian Church, which we were going to augment.

India is a big place and “there’s no such thing as ‘a country like India’”. Maharashtra is one of its larger states – currently about 100 million people. Jalna was then a market town in a rain-shadow, cotton-growing area of the former Muslim dominion of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The three big problems were drought, debt and demoralisation, and who better to help the Church solve them than a New College graduate student of Divinity, expert in Scottish Barthianism and John Calvin, and an evangelical, to boot!

Thank God, however, that there was the little matter of learning Marathi, the mother-tongue of most of those 100 million people ! The mission work had been started by a Marathi-speaking Brahmin Christian, Narayan Sheshadri, about 1855. Neither Karl Barth’s “Church Dogmatics”, nor even Calvin’s “Institutes” had not yet been translated into Marathi ...

It was while struggling to learn some Marathi, largely by listening to local farmers and farm labourers, and living as a family in the mixture of local castes in the community, and also in the process of taking over the well-drilling and blasting programmes, I began to discover, surprise, surprise, that the Church and attached missionaries, not least the evangelicals, myself included, were as much a part of the problem as the answer! Nobody had said much about this.

Mission policy was talked about endlessly at residential Mission Council meetings, occasionally attended by educated local Christian leaders. It was taken up with two Big Ideas. One was called Integration of Church and Mission, which boiled down to “who gets to control the medical and educational institutions and who pays for them?”; the other was Church Union, which boiled down to “who gets to be a bishop when we join up with the Anglicans (who’ve already got some), the Methodists (some of whom have already got some better-paid ones) and distant Baptists, but not with near-by Nazarenes, and Christian and Missionary Alliance churches?”.

Meanwhile, in the face of serious droughts, hunger, soil erosion, deforestation, inter-communal riots, etc etc. local Government officials in both administration and rural development, were creating a different agenda. The same agenda was also being produced by some interesting Hindu and Jain people we were getting to know, not to mention some Indian socialists in the Gandhian tradition, a few Jesuits, and, to be fair some of the Protestants and evangelicals. This agenda, for a better life before death, is one, I believed then and believe even more strongly today, which has far more to do with God’s will (or mission, if we still have to use that word, when even our wonderful financial institutions have mission statements, and have made the word almost meaningless).

Instead of seeking first the ecclesiastical joinery and politics, working with these friends day-to-day was both practically satisfying and theologically taxing. In word and in action with them I was struggling with the meaning of renewal, salvation, and revolution, all the time asking myself: “who is bearing the first- fruits of Christ’s New Creation, aka the Kingdom of God ?”. Five years from the rural side, followed by seven on the receiving end in Mumbai, with the “slumdogs” of the pavement club and the hutments, did wonders for my reformed theology!

There is, I believe a rolling Gospel agenda, in the sense that individual issues have a greater or lesser importance at different times and places. In the Seventies and in “Western” India, malnutrition *versus* food production, drought *versus* water conservation, caste/denomination *versus* personal identity, and above all, despair *versus* hope contended.

As for **outcomes**, how about the following provisional thoughts about what God is about ?

1. The Church has no monopoly of God’s Truth (or the Life, or the Way). Certainly seen most clearly in Christ’s earthly life, today the fruits of the Spirit, the “first-fruits of the New Creation”, are sometimes found inside, but more often outside the institutional churches.
2. Loyalty to Christ is mutually exclusive with any great trust in human institutions and systems, not least ecclesiastical ones.
3. Loyalty to Christ has to be inclusive with trusting people of many faiths and none, but who are committed to seeking first God’s justice and peace.