

The Influence of Swedish Pentecostalism in India

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Paper presented for the 9th EPCRA Conference at the Missions Academy
at the University of Hamburg, July 13-17, 1999

India: A land of religions:

India is a country included in the 10/40 window of the mission world. This vast sub-continent that lies on the underside of Asia is home to 950 million people which is almost one-fifth of the people of the earth. This great land with its diversity of peoples and languages is now united under one secular democratic government. Even though it is a secular country, freedom of religion has been at stake for the last two decades. Christian mission in India is now in danger due to the fanatic attitudes of some religious people and political parties. While Asia is the cradle of all great religions of the world, India alone gave birth to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Even though we are now living in the last decade of the 20th century, the majority of the 900 million in India have yet to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Historically speaking, the gospel reached India in the first century AD. But only 2.7 % of Indians are Christians including Roman Catholics and agnostics. Pentecostalism came to India in the early part of the 20th century. The Christian mission in India has enhanced rapidly only after the Pentecost has come to India.

Christianity in India: The background of Pentecostalism

The beginning of Indian Christianity goes back to first century itself. The most venerated tradition of the Indian church passed down from the first century affirms that the Apostle Thomas came to India, landing in Kodungallur (then Craganur) in 52 AD. All the studies conducted up to the present day on the early Indian church also reveal that the church in India was not autonomous. It was basically a Persian Church. It received its bishops from Persia and its ecclesiastical language was Syriac. To reach a conclusion about this era of church history in India is both arduous and challenging due to the lack of clear documentation. The only possible way is to ?reconstruct the whole story which lies shrouded in legends, fables, fictions and confusing details.? Then, the Indian church was part of the Persian church. Since the priests were ordained by the Persian Patriarch and the ceremonies were conducted in Syriac, we can assume that the doctrines of the Indian church were those of the Persian church.

Because of the Charter Act of the East India Company in 1833, a large number of missionaries came to India from America and Europe. Most of them were evangelical and evangelistic. The evangelical awakening in America made a great influence upon these missionaries. Missionaries working in major cities of India set aside time for a united prayer. Native Christians joined their hands with missionaries for prayer. A revival broke out all over India. Tongues, visions and prophecies were part of the revival. This revival made a lasting impact on the churches in Kerala. Many came out of the extant churches and formed independent fellowships. Several leaders like K.V.Simon, K.E.Abraham gave the leadership.

The earliest recognized Pentecostal outpouring was at Mukti Mission, Pune in 1905. Minnie F. Abrams, an associate of Ramabai wrote: ? Seventy girls joined the prayer band and it grew up to five hundred?. A senior girl received the Holy Spirit baptism. About it the article ? How Pentecost came to India? said ?The young woman sleeping next to her awoke when this occurred, and seeing the fire enveloping her ran across the dormitory, brought a pail of water and was about to dash it upon her, when she discovered that the girl was not on fire?.(M.F.Abrams , The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire, Kedgaon: Mukti Mission, 1906. pp 5-6.) Revival sprang out in Mukti. Many girls were filled with the Holy Ghost. Edwin Orr reports of emotional accompaniments and speaking in tongues. (J.Edwin Orr, Evangelical Awakening in India, New Delhi, Masihi Sahitya Sanstha ,1970 pp110). Also, God used Barrett of Norway, George Berg of Germany to spread the good news of revival all over India.

Many non-Pentecostal missionaries had received Spirit Baptism and became Pentecostal ministers (Gary B.McGee, selected documents on the early history of the Assemblies of God in India, Springfield : Unpublished, 1991 pp.19). In 1913 Robert F.Cook came to Kerala and preached the Pentecostal message. Many experienced Pentecostal baptism and joined together, formed Pentecostal churches

Swedish Pentecostalism in India

Rev. Karl Swan, a Pentecostal Missionary came to North India in the city called Allahabad from Sweden. After working for a long time, seeing no result he wanted to go back to his own country. Through a college professor, Swan heard about the Pentecostal works going on in Kerala, India. The College professor invited him to Kerala and this paved way for Swan to establish a relationship with the brothers from the Indian Pentecostal Church (hereafter it will be called IPC). In 1934, June, Swan came to Kerala the second time and conducted meetings in Kumbanadu, the head quarters of IPC. Meeting lasted for seven days and returned to Bombay.

Indian Pentecostalism in Sweden

After some time, Swan returned to Sweden and reported about the IPC to Levi Pethrus, who was the leader of the Swedish Pentecostal Churches (Hereafter it will be called SPC). Philadelphia Church in the city of Stockholm had 6000 members during that time and they have decided to hold their annual convention from 15-21, June 1936. The Church decided to invite Rev. K.C. Cherian and K.E. Abraham, leaders of the IPC also to be the speakers in the convention. 1936m May 9th Abraham and Cherian started to Stockholm and reached there on May 24th. They stayed there for 17 months and that was the period of grounding the relationship between the IPC and SPC.

Characteristics of Scandinavian Pentecostalism

The Pentecostal Revival Movement in the Scandinavian countries is marked by a strong Congregationalist ecclesiology. Scandinavian Pentecostals have typically resisted all forms of supracongregational organization, seeing such structures as unbiblical. In Sweden also they upheld this strict congregationalism (Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, eds. Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, Zondervan Publishing House, Michigan, 1988, p. 272).

The structure of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement was officially egalitarian. Lewi Pethrus was the prominent leader of this Movement for a long time. He became a Pentecostal under the guidance of T.B. Barratt in 1907. In 1913 the Swedish Baptist Convention expelled him and his congregation from the Convention because of their Pentecostal theology and liturgy. Pethrus founded the Filadelfia Church Rescue Mission, 1911; the Filadelfia Publishing House, 1912, the Filadelfia Bible School, 1915; the periodical *Evangelii Harold*, 1916; a national daily newspaper, *Dagen*, 1945.

As pastor, Pethrus led his own congregation to become the largest in the Pentecostal world until 1975 and the Pentecostal movement in Sweden to become the largest free church in Sweden. He remained pastor at Filadelfia, Stockholm until his retirement in 1958 and active in the movement until his death in 1974. It is during this time the brethren from India visited Sweden. (Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, eds. Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, Zondervan Publishing House, Michigan, 1988, pp. 711, 712).

Statement of Levi Pethrus

After the Indian brethren preached in Sweden for a period of time, the Swedish Pentecostal leader, Levi Pethrus published an article in the *Evangelii Herald*. The article gives us a good picture of the influence of the Swedish Pentecostalism upon the Indian Pentecostalism and vice versa.

Summary: We are not worried because of inviting these black brethren. Our contact was interesting, edifying and informative. They held the doctrines such as ? Salvation through Jesus Christ, Water baptism, Spirit baptism, Divine healing and Sovereignty of the church?. We have complete agreement with their doctrines. Their messages are in accordance with the word of God and Holy Spirit. Their missionary spirit is exactly same with ours including the vision of foreign missions. These Indian brethren left the missionary-led work and started their own indigenous work. They informed us and we are convinced that that missionaries have to spend a huge amount of money and of no use, but these brethren with a period of time, with a small amount, could establish many local churches and win many to the kingdom of God.

Why did the Indian brethren leave the missionary-led church?

Missionaries without any exception considered these national brethren as coolies, office boys to carry their letters, or as servants to work at their command. They were against to these national workers. Some of the missionaries have accused them of a high national spirit which led them to hate the missionaries. But we are convinced that this is not so. They love all the missionaries and consider them as co-workers and give them high respect. More over they praise God for any missionaries send to them by God. The brethren are highly educated in the Bible and they are eminent preachers. They stand strong for their matters of faith. They do not preach any heresies and they are eligible to be good leaders. In our opinion, if these brethren are supplied with the money and ask them to share the responsibilities, the work in India will surely increase.

They have come here in our country not to collect money but only to share the unity between the Indian churches and the Swedish churches. Their aim is to introduce the Pentecostal work that is going on in India. Surely, if they receive any financial help from any of these countries they will gladly accept it and use it for the work in India. They, after coming and preaching here, get numerous invitations to preach in Sweden as well as in other Scandinavian countries. Some of the letters I got from India show that they are highly considered in India. Every message they preached was excellent and high in quality.

What we have learned from them?

We gave more importance to color, nationality in evangelistic work. God is not concerned of these things. These brethren are equal with us and are our brothers in Christ. They too have equal rights like us and we should encourage them and cooperate with them. If so we shall see open doors for evangelism in India through these Indian brethren. (Levi Pethrus, *Evangelii Herald*, 1936 July 9, quoted by K.E. Abraham, in My Autography, Hebron, Kumbanadu, 1983, pp. 275-79).

Was the Swedish involvement a coactive model (Sue Jones who suggested the term coactive to represent the interdependent relationship : *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 1: 1 Jan. 1998, p.73).

Today, the approach to missions of evangelical mission agencies has been based on the indigenous church principle (Melvin Hodges, *The Indigenous church*, Springfield, Mo. GPH, 1953). The indigenous principle suggests that the goal of the missionary movement is to bring the church in the land where the missionaries serve to the place where it is ?self ?supporting, self-governing and self-propagating?.

How far we can apply the indigenous principles today? Is the indigenous principle and the coactive model the same? If not how is it different? The logical implication of the indigenous principle is that there comes a point in the development of the national church in a given country when missionaries should recognize the maturity of the national leadership and disengage themselves from that context to move on to other fields of service. Since the Indian Pentecostal church was not started by any missionaries, indigenous principles such as surrendering the leadership, missionaries staying for a long time do not apply here.

Conclusion

Why Swedish Pentecostals could see a stronghold in India? The nature of Pentecostalism both in India and Sweden had a common nature and agenda. Pentecost means 'the triumph of the inexperienced, the unprofessional, the non-ecclesiastical' said Hollenweger in his book (Walter J Hollenweger, The Pentecostals, Augsburg publishing House, Minnesota, 1972. p 429). This was true both in Sweden and in India. When Abraham came to Pentecostal experience, he not only resisted the devil but he also resisted the foreign supremacy. When SPC wanted to have a fellowship with the IPC, the first thing to clarify was that of supremacy. Both the IPC and SPC held the autonomy of the indigenous church even when they held the federal fellowship. Doctrinally, both had the same tenets of biblical principles. Economically, IPC was very weak, hence they accepted donations and gifts from other foreign churches without surrendering the freedom of the church.

Till the death of Pastor Swan, the cooperation between the IPC and SPC went uninterrupted. Pastor Swan and many other pastors from Sweden used to come to India as speakers of the general conventions of the IPC. Same thing was true with Pastor Abraham and others. In total the brethren from India made seven visits to Sweden till pastor Abraham's death in 1974 and the last one by Abraham was in 1962. Pastor Dalle of Malmo said: 'I consider Pastor Levi Pethrus of Sweden, Pastor Barratt of Norway, Pastor George Jeffrees of England and Pastor Abraham of India as my spiritual teachers'.

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