

Round Table Meeting of IAMS, July 31/2004, Port Dickson, Malaysia:
"Cooperation between Mission Study Associations"
Fellowship of Indian Missiologists [FOIM]

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Introduction

This meeting prior to the IAMS conference for an informal meeting of mission study associations and networks is overdue. Several times, in the previous executive meetings, I had expressed this need for cooperation between Mission Study Associations round the world. I was representing, in the Executive Council, the Asia-Oceania voice to relate to each other as mission study associations and networks. I am glad that today this felt need has become a reality.

1. India: A Land of Diversity

India is perhaps the most complex nation in the world because of its nearly unimaginable pluralism and contrasting, often conflicting, diversities at every level. Today's population of one billion originated from six distinct racial types and some degree of mixing, with the predominance of the Aryan race in the Indo-Gangetic plain in the North, and the Dravidian race in the South. Eighteen official languages, including English, plus 1,652 dialects belonging to six linguistic families, in some sense, create a veritable tower of Babel. Minority religious communities (40%) like Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Parsis and animists co-exist with the dominant Hindu community (60%).

2. Christian Presence in India

Beginning with the first century of the Christian era missionaries landed in different parts of the country at different periods. The oldest Church, the Syrian Church on the Malabar Coast, also known as St. Thomas Christians, with its traditional claim to apostolic origin, could be called the first Church. In spite of the last 2000 years of missionary enterprise, the Indian Christian artist Jyoti Sahi, observes that many Indians cannot think of an Indian Christ. "For them Jesus has to be foreigner and hence white. They cannot just imagine a blue or a brown Jesus".

Some attempts were made to present Christianity with an Indian face. In Madurai Robert de Nobili imitated the life-style of a Hindu *sanyasi*. John de Britto, J. Beschi and few others carried on the new experiment of adaptation. The fruits of it are Indian ashram movement, inter-religious dialogue, inculturation in worship and liturgy, etc. The compassionate face of Mother Theresa represents the most known and appreciated picture of the Church. The shocking cases of martyrdom by Graham Staines and his two little sons has attracted the attention and reactions of the international community. Vast majority of Christians in India are socially oppressed and marginalized, economically poor and exploited, politically powerless and manipulated, creating a minority also within the churches with opposite characteristics!

3. The Need for Mission Studies

Indian missiological reflection over the years placed before the Christian churches certain questions that radically affect their life and mission. It was a felt need to prepare the Indian churches for a new way of being the sign and sacrament of Christ in India, which was undergoing profound changes. In order to effect a radical change we need to have a vision. Committed Missiologists like Jacob Kavunkal (who is present at this assembly) and others got together in Bombay in the year 1990 to form a missiological association for this purpose. They became aware of the need for an ongoing dialogue among Christian churches to formulate an authentic vision, with which Christian churches would be fully inserted into the emerging Indian reality and be fully awake to the context. Letters were sent out to Missiologists and mission researchers and the first meeting of the association took place at Bhopal from 28 to 29 June 1991, in order to frame a constitution.

4. The Constitutions of the Association

The very first article **names** the association as “Fellowship of Indian Missiologists” (FOIM). It is an interdenominational fellowship of professional missiologists at the service of the Church in India. The primary **objective** of FOIM is to serve as a forum for missiologists in India to meet and discuss current missiological issues in order to:

- Relate the message of Jesus Christ to the Indian context,
- Promote missiological studies,
- Make a common contribution to the cause of evangelisation in India,
- Collaborate with missionaries in their work through our reflection in terms of the cultures, religions and socio-economic context of India, and
- Experiment with new methods in evangelisation.

5. FOIM Publications

The Fellowship seeks to achieve the objectives of the fellowship by holding regular bi-annual meetings, occasional symposia and colloquia with a specific theme at different parts of the country. Members are encouraged to present their researches and reflections in the form of a formal papers or responses and group discussions. Editors are identified to publish the proceedings of such meetings and other relevant missiological literature. Permit me to present before you the titles of our publications over the years:

- 1) Bible and Mission in India Today
- 2) Christ and Cultures
- 3) Dimensions of Mission
- 4) Mission and Conversion – A Reappraisal
- 5) Missiological Trends – Theological and Historical Perspectives
- 6) Blossoms from the East – Contribution of the Indian Church to World Mission
- 7) Missiological Approaches – Retrospect and Prospect

- 8) In the Shadow of the Cross – Christians and Minorities in India Encounter Hostility
- 9) Creative Ministries – Exploring New Frontiers in Mission

I have here with me, as samples, the FOIM Series I, edited by Jacob Kavunkal and F. Hrangkhuma, and the last one Series IX, edited by Joseph Mattam and Philomena Parackal, whom I quote, “This is not an exhaustive list of all new attempts, but only those in which the members of FOIM are in one way or another involved.

Conclusion

What began with 7 have become 70 registered members, most of whom are active contributors to missiological reflection in India and are willing collaborators to evolve relevant methodologies in the context of the culture, religions and the socio-economic reality of India. Hence, as the secretary of FOIM, my appeal to IAMS is to:

- Accept as members automatically,
- Relate with us as an association,
- Network with us in projects that are relevant to our context, and
- Extend cooperation by inviting one of our executive members to IAMS executive planning sessions and all our executive members to IAMS quadrennial international conferences.

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