

Christian Responses to Poverty in India

Ranjeet Gupta shows that for at least 300 years Christians have been alleviating poverty in India, and benefitting Christians and non-Christians alike. However, the initiatives have been individual and personal, and more needs to be done nationally, especially in the areas of policy and transparent government.

General knowledge about India has increased in recent years, helped by the growing popularity of 'Bollywood' films. In 2009 the Bollywood film *Slumdog Millionaire* won an armful of awards. *Slumdog* highlights the reality of the poor in slums as well as the affluence of the glitterati millionaires. Since 2010, the Indian economy has been listed as one of the BRICS economies, alongside Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa. Yet the average Indian lives on less than

half that of the other BRICS nations – barely \$5,000 on average. The majority of villagers earn less than 100 Rupees, or \$2 per day. Wealth is especially skewed in India, where even the richest 10% of Indians earn less than 90% of American citizens. India may be a global leader in Information Technology, but it also has the largest populations of those with HIV, malnutrition, disease, and illiteracy. India's poorest are truly "the least", by global standards. Matthew 25:31

reminds us that whatever we do for the least, we do for Jesus. So what have followers of Jesus done to alleviate suffering in India? In this article, space permits an overview of just a few historical Christian pioneers and some positive contemporary examples of entrepreneurs powered by 'Faith in Business'.

Christian responses to poverty in India have at least 300 years of precedents, starting with





Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore

Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and William Carey, and continuing through the likes of Dr. Ida Scudder. These are just three examples of the development of Christian mission in India, and refute the argument that Christians only came to proselytise and convert. Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1682 - 1719) is worthy of study today, because he is the German Moravian pioneer of protestant missions to India, yet few have heard about him. He was sent by the King of Denmark to the Danish trading port of Tranquebar in 1706, because the British East India Company would not allow missionary work. Ziegenbalg imported a printing press and is still venerated by Tamil speakers today for translating the Bible into Tamil, and giving them printing in their own language. William Carey (1761 - 1834) built upon Ziegenbalg's foundation, managing an Indigo factory providing

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ink for printing presses. He also started Serampore University in 1818, India's oldest university in modern times, training up indigenous pastors and preachers. Most significantly, he began to attack the injustices of society, such as Suttee - widow burning - and lobbied parliament to make this illegal. At the same time, one cannot forget the work of the Evangelical Reformers back in Britain; this had a ripple effect internationally throughout the colonies, including India. The likes of Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Macaulay had an electrifying effect on the reduction of corruption in the colonies as well as at home, notably through the Sales of Offices Act in 1809. India managed to run largely without corruption until Nehru tolerated bribery within his own cabinet. While it would be invidious

to deny that there are blots upon the history of the British Empire in India, such as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, there are many positive legacies left by the British, such as a more democratic system of government, establishment of the rule of law, infrastructure such as modern railways, roads and telegraph, industrial knowledge and machinery, hospitals, and widespread education. Vishal Mangalwadi treats this in more detail in his work, in particular *India: The Grand Experiment* and *Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Post-Modern Hindu*. Dr. Ida Scudder (1870 - 1960) is an interesting example of a third generation American lady missionary. She was shocked at the lack of midwives and the resulting high mortality rates in childbirth, and so started Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore in 1918, initially training only female medics.

Building on these historical foundations, the legacy of Christian responses to poverty in India continues to this day. I shall

highlight four examples where I have had the privilege of visiting or supporting in a small way. First, World Vision's Street Children Centre in Calcutta. The Bob Pierce School for Girls takes in females who were often involved in prostitution, and offers them a safe house, as well as the possibility to learn a trade – thereby helping to break a cycle of human abuse which an economist may look on purely as an interpersonal transaction, and a Christian may view as evil.

Second, Satya Niketan High School in Nagod. This started with Mr. Shourie's call from God to turn down an international engineering career with Philips and start a school in the most backward area of Madhya Pradesh in central India, where there were no English schools, or even Christians, for 100 miles around. After three decades of struggle against intimidation, legal accusations and physical persecution, the Shouries now have a non-subsidised school, where the second generation of children have returned to help the parents run the school, and over 500 pupils now attend, after great reluctance of villagers to send their children to school instead of working in the fields. They have successfully provided primary and secondary schooling for young people who have gone on to become teachers, information technologists, and doctors – Indians who otherwise would have had no education.

Third, an international approach is demonstrated by the inventive young American Christian, Nathan Sigworth, who started PharmaSecure in 2010 with the innovative idea of authenticating the original medication of large pharmaceutical companies in India by printing a code on each packet which can be verified over the internet or by the web. This reduces the incidence of counterfeit

and often damaging drugs being sold, and increases consumer knowledge of the distribution of medicine across India, helping to reduce prices in the long term through making operations harder for illegal manufacturers. While Sigworth is an overt Christian, many of his employees are not.


A fourth example is the Emmanuel Hospital Association. The roots of this organisation go back to the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Association in 1841. Today, there are over 20 former missionary hospitals which have banded together. One of their members which I have visited is Kachhwa, which is near Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Starting from Dr. Everad's foundation of the hospital, and years of prayer, one of

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his successors is Dr. Raju Abraham, a former brain surgeon from London who relocated to Kachhwa. He came to realise that the gospel should be about more than just physical healing, and should be

more holistic than just the hospital. From a humble beginning in a small room at Kachhwa Christian Hospital, 7 students have grown to 1700 students who come from within an 18 km radius of Kachhwa. Apart from the school, due to the problem of rural unemployment, Dr. Abraham started a series of practical apprenticeships such as nursing, sewing, electrical engineering, air conditioning maintenance, computer and mobile phone repairs. As well as these micro-enterprises, Kachhwa

has started a church planting and bible training centre which has pioneered several hundred house churches and over 100 village schools. At the same time, the hospital has reinvented itself as India's leading snake bite treatment centre, in addition to the traditional roles of accident and emergency, eye surgery and maternity unit.

In conclusion, all four examples, whether indigenous or international, demonstrate not only a clear Christian witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, but also alleviate poverty for many non-Christians too: World Vision through breaking the cycle of prostitution in urban Calcutta; the Shourie family through providing much needed life-changing education in rural Madhya Pradesh; Nathan Sigworth's PharmaSecure through bringing transparency to medicine from Delhi; Kachhwa Christian Hospital through innovating multiplicative holistic mission in Uttar Pradesh. These examples demonstrate Christ's body responding to acute local need. However, there are fewer current examples of Christian witness influencing the government across the nation, with some exceptions such as Dr. Vishal Mangalwadi's academic and political work. The difference the church makes practically to the poor in India is certainly a reason for the incredible growth of the Indian church today. Nevertheless, considerably more needs to be done, especially in the areas of policy and transparent government, given the enormous problems of hunger and poverty in India. 



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