
India's Latest Export to Adventism: Bullock-Cart Theology

by Brian de Alwis

I am writing from India, a land that has been the target of Christian missions for over four centuries. Christianity has, however, made little headway and Christians number less than three percent of the population. Seventh-day Adventist missions have been in India for nearly a century, but the results (153,571 members on the books by the end of 1987 in a land of 800 million people) are distressingly meager. With over a billion people in Southern Asian countries, the church faces a staggering task. The two most significant challenges that bear directly on the mission of the church are the overwhelming presence of the world religions and the massive poverty typical of these countries. As one who is deeply grateful to count myself one among this small number of Adventists I want to share with you, my Australian brothers and sisters, my hopes and fears for the church and its mission in Southern Asia.

I'm excited, because I believe that Southern Asia is ready for the fulfillment of the Advent mission—the climactic proclamation of the everlasting gospel. This may be due to the religious nature of the people who have a strong sense of the supernatural. Alternatively, it may be related to the need we feel because of the stark economically conditioned poverty which forces over 60 percent

of the people to live below the poverty line (that is, below an annual income of \$100.00 U.S.). Or it could, in part, be brought about by the agony of terrorism with which we are daily confronted. For whatever reasons, our people are eager to hear a good word for times such as these. Among the believers themselves, I find a vibrant faith in that which Adventism holds dear. There are individuals who are remarkable examples of faith. However, there are also some things which are cause for great concern. My overwhelming concern is that Adventism in Southern Asia is still, and seems all set to continue to be, a foreigner. My greatest hope for Adventism is that it will become “the Servant Church,” for I believe it is only in this way that the mission of the church will be fulfilled in Asian countries.

Bishop Clarke Sunder of the Church of South India, speaking at Spicer Memorial College recently, remarked: “I see very little that is Indian here.” Often referred to as “the American mission,” the foreignness of Adventism in India persists. Foreignness touches every aspect of church life and is perhaps the greatest single drawback to the accomplishment of its mission. Southern Asians looking at our publications will see that four decades after Southern Asian countries became independent and the appointment of nationals as editors, almost all the articles are written by foreigners. Glancing through our church paper, the *Southern Asia Tidings* (comparable to the *South Pacific Record*), for the last three years (1986-1988), they will see that 87 out of the 90 theological or spiritual articles that involve creative thinking were reprints from Western journals. They will probably take note of the column

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“Home and Family” by Margaret Nathaneal, the indigenous associate director of Church Ministries, as an outstanding exception because it appeared in 23 issues. If they look for editorial reaction, their opinion of our subservience will find confirmation as editorial comment on the Southern Asian church, its mission, and concerns is entirely absent. Not a single editorial is to be found in all 36 issues.

At a conference on Buddhism in Rangoon, in June 1988, Adventist missiologist Gottfried Oosterwal asked a Burmese brother as to how a Burman would view the Rangoon church building. The prompt reply was: “A colonial building.” If you should look at the model of the proposed church building for Spicer College, with its gothic windows and other typically Western features, and you had a suspicion that it strongly resembled the Takoma Park Church or the Pioneer Memorial Church at Andrews University, it would be precisely because the Indian architect was sent to the United States to see these churches and use them as models. Southern Asian Adventism has slavishly accepted Western church architecture as being synonymous with Christian architecture. We have, as yet, not given serious consideration to the theological statement our church buildings can make. Western fears of syncretism have too often stifled our creativity. However, both in appearance and function the desirable features of Hindu and Buddhist temples can be incorporated with profit. There are points at which the gospel can be accommodating, and others at which it must be challenging.

The foreignness of Adventist missionaries is a byword. Adventist mission institutions are seen by Asians of other faiths not so much as representing the religion of Christ, but as enduring pockets of colonialism. The missionary not only brought the message, but all too often the Western world, as well. Experienced and senior national workers find themselves overshadowed by the fledgling missionary who comes with a far higher salary and has all the advantages of better housing and facilities. The newcomer’s vast supply of goods in underdeveloped countries has the effect of isolating the missionary from both the people and the culture. The Adventist living in the mission com-

pound is profoundly influenced by the missionary’s affluence and lifestyle. In dress and lifestyle Adventists are more Western than most Westernized Indians. Little wonder then that there is a constant exodus of our college graduates and others to Western countries.

One can hardly blame the average Southern Asian for thinking of local Adventists as being in a state of colonial servitude. The role of the national leader, the average church employee, and the lay member is largely adjectival to the part played by the missionary. The local Adventist

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elite often came across as being more foreign than the missionary. Until the idea was abandoned in 1985, a concerted attempt was made to shift the Southern Asia Division headquarters outside of Division territory. The places to which the shift was attempted included London, Teheran, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, and Colombo. Considerable money (including a 100,000 rupee gift to the Sri Lankan president’s fund) was spent in the attempt which had to be abandoned as government permission was not forthcoming in any place. Reasons given for the proposed shift included the fear that missionaries would be phased out of India, and concern for travel restrictions on Indians to other countries within the Division. One dreads to imagine what the average Indian would have thought of a church that shifted its headquarters to a foreign country after being based in India for decades. Nothing would have served better to reveal our foreignness and subservience.

Consequent on the failure to make the shift, four Unions (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, and Pakistan) were transferred to other divisions. The

most troubling aspect is the lack of participation by the church membership in major decisions of this nature. Twenty-seven Spicer College faculty members met with President Neal Wilson in 1985 at the Division Office in Puna to protest the shift of headquarters and the transfer of the Unions. They prefaced their memorandum with this statement:

We are constrained to place our concerns before you as crucial, far-reaching decisions are being taken by the Division Officers at the General Conference without broad-based consultation (or for that matter, it seems to us, without any consultation) of the Southern Asian church.

Southern Asian Adventists have long felt the need for open lines of communication between leaders and laity, between first and third worlds. The vital need is for a servant (incarnational) theology to inform the church in its polity and practice. Such a theology must identify with the trans-cultural core which constitutes the distinctively Adventist message, and yet be rooted in Southern Asian soil. In recent times, the “Bullock-Cart Theology Series” is attempting to meet this

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need. The symbol of the bullock-cart is a call to “do” theology and not merely “import” it. Adventist theology cannot ignore the overwhelming presence of the world religions in Asia. This is the context in which we live. It means, for instance, that Adventist apocalypticism and eschatology must be made meaningful in the context of the cyclical world views of Asian religions. Bullock-Cart theology is a call to mutuality—first world Adventism must realize, as we do, that in some places the bullock-cart is the most efficient means of transport there is. The best vessel to proclaim the Three Angels’ messages in Asia is the life that is truly Adventist and truly Asian.

If there is one theological issue, more than any other, which calls upon the church to be servant and experience the Incarnation, it is that of poverty. All Asian religion is basically an attempt at explaining the economically conditioned poverty that pervades Southern Asia. Adventism has yet to learn to do theology from the perspective of the poor; yet, it is only as it is shown how God speaks in the midst of Southern Asian destitution and deprivation that Adventism will cease to be a foreigner. An Adventism without the cross will fail in the accomplishment of the mission of the church. Because the Son of Man came to this world not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, the church is to manifest the same form of a servant. And only as the church manifests the same form of the servant which was seen in the Lord’s march to the cross, will it become the body of which he is the head.

What does all of this have to do with Adventist believers outside of my home division? Neal C. Wilson, president of the General Conference, speaking at the Spicer College Forum on “Issues in Bullock-Cart Theology” on March 25, identified an issue which I believe is as significant to the South Pacific Division as it is to us in Southern Asia. He was responding to Volume 2 of the Bullock-Cart Theology Series, an open letter to the president and members of the General Conference Committee, which stated:

This is what bullock-cart theology is all about—mutuality. And yet this mutuality will never be the result of either the magnitude of first-world funds or the preponderance of third world numbers.

President Wilson considered this a “very valid point,” which Seventh-day Adventists need to be aware of today because it could “introduce a force that could tear us apart!” He said:

It speaks in this document about the conflict that there is between numerical voting power in the church as opposed to financial power within the church. Now it didn’t put it exactly in those words, but it is very clear in the document that this is being presented as the great stumbling block to this church. And frankly I have to totally concur . . .

There are those who are helping to finance the world church financially, who do not have voting power in the church. They have the financial power but not the voting

power. And to a large extent those who have the voting power do not have the financial power. Frankly, if we are not very careful, and if the Holy Spirit does not guide us in finding a good solution to that, and one of the best solutions there is, is what has been suggested in this little document, that is, let's get together and talk about it (S.M.C. Forum Tape).

Wilson concluded his comments with the hope that the Lord would help us somehow to find an answer "to avoid some kind of difficult confrontation that this church could very easily experience and that could fragment us."

The crux of the question lies in the importance accorded to money. Is financial power in the Seventh-day Adventist organizational structure in harmony with the mission of the church? Asian and African countries have seen their memberships grow, but for years have had no representation on the General Conference Committee. Even with recent changes, they are still very inadequately represented. Leadership positions in these divisions have for too long been retained by missionaries from the first world.

Our experience may well pose some questions to you in Australia. In the South Pacific Division, the home field, with a membership of 55,399,

pays a total tith of \$AU31,662,746. On the other hand, the mission field—the Central, and Western Pacific, and Papua New Guinea Unions, with a membership three times as large (157,667)—pays a tith of only \$AU6,921,281.

What has the financial dominance of the Home Field meant to the mission of the church? Has it resulted in the cultural emasculation of the Islanders? Would not the mission of the church be accomplished sooner if the indigenous church was encouraged to develop along the lines of its own genius? Is there not an assumption of the superiority of the donor (with regard to the cause of the mission) in the impositions he makes on the donee? If democratic elections on a membership basis were held in the South Pacific Division, would there be a majority of Island staff at Division headquarters? These are questions that are meaningful, I believe, if our experience has anything to say to you. The Bullock-Cart is a call to mutuality—bridging the gulf between the worlds. It is an attitude, an outlook, a conviction which says that the Third-World church is also a full partner in Adventism. Supremely, it is a call to a servanthood that brings about a mutuality manifested in our Lord's incarnation.