

Methodism's Indian Partners.

India is currently in the news as our Department for International Development is ending its aid programme for India, on the basis that India does not need such assistance any more. It is a country with a space programme, heavy military expenditure and more millionaires than the UK. Is this the right thing to do, and if so should the Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) rethink our relationships with our Indian partners to phase out the financial dimension?

One thing the aid agencies point out is that India may have increasing wealth but still some 30% of people in extreme poverty are found in India, over 350 millions. UK development programmes have been targeting some of those poorest in four of the most vulnerable states in India. There is also the ubiquitous issue of caste. The great majority of the poorest are Dalits or Adivasis (indigenous peoples), and many in the higher reaches of Indian society have no interest in helping them. Most of those with whom UK aid programmes work suffer from the caste discrimination endemic in Indian society.

During September I undertook a visit to some of our India partners, on behalf of our World Church Relationships (WCR) team, to express solidarity and understand more of how their work is going. One partner is the National Council of Churches of India (NCCI), and it was a real pleasure, having worked with and in ecumenical structures for many years, to see the Council alive and well.

I was able to attend the NCCI's Annual Meeting and hear the reports of the various sections. We were given hospitality by the Gossner Mission, an Evangelical Lutheran Church set up by the original German missionaries in the north east of India. I was invited to preach at the opening service and was able to reiterate our concern for Dalit and Adivasis, those continuing to suffer caste discrimination and untouchability in India and its neighbouring countries.

The NCCI has thirty member churches and seven Commissions. Four of them cover general work on Unity and Mission, on Justice, Peace and Creation, on Policy and Public Witness, and finally Communications. The more specific work is on Dalits, Adivasis, and Youth. In addition the Council has several other projects, including ESHA.

The ESHA project carries out a very specific and challenging area of work. It stands for Ecumenical Solidarity for HIV/Aids, and this work, led by an energetic priest Father Philip Kuruvilla, has been challenging church leaders to engage with those suffering from HIV/Aids but also to address homophobia and the problems of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities. He edited a very direct and informative issue of the NCCI Review in June this year. Such work is rarely done by the Churches individually, which is what makes ecumenical presence so important.

Two of the NCCI's other initiatives are the All India Council of Christian Women (AICCW) and the India Peace Centre, both of which are MCB Partners. Last February, in the aftermath of its Assembly which the MCB supported, the AICCW launched the 365 Days of Zero Tolerance, a campaign against the increasing levels of violence against Indian women. The following month it engaged in a programme on Women's Legal Rights in New Delhi, which was attended by the Minister of Education, highlighting the need for women to know how the law might help them.

During March also churches were encouraged to mark International Women's Day by drawing attention to the 365 Days of Tolerance campaign, an event to promote women-friendly police

stations was organised in Nagpur, and a pilgrimage took place in Delhi to address the issues of trafficking and sexual slavery.

The India Peace Centre during 2015 has been following up the outcomes of an event held at the end of last year on 'Called to be Peacemakers'. India is an increasingly violent society, and although there have been no significant outbreaks of violence, such as the Kandhamal massacres of Christians in 2008, there has been low-level violence especially against minorities. Churches were burned in Delhi earlier this year and Christian leaders were beaten by police at a protest in New Delhi last December. The latter did result in a direct apology from the Prime Minister, and reminded us of the importance of international action when such events occur.

The 'Peacemakers' consultation related to the IPC's three main concerns of the environment, disarmament and militarisation, and human rights, justice and peace. There was a focus on the issue of the importance of pluralism in the Indian context. There is a move under the present Government away from 'secularism', i.e. no faith community should seek to dominate, towards the idea that all Indians should be Hindus ('Hindutva'). Those of other religions should either 'convert' or accept their status as second class citizens. This is one of the areas where the presence of the NCCI is crucial, in that it can rally the Churches to act together to oppose this kind of oppressive behaviour by some in the Hindu community.

While in India I attended a further consultation of the IPC on 'Human and Democratic Rights'. This took place in Mumbai, where many of India's millionaires live. It is also where a community of the 'safai karmachari', the hundreds of thousands of manual scavengers who clean the dry toilets and sewage pipes of the villages and cities of India operate. The consultation heard from those tackling poverty, caste violence and also farmers' suicides, another key issue in contemporary India.

In the last twenty years some 300,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide, borne down by debt for the seeds, fertiliser and pesticide they are required to purchase. Microfinance has collapsed due to corruption and farmers are prey to money-lenders who demand between 30% and 48% interest on their loans. It is a shocking condemnation of successive Indian national and state Governments of the last twenty years that this situation continues today. The Churches express concern but even they could do more to highlight this shameful situation.

Hence there is a strong argument for continuing an active partnership arrangement with the Churches of India, and especially their ecumenical structures. One might also add there is an argument for continued British aid, it is questionable whether the Indian authorities will help the Dalits and others whom UK aid projects were supporting. The broad range of NCCI activities reminded me of the sad losses we have suffered in ecumenical activity in the UK over the last fifteen years. That is an area where the Indian Churches have something to teach us.

Revd David Haslam is a supernumerary minister in the Stratford and Evesham Circuit, a former chair of the WCR Grants Committee and a founder trustee of the Dalit Solidarity Network.