Nearly two thousand years have passed since St Thomas first preached the gospel in the southern coast of India, giving birth to the Indian church.

The Indian church
from St Thomas to the 21st century

early a century ago, the first expression of an indigenous mission movement began in India. When India gained her independence from the colonial powers, many foreign missionaries and mission agencies began to withdraw voluntarily, paving the way for indigenous leaders and structures to take over the Church and mission leadership. It was during this time that the indigenous ecumenical church unions like the Church of South India, the Church of North India and various other indigenous churches began to emerge. Later, from the 1960s onwards hundreds of indigenous mission agencies emerged which eventually resulted in the growth of several new churches across India. The Indian Church owes its existence to the mission of both the Eastern Church and the western church. The Eastern Church’s missionary effort is evident in South India, where historical tradition suggests a linkage to the ministry of Apostle Thomas. From that tradition, the Syrian church’s involvement continues even till today. Most of the western church’s missionary enterprise is closely linked to the colonial era which only started around 250 years ago. However, Indian involvement in global mission has increased by leaps and bounds in the last fifty years. It is now acknowledged that India is one of the major missionary sending nations – a reflection of the changing geographical representation of the global mission world.

What does the Indian church look like?

The Indian church owes its existence to the missionary efforts of the eastern and western church and therefore bears much resemblance to them. All of the churches founded by overseas missionaries struggled over the centuries to make a transition to Indian leadership and to adapt to Indian cultural situations. The overseas missionaries brought the Gospel along with their culture and denominational structures, transplanting the native religious and cultural practices in order to do away with the evils of the caste system and other exploitative traditions.1 This has been one of the major reasons for the misconceived perception that Christianity is a foreign religion.

Another achievement of the western missionaries, apart from church planting, has been their vision of establishing educational and health institutions which continue to

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play a major role in the ministry of the Indian church even now. The ministry of the church in pioneering healthcare and education initiatives continues to be a wonderful witness to the love of Christ.

**Understanding the Church in India**

The present church scenario in India is very diverse. There are denominational and traditional churches with highly structured organisations, and emerging churches with less structure which claim to be independent and are loosely networked. A general observation of the scenario reveals that the structured, established churches are often preoccupied with organising worship and pastoral care for their congregations and administering educational and medical institutions and local evangelistic efforts. The emerging churches and independently formed mission agencies are primarily involved in sending out the people to fulfil the Great Commission through cross cultural missions. The major exception to this would be the established denominational churches in the North East of India. In these regions both the Presbyterian and Baptist traditional churches have been actively involved in cross cultural mission in many parts of India as well as in neighbouring countries. However, the importance of cross cultural mission among the established denominational churches is declining.

The emergence of inter-denominational mission agencies can be directly attributed to the involvement of lay people. The support bases of most Indian mission agencies consist of passionate, motivated lay people. The missionaries who are recruited are all lay people and are seldom theologically trained. The impact of these missionaries and their supporters in the home churches cannot be underestimated. Mission awareness has generally increased and there is evidence of this in the fact that many more missions are continuing to emerge and the cross cultural mission personnel is also increasing.

**Wholistic ministry of the church**

The European and American mission movement in India had laid a strong foundation for the missional expression through wholistic missions. They have founded many institutions in the field of education, health, community development & rehabilitation and those efforts have been pioneering in many ways. Many of the Indian churches continue to establish schools, literacy classes, community development projects, and medical clinics in their areas.

**Prayer ministry of the church**

All this missionary zeal is the direct result of the spontaneous prayer movements that have emerged in the local churches. These prayer groups meet in homes and consist of Christians from different churches. They meet regularly and support mission workers through prayer and giving. Although this prayer movement is outside the structure of the denominational churches, the prayer groups have a great impact on the local congregations. There are many churches where members of these prayer groups are also the active core leaders of the congregation and thus contribute to the growth of the Church. A similar prayer movement among the lay people of the churches in Nagaland and Mizoram form the backbone of the missionary enterprise of the North Eastern church.

**Conclusion**

The emergence of the indigenous church in India, especially in the last thirty and forty years, has changed the church-mission history of India. God has used lay people in new and different ways to fulfil His mission in India by breaking traditional structures. The Indian church is called to be the redeemed community that will share the gift of redemption with their brothers and sisters in a culturally relevant manner, and is also called to play a prophetic role that will make an impact on the social, political and economic areas of Indian society. However, Indian churches continue to struggle in discipleship training and Christian education, which has resulted in the spread of nominalism. In general Indian missions and churches have done well in responding to some of the challenges within India but they have been slower in responding to the mission challenges outside India. The growing Indian diaspora outside the country is a major challenge for the Indian and the global church. The Indian churches and missions have felt that they need to prioritise the vast mission needs already in India, but we are also called to fulfil God’s mission not only within India but also around the globe. If and when the Indian church fulfils its calling it will begin to have a huge impact on the world and will give leadership to the global church in her calling.