Preterism in the land of Gandhi

Christianity is India’s 3rd largest religion according to census of 2001, with approximately 24 million followers which translate to 2.3% of India’s population. Its history traces back to the time when Thomas the Apostle traveled to the region now known as Kerala state in South India to spread the gospel. (Image 1) He traveled to the city called Muziris, modern day Kodungallur a small town near Cochin. There he baptized several locals in the area in AD 52. This is the origin of Christianity in India. There a thriving Christian community was born, now known as St.Thomas Christians. The Protestant mission began with William Carey who translated the Bible to Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi, arriving in Calcutta in 1793. Since then Protestant ministries spread throughout India. Among early Protestant missions from the United States to India, John Christian Frederick Meyer who studied Sanskrit and medicine in Baltimore was the first Lutheran minister in the region of Andhra Pradesh. He founded the Guntur mission in 1842. Since then, Guntur district in the state of Andhra Pradesh has been a major center for
Protestant ministries in India. (Image 2). Some missionaries identify these regions to the ‘bible-belt’ of south India. This area called Guntur in Andhra Pradesh is significant for Indian Preterists because this is where Preterism first spread to India from the United States.

**Its Arrival**

Preterism was introduced to India by Br. Argie Drollinger from Australia and Dr. Victor D. Thuraka, D.D. who was exposed to Preterist ideas during his time as a missionary student in the Bear Valley Bible Institute of Denver, CO, United States in 1972. (Image 3) After his studies he moved back to Guntur, India, conducting ministries and introducing young Indians to Preterism until 2007 when he passed away. Dr. Victor Thuraka was a very instrumental in establishing the Churches of Christ in India. Meanwhile, fledgling Protestant churches in India could not listen or digest and were not able to welcome the Preterist view of Scripture. Due to the hostile nature from the conservatives towards the Preterists back in America, Indian Preterist preachers who relied on financial support from US churches had even more difficulty to carry out their work in India. Dr. Thuraka was no exception, as his financial support and official recognition from Bear Valley Bible Institute were cut off towards the end of his life. During this time, Preterism was widely known by its opponents to be the “70 A.D. Doctrine”. Despite these unfavorable situations, men such as Dr. Thuraka and his friend Argol F Drollinger of Australia has continued to spread the Preteristic thoughts into minds of his senior students, which lead some to believe in Partial Preterist form. One of Dr. Thuraka’s senior student, Prabhu K Das was instrumental in not only bringing the full Preterist concepts openly and publicly, but also popularized the term ‘Preterism’ in Telugu tongue and initiated serious Preterist scholarship activities in India. Argol F Drollinger and Dr. Thuraka played a very crucial role in mentoring Prabhu K Das and many others to be the future successor of Preterist movement in India.

By the time of Dr. Thuraka’s death, India hosted her first annual Preterist meet in 2006, continuing up to 2009. This was the first structured nationwide Preterist conference in India. It
was conducted by Prabhu K Das, hosting the event in presence of some Australian Preterists, equipping the like minded, along with 238 guests and the majority of the crowd consisting of young Christian preachers all over India. (Image 4) Besides the annual Indian Preterist meetings, Prabhu K Das has traveled extensively in the state of Andhra Pradesh as a visiting speaker introducing many to the Preterist view. I attended one such meeting in the city of Ponnur, 35 km away from Tenali. (Images 5) Prabhu K Das visited a local congregation, approximately 20 people, and gave a lecture series on the Parables of Jesus from a first century historical context.

Young Preterist minister in Andhra Pradesh, India

Prabhu K Das, who is a respected Preterist preacher and leader in Andhra Pradesh state and entire India, hails from Tenali, India. He studied under the late Dr. Victor D Thuraka D.D. He is an author of “Second Coming of Christ- Past? Present? Or Future?” (2012), “Melchezedek Order” (2013) making him the first Preterist author in India. (Image 6) Prabhu K Das has been active on Facebook Preterist groups and online Preterist forums outside of his own ministry work in his home state of Andhra Pradesh. In Tenali, a small town near Guntur district with a large Christian presence, there are many congregations in the surrounding area who would like to hear about the Preterist message. (Image 7) Preterism is still very new to many in India and in a country with many different religions the positive message of Preterism is appealing to many. Prabhu K Das has responded to these needs by dedicating past ten years of his life with teaching. He has traveled extensively around his region to teach, support and pray with those who want to learn more about Preterism. He has also engaged in scholarship in public lectures and seminars in Preterist theology and eschatology, being one of the foremost expert in Preterism in India. Some major contributions that Prabhu K Das has made to Indian Preterist movement past few years include introducing theological terms (as well as concepts) like ‘Preterism’ (ప్రత్రితియుత), ‘Covenant Theology’ (సంతరంగ సంఘటన), ‘Covenant Eschatology’ (సంతరంగ వస్తుందింపు), ‘Covenant Creation’ (సంతరంగ స్వభావం), ‘Corporate Resurrection’ (సంతరంగ జీవితం), ‘Millennialists’ (మిల్యెనియస్) and some other
theological terms into Indian language, the Telugu tongue. Instead of directly borrowing English terms into his language, he reintroduced these terms in his mother tongue for the easy receptiveness and inducing the systematical approach of his fellow brethren.

Things haven’t always been so green for Indian Preterism, however. After 2009, there has not been a united nationwide Preterist gathering in India due to financial difficulties as well as fragmented nature of politics among Indian Preterists. Past few years we have seen both an explosive growth of Preterism as well as equally increasing oppositions and hurdles. Persecutions in forms of social alienation and ridicule from non-Preterist Christian community are similar problems that are also faced by Preterist ministries in the United States. Indian Preterists face additional problems of often hostile environment created by India’s Hindu majority and indifferent regional and central government to the plights of poor Christians. The situation in Andhra Pradesh, the region that brought up many young Preterists in India have deteriorated due to two events: the election victory of Modi and his BJP party into power in India, second the secession of Hyderabad the state capital of Andhra Pradesh and its surrounding regions into a new state called Telangana.

**Deteriorating situation for Indian Preterists**

Traditionally, modern day Indian state was ruled by Congress Party which was founded by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharal Nehru and led by his descendants. Congress Party was in power since independence and had grown to be seen as inept, corrupt and weak. It is also blamed for communal politics and caste based politics which sought to divide Indians by caste and religion for electoral votes. This changed in 2014 when Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the election in 2014 and obtained majority in Lok Sabha (lower house) and parity with incumbent Congress Party in Rajya Sabha (upper house).(Images 8) Many young Indians welcomed this change, as BJP and especially Modi are seen as hopes of change, and Modi is indeed an able and energetic leader to bring the change for better India. The problem this poses to Indian Christian is that Modi’s party BJP has links to many Hindu extremists. Congress Party, whether genuine or for electoral votes, supported Indian Christians and minorities.
With the decline of Congress Party, Indian Christians hesitantly look to BJP who has yet shown enough governance to gain their trust. On the other hand, the history of BJP’s relationship with Hindu extremists worries many Christians who fear looming persecution and possible violence. Indeed, there have been endeavors by some Hindu fanatic groups to root out Christianity from India. These days Christians need to take permission from the Police department to conduct public gospel meetings, often receive threats for conducting prayer meetings, even those that they conduct at their homes. Distributing Christian and Preterist literature have become more difficult with restrictions and threat of violence.

Nowadays some Hindu fanatic organization like ‘Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’ (RSS) and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) are wrongly allying the Christianity to be a borrowed religion (from the West). Very recently Indian Hindu organizations called for “Ghar Wapsi” (home calling) a series of re-conversion exercises to convert tribal and low caste Christians back into Hinduism using financial and political incentives. We have to seriously think about the conditions that caused the advancement of gospel in India. The Traditional Hindu concept of karma and the belief that deeds from your previous life led to better afterlife justified the difference between rich and poor in traditional Indian society and permitted caste system to continue. This is not to say that idea of charity doesn’t exist in Hinduism. In fact, it is considered good deeds to help the poor by giving alms and providing financial support to those in need. However, this is done strictly as a help to the poor, those outside your community. The idea of assimilation with the poor and making them part of one’s community is foreign to Hinduism and runs contrary to the foundation of caste system. Turning to the poor and making them one’s own brethren is a very Christian concept and explains why so many poor in India turn to Christianity. This also threatens the traditional social hierarchy and caste system, especially to those who adhere to conservative and reactionary segments of Indian society. As a result, fanatical Hindu organizations are increasingly reacting to Christianity in India by doing their own charity work to the poor. In this case, the poor are used as a political chip for their own advancement.

For Preterist ministries in Andhra Pradesh, the recent split of the richer Telangana and its capital Hyderabad from the old Andhra Pradesh state in 2014 (Image 9) meant more financial difficulties for the people living in that state from increased
electricity, water bills and possibly increased taxes on consumable goods. In a region that is already subject to daily power outage from morning till evening, the diversion of resources to the richer Telangana is only going to make life more difficult for people from the rest of Andhra Pradesh. This financial toll at the state level trickles down to individual level. To an average Indian preacher who is a symbol for poverty, starvation, shelterlessness and persecution, the new financial hardship of the state offers no encouragement for his living. These reasons explain some of the reasons why Preterist ministers from India ask for our helping hand through social media, especially Facebook and Tweeter. The major problem is that many of them are unable to compensate the requisites of their ministry needs. They have fallen short of financial resources to meet the needs of their daily lives to work effectively. Prabhu K Das is no exception. As with any non-denominational and independent ministers, Preterist ministers rely on their congregation for living. Most of the people brother Prabhu works with are poor and daily laborers. They are only able to gift or able to give the preacher 100-150 rupees, which roughly amount to 3 or 4 USD, which even don’t cover a single way train ticket or motorbike fuel cost. Despite being an avid reader of Preterist literature, Prabhu has difficulty obtaining book copies because of the sheer difference in book costs in India and United States. Books in India generally cost from 50 INR to 300 INR, roughly US$1 to 6. Titles that cost US$15 to 30 are beyond the reach of many. Even if these books are available via Amazon, the shipping cost alone would be too much for these people to handle. Prabhu circumvents this situation by relying on local printer shop to print PDF copies or ebooks. This, of course, has limitations and quality of these printed books is variable. Books as we know in the United States are considered luxury for many in India. Prabhu K Das and many young Preterist ministers in India share same financial difficulties over things that we take for granted in the United States. Moreover, with the impending financial and infrastructural disruption of Andhra Pradesh state, it’s becoming increasingly difficult for Preterist ministers to support their family while running a Preterist ministry. Despite all these hardships that are unimaginable to many of us here, Prabhu and other young Preterist ministers in India simply carry on.

Preterism in Modi’s India and beyond

Perhaps because of such sacrifice and dedication, Preterism has been a success in India so far. Its message of fulfilled hope is so powerful, liberating and faithful that it attracts people from all walks of life, Christians, Muslims and Hindus. One such example is a brother named Akbar, who was from a traditional Muslim family. He has been attending church for the past 5 years. In the year 2012 he was introduced to Preterism, which really challenged him to dig deep into the scriptures. In his own words, he said about Preterism that “it really makes sense of biblical prophecies, moreover I’m able to effectively answer and put some thought provocative arguments for my brethren, who are home calling me”. Many of his relatives and Muslim friends think of him to be a disgrace to their community. But Akbar gives his thanks to God, for his faithful stand and devotion to Christ. He openly acknowledges brother Prabhu K Das whose steadfast support has been instrumental in Akbar’s new faith and conviction despite ridicules and hardships imposed on him by his Muslim and other
Christian brethren. End times doctrine is also a big part of Islamic faith and the fatalism of fundamental Islam could be attributed to the same eschatology of our Christian faith.

Over the years many of younger generation of different religion and caste backgrounds such as brother Akbar have been turning to God and embracing the Bible and Preterist concept more effectively. But, the present leaders and ministers of the mainstream Christian church in India are not willing to neither accept nor even hear about the new idea. The first and foremost hurdle for an Indian Preterist is neither a Hindu extremist nor a Muslim, but a fellow Christian, who labels Preterists and their teaching to be ‘heretic’, creating much havoc among the believers by shunning the new thinkers and closing the door for any intellectual exchange from all sides of ministry. With such unfavorable environment and situation that they live in, it is only natural that Indian Preterists will first look to their brethren in United States and other affluent countries for help. However, many of us In the United States and other countries put our priority on debating minor theological issues and church politics over helping the brethren who belong to same school of thoughts who are in dire need. The greatest strength and weakness of Preterism is its hermeneutics. It is the deeper studying of the Word that brought us to Preterism. However, the focus on hermeneutics and theology may have diverted our attention from more truly important things in Christian life. Preterists will commonly find that they tend to be more inquisitive and delve into the study of theology more heavily than our non-Preterist counterparts. However, the emphasis on the word and the academic activities has led us to forget things that are more important, helping the ones in need as a good Samaritan had done for an abandoned traveler on the side of the road. (Luke 10:29-37)

The Indian Preterist ministries focus on balancing the hermeneutics and theology with traditional Christian values of helping others in need. They reach daily hundreds of people through literature, local TV programs, seminars, public meetings and Bible school training younger generations in Truth and to develop prominent members as future leaders of the Preterist ministry in India. Prabhu K Das is dedicating his life to this cause. He has organized free books and stationary drives for orphans and Christmas gifts for widows and those stricken with leprosy. (Image 11) Despite his own hardships raising two children and supporting his wife and his parents who are in retirement, he constantly prays for the change in their situation, social as well as financial matters, so that him and other young Preterist ministers like himself may adequately provide the needs of their family as well to the members of their congregation, who are working tirelessly in fulfilling their vision. Thankfully the truth is prevailing and they are growing. What they are doing here will impact and yield fruits for Christians in India for generations to come. For this all they need all our prayers and generous support. It’s high time to awake, unite and bear fruits.

Images II. Prabhu Das with widows and leprosy victims
Jaemin Park is a pathology resident in Houston, Texas, and friend of Prabhu Das. Last year he visited Prabhu and several other Christian ministries in India, and brings this report.
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