

# India's Catholic minority spreads message to poor, Hindus

By John Thavis  
**Rome (NC)** — Pope John Paul II will visit India Feb. 1-10, where a Catholic minority is finding new ways to bring its message to the poor and the Hindu majority.

India's 12.5 million Catholics are less than 2 percent of the country's estimated 745 million population, but the Church's presence — especially in tribal areas — is increasing through programs that stress prayer and social action.

Indian leaders have been sensitive to, and sometimes critical of, Christian evangelization. As their guest, the pope is expected to emphasize the common spiritual values that unite the country's 25 million Christians with its 600 million Hindus and 80 million Moslems.

In a visit Feb. 1 to the funeral monument of Indian independence leader and Hindu philosopher, Mahatma Gandhi, the pope plans to read a message of peace and religious harmony, Vatican sources said. On Feb. 8, he will speak at a meeting with non-Christian leaders in Madras.

But the pope also is expected to carry a specifically Christian message when he visits 14 cities — all places where the Catholic Church has become firmly established.

The stops include the southern state of Kerala, the most strongly Catholic region, where tradition says St. Thomas the Apostle preached; Goa, where Portuguese missionaries landed in the 1500s; and Ranchi and Shillong, where "tribal" churches have grown in recent years.

It will be the Polish-born pope's first trip to India. Pope Paul VI was the first pope to visit India, traveling to a eucharistic congress in Bombay in 1964.

Although constitutionally a secular nation, India has a Hindu tradition that goes back about 4,000 years. It also has had periods of religious violence, most recently between Hindus and militant Sikhs in the northern Punjab state — a place not on the papal itinerary. Fighting between 1982 and 1984 left thousands dead and culminated in the 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by two Sikhs.

Indian authorities have promised strict security for the trip. Some extremist Hindu leaders have sharply criticized the visit, saying it would "accelerate" conversions among tribal peoples and members of the lower Indian classes. Protests against the trip could include demonstrations along the way.

In India, Catholic evangelization has stressed "presence" over "preaching," ac-

ording to several Church sources interviewed in Rome. It has been marked increasingly by two movements, they said: social action among the poor and inculturation — an effort to translate Christianity into traditional Indian languages, prayer forms and ceremonies.

The trend is away from simple charity and toward greater social education, particularly among the country's 17,000 missionary stations, they said.

Jesuit missionaries, for example, have set up regional theology centers in local languages and village programs for adult education and literacy. About two-thirds of Indians are illiterate.

Near Bhopal in central India, Father Volken worked three years to organize resistance to bonded labor, an illegal but still common practice in India that has kept some families indebted for generations. Other Jesuits and Religious have organized on behalf of poor fishermen in southern India, whose livelihood is threatened by increasing mechanization.

These activities have at times upset the government and Church leaders because of their political implications, he said.

The pope will visit a home for the dying and destitute run by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in downtown Calcutta, where 9 million Indians live, many in slums or shacks.

But according to Bishop Henry D'Souza, co-adjutor of Calcutta, the Church does not plan to make a public issue of poverty during the trip.

"So much of the poverty in India is structural. The Catholic Church in India has not highlighted this because of its minority status. It doesn't want to be seen as a complainer," he said. "We would rather give a witness of justice to people who are poor, and arouse consciences."

In addition to social awareness, some believe the Church in India needs to further emphasize individual spiritual development.

"Our fundamental commitment is to have more prayer among the poor," said Franciscan Father Gualberto Gismondi, who is in charge of missions for his order. "If you underline the social problems too much, Indians will admire you, but do not accept you as a religious person."

U.S. Father Joseph Connolly, vice general of the Divine Word missionary order, agreed.

"A big complaint Hindus have is that, while they see the social work of the Church

as good, they really don't see that the Church produces men of sanctity," he said.

Through inculturation, the Church has emphasized Christian prayer, blending it with India's traditions of meditation and asceticism, Churchmen said.

This has helped the Church shed its "foreigner" image, said Archbishop Simon Pimenta of Bombay, president of the Indian bishops' conference.

"We are a Church in transition, toward adopting local cultural values and toward the 'Indianization' of the Church. It's a long and painful process," he said.

The painful part, he said, is that the movement is viewed with suspicion, not only by the Hindu majority, which fears conversions, but by Catholics who resist change.

"They say, 'You're making us Hindu again,'" Archbishop Pimenta said.

In several states, "anti-conversion" laws prohibit the Church from active evangeliz-

ing. To protect themselves, priests sometimes ask converts to sign a statement saying they have adopted the faith under no coercion.

The conversion issue is still a sore spot in church-state relations, the sources said, but the general situation has improved under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded his mother as head of government. The pope is expected to meet with the prime minister and other officials Feb. 1.

The Church and Indian government have battled over birth control, sterilization and abortion in recent years. Faced with a population that has more than doubled in the last 35 years, the government still promotes birth control and allows abortion, but the forced sterilizations of the late 1970s have disappeared, Church sources said.

One positive result of the sterilization campaign was that the Church developed a strong natural family planning program in response, Father Volken said.

## Holy Father hopes upcoming trip will strengthen India's tie to Rome

By John Thavis  
**Vatican City (NC)** — Pope John Paul II praised India's spiritual traditions Jan. 10, and said he hoped his upcoming visit there would strengthen the country's ties with the Holy See.

India and the Vatican share the same concerns for "international peace, disarmament and the proper use of the world's resources," the pope said. He spoke at a welcoming ceremony for India's new ambassador to the Vatican, Ashoke Sen Chib.

The pope referred to "the particular bonds which exist between the Holy See and India," where "Christianity has been at home since the earliest Christian era."

"I pray that my forthcoming visit may further deepen these bonds and make clear my heartfelt respect for the spiritual traditions which so characterize your nation's history," he said.

The pope was scheduled to visit 14 Indian cities during his Jan. 31-Feb. 10 trip.

He said he was preparing for his first visit to India with the same "sentiments of friendship and respect" that Pope Paul VI showed when he traveled there in 1964.

During his trip, Pope Paul praised Indians as a "great and noble people" who worked untiringly for peace.

Pope John Paul said India remains a spokesman for peace in international forums. The Church, too, believes that "dialogue must take the place of confrontations" in order for world peace to develop, he said.

In a brief speech to the pope, the new ambassador described Indians as "deeply religious by nature."

"The official policy of secularism followed by the government does not represent any kind of apathy toward religious beliefs, but rather gives equal and impartial importance to all the religions represented in India," he said.

"As aptly summed up by the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, 'each one prays to God according to his own light,'" he said.

India is a predominantly Hindu nation of 746 million people. Catholics there form a tiny minority of less than 2 percent, about 12 million people. According to tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle evangelized Kerala State in the south of India.

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