

A Common Approach that Often Fails

by **Greg Parsons**

Director of Global Connections
Frontier Ventures

This story is about a working young woman but it could have been the story of many international students who come to the U.S.¹

An unmarried Indian Hindu girl in her late 20s obtained a good job, which took her away from home to live in a major city outside of India. Though still not married, her new income relieved some of the family responsibility for her. She is most likely sending money home. Her father and mother were also excited and relieved about this new job because, before she left, she was in a relationship with a young Muslim man near her home.

After she was there a while, she comes to Christ and begins attending a local Christian church. Those in the church are excited about her new faith and her growth. Naturally, she is growing related to what she learns from the Bible, but without realizing it, she is also growing in how that particular Christian church interprets the Bible—especially as it relates to Hinduism, family, honor, and culture. These things may not have been mentioned in specific words, but were communicated, likely with a firm sense of authority. Everyone seems excited that she can now reach her family. So, without asking her father, she decides to quit her job and return home.

Back in India, she is now under her family's responsibility again. She is not able to contribute to the household until she gets a new job, which she cannot easily find. And, there is a

new pattern in her life which was not the case when she left: she goes to a Christian church nearby—which the people back in her first church certainly instructed her was crucial for her growth in Christ.

Now, her father is encouraging her to marry that young Muslim man she was interested in earlier. She was probably told by her Christian friends that she should never marry a non-Christian, no matter what her family said.²

This story, or one like it, has played out over and over in India for 100 years. Donald McGavran—third generational missionary to India—called this: “One by one against the family.” He saw it all over India.

Naturally, it raises several questions which impact the spread of the gospel there:

What would make a Hindu father encourage her daughter to marry a Muslim?


Clearly, in this situation, it brings less shame on the family to marry a Muslim than a Christian. Experts believe that this is because the Christian community—perhaps without realizing it and based on a Western view of Christianity—ends up encouraging individual converts to sever ties with their family that they had hoped to reach. To the Hindu, the Christians, who are supposed to be people of faith and love, seem to have no room to consider others' views on these crucial, deep, family, community and cultural issues.

Who should she obey, the Christians or her father?

This may not be quite as clear as many Christians think. Was Paul mainly commanding something about the

choice of marriage partners in 2 Cor 6:14?³ I believe this should be the norm whenever possible, and it may create grief in the long run for the believing Christian should they marry a non-Christian. More importantly it seems—especially around the world in shame/honor cultures—how do we reconcile 2 Cor 6:14 with Exo. 20:12 “Honor your father and mother, that your days may be long in the land”? Jesus repeats this, as does Paul in Ephesians 6—just after talking about marriage! Perhaps, first, we should ask how someone like this woman might live out both these truths by faith through God's mercy and grace?

Perhaps the Christians where she first believed could have said: “Do *not* come to our church again! We will meet with you in a small fellowship to help lead you to God's truth in his Word in a way that will honor your family and see the gospel spread.”

We don't know what happened next with her. This is current. As we reach out to those from other cultures and traditions, we must be able to think about what is heard and understood when we are trying to communicate truth with them. 

¹ This is a true story; some details are assumed based on information from those on the ground.

² It is rare for a family to want their Hindu daughter to marry a Muslim more than a Christian. That may speak to how the Christian community in the family's home area is viewed.

³ It should be noted that marriage is not mentioned in the entire book of 2 Corinthians. I realize that most commentators take Paul's reference here to refer to marriage or business partnerships.