

Break the Christian Cocoon— Let Hindus See Jesus

—Premkumar Dharmaraj

I AM CONCERNED with how little focus is given in our mission planning to target the Hindus in India and overseas. There are about 746 million Hindus in the world and they comprise 13.3 percent of the total population of the world. About 706 million Hindus live in India and they make up about 80 percent of the population of India.

The Problem—Indifference or Inadequacy?

Patrick Johnstone (in *Operation World*) indicates that evangelicals make up 1 percent of the population of India. That means there are some 8.3 million evangelical Christians in India—though I believe there are many more. These are Bible-believing Christians, people sincere in their personal Christian life, faithful to their church and to missions. They want to see the Hindus come to Christ. But most of them never attempt to communicate the Gospel to their Hindu friends and neighbors. I believe the problem is not really indifference, but rather inadequacy! It's as if Christians are trapped in a

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“Christian Cocoon,” isolated from Hindus. They need our help to break free! They must break free if Indian Hindus are to be reached.

The Program—Evangelical or Evangelistic?

There are many churches in India that can be classified as evangelical. Too often their ministries and programs are confined to the denominational and traditional structures maintained by the leaders and the members of those churches. They serve the purpose of shoring up the faith of their members rather than seeking to reach out to the Hindu community in that part of the country. Thus many of these churches and their programs are of course evangelical, but they are not necessarily evangelistic.

There are also a good number of parachurch organizations in India that are identified as evangelical. But most of these organizations are busy in reviving and helping the churches to maintain their evangelical faith. The question is: Are we only interested in enabling the churches to be evangelical? Or, are we interested in equipping and mobilizing the evangelical churches

to be evangelistic in the context of the Hindu world around them?

The Principle—Priority or Pragmatism?

Again referring to the statistics presented by Johnstone in *Operation World*, there are 198 mission agencies in India and only about 50 percent of them are involved in cross-cultural work. And of these, more than 90 percent work among the tribal people (who comprise only about 7 percent of the population of India), who are not Hindus. Maybe it is the result of missionary pragmatism: Tribal people are often more receptive to the Gospel than the Hindu community. Reaching Hindus also requires more research and preparation. As a result, many agencies have preferred to concentrate their work among the tribals.

Of course the tribal mission must go on. But it must not be done at the expense of ignoring our priority in reaching 80 percent of India.

The Purpose—Conglomerating or Communicating?

We can find pockets of Hindu communities—and Indian Christian communities as well—in countries all over the world. Particularly in 18 countries around the world, there are communities of Hindus which number over 100,000.

Sadly, not much is done to communicate the Gospel to them. The overseas Indian Christians have been preoccupied in establishing themselves and their families in a foreign country. Preserving their cultural, traditional, and spiritual values has been their primary concern, trying to maintain their

identity and security as part of Indian Christian society in a strange land and culture. They are not equipped and mobilized to take up the challenge of communicating the Gospel to the Hindus around them.

The people of India have seen enough of empires in the past. They need to see the reality of the Kingdom of God.

The Need for Training the Laity

Over the years, I have personally listened to hundreds of Indian Christian believers speaking with much regret and frustration, "I want to talk to my Hindu friends about the Lord Jesus, but I just don't know how to communicate to a Hindu." This is because these believers are third and fourth-generation Christians and they do not know Hindu thinking. They have never been trained and equipped to share the message of the Gospel with confidence and clarity in the context of Hinduism. The problem is two-fold. On the one hand, they are ignorant of the concepts of Hindu thought. On the other hand, they are equally ignorant of the Christian concepts that could help them

make a meaningful presentation of the Gospel in the context of Hindu thinking. So they feel intimidated when they think of sharing the Gospel with Hindus. This means we should seriously think of providing a proper Lay Training Program if we are sincerely concerned about communicating the Gospel to Hindus.

The Need for Developing Strategies

We need to recognize Hinduism at different levels. The Hindu tradition accommodates varied religious concepts. It is not so much one religion as a conglomeration of religions. We also need to identify numerous Hindu unreached people groups as they exist

in different levels according to the caste system of the Hindu society. So we cannot follow a stereotyped method to communicate the Gospel to all Hindus. There is a great need to do serious research in order to produce proper tools and appropriate strategies to make the message of the Gospel meaningful to Hindus at different levels.

The Need for Partnering with Proper People

There are credible indigenous mission agencies, churches, and individuals that are doing good work in India. However, we need to motivate them to focus on reaching the Hindu communities and enable them to accomplish the task by

Ten Tips for Ministering to Hindus

—H.L. Richard

Friendship evangelism is usually easy to initiate with Hindus. Most Hindus esteem religion in general and are free and open to speak about it. A sincere, nonjudgemental interest in all aspects of Indian life will provide a good basis for friendship. Personal interaction with Hindus will lead to a more certain grasp of the essence of Hinduism than reading many books.

A consistently Christ-like life is the most important factor in sharing the Gospel with Hindus. The suggestions that follow should help to break down misunderstandings and help to build a positive witness for Christ. But learning and applying these points can never substitute

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for a transparent life of peace and joy in discipleship to Jesus Christ.

1. Do not criticize or condemn Hinduism.

There is much that is good and much that is bad in the practice of both Christianity and Hinduism. Pointing out the worst aspects of Hinduism is hardly the way to win friends or show love. Criticizing Hinduism can make us feel we have won an argument; it will not win Hindus to Jesus Christ.

2. Avoid everything that hints of triumphalism and pride.

We are not the greatest people with the greatest religion, but some Hindus are taught that we think of ourselves in this way. We do not have all knowledge of all truth; in fact we know very little (1 Cor 8:1,2).

We do not desire all India to become "Christian." (Think of what that means to a Hindu—India like America or Europe!) But we do desire all India to find peace and joy and true spirituality.

3. Never allow a suggestion that separation from family and/or culture is necessary in becoming a disciple of Christ.

To insist or even subtly encourage a Hindu to leave his home and way of life to join the "Christian" way of life in terms of diet and culture, etc., is a denial of Biblical teaching (1 Cor. 7:17-24).

4. Do not speak quickly on hell, or on the fact that Jesus is the only way for salvation.

Hindus hear these things as triumphalism and are offended unnecessarily. Speak of hell only with tears of compassion. Point to Jesus so that it is obvious He is the only way, but leave the Hindu

to see and conclude this for himself, rather than trying to force it on him.

5. Never hurry. Any pushing for a decision or conversion will do great harm. God must work, and the Holy Spirit should be given freedom to move at his own pace.

Even after a profession of Christ is made, do not force quick changes regarding pictures of gods, charms, etc.

Center on Christ. He alone can win their hearts' total loyalty to Himself.

Be patient and let a person come to fuller understanding and conviction in his own mind before taking action.

6. Work traditional Hindu (and Biblical) values into your life, like simplicity, renunciation, spirituality and humility, against which there is no law.

A life reflecting the reality of "a still and quiet soul" (Psalm 131) will never be despised by Hindus.

providing necessary tools and resources. We can accomplish great things for God if the churches, agencies, and the Christian believers in the West would enter into proper partnership that will be productive in terms of building up the Kingdom, and not helping some people to build their own empires in India. The people of India have seen enough of empires in the past. They need to see the reality of the Kingdom of God.

The Need for a Mobilization Program

If we are really serious about reaching the Hindu world, we need to think of mobilizing people at various levels to reach out to Hindus. We



must equip and mobilize the leaders and members of the church, university and seminary students, Christian workers and missionaries in India, and overseas Indian Christian workers. We should also equip and mobilize the people in the West who want to be involved as short-term missionaries, non-resident missionaries, and partners with the national workers in reaching the Hindus.

I am convinced that we must carry on this mission of reaching the Hindus, but we cannot do it without help from God and His people. You can have a very important place in this mission. We invite you to join hands with us. Feel free to contact us for further information and involvement. 🌐

7. Know Hinduism, and each individual Hindu.

It will take some study to get a broad grasp of Hinduism and patient listening will be required to understand where in the spectrum each Hindu stands. Both philosophical and devotional Hinduism should be studied with the aim of understanding what appeals to the Hindu heart. Those who move seriously into work among Hindus need to become more knowledgeable in Hinduism than Hindus themselves are. Some study of the Sanskrit language will prove invaluable.

Remember the Biblical pattern from Acts 17 of introducing truth to the Hindu from his own tradition, and only secondarily from the Bible. For example, the Biblical teaching on sin is repulsive to many modern Hindus, but their own scriptures give an abundance of similar testimony. Bridge from Hindu

scripture to the Bible and Christ.

8. Be quick to acknowledge failure.

Defending wrong practices in the church and Western Christianity only indicates we are more concerned for our religion than we are for truth.

9. Share your testimony,

describing your personal experience of lostness and God's gracious forgiveness and peace. Don't claim to know God in His majesty and fullness, but share what you know in your life and experience. This is the supreme approach in presenting Christ to the Hindu, but care must be taken that our sharing is appropriate. To shout on a street corner, or share at every seeming opportunity is offensive. What God does in our lives is holy and private, only to be shared in intimacy to those who will respect the things of God and his work in our lives.

10. Center on Christ. He alone can win their hearts'

total loyalty to Himself.

In your life and speech so center on him that all see in your life that God alone is worth living for. Hinduism is often called "God-intoxicated," and the Hindu who lives at all in this frame of mind is put off by Christian emphases on so many details to the neglect of the "one thing that is needed" (Lk. 10:42).

A Hindu who professes faith in Christ must be helped as far as possible to work out the meaning of that commitment in his own cultural context. Often a new follower of Christ is ready to adopt any and every practice of Western Christians, and needs to be taught what is essential and what is secondary in Christian life and worship. For example, it can be shown that the Eastern practice of removing shoes in a place of worship has strong Biblical precedence despite the fact that shoes are worn in Western churches.

A new believer should be warned against making

an abrupt announcement to his or her family, since that inflicts great pain and inevitably produces deep misunderstanding. Ideally, a Hindu will share each step of the pilgrimage to Christ with his or her family, so that there is no surprise at the end. An early stage of the communication, to be reaffirmed continually, would be the honest esteem for Indian/Hindu traditions in general that the disciple of Christ can and does maintain.

Approaching Hindus on these lines does not result in quick conversions and impressive statistics. But a hearing will be gained from some who have refused to listen to traditional Christian approaches. And new disciples of Christ can be taught to deal more sensitively with their contexts, allowing them to maintain an ongoing witness to their family and society. As the leaven of the Gospel is allowed to work in Hindu minds and society, a harvest is sure to follow in God's own time. 🌐