

Partnership in Evangelizing Global Hindu Diaspora

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In the wake of globalization, the twenty-first century is witnessing a significant movement of upwardly mobile Hindus to different parts of the world. Next to Chinese, probably Hindus or Indians are perceived to be most influential migrants in the globalised era. This Hindu presence is not only confined to physical, professional and cultural aspects, but more profoundly spiritual aspects of the global society. An increasing number of people around the world have been influenced by the concepts and practices like *Yoga*, Transcendental Meditation, Re-incarnation, *Maya and Karma*, which have been consciously introduced in the West by the Hindus in the Diaspora and their counterpart Gurus from India. As the process of globalization continues to grip the world, upwardly mobile Hindus are bound to impact the world in no lesser manner.

It is clear from the trends that the number of Hindus is bound to increase around the world in the coming decades. This will bring tremendous pressure on the global Church and mission agencies to strategically think about their role in witnessing to these Hindus who are now an inevitable part of global society. Truly the uttermost parts of the world have come to the doorstep of the global Church. The process of migration, settlement, adaptation and eventually assimilation of the Hindus provides the global Church a significant opportunity to witness to them. The need for critical reflection on the global Hindu Diaspora and developing a meaningful partnership in evangelizing them is urgent.

Global Hindu Diaspora

For centuries Hindus from India have been migrating to different parts of Asia and Africa. History shows that Hindus constantly left the shores of India and impacted the surrounding nations. Hindu presence can be traced in Burma, Bali, Fiji, Mauritius, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Surinam, Guyana and Trinidad. But the contemporary wave of Hindu migrants to Europe and North America is quite significant and worth noting. Modern Hindu migration to different parts of the world is not new, but the extent and the speed with which it is taking place in recent decades is amazing.

The early wave of modern Hindu migration is linked with trade and business, but much of this was not permanent, hence does not technically fit into the category of Diaspora. The second wave of migration was related to so-called ‘indentured workers’ who were taken as cheap labor for plantation and construction work under the British, French and Dutch colonies. “During the period from 1834 to 1917, about 1.5 million Indians signed five year contracts and were shipped to Mauritius, East and South Africa, South America, and Caribbean and Fiji Islands.”² A significant number of Hindus taken into these countries eventually preferred to settle down there, thus becoming the early Hindu Diaspora. Then there was a large influx of immigrants especially

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² Martin Baumann, “The Hindu Diaspora in Europe,” in Gerrie ter Haar ed., *Religious Communities in the Diaspora* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 88.

to Britain due to labor shortage, most of whom were male workers from the north-western part of India. These were either illiterate or marginally literate artisans, but very hard working people whose services were utilized extensively to build roads and rail. Then in the mid-1960s family-based immigration began to take place. Consequently, most of those earlier migrants who had intended to earn some money and return to India began to put down roots in their adopted land by investing in properties. This probably was the beginning of the real Hindu Diaspora in Europe. In the later part of the 1970s many East Africans of Indian descent started moving to Europe and North America due to political unrest in Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. These were well-established and experienced business and professional people who were forced out of East African countries. Estimates differ quite drastically as to how many Hindus³ are found outside India, but it is clear that the figure is in millions and will continue to increase in decades to come.

Hindu Diaspora Distinctive

Hindus in the Diaspora are similar to Hindus in India in many ways, and yet there are numerous distinctives that should be noted. These differences are perhaps only slight variations of traditional Hindu society, and yet they set the Hindus in the Diaspora apart from the Hindus in India.

Multi-lingual and Fragmented: When considering Hindus outside of India, one must remember that these are not one homogenous people, though most of them have their origin and roots in India. India has thousands of castes, tribes and ethnic groups⁴ with different languages and religions. The most prominent group of Indians of course is the Gujaratis and Punjabi Sikhs who have come either directly from the north-west part of India or via East Africa. Although most Sikhs perceive themselves to be a distinct community, they share many similarities with Hindus, including the caste distinctions. Then there are Sindhi Hindus, a strong business community who are found all over the world and especially in Europe and North America. They are also Hindus but with slight variations in their religious beliefs and practices. Apart from these dominant migrant groups among the Hindus, there are Bengalis and numerous North Indian groups, mostly from the Hindi speaking states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. These people are mostly educated professionals and skilled workers. Then there are many South Indian Hindu groups which include the Malayalis, Tamils and Telugus, who are found in various professional, educational and administrative sectors, and are primarily from one of the higher castes if not Brahmin. While recognizing this diversity of ethnic styles, it must be kept in mind that there is no uniformity in so-called 'Hinduism' of the neither Diaspora, nor unity among the Hindus.

Educated and Open to Change: Evidently, the Hindus in the Diaspora are well educated and financially secure. Most of those who are involved in medical, technological, educational and scientific fields are highly educated, and those involved in entrepreneurship are highly experienced in business undertaking. A good number of these were already from the business and farming communities of North-West India, which provided them with an edge to move upward.

³It must be kept in mind that the term 'Hindu' generally represents all types of Hindus, including Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs, though these are distinct religious communities in India. However, the term 'Asian Indian' includes Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Parsees and other religious communities whose origin can be traced to India.

⁴ Anthropological Survey of India documented 4635 distinct people, caste, tribal and ethnic groups in India.

The majority of these Hindus, whether professionals or business people; are from the higher castes. And yet many of them, representing the cream of Indian society, are not necessarily convinced practicing Hindus. Most of them are highly globalized and consequently open to change in their overall perspective of life. To a certain extent, higher education and financial security free them from the traditional Hindu mindset. Diaspora Hindus and especially the youth are gradually becoming secularized, individualistic and materialistic. This is perhaps inevitable, since it is in line with the American way of life. Open and at times eager to assimilate, many young Hindus show increasing tendency towards new perspectives, new ideas and practices.

Culturally Clashing: The overall life, culture, religion and society in different parts of the world are different for Diaspora Hindus than what they would have been accustomed to in India. This is especially seen in the area of religious and social values and worldviews. Tension arises when Hindu cultural values are brought under pressure by the host country's cultural values. At times they develop mechanisms to resist changes and retain their Hindu culture and values.

To cope with such tensions, concentrated efforts are being undertaken by first generation Hindus to re-orient the new generation to the Hindu faith by inviting Hindu religious gurus and spiritual teachers. Another way of safeguarding and strengthening their religious and cultural presence is by establishing Hindu temples. Community life and spiritual bonding are strengthened through the construction of temples and various religious as well as socio-cultural values are imparted to the younger generation. These activities are designed to institutionalize, preserve and transmit Hindu values that were implicitly institutionalized in India.⁵ Many of these activities also present a comparative perspective of the Indian (Hindu) values against local values that enables the younger generation to think through their religio-cultural heritage seriously.

Being born or raised outside of India, they are more inclined to be assimilated into the dominant culture, while affirming their basic Hindu norms such as arranged marriages, modesty, and respect for others.⁶ This process of assimilation creates a huge socio-cultural as well as spiritual vacuum, leading many to search for more pragmatic and contextually relevant ways to cope with such tensions.

Family/Community Oriented: For most Diaspora Hindus, Western society stands in direct contrast with Hindu society. This is partly because Hindus are generally more accustomed to a sense of community, interdependence and divinity in every aspect of human life and nature. "Consequently, for most Hindus there is a great awareness of, and respect for, human interdependence and interconnectedness, which is understood to be the foundation of well-being."⁷ Strong ethnic and regional identities are consciously built around family, clan and caste. They tend to stay close to each other and instead of individually attempting to meet their own needs, they work together to care and provide for their family and community. When it comes to the concept of the family, most Hindus consider themselves as part of an extended rather than a nuclear family. "In keeping with the community ethos of Hinduism, the individual is understood to be embedded in a family that is embedded in an extended family, which in turn is embedded in an even wider kin and network."⁸ This network is evident especially during times of festivals,

⁵ David R. Hodge "Working with Hindu Clients in a Spiritually Sensitive Manner" in *Social Work: A Journal of the National Association of Social Workers*, Vol., 49, Number 1, (January 2004), 33.

⁶ J. G. Miller, "Cultural Diversity in the Morality of Caring: Individually oriented versus duty-based interpersonal moral codes" *Cross-cultural Research*, 28(1), 3-19.

⁷ David R. Hodge, "Working with Hindu Clients ..." 27-38.

⁸ I. Reddy and F. J. Hanna, "The Lifestyle of the Hindu Women: Conceptualizing Female Clients from Indian

celebrations and death.

Partnership in Witnessing to the Diaspora Hindus

The Diaspora Hindus are largely neglected not because they are resistant or are perceived to be an insignificant minority, but because the global Church has not seriously perceived their significance and explored possibilities of meaningful partnerships in witnessing to them. Although there are considerable resources, expertise and qualified personnel available to initiate Christian witness among the Diaspora Hindus, very little efforts are being made in using them. Ministry to Hindus in the Diaspora requires not only different but more innovative and contextually relevant approaches, with the backing of research and prayer. Keeping in mind the partnership model of St. Paul and in the light of the present reality of Hindus in the Diaspora, the following guidelines are presented for effective Christian witness among them.

Partnership with the Church

The global Church may not necessarily have the expertise, know-how, and personnel to witness to Hindus in the Diaspora, but through the existing network of churches, plans for witnessing could be initiated.

Recognize Centrality of the Church: First of all, it must be recognized that the Church is central to God's plan of salvation for the world; and therefore needs to be taken seriously while establishing a base for witness among Hindus in the Diaspora. Most of these Hindus are accessible to the Church in North America, Europe and other countries of the world. Taking the example from the church in Antioch, teams of missionaries could be set apart and sent to minister among Hindus in the cities of the world. This would require prayerful sensitivity and planning on the part of the Church. As the church in Antioch, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, set apart two of their experienced and able leaders for cross-cultural ministry, so leaders could be set apart for such a task by the global Church.

Initiate Global Church Partnership: In the era of globalization, conscious efforts are needed for such partnership between the East and the West. It is time that we also look into the possibility of sending short term, long term and even life-time missionaries to the countries where a significant number of Hindus have migrated. Many global denominations have had ministries in India for years and they also have a pool of experienced leaders, theologians, evangelists and pastors who have had exposure to and expertise in working with Hindus in India. Various exchange programs could be initiated to bring experts from India to work with the global church leadership. Similar initiatives could be undertaken in sending global church leaders for exposure trips to India where they could observe various kinds of ministries among Hindus.

Further, partnership between global mission agencies and denominations should also be encouraged. Collecting, interpreting and sharing information about Hindus in the Diaspora can best be done through such partnerships. Churches and mission agencies that are involved in ministering to Hindus in the Diaspora should be encouraged to come together for mutual understanding, support, strategy development, and actual working out of effective Christian witness among them. The increasing number and the influence of Hindus in the Diaspora needs to be researched and studied systematically, for which partnership with mission bodies that have

Origin". *Journal of Individual Psychology*, (54) 384-398.

the experience and expertise is essential

Develop a Broader Global Network of Churches: Reaching the Diaspora Hindus is a complex and demanding task and it can never be done by one single church. Learning from Paul's model of partnership with various churches, efforts should be made to develop a broader network of Church partnership. Such partnership should be explored both at the local church levels as well as at regional or denominational levels. Knowing that strong pockets of Hindus are concentrated in certain cities of the, efforts should be made to initiate partnerships with those churches that have strong Hindu presence in their vicinities. Churches should be encouraged at various levels to develop meaningful partnerships with each other and share their resources in witnessing to Diaspora Hindus.

Resources in terms of information and expertise ought not to be the monopoly of one group; rather such information should be shared widely among those who are interested in ministering to Diaspora Hindus. Joint ventures should be undertaken to initiate the ministry among Hindus and assess progress, growth, and direction of ministry. Human resources, especially those who are experienced, should be extensively utilized. Conscious and deliberate efforts are needed to establish a strong support base of prayer, training and finance.

Utilize Indian Christian Networks: Even though the number of Christians of Indian origin is limited, a number of regional groups and fellowships meet regularly all over world. Many Indian Christians are either living in close proximity to their Hindu counterparts or working with them. This naturally provides a good point of contact with the Hindu community.

In addition, partnerships should be developed among the networks of Indian Christians who work in different parts of the world. These networks appear to be loose at the moment, since a good number of them are working in regional language groups (i.e. Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati, Telugu, Hindi), and they are confined almost exclusively to the Christian communities. However, many of these groups have willingness and potential to reach out to the Hindu community in North America.

Encourage House Church Network: Plans for follow-up and nurture of new believers with the concrete aim of forming contextually relevant worshipping communities of new believers should be undertaken. Since most Hindus are very family/community oriented people, efforts should be made to keep their family structures intact, as much as possible, even after their conversion. So, different ways of establishing house fellowships should be explored and through these fellowships of Hindu believers, deeper penetration into the Hindu Diaspora community be explored. Existing established churches where such new believers from Hindu background are added should be encouraged to undertake systematic nurture, and in turn encourage these new believers to develop partnerships with older and more experienced churches to reach other Hindus.

Partnership with Fellow-Ministers

The task of Christian witness among the Diaspora Hindus will never be effectively undertaken unless various types of Christian leaders form specialized teams and develop strong networks for ministry. Paul's ministry model was clearly multi-ethnic. There is a need for developing a "team ministry" to reach Hindus in the Diaspora. Teams of missionaries, pastors, evangelists, researchers and other interested Christians should be encouraged to work together. Since ministry to the Hindus in the Diaspora requires various kinds of resources,

expertise and personnel, attempts should be made to develop teams of Christian leaders with varieties of expertise and backgrounds. Attempts should further be made to develop team ministry with different ethnic groups of Christian leaders, both from Indian and non-Indian backgrounds. These teams could consist of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual as well as multi-regional leaders. Seasoned missionaries with substantial experience in ministry among Hindus should be encouraged to team up with global leaders interested in working with Diaspora Hindus. Building multi-ethnic, multi-gender and trans-generational teams to reach Hindus in the Diaspora is bound to yield good results.

Partnership with Families

Any ministry among Hindus in the Diaspora will have to take the centrality of the family into consideration. To make any breakthrough in the Hindu community, one has to use the existing family network.

Recognize the Importance of the Family: The importance of family, caste and community should be kept in mind as strategic approaches are developed to witness to Hindus in the Diaspora. Many Hindus of upper caste origin equally value their family as their religion and any threat to these is vehemently opposed. Because of the close-knit nature of the extended family, any member who acts out of line or questions its activities or views is considered a traitor. Moreover, becoming a Christian means renouncing not only the religion of the forefathers but also the age-old caste structure which is strongly woven into the fabric of the Hindu family. Therefore, very few caste Hindus, even after moving to other parts of the world, would like to renounce their caste and religion and become outcasts. For most Hindus, caste, religion and family issues are so interwoven that it is difficult to separate them.

Taking Paul's example of partnership, we can gain several insights. Although Paul did not neglect individuals in his evangelistic approach, he strongly focused on the family as a total unit. Learning from his family-centered approach, special care may be taken in developing family-based approaches to Christian witness among the Hindus. This would entail not only mobilizing families for Christian witness, but also forming house churches in line with the Hindu extended family structure. This approach, at least theoretically, has a great scope for penetrating the large number of Hindu communities and triggering a family-based house church movement.

Equip and Mobilize Christian Families: Perhaps the most effective way of reaching Hindu families for Christ is through Christian families. For the effective spread and penetration of the gospel, Christian families need to be nurtured, equipped, and trained systematically to undertake Christian witness with Hindu families. Though this is a natural and effective way of witnessing it is rarely taken seriously, since traditional approaches of evangelism tend to be more individualistic and male dominated. Families with women and children could become effective instruments in witnessing to Hindus in the Diaspora.

However, the task of identifying, equipping, training and mobilizing Christian families for such witness is not easy. The Christian faith should be nurtured in the family in such a way that the Christian family becomes instrumental in sharing this faith effectively with their Hindu counterparts.

Understand the Decision-Making Process: With a family-based approach in Christian witness to Hindus, the issue of decision-making has to be dealt with carefully. Focusing on the decision-makers is crucial, as it has great potential for the natural spread of the gospel among other Hindu

families. Having gone to different parts of the world, many Hindus and especially the younger generations of Hindus have become more comfortable with individualistic decision-making. But it must not be forgotten that most crucial family decisions, and especially religious decisions, are still taken by the elderly male or at least processed through him. This is very much in line with the Hindu cultural norm of respecting elders and abiding by the decisions made by them. Important decisions and especially religious decisions in Hindu families are not normally taken by individuals or young people. Understanding and respecting the decision-making process is crucial in witnessing to Hindus for further penetration of Christian message.

Be Sensitive to the Reality of Honor and Shame: The issue of shame and honor, which is indirectly linked with the family structure and decision-making process, also has to be given due consideration when witnessing to Hindus. Most Hindus come from a ‘shame and honor’ culture, where social acceptance and harmony in interpersonal relations are carefully balanced with the need to protect and enhance one’s self-esteem. The issue of ‘shame’ in Hindu culture acts as a potent social control; when an individual commits a mistake or a grave sin, their reputation and honor is perceived to be at stake. In most cases, individual conversion to Christ is considered by the Hindus as something that brings shame upon the family. When an individual takes a decision to renounce his age-old Hindu religion and accept the Christian faith, heavy pressure is brought upon him/her from every segment of the family, extended family and caste association, because becoming Christian is inevitably perceived as bringing shame upon the family. Ways and means should be explored to present the Christian message in such a manner that accepting it would make people feel proud and ‘honored’ as a result of their decision to become followers of Christ. If the issue of shame is handled carefully and the gospel is presented so that most Hindus will feel it honorable to become a follower of Jesus Christ, then there is a great possibility of triggering a Christian movement among them.

Conclusion

Until recently, Hindus in the Diaspora were considered marginal to the study of the “main” religion, and have been viewed as peripheral in Christian studies. Although of interest among social scientists, Christian theologians and missions thinkers have rarely given any serious consideration to systematic study of the Hindu Diaspora around the world. Traditionally, India and her people have been a mystery for most Western Christian theologians; not many serious attempts have been made by them to develop theologically informed and missiologically appropriate approaches in reaching upper caste Hindus in and outside of India. Indian and global Church’s failure to deal with the issue of witnessing to Hindus in the Diaspora is partly because they are generally from a higher caste background and financially better off, in contrast to most Christian mission workers and theologians who are accustomed to working among the poor ‘outcaste’ people.

Despite the presence of a millions of Hindus all around the world, and the popularity of Hindu practices, the global Church tend to keep her distance from them, thus making Hindus in the Diaspora one of the most neglected and un-evangelized people groups. Christian witness among them is possible, provided that serious efforts are undertaken in developing comprehensive partnerships at various levels. The reality and the challenge of witnessing to the Hindus in the Diaspora in the globalised world demands a comprehensive partnership without which most of them will still remain untouched by the Christian message.