

Bridging the Gap between Western Workers and India's Hindus

by Ryan Stevens

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Ryan Stevens' ministry efforts are focused on cross-cultural and domestic church planting and mobilization. With a concentration on unreached peoples and strategic methods for reaching them, he has been leading cross-cultural teams of senior church leaders and full-time missionary candidates for more than twenty years. These initiatives include regions such as Central Asia, South East Asia and Eastern Europe.

Since 1996, Ryan has been leading teams and churches to South Asia. He serves churches and workers, addressing areas from mobilization and initial involvement to ongoing long-term roles among the unreached. Ryan has also played instrumental roles in planting several churches in the U.S. He currently serves as an elder in his local fellowship and oversees local and global outreach.

Learning from Others' Experience

A cardiac surgeon doesn't begin her career by grabbing a scalpel and starting to cut. Complex initiatives require knowledge built upon the experience of others. Having led cross-cultural teams since 1986, I began focusing on bringing teams to India eleven years ago. For the most part, these teams were comprised of senior leaders of churches and potential long-term workers. We visited cities like Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Agra, etc. Primarily, though, most trips were to North India concentrating in the Ganges Plain and cities like Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Varanasi, Patna and Calcutta.

Whether leading teams from my own churches or from others, trips were designed around vision, exploration, increasing understanding and prayer. Initial trips with senior leaders were primarily for vision, culminating with a challenge to consider long-term involvement. Subsequent trips with the same church involved greater exploration for potential long-term workers and the investigation of viable platforms and ministry strategies. In both cases, after getting some brief exposure to India's history and complexity, we would spend much of our time meeting with others. Over the years we've talked with hundreds of indigenous and foreign workers. A small percentage of those we met with remained in North India long-term. With that in mind I favored meetings with those who were able to sustain a lengthy presence. They gave us insights into how they were able to remain on the field, what platform options made sense and worked well, and what they had learned about how to engage India's peoples. We also met with workers who were more recent arrivals and others who may not have been new but were new to us. I endeavored to show teams the wide range of thinking and approaches present from both Indian and Western perspectives. Their insights were valuable beyond measure and time spent with them moved us further along than any "ministry" we might have undertaken while in India short-term.

Who Will Complete the Task? Is There Room for Western Involvement?

Discussions with workers covered many topics. From time to time controversial subjects would arise. One major debate we were exposed to revolved around two areas: roles and finances. While Indian Christian workers emphasized their strategic positions and cost-effectiveness over their Western counterparts, Western workers cautioned against outsiders funding Indian ministries, warning of dependency, false reporting and undermining local authority structures. Without exception these issues were raised in every church considering any involvement in India and were further raised during every trip. Given the complex, and in some ways unfortunate, history of missions in India along with the disparity in economic resources between our country and theirs, this is to be expected. The debates need to take place.

However, the arguments were full of oversimplifications which painted a big picture that was inaccurate. Most notable were broad-sweeping comments about the indigenous mission force needing only financial resources to see the rest of the country evangelized. Resources are no doubt an issue. However, comments like these were spoken irrespective of the linguistic, cultural and caste boundaries that hinder expansion, not to mention the geographic and ethnic distance between India's reached and unreached. These issues, along with a lack of reproducible models for upper-caste Hindu society within the traditional Indian church, are easily just as significant, but no mention was made of them.

Patrick Johnstone has written about the massive lack of exposure India has to the gospel while at the same time spelling out that states in the Northeast are the most evangelized in the world and that states in South India continue to benefit from much

indigenous effort (*Operation World*, 1993, pp. 273–291; *The Church is Bigger than You Think*, 1998, p. 223). The Indian sub-continent with its vast mosaic of peoples among whom the gospel has traveled either extensively or barely at all can hardly be evaluated in a brief glance. Johnstone helps us understand that when it comes to evangelism there are radically different levels of exposure and success within India. Given the number of workers being raised up in the Northeast and South, there are numerous opportunities



to come across something related to indigenous Christian efforts in India. Churches in America hear of many opportunities to get involved. However, a clear picture of what has been accomplished and what remains is often absent, as are forthright discussions about the real issues that separate traditional Christian culture from mainstream Hindu culture.

A Role for Westerners

The truth, I believe, is that India ultimately must be reached by Indians. People movements happen when the gospel is wrapped in culturally unique expressions. India has seen some of that but it is largely overshadowed by the traditional church in the Northeast and South and largely unknown in the North. The goal is a uniquely Indian expression(s) of following Christ. Foreign workers can do their best to contribute in facilitating a people

movement but eventually it will need to move beyond them.

Having said that, of the workers I have seen, Westerners often seem more sensitized and generally more open, in my estimation, toward contextualization than many of their traditional Indian Christian brothers. If well prepared, Westerners are cognizant of needing to separate the seed of the gospel from the kind of fruit in which it's wrapped. Outsiders should have the benefit of knowing that certain components of what they bring in are essentially spiritual while many others are cultural and matters of preference and often need to be abandoned. Distinctions between the gospel and the Western or traditional understanding and implementation of the gospel need to be made.

India's Christian community is largely comprised of backward castes, dalits and tribals. It is significantly Westernized and comprises an identifiable subculture. For thousands of years, being Hindu has been a matter of identity and community as much as a system of belief. Those from Hindu society who converted not only changed their focus of worship but in converting to Christianity rejected one community and culture for another. All manner of values, forms, and rituals were exchanged but more importantly a transfer of group and personal identity also transpired. They have been brought into Christ which is glorious, but they have also been brought into Western culture, perhaps unaware. Separating the two after generations of established church tradition must be overwhelming to consider. This may not have been what missionaries intended but it is what happened nonetheless.

The ways things are done today in the Indian church are not necessarily reflective of Biblical requirements or cultural relevance among the broader audience. Rather, they are often reflective of foreign forms and values that carry different meanings in the Indian context. At this point they

are also deeply established expressions of Indian church culture. The depth of these established expressions is illustrated by the tension caused in considering a move back into mainstream Hindu (culturally) society. To Indian Christians it feels like this is a compromise, not only spiritually, but also in terms of community identity. Perhaps they will continue to make the most impact within their current context. However, being “Christian” isolates them from the larger target group. Continuing to remain outside of Hindu society minimizes any potential impact for the gospel. This is the major problem in further evangelization because without expressions of Christ within the larger group, how will it be reached? Westerners can’t fully represent those expressions but in certain cases, particularly among caste Hindus, they are positioned to help bridge the gap.

Building a “Better” Mousetrap— The Debate over Funding

Finances also greatly complicate matters. If the landscape were as simple as India having scores of indigenous missionaries ready to spread the gospel to its countrymen the only thing lacking being financial resources, then money might perhaps be the answer. The remaining issue left to deal with would be the monumental problem of dependency and how it can undermine local God-given authority. Unfortunately, the issue is far more complex. Hindu society distrusts any paid person claiming spiritual insight or authority.

Further, India’s mission force, of which 80% comes from backward castes, tribal and dalit backgrounds, is as yet unprepared to take the Gospel to the upper castes. At best outside finances assist in allowing indigenous workers to spend their time doing ministry among nominal Christians, dalits and tribals which have historically been receptive. At worst it continues to perpetuate questionable reporting and un-reproducible ministry models and solidifies the impres-

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sion that Christianity is the religion of outcastes and foreigners.

When it comes to the consumer mentality in America, there is hardly a better deal available than what is promoted by some indigenous missions. The terms as stated allow people to feel that they’re making a significant impact among unreached India by increasing exposure to Christ all by giving up the cost of cable TV every month. For churches who feel overwhelmed by sending their own people it’s an easy alternative. When Western workers raise support they are doing so against an economically-driven, outsourcing paradigm. In the global economy we’re used to sending jobs overseas and missions is cast in the same light. If finances are the criterion Western workers can’t compete. I have seen this issue come to a head many times when American workers are compared dollar-for-dollar with what is being presented.

India’s traditional indigenous workers are doing great things, mostly among nominal Christians, tribals and dalits and their influence looks to remain primarily among those groups. Western workers have ethnic, linguistic and cultural barriers to overcome, but so do Indian missionaries if they are going to the unreached and not remaining in their traditional areas of ministry. Westerners also have a realistic opportunity of influencing caste Hindus who overwhelmingly represent the task remaining. Will it cost more to send them? Of course, but should that prevent the gospel from going to the hundreds of millions of Indians who still need to hear it? If we are to see India’s unparalleled gathering of peoples before the Lamb’s throne it will take the full efforts of both India’s indigenous mission force and those of sensitive foreign workers who also have a role to play.

Regarding Platforms

The area of platform addresses more than visa issues. Most Western workers I’ve met struggle with the issue of identity that platforms attempt to address. Helping others make sense of their presence creates enough of a challenge. When thoughts of setting precedents arise, it becomes even more difficult. The idea of someone being paid to do spiritual work is suspect within the minds of caste Hindus. Carrying a viable role in society and relating to people from inside that framework is far more acceptable.

Life in India is much different and the demands are significant. Most things take more time than Westerners are used to. It’s easier to do ministry without losing time spent at a job. Foreign workers are in a tough situation. It’s unlikely that most will be able to sustain themselves solely on what they are paid in India. However, the greater question is, Does being on support present a model that can be followed? If people in vocational ministry are viewed as religious propagandists, do Hindu devotees of Christ compromise their testimony by following suit? Creative solutions to this issue are still very much needed. However, there are examples of Westerners being invited in and paid both by the government and private enterprise. As India grows economically more opportunities like this will arise. Western workers can also partner with entrepreneurs looking to outsource work to India. People with skill in business, management, education and technology can consider using their knowledge and experience in ways that were previously less viable.

Searching for Unique Indian Expressions of Following Christ

While the debate over roles and finances was front and center, the thing I was increasingly bothered by

was the similarity between Indian Churches and those back in the U.S. From very early on I wondered how life and worship expressions were so similar to our own. In visiting churches both in the South, Northeast and North I was struck by how much English was used in worship, by the fact that I knew the songs and the order of service, and that architecture was familiar to me but seemed out of place alongside other buildings, etc. Is it that time spent in Christ conforms us to a universal culture and identity that supersedes all other earthly forms of the same? Is this to be expected, that Christians should look, act and live very much the same even on opposite sides of the globe?

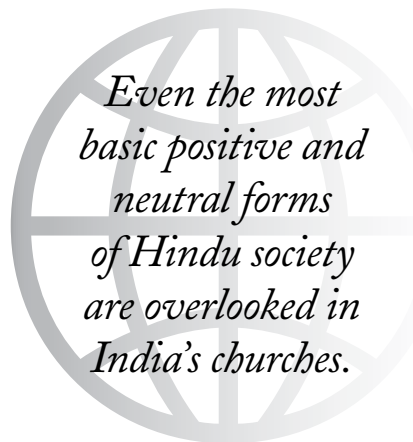
Consider the differences. Westerners, and Americans in particular, come from a few-hundred-year-old, modern, industrialized, culture with Judeo-Christian monotheistic roots, a primary language, and an instant-gratification, independent mindset. India represents an unparalleled mosaic of peoples, languages, and religions in one of the world's most ancient societies that embraces community and interdependence and a far more complex system of thought than that found in the West. I thought the disparity between cultures would be greater than what I saw between my own church culture and what I observed in many Indian churches.

The Vision of Coca-Cola and the Short-Sightedness of McDonald's—A Glimpse into Contextualization

I'm a die-hard Pepsi drinker, but I must say that I love the vision of Coca-Cola. It's succinctly stated, "A can of Coke in the hand of every person on earth." They're doing a great job of bringing that into reality. They have a few non-negotiables that are maintained internationally—a purified water supply, their unique recipe including carbonated water, sugar, caramel coloring, caffeine, etc. The rest is adapted to the local

economy and environment. They do tremendous marketing. They're not sticklers for distribution methods. Store owners and vendors don't have to follow rigid guidelines to qualify as re-sellers, etc. My teammates have also appreciated Coke's success in reaching far-away places. If a first-time traveler to India is experiencing some stomach distress and I bring them a Coke they're often surprised and begin feeling better in minutes.

McDonald's provides us a different example; its presence in India can help us understand some things. When



McDonald's sought permission from India's government to open restaurants there they made some concessions. No beef would be sold. Big Macs and Quarter Pounders were absent from the menu. In their place were several unique items such as the Maharajah Mac and some vegetarian selections along with their universal staples of French fries, soft drinks and ice cream. While many things are the same in all their restaurants around the globe, it looks as though McDonald's made some effort into contextualizing their restaurants in India.

However, when U.S. policy makes waves, McDonald's is often targeted for vandalism. This demonstrates that in spite of their attempts, no one thinks of McDonald's as an Indian restaurant. The American teams I've taken to India recognize this, too, as they would often prefer to eat every meal there. It's not exactly the same as McDonald's back home but, it's close enough to give

them a sense of security and peace. They know what to expect and they now the rules of how things work. After all, it is an American restaurant.

There are some parallels between these approaches and Kingdom efforts, and some lessons we can learn. McDonald's menus can be found in Hindi and other Indian languages. Customers pay in rupees. They have some unique menu items only found in India. Yet, in spite of all this, they are not seen as truly Indian. Coming into the country, they have fit a few pieces of India into their restaurant instead of fitting themselves into India. In many ways Christianity in India has traveled the same path. Westerners brought the gospel in and in some cases attempted to make their churches Indian but for the most part what is presently there feels much more like what we're used to back home. Seeing the gospel wrapped in Indian culture means much more than translating a sermon from English to Tamil or even speaking it directly into Bengali or Hindi, etc., while standing behind a pulpit in a church. Even the most basic positive and neutral forms of Hindu society are overlooked in India's churches resulting in an identity that remains foreign to mainstream society even after hundreds of years.

Coke has gone in a better direction. They recognize that what is inside the bottle is really what matters, and everything else is flexible. We would do well to learn from this principle.

The Yeshu-Bhakta Movement—Christ in the Hindu Context

India is not without its own unique expressions of following Christ; there are expressions that may look odd to outsiders, but are also intimately reflective of Indian culture. These expressions are a growing phenomenon but not a recent one. Rather than exchanging Hindu culture and identity for Christian culture and identity when coming to Christ, *Yeshu-Bhaktas* (devotees of Christ) live out devotion and discipleship to Jesus within their

natural context. This allows them to maintain levels of credibility and influence among those who still need to hear rather than being extracted and isolated from them.

A teammate of mine on meeting an Indian woman following a worship service asked her, “When did you become a Christian?” The woman explained that she was a follower of Jesus but a “Hindu” rather than a “Christian.” “To be a Christian would mean that I was born in a Christian home. My family is Hindu as am I.” Without question, this woman was a true follower of Christ. By maintaining her cultural and family identity and by demonstrating her life in Christ in a manner that could be understood she kept the door open to influencing her family rather than slamming it shut.

Satsangs

One of the most powerful cultural expressions of Christ-focused corporate worship I’ve observed in the Hindu context has been in the form of *satsangs*. A “*satsang*” or “gathering of truth” is a common Hindu model of spiritual worship and instruction. As such it addresses the two trouble-areas that current evangelistic methods are yet to overcome—forms and identity. Typical Hindu worship elements such as flowers, fruit and incense are included. *Bhajans* (hymns) are sung to *Yesbu* (Jesus). Teaching comes by way of a *swami* or *guru* who follows *Yesbu*. At times Hindu topics or well-known stories are used as introductions of spiritual concepts and then bridged to Biblical passages which are then elaborated. I’ve seen Westerners have a significant role in starting *satsangs*. As outsiders they are limited in some respects but since the form is indigenous it creates opportunity for the meetings to grow and spread beyond them.

Concerns over syncretism sometimes arise. I’ll grant that unregenerate Hindus may possibly confuse or combine what they experience in this context with their existing paradigm of spirituality, especially early on.

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For some, that means that this model should be abandoned altogether. However, if misunderstanding is something we totally wish to avoid we’re without much hope in the Hindu world, or anywhere else. To caste Hindus, converting to Christianity means a rejection of community, family, personal identity, and tradition; a throwing off of the things that bond peoples. There must be ways to preserve these elements while communicating truth accurately.

Personally, I believe that when it comes to Biblical revelation it’s unrealistic to conceive of an approach that would eliminate every possible angle of misunderstanding. Unregenerate people attend our churches week after week, and year after year. In spite of our thinking that truth is always communicated accurately they remain either confused or unyielded. Are we ready to abandon our own methodologies? We should endeavor to teach truth in ways that it can be grasped and not compromised. At the same time we must recognize that the truth of Christ ultimately comes through revelation and we must strive to live within the tension of how people encounter and come to follow Him. Furthermore, Hindu expressions of life in Christ should and do look different than those from the West. The Holy Spirit must be trusted in both environments to lead people as He sees fit.

Mobilizing for India

In mobilizing people and churches toward India there are many mistakes I’ve made and misconceptions I’ve held. Some things have proven valuable and I’ve held onto them over the years including them with things I continue to learn.

Caste and People Group Thinking

It’s a matter of debate whether the most significant boundary to

Kingdom expansion in India is related to caste. The more common obstacles of ethnicity and language are overwhelmingly present but it appears that caste or *jati* (caste in its practical and extensive form resulting in thousands of groups) is even more critical and may override linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Observable markers within society stress the preeminence of caste. For example, insofar as it relates to marriage, caste takes precedent in marriage over ethnicity and language. Similar boundaries exist among some high-caste groups when it comes to eating and the preparation of food. These are not trivial matters in the minds of caste Hindus and they demonstrate that the gospel might travel most freely within caste constructs. It would seem beneficial then to consider caste distinction and work within caste paradigms when introducing the gospel.

Spiritual Lasik

India has its share of spiritual, social and economic negatives. Often in mobilization I have emphasized these. People need to be convinced that something is wrong before they will participate in offering a solution. Having the landscape dotted with temples, mosques, *gurdwaras*, and shrines in addition to the component of visible idolatry, underscores India’s spiritual state. To be certain, she also lacks the resources and infrastructure of more industrialized nations. Certain diseases and health concerns that have been eradicated in other parts of the world continue to cause havoc. However, for years my eyes saw only these things while failing to see many positives.

Managing Diversity

India demonstrates amazing success with a free form of government. It is both resilient and tolerant. Society maintains

a relative level of peace that is unimaginable given the diversity of its peoples, worldviews, languages and cultures.

Worship and Devotion

Propensity for worship and a lifestyle of devotion are easily seen. We may be burdened with the focus of devotion but the Hindu ability to worship seems to far exceed what we typically see in the West. Countless times, while in Indian cities, I've seen people pull over at roadside shrines to devote themselves to worship. Often, this happens in addition to daily *pujas* at home and temple visits. I've thought of the amount of light we enjoy in Christ and have hoped for that to be combined with the level of devotion I have seen in the Hindu context.

Value of Relationship

The importance of family and community are paramount. Respect for elders

is evident. Tolerance is of high value. Complex social structures and informal task structures are common. All of these represent components of Indian society that we can appreciate.

India's unreached peoples comprise one of the most significant challenges to the remaining task of global evangelization. They also represent an unparalleled concentration of peoples, unmatched in diversity, offering a uniquely complex expression of God's glory. After hundreds of years of modern mission efforts, believers remain primarily in two remote geographic regions and are further isolated by more significant elements including foreign identity, caste, ethnicity, language, etc. By and large, Western workers operate outside most of these paradigms. Incorporating an appreciation of Indian values and culture and learning to see appropriate elements

wrapped around the seed of the gospel could help them as they continue to play a role in seeing India's peoples move into Christ. **IJFM**