

Impacting the Hindu Diaspora in North America

by Timothy Paul

A unique strategic opportunity has emerged in North America, and it has the potential for significant spiritual impact on a global scale. This opportunity is *unique* because it connects two very different societies: the modernizing and pre-Christian higher caste Hindu culture from India's ancient villages and burgeoning cities, and the increasingly post-modern and post-Christian high-tech culture of urban and suburban North America. It is *strategic* because, if properly understood and fully experienced, it could help to exponentially expand the influence of the reign of Christ around the world.

What is God doing? He is sending thousands and thousands of higher caste Hindu families to North America. His purpose is redemptive. He is "determining the times set for them and the exact places where they should live so that they may reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any of them" (see Acts 17:26-27). God is arranging a relational context for higher caste Hindus to live within and personally discover the death, resurrection, and Lordship of Jesus Christ as it is incarnated within the lives of Christ followers in North America.

Any evangelistic consideration of the people of India must consider caste, the high to low social structure that dominates Hindu cultures. Although the rigidity and dehumanizing prejudice of caste discrimination is softening, caste still exerts huge influence over how Hindu India perceives itself in the modern world, and how the gospel spreads within Hindu society. In terms of the Indian people groups who are referred to by caste as tribals and Dalits, God is working powerfully through the Indian church. The Indian church is vigorously spreading the gospel to the many millions of Indian people who are socially at the low end of the scale. The churches' zeal and commitment to serve the Lord and these dear people in some very difficult environments is among the very best examples of the apostolic missionary tradition, and God is blessing their labors as thousands of new churches emerge all over India. The Indian church is just beginning to initiate outreach to the next higher level of people groups within the caste system, referred to as low caste or Other Backward Caste (OBC),

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and there are some encouraging signs of blessing. The higher caste people groups, however, remain almost totally untouched with the gospel. Compared to the organized and effective outreach to the other sections of Hindu society, the higher castes receive almost no ministry at all in India. This is perhaps the reason why God is sending thousands and thousands of higher caste Hindus out of India to North America.

There are approximately 120 million high caste Hindu people living in India. There will be over 3 million Hindus living in the United States and Canada by 2010. Almost all of these people are from the high castes. This means that 2.5% of the high caste population of India is relocating to North America. Furthermore, every high caste Hindu person in North America comes from a large and very connected extended family to which s/he usually remains strongly committed. In fact, a typical high caste married couple residing in the United States is connected to approximately 132 other people in their family (up to first cousin), many of whom still live in India. What this means is that the growing high caste Hindu community in North America is still strongly connected to *millions* of people in India. If North American Christ followers can enter into authentic, sustainable faith-sharing relationships with the high caste Hindu people who live around them, they have the opportunity to enter into relationship with a huge proportion of India's vastly unevangelized high caste Hindu population.

Brian and Ashish (not their real names) became friends in a large northeastern city in the United States. Ashish is from a highly influential high caste family in north-west India. Brian faithfully shared Christ with Ashish, who was very open to the gospel. When Ashish's father arranged his marriage in India, Brian accompanied him to the wedding. During the two weeks that they spent in India, Brian met dozens of people from both the bride's and groom's families. Today,

Brian is in a living relationship with Ashish and his wife who live in the United States, and he is in touch with many of the family members who live in India. This living relationship has allowed Brian to share Christ with several people from this family. This is an example of what is beginning to happen all over North America and India. What follows is a contextualized faith sharing approach for North American Christ followers to use in relationship with high caste Hindus who live here and, by extension, with their families in India.



Hindus usually do not quickly “get saved.” They usually enter into a relationship with a believer in Christ who walks with them on a path of spiritual discovery and gradual acceptance and surrender to a reality that the Hindu would have never dreamed to be true; Jesus is indeed Lord, salvation is in his name, and I as a Hindu can embrace him as my Lord and Savior. This process of ministry for the believer and spiritual discovery and surrender for the Hindu is very similar to what Hindus refer to as a *marg*. *Marg* is a Sanskrit-based word that means “path” or “spiritual journey.” Hindus describe their unique concepts of salvation as walking a certain *marg* that leads them to salvation. The importance of this is that Hindus almost always bring that thinking about salvation forward when they encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, I have entitled this contextualized approach to ministry that I've used over

the years MARG—Making Authentic Relationships Grow.

MARG: Making Authentic Relationships Grow

MARG is an outreach plan that seeks to integrate the way that high caste Hindus seem to respond to the revelatory working of the Holy Spirit in their lives with a process of deeply sharing the gospel with them over time. In this way, the believer contextualizes his or her witness to the Hindu experience of the gospel, enabling the truth to penetrate deeply into the heart of the Hindu who will naturally respond by beginning “to travel” toward Christ. This is the preferred method of ministry because it provides the best hope for deep transformation to take place within the life of the person, enabling the Hindu to truly become a disciple of Jesus Christ. MARG is a five-part process of Hindus and Christ followers interacting with each other and with Jesus as they journey toward the Lordship of Christ together. MARG is, very simply, Hindus experiencing the truth of the gospel and then having that experience explained, clarified, and deepened for them from God's word, all in the context of authentic relationship with followers of Christ. The first part of the journey is *sabandh*, or relationship. The second is *anubhav*, or experience. The third is *bhakti*, or devotion. The fourth is *balidan*, or sacrifice, and the last is *sharanam*, or surrender.

Sabandh: Relationship

Sabandh, or relationship, is the beginning. A believer in Christ and a Hindu enter into a relationship with one another that is authentic and sustainable. An authentic relationship is a natural relationship, one which the Hindu and believer almost seem to expect to take place. It is based on the identity that the Hindu and the believer naturally have to each other, such as colleagues, neighbors, or classmates, rather than a contrived friendship for the purpose of sharing the gospel. Because the relationship is natural, it is sustainable, not based on

whether or not the Hindu person or family is ever open to the gospel. So *sabandh*, or relationship, is authentic, sustainable, natural.

Believers may face some contextual, cultural issues as they invest in this *sabandh*, or relationship, with Hindus. Contextualization among Hindus in the Western world is based on cultural connectedness—how and with whom the Hindus are connected. Some Hindu families remain very connected to India, some are almost totally connected to the Indian community that resides here in North America, and some are totally connected to the predominant North American cultures. Most Hindu people and families, however, are a dynamic blend of the above categories, living in a cultural continuum of Indian and North American culture. To make things even more complex, they also experience Indian culture as it is emerging in North America, and North American culture as it is emerging in India, the cultural fusion that is happening all over the world. So, the cultural connectedness and contextualization issues involved in a gospel witness to Hindus living in North America can be dauntingly complex and confusing. What is to be done? One must avoid two pitfalls: analysis paralysis and oversimplification.

Contextual ministry paralysis happens when the questions about contextualization far outweigh the answers and stymie any attempt to reach out. Oversimplification leads to irrelevant outreach to people whom we actually don't understand. Both of these errors come as a result of trying to wrestle with contextual issues of ministry approach before one acquires sufficient contextual skills. It is best to focus on developing contextual skills first because they give the believer experiences in relationship with Hindus that reveal appropriate contextual approaches. So the best way to develop contextual skills is to initiate authentic sustainable relationships with Hindu families that are founded

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on Christ's agape love and our respect for people. In this way, believers learn how Hindu friends live in their own India-North America cultural continuum, and they can make solid decisions about what contextual skills they need to acquire in order to deepen and extend the relationship. Below is a suggested set of contextual cross-cultural skills that North Americans may need to acquire as they live in authentic sustainable relationship with Hindu people. They are arranged from the more basic to the more advanced.

1. Learn to say the person's entire name correctly.
2. Learn to appreciate and participate in the Hindu food culture, especially vegetarian.
3. Learn to develop Hindu forms of courtesy and politeness.
4. Learn how the Hindu family structure works.
5. Learn about Hindu deities and worship forms.
6. Learn about the Hindu holidays and religious calendar.
7. Learn about Hindu holy scriptures.
8. Learn about Hindu philosophy.
9. Learn the language.

In addition to reaching out in a contextualized relationship, the Christ follower should not hesitate in any way to naturally include his or her devotion to Jesus within the atmosphere of the relationship. An occupational therapist in the northeast has a patient who is a north Indian Hindu. This therapist is an enthusiastic and devoted follower of Christ. Throughout the interaction that she has with her Hindu patient, she naturally and winsomely mentions faith in God, the grace of God and her dependence on Jesus to help her in her work. The Hindu man is very impressed with her spirituality, professionalism and excellence in her practice. She is in an authentic relation-

ship with her Hindu client that is sustainable whether or not the patient is open to enquire more about Jesus. The therapist often prays for her Hindu client to experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Another believer who is a legal professional has a deepening friendship with a woman from a high caste Hindu family from north India. These two women share a mutual love for arts and crafts, and often shop and work together. The relationship is so close that this Hindu family gives the believers the keys to their house whenever they travel to India, which they do each year, so the believers can collect their mail and watch their property. This believer is now looking to develop contextual skills two and three above (she already has 1) so that she can enter their lives more deeply. She is also praying for God to give her an opportunity to pray with her friend in Jesus' name for a specific need so her friend can experience the reality of Jesus.

Anubhav: Experience

The next stage in the MARG process is *anubhav*, or experience. Hindus interact with and certify religious truth in two ways, either traditionally or experientially. Since Jesus is not a part of Hindu tradition, no amount of our sharing about the Christian tradition will impact them. The better way to bring the gospel to Hindu people is by experiencing Jesus together with them rather than simply telling them about him. Then, one may have the opportunity to explain why Jesus seems to actually be alive. In an authentic relationship, the Hindu may share a concern that they have with the Christ follower. The Christ follower should indicate that they will pray to God in Jesus' name about this issue, perhaps even arranging a time when they meet with the Hindu and have a prayer ceremony about the issue. As

the Christ follower prays, the Hindu is in a wonderful position to experience the benevolent power of Jesus. Jesus can provide jobs and places to live. He can guide people who are confused about their lives, restore broken families and heal bodies and minds. This is *anubhav*, an initiatory experience into the reality of the living Lord, Jesus. When believers and Hindus who are living in authentic relationship share these types of experiences with Jesus, many barriers between them and Jesus can be broken down.

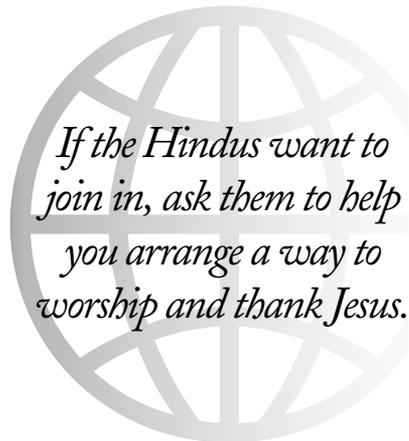
A Hindu man was living in authentic sustainable relationship with a believing colleague at work. The Hindu was facing some serious problems within his extended family, and shared those with his believing friend over lunch. The believer called another friend who accompanied him to the Hindu man's home that evening and together they prayed about these problems. That very week, God miraculously began to address those problems. Unlimited opportunities to explain about the power of Jesus followed these answers to prayer.

A young couple from a very ascetic form of Hinduism immigrated to the US, and almost immediately lost the wife's golden wedding bangles. They were friends with a neighbor who was a believer. Upon hearing about this bad news, the believer prayed with them in Jesus' name; they found the bangles the next day. Needless to say, the couple loved their neighbor and received what he had to say about God. This type of experience may lead Hindus to wonder if it is possible for them, as Hindus, to pray to Jesus more and worship him, even though he is not a part of their tradition.

Bhakti: Devotion

The next step in MARG is when Hindus and believers begin worshipping Jesus together in some way. Hindus refer to this as *bhakti*. *Bhakti* means devotion or worship of a specific deity and it is the heartbeat of how Hindus respond to God. It is how

Hindus would naturally respond to a positive initiatory experience of Jesus. Believers who are living in authentic, sustainable relationship with Hindu people who have had an initiatory experience or experiences with Jesus can let their friends, Hindu and non-Hindu, know that they are planning a special way to worship and thank Jesus for what he has done. They may ask the Hindus to join with them. This should not be contrived for the Hindus, but should be a genuine expression of thanksgiving and worship to Christ which the believers will



do with or without the participation of the Hindus. Authenticity must characterize every level of this type of ministry. If the Hindus want to join in, ask them to help you arrange a way to worship and thank Jesus. They may want to sing to him, thank him in some sort of ceremony, speak his name with reverence or pray to him again with love and faith. One unique element of *bhakti* is called *bhajan*, a style of music that characterizes much of the Hindu worship tradition. It combines singing, worship, saying the name of the deity in honor, or praying to him. It is perfectly fine to worship Jesus in a *bhajan* style.

In this matter of *bhakti*, levels of contextualization become a practical concern. Hindu people who are still connected to India may want to worship Jesus in a more Indian *bhajan* style, sitting on the floor, and using Indian musical instruments. They will need to either write their own *bhajans*

or they could use *bhajan* styles that they know, but use the name of Jesus in the *bhajan*. Hindu families which are more connected to North America may want to either follow the believer's lead in a thanksgiving-worship ceremony, or mix or match some Indian and North American style worship forms together. The believer is guided by the cultural-contextual continuum that the Hindu family is connected to.

Balidan: Sacrifice

The next aspect of MARG is called *balidan*. *Balidan* is a Sanskrit word deep in meaning. It means sacrifice, and is a word used in connection with the sacrifices that dominated ancient Vedic Hinduism. Vedic sacrifice was powerful and central to Hindu practice for many centuries. Sacrifice is an ideal that still lives in Hindu world view, even though animal sacrifice is limited to only a few traditions in India. Hindus who are living in authentic relationship with Christ followers and experiencing the reality of Jesus by answered prayer and worship need to be introduced to the core truth of the gospel, namely the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and his glorious resurrection and Lordship.

The Christ follower should explain the good news of the cross to his or her Hindu friend in great detail. An informal explanation of Christ's death and resurrection and what that means to us, done over coffee or on the phone, often does not succeed in communicating the fullness of the good news. The gospel is God's plan for mankind, and the cross and resurrection is the final consummation of God's revelation to the human race. Believers will need to patiently explain the truth over time, perhaps meeting together several times.

A contextualized approach to explicitly share the gospel in this manner is referred to as *satsang*, a planned meeting for religious discourse. In *satsang*, people gather together to sing about truth and discuss the truth they sing about. A believer could follow

this pattern or s/he could limit it to a Bible study with Hindu people who are experiencing Jesus. Again, the cultural context of the Hindu people determines the approach.

It is certainly the believer's responsibility to clearly and accurately communicate the gospel, but the believer does not determine what a positive response to the gospel looks like or how it manifests itself in the lives of the Hindus. Hindus need to remain free to follow Jesus as Hindus, so the cross of Christ can impact them at the deepest levels of their lives. As the believer teaches the gospel message over time, s/he adopts a responsive posture, continuing to live in authentic relationship with the Hindus, but adding dialogue with the Hindus as they seek to discover how they can follow the slain yet living Christ. The heart response to the gospel is one of surrender, inner surrender of one's heart and life to become a Christ follower, or, in Hindu terms, a Christ *bhakta* (devotee).

Sharanam: Surrender

Sharanam means surrender. It is used in a highly devotional context in Hindu culture, describing the person who is utterly abandoned to God, and it is the call of God to the Hindu heart, "surrender to Jesus." Traveling with Hindus in authentic relationship toward *sharanam* sometimes takes place within an atmosphere of inner struggle, self-doubt and identity crisis, family pressure, and even conflict. The believer and the Hindu need, therefore, to stay positive and focus on the person of Jesus alone as he leads them on this perilous road to *sharanam*, or surrender to Jesus.

Many times, well-meaning followers of Christ call Hindus to give up all of India's gods and goddesses and believe in Jesus exclusively. It can be very hard, in fact, not to do that, but it is almost always a mistake to confront them with an either-or ultimatum. When a Western Christ follower tells a Hindu person to cease living in some way as a Hindu in order to embrace Christ, the Hindu hears "Jesus will not really accept me if I'm Hindu. He

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only accepts Christians." This may not be at all what the believer wants to communicate, but that is often how the Hindus interpret this type of exhortation. Naturally this almost always offends them because it sounds like condemning their family and heritage and uncritically exalting the believer's family and heritage. It also seems to them to place the believer in a judgmental position over the Hindus. This scenario is strikingly similar to the issues that the first-century church grappled with as Gentiles began to join the Jews in the new church. The problem was dealt with by God showing the Messianic believers that it is completely unnecessary to compel Gentiles to become like Jewish Christians to follow Christ. The same is true today. It is unnecessary for Western believers in Christ to compel Hindus to become like them by adopting their religious traditions. They can follow Christ as Hindus, becoming Christ *bhaktas*, or devotees of Christ. *Our challenge is to help them grow into an exclusive relationship with Jesus without condemning them along the way.* It is much, much better to speak positively about the fullness of Christ and subsequent surrender of our hearts to him without even mentioning other deities. The Hindu people understand the issue, and are fully capable of grappling with the exclusive implications of the gospel without us telling them. Western Christ followers need to journey with them as they grapple with Jesus, supporting them and trying to help them find answers to their questions and problems.

Hindus almost always seem to surrender to Jesus in a series of stages, surrendering to the power of his name (experience), surrendering to his love (devotion), and surrendering to his cross and resurrection (sacrifice). These approaches to ministry eventually begin to happen simultaneously, as

the Christ followers and Hindus live in authentic relationship.

Hindus commonly begin to respond by accepting Jesus as a god that they, as high caste Hindus, can pray to, surrendering to the power of his name. This usually happens after they have an initiatory *anubhav*, or experience. All of their other deities are still very much a part of their life at this point. Then, as they begin to worship Jesus and give him thanks, surrendering to his love, he gradually becomes the highest or primary deity that they pray to, although the other deities are still a part of their lives. In fact, it seems that Hindus grow to love Jesus before they come to know him in an exclusive relationship, just the opposite of western believers who accept him as their Lord and Savior and then learn to love him. The next stage of response happens as Hindus plumb the depths of the death and resurrection of Christ, *balidan*. They may find that in light of the awesome love and power of Christ and the cross, they have no further desire for other deities in their lives, and they surrender to his sacrifice; Christ is all that they need. Finally, Jesus has become for the Hindus *Mukthinath*, the Lord of salvation (*mukti* meaning salvation, and *nath* meaning Lord). They have come to realize that Christ alone is the Lord of all.

Conclusion

MARG is a process because high caste Hindus in North America come to Jesus in a gradual way, over time. MARG empowers the North American Christ follower to travel with Hindu people toward Christ, giving a framework about what to expect. There is no system that will fit every situation, so MARG is not a tight plan, but a framework to help people think and pray and hopefully do something to share Jesus with Hindus. **UJFM**