

S D Panraj

~~1993~~ 1994 Madhpar, MEB

2. Oral Communication is Effective: In most of the tribal societies communication is oral. Their worldview of logic is 'concrete functional' and therefore the gospel message has to be told in stories and parables, and not in abstract propositions. Songs, stories, drama and dance are the best forms of communication. Visual aids, such as flash cards, flannel pictures and film slides would greatly help the people understand the gospel message. Mass media such as video and movie film are also effective, but if someone needs to immediately explain what they saw in the film.

3. Group Decisions are Important : Tribals live together as families and communities. Their worldview is 'group oriented' and they have a strong sense of group identity, solidarity and responsibility. Therefore important decisions are taken by group leaders in understanding with the group members. This strong group orientation would help in decision making for Christ. The missionary should try to win them as families and communities rather than individuals. He must approach the group leaders and through them he must influence the whole group to make decision. Indian mission history has witnessed several of such group decisions for Christ among the tribals of Gujarat, Bihar and the North Eastern States.

4. Community Social Structure should be Respected: Since the tribals are group oriented their community social structure is very important. Decisions are taken for good or bad by the community leaders. When the missionary wants to start any work among the communities he must get the permission of the leadership. Even for conducting night meetings permission must be taken from the village or tribal chief. Village leaders must be invited for the important programmes even though they may not have accepted the Christian faith.

5. Wholistic Ministries should be done: As mentioned above, the tribals are longing for socio-economic emancipation. Social justice is denied to them. They have been exploited by the landlords, money lenders and in some places by the government officials. They often look to the missionaries for justice, relief and development. Apart from preaching the gospel, the missionary should also introduce socio-economic and developmental programmes in the community. Some of their basic **felt-needs** should be met such a drinking water, education, jobs and community health, etc. When they approach the missionary with such needs they should not be condemned as people with ulterior motives. They should be accepted with their **mixed motives** and the missionary should try to see what their genuine needs are and try to fulfill them. Such a wholistic ministry would make the gospel natural, realistic and relevant in their context.

Communicating the Gospel to the Popular Hindus

"Hinduism " is a general word used for all Hindus, but in reality among Hindus there are different forms of Hinduism. D.S. Sharma, in his **Primer of Hinduism**, says:

Hindusim is not a simple homogenous religion. Hinduism is rather a name given to a League of Religions. In its comprehensive and tolerant fold we find all types of religion from the highest to the lowest.¹¹

The 'highest' form of Hinduism is the vedic religion, the philosophical religion or the 'Arya Dharma'. And the 'lowest' form is the folk religion, or the animistic type of religion. (The word 'lowest' is used just to define the above statement and not to mean tribal religion is the lowest of all). J.C. Gamaliel gives the following definition of Popular Hinduism:

Popular Hinduism is a complex phenomenon which resulted from the interaction of Brahminic, Dravidian, pre-Dravidian and tribal religions. Some elements from all these will be discernable in popular Hinduism. A good deal of absorption, assimilation, and synthesis is discernable in popular Hinduism, the degree of assimilation varying from place to place.¹²

Bishop Leslie Newbigen who was a missionary in India for several years points out that "too much published writing refers to levels of Indian thought far removed from the world of ordinary villagers who represent the majority of India's people."¹³ The majority of the people of India are the followers of popular Hinduism.

The Beliefs and Practices of Popular Hindus

As mentioned earlier, popular Hinduism is a mixture of different religions such as Animism, Dravidian and Aryan religions. Therefore it is a complex religion. Let us see some of its beliefs and practices.

1. Belief in numerous gods and goddesses: It is said that Hinduism has three hundred and thirty crore gods and goddesses. Therefore it is a religion of polytheism unlike Islam or Christianity. Different gods are worshiped at different festivals and by different castes. Worship of many gods and goddesses is a real problem for relevant communication of the gospel.

2. Belief in idols and temple worship: Unlike the philosophical Hindus the popular Hindus worship idols, visit temples and offer pujas. Idols are found everywhere, even on the roadside. Thus these people have some object for worship such as idols, photographs of gods, and temples.

3. Belief in rituals, offerings and festivals: Several rituals have to be performed by every popular Hindu. Rituals are often accompanied by offerings and sometimes animal sacrifices. They also have numerous festivals almost the whole year through. Popular Hinduism is an expensive religion to practice.

4. Belief in pilgrimages: go on pilgrimage to different holy places, such as, Kashi, Tirupathi, Rameshwaram and sabarimalai. They give their hair to their gods. They even worship rivers, such as the Ganges, Jamuna and Cauvery.

5. Belief in supernatural powers: Like the tribals, the popular Hindus believe in spiritual powers, both good powers and evil powers. Their beliefs are controlled by fear of these powers, being understood as demons and evil spirits, which people address as gods and goddesses. The people are under bondage to many myths, legends and uncertainties about the future.

6. Belief in blood sacrifice: Most popular Hindus believe in blood sacrifice to appease the gods and goddess. The female gods known as the seven sisters (devis or mathas) are worshipped by different names all over India. In South India the Mariamma/Mariatha and in North India Kali demands appeasement by blood sacrifice and sometimes human sacrifice, to avoid fatal disease.

7. Belief in magic, witchcraft, sorcery and the evil eye: Many Hindus use rituals, purifications, charms, and amulets to escape the 'evil eye', to manipulate spirits, to counteract curses, witchcraft, and disease, and to persuade godlings to give children, good harvests and success. Each community has its guardian spirit, whom all must propitiate. Some Hindus practise ancestor worship. Mountain deities are represented by piles of stones or branches, to which passers-by contribute offerings. They also go to the magician, or the bhagat, who practises sorcery.

8. Belief in astrology: Millions of Hindus follow astrology, horoscopy, divination, and auspicious omens and moments. They also worship planets and some of them are worshipped as gods, such as the Santi planet is personified as 'sane bhagavan'

9. Belief in gurus and god-men: Common Hindus believe in gurus and god-men and become their followers. An example in South India is Satya Sai Baba, and in Western India the late Rajneesh. In Gujarat people follow Moksha Marg, a Hindu Guru sect. People believe that these gurus and god-men can do miracles and lead them to a prosperous life and finally to God. Some of these god-men project themselves as **avatars** of gods and people worship them.

Social and Religious Aspirations of Popular Hinduism and Fulfillment in Christ

Most of these popular Hindus are represented by the so-called untouchables and the backward class people of Indian Society. The Brahminical Hindus have made them slaves and as such they are denied both religious and social freedom.

Social and Religious Aspirations of Popular Hindus

Their Fulfillment in the Christian Faith

- | | |
|---|--|
| * Rituals & Festivals are a heavy financial burden. | * Forgiveness and salvation are free gifts from God. |
| * Uncertainty, hopelessness and fear of the future. | * Hope and assurance of eternity is in Christ. |
| * Expect miracles through supernatural powers. | * The miracle working power of the Holy Spirit. |

- | | |
|---|---|
| * Look for gurus / godmen to lead them to the Truth | * Missionary should lead them to Christ as perfect Guru |
| * Long for social justice and freedom from oppression | * Social justice possible through the Christian faith |
| * Look for social emancipation | * Possible in the Christian faith |

Methods of Communicating the Gospel to Popular Hindus

Most of the methods recommended to the tribal evangelism can be used in reaching the popular Hindus since they have several identical beliefs and practices as that of Tribals.

a) Resident Witness Required: People generally want to see the gospel communicator's life before they start believing what he says. The gospel message must be demonstrated in the life of the missionary by living with the people. As we mentioned earlier it helps him to win the confidence of the people. Mobile team ministry will not be effective unless the resident missionary accompanies the team.

b) Group Decision is Strategic: Popular Hinduism is practiced by most of the rural communities of India. They have a group consciousness, and as such any decision must be a joint-family or joint - community decision. It is a multi-individual decision, as McGavran puts it. Such a group decision must be honoured by the evangelists and missionaries. Among popular Hindus there are also social classes popularly known as **Castes**. While Christian faith does not advocate nor believe in the caste system, we have to accept the reality of it. Communication takes place in the context of social relationships, and castes are strong

social relationships which the missionary should use to his advantage. Each caste should be reached separately. In the initial stage the caste system has to be recognized and used as a channel of communication, but in the later stage, when people accept the Christian faith, they need to be taught about Christian brotherhood and the fellowship of God's people without caste differences.

c) **Use of kinship relationship is important:** There is a kinship network among these rural communities. They have joint families and extended-families. Family ties are very strong, so the missionary should use them in communicating the gospel. An individual approach in these communities is not only irrelevant, but would also bring apposition to the gospel. **The Web Movement** as described by McGavran is to see how each individual is related to the whole group so that the gospel may be communicated through this kinship or family and community relationship.

d) **Oral and written communication is needed:** Some of the popular Hindus are still primitive and they need oral communication through story telling, songs, drama and dance. **Satsangh** is a good method of communication in the villages. Literature also should be used as part of the communication method.

e) **Power Encounter is effective:** The real issue is power among the popular Hindus. They want to experience the power in their lives in terms of miracles of healing, casting out demons and answers to their prayers. The power of Jesus Christ should be demonstrated as a 'greater power' than the powers of the gods and goddesses they believe in and worship. In other words miracles are the powerful evidence of the gospel.

f) **Community Development must be part of the mission work:** Most of the popular Hindus are backward and oppressed people in their society. They have been

denied social justice for centuries. They look to the missionary for social emancipation and expect community development through opening schools, hospitals and creating job opportunities. The missionary should respond positively and meet the necessary basic needs. However, the gospel itself will work as a development factor.

POPULAR ISLAM - SUFISM

As with Hinduism, Islam also has its philosophical and popular forms. The word **Islam** means 'submission', and a 'Muslim' is 'one who submits'. The god of Islam is supreme, transcendent, one, non-trinitarian and a god of justice. He is not a personal God. He is referred to as **Allah**. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, who recognize a certain line of successors after Mohammed. The minority of Muslims are Shia, who recognize a line of succession different than that of the Sunnis. These two groups constitute the majority of Muslims. In popular thinking Sunnis are orthodox Muslims and Shias are a branch, (Sunni Islam predominates in Saudi Arabia, and Shia Islam predominates in Iran.)

Another branch of Islam is Sufism. Although there are many sects of Islam, Sufism is one sect that many orthodox Muslims consider to be unorthodox. Most Islamic theologians consider that Sufism emerged from a desire to have a more personal God and a more personal experience with religion. **The basic beliefs of Sufism are:**

- 1) A simple lifestyle
- 2) Emphasis on mystical experiences (influenced by Greek thought)
- 3) A personal relationship with God, emphasizing prayer
- 4) Importance given to devotion to God, a concept similar to the Hindu idea of **bhakti**

The basic quest for Sufis (those following Sufism) is a personal relationship with God and with the spiritual world. Followers of Sufism are not satisfied with the arid and judicial theology of Islam, but they rather wish to have personal communion with Allah. One way of looking at Sufism is that it is the separation of Islamic theology and philosophy from the spiritual life of the everyday man and is an attempt to make Islam more personal, human, and experience-based.

Sufism was influenced by Greek religious and philosophical thought which emphasized mystical experience, devotion to God and union with God. Prayer is the mode of communication with God, and many Sufis can repeat the ninety-nine names of Allah. Sufis worship the Quran as a holy book, the sacred writings of Islam.

The effect of this popular movement on Islam was its salvation from the coldness of its God and the harshness of his laws. But like with many other popular movements, the original intentions of Sufism became corrupted as they spread, and too much emphasis was placed on experience and not on theology.

The Beliefs and Practices of Popular Islam¹⁵

Felt-needs	Beliefs	Practices
1. Fear of the unknown	- Superstition	- idolatry, tomb worship, fetishes
2. Fear of evil spirits	- exorcism	- sorcery, witchcraft, amulets, knots
3. Fear of the future	- Fatalism, fanaticism	- angel worship, divination, spells
4. Powerlessness of individuals against evil	- Sufi saints and angels can help	- Saint worship, petitions made to angels
5. Physical sickness	- Supernatural healing	- tree and saint worship, healing by magic
6. Meaningless life	- supernatural powers to help problems	- pray to supernatural powers

Communicating the Gospel to the Followers of Popular Islam

The beliefs and practices of the popular Muslim, as seen above, are different from the philosophical Muslims. Therefore, the communication principles and methods should be relevant to them. The following are some of those principles and methods:

1. Emphasis on Personal Relationship with God: Since the Sufis are influenced by mystical experiences the gospel must be related to their personal relationship with God. Jesus Christ must be presented as 'Immanuel' meaning 'God with us'. The closeness of God and the possibility of intimate relationship with Him in Jesus Christ must be emphasized.

2. Importance must be given for prayer and meditation: Prayer and meditation must be emphasized as a means of communicating with God and having real fellowship with God. Meditation on the Bible, Bible study, Bible memorization and hearing the preaching of God's Word must be taught. Regular prayer life such as family prayer, personal prayer, group prayer, fasting and prayer and all-night prayer must be emphasized.

3. The Gospel must be related to every day problems: Most of the followers of Sufism are generally poor and their religion is everyday religion of the common man related to their every day problems. Therefore the Gospel must be related to their daily problems of poverty, sickness, family needs, and other social problems. Jesus Christ must be presented as One Who cares for them in the daily affairs of their lives.

4. Power encounter should be practiced: The popular Muslims believe in power encounter related to spirit worship, witchcraft, magic, etc. Therefore, the gospel must

be presented in terms of "power" power to heal sicknesses, to cast out demons, to pray for victory over evil powers related to magic, sorcery and the evil eye. The people must understand that the Holy Spirit is greater than all the evil spirits. Therefore when they trust in Jesus Christ they need not be afraid of other spirits. Gospel preaching must be confirmed by wonders and miracles.

5. Local church fellowship must be given to the new believers: One of the constant complaints of the new believers from Islam is that they have not been accepted into the fellowship of the local church. Therefore care must be taken to relate these believers to a church fellowship.

6. Social concern must be balanced with evangelism: Since most of the followers of popular Islam are poor and backward, they need the care of the Christian community. Social service in terms of relief and development must be introduced wherever the popular Muslims respond to the gospel. Socio-economic programmes must be introduced to develop the new believers and to help their non-Christian relatives.

Summary

For effective and meaningful communication the gospel must be communicated in the context of the people. India presents a multi-cultural context and therefore the gospel communicator must take the different contexts into account while presenting the gospel. The Gospel must be focused on a particular people group in their cultural and religious context. For our study we have taken the popular religious contexts of India as represented by the tribal and rural societies. The following is the summary:

Dominating factors in all Tribal & Rural Societies

How the Missionary should respond?

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Group consciousness | * Follow group decision |
| 2. Mutual trust to be built | * Residential witness needed |
| 3. Power encounter | * Demonstrate Holy Spirit's power |
| 4. Look for personal experience | * Emphasize personal faith and devotion |
| 5. Non-philosophical faith (popular religion) | * Present the simple gospel |
| 6. Mostly oral societies | * Use indigenous oral methods |
| 7. Social justice denied | * Get involved in social action |
| 8. Socio-economic backwardness | * Get involved in social service |

End Notes

1. John Stott & Robert T. Coote, **Gospel and Culture** (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), p.x
2. David Hesselgrave, **Communicating Christ Cross-culturally** (Allahabad: St. Paul's Publication, 1981), p.31.
3. *ibid*, p.31.
4. Paul G. Heibert, **Anthropological Tools For Missionaries** (Singapore: Haggal Institute, 1978).
5. Bruce J. Nicholls, "A Living Theology for Asian Church-Some Reflections on the Contextualization - Syncretism Debate" in **The Bible and Theology in Asian Context** (Asian Theological Association, 1970), p.134.
6. J.T. Seamands, **Tell it Well: Communicating the Gospel Across Cultures** (Kansas city: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas city, 1981).

7. Ibid, p.
8. David Burnett, **Clash of Worlds** (Eastbourne: MARC, 1990),
9. Paul G. Hiebert "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" in **Missiology: An International Review**, Vol X No.1 Jan.'82.
10. Seamands, **Tell it well**, p.
11. D.S. Sarma, **Primer of Hinduism**
12. J.C. Gamallel, "Patterns of Popular Hinduism," in **The Gospel Among Our Hindu Neighbours** edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, (Bangalore: Partnership in Mission-Asia, 1983),p.
13. Leslie Newbigin, quoted by S.P. Appasamy in **Rural Hinduism** by Ellis O. Shaw, (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1986), p.1
14. John Abubaker, "**Popular Islam**," - typed class notes presented at SAIACS, Bangalore, 1987.
15. Ibid

The Church in India must deal with village folk religions. More than Hinduism and Islam, they present the Church with the central challenge for witness.

Paul G. Hiebert

Too much published writing refers to levels of Indian thought far removed from the world of ordinary villagers who represent the majority of Indian people.

Bishop Leslie Newbigin

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONTEXTUALIZING THE LOCAL CHURCH

The contextualization, or indigenization, of a church is a critical function of cross-cultural church planting. In fact the success of a cross-cultural church planting effort is judged exactly by how contextualized the planted church actually is. The planted church must first be based on the truths of Scriptures, then grow from the soil of the culture in forms appropriate to it. It is the responsibility of the missionary to contextualize the gospel he preaches and the church he plants. A church is a living organism that should be alive in the lives of the target people. So the missionary must understand the culture of his field.