

Church Planting in the Hindu Context*

By Timothy Shultz



Church planting is a well-known phrase which describes how Christians conceive of concentrating a ministry that will sustain local gospel impact. Church planting often follows a process of evangelism and discipleship which is meant to be a contemporary and faithful example of New Testament patterns. It has been the main way that missiologists and missionaries approach spreading the gospel among Hindu people who live in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan) and in the global Hindu diaspora.¹ It is vital to have a Biblically informed philosophy of church planting, but it is also important to learn about the patterns of church planting which have taken place among Hindus.

The first churches that emerged in Hindu communities were in Kerala, a state in southern India. These churches were planted at the beginning of the Christian era, perhaps by the apostle Thomas.² Philip Jenkins in *The Lost History of Christianity* states that there is “evidence of formal church life” existing in Kerala by AD 345.³ These Mar Thoma churches are a part of the ancient Orthodox Church that spread from Jerusalem eastward toward Persia and beyond instead of westward toward Rome. For nearly 2000 years, Orthodox Christianity has been thriving among these Malayali Christians in Kerala and wherever they settle in India and around the world.

Unfortunately, Catholic and Protestant efforts at church planting in Hindu environments were begun within the geo-political frameworks created by European colonialism. There is much to learn from this missionary era; a good bit to emulate, and some to grieve over and never repeat. Church planting within Hindu communities during this period of time was significantly influenced by “people movements.” These consisted of thousands of Hindu people converting to Christianity over a period of decades. The Hindu people who became Christians in this way were almost always from the same caste background and lived in rural villages. There was usually a confluence of cultural, social, historical, and spiritual

motivations that led to this planting of thousands of churches all over South Asia. To this day, the legacy of these people movements contributes greatly to contemporary thinking and vision of planting churches in Hindu context.

A specific focus on church planting within higher caste Hindu communities is relevant to our consideration of church planting in Hindu context because there have been few, if any, of these people movements among Hindus from higher castes. Higher caste resistance to church planting ministry is complex, but most of the reasons are sociological rather than theological or philosophical. There is a set of inter-connected obstacles that exist between faith in Christ and higher caste communities of Hindus which negatively impact the planting of churches according to these movemental patterns. It is vital to understand these obstacles and then bravely ask God to reveal approaches that facilitate church planting in the era in which we live.

Obstacles

First of all, the majority of higher caste Hindus, especially in central and northern India, believe that Christianity was first introduced to India by foreign missionaries. They assume, therefore, that it is a foreign religion and not relevant to them. In recent

years, many of these people have taken this widespread disinterest a step further and become opposed to the spread of the gospel in India. They assume that foreign missionaries planted churches with an agenda to contribute to the subjugation of all of South Asia to Christian Great Britain. Western Christians must force themselves to feel the weight of these interpretations of Church history and allow this view to speak to them before they create an apologetic response to it because it does have some merit. Simply put, the British summarized what they felt was an enlightened colonialist foreign policy with the phrase “Christianity, Commerce and Civilization.” Although not every western missionary aligned with this point of view, including many Britons, Christianity was politicized during the British Raj and government was Christian.

This has a direct impact on church planting among Hindus in modern India and the diaspora. In twenty-first century India, Hindu nationalists have intensified these widely held beliefs about foreigners planting churches to help subdue India and sharpened them with a vengeful political edge. They represent Christianity (and Islam) as foreign threats to India which is meant to be exclusively Hindu. Politicians craft their own versions of a long and complex history to convince the Hindu communities to help restore the glory of pre-Islam and pre-Christian India by voting for Hindu nationalist candidates. Of course, this political rhetoric makes the challenging job of church planting within higher caste communities that much harder.

Another obstacle that arises between higher caste Hindus and faith in Christ is Christian misunderstanding about their identity as Hindus. Most church planting models assume that people convert to Christianity, become Christians, as a way to express their new allegiance to Jesus Christ. When enough of these converts exist in a given area, a sustainable church can be planted. Church planting ministry in a higher caste Hindu context which assumes this ministry philosophy will face significant problems and unintentionally confuse people about the truth of the gospel. In South Asia, Hindu and Christian are more than words that describe the theological views or religious affiliation of specific communities of people. They describe personal identity as well. Being Hindu and not Christian or Sikh and not Muslim is more like being French and not British, Korean and not Japanese, American and not Canadian. Church planters intuitively and easily understand that faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ do not require a Peruvian family to assume Colombian

identity, for example. However, church planters often assume that Hindus must assume Christian identity in order to follow Christ because they believe that being Hindu is not really the same thing as being Peruvian or Colombian. They assume that Hindu is a word that describes South Asian people who believe in a false religion called Hinduism that must be rejected in order to have an appropriate relationship with God. A Peruvian or a Colombian can have an appropriate relationship with God and remain Peruvian or Colombian. A Hindu can't; how can an adherent to a false religion be a follower of Jesus? This interpretation of the nature of Hinduism requires conversion to Christian identity.

Hinduism is not essentially a religion.⁴ Even the word suggests otherwise. Hindu is the word which the Islamic and then the British overlords of India used to refer to the people who lived beyond the Sindhu, or Indus, river. Their vast civilization occupied the entire Indian “sub-continent” and came to be known as Hinduism. Because Christianity and Islam have been identified as world religions, Hinduism has been as well.

Anyone with even a cursory experience with South Asia, especially India, has encountered the unprecedented religious and cultural diversity which exists there. They will also perceive that there is a unity called Hinduism that frames all of the diversity. The unifying nature of Hinduism can't be religious—there is simply too much religious diversity. It is better to understand Hinduism as a civilization which encompasses a vast human experience of religion and culture.⁵ Being Hindu is like being Peruvian or Colombian. A Hindu person or family can be a follower of Jesus Christ and retain Hindu identity.

Even after realizing that conversion from the Hindu community to the Christian community is much more intense than expressing allegiance to Jesus Christ, many church planters continue to implement a conversion-based model of church planting within higher caste communities because they don't know what else to do. Of course, this is similar to the volatile issues that erupted in the first century Messianic Jewish community as the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem and Jewish identity to people who were Gentile. Large portions of the New Testament were written to address these issues. Church planters who aspire to work in a higher caste Hindu context must learn how to translate the truth of Galatians to their Hindu environment. Otherwise, they may innocently and unintentionally create confusion within the heart and mind of Hindu people about the

nature of discipleship to Jesus. The result will be that higher caste Hindu people will view Christianity, and Jesus himself, as threats to their very existence.

A third obstacle is Christian identity in South Asia. This is important, but quite delicate and potentially very painful, so I beg the indulgence of my Christian brothers and sisters from India. Apart from the Orthodox Church in Kerala, the Christian community emerged in India largely through the agency of people movements. Many of these movements were among Hindu people of lower caste or animistic tribes while others were among Dalits, formerly referred to as Untouchables. John CB Webster in the third edition of his important book *The Dalit Christians* estimates states that the majority of the entire Christian community in India, slightly more than 50%, is from a Dalit background.⁶ In some areas of northern India, it is much higher than that. To be cruelly candid, many higher caste Hindus assume that all Indian Christians are from Dalit background and project the ancient contempt and prejudice inflicted upon Dalits toward Indian Christians in general, whether they are from Dalit background or not. This makes alliance with the Christian community abhorrent to them. While church planters within a higher caste community must be aware of this and thoughtfully consider how it affects a local church planting ministry, they must not include empowering the evil of discrimination based on caste as a part of their ministry philosophy. Again, if my words offend or inflict pain, please forgive me.

Approaches

Planting churches in higher caste Hindu communities will require a certain approach. I will suggest three approaches that can serve to frame a philosophy of church planting specifically for these people.

Make the solemn decision to assume a Christ-like life and ministry.

This is very simple to understand but challenging to put into practice over time. The church planters decide to live according to the words and deeds of Jesus, as they are recorded in the four Gospels. They do so in relationship with a higher caste Hindu community. This Christ-like life is intentionally expressed in ways that help the Hindu community to experience the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The church planters also decide to remain free to evaluate church traditions that do not directly emerge from the Gospel Narratives or cannot be clearly traced to apostolic adaptation of the words and deeds of Jesus. Obviously, the church planters must make real effort

to read and study the Gospels and search for the ways that the apostles brought their experiences with Jesus forward into their ministry after Jesus ascended. This philosophy of ministry can be threatening to established churches, so the church planters also develop strategies to avoid conflict with the local Christian community.

Empower higher caste Hindu people and families toward discipleship to Jesus without insisting on observable conversion to Christianity.

By observable conversion, I mean conflating faith in Jesus with a gradual and irreversible exchanging of the disciples' personal identity as Hindus for Christian identity. Instead of planting a church where the former Hindus can learn how to follow Jesus as new Christians, even contextualized Christianity, the church planters come alongside the disciples in the company of their family and friends, clans and community and help them learn how to assume a Christ-like life and ministry (*bhakti and seva*) as Holy Spirit regenerated Hindus. The Hindus remain free to evaluate church traditions that do not directly emerge from the Gospel Narratives or cannot be clearly traced to apostolic adaptation of the words and deeds of Jesus. This means that formal conversion to Christian identity is a choice that disciples of Jesus in a higher caste family or community are free to make, or not. This approach can empower people movements much better than planting a single church of converts.

Translate the scattered and gathered discipleship patterns which characterize church planting in the New Testament into forms and functions that fit higher caste Hindu environments.

Two Greek words summarize scattered and gathered discipleship forms—*oikos* and *ekklesia*. *Oikos* means household, or family, but in its broadest sense, it describes the types of relationships that exist in families and among friends, within and between blood related clans, and culturally compatible communities. *Oikos* describes identity. *Oikos* also shaped the discipleship philosophy of Jesus. He formed what was essentially an *oikos* of disciples whom he mentored in the words and deeds of the Kingdom. He did this among and within the *oikoi* of family and friend, clan and community in which every person in Israel lived, including himself and his disciples. *Oikos* was the core human reality that characterized the discipleship philosophy of Jesus.

Ekklesia is the discipleship innovation implemented by the apostles after Jesus ascended. It is translated

throughout the New Testament as church. Wayne Meeks in *The First Urban Christians* describes *ekklesia* as a crowd of people from various *oikoi* who gather to hear an important message or decree.⁷ *Ekklesia* was more of an event than a community and in scripture, refers to an intentional gathering of disciples.

Jesus had not extended discipleship to the large groups or crowds of people who had gathered to be blessed by him, but the apostles began to do exactly that in Jerusalem after Pentecost. The new disciples lived and learned about the Messiah in *oikoi* that were scattered all over Jerusalem. They also gathered as an *ekklesia* at the Temple from time to time to hear primary witnesses clarify the details of the life, teaching, death and especially, the resurrection of Christ.

Paul adapted the scattered and gathered church planting patterns that had been used in Jerusalem to church planting opportunities which he encountered outside of Jerusalem. Following the example of the disciples who had gathered in the Temple, the scattered *oikoi* of disciples in Antioch Pisidia, Derbe and Ephesus, for example, created intentional *ekklesia* gatherings according to the synagogue model. The relationship of scattered and gathered forms of discipleship was further refined according to 1 Corinthians 16:19, Romans 16:5, Philemon 2, and Colossians 4:15. In each of these verses, *oikos* and *ekklesia* are used together to refer to the same community of disciples. The “New Testament Church” then, became a discipleship synergy of scattered *oikos* and gathered *ekklesia*. It was an *oikklesia*. This scattered *oikos* and gathered *ekklesia* model of being and making disciples was a key reason why discipleship to Jesus was sustained and spread all over the Roman and Persian Empires.

Oikklesia is a model to consider for church planting ministry in a higher caste Hindu context. Hindus already live within scattered *oikos* communities that intentionally gather from time to time in homes, rented halls and temples. Church planters in this environment translate discipleship to Jesus into the *oikos* relationship patterns that already exists within the Hindu community, primarily the family, rather than planting a new community that focuses on weekly gatherings of Hindu converts to Christianity. When issues of *ekklesia* gatherings (*satsang*, *bhajan-kirtan*, *katha*), the observance of sacraments (*sanskara*), and development of ministry (*seva*) arise, the church planter functions as a coach rather than a teacher or pastor. Church planters refuse to lead the discussion but come alongside the disciples to help

them to arrive at *oikklesia* patterns that adapt New Testament teaching about discipleship into faithful and fruitful church planting patterns within higher caste Hindu communities.

If you have read this article, you are probably aware of the staggering numbers of higher caste Hindus who need more access to the gospel. Starting small with *oikos*-based discipleship and networking with other compatible Hindu communities in whom discipleship to Jesus exists, is a legitimate way to think about birthing movements within higher caste Hindu communities.

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Timothy Shultz has been making disciples in India, the UK, and North America since 1985. He holds a master’s degree in education and is the founder of GO Network. He and his wife, Melanie, live in New Jersey and have three children.

Notes

1. I will use both South Asia and India throughout this article because it is clumsy to list the South Asian countries with large Hindu populations. I am fully aware that Bangladesh has a large Hindu community, and Nepal is majority Hindu. Even Pakistan and Sri Lanka have considerable Hindu communities. This article applies to higher caste Hindu communities everywhere, including diaspora communities outside of South Asia.
2. This claim is hard to prove but is held to firmly by these Mar Thoma Christians. Their claim to apostolic founding is essential to their identity.
3. Dr. John P. Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (Harper One, New York, 2008).
4. I realize that this is a controversial point of view. In modern India, the nature of Hinduism is debated by scholars to this day. I like the civilizational idea because it provides a good vantage point from which to view the complexities represented by a billion people with a 4000-year history.
5. For a fuller explanation of Hinduism as civilization, see chapter 1 in my book *Disciple Making Among Hindus*.
6. Dr. John CB Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 3rd edition (Indian Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), New Delhi. 1996).
7. Dr. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 2nd edition (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003).