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Calling Kiwis to the mission of God

Don't Forget the Hindus!

Patrick Johnstone, former editor of Operation World, once stated, "The Gangetic Plain of North India is the touchstone of our success or failure in completing the task of world evangelisation."

How are we doing? Not that well, it seems. Operation World states India has more unreached individuals than any other nation. The four northern states through which the Ganges flows are home to 382 million people. Not one of these states is more than 1% Christian.

Many of the world's least-evangelised peoples are concentrated in India. Of 159 people groups larger than one million, 84% are still unreached. Hundreds of smaller unreached people groups also exist, let alone those who make up the ever-widening Indian Diaspora.

North India is a place where inconceivable numbers live with hardship, dire poverty, and a desperate need for the gospel. Pastor Santar Singh, an ex-Sikh, highlights another need when he says, "We must redress the misconception that becoming a Christian means becoming a Westerner."

But perhaps the greatest obstacle is the perception the task is nearly completed. We think, "There are so many Christians now in India. Surely they can finish the task!" The reality remains, the need is great but the labourers are so few.

There may be many barriers to the gospel reaching the plains of India and beyond, but none are insurmountable. Indeed, more are coming to Christ than ever before, and this in the face of greater persecution.

While much of our recent focus has been on Muslim people groups, our cry must also be, "Don't forget the Hindus!" There is still much to do to ensure hundreds of millions of Hindu's have an opportunity to hear about a Jesus who truly loves them. This edition is devoted to Down Under stories of that love in action, near and far, and how we can be involved.



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Living Amongst Hindus

I've lived amongst Hindu People for almost 16 years. The suburb in Delhi where I live is almost 100% Hindu. After living here for so long, and having carried out studies on the subject, I still have difficulty in explaining exactly what Hinduism is. I certainly don't consider myself an expert.

A single word summary of Hindu philosophy could be "inclusiveness" or "plurality." As Christians our faith is exclusive and singular, but Hinduism has no limit to the number of paths to God. With 330 million gods, how can there be? In fact the more the merrier! Hindus revel in their "tolerance" of a multitude of beliefs. The 'Mother Temple of the Sub Continent,' the Lotus Temple in Delhi, is actually a Baha'i Temple, not Hindu. It's claimed that all gods can be worshipped in that temple.

This tolerance can work to our advantage. Of all the different peoples amongst whom I have worked, I find Hindus the most receptive to the gospel. Initially it probably fits into their "the more the merrier" philosophy. But at least they're open to the gospel. If their hearts are truly moved, they become true believers.

In Betel we minister primarily to people with drug or alcohol addictions. Many have been living in squalid conditions, often arriving in very poor physical condition. Recently a man suffering from TB came. He was literally skin and bone, weighing barely 30 kgs. Such desperation, combined with the inclusiveness of their culture, allows them to openly come and receive what we have to offer. They eagerly listen, receive prayer, and often respond positively.

In an atmosphere of love and compassion, with much prayer and the watering of the word of God, the Holy Spirit brings people to a singular devotion to their Lord and Saviour. The man mentioned above received Jesus. We see others too, not only becoming followers, but serving as leaders and pastors.

Now seems to be God's time for the Hindi people. A prominent local pastor told me recently of a growing discontent of traditional beliefs among Hindus today. He believes they are becoming more and more open to the gospel. My privilege, to live and serve here, is available to anyone willing to step out. For opportunities see www.betelinternational.org

Carlos (pseudonym) is an Antipodean who has served with Betel on several continents. He travels widely and enjoys early morning walks with his wife, imbibing the unique nature of each locality and contemplating what God might do there.

Carlos (pseudonym)



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Making the (Indian) Connection

NZ continues to trend towards greater ethnic and religious diversity. Significant Chinese, Indian, Korean and Filipino communities bear witness to this fact. Many overcome huge hurdles and show enormous courage to get here. Pause for a moment and think what it might feel like to make NZ home.



How can we relate to people of different backgrounds? If we're honest, often we're as uncertain as they are. This article focuses on Hindus, predominantly from India, but many of the principles apply in making any cross cultural connection.

Staggering Numbers

In the 2013 census, "Asian" was the third largest ethnic grouping. India replaced Australia as the third most common country of birth. People affiliated with Hinduism increased 40% to 90,000, and Indians are up 48% to 155,000 - only marginally behind the Chinese. The number of Sikhs has more than doubled since 2008 too. Unsurprisingly, Hindi has officially become the third most spoken language behind English and Samoan.

Compare this to people identifying as Muslim, which increased 28% percent to 46,000. A recent NZ Herald article showed Auckland alone has 17 Hindu temples. The latest one in Swanson Road is the largest in Australasia, its marble imported from India. Two priests and their families have come from India and live next door.

Are these Indian people Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsee, Muslim, or Christian? Are they from North India, Punjab, the North East, South, Fiji or elsewhere? India has many different and distinct communities. Cross cultural bridge building likewise takes many forms, requiring an attitude of mutual learning.

Hospitality

Meals are an excellent way to get to know people. Great conversations can happen around food. In Indian culture, it's polite to remove shoes and be offered water or a cup of tea upon arrival.

When Hindu friends visit, it's good manners to wash hands before and after a meal. Food may be eaten with a spoon or fork, or with the right hand (never the left). It's best to offer vegetarian food. Definitely don't serve beef, as cows are considered sacred. Ensure there's some spicy chilli sauce, and traditionally serve the guests and older males first.

Food left on the plate isn't a sign the meal isn't liked. It means the food is good and the guest is satisfied. A guest may take only a small portion of each dish on offer. Don't be shy though to press guests three times to have a second helping. This signals that the host means it, and the guest's refusal indicates they're not greedy. Drinking alcohol is not usually part of an Indian meal or culture.

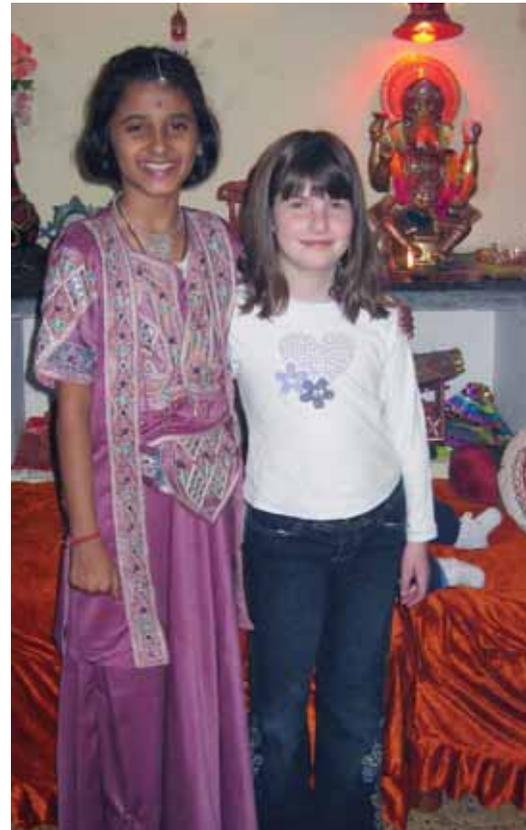
Some Pointers

- Pray, and then pray some more!
- Be a genuine friend. Afford people the same value and dignity Jesus would.
- Hindu people are very community oriented. Get to know their extended family and include them in any invitations. Likewise try to share with the family rather than individuals.
- Show a consistent Christian lifestyle – in marriage, parenting, singleness, the workplace, even the sports field!
- Dress modestly (no short skirts or shorts, low neck lines etc) and avoid touching and eye contact with the opposite sex. If no men are at home, male visitors should stay outside.
- Steer clear of criticising their religion, philosophies and practises. Instead utilise a positive approach by asking questions, listening lots, and discussing issues in a friendly manner.

Sharing faith with a Hindu or Sikh

Hinduism sees unity in diversity and is very accommodating. Because many Hindus don't have a problem accepting Jesus as one of many incarnations of god, be clear how you present Christ. Ensure you have mutual understanding of any terms like sin or heaven, and try to use their terms where possible.

Authenticity is valued, so relax and share your testimony and faith with honesty, humility and confidence. Because Hindus are spiritual people who desire to experience God's power and peace, we can naturally speak of God's involvement in our lives, being fully convinced of the truth upon which we stand. As many live in constant fear of magic, witchcraft, and evil spirits, we can also offer to pray whenever it's appropriate.



Hindus, and Sikhs especially, have great respect for the sacred writings of different faiths, and will generally listen attentively. Don't put the Bible on the floor or write in it. Encourage them to read it for themselves rather than quoting scripture to them. The quality of Christ's relationships with people, his teachings (particularly the Sermon on the Mount), and his self-sacrifice and suffering particularly appeal to the Hindu.

Hinduism teaches that karma (the results of actions in the past life) causes samsara (endless cycles of births, deaths and rebirths). Consequently, Hindus have no assurance that they can break this cycle. Show that in Christ we can have freedom from sin and an assurance of salvation.

The goal of salvation as "eternal life" is unlikely to communicate effectively. Prayerfully search the Scriptures for keys to present the gospel message. Examples of Christ bringing peace, healing, and forgiveness in the present life often connect well. Other important examples include Jesus demonstrating his power over nature (Mark 4-5), evil and death itself.

Where To From Here

Hearing the gospel often over a period of time is usually required before someone responds. Remember though, that for Hindus to leave their community they must find alternative relationships with their new brothers and sisters. We must be prepared to become family and friends to new believers, and this means more than having a cup of tea together after the Sunday service. As Jesus followers we must help Indians become a vital part of a Christian community.

Genuine caring speaks for itself, and often becomes the strongest bridge between people of any background. While not exhaustive, hopefully we've given you some helpful hints to begin making cross-cultural connections!

Prepared by a staff member who's lived with his family in India, this article contains extracts from our Glocal Workshop - Hindus, Me & God. To host a workshop at your church contact the team @ WEC NZ.

