

PRABHUSINGH VEDHAMANICKAM

*Living Water in Indian Cups: A Call for Cultural Relevance
in Contemporary Indian Missions*

Abstract

There has been a concentrated effort in contemporary India to stereotype Christianity as a western agent involved in destroying Indic religions, desecrating Indian cultures and destabilizing the nation. While there have been some attempts to contextualize the gospel in Indian missions, in the theological and missiological realms, there is an urgent need to incarnate the gospel in culturally relevant ways due to three critical factors: The cultural diversity of the nation, the rise of Hindu nationalism and the paradigmatic shift from Indian cross cultural missions to local, indigenous movements. While the multinational companies in India are tailoring their strategies according to the Indian markets, Indian Christianity seems to uncritically import and uncontextually apply some of the mission strategies from the West, which perpetuates the stereotyping of Indian Christianity as a West-dependent faith. The four key principles that enable us to serve in a culturally relevant manner in contemporary India are: Sensitive listening, Humble learning, Contextual laboring and Authentic living.

Key Words: Indian missions, Contextualization, Culturally relevant missions, Christianity in India, Western mission strategies, Gospel and Culture

PrabhuSingh Vedhamanickam is a trained missiological anthropologist with a Ph.D. in Inter-Cultural Studies from Asbury Seminary, Kentucky, USA, and he lives and serves in India. (He also serves as the Chair for International Alumni in Asbury Alumni Council).

In his highly acclaimed book *Reimagining Evangelism*, Rick Richardson presents an interesting story of Daniel, a youth pastor of a large church in America. Daniel's deep desire to reach his own generation for Christ finally led him to take up a job in a Starbucks coffee shop, hoping to make friends and share the good news with his fellow workers. As he shared the gospel with his co-workers, there were two big surprises for Daniel: the first one was that all the twenty one people who worked with him believed in God and were open to spirituality. The second one was that even though they were open to spiritual things, they were not interested in Christianity or the church. All of them had some prior bad experience with Christians and the church that made them resistant to Daniel's invitation to participate in the gospel.

Richardson comments,

For different people, the particular issue varied. But almost everyone at Starbucks had experienced some breach in trust with God or with Christians. So Daniel wasn't starting at ground zero, but rather at minus three or four. He would have to pierce through their stereotypes and rebuild broken trust before they would even listen to what he had to say.¹

Christians living in a post-colonial context like India are already on the back foot because of some of the excesses of the colonial rulers who are generally perceived as "Christians" and hailing from "Christian nations." This situation is also exacerbated by the strategic stereotyping and malicious vilifying of Christians and their faith by the Hindu nationalists.² Christians are often portrayed as subversive western agents involved in destroying Indic religions, desecrating Indian culture and destabilizing the nation. Added to that, the culturally insensitive approach of some mission agencies, both Indian and western – due to a combination of ignorance and arrogance – also give fodder to the anti Christian rhetoric, resulting in an almost "perfect minus ten" situation for Indian Christians to meaningfully share the gospel in contemporary India.

Need for Cultural Relevance in Contemporary Indian Missions

In the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu, popularly known as the temple city, a Christian evangelistic outreach was organized few years back. As an advertisement blitz, some Christians wrote on the street walls this slogan, "Jesus is the answer." However, the next day, some perceptive Hindus wrote underneath that slogan these words, "What is the question?"³ Christian communication that fails to take into account seriously the doubts and questions of the receptors as well as the socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded, will be irrelevant. Decontextualized presentation of the gospel results in reductionism and miniaturization of human beings as people are viewed and treated as disembodied souls or disembodied minds.

While there have been attempts to contextualize the faith in the Indian context, both in the theological and missiological realms,⁴ the need for cultural relevance and sensitivity in missions has gained greater ascendancy in contemporary India. This is primarily due to three important reasons, which I shall briefly highlight.

1. India is an ancient civilization known for its rich heritage of cultural diversity and religious plurality. As Indian scholar Shashi Tharoor puts it, “The singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural.”⁵ The Anthropological Survey of India’s *People of India* project has enumerated 4693 communities in India.⁶ It claims that Indian diversity is marked by linguistic heterogeneity, ecological diversity, biological variation and cultural pluralism.⁷

While some argue that the hegemony of globalization is inevitably shaping the world into a homogenized western mould, in India, globalization and economic liberalization have also led to the fragmentation and tribalization of the Indian population, with each community attempting to assert its identity. This is evidenced by the formation of innumerable caste organizations, regional political parties and religious movements in the last two decades.

Indian Christians must celebrate the diversity of Indian cultures as this not only reflect the Kingdom reality (Revelation 7:9) and Indian ethos, it is also a bulwark against the homogenizing attempt of Hindu nationalists to create a mono-cultural, mono-religious Hindu *rashtra*. Christian witnesses are called to incarnate the gospel in the nation so that the 4693 communities may understand, appropriate and celebrate Christ in a manner that is compatible with their own cultural contexts.

2. The issue of rootedness of Christianity in the native soil that reflects the local culture has become all the more pertinent in the light of attacks against Christians and the noisy propaganda of the opponents of Christianity that Christians are involved in cultural cannibalism. Indian Catholic scholar Felix Wilfred writes, “The recent incidents of attack on the churches, Christians, religious personnel – condemnable and painful as they are – are also an occasion for the Christian community for a critical self-examination about its rootedness in the soil.”⁸

In my PhD dissertation on Hindu nationalism and its engagement with Christianity in Gujarat, I found out ten factors for antagonism towards Christianity, and cultural insensitivity of Christians is one of them. Even though it does not absolve the perpetrators of the atrocities committed against the Christian community, nor can we accept uncritically the Hindutva-inspired conception of Indian culture, Indian missions need to engage cultural issues more seriously.

3. The call for cultural relevance is also heightened due to the paradigmatic shift happening in the Indian mission scenario. The Protestant Christian mission in India can be broadly classified as three waves or eras:⁹ The Foreign cross cultural era during the colonial period (1706-1946), the Indian cross cultural era in post-independent India (1947-1990) and the Indigenous era¹⁰ in post-liberalization India (1991-).

After the independence of India in 1947, the 1950s and 60s were a period of withdrawal as many of the foreign missionaries phased out of India. Many Indian cross cultural mission movements were started from the late 1960s onwards in south India and other places with the specific focus of taking the gospel to the unreached *adivasis*¹¹ in North and Central India.

From the 1990s onwards, there is an ongoing shift in emphasis from Indian cross cultural mission movements to local, indigenous movements and personnel, due to factors like the rise of Hindutva and also the widespread growth of local churches in different parts of the country. Nearly 50 years of Indian cross cultural efforts have borne fruits, evidenced by a vast array of diverse churches thriving in various parts of the country. It has also significantly contributed to the welfare and holistic development of the *adivasi* communities.

In many places, however, Indian cross cultural witnesses have failed to incarnate the gospel in such a way that the Christian faith has not been rooted within the particular cultural context, as a result of which it looks alien and foreign in some of those places. There are many instances, where “Tirunelveli Christianity”¹² has been uncritically transported and transplanted by well-meaning “*madarasi* missionaries,”¹³ seemingly oblivious to what the context demands. One of the vital reasons for the high attrition rate among new *adivasi* believers, in some cases 30 to 50 percent as claimed by some cross cultural witnesses in my anthropology seminars, is due to the alienation felt by these new followers who have experienced a form of Christianity that lacks cultural relevance.

Contextualization in the Corporate World – Learning from Burgers and Pizzas

The call for cultural fit reverberates loudly in the corporate world, in the post-liberalization India. In her highly influential book, *We Are Like That Only*, Rama Bijapurkar explores the contemporary consumer scenario in India. She writes that some of the multi national companies (MNC) that made early entry into India to do business, after the economic liberalization in 1991, did not achieve their desired success. The reason was their faulty assumption that the strategies that popularized their products in developed nations will do the same in the emerging markets of India as well. Giving fascinating examples from the corporate world, like why Kellogs breakfast

cereal could not take off in India, she convincingly argues that many MNCs failed to understand Indian markets as well as the cultural conditioning of the Indian consumers.

Rama writes, “The Indian experience so far makes it pretty obvious that only those companies that leverage their competencies for creating businesses tailor-made for India are likely to win in India and benefit from its inevitable growth, rather than those that mechanically transplant their best practice strategies from other markets.”¹⁴ She recommends the MNCs to have a specific “Made for India” approach that takes into account the complexity and diversity of the Indian society: “The question is not ‘What sort of market for this [global] strategy?’, but ‘What sort of strategy for this [local] market?’”¹⁵

Some of the MNCs are listening. While the McDonalds in India offers McAloo burgers (a variant of McChicken for the vegetarians) and Pizza Hut churns out Chicken Tikka Pizza, Christians still lag behind in contextualizing the gospel.

Western-initiated Mega Mission Movements and Mega Mistakes

In the Indian mission context, there seems to be an affinity for mission strategies that emanate from overseas. Uncritical acceptance and uncontextualized application of some of these mission strategies and mega movements – that seem to originate from the classrooms of California or boardrooms of Boston – may have serious ramifications for the future of Christian missions in India. Some mission programs are often conceived and executed in a militaristic manner by “mapping” the local area, fixing “targets” and conducting “campaigns.” The militarization of Christian rhetoric is particularly offensive for people living in countries that have experienced colonial subjugation.

Organizing large public meetings with a foreigner flown in to preach the gospel alienates the Christian community and perpetuates the stereotyping of Indian Christianity as a West-dependent faith. Some of the mission practitioners’ sloganeering like “India for Christ in 10 years,” bombastic claims and statistical hypes are also causes of concern. Obsession with statistics leads to the objectification of people as members of a community are reduced to mere numbers.

Some of the evangelical mega mission movements like Joshua Project have come under the severe scrutiny of Indians. Sudarshan, the former *sarsangchalak* (chief) of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS – the key organization of the Hindu nationalist movement) claimed that Joshua project is a threat to Indian national security due to the collection of strategic statistics regarding the demography of India, which is then stored in the data base of western agencies. Also, the name “Joshua” as a metaphor,

which implies the idea of spying and collecting vital statistics regarding the land that leads to its eventual conquest as in the biblical narrative, is disconcerting to those nations with a colonial past.

The 10/40 Window movement created an illusory window that demarcated nations like India and others in Asia, Middle East and North Africa as the “resistant belt” and under the dominion of darkness, while conveniently leaving out the western countries. Is Chennai more corrupt than Chicago? Is there more sin in Lucknow than in Las Vegas? Even though this movement attempted to mobilize and channel mission efforts towards a particular region, the whole notion of boxing and labelling people and places smacks of ethnocentrism.

While there is room for western Christians’ contribution to Indian Christianity in many areas, some of these highly publicized, West-initiated mega movements tend to create suspicion and antagonism in the minds of many Indians. Unfortunately, many Indian Christians do not look into these issues critically or they choose to keep quiet due to their over dependency on the West for their resources. While there is a legitimate and biblical warrant for inter-dependent partnership between the global and the local church, the deification of dollar can lead to the pathetic prostration of Indian Christian missions at the feet of the West.

How Then Shall We Live and Serve?

The bible clearly exhorts God’s people to understand and appropriate the times they live in. The matrix of Christian mission in India is no longer the same as during the previous eras (Foreign cross cultural and Indian cross cultural eras), and we must be sensitive to the shifting moods and the seismic changes that are happening in the Indian social, economic, religious and political realms. How then shall we live and serve in “such a time as this” (Esther 4:14)? I shall briefly highlight four principles that help us to serve Christ in a culturally relevant manner.

Sensitive Listening

Raj Mohan Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, in his work *Revenge and Reconciliation* traces the aspect of revenge as a driving force in the south Asian history, from Kurukshetra to Kargil. Even though reconcilers came periodically, like Buddha and Ashoka, they were not able to stem the violence. In his final chapter, “The New Century: Strategies for Reconciliation,” he presents various ideas and strategies for people to coexist peacefully. One of them is the need to listen to the other – “listening, with the heart as well as the ear, to what is said and also to what is unsaid.”¹⁶

Rajmohan claims, however, that south Asians are more prone to talk than to listen.

Is listening natural to the South Asian? A Japanese friend once said to me: For fifteen years I have been attending international conferences and seminars. Africans, Europeans, Asians, Americans, all take part. Do you know the biggest difficulties that the person in the chair faces? One is to persuade the shy Japanese delegate to say something. Another is to persuade the Indian delegate to end his speech.¹⁷

Indians are quick to speak and speak at some length. Amartya Sen, Indian thinker and Nobel laureate, begins his best-seller *The Argumentative Indian* with these words, “Prolivity is not alien to us in India. We are able to talk at some length....We do like to speak.”¹⁸ Sen points to Krishna Menon’s record setting 9 hours, non-stop speech in the UN assembly nearly half a century ago, as well as the Sanskrit epic *Mababharata*, which is about 7 times as long as *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, as some of the evidences of the loquacity of Indians.¹⁹

Christians have a propensity to talk more and listen less. However, without listening to the sighs, groans, doubts and questions of a hurting broken world, we would perennially be answering questions which people are not asking and scratching where it does not itch.

John Stott writes, “Everybody finds listening difficult. But are Christians for some reason (perhaps because we believe ourselves called to speak what God has spoken) worse listeners than others?”²⁰ He calls Christians to develop the ability of “double listening,” which is the “faculty of listening to two voices at the same time, the voice of God through Scripture and the voices of men and women around us.”²¹

Humble Learning

Listening is closely tied with learning. We must be willing to listen, observe and learn from the songs and stories, poems and proverbs, myths and rituals, religious symbols and worldview of the culture of the people to whom we are presenting the gospel. In Athens, Paul commended the spiritual thirst of his audience (however misguided it may be) to win their attention, then used the “altar of the unknown God” as a launching pad for the gospel and proceeded to quote their own poets to help them understand the gospel better. He could do this because he was a good observer and learner, as he “walked around and looked carefully at their objects of worship” (Acts 17:23).

King Solomon, known for his wisdom was also an avid learner (Proverbs 24:30-34), as he writes, “I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw” (24:32). Stanley Jones, in his talk commemorating his 75th birthday, spoke on what his life of 75 years taught him. He pointed out that some where in the Alps, a mountain climber died and the epitaph on his tomb read, “He died climbing.” Then Jones said, “I would like my epitaph to say, ‘He died learning.’”

At the conclusion of a recent anthropological workshop I conducted for cross cultural witnesses of one of the largest mission agencies in India, one south Indian missionary who has been serving for nearly 15 years among a particular people group in North India, made a startling statement. He said,

I wish this training had come 15 years ago. The *adivasi* people whom I serve are the original Christians as many of their stories and myths are similar to those in the Bible. But we did not take time to listen and learn; instead we brushed them all aside as demonic and brought Christianity as some thing totally new. Even though many have come to the Lord, many more thousands would have embraced Christ if we had built on what they already had. Instead we ended up presenting an alien faith and also drove a wedge in the community.

Tragic but true, and there are many such stories in Indian missions.

Contextual Labouring

Sadhu Sunder Singh gave a succinct description of what contextualization in the Indian context is. He said, “It is giving the water of life in Indian cup.” As mentioned earlier, there are atleast 4693 cups within India that need the water of life. Christian missions do not occur in a vacuum as the receptors of the gospel are deeply embedded in their respective cultural contexts. Hence, Christian communicators are called to understand and engage cultures carefully.

While the Christian gospel is supracultural (it is not a cultural construct as it is the revelation of God) and also transcultural (applicable and translatable to all cultures), it can be understood, accepted and expressed primarily through one’s own cultural categories. The Scripture teaches us that God has created humans as creative beings with the capacity to produce culture. Humans create culture, which in turn shapes them. As humans are both good (created in the image of God) and bad (fallen), all cultures have both good and bad elements. No single culture is fundamentally good or fundamentally bad. Therefore, in its dynamic interaction with a particular culture, the gospel affirms what is good (contextual approach), judges what is bad (counter-cultural approach) and transforms the whole culture, which results in both cultural continuity and discontinuity.

Too often Christians tend to swing to both extremes – viewing all of culture as bad thereby developing an antagonistic approach and demonization of the local culture and religion, or uncritically embracing all of culture as good which results in syncretism and split level Christianity.

A balanced approach requires a careful study of both the Word and the World. Unfortunately, while there is a proliferation of bible schools, mobile training institutes and specialized seminars and conferences in India, Indian

Christians and cross-cultural witnesses are still poorly equipped to deal with the cultural issues, as there is a distinct lack of teaching on culture and related issues.

Authentic Living

The church that incarnates the gospel must exhibit the mind of Christ and embody the love of Christ. A Christ centered, other oriented, authentic Christian living is imperative to make an impact on the world around us.

Stanley Jones narrates a visit of Kagawa, the saintly Japanese Christian, to America. Kagawa was a godly man but not a gifted public speaker. After an address by Kagawa, two American pastors were talking. One was obviously not impressed. He looked at his friend and said, “He didn’t say much. Did he?” The other replied, “Well, if you are hanging on the cross, you don’t have to say much.”²²

Endnotes

¹ Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), p. 65, 66.

² Hindu nationalism is an ideology that seeks to create a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) in India by redefining Indianness on the basis of religion. Hindutva (Hinduness) is also a term often used to refer to this ideology and the movements that subscribe to this view.

³ Cited in Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), p. 2.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya’s interpretation of Trinity as Saccidananda Brahman, Appasamy’s portrayal of Christianity as Bakti Marga, Chenchiah’s appropriation of Aurobindo’s philosophy for Christian theology, as well as various attempts by different scholars to present Christ as Ishvara, Avatara, Saguna Brahman, Sabda Brahman, Vedic Prajapati etc, are some of the efforts in the theological realm (See, Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1969). Also, the Ashram Movement, Sadhu ideal, Yesu Darbar, Yesu Bhaktas, Truth Seekers and other movements are efforts to incarnate the gospel in the Indian settings. However, most of them are geared towards Hinduism, and particularly high caste Hindus (with some exceptions like Truth Seekers).

⁵ Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 8.

⁶ K.S.Singh, *People of India: Introduction*, (New Delhi: Anthropological Survey of India/Oxford University Press, 2003, Revised Edition), p. 289.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁸ Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, (Delhi: Indian Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2003), p. 189.

⁹ Like any periodization, this classification of the three waves or eras is not a watertight compartmentalization, but just a conceptual tool to analyze and understand protestant missions in India that stretches over three centuries. The three key markers are: 1706 – The arrival of the first protestant missionary to India, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg; 1947 – India attains independence; 1991 – India

liberalizes its economy that paves the way for rapid globalization and westernization. This year also witnessed the demolition of Babri Masjid and the rise of communal clashes and polarization of the nation along religious lines.

¹⁰ The term 'indigenous' is used here to mean "local."

¹¹ Adivasi is a term often used to denote the various indigenous tribal communities in different parts of India. It means original, primal inhabitants ("Adi" – First, "Vasi" – inhabitant).

¹² Tirunelveli is a region in southern Tamil Nadu that has historically been one of the prime loci of western missionary activities for many centuries. Also, it is the region that has mobilized and sent thousands of cross cultural witnesses to North and Central India, particularly among the adivasi communities, during the second wave of protestant missions.

¹³ The term "Madarasi" is derived from Madras (capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu), now called Chennai. It is usually used to refer people hailing from south India, sometimes with a pejorative connotation.

¹⁴ Rama Bijapurkar, *We are Like That Only: Understanding the Logic of Consumer India*, (New Delhi: Penguin/Portfolio, 2009), p. 10,11.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 270.

¹⁶ RajMohan Gandhi, *Revenge and Reconciliation: Understanding South Asian History* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999), p. 401, 402.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 402.

¹⁸ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

²⁰ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Chennai: Evangelical Literature Service & UESI Publication Trust, 2001), p. 28.

²¹ Ibid, p. 29.