

The Cultural Core of Hinduism

— Timothy Paul

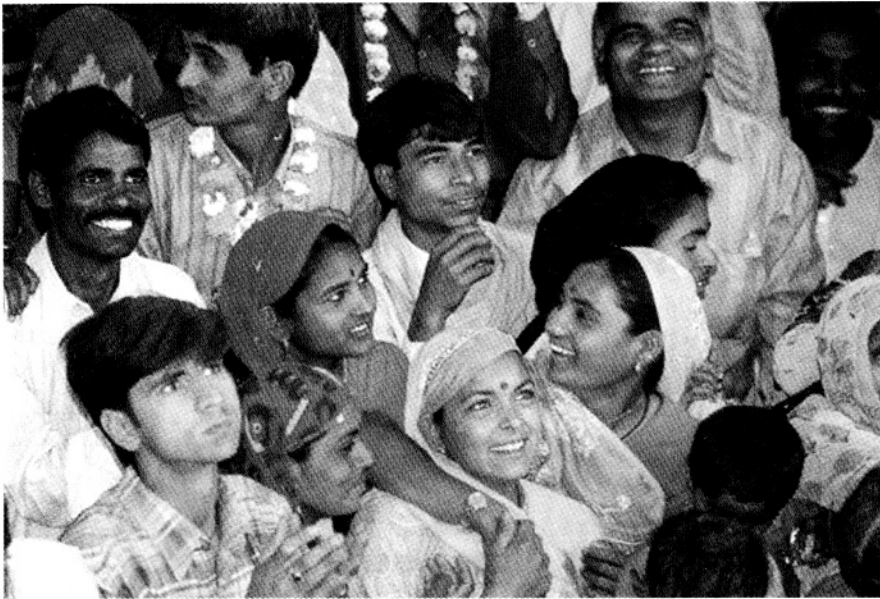
Thinking of “religion” in terms of theology and ideas leads one astray when dealing with Hindus. Culture or civilization is the more fundamental issue.

From a distance, Hinduism seems to resemble a vast and intricate complex of deities, customs, philosophies, languages and holy books. Many people find it confusing, so they try to classify it in terms that they can understand. The most common is to refer to Hinduism as a religion with its own doctrine and world-view philosophy. While there are concepts and traditions that seem to extend to almost every sect of Hinduism, there is also an endless panoply of detail that makes either a straightforward religious or philosophical explanation impossible. What can be done to unravel the complexity and enable people to begin to understand it?

A good starting place, perhaps, is to ask Hindu people to tell the world who they are and what they believe on their own terms. What Hindu people emphasize is that Hinduism is not a religion or a philosophy. It is a culture or a way of life that evolved over time in India. Furthermore, it is a uniquely Hindu culture, defining itself according to Hindu cultural dynamics; it is culture as Hindus define culture. It may not be incorrect to say that Hinduism is actually nothing more or less than the expression of how the idea of social and spiritual culture emerged in India over the cloistered centuries of Indian history. It is actually a unique civilization, indigenous to India.

Hindu civilization, as it exists in the modern era, grew through a process of interchange and assimilation with numerous other cultures. There have been many of these social upheavals over India's five thousand year history, but the most influential was the ancient Aryan migrations into India from Europe and Iran. The merging of Aryan culture with the indigenous people of very ancient India and the social and philosophical dynamics that emerged from it laid the cultural foundations for modern Hinduism.

Timothy Paul developed his understanding of Hinduism and ministry among Hindus during 15 years of hands-on ministry in the metropolitan New York area, where he continues to live.



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It can be translated variously as duty,
way of life, religion or relationship.***

The next critical period of interchange was the five hundred years of Islamic rule in different areas of India. This was followed by the European colonial period of India during the 18th and 19th centuries. These three epochs of time in Indian history blend together their own unique emphases and experiences into customs and concepts that live today. This is why Hinduism is nearly impossible to cogently define. It is an ancient civilization that contains nearly five thousand years of tradition, philosophy, religion, literature, government and language. Over many centuries, this civilizational evolution provided the context for Hindu people to assimilate different ideas and cultures and, almost subconsciously, to create a Hindu core of culture that is indigenous to Indian civilization.

Group relationship is the life force of Hindu social and spiritual culture. To outsiders, the relationships between and within groups in Hindu culture appear very formal and occasionally complicated. They are also static or resistant to

change. Hindu group dynamics appear this way because they are circumscribed by an ancient and powerful Hindu concept called Dharma. Dharma is the heartbeat of Hindu group dynamics. It can be translated variously as duty, way of life, religion or relationship. All of

the different kinds of cultural groups in Hindu civilization follow a known Dharma that governs their relationships. Hindu people, individually, are expected to live according to the Dharma in each group that they belong to. This is why Hindu group relation-

ships struggle with change; they are not supposed to change! Dharma governs everything.

Dharma can best be understood in the context of the Hindu family. The extended family is the center of Hindu life and the most authoritative group in Hindu culture. The extended family is a tight knit clan than is made up of several smaller nuclear families that come into existence through marriages. Relationships within the families and between the families in a Hindu clan are experienced through observing a known and accepted set of relationship formalities. These formalities are carried out according to the traditions that the elders of each clan pass on to the next generation. Everybody has a role within the family or larger clan and they fulfill their Dharma when they keep the formalities that their identity prescribes for them. Each clan is part of a larger group of clans referred to as castes or sub-castes, and the different castes are a part of even larger "people groups" that may have commonality of language, region or specific cultural distinctives. Dharma prescribes how relationships are carried out between and within all of these groups. Dharma is how Hindu culture functions.

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Culture is absolute for Hindu people. Everything, especially spiritual ideas, is evaluated on the basis of how it will affect their present way of life, or culture. In our western culture, ideas are absolute. They stand alone and are evaluated according to their own

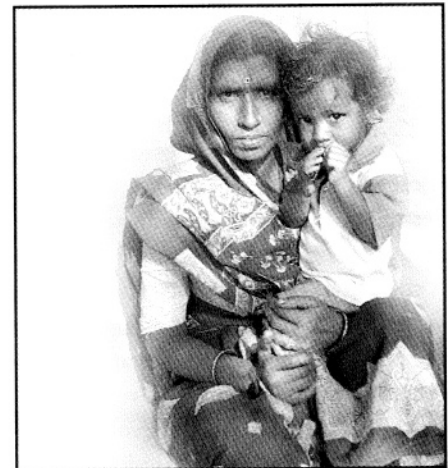
intrinsic truth. Understanding that culture is more powerful than ideas to Hindu people is a significant clue why gospel ministry among Hindu people is frequently difficult. Most American-style gospel ministry is carried out all over the world on the basis of the conviction that the gospel is an intrinsically superior idea that stands alone, apart from any culture. This is why many Hindu people who are fully aware of the gospel do not follow Christ. To Hindus, the gospel as an idea does not stand apart from culture. Hindu people will not judge the gospel on its own merits. It will be evaluated according to the culture of its proponents, and most importantly, on the basis of the changes that "gospel culture" will bring to Hindu culture. There is a culture in which the gospel lives and this culture must be presented as both the source and the destination of the gospel idea. This culture is universal and brings the benevolent authority of Jesus over sin, Satan and death to all of the world's imperfect cultures, transforming them into a pleasing home for Jesus, the king, to live in. That culture is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of the heavens. A "gospel of the kingdom" that will be effective within a Hindu context is one in which the ambassadors of Christ clearly explain life in the gospel culture of the heavenly kingdom and demonstrate in everyday life how the lordship of Christ is the path to fullness of joy, peace and blessing for Hindu civilization.

There are perhaps two concepts that deserve a fresh look as we seek to bring the gospel of the kingdom into Hindu civilization. Those are freedom and authority. The reign of Jesus in the earth is one that contains both freedom and authority. Kingdom ambassadors need to understand how the freedom and authority of Jesus and His kingdom present themselves within Hindu culture. In this glorious endeavor, we are free to reconsider the kingdom relevance of much that is identified



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as Christianity and retain only those traditions and practices that exalt Jesus as Lord of Hindu civilization. We are also free to seek out bridges of Hindu culture over which we may carry the gospel of the kingdom into Hindu families and clans. We are wise to fully embrace the authority of Jesus as Lord. Jesus alone has the wisdom and power and the passionate love to fully transform Hindu culture into one which can reflect His glory and bring all of the blessings of His reign into the Hindu heart. ☞



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