

7 A New Paradigm for International Student Ministry among Hindus

By Matthew Agrafiotis

India is now the number one sending country of international students to the USA, putting Hindu students in a category of people among whom we urgently need to minister. For the most part, Hindu students do not get involved in Christian student ministries reaching out among internationals on North American campuses. In a few cases, a successful ministry focused on Indian students has developed, yet even accounting for these ethnic-specific fellowships, Hindus are basically unreached international students in the U.S.A. Given these realities, *What can be done to reach Hindu students in the student ministry context?* Of course, this question brings up a variety of sub-questions such as: *Should Hindus be combined in the mix of other international students? What special needs do they have? What do Hindus find offensive about Christianity and international student ministry methodologies? How does it look for a Hindu to start following Jesus? How is this similar to or different from other international students?*

My Own Journey

During the time I studied for a master's degree in electrical engineering, I connected with a number of Indian/Hindu students. As I continued working with a campus ministry, it seemed that Indian students were drawn to me, possibly because I was their senior, having graduated as an electrical engineer. Many times I have been awestruck at the spiritual openness and insight of my Hindu friends. But it is sad that their respect for me did not cause these students to become part of a campus ministry for more than a short time, much less become followers of Jesus.

In my quest to better understand how to reach Hindu students, I read from a variety of resources and even took a trip to India. These experiences confirmed what I was hearing and seeing as I spent time with Christian and Hindu Indian students. I looked to resources of the Rethinking Forum and articles from other campus ministry staff working with Indians (see articles listed in "Additional Sources"). These colleagues seem to have taken the ethnic-specific approach rather than integrating Indians into the mix of the international

student fellowship. Prayer and friendship were obviously in the forefront of their approach. However, I continued to wrestle with the question, "What more can be done to reach Hindu students in the campus ministry context?"

I discussed this question with a man who was part of a Christian student club in one of India's most prestigious colleges. He explained the functioning of the ministry and how many students from Hindu backgrounds became followers of Jesus Christ. I then asked him to describe how the ministry had called these students to commitment to Christ. After asking him the same question several different ways, I was surprised that he could not answer it. I finally realized that *devotion to Jesus* was the focus of this student ministry in India. While practicing this devotion, students become followers of the Lord Jesus.

How did Jesus reach his world?

Perhaps the best example of this type of ministry is seen in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. The world that Jesus was to reach was more than just the Jews. He wanted to reach the whole world and even the Romans who had many gods. We see some interesting things about how Jesus set up his ministry. Jesus reached his world by empowering a few devoted disciples and expecting them to pass on the good news. Jesus set apart a few disciples that spent time with him and he poured himself into them. It seems to be the exception for Jesus to associate with large numbers of people. At times, he even avoided crowds. Early Christian leaders may have had more impressive results, in terms of numbers, than Jesus did (like Peter and the three thousand). Certainly, many popular ministries today would seem more impressive than Jesus' in regard to how they reach the masses around the world through crusades and television. Jesus never talked to 30 million people at one time, yet Jesus knew what he had to offer was world changing. Jesus modeled how his followers would reach the world... by living a life of faith for his followers to see and experience. Within these few people, over just a few years, Jesus developed a deep devotion and they gave the rest of their lives to disciple other followers.

The idea of making relatively small numbers of devoted disciples and encouraging them to do the same is far from glamorous. It is not what most ministries

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want to strive for, but really, that is what is being proposed here. Each leader will have to figure out how to apply this principle to the specific ministry to which God has called him or her. If you desire to learn more about the devotion that Jesus modeled and taught his disciples, study the Gospels.

The reader should realize that no great new theological theory has been proposed here. This method is simply following the Great Commission to “make disciples” of all nations. A disciple is one that chooses to affirm Jesus’ call to “follow me.” By “follow me,” Jesus meant *observe* and *do* what I do (1 John 2:6). Here in this paper, I use the word devotion where others may have used discipleship and/or worship. I feel devotion is a word that is not overused and a good mix of both discipleship and worship, and is especially a term that resonates with Hindus (*bhakti* being the equivalent in various Indian languages). For the purpose of this paper, discipleship is the process of modeling worship and devotion to the Lord Jesus with others. I would suggest further study in both worship and discipleship in the context of evangelism. A good start for a classic on discipleship and evangelism is Robert E. Coleman’s *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.

When Did Jesus’ Disciples Cross the Line into Faith?

Many would say the original disciples crossed the line into faith when Jesus said “follow me” and they left everything, while others may say it was after Jesus’ resurrection. To me it is clear that *Jesus taught his followers what it meant to be devoted to himself no matter where they were in their faith journey*. Even just before his death, Jesus’ disciples seemed to be only beginning to understand Jesus’ identity:

Then Jesus’ disciples said, “Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.” “You believe at last!” Jesus answered. (John 16: 29-30, NIV)

In most of his ministry, Jesus understated himself and intentionally used figures of speech (parables) to indirectly expose the kingdom of God. Much of the time he would only speak directly when asked. I believe these verses show that Jesus was very patient with his followers in regard to belief, yet he had no problem with teaching and modeling devotion prior to his followers becoming Christ-followers. These verses cause me to think that the disciples became Christ-followers after a

few years with Jesus.

Current Methods of Reaching International Students

Most international student campus fellowships have a strong East Asian constituency, because the predominant portion of international students arrive from these regions. I believe that many ministries have been (rightfully) shaped to fit these cultures. Therefore, current approaches, though they may build trust and possibly raise curiosity among Hindu students, are usually not effective in connecting with Hindus. That there are few success stories reported from traditional international student ministries to Hindu students demonstrates the overall failure to understand Hindu culture and appropriate ways to minister among Hindus on the part of ministry staff.

One campus ministry worker observed,

It seems to me that if we want to attract interested Indian students into our group, we need to rely less on “traditional International Student Ministry hooks” (free food, English lessons, experience American culture, etc.) and just go where they are and become a friend. That friendship might lead into sincere religious discussion.¹

Some traditional campus ministry strategies may continue to be utilized, but extreme caution should be taken to understand how the ministry is perceived by Hindu students. Hindus are very concerned to see whether the purpose of an event is to promote a “foreign religion” or to develop meaningful friendships. Bringing Hindus to a church, a Bible study or a Christian fellowship meeting without the context of a personal relationship is a bad idea. It is very important that these Hindu friends know the purpose and boundaries of any event before attending.

Even though a Hindu friend may seem to have significant spiritual openness, often initial spiritual openness is not equivalent to seeking to follow Jesus. It is more of a Hindu way of seeing the world and accepting the good within all faiths. If a Hindu feels that their openness is being taken advantage of, it leads to resentment and withdrawal from the developing relationship. Also, the negative reputation of that Christian or ministry will likely be spread throughout the Hindu community and thwart further efforts to share about Jesus. So while some of the standard ministry approaches and tools can be used effectively, there must be a broader context in which the Hindu realizes that

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Jesus accepts them and their culture as much as any other culture. In reality, most Hindu students that get involved with international student ministries have enough of a negative experience so as to be turned away from anything that has to do with Christianity.

Reaching Hindus versus Other Internationals

Strictly speaking, we would not consider most East Asians to be polytheistic or, for that matter, to believe in any god. For example, students from China may be outright atheists, Japanese students tend to be more secular, though they have Shinto and Buddhist roots,

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etc. Therefore, many international student ministries have been shaped first to teach students with the Bible in order to expose them to *belief in God* (theism) and then to encourage them to cross the line and have faith in Jesus Christ. One of the major goals of such ministries is that students will come to *believe in Jesus*. If an atheist or agnostic comes to believe there is a God, there is excitement because they are on the right track. Ministry for those that are not polytheistic tends to be done through building friendships with students, encouraging them to become part of a Christian international fellowship, sharing scripture with them, loving and caring for their needs, etc. Non-polytheistic students appreciate what these ministries offer them, and many of these students do come to Christ, but few Hindus can be reached in this manner.

Hindu students may be considered polytheistic.² They are very open to thinking of things on a spiritual and supernatural level. Events considered irrational and unscientific by Westerners (and by East Asians), like Jesus walking on water or healing people, are generally instantly accepted by Hindus. Many Hindus can read a passage of the Bible for the first time and give accurate insight to the spiritual meaning. Hindus are not held back by the idea of belief in God, or the incarnation of God into Jesus (or other holy men for that matter). *For the Hindu, the process of coming to faith in the Lord Jesus may first look more like syncretism* (adding Jesus to their belief in many other gods) and later become singular devotion to the Lord Jesus. Just as we rejoice at an atheist believing there is a God or supreme being, we should also rejoice at a Hindu starting to be devoted

to Jesus, even though the other gods are still on their shelf at home. This devotion is a clear step in the right direction and an on-ramp to a deeper faith. Yet this is only a starting point because we know they need to come to complete devotion to Jesus.

Yet Hindus generally are derailed from the path to Jesus long before this point because they are pressured to believe in Jesus before even having an opportunity to experience what it would mean to be a devotee of Jesus. Worse still, they perceive that following Jesus means giving up their gods and also giving up their family, culture and everything that it means to be culturally Hindu/Indian. Hindus need to have an opportunity to connect with Jesus and experience what it means to be his follower in an atmosphere where it is clear that he can be followed without abandoning all aspects of Indian culture.

Because the process of becoming a follower of Jesus looks different for the Hindu, let me propose a counterintuitive idea to reach Hindus.

Let's consider Hindus to already believe in Jesus and not stress that they need to "believe." After all, a Hindu is a polytheist and, as my Hindu friends say, a Hindu believes "in (n + 1) gods." In other words, however many gods he or she may believe in now, it is never a problem to believe in one more. The Hindu that connects with a ministry will make Jesus of Nazareth the "+ 1" as they learn about Jesus from the Bible.

Rather than emphasize belief in Jesus, we should focus our ministry on helping Hindu students *experience* what it means to be devoted followers of Jesus. Since most Hindu students have the preconception that Christians are only out to get them to convert (make them not Hindu), they are very cautious about being a part of anything that is Christian. Repeating to them that they need to "believe," yet not giving them a place to experience devotion to the Lord Jesus, will only drive spiritually-sensitive Hindus away from the gospel.

Reaching non-polytheists flows in this direction:
Teach/expose belief in God → Encourage belief in Jesus
→ Follower of Jesus

For the Hindu, it may be more like be this:
Assume Hindu believes in Jesus → Encourage devotion to Jesus → Follower of Jesus

If we look at faith one dimensionally, then the continuum on following Jesus would look like this:
Atheist → Agnostic → Theist → Follower of Jesus ←
Polytheist + Jesus ← Polytheist

From this diagram it may appear that reaching a Hindu may be the opposite of reaching someone that is not a polytheist; after all, they need to stop being devoted to many gods rather than come to belief in one God. This reality may pose a paradoxical challenge as we try to reach students from these diverse backgrounds. But instead of working from opposite directions, it would be advantageous to have a common direction for all students. The main difference in this approach is the focus on devotion to the Lord Jesus that leads students to become followers of Jesus.

If ministries focused on *devotion to Jesus* to reach students, maybe it would look like this:

Expose Jesus → Encourage/model devotion to Jesus → Follower of the Lord Jesus

Establishing a Friendship with a Hindu

Some good ways to build friendships with Hindu students are:

Helping find necessary items like mattresses and furniture when students move in.

Shopping for groceries.

Spending time with them.

Enjoying their cooking and hospitality.

Dropping in if you happen to be “passing by.”

As much as possible, reciprocity should be a part of the relationship. For example, dropping off a mattress might be a great time to receive some good Indian tea (chai). But nothing should be done with the expectation, “I did this for you, so you have to come to such-and-such religious event.” And, the time spent just relaxing and talking is more important than the task that may be accomplished. For great information about building friendship with Hindus, please read “Some Pointers for Personal Evangelism among Educated Hindus.” (See “Additional Sources” at the close of this paper.)

Friendship must be authentic, not just a ministry method. If the Christ follower’s motive is just to share faith, then perhaps it is not a friendship that they are looking for, but rather they are seeking to be a religious teacher looking for students. If that is the case, it should be made clear at the beginning of the relationship. In friendship, the Hindu friend should be the one that sets the pace of the spiritual discussion. Lisa Espineli Chinn states it well: “Your friendship is not conditioned by their acceptance or rejection of Jesus. Your friendship is based on mutual respect and commitment to each other. You have discovered and developed a variety of

interests. So even if your friend does not share your spiritual beliefs, you can continue to enrich and enjoy each other’s lives.” (“Crossing Cultures Here and Now,” InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 2006.)

For Hindu students, learning to follow Jesus will probably happen outside of “the classroom” or planned meeting. We should move onto their turf, serve/eat their food, watch Hindi films, follow cricket matches, recognize Indian holidays, etc. Much time will be needed to build relationships and give space for spiritual insight to be imparted in everyday life. Over time, opportunities will open up to share about following Jesus. It has been my experience that I am often the one in need of learning from a Hindu about spirituality and culture. Yes, Hindus have a lot to offer the Christian. They know what it means to be devoted to gods and serve lords. For many Western Christians, Lord seems to be a nickname for Jesus. Hindus can help us to understand what it would mean to serve the *Lord* Jesus Christ. Observing and learning from the traditional Hindu values of simplicity, renunciation, spirituality and humility may be life-changing for many Christians. Learning how Hindus fast and meditate in devotion to their gods has helped me see how beneficial these biblical values are in my life.

What would an international student ministry with focus on devotion to the Lord Jesus look like?

For modeling devotion, there needs to be time and space for students to learn what it means to be devoted to Christ. It should be done in a way that is familiar and non-threatening for a Hindu. Because of the presupposed perception of Western styles, I hesitate to

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use the terms Bible study, prayer meeting or (musical) worship time. Though each of these components may be a part of the time, the focus would be on devotion to Jesus. The devotional time may not be a structured meeting. Or, at least it may not be a meeting where 5-50 students come every week to a specific location. It may be more of a journey where the Holy Spirit guides and challenges the disciple to be a devoted follower of Jesus Christ.



Having a devotional time that does not feel threatening for a Hindu may be one of the most difficult stretches for campus ministries. Even the way people are invited sets a tone for the event and for the ongoing relationship. There really needs to be an authentic relationship before considering giving an invitation to a devotional event. Direct invitations to Christian meetings or church may be negatively perceived as trying to get them to join our religion with no real desire for an authentic relationship. Indirect invitations are less threatening. For example, if someone asked me what I am doing on the weekend, I could mention a few things and include that I spend time in devotion to the Lord Jesus. Depending on the relationship and interest I perceive, I may mention that they are welcome to join me. Once a group is meeting with Hindus involved, the best invitations will come from these Hindus, who can both invite and prepare others for the experience.

The content of the devotional time needs to be carefully considered. Due to the conception that Christianity is a foreign religion, Hindus need to *feel* the relevance of devotion to Jesus as distinct from Western institutional religion. The singing of a devotional song in traditional Indian style (a *bhajan*) helps set this tone.³ It will take time for most campus ministry leaders to become comfortable leading such a time. But most important is providing an atmosphere to experience authentic devotion to Jesus. A brief time in meditative silent prayer with three people may be a great starting point. Adding a devotional CD may be a second step. Those involved in the time may shape it further depending on the needs and talents in the group.

Devotion to the Lord Jesus is all about whom we serve and should not be confused with how/what we do. It is easy to try to give students a formula for how

they should be devoted to Jesus, but devotion is more than Bible study or prayer. There is no mandate in the Bible that states how often followers should read scripture, pray, or worship together. Devotion varies from person to person, community to community, and culture to culture. God blesses diversity in worship and this is a fact in which we can rejoice. Consequently, it is important to exercise caution in modeling devotion. It is very easy to say, “this is the way to worship God.” In this way, although unintentionally, we may make disciples more of ourselves and of our culture than of Jesus and his kingdom. Consequently, the worst fear of Hindus about Christianity becomes

true: it is just a “foreign religion.” In order to avoid this misconception, the “leader” needs to make clear that they are personally learning more about devotion to the Lord Jesus day by day as well. They should also invite others into the process not as a leader that teaches a student, but as a fellow student learning from the same Great Teacher, the Lord Jesus, through the Holy Spirit (John 14:26).

In true devotion, a Hindu should find spiritual meaning within their own culture. Outsiders should give Hindus room to make connections and resist any temptation to force issues. A Hindu Christ follower may find new meaning in their music and holidays as they become more devoted to Jesus. It is important to note that this cultural adaptation occurred in Western Christianity, as popular secular melodies made their way into hymn books and the resurrection celebrations became aligned with Easter (a pagan fertility celebration) rather than with the Passover. As a Hindu contextualizes faith, they will be stronger followers of Jesus and still be in the Hindu community to share about Jesus with other Hindus.

On the broadest level, the following contrasts are instructive of the different tone and emphasis in traditional international student ministry and in ministry specific among Hindus. (See chart on page 43.)

A Helpful Analogy

The idea that the Hindu may need an “on ramp” to become a follower of Jesus was mentioned earlier in this paper. That is, they should be given space to speed up and join in fellowship with other followers of Jesus. Of course, traffic in India and traffic in the U.S.A. are vastly different, and this difference helps provide a useful illustration.

	Traditional Approach	Alternative Approach
ESL teaching	Many ministries offer conversation partner programs to international students and have been effective to build relationships.	Indian students tend to speak English twice as fast as Americans and are not drawn to classes to learn American English.
Friendship	Friendship programs have been used to connect community people with international students as a way to reach out to international students. Most international students come to the host country wanting to build friendships.	Authentic friendships are welcome by Hindu students. Every ministry must see friendship as a crucial part of the strategy. Community friendship programs may be very helpful. Ideally training would be given, so people would be sensitive to the specific needs and cultural differences of Hindus.
Mixing Ethnic Groups	Many international student ministries are mixed ethnic groups. International students tend to bond together quickly because of similar struggles. The advantage with this approach is that students can learn from each other and be blessed by the diversity.	Diversity does not drive all Hindu students away and some may be attracted to it. Yet for the most part Indians tend to stick together, so any ministry with Hindus must have a critical mass of Indians that welcome and build relationships with Hindus. An integrated structure might work if it anticipates the needs of Hindus.
Teaching Scripture	Many ministries among international students have some sort of Bible teaching. These times may be a part of a larger fellowship or social ministry events.	Much caution should be taken when teaching Hindus. The students come to the guru seeking his wisdom. It would be better to take an approach of co-learners of the Great Teacher, Jesus.
Focus on Conversion and Belief	Many international student ministries focus on students coming to belief in Jesus Christ.	Hindus resent any idea of conversion. If they sense that this is the purpose of “friendship” they will turn away. But Hindus have no issue with Jesus. Rather than focus on belief, provide opportunities for students to experience devotion to Jesus.
Social Activities	Many student ministries create a fun social environment with lots of activities that draw in internationals for ongoing fellowship meetings, Bible studies, etc.	Attending popular Indian activities that students are already involved in (cricket matches, etc.) would be better. This would leave time set aside for devotion to be more focused.
Devotion	Some ministries may have times of prayer and open worship. Ideally this is led by students and reflects their culture and devotion to the Lord Jesus.	For Hindu students it is critical that they experience devotion to Jesus. Finding ways to best model devotion should be a goal of every ministry. Singing <i>bhajans</i> is particularly helpful.

A North American visitor to India is usually shocked by the difference in urban traffic patterns.⁴ The rickshaw is a fundamental means of transportation. It is basically a three wheeled taxi powered by a small motorcycle engine. It functions very well in the Indian transportation system where it shares the road with buses, trucks (“lorries”), auto taxis, motorcycles, bicycles, pedestrians, ox carts and cows, all of which have equal right of way. In this system, value is placed on flexibility and accommodation. People show one another respect by honking to signal danger, or to simply let others know they are coming, and hand signals are friendly

parts of this orchestra. All parties understand that they must work together in order to keep the system moving in order to reach their destinations. By contrast, in the North American system of transportation, value is placed on structure and time; people concern themselves with their own goal or destination. All are not welcome, especially on the freeway. To be on the freeway, you must incorporate into the structure of fast-moving vehicles (i.e. no rickshaws, etc.). Ironically, during “rush hour” (that lasts 4-6 hours, twice a day), the 405 freeway in Los Angeles, even with all its “efficiency” and structure, seems to move slower than the main roads in

Mumbai (Bombay). To say one system is more efficient is an error. To see that there are differences that make both acceptable in their own context is insightful. An American may be tempted to propose implementing a freeway system as a fix to what they perceive is a deficiency of the Indian system, but in reality, that would not be helpful. It would be like LA freeways, only with twice as many cars! The best solution will need to allow for the Indian in the rickshaw, motorbike, etc.⁵

This paper, of course, is not about traffic but about means for Hindus to enter into devotion to Jesus without denying their cultural identity. For this to happen at American universities, it may mean that campus ministry strategies need to accommodate a whole new approach.

Summary and Conclusions

Hindu students are coming to North American universities in large numbers. God has determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-28, *NIV*). International student ministries can help connect Hindus with the Lord Jesus. As current ministry strategies are refined to better serve Hindus, the result will be a better understanding of what it means to be fully devoted to the Lord Jesus. And out of these emerging international student ministries, much will be learned about how to better serve all international students.

Notes

1. "Thoughts on Ministry to Students from India." (www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/3765)
2. Because Hinduism is so diverse, many would say that Hinduism should not be seen as a religion, but rather as a multi-cultural civilization. Hinduism may be viewed as polytheistic (belief in many gods), pantheistic (belief that all is God), and even monotheistic (belief in one God). When

defining their faith, many Hindus are clear that they believe in one supreme God. Their view is that they worship many deities, which are manifestations of the same God, similar to how Christians view the Trinity. Yet, at the risk of offending Hindus, I state here that a Hindu is a polytheist. The term monotheist here is assumed to denote belief in a God who created and is distinct from the universe (i.e. not pantheistic). The purpose of the labels here is not to fully describe Hinduism, but to help expose how Hindus view theism differently than others. Perhaps better labels would be Hindu theism and Christian theism.

3. Simple *bhajans* focused on Christ are available on the internet at www.aradhnmusic.com, with lyrics and translations and even guitar chords.
4. For those who have never had an opportunity to experience India's transportation system, please check out this two minute video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjrEQaG5jPM>.
5. I don't mean to imply that for environmental reasons we should say anything goes. Anyone that knows me well would know I think riding a bike most of the time is the way to go.

Additional Sources:

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