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Introduction

Worship is the signature activity of the Christian church. Christians believe that worship is the purpose of God's creation itself. Like other religious traditions, Christians have their own worship styles, with cultural adaptations. Although Christianity originated in Jewish history and culture, it put down roots in different cultures with unique cultural forms.

Historical tradition says that the Christian gospel reached South India through Thomas, the disciple of Jesus. Later, there was a long chain of missionaries, like William Carey and Amy Carmichael, and missionary organizations, like the Church Missionary Society, the London Missionary Society, and Basel Mission, who worked to evangelize India. Even with this long heritage of Christianity on Indian soil, only 2.3% of today's population is Christian (according to 2001 Census data). In recent years people became more aware of this fact and attempted to identify problems in the strategies of missions. Added to this awareness was a tremendous amount of writing from the Hindu world against the Western roots of Indian Christianity. These factors led Indian Christians to become aware of their Western influences and attempt indigenization of worship over the past 150 years. James M. L., a Catholic lyric writer and exponent of indigenized worship, writes:

Instead of preaching directly, the whole culture in India is to be evangelized, not individuals. . . . Here in North India we feel that Christianity has to grow much in culture [through] the art forms. It's in the initial stage. A Christian art is to be developed. (quoted in Hale 2003)

This reflects the awareness and the desire of Indian Christians to take on cultural roots in Indian soil. In this paper I look at the possibilities of indigenized worship from a theological and biblical perspective, rather than from an evangelistic perspective. I also look at some of the problems of the past attempts of indigenization



from a biblical, cultural, and practical perspective.

Problems of Indian Christian worship

Westernized worship and music

One of the greatest challenges of the Indian Christian church is its Western heritage. Most mainline denominations follow a completely Westernized liturgy and music in the worship. When missionaries came to India they translated Bible and their own hymns into the local languages for the use in worship. But now even a century later, churches still use the same hymnal and the translated *Book of Common Prayer* for worship.

Because of linguistic limitations, missionaries were not able to make a translation that fits well to the common use of the language. Problems in syllables and structures make it almost impossible for people to understand the texts of many songs. But over the years there have been no attempts made to retranslate the *Book of Common Prayer* or the hymns, or to create a liturgy that is relevant in the Indian context. Although many Indian Christians wrote songs reflecting their theology in Indian terms, churches rarely took the initiative to use them in worship. Use of the indigenized liturgies was limited to the seminaries and ashrams. The only musical instrument that was allowed in the church was organ; only the Catholic, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches attempted to use some of the indigenous musical instruments for worship. At Christmas time, churches in South India use hymns that talk about winter and snow—when the temperature is 80° F and the people have never seen snow!

Westernized posture

Another significant aspect that the Indian church lost in worship was the posture of worship. In most Indian religions worshipers sit on a thick mattress spread on the floor. People sit on the floor, with their legs crossed, as an expression of their respect to their deity. During the time of prayer they kneel, with their heads bowed to the ground. But the Christian churches accepted the Western form of sitting on pews for worship. According to the Hindu tradition no one may enter the place of worship unclean or wearing sandals. But Christian churches do not emphasize these aspects in their worship. In the mind of an Indian these show a lack of respect and devotion to God.

Westernized language

Due to the limitations of the missionaries' language understanding, the liturgies and the translated hymns do not match the common usage of the language. The language used in the church is much different from the common language. It is not unusual to see the Christians being mocked by people of other religions for the strange form of language that was used in the church. Dayanand Bharati, a leading Christian theologian, says about the language in church:

Where are Christians who can speak in languages familiar to the people? If a new believer ever goes to a church service, he cannot even understand the message, not to mention all the other activities of the church. If he wants to survive among them, then he must become conformed to their image in all the areas of his life. But the church will remain Westernized and will not be bothered about either the new believers or the common people yet to be reached with the gospel. (Bharati 2004, 70-71)

Westernized preaching

Preaching in Indian churches is also influenced by the western heritage. Indian churches typically use an elevated pulpit or a preaching stand. In recent years, influenced by the charismatic preaching seen on international Christian television channels, the preacher tends to move around on the pulpit and preach very loud in his attempt to imitate the Christianity viewed on the television. But in Indian tradition, teachers of the scriptures sit on the floor on a slightly elevated place with the scripture open in a small book holder. The name of the Hindu scriptures, *upanishads*, is a word picture of this aspect of teaching in Indian context. *Upanishad* means the inner, or mystic, teaching. The term upanishad is derived from *upa* ('near'), *ni* ('down') and *s(h)ad* ('to sit'): that is, sitting down near. Groups of pupils sit near the teacher to learn from him. This does not match with today's Christian preaching.

Difficulties of indigenization

Although I believe indigenization of worship is desirable in the Indian context, it brings several challenges. Careless handling of these challenges has caused several problems over the years. Many times the struggle of working through these issues has prevented people from attempting indigenization of worship.

Interconnectedness of culture and religion

Indian culture and the Hindu religion are intermingled and it is challenging to isolate the culture and religion in some areas. In interreligious dialogue some people have gone to extremes to find common ground between religions. Some attempts to indigenize Christian worship have ended up in the Hinduization of worship. Some of these attempts failed due to their lack of theological and Biblical criteria for adapting aspects of worship. A good understanding of the Scripture is essential before taking any steps in to the cultural adaptation. But in the Indian context these things need to be done cautiously.

Strong roots in Westernized Christianity

Another difficulty of indigenization for the Indian Christian church is the strong roots in the Western style of worship. Worshipers in many churches are comfortable with the way things are; they were born into this "church culture" and it has been a part of their whole lives. Average church members might never address their Western heritage and identity very seriously. As Marva Dawn says, they are living in "the idolatry of 'the way we've always done it before'" (Dawn 1995, 47). Many churches and Christians value the heritage of the *church* over the heritage of their *homeland*.

Lack of trained practitioners of Indian music

Due to the church's long association with Western culture, a movement for indigenization is quite challenging. An attempt to learn Indian music and other arts, and attempts for indigenization, may be viewed with suspicion. When an individual from the West attempts to learn Indian music and culture, the Indian teacher may take pride in it and accept the outsider student. But Indian Christians can be seen as having already neglected the culture, and any Christian individual attempting to learn Indian music may receive criticisms from others.

Another issue in this area is the association of Indian music with Hindu worship. Many traditional Christians regard Indian music as specifically Hindu rather than generically Indian. This has led many Christian families to prohibit their musically gifted children from learning Indian music. Instead of learning Indian music, most of them were schooled instead in Western music. What Indian Christian music exists today draws from Bollywood contemporary musical fusions, rather than traditional Indian classical styles; these contemporary pop songs may be more difficult to incorporate into congregational singing contexts.

Diversity of culture and language

Another major challenge is the diversity of India's cultures and languages. The *Ethnologue* lists 447 living languages in India (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013). This sociolinguistic diversity makes it very hard for church denominations to move forward with indigenization in any kind of unified way. Some cultural preferences in one part of India may not be acceptable in the other parts of India. The eating of meat is but one example. In states such as Kerala, in South India, even the Hindu people eat meat and it is sold publicly. But in northern parts of India it is considered sinful, and those who eat meat are looked down upon by others in the society.

Limitations of Christian publishing

Printed material is regarded as more credible and prestigious than any other means of communication. But the hesitation of publishers to produce Christian materials in minority languages is another hindrance to indigenization. This issue becomes more pervasive with growing dominance of global media culture. As Dawn says (echoing Neil Postman), "the printed page revealed a more serious, coherent world, which was capable of management by reason and attempts to improve with criticism . . . [but] television pictures the world in rapidly shifting images that destroy all the virtues formerly associated with mature discourse" (Dawn 1995, 23). Christian publishers in India tend to publish things either in English or in languages of South India in which there is already a strong Christian presence; publishers ignore most of the other Indian languages for fear of losing profit. This inhibits the spread of ideas. Christian music is similarly affected by the lack of willing producers and studios.

Global media culture

As I mentioned, another significant issue for indigenization of worship is the international media influence. The availability of international television channels and the broadcasting of Western Christian worship

strengthen the Western heritage still further. It is common to hear songs by contemporary Christian musicians in worship services in Indian cities. Families all throughout India are greatly influenced by television culture. Even families who struggle to meet their daily necessities will do anything to own a television. *India Today* writes: “[T]elevision is accorded priority in Indian households. Families will walk for miles from their homes to bathe and to attend to nature’s call, but would watch television within the confines of their home. Even rural India isn’t doing too badly with 26 million television sets—one in every five families” (Saran 2003).

Failures of past attempts of indigenization

Hinduization vs. Indigenization

One of the primary problems in past attempts at indigenization was the Hinduization of worship. In the attempt to indigenize Christian worship, some people went to extremes by uncritically accepting Hindu religious practices, without taking time to fully consider the theological implications. A big bowl full of rice, flowers from a palm tree, sandalwood-cream marks on the forehead—these are theologically significant symbols in Hinduism. Christians must be cautious about accepting the symbols without fully understanding what they signify. Bharati writes about the extreme movements of indigenization:

Just sitting on floor and using few Indian musical instruments will not make worship indigenous. Several things have to be radically changed. In this area the Roman Catholics, particularly their *ashrams*, went ahead of everyone to other extreme of making Christianity as another cult within Hinduism. (Bharati 2004, 81)

Some people advocate the use of Hindu religious terms to describe God and Holy Communion. For *God* they recommend terms such as *Bhagavan* (Blessed Lord) or *Brahman* (Ultimate reality). They also suggest the term *prasad* (‘grace’) for Holy Communion. The use of such terms gave Christianity an appearance of Hinduism but never made it truly indigenous. When Hindus use terms like *Bhagavan*, *Brahman*, and *prasad*, they associate them with common usage understandings, rather than the literary meanings of each term. Thus *prasad* is merely a portion of something that is offered to the idol, which they eat or apply on their forehead. But the Christian understanding of Eucharist involves much different theology than the term *prasad* offers; Eucharist carries within it historical, theological, and future hope.

Lack of theological and biblical foundation

Lack of a solid theological foundation has been another problem. M. M. Thomas, a prominent Indian theologian, states: “I cannot see any difference between the accepted missionary goal of a Christian Church expressing Christ in terms of the contemporary Hindu thought and life patterns and a Christ-centered Hindu Church of Christ which transforms Hindu thought and life patterns within” (quoted in Ro 2001, 107). Statements like this from Indian Christian theologians who attempted indigenization created a suspicion in Indian mind about the whole endeavor. Some people who took leadership roles in indigenization processes did so apart from a strong theological, biblical foundation.

Attempt to replace Western music with Indian classical music

A shortcoming in the area of music was the attempt to replace Western music with Indian classical music. But Indian classical music is not the music of the common people. Most people in India have little connection to Indian classical music, and attempts to replace Western music with Indian classical music have led to a failed attempt at indigenization.

Possibilities for indigenization

Change of focus from evangelism to worship

I believe one of the greatest needs today is a change of focus in indigenization. Until now, the primary motivation behind indigenization was to attract more people to the church. That motivation has sometimes caused people of other religions to think that the Christians are faking something to make Christianity more attractive. Hindu critic Sita Ram Goel views the indigenization process as “disguised in Hindu form” and “casting covetous glance before mounting a marauding expedition” (quoted in Bharati 2004, 79). Attempts at indigenization in the area of mission have given a negative picture of Christianity as a kind of “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

This attitude will change only if the church changes from its roots. Before attempting indigenization in missions outreach, the church’s *worship* must become indigenized. Over the years, churches used indigenous methods to evangelize the world, while keeping all the Westernized forms in the worship. In my opinion, the church should change for the sake of worshiping God in the language and culture of the people, not simply to attract more churchgoers. As American pastor John Piper says:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever. (Piper 2010, 15)

To make the indigenization authentic and meaningful, the church needs to initiate radical changes from the center: that is, worship. Indigenization should take place in the primary aspects of the church’s worship and life, and then indigenized missions will flow naturally from the indigenized worshiping church.

Worship posture

Christian churches should consider returning to Indian heritage in their worship styles. Churches might leave their pews behind and follow the more typical Indian style of sitting on the floor and praying while kneeling. This worship posture may even draw the worshiper closer to the original meaning of the word *worship* as it is used in the Bible. The Hebrew word *hištaḥawâ*, translated as ‘worship,’ literally means ‘to bend oneself over at the waist.’ (Peterson 2002, 57-58). I find it fitting to adapt worship posture from Indian traditions. This posture may be more acceptable to Christians as a way of remaining Indian, while showing their homage and

submission to the Christian God. Bharati, for example, expresses his desire for an Indian style of worship posture after attending a Westernized worship service:

I often dreamed in this way—remove all the Western musical instruments, and also even the pulpit; spread a dari (thick carpet) on the stage, have one *bhajan* [one form of worship music in Indian tradition] team lead in singing beautiful *bhajans*; the, how we could all worship the Lord in spirit and truth! (Bharati 2004, 74)

Expression of homage, devotion, submission and awe in the presence of God by removing sandals and cleansing oneself before entering the worship space are practices that can be integrated into the Christian church context. Exodus 3:5 shows the significance of removing sandals in God's presence; and Exodus 19:10 stresses the importance of being cleansed in the presence of God. Such elements of Hindu worship can be a part of Christian worship as well, and they will help the church and its worship to take acceptable cultural forms.

Language of worship

The language of worship needs to become more culturally understandable. What I mean is that the church could create a new liturgy with awareness and understanding of cultural aspects of Indian culture. Even if churches continue to use their Western liturgies—for example, based on the *Book of Common Prayer*—they can be translated into the common (vernacular) languages of the people. It's also possible to use the terms like *Krist Bhakt* ('devotee of Christ') to refer to a believer. But calling the believer a Hindu, as some Indian Christian theologians suggest, gives a wrong understanding of a person as both a follower of Christ and also accepting of other gods—as the Hindu religion allows each individual a personal deity. But the use of all the terms must be accompanied by biblical understanding that justifies the use of the term. It is also important to develop indigenous terminologies to teach Christian doctrine. Historically, William Carey and his team developed Sanskrit terms for their Biblical translation. This provided a set of standard Sanskrit terms for the theological education of future generations (Mathew 1999, 56). The contemporary church needs to continue to seek out these culturally relevant terms for theological concepts. Using Indian words to explain Christian doctrine will lead people to a better understanding of their faith, and that understanding will lead to clearer, more appropriate worship.

Architecture of the worship space

The architecture of the worship space is another area that might be indigenized. Today most of the mainline Christian worship spaces are imitations of Western structures, ignoring the significance of appropriate architecture altogether. Many churches do not have a theological understanding about the structure of place in worship. For the Hindu worshiper, temple structure carries great religious significance. Hindu temples are constructed according to very specific, intentional plans. Each aspect in the temple has some kind of religious significance (Parrinder 1961, 51). This architectural awareness could be adapted to Christian churches. What would it look like to have a Christian theological perspective on architectural design? St Mary's Church in

Nagercoil, South India, which claims a historical link to St Thomas, is an ancient example of the Christian adaptation of Hindu architecture (Hoefler 2001, 13).

Role of music

Music plays a very important role in the indigenization of worship. The church has tended to use Indian songs only for evangelism, and Western songs in their congregational worship. As I suggested above, I believe the idea of indigenization and change in the church should begin with the church's worship, rather than specifically with its outreach to others. The common music styles of the people could be given a place in corporate worship. Musical forms such as *bhajans* and *keerthans* can be brought into the Christian worship context. This is the music that every Indian hears early in the morning from the temples. These forms, originating in the Hindu *bhakti* (devotion) traditions, are easily adaptable for congregational use. The leader sings one phrase of the song and the congregation repeats that phrase with the accompaniment of small cymbals. Many of the psalms and other biblical passages could work very well as bhajans (for further discussion about Christian bhajans, see Duncan 1999).

Another musical possibility is the reconfiguration of the hymns into Indian musical forms. Hymns carry a rich theology from throughout the history of the faith, and they can be used effectively in Indian contexts by retranslating the lyrics and pairing them with indigenous melodies.

Role of preaching

Preaching plays a very important role in making the gospel relevant to the people. Timothy C. Tennent talks about making the gospel culturally relevant:

[T]he gospel is not only *linguistically* translatable, it is *culturally* translatable. The gospel is not only delivered to us in the enscripturated text, but also in the proclamation and witness of a believing community, the members of which belong to a particular culture at a particular time in history. (Tennent 2007, 67)

Preachers should carefully consider the methods by which the gospel can be shared through culturally relevant terminologies. This can be done cautiously, lest extreme adaptation of cultural terms mislead people in wrong theological directions. Scripture plays a very significant role in Hindu temple worship. There are days throughout the week when Hindu worshipers read from the scriptures. Although Hinduism does not have preaching sessions as part of corporate worship, Christians could consider how to give importance to the Bible by devoting significant time to hearing it read.

Posture of preaching also must change. The Bible mentions times when Jesus sat and taught people; this posture of teaching may be more acceptable in Indian contexts than preaching from a pulpit. Bharati suggests an Indian form of preaching style for worship and outreach. For many Indians, it's a more natural appearance; after trying this arrangement, a missionary admitted to Bharati it also helps to conduct the *satsangh* (fellowship of the believers) as Hindus usually do (Bharati 2004, 71).

Whole of life as worship

Bharati, himself a convert from high caste Brahmanism, talks about Indian and Hindu attitudes to worship like this:

Worship is the pivot on which the entire spiritual life revolves, particularly for Hindus. They never worship just three hours [Sunday worship usually lasts three hours] in a week plus (bonus) one house prayer meeting. (Bharati 2004, 74)

This holistic concept of worship fits well with a biblical Christian understanding of worship in all of life. Indian Hindus are accustomed to *pooja* (prayers) early in the morning, at their homes or in the temple. This habit can become a part of the Indian Christian's life as well.

Family plays a very important role in the religious life of India. Devoted Hindu families start their day by cleansing themselves and doing *pooja* in the small worship place built into their house. This concept also can be transferred well in Indian context by emphasizing the importance of family worship and prayer at their homes. In that way all of life can be emphasized as worship.

Conclusion

In a number of biblical passages the diversity of cultures is highlighted. Philippians 2:11 talks about worship from every language, all people. In Daniel 7:14, the prophet describes a vision of all people, nations, and languages worshipping the Son of Man. These passages predict and celebrate the diversity that is alive in worshipping God.

Indigenization of worship needs to proceed with caution, and with fidelity to the Bible. Lack of biblical and theological understanding can result in serious flaws. It is not an attempt to appear like other religions of the country or to compromise with other religious faiths. Bharati says, "Contextualization is not compromise, nor conforming to the image of the world, but rather allowing the gospel to become incarnate in the existing culture in faithfulness to the Bible" (Bharati 2004, 76).

Marva Dawn offers a good criterion to evaluate our attempts for indigenization: "We make use of the cultural forms, new and old, but we dare never let up in the struggle to make sure they are consistent with the ultimate eternal world to which we belong" (Dawn 1995, 10).

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