Sharing Jesus with Hindus

Global Witness Among Hindu Diaspora



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Editors

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Witnessing to the Hindu Diaspora in North America

Dr. Atul Aghamkar

The Hindu Diaspora is one of the most neglected and unreached peoples in the world, even though they live in close proximity to traditionally strong Christians in Europe and North America. Although the modern history of Christian missions to Hindus goes back to the arrival of the Danish missionaries in India in the early sixteenth century, the real impact of Christian missions during the past four centuries has primarily been seen among the outcaste (Dalit) and tribal populations. The caste Hindu people[1] have either been ignored or were only a peripheral focus of the missionary endeavors in India. In North America, where the majority of Hindus were derived from caste Hindu society, they appear to be marginalized by the Christian churches and mission agencies.

As the process of globalization continues to grip the world, upwardly mobile Hindus are increasingly emigrating to Europe and North America and penetrate Western culture. This brings immense pressure on the North American church and mission agencies to think strategically about their role in witnessing to Hindus who are now part of their society. Truly, the uttermost parts of the world have come to the doorstep of the North

1 Caste Hindus are those who fall into one of the four major caste categories: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Shudra. In each linguistic region, there are about two hundred caste groups, which are further subdivided into about three thousand smaller units, each of which is endogamous.

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American church. The process of migration, settlement, adaptation, and eventually assimilation of the Hindus provides the North American church a significant opportunity to witness to them.

In this chapter, I will critically reflect upon the emergence and spread of the Hindu Diaspora in North America, with the specific aim of providing insights and guidelines for possible partnerships for Christian witnesses among them, in the light of Paul's model of partnership. Here a *partnership* is defined in terms of sharing information, equipment, personnel, strategic mobilization, and prayerful planning for Christian witness among Hindus in the Diaspora. While this applies to many diasporic settings globally, my primary focus is North American Hindus.

Toward an Understanding of the Diaspora

The term *diaspora* was at one time a concept referring almost exclusively to the experience of the Jews, invoking traumatic exile from a historical homeland and dispersal throughout many lands.[2] Both biblical and non-biblical sources indicate that the word *diaspora* has to do with people scattering from their homeland to an alien land, mostly by compulsion. It was deemed a negative experience because people living in the diaspora were believed to long for their original homeland, to which they wished to return.[3]

More recently, however, the notion of *diaspora* is increasingly employed to denote ethnic, linguistic, national, or religious communities settling outside their homelands. Broadly speaking, the *diaspora* term is often used today to describe any population that is considered "deterritorialized" or "transnational," and whose cultural origins are said to have arisen in a land other than that in which they currently reside, whose social, economic, and political networks transcend the borders of nation-states or spans the globe.[4]

As far as the modern Hindu Diaspora is concerned, in most cases, Hindus have sought opportunities to move out of India for their overall betterment. Normally, Hindus do not see themselves as in Diaspora; rather they call their diasporic situation *Desh Pardesh* (in Hindi), which "can equally well be translated both as 'home from home' and as 'at home abroad.'"[5] For most Hindus in the Diaspora, India (Bharat) not only is their motherland

2 Vertovec, *Hindu Diaspora Comparative Patterns*, 141.

3 Ter Harr, *Religious Communities in the Diaspora*, 4–5.

4 Vertovec, *Hindu*, 142.

5 Baumann, "Hindu Diaspora in Europe," 87.

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and home but the holy land of their spiritual forefathers, *Punya Bhumi*. Another term used to differentiate them from Indians who live in India is "Non-Resident Indians" (*Anivasi Bhartiya*). In this chapter, the term *Hindu Diaspora* refers to the migration and settlements of Hindus outside of the Indian subcontinent, especially in North America.

Hindu Diaspora in North America

History shows that segments of Hindus constantly left the shores of India and impacted the surrounding nations. This Hindu presence can be traced in Burma, Bali (Indonesia), Fiji, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Malaysia, Surinam, Guyana, and Trinidad. However, the contemporary wave of Hindu migrants to Europe and North America is quite significant, and the speed with which it is taking place in recent decades is unprecedented.

The early waves of Hindu migration were linked with temporary trade and business. The second wave was related to "indentured workers," taken as cheap labor for plantation and construction work to British, French, and Dutch colonies. "During the period from 1834 to 1917, about 1.5 million Indians signed five-year contracts and shipped to Mauritius, East and South Africa, South America, and the Caribbean and Fiji Islands."[6] Many eventually preferred to settle down there, thus becoming the early Hindu Diaspora.

Then there was a large influx of immigrants, especially to Britain due to a labor shortage, most of whom were male workers from the northwestern part of India. Then, in the mid-1960s, family-based immigration began to take place. Consequently, most of those earlier migrants who had intended to earn some money and return to India began to put down roots in their adopted land by investing in properties. This was probably the beginning of the real Hindu Diaspora in Europe. In the latter part of the 1970s, many East Africans of Indian descent started moving to Europe and North America due to political unrest in Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. These were well-established and experienced business and professional people.

Migration to North America was earlier confined to European people; however, the repeal of the Asian Exclusion Act in 1965 resulted in opening the North American shores to Asians and Indians. During this time a number of Hindu professionals from a largely urban middle-class background started arriving in North America.[7] These included teachers, professors, scientists,

6 Baumann, "Hindu Diaspora," 88. Also George, *Desi Diaspora*, 4–5.

7 Coward, "Hinduism in Canada," 151.

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medical doctors, and a large number of nurses and other professionals. Those who came after 1965 were among the best educated and most professionally advanced and successful of any population.[8]

In recent years, students and software professionals who came to North America found good jobs and remained there rather than returning to India. It is important to note that most North American Hindus tend to settle in major metropolitan areas. Thomas Wolf estimates that at least 38 percent of medical doctors, 36 percent of NASA scientists, and 34 percent of Microsoft employees in the US are Indians, most of whom are Hindus.[9] Estimates differ as to how many Hindus[10] are found outside India, but it is clear that the figure is significant and will continue to increase in the decades to come.

To ascertain the exact number of Hindus in the United States is particularly difficult because the 1957 Congressional Prohibition Act safeguards religious privacy. However, the steady growth in recent decades has swelled the Indian American population significantly. According to the US Census Bureau 2020, the growth rate of the Indian American population between 2000 and 2020 was 56.9 percent.[11] By 2022, that number grew to 4,606,000 and is currently estimated to have crossed 5 million.[12] The Pew Research report of 2012 found that 51 percent of Indian Americans are Hindus, 18 percent are Christians, and 10 percent are Muslims.[13] In addition, there are Hindus from the Caribbeans, Africa, Fiji Islands, and elsewhere. Putting these approximate figures together, we can assume there are nearly three million Hindus in the United States and Canada. Here is a list of the top ten cities of settlement for Indian Americans.

8 Hodge, "Working with Hindu Clients," 31.

9 Wolf, "Wrinkled Wired Elephant." These figures are consistent with the 2020 US census report, "American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Table DP05," 2020. https://data.census.gov/table?q=DP05.

10 *Hindu* generally represents Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs, though these are distinct religious communities in India. The term *Asian Indian* includes Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Parsees, and other religious communities whose origin can be traced to India.

11 US Census Bureau, "2020 Indian Americans," https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/2020-census-dhc-a-asian-population.html.

12 Fact Sheet about Asian Americans, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/asian-americans-indians-in-the-u-s/.

13 Pew Research Center, "Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths," 2012, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/.

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Table 1: Top Ten Metropolitan Areas for Indian Americans (Source: US Census 2020)

Rank	Metropolitan Statistical Area	Population	Indian American Population	% of Indian Americans	% of Indian Americans in the US
1	New York	19,617,869	528,329	2.7	11.9
2	Los Angeles	12,872,322	295,448	2.3	6.7
3	Chicago	9,441,957	192,827	2.0	4.2
4	Dallas	7,943,685	163,657	2.1	3.4
5	Houston	7,205,819	142,105	2.0	3.0
6	Philadelphia	6,120,703	124,381	2.0	2.7
7	San Francisco	4,740,472	95,400	2.0	2.0
8	Washington	6,319,631	115,878	1.8	2.4
9	Atlanta	5,741,025	105,028	1.8	2.2
10	Boston	4,928,234	80,913	1.6	1.7

Hindu Diaspora Distinctives

While there are many similarities between Hindus in India and Hindus in the Diaspora, some of their differences need to be acknowledged. Though they are minor deviations from traditional Hindu society, they distinguish Hindus in the Diaspora from those in India.

Multilingual and Fragmented

When considering Hindus in North America, one must remember that these are not homogeneous people. India has thousands of castes, tribes, and ethnic groups[14] with different languages and religions, and only a small segment of these is represented in North America. The prominent groups of Indians in North America are the Gujaratis and Punjabi Sikhs, who have come either directly from the northwest part of India or via East Africa. In Britain, they make up about 70 percent of the Hindu population,[15] whereas in North

14 The Anthropological Survey of India documented 4,635 distinct people, caste, tribal, and ethnic groups in India.

15 Baumann, "Hindu Diaspora," 95.

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