



Oikos – Intentional Community

We who believe God wants us to bring Jesus and the gospel of his Kingdom into the lives of Hindu people, families or communities usually face many challenges as we try to carry out that ministry. Some of those challenges are within ourselves and they require us to embrace a cross cultural life that compels us to climb a long and sometimes steep learning curve. There have been too few of us, frankly, who have been able or willing to travel this path of discovery. As a result, we lack a comprehensive and sharpened body of knowledge and experience to draw from and apply in contemporary ministry within a Hindu context. MARG is an attempt to add something to that much needed body of work.

Many of the challenges that we confront as we reach out to Hindus are based in cultural confusion and conflict because Christian faith and practice has been largely disconnected from Hindu civilization. This does not mean that there is no Christianity in India, of course there have been Christians in India for 1900 years. This Christianity is often vibrant and spiritually rich, but it is also intentionally “converted” away from the Hindu civilization and configured toward what are perceived to be Christian civilizations around the globe. Nestorian Christianity, Portuguese Catholicism and European Protestantism have greatly impacted Indian Christianity historically, while connection with American Evangelicalism is a current focus within Indian Christianity.

This does not happen because Indian Christians lack a sense of who they are; they know exactly who they are and what they are about. Indian Christians have felt the uncertainty of being a minority in India, separated from mainstream Hindu culture that has been antagonistic at times, so they sometimes look for support from other perceived Christian cultures. This seeking for connection and Christian fellowship outside of India happens because Hindu civilization and global Christian civilization are believed to be incompatible, and in many ways and over many years, Christian experience in India seems to prove that assumption. There are many good reasons for all of this; it’s complex, so we do not intend to judge this negatively. It is, however, our belief that Christ can reign over Hindu civilization, redeem it, and gift it to the world for His glory. In fact, the teaching of Jesus about how to spread the gospel fits amazingly well into a major component of Hindu culture which we know as caste.

The word that foreigners use to describe the unique Hindu social structure is **caste**. The Hindu people use the words *jati* or *varnashrama dharma*. *Varnashrama dharma* is the theory that prescribes Hindu social structure and *jati* is the word that means a group of people who live according to the theory of *varnashrama dharma* as it is interpreted and incarnated in the lives of the people within a particular group. *Varnashrama dharma* is an ancient and deeply embedded reality In India, but what is does it look like today? In other words, how do *jatis* function today?

It is extremely important to understand that *varnashrama dharma* is open to interpretation by a *jati* because as India enters the modern world for the first time as a major player, many things once considered sacrosanct are being re-evaluated and applied in a way that empowers the rise of modern India and maintains the core spirit of *varnashrama dharma*. This means that in some ways, caste is changing, especially in major cities, and changing tremendously within the global Indian diaspora. The main point to grasp about caste is that Hindu *jatis* are closed social and cultural groups that are structured vertically from higher to lower.

Just how socially closed is a Hindu *jati*? A Hindu *jati* is not open to membership of people born in another *jati* because the only way into it is birth; a Hindu *jati* is very socially exclusive, very closed. If membership in a *jati* comes exclusively through birth, then marriages between young adults from the same *jati* becomes a paramount responsibility for the families within the *jati* to arrange. Obviously then, a *jati* is comprised exclusively of families who share the same way of life, or in Hindu terms, *dharma*. In some Hindu *jatis* there are more males than females, so marriages between young adults from different but acceptable *jatis* are now happening in India.

How culturally closed is a Hindu *jati*? Families within a Hindu *jati* share a carefully prescribed way of life that has been maintained through generations. Their worship, vocational expectations, diet and perhaps even personal habits are the same for everyone in the family so that the *jati* remains pure. Deviation from the cultural expectations can bring undesirable impurity into the family and through the family into the *jati*, so cultural conformity within the family is maintained. *Varnashrama dharma* teaches cultural purity.

The so called “caste system” is structured vertically. There are higher castes and lower castes. *Jatis* that are called higher caste are considered more pure than castes that are considered to be lower. *Dalits*, or what used to be referred to as Untouchables or Outcaste, are more numerous in India than the higher caste. We do not believe that there are human beings that are more or less pure than other human beings based on Hindu *dharma* or what their lineage is, so we do not accept the high and low nature of the caste system. *Dalits* are coming to the Lord in huge numbers in India, and for this we rejoice. In fact, the vast majority of the Christian community in India is from a lower caste background, a fact which hinders their ability to connect with upper caste Hindus in faith sharing relationships. Even so, some Christians in India overcome this racial prejudice and attempt to bring Jesus to the higher castes.

Amazingly, and quite surprisingly to Christians when we encounter it, Jesus addresses issues in his teaching about spreading the gospel that apply directly to the caste based Hindu social structure. This is found in his teaching about the gospel and *oikos* in Matthew 10 and Luke 10.

Matthew 10:11-14,

*"Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his **house** until you leave. As you enter the **home**, give it your greeting. If the **home** is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that **home** or town.*

and Luke 10:5-7,

*Whenever you enter a **house**, first say, 'May peace be on this **house**!' And if a peace-loving person is there, your peace will remain on him, but if not, it will return to you. Stay in that same **house**, eating and drinking what they give you, for the worker deserves his pay. Do not move around from **house** to **house**.*

The words home or house are translated from the Greek word *oikos*. *Oikos* means house, home, family, kinship or lineage group, clan. It means a group of people who share a commonality of some kind. A Hindu extended family is an *oikos*. A group of single IT workers from India who live and eat together because they work in the same company in California is an *oikos*. A group of Hindu students who live and eat together at a university is an *oikos*. The most significant Hindu *oikos* is the *jati*, the caste group. Applying these scriptures to a Hindu context in an intentional way by using the word *jati* to translate *oikos* instead of house or home is a revelation.

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*Whenever you enter a **jati**, first say, 'May peace be on this **jati**!' And if a peace-loving person is there, your peace will remain on him, but if not, it will return to you. Stay in that same **jati**, eating and drinking what they give you, for the worker deserves his pay. Do not move around from **jati** to **jati**.*

In these two passages, Jesus teaches us how to enter closed social structures like the caste system, and how to effectively bring the gospel to the Hindu people of India. First, be aware that you are approaching a *jati* with the gospel rather than a person or even a family. Don't fight this, accept it. Remember that Jesus taught us to approach an *oikos* and if a *jati* qualifies as an *oikos*, then Jesus taught us to approach an entire *jati* with the gospel. Second, seek to locate a worthy person of peace who can open the door for the evangelist to enter the *jati* with the gospel. The worthy person is not the person from the best family or the highest caste. The worthy person of peace is one from any *jati* who recognizes that Jesus has sent the evangelist to bring the gospel of peace to all of us within our *jati* so s/he creates an atmosphere of peace and welcome between you and the socially and culturally closed *jati*. If no one like this emerges, do not try to force the issue. Move on, keeping peace between you and this *jati*, allowing God to work in his own way. Third, stay within the *jati* of the person who has created a peaceful way in for you, and bring the gospel of peace to the people within that *jati* while you participate in the social and cultural life of that *jati* as much as possible. Do not move around from *jati* to *jati* which would eventually and rather quickly alienate you from everybody. This is how Jesus taught us how to bring the gospel to Hindu people. MARG is a framework of what to do within a Hindu *oikos* like a *jati*.

Goal: a kingdom community planted in every *jati* – in every *oikos*!

Note: the oikos logo is a representation of a **reciprocal roof**, which is used in many types of tribal- and village-based construction, such as for thatched roof homes, banda (community meeting places or shelters), and for open-sided pavilions. The structure can be expanded to fit a growing meeting place and serves as a good metaphor for the extended family, and especially the family of God.

