



Building Bridges to the Hindu

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Contents

Part 1: Understanding the Hindu Mind

- Some Common Beliefs of the Hindu
- What is Important to the Hindu
- Some Phrases You are Likely to Hear from a Hindu

Part 2: Building Bridges to the Hindu

- The Bridge of Friendship
- The Bridge of Mutual Respect
- The Bridge of Knowledge

Part 3: Approaches to Sharing the Gospel with a Hindu

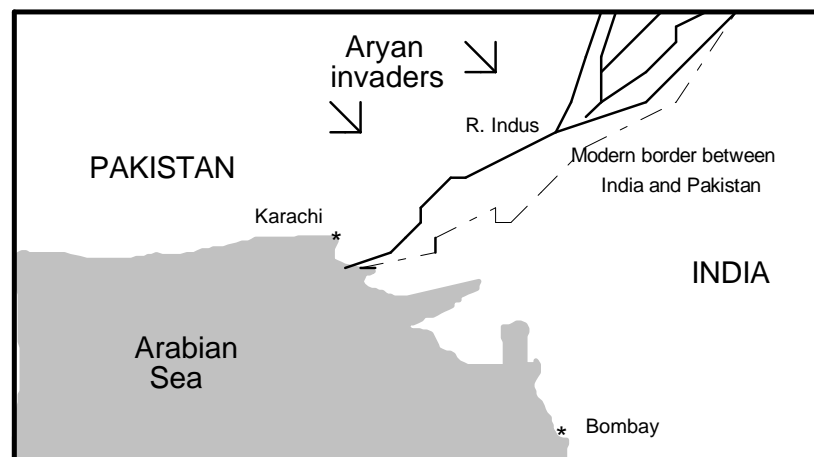
- The Example of Paul's Witness to 'Hindus'
- The Gospel Pictorially for a Hindu
- Mercy not Sacrifice

Helpful Reading

Introduction

Hinduism has no founder, no set creed and a variety of holy books. It is like a tree that has grown gradually over a period of 5000 years and that has so many branches to it. One Hindu person believes and practices something very different from another. A Hindu could be an animist (worshipping spirits) or an idol worshipper, or just practice meditation. This introduction cannot do justice to the variety and complexity of Hinduism, but aims to introduce you to some of the common themes and to offer you a basic springboard to help you get started in building a bridge to a Hindu friend or neighbour.

Originally the Hindu was a person who lived near the Indus valley and not a follower of a particular religion. The Indus Civilisation developed in Pakistan, east of the Indus river. Aryan invaders around 1500 BC introduced a variety of their deities and in 800 BC the first Hindu scriptures were written down. Over the years the people of the Indus valley became synonymous with their religion and spread right across the sub-continent. With the partition of India and Pakistan, there was a great migration of Muslims from India to Pakistan and Hindus from Pakistan to India. Today there are approximately 716 million Hindus or 13.5% of the World's population. Most are in India and Nepal. In the West Hinduism is strong in certain Asian communities, it also has made missionary inroads through transcendental meditation, Yoga, New Age thinking and sects such as Hare Krishna.



Part 1: Understanding the Hindu Mind

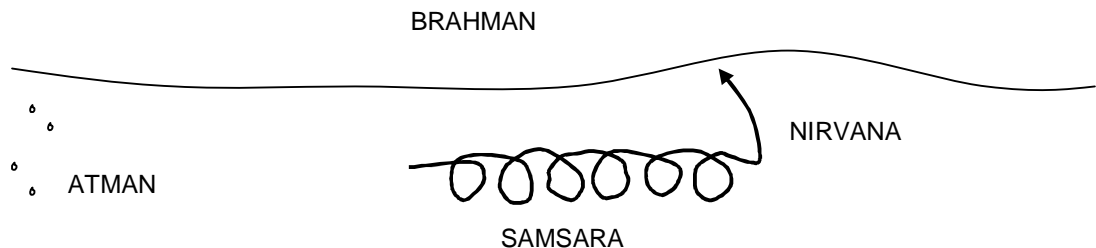
Some Common Beliefs of the Hindu

The Hindu had received a tract offering eternal life through Jesus. Giving it back, he said "I don't want that - I already have that." He thought eternal life meant "life that goes on for ever as it is now". Concepts and terms can be so different between the Christian and the Hindu and can lead to so much misunderstanding. Coupled with the fact that Hinduism has no set creed and a variety of practices and beliefs, the Christian has to be careful about the terms he/she uses and to define what they mean when using even terms like 'eternal life', 'God', etc. At the same time the Christian needs to ask plenty of questions of the Hindu to find out what they mean when they use a particular term.

Hindu holy books

Hinduism has many 'holy' books that developed over a wide period. They include the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata (of which the Bhagavad Gita is a part). The Bhagavad Gita is the most popular of these and is the basis of what most Hindus believe.

The Gita is part of a very large book called Mahabharata which recounts epic legends and stories, which is thought to have been developed between 100 BC to 500 AD. The Bhagavad Gita is the latter part of it and so likely to have been written about AD 200-500. In its form it is a song and is about the size of John's gospel. Its popularity is due to the character of Krishna and his conversation with Arjuna. The background to the book is a battle in which Arjuna was going to fight. Some of his relations were on both sides...what should he do? Krishna encourages him to do his duty!!



Brahman

God, the ultimate reality from whom the universe flows. Brahman is above all and yet embodied and worshipped as other deities at a lower level. At a second level there are the *devas*, such as Durga, Ganesha, Kali, Vishnu, Siva and Brahma (not to be confused with Brahman). At a lower level there are regional gods or *devatas* who constitute a variety of deified forces. Beneath them are the more localised spirits, demons or *bhuts*. In general, Hindus regard Brahman as aloof and remote and therefore choose to focus their worship on one (or sometimes more) of the lesser divine embodiments, which are more approachable.

Atman

The immortal soul, which lives thousands of lives seeking to atone for bad karma or actions in previous lives. Like a drop of water leaves the clouds and falls into the ocean to eventually be re-absorbed into the cloud, the individual soul is caught in a cycle seeking to be re-absorbed into Brahman.

Samsara

Like a spring, each coil represents birth followed by death. The cycle of birth and death is called "Samsara". The Hindu believes he will experience thousands of births into this world (and deaths) before merging into Brahman again..."Nirvana". This needs careful thought by the Christian. It tells him what the Hindu expects to happen to him, what he is living for and what he can look forward to.

Salvation

Salvation (*moksha*) is when the soul becomes free of all debt and bad karma, becomes pure and is re-absorbed into Brahman. Different traditions have developed about how this happens and how it can be obtained. From the Gita three main ways or paths of salvation have emerged and that a Hindu can follow:

"Karma marg"

The way of works: doing your duty, doing good works in social and religious life.

"Bhakti marg"

The way of devotion: worship in the temple and sincere devotion to the gods and goddesses.

"Jnana marg"

The path of enlightenment. "Jnan" means "knowledge", the knowledge that you and God are one. In the book Death of a Guru there the example of a man who followed this way to its conclusion.

What is Important to a Hindu

The following issues are important to the Hindu. Being aware of them will help the Christian build bridges to their Hindu neighbour. Rather than attack or belittle what the Hindu counts as important, use what matters to him/her to open up conversation and to build a bridge.

Accepts the supernatural

He lives in a world surrounded by a multitude of gods. This seems to be his way of reaching out for a personal God in a world that seems impersonal. Miracles are easy to believe in and are expected to happen. Many are attracted to Christian healing meetings. Talking about the supernatural is easy.

Tradition is important

Generation after generation has performed the same rituals for worship. Fear of reprisals from the gods seems to encourage this. There is a fear that evil and loss may enter the life of the family if these rituals are not carried out.

The family

The family ties are so strong that they determine the behaviour of family members. To do something that the family disapproves of is to be ostracised by all, and possibly to experience some physical injury.

Some Phrases You are Likely to Hear from a Hindu..

"All religions are the same"

It is at this point the diagram of the pictorial gospel (see example later in the booklet) proves useful. It shows we all start from the same place as sinners and that sin results in separation from God rather than going towards Him.

"All roads lead to God"

We are in fact further from God today than year ago - the older we live, the more sins we do. Just look at society to see that things are getting worse, not better.

"The important thing is to fulfil your duty (karma)"

But we keep failing to do this! We need someone to fulfil our Karma for us. That is just what Jesus did.

"God is in all of us"

If this were true we would all behave better than we do. We only have to look at our hearts and the bad that is there, to see that God could not live there...unless we are cleansed first.

Part 2: Building Bridges to the Hindu

Where do you start? Go to them: homes, parks, community centres.

What do you say when you meet? Of course it is not possible to have just a few phrases for all occasions! The real question to answer is "why am I visiting?" The basis ought to be "to become a friend" and whatever we say should spring from such a motive.

There is a cost and a need to persevere, and I cannot emphasise enough the importance of pressing on and not giving up. However, there are rich rewards ahead as we continue in faith.

The Bridge of Friendship

- * Introduce yourself (of course!) and be prepared with time to be open about yourself.
- * Ask about the family. As the family is so important to the Hindu, show your interest in their family.
- * Accept what you are offered...a drink(hot or cold) biscuits or something they have prepared. Hospitality is important.
- * Give a gift: A book (Scriptures, testimonies, children's book), a video (the Jesus video or a testimony one is good), a cassette with Christian Asian worship songs. A gift is usually received well and it is not regarded as odd or offensive to give a 'religious' item in the same way that it might be if you gave a similar gift to your average Westerner. Often they see it as an honour that you want to give them what is very important to you .
- * As you revisit - find out their interests, be open and sympathetic

The Bridge of Mutual Respect

Even when it is obvious there are differences, friendship may still be strong. This usually comes through each allowing the other to have a different view-point.

Respect can grow between two people who are from different religious backgrounds. Each may see that the heart's desire of the other is right even if building on a different foundation. Of course that does not make both right, only that they can relate to each other.

Respect for culture is important in this regard. Taking time to find out about their culture and a willingness to behave in a culturally sensitive way can build respect and help to win a platform for you to share your faith. Silly cultural mistakes and faux-pas can really close an opening. We can offend people if we do not understand their culture. This is particularly so with folk from Asia.

Try to spot the mistakes in figures 1 and 2 overleaf.

The Bridge of Knowledge

- * Take time to discover what he / she believes. As there are so many ideas, thoughts and concepts in Hinduism, you cannot make any assumptions about what an individual believes. Ask plenty of questions and listen very well. This will help you to share your faith
- * Use literature, videos, etc. It is now we see the value of having something to give or lend: a book (Scriptures, life history - testimony -, children's books, etc.), a video (the Jesus film, or a testimony), a cassette with music or Christian worship songs. This gives an opportunity to return.
- * Be frank about your beliefs. Without being argumentative, share your beliefs. Be careful to define terms and explain what you mean when you use a word. The Hindu needs to hear the good news of Jesus in a way that they can understand as much as any other person.

Here is a well-meaning couple wanting to "Share the Gospel". How many mistakes do they make?

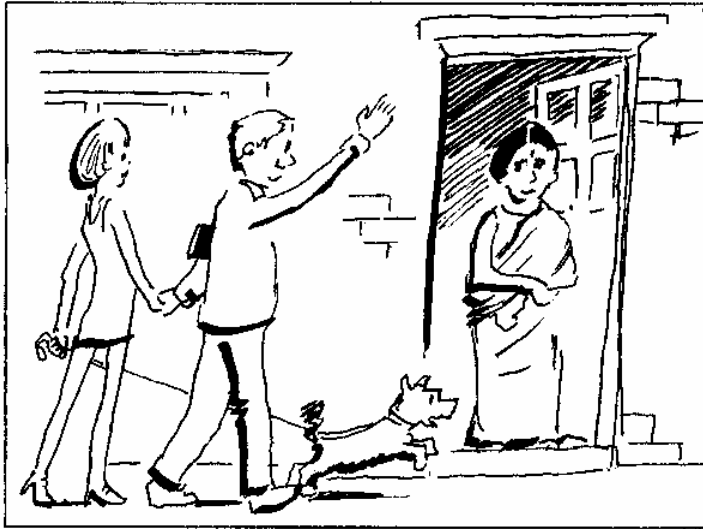
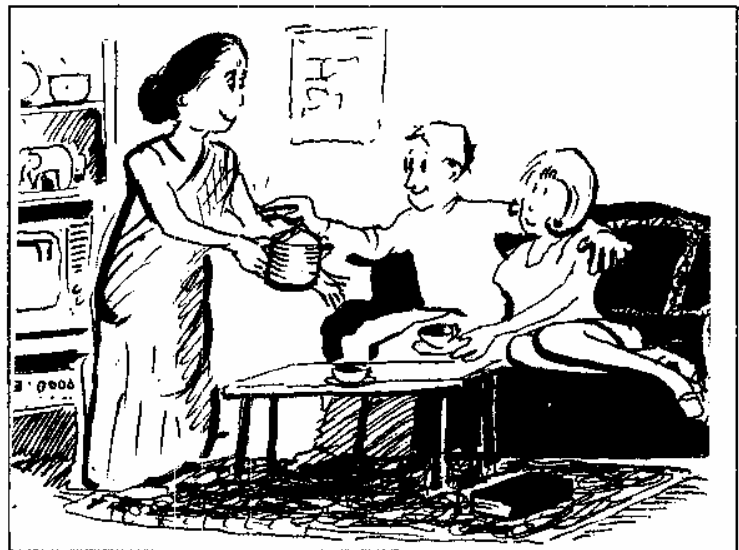


Figure 1.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Figure 2.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____



- Figure 1
- 1) Her dress is too short
 - 2) Not all Asians like pets
 - 3) The young man is too familiar with the lady at the door
- Figure 2
- 1) There should be a space between the young couple visiting (i.e. they should not sit so close together)
 - 2) Books should not be left on the floor.
 - 3) He has touched his hostess on the arm. Asians often do not touch or shake hands.

Part 3: Approaches to Sharing the Gospel with a Hindu

The following three outlines are suggested approaches to sharing the gospel with a Hindu. Like all evangelism approaches, they are guidelines and not fail-safe, guaranteed methods. They need to be adapted to your own style, as well as to the individual that you are sharing with.

Share as much as your listener will receive. Make sure that they understand what you have said by asking questions. Let there be a dialogue rather than just you preaching at them.

Develop your own approaches, the following suggestions are definitely not the only ones, nor the best ones for every Hindu that you meet.

The Example of Paul's Witness to 'Hindus' (idol-worshippers) Acts 17: 22-31.

Read the passage about Paul's time in Athens. In many ways the people of Athens that Paul was talking to were like Hindus. He spoke to answer two strong philosophies of the day: The Epicureans and the Stoics.

The Epicureans held that the gods, whatever they may have done in creating the world, have no further interest in it. All that happens now is the result of chance. You cannot control your destiny, all that you can do is get the best out of it, be happy as long as it doesn't interfere with anyone else's happiness.

The Stoics held that this world is controlled by an impersonal, but rational force or forces. In many ways it was a pantheistic view with God. God is in creation or contained within it. The way to live is not to struggle against these forces, but ally yourself with them, even if it means a 'stiff upper lip'. It is not difficult to see similar elements of their beliefs in Hinduism.

Paul gives us a real example of building a bridge to this mind set. It is not just what Paul said that makes this a model for us, it is the way he spoke - moving from point to point. We need to remember some significant people were converted from this!!

Paul starts where his hearers are "to an unknown God" and then proclaims who He is. He moves from speaking of the God of the Universe to the God of judgement...and was just going to introduce Jesus when they called a halt to his message when he mentioned the resurrection of a man!

Read Acts 17: 22-31 carefully and notice how Paul gets his message across... and some were converted (v32-34)

v23 "to an unknown God" He assumed they were reaching after God.

v24 "the God who made the world". He started with the God of creation.

v25 "as if He needed anything". God gives life and everything to man. God is above everything and does not need anything from man. He is not limited or contained by His creation.

v26 "from one man He made every nation". We are all of the same family and the same blood. We are all on an equal footing before God.

v27 "God did this so that man would seek Him...and find Him" Here we have the purpose of God in making mankind - that we should find Him and be in relationship with Him. Far from being aloof and distant from His creation, God is intimately involved and concerned about it. There is a purpose and plan behind it all and God wants us to know it.

v30 "God overlooked such ignorance" Our problem is ignorance. Man can be excused in the past because of their ignorance. Man is in a state of ignorance that needs an outside revelation. Man cannot find the truth in or by himself. Paul's implication is that now God has revealed Himself to mankind.

v30 "but now commands all people everywhere to repent" The word repent means to have a change of mind. First there must be a change of mind about God...that leads to a change of behaviour...a turning from the worship of idols to the worship of the living God (1 Thess 1 v 10).

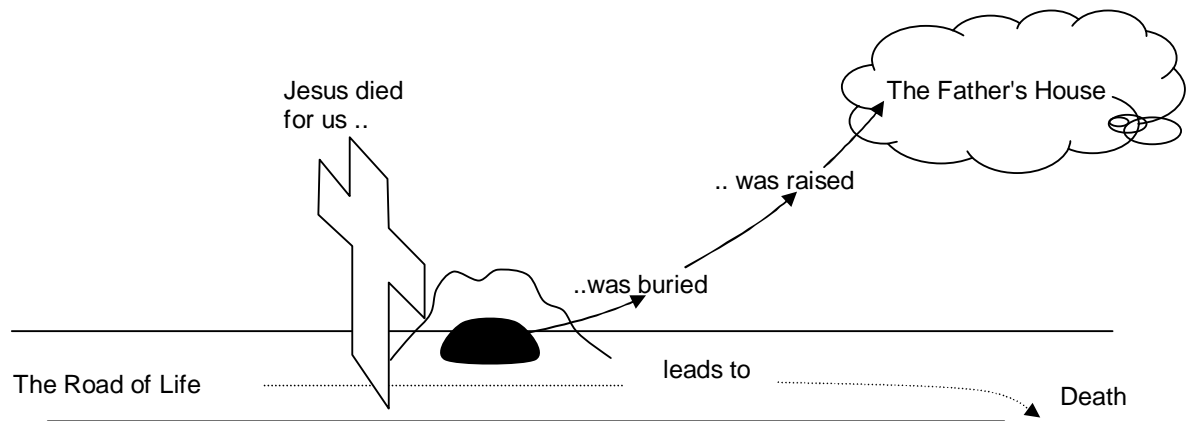
v31 "For He has set a Day when He will judge" What happens if we remain as we are and do not return to the living God? Will it matter? Here is the answer: the day of judgement is fixed. We can only escape for a short time and then judgement. There is a purpose and direction in life, an end to a cycle.

v31 "by the man He has appointed" It is here Paul prepares to introduce Jesus to them and the proof - He raised this man from the dead

v32. The resurrection is a vital part of the message to the Hindu. Here is someone who has broken the 'cycle'.

The Gospel Pictorially for a Hindu

Starting by drawing the road, build up the diagram as you talk through each section.



- 1) We are all on the road of life. Emphasis that this puts us all on the same level, we all have a life to live.
- 2) But the road of life leads to death. Why is there death? Why, if we are just here to improve and to seek God, do we need to die? The reason the Bible tells us "all have sinned" Roms 3: 23 How do we deal with this sin? Does God care? Has he revealed the way to live? Can we improve our life and escape death?
- 3) God tells us His plan to rescue us and bring us to Himself. God sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world". God came to earth in Jesus to live a perfect life, to fulfil God's requirements of man. he was pure and one with God. In doing so he defeated sin and death. He was buried, but was raised to life.
- 4) All our sins were laid on Jesus and He was punished for us. "He himself bore our sins in His body on the cross" 1 Pet 2:24 God accomplished in Jesus what we could not do. We couldn't live a perfect life. We could not pay for our sin. Jesus did it for us, taking our punishment.
- 5) As we go through life we must face the cross of Jesus and respond to Him. "God commands all men everywhere to repent", to stop at the cross and recognise Jesus died for me and for my sin. Now I must respond to him by acknowledging what He has done in repentance and faith.
- 6) Those who respond to Jesus find forgiveness, peace and the living presence of Jesus in them, by His Spirit.
- 7) The promise of Jesus is theirs. "I will come again and receive you that where I am there you may be also." We do not await re-birth into this world. We await a Saviour who will change this body to be like his glorious body. Phil 3:21
- 8) The Father's House. This is what we are looking forward to - being with the Father in His home. No evil thing can enter there (Rev 21:27) All tears will be dry, there will be no death, no sadness, no pain. (Rev 21:4) The harmony of the children of God will never be broken.

Mercy and not Sacrifice

This approach is one used by a converted Hindu Asian living and witnessing in the UK. He uses a series of scriptures to outline the Gospel.

Matthew 9:13

"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous but sinners."

Sacrifice or works is not what God is looking for. He waits to show mercy. Other religious leaders only accept religious people. Jesus alone accepts sinners!

Matthew 11:28

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Jesus requires that we come to HIM, not another person or religion.

Matthew 7:7-11

"Ask, and it will be given you; Seek, and you will find; Knock, and it will be opened to you..."

Jesus makes a promise.

John 3:16-17

Explains the gospel message. Jesus came to save from condemnation.

Romans 10:9-10

Shows what the response must be in order to receive salvation: true confession of the Lordship of Christ; true belief that God raised him from the dead (with the implied understanding of and belief in the purpose of his death).

Mark 7:14-23

Gives Christ's word concerning vegetarianism!! Of great significance to Hindus and their world view of karma and reincarnation.

Acts 4:12

Jesus is the only way!!

Helpful Reading

The death of a Guru - Ravi Maharaj
A testimony that also shows the spiritual world behind Hinduism

Sharing Good News - Patrick Sookdeo
This book combines what Hindus believe and how to approach them

Chapatis for Tea - Margaret Wardell and Ram Gidoomal
Practical approach to befriending Hindu acquaintances

Karma 'n' Chips - Ram Gidoomal and Mike Fearon
A very readable attempt to outline Hinduism in more depth

Sari and Chips - Ram Gidoomal and Mike Fearon
Asian culture and Western culture

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