

Lessons from India

# A Survey of Disciples of Christ from Non-Dalit Hindu Homes

by P. and S. Kannan



Over our years of Christian ministry we have had contact with many disciples of Jesus from Hindu homes. In light of the need to understand the situations and problems of these people we decided to conduct a proper survey of their situations and responses. Our desire was first of all to understand the life and suffering of those who turn to Christ from Hindu homes. Our second major concern was to see how far they have been able to influence their family members to follow Christ.

As we gathered information from May to September of 1998, what seemed most significant to us was the data on the marriages of the disciples of Christ from Hindu families. That is the major focus of the information that follows. Most of the people contacted are from Tamil Nadu state in South India, though a few are from other states. This is due to our location in Tamil Nadu, and it must be emphasized that this is not a statistical survey with random sampling, etc., but rather a private survey of our own friends and contacts.

The fifty-one people surveyed belong to backward caste or high caste families. Most of them belong to middle class Hindu families though a few are from rich and influential families. Our original list of people to survey included a number of people from Dalit communities. We decided to omit the data collected on these people in order to focus on the non-Dalits.

Generally speaking, people of the Scheduled Caste (Dalit) and Scheduled Tribe communities do not follow strict rules and regulations in their worship. Since they are generally poor and needy they do not worry so much about some of their people becoming disciples of Christ. So commonly there is not much opposition if one becomes a Christian. That is why it was easier to bring them to Christ, and Christ came to be seen as the God of the low caste people in India. Also since the low caste people came to Christ in people movements they did not face as much opposition. These are some of the reasons why we did not include people from these communities in our survey.

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**Raw Survey Data**

<i>Gender</i>	
Male	27
Female	24
<i>Age</i>	
Under 30 years	5
30-40	18
40-50	12
50-60	7
above 60	9
<i>Caste</i>	
Backward	22
Brahmin	8
Other forward	21

**How these people first learned of Christ**

The first question was how they first became acquainted with Christ and the gospel message.

At school or at college	23
Through family or friend	16
Through meetings	11
Through book	1

Though most people heard about Christ while at school they decided to follow Christ only in their twenties. The fellowship they enjoyed and the meetings they attended influenced many to become Christians and to live like Christians. Most of these people are baptized, as that also was a basic issue that we sought information on.

**Baptism**

within 1-2 years of turning to Christ	37
within 3-10 years	7
after 10-15 years	3
after 22 years	1
not baptized	3

Baptism is often a point of offense to Hindu families. In India religion is not so strictly organized as society is. Baptism is seen not only as an initiation ceremony related to religious faith, but also as initiation to enter a new

community, leaving one's birth religion and community behind. A baptized person is thus not fully accepted in the Hindu community and they sometimes have been excommunicated from society and are not allowed participate in important events or functions. Most of our friends were baptized soon after turning to Christ.

Christ is still generally considered to be a foreign God brought by the British. He is also considered to be the God of the low caste people. Though the high caste people often have a high regard for Christ and the Bible they do not want to identify with Christianity. Some people still feel that an Indian who is patriotic should be a Hindu. These things contribute to the offense of baptism to the family members.

Another major issue is that many Hindus believe that the salvation of parents depends upon the pujas and sacrifices done by the sons after the death of the parents. Once the son in a family leaves home to follow some other religion, or marries a girl from another caste, he loses his validity to do puja for the parents. So for a son to leave his Hindu parents is not a simple thing. If at all he does so it will be at great cost to the family and to the individual who often loses his share of the family's wealth and above all the love and affection of parents and family members.

Once a disciple of Christ is baptized they join the local church, and we sought to understand the problems that accompanied church affiliation.

**Church Affiliation**

Pentecostal	13
Brethren	13
Church of South India	7
Nazarene	7
Independent	3
Layman's Evangelical Fellowship	1
Seventh Day Adventist	1
Roman Catholic	1
Jehovah's Witnesses	1
None	4

**Expectations of the Church**

Most of the people we met belong to a local church, but most indicated that they do not receive any moral or physical support from the church. They have only the satisfaction of belonging to a church. Many people have not received any proper Bible teaching in order to grow in their newfound faith. Usually if a personal crisis arises it is the family members rather than the church that comes forward to spend for them time, money and energy. We came across a girl, Rama, who left her family on conversion. After baptism she joined a Christian organization to be trained as a Christian worker. But within 3 years she became mentally sick and was admitted in a hospital. No Christian came forward to take care of her and support her financially. Finally the family people took her home and gave all the necessary treatment. Afterwards they got her married to a Hindu and she is not following Christ now.

The expectations of the local church cause many problems for disciples of Christ from Hindu families. Christians expect "converts" to make all the adjustments and changes in order to fit themselves in the church. They expect the converts to give up everything for the sake of Christ, but do not provide the needed teaching and support which are necessary for growth and life. Especially when single men and women join the church they face great difficulty in regard to their marriage.

**Marriage**

Marriage in India is mostly arranged by parents. The families are very much involved and not just the two individuals. There are many different customs and cultural practices followed in arranging and conducting marriages. These things differ according to the community and place. Marriage is a social event arranged and conducted by the parents, and it gives great satisfaction. When children go their own way in matters of marriage the parents are humiliated in their society.

**Women unmarried when they turned to Christ (12)**

In our survey we came across twelve women who turned to Christ before

marriage. This is what happened to these 12 women, with details following:

Marriage arranged by parents*	5
Marriage arrange by the church	2
Still unmarried	5

(\*Three with same-caste unbelievers, two with a same-caste believer)

### *Marriage arranged by parents*

These five ladies who came to Christ before marriage obeyed their parents. These ladies trusted God, into whose hands they had committed their lives, to choose their partners. God in His sovereign control works wonders. All the five ladies are having happy families.

One girl's husband, Shekar, was a secret believer even before marriage. The parents of the girl, Vijayalaxmi, knew that their daughter was a believer in Christ. They wanted to get her married to a Hindu so as to make

their daughter. They are both growing in Christ happily and witnessing to their own people.

The three ladies who married unbelievers are also happy in their families. Theirs is a struggle as they don't have much freedom to read the Bible and pray. But they continue to pray for their husbands to experience the grace and love of Christ. Among these three, one lady's husband came to Christ through her. After the husband's change of heart they were both baptized and joined a church. This couple received unwise and false teaching from their church. In order to be accepted in the church the wife removed her wedding chain (thali). In her community only widows remove the thali, and the families and relatives of this lady were very much offended by this. She would not agree to wear the thali even after much pleading from her family people, and now this couple are not regarded as a good

society. They felt cheated and let down before others in the same community. They are angry with Christians and they are far from listening to the gospel of Christ. It has been nearly 25 years since one lady (Renuka), married and more than 25 years since she became a believer. But she could not help anyone in her parental family to come to Christ. She and her Christian family are accepted in her mother's home now. But the other lady who married a Christian is still not accepted even in her mother's home.

These two ladies seem to have acted very selfishly, since by marrying Christians and establishing happy homes they only helped themselves.

### *Still Unmarried*

Five other ladies who came to Christ before marriage are still single. One lady is nearing 50 years old now and still hoping to find a partner. She left her family at the time of her conversion

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her change her mind to come back to Hinduism. But God worked in such a way that they themselves unknowingly chose a believing boy for their daughter. Thus God performed a miracle in bringing two believers together from two Brahmin families.

But the sad thing is that the couple joined a Charismatic church after their marriage and became an aversion to their families. They themselves built a barrier between themselves and their families and they could not influence anyone in the families to come to Christ. Had they learned to live as Christ bhaktas (devotees of Christ) while still following Hindu cultural activities, they would have had more chances to share the love of Christ. It seems they gave more importance to joining a church and having fellowship than to helping their own people to come to Christ.

In another case the girl's parents were themselves converts, and they found a believing boy from their community for

family in their society. So they lost their credibility to share the love of Christ with their people. Though they are helping some Hindus to come to Christ, their own family people are far away from him.

### *Marriage arranged by the church*

Two ladies mentioned above who came to Christ before marriage preferred to marry believers from other castes. Their Hindu parents would not have allowed such a thing to happen, so they married other caste believers without the permission of the parents. Their marriages were arranged by other Christians and the families of the Christian boys. Both the ladies are happy with their husbands and children and live as Christians. They are actively involved in evangelistic work and are a blessing to many.

However, the measure of pain these women caused their parents and family cannot be explained. The parents felt deeply hurt and humiliated in the

hoping the Christians would support her. Her church could not find a partner for her. Even Christian believers are not willing to marry such converts who are like orphans. So many such converts are forced to stay single. Her family people were willing to get her married, but she would not marry an unbeliever. She is on good terms with them and is trying to help them to experience the love of Christ.

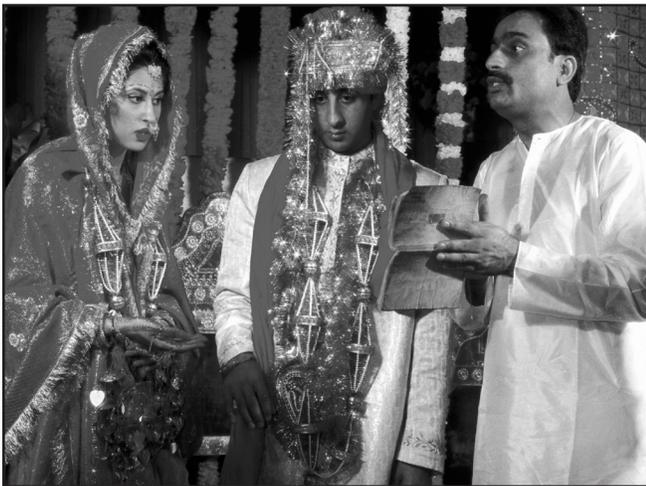
Another lady is still single at 39 because she did not want to marry either a Hindu or a believer from another caste. She made her parents sad by becoming a follower of Christ and she did not want to add humiliation by marrying someone from other caste. She is staying

with her parents but she has so far been unable to help them to believe in Christ.

Another girl is also still unmarried because she could not find a boy from her own denominational church. Her parents belong to the Jehovah's

Witnesses and they are looking for a boy from that group only.

Two more convert girls are unmarried. They are willing to obey their parents in marriage matters and they will be getting married soon. Since parents do everything for the children until marriage, they deserve to have the joy and



satisfaction of settling their children well and seeing them walk upright in society.

**Men unmarried when they turned to Christ (15)**

In our survey we came across fifteen men who turned to Christ before marriage. This is what happened to these men, with details following:

Marriage arranged by the parents:	11
to unbeliever of the same caste	6
to believer of the same caste	3
to believer from Christian background of different caste	2
Marriage arranged by the Church	2
Still unmarried	2

**Marriage arranged by the parents**

Eleven of the 15 men who came to Christ before marriage allowed their parents to arrange their marriage. Three of the men's parents were also believers and so they had no problem in following Christ. Six men married unbelievers, and of those, four have seen their wives turn to Christ after marriage.

Two of the wives are still not believers but in both cases there is a happy family life. These two husbands are making opportunities for their wives to come to Christ and are expecting them to know Christ personally. One man, Shanmugam, had to leave home at his conversion since his parents did not allow him to practice his faith while staying at home.

Though he loved his parents he had to leave them. But God in his mercy after ten years provided a believing girl from his own caste and his parents were happy about this marriage. After the marriage he was accepted in his parents' home and this believing family is happy and they are trying to help his family members to come to Christ.

The other two men who married believers from their own caste are doing well and both the families are trying to bring their relatives and family people to Christ.

Of the two who married believers from Christian backgrounds of different castes, one is a Brahmin convert who married outside of caste with the consent of the parents. We are yet to see how this family is going to help the Brahmin relatives to know the love of Christ. The other is a very sad story where the marriage broke up very quickly for reasons that we have not been able to properly determine.

Two men are still unmarried. One man, who is closely working with Christians and Christian workers, is unable to demonstrate the love of Christ to his parents. He wants to have his own way even though it hurts his parents very badly. He takes advantage of their love and tolerance. Though he is willing to allow his parents to choose his partner he is not willing to marry an unbeliever. The result is that there is much tension and unhappiness in the family because of this believer. He cannot justify this in any way and is failing miserably to show his love and concern for his parents and

is not proving himself to be a faithful follower of Christ. In what way can he help them to experience God's love and forgiveness? The other person who is still unmarried is still young and will hopefully get married soon.

**Men who turned to Christ after marriage (12)**

Husband followed wife's faith	4
Husband's faith first, wife followed	5
Husband believer, wife not	3

Twelve of the men we surveyed turned to Christ after their marriage. Five of these men came to Christ first and helped their wives to also believe in Christ. Four became believers after their wives had first turned to Christ. They were influenced by their wives to believe in Christ. Wives of three men are still not believers. One wife of a believing husband is a Roman Catholic, and she left her husband after he became a disciple of Jesus. She could not tolerate his involvement in evangelistic work. He is a prayerful man and is waiting for his wife to come back. When the wives are not believers, husbands find it hard to bring up the children as believers in Christ.

**Women who turned to Christ after marriage (12)**

Wife followed husband's faith	5
Wife's faith first, husband followed	5
Wife believer, husband not	2

Twelve of the women we surveyed came to Christ after marriage, and in five of those cases they followed their husbands in belief in Christ. One Brahmin lady suffered much humiliation from Christians before coming to Christ since she was not convinced that Christ was the only way but she wanted to follow her husband's path.

Five other women came to Christ first and helped their husbands to believe in Christ.

The other two ladies' husbands are not believers yet. It is hard for ladies to live as believers and grow in faith when the husbands are not believers. The one lady's husband threatened to send her away from home if she continued to

read the Bible and pray to Jesus Christ. With God's help she has been able to convince him and is now reading the Bible with his knowledge. She does not go to church or Christian meetings but has the fellowship of a Christian woman to pray and share with. The other lady whose husband is still an unbeliever

the love and power of Christ they could surely have brought many people to Christ. Now they do not have much contact with Hindus and hence fewer chances to be shining lights to show the way to others. Hindu Christ bhaktas can witness more effectively to Hindus than Christians can.

from their families. Marriage outside accepted family parameters deals an almost irreparable blow to family relationships.

"Converts", instead of coming out of the family and community, should stay within the family to show the love of Christ. It must be noted that in the general understanding of Indian society, "conversion" IS this transfer of community allegiance. Disciples of Christ must learn to teach a spiritual "conversion" that does not involve this communal change. The disciple of Christ who identifies as a Christ bhakta rather than as a Christian, and stays within his or her community, should reject the label of "convert", and all Christian communicators should learn to desist from practicing communal "conversion" and thus also cease using "conversion" terminology.

Unless "converts" (new disciples of Jesus) stay within their family and community they cannot spread the love of Christ and bring their relatives to Christ. This staying within the community is a greater challenge than to come out and join a church and enjoy the fellowship. It seems Satan is deceiving converts by bringing them out of the family and thus removing the light so that others continue to live in darkness. Christians are also preaching and teaching to "come out and be separate." The church should reconsider the way it encourages converts as well as its expectations from the converts. Only if Hindus who come to Christ continue to be true Hindus in the social and cultural aspects of life, while living as Christ bhaktas within their Hindu communities, can they influence the vast majority of Hindus in our country. When sociological conversion is rejected and spiritual conversion is demonstrated within Hindu families and communities there is great hope for a significant turning of Hindus to the living Christ. **IJFM**

## **D**isciples of Christ must learn to teach a spiritual "conversion" that does not involve this communal change.

enjoys full freedom to practice her faith. She even has meetings in her home for other disciples of Christ.

### **Relating to the Hindu community**

All of the fifty-one converts surveyed faced numerous problems in their lives because of their faith in Christ. One woman did not seem to follow Christ after marriage, as mentioned above. All the others are strong in faith and many are actively participating in evangelism. They have great zeal for God and His kingdom, yet the light of the gospel has not been touching others in the families of these disciples of Christ.

One would surely expect and hope that when one Hindu turned to Christ there would be an ongoing impact in Hindu families and communities, with more and more people being touched by the love of Christ. Our survey revealed that in only seven cases had any other immediate family member been led to Christ by one of these fifty ardent disciples of Jesus. Rather than the gospel spreading as a leaven in Hindu society, the common pattern is the extraction of disciples and the negating of any hope for positive influence on family and community.

The reasons for the failure to effectively present Christ to relatives are not hard to identify. Except in four cases, all those we surveyed are members of a local church. Since they identify themselves as/with Christians and live like Christians they are outside of the Hindu community. Had these people remained in their own Hindu communities and still lived as witnesses to

Another thing we found from our survey is that the second generation from the converts are still more deeply rooted in the Christian community through intermarriage and church membership. They tend to lose the zeal which their parents have to help others come to Christ, unless it is through traditional church activities and work among Dalits. This problem is most strikingly illustrated in the elderly people we surveyed. We spoke with nine men and women who are older than sixty, and only two of these (a married couple) have stayed in close touch with their Hindu society. Except for this one family, the others are fully identified with Christians. These fine Christian people have over fifty descendants, and all of their children and grandchildren except two boys are involved in Christian activities. They are absorbed into Christian society and have lost contact with their relatives. The elderly believers have not been able to influence their relatives for Christ, and their descendants are no longer in a position of intimate contact with Hindus.

### **Conclusion**

The most fundamental stumbling blocks for the gospel in India are social, related to the community identity which is so strong for each individual. The abandoning of Hindu community and alignment with Christian community is far more offensive to Hindu families than any doctrinal teaching found in the Bible. "Conversion" and church membership almost inevitably lead new disciples of Christ to distance themselves

# Book Reviews

## Yishu Das: Witness of a Convert

By Ravi Tiwari. ISPCK, Post Box 1585  
Kashmere Gate, Delhi, 2000,  
280 pages + xvi, \$12

—Reviewed by H.L. Richard, *Independent Research Scholar presently focusing on issues in South Asian culture and religion.*

Yishu Das Tiwari (1911-1997) is one of the fascinating figures of 20th century Indian church history, and this account of his life and work compiled by his son allows the reader entry into the world of this Brahmin convert to Christianity.

The book is in six rather distinct parts. The first gives some autobiographical pieces by Y.D. Tiwari (YDT), including a record of interviews the son (compiler) had with his father in his last weeks of life. The second part gives some writings of YDT, particularly on John's gospel. Part three, at just over 100 pages the largest section of the book, is a biography of YDT by his son. Part four gives eleven tributes by other friends and acquaintances. Part five gives Ravi Tiwari's theological reflections. Part six is three appendixes giving a chronological table, the text of the citation from Serampore College honoring YDT, and a family tree.

There are errors of grammar and spelling on almost every page of this book, and there are more serious internal conflicts of fact as well. The fifth section entitled "Theology of a Convert" has very little relationship to Y. D. Tiwari's story and is rather an imposition into the text. But despite such weaknesses this is a volume of great interest and value for all who are interested in the Hindu-Christian interface.

Tiwari faced rather extreme persecution in the early 1930s when he was drawn towards Christ. His family went to the extent of having him placed in an institution for the mentally ill, and while there he had a vision of Christ which deeply impacted his entire life even though he rarely spoke of it. (His own account of his conversion in chapter one of this book makes no mention of it, nor did he mention it to this reviewer in a discussion to be noted shortly.) The principal of the

Christian College learned of his being so institutionalized and had the clout to see that he was released.

The baptism of Tiwari in January of 1935 is recounted with some hints of uncertainty. Page 187 in a missionary's reminiscences recounts that "he went to Poona, to an Anglican brotherhood, and thereafter (sic) some time he was baptised by immersion at his request. A little before my return from furlough he came back to Agra, recalled by a bogus telegram telling him that his wife was seriously ill. News of his baptism reached Agra and the home was bolted and barred against him." The compiler of this volume, in his biographical section, says this about the time of baptism, "I do not have much information to construct the events that took place from January 1934 to January 1935, which forced him to go for Baptism and officially become the (sic) part of the Church" (p. 103).

Barbara Noreen, in her authoritative history of the *Christa Seva Sangha Ashram* in Pune (the "Anglican Brotherhood" referred to above) gives more light on YDT's baptism. She writes that he was with the ashram "for a time from 1934....where he was prepared for baptism and subsequently baptised" (*A Grain of Wheat Sown in India*, privately published, n.d., p. 167; the ISPCK edition of this work published in 1994 (*Crossroads of the Spirit*) contains an edited account of this same material on page 195.) In a private interview with this reviewer in the last days of 1992, YDT gave a somewhat different account of his baptism. This is my report of his account written less than a week after the interview:

He was baptised in a rush when called home due to the illness of his wife; his missionary friends thought the illness a ruse to get him home and keep him from baptism. So he was baptised, sent home, and (as predicted) thrown out. (On my questioning he said that he found that his wife was indeed sick.)

Tensions and discrepancies such as the above are minor issues compared to the tensions and discrepancies that come into the life of a high caste convert to Christianity. The value of this book lies

in this area, and thoughtful readers will find much to reflect on. The book itself provides precious little reflective analysis and contains no call for change yet the imperative need for change should be apparent to all who read with sensitivity. Two striking points will illustrate this.

YDT's story makes much of advice he received shortly after his baptism from C. F. Andrews: "Deenabandhu [CFA] advised him not to break relations with his family and the people of the land; continue to have the links with the religious, cultural and political movements that were taking place in the country, and for heaven's sake, not to confine yourself within the fold of mission compounds" (p. 113). While there is no doubt that YDT tried to follow this advice, his interactions with Mahatma Gandhi being a fascinating illustration, yet in the end it is clear that his life focused on mission compounds far more than on normal activities in Indian society.

Doubtless YDT felt this himself. In his final weeks his son probed for any regrets regarding his decision to follow Christ. Without hesitation YDT affirmed Christ as his "Lord and Master" whom he would not exchange. But a second question brought a striking reply:

What about leaving family, friends and community, would you have followed the same course? His answer was as straight as the other but thought provoking, "I would have not joined the Christian community." He did not elaborate, and could not be provoked to elaborate (p. 104).

Tiwari turned to Christ under mentors who prided themselves on cultural and religious sensitivity, yet their track record with converts is no better than that of narrow conservatives who ignore or despise Indian culture and religion. The liberal theological currents that run through this volume will disturb conservative readers, but the sociological blindness that afflicts both conservative and liberal—forcing many "converts" to lament (like YDT) late in life when it is too late to change—should cause still greater disturbance. Tiwari could not be truly incarnate in Indian life and live as a Christian, nor can this be done today by those who wish to follow Christ from high caste Hindu families. Tiwari's record thus is a call for change in missiological paradigms; who will heed and act?