

Lessons from India

The Contextual Christian: Channappa D. Uttangi

by Brad Beaman



For those interested in Christian contextualization, the life of Channappa D. Uttangi of India uncovers a fascinating personality. The Hindu Lingayats constantly invited Uttangi to preach at their festivals and gatherings. The Lingayats published Uttangi's writings, they wrote books about him, bestowed honors upon him and many accepted his Christ. Uttangi served for thirty-three years as an evangelist with the Basel Mission, but according to the Lingayats Uttangi was "The True Lingayat."

Uttangi's Heritage: The Lingayats

Chennappa D. Uttangi was born October 28, 1881 in what is now the Karnataka State in South India. He was a third generation Christian. His grandfather, a Lingayat, became a Christian following a dramatic set of circumstances. To be an effective evangelist Uttangi studied Lingayatism, Hinduism and Buddhism, but most of all Lingayatism, because Lingayatism was his own heritage.

Lingayats are a unique Hindu sect based on the condemnation of caste discrimination. Another feature of the Lingayats is their monotheism. The Lingayat founder taught that as a faithful wife has one husband, the devotee who believes must have one God.

A Lingayat is one who wears the Linga, a small spherical object that the Lingayat believes represents God. Lingayats are officially considered as part of Hinduism, however Lingayatism is unique, as are other Indian based religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. These religions, unlike Hinduism, have a founder. The Lingayat founder is Basava, a twelfth century social and religious reformer.

The twelfth century in India was a time of discrimination and extreme caste prejudice. Those of high caste treated the lower caste as less than human beings. Basava led a reform movement against these social injustices. He opposed caste and society divisions. Basava eventually became the Prime Minister of King Bijjala's Chalukyan Dynasty. In this position as Prime Minister Basava's ideas of social reform had a far-reaching influence. The platform of this new reform movement was the Anubhava Mantapa (Hall of Experience). Here social

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equality was upheld. At this Hall of Experience high caste people would dine with untouchables. Basava tried to eradicate untouchability by giving freedom of worship to low caste people. Wearing the Linga, the sign of a Lingayat, was open to all, and a symbol of social equality. "All have the same birth out of the same womb," Basava said.

To promote these radical reforms Basava arranged a wedding between a Brahmin girl and a low caste boy. This wedding outraged the traditional society. At pressure from Basava's opponents, The King banished Basava and punished the groom and the fathers of the bride and groom by gouging out their eyes, and dragging them to death behind elephants in public view.

The Lingayat movement lost its influence after this persecution. But, soon the Chalukyan Dynasty fell to Muslim invasion. As time passed the Lingayat movement regained influence. Today the Lingayats are the largest single community in Karnataka numbering over twelve million.

Evangelist and Scholar

Channappa Uttangi began his theological studies at the age of twenty at the Basel Seminary. Upon completing his studies Uttangi joined Basel Mission as an evangelist in 1908. Uttangi's first published work was from a sermon preached at a Hindu gathering: *Bethlehem's Appeal to Benares* (today Benares is called Varanasi). Varanasi is known as a symbolic place for Hindu culture and learning.

Uttangi showed that what is longed for in the Hindu literature is found practically in Christ. Therefore Uttangi argues, Christ is a fit person for Indian people and for Hindus. Logically Uttangi analyses the life of Christ. According to a Lingayat, "Uttangi has written about Jesus in such a manner that no Hindu can deny Christ."

One Lingayat Swamiji (Priest) particularly had a great regard for

Uttangi. He would invite Uttangi to the Mutt (religious training center) to give moral and ethical advice for the Lingayat students. Uttangi would come and address 150 students in the evenings. Uttangi spoke on Basava and Christ quoting from books and from his experience and this impressed the young Lingayat students.

Uttangi wrote about Christian philosophy and about contextual Indian Christians. He wrote a four-part book on the life of Sadhu Sunder Singh and classified Sunder Singh's parables. Uttangi also worked to make the life of Narayan Vaman Tilak available to Christians of Karnataka. Uttangi translated Winslow's Biography of Tilak into Kannada. Uttangi's works on Sunder Singh and Tilak were both published by the Basel Mission.

Almost all the Lingayat priests of Karnataka and all those scholars who knew Kannada literature respected Uttangi. This is primarily because of Uttangi's ground breaking work on the Kannada poet Sarvajna. For twenty-five years Uttangi researched this sixteenth century Kannada poet.

Before Uttangi's work these poems of Sarvajna were spread out among the villages. Uttangi would go to the villages, stay with the people and collect information on the poems of Sarvajna. In all Uttangi collected two thousand Poems and classified them in a systematic manner. To study these poems Uttangi developed a skill of reading and interpreting the ancient manuscripts preserved on palm leaves.

The Hall of Experience

A controversy arose in scholarly circles regarding an article, which discredited the historicity for the Lingayat Hall of Experience. The Lingayat scholars read the article and disagreed, but not a single one could counter the article and conclusively establish the historical evidence.

Though Uttangi was a Christian he was regarded as the only person who could write an article documenting

the evidence. The Lingayats asked Uttangi to write a book presenting the arguments for the historicity of the Hall of Experience. Uttangi said, "I am a Christian, one of you Lingayat scholars can write this book." They responded, "though you are a Christian you are a true Lingayat."

Uttangi studied and wrote about the Lingayat Hall of Experience and this was published in a journal. The author who previously wrote against The Hall of Experience agreed that the Hall was historical. Lingayats then published Uttangi's work in the form of a book. The Lingayats claimed Uttangi wrote books as if he was born and brought up a Lingayat. Uttangi said it was Christ within him that enabled him to write with such influence.

After Uttangi's death a Lingayat scholar, Dr. S. R. Gunjal, wrote a 450 page Ph.D. thesis about Uttangi. He received a gold medal for this work and later the Lingayat Society published this thesis on Uttangi in the form of a book.

Kirtan Method Used

As an evangelist Uttangi shared the gospel using the Kirtan (worship song) method. This is the method Hindus use to communicate their religion. It consists of indigenous instruments, singing and explanation.

Uttangi used the Kirtana method with a team of three people. One played the stringed instrument, another sang and Uttangi told the stories. They would go from village to village and announce that a discourse about Christ was coming and invite the Hindus interested to listen. First, the musical instrument was played along with singing. Afterwards, Uttangi would explain the meaning of the songs.

They loved Uttangi because he used examples from Hindu writings. He would highlight the Hindu principles and in suitable ways compare them to Christ. Uttangi told how Christ's life was superior. He was always referring to the life of Christ in the Hindu

festival or weekly Bazaar or in the Lingayat institute. When they invited Uttangi to speak he would tell about the Lingayat saints and compare them to the life of Christ.

Uttangi Opposed

When Uttangi was called to preach at the Hindu Festival of Lights he preached on the theme, "Christ the Light of the world." Lingayats asked Uttangi, if Jesus is the highest place and the light of the world, what is the place of Basava? Uttangi replied, "Jesus is the Light of the world and Basava is the light of Asia."

When fellow Indian Christians asked Uttangi why he admires Basava and Lingayat literature, he answered that Basava is the best Christian. When the Lingayats asked him why he should not return to Lingayatism, the religion of his forebear's which he admires and writes about, he answered, because Jesus is the best Lingayat.

Some foreign missionaries and Indian Christians claimed Uttangi was more interested in Lingayatism than Christianity and that he was on the verge of converting to Lingayatism. An allegation arose that Uttangi was nearer to Lingayatism than the Christian faith. Some missionaries lodged a complaint to the head Basel Mission office in Germany.

Some insisted that Uttangi who is paid by the Basel Mission should tell only of Christianity. There were missionaries who were sending confidential reports regarding whether he preached Basava or Christ only. They closely observed him and sent reports during the years 1932-1940.

The Critics Answered

Uttangi gave a lengthy reply to the charges against him and no one in the Basel Mission could object to his reply. The confidential reports on Uttangi were released after his death. These reports stated that although Uttangi's critics told he is going nearer to Hinduism and leaving Christ, his life and work glorifies Christ. They noted that he is a great scholar and wrote of the Lingayat Poet and that all Lingayats respect him. Uttangi, the reports concluded, was the best and most effective evangelist of his time.

At one point even Uttangi's daughter became concerned about his method of preaching. It was during a time when Uttangi was addressing a group of Lingayat scholars. She observed that Uttangi lectured forty minutes but never even mentioned Christ. However, the last twenty minutes he spoke in such a wonderful manner that he proved Jesus Christ to be the only person having the ability to save sinners. The majority of the people accepted his views.

Uttangi believed that awareness of sin is the first step toward repentance. He held that creating awareness of sin is an important duty of the preacher. He thought that exposing the secret personal sins of the heart is more effective to bring a Hindu to repentance than a general condemnation of idol worship.

In his autobiography Uttangi stated his personal position on Christ. "I have accepted Jesus Christ with all my heart as my Savior, my Lord and my Protector." When Rev. Chennappa D. Uttangi retired from Basel Mission in 1942 he completed thirty-three years of ministry. Today congregations still exist where Uttangi worked as an evangelist.

Conclusion

Uttangi faced many difficulties in his life. His wife was bedridden for twenty-five years. In addition to this a stroke left him paralyzed, but he quickly recovered and finished writing one of his books. He died August 28, 1962 having lived eighty-two years.

Uttangi was considered the first Indian clergy in Karnataka to be honored and respected by the non-Christian. In 1949 when Uttangi was named president of the Kannada Literature Society, he in his presidential address referred to himself as, "A beggar of genuine Kannada" referring to his work going from village to village collecting Kannada poems. The Lingayats said "Uttangi means Sarvajna and Sarvajna means Uttangi". This made Uttangi an equivalent, in the eyes of Lingayats and secular scholars, with the greatest poet of Karnataka.

On observation the Basel missionaries saw and appreciated Uttangi's methods. They reported that instead of

using the lecture preaching his Kirtan method is more effective. They concluded the Christian preachers must use the Hindu methods to impress the principles of Christ.

A Lingayat Professor, S. M. Angadi in his essay on Uttangi describes his preaching::

His method of preaching, unlike the traditional method of locating and pointing out flaws and loopholes in the other religions and harping upon them day in and day out and in all places, was that of placing in juxtaposition the best in every religion and giving a requisite exposition to the comparative excellence in Jesus and his gospel."¹

To Lingayats he always advised, look at Christ, not the Christian sects who quarrel. He did not condemn the Hindu and Lingayat. He would only examine these faiths in the Light of Christ.

Uttangi requested all Hindus to think of Christ in an impartial way and to remember the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 11:28-30:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. **UJFM**

Endnote

¹Anubhava Mantapa, *The Heart of the Lingayat Religion*.

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Book
Reviews

Understanding Hinduism

by Dayanand Bharti (yet to be published)

—Reviewed by Joseph Paul, Institute of Hindu Studies, U.S. Center for World Mission, Pasadena, CA

When my wife and I first began working with Hindus, we had no formal training in Hinduism but learned about it from the people themselves. We visited them in their homes and businesses, observed them as they worshipped at their family altars and in their temples and attended their community celebrations of religious holidays. After several years in ministry, we finally were able to take a formal class in Hinduism but found that what was being taught seemed out of touch with what we had learned from Hindus themselves.

Dayanand's book, *Understanding Hinduism*, however, fills this gap between what Hindus actually practice and what is formally taught about Hinduism. He echoes our own feelings when he explains that, unlike other religions, Hinduism, cannot be understood by an academic study nor by a study of its scriptures but by understanding Hindus themselves. Hinduism, the author asserts, is a way of life and that "without a 'subjective' involvement and study of the people, there is little chance to gain [a] real understanding [of Hinduism]."

According to Dayanand, a study of the Hindu is a study of the meaning of "dharma" because the common Hindu understands his way of life as "dharma." Since dharma does not have an English equivalent, the author presents several definitions. One definition is that dharma is the social, economic, moral, and biological duties of man in society or "varna-ashrama-dharma" (caste-social-class life). The underlying idea of dharma is that "practice takes precedence over belief"; it is more important what a Hindu does than what he believes. With the overall theme of dharma, he conducts his study of the common Hindu person, covering the origin and development of Hinduism, and its fundamentals, scriptures, sects, and rituals. For the western reader, he includes a description of Hindu beliefs in the last chapter.

Here we should note that the reader must keep in mind the aim of the author in writing this book. He states that he is writing to two groups of people. Instead of writing to a Christian audience, his aim is first to write to the common Hindu who has no time for scholarly research but wants to understand what he believes. Secondly, his aim is to write to the non-Hindu who wants to understand the common Hindu people.

Because his main aim is to write a book for Hindus, the book is especially important for the Christian worker

because it will help him or her see Hinduism from the inside. Especially noteworthy are the author's discussions on the meaning of the words Hindu and Hinduism, the unity of God and idol worship. In keeping with the theme of dharma, the author offers a definition of a Hindu as "a member of a particular community who professes his dharma according to his caste and stage of life." He points out that the root word of Hindu and Hinduism refers to the Indus River which is a place and not a religion. This gives credence to some Hindu background believers referring to themselves as Hindus. They are culturally Hindus but follow Christ. Later in the book, however, he admits that "fundamental to definitions of Hinduism is its connection to the Vedas."

Because idol worship is such an anathema to Christian readers, the author's discussion on this topic is enlightening. Several times he explains the misunderstanding that Westerners have concerning the seeming contradiction of Hindus worshipping many gods and goddesses while at the same time proclaiming that God is one. At the same time, he seems to say that Hindus realize that images do "restrict our efforts to understand God in our spirit beyond all human limitations."

An additional value of the book is that it is heavily footnoted which provides details for the more serious reader. Perhaps more could have been said about fear in the life of a Hindu especially of the gods and goddesses, but overall the book is a needed addition to our understanding of Hinduism and the common Hindu.