

Lessons from India

A Brahmin's Pilgrimage in Christ: Lessons from N. V. Tilak

by H. L. Richard



When Narayan Vaman Tilak died in Bombay, India, on May 9, 1919, one of the great pioneer efforts of Indian church history died with him. Tilak had come to see himself as specially called by God for contextual witness to Hindus. The lessons and challenge of his life still speak with powerful relevance to present mission situations in India.

Tilak was born in 1861 in a Brahmin family in what is now the western Indian state of Maharashtra. He grew up in the bhakti (devotional) tradition of Hinduism, which in his Marathi language boasted a long line of esteemed poets (culminating in Tukaram (1608-1649)). Tilak long sought peace of mind and life in devotional worship and renunciation, and was involved in serious scholarly research into Sanskrit Hindu writings as well. His own poetic skills developed early and earned him a depth of esteem and affection from his Hindu countrymen that even his later conversion to Christianity could not extinguish.

The early death of his mother and always-strained relations with his father led Tilak out alone into the world at a very young age. His vast potential was noticed and various friends saw to his education in both Sanskrit and English. The tide of Indian nationalism was rising with power, and Tilak was heart and soul a lover of India who longed for the rejuvenation of his country.¹

Religion had been deeply rooted in Tilak's heart, and it was his conviction that India's transformation could only come about on a religious basis. Tilak saw Hinduism in its various forms during times of wandering as an ascetic, and he gave up hope that this faith could bring about the spiritual renewal of his people. Other religions were studied but also found wanting. Tilak decided to start his own religion.

At this time of spiritual turmoil in Tilak's life the church in Maharashtra and the message of Jesus Christ never entered his mind. The American Marathi Mission had been working there for over 60 years. Tilak had seen missionaries and some of their literature, but he despised it all to the point of never giving it a thought. Christianity was a thoroughly foreign and unspiritual way of life that had no appeal to him. The gospel had made some measure of impact among the lowest castes of Hindus but the problems of teaching and developing mass

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movement converts from backgrounds of poverty and illiteracy had contributed to the generally unspiritual state of the church. The cultured Hindu could not be impressed by this, especially as all the forms in which faith was expressed were foreign.

Conversion and Extraction from the Hindu Community

What should have been a minor and routine event in Tilak's life proved the start of a great personal revolution. On a brief train journey in the early 1890s he happened to enter a compartment with a missionary. After much talk about Sanskrit poetry, Tilak's views of Christianity were questioned. He expressed his disapproval and mentioned the ideas he had developed for his new religion. The missionary was astonished at how near Tilak's views were to New Testament teaching. He told Tilak that God was at work in his life and within two years he would be a Christian.

Tilak was dumbfounded and considered the prediction of his conversion utterly foolish. But he read the New Testament as he had promised his train companion. He recalled later that

According to my usual custom I resolved to go through the book, marking with pencil the points worth noticing; but when I reached the Sermon on the Mount, I could not tear myself away from those burning words of love and tenderness and truth. In these three chapters I found answers to the most abstruse problems of Hindu philosophy. It amazed me to see how here the most profound problems were completely solved. I went on eagerly reading to the last page of the Bible, that I might learn more of Christ.²

It would be almost exactly two years before Tilak gave himself fully to Christ and was baptized. Subtle pressure to prevent his conversion began as it became clear to his wife and friends that Christ was gradually winning Tilak's heart. Finally after deep inner struggles Tilak came out in a clear Christian profession. The turmoil following his conversion

was even greater than that preceding it.

Looking back, the way Tilak's conversion was handled by both missionaries and Tilak himself must be criticized. Tilak left his home telling no one where he was going; the next they heard was news of his baptism in Bombay. He became a meat-eater and often dressed in western clothes. As his wife did not join him in professing Christ, some Christians urged him to remarry a Christian and even went so far as arranging marriages for him. Thankfully he did not remarry, and eventually (after 4 1/2 years) his wife Lakshmi Bai joined him in professing Christ.

Hindu society, and especially Tilak's own family, reacted with anguish and outrage on learning of his baptism. Lakshmi Bai especially suffered immensely and was near suicide a few times. Is it not time for evangelicals to seriously listen to and empathize with the honest expressions of pain from Hindu society at the conversion of one of their friends? Are the true roots and reasons for such distress properly understood and accounted for? Does not the love of Christ demand that strong steps be taken to mitigate this anguish that is inevitably felt when a Hindu confesses faith in Christ?

Tilak is a typical extraction convert, pulled from his culture and family to start a whole new life. Tilak initially could only have understood this as part and parcel of following Christ. He would no longer be a Brahmin, but a Christian. Like Ruth in the Old Testament his baptism (at least implicitly) involved the profession to missionaries and Indian Christians that "your people are now my people", and the Brahmins are no longer "my people". Some will say that such extraction is necessary, but Tilak's testimony indicates otherwise. He was able to rebuild many of his relationships in Hindu society, largely due to his poetic gifts and continued ardent patriotism. Was it really necessary for those relationships to be destroyed before rebuilding? Tilak's answer to that question is clearly a resounding "no." The great experiment

of his last years of life proves he found such extraction harmful and unnecessary.

Christian Service

For most of his Christian life Tilak was employed by the American Marathi Mission, teaching and evangelism being his main responsibilities. During his twenty-one years as a mission employee he often spoke against mistakes in mission policy, especially as the Indian church was kept almost completely dependent on foreign missionary workers and funds.

Tilak is best remembered today for his pioneer efforts to make the church and Christianity more Indian in heart and appearance. He broke out into new areas at times, pioneering evangelistic works and developing contextual communication techniques based on the Marathi bhakti tradition of poetry and song. His impact can never be lost from the Marathi church as his numerous hymns and choruses will live as long as there are Marathi disciples of Christ.

Tilak's greatest contribution, however, does not lie in his contribution to the church but rather in the field known today as missiology. He is among the greatest of pioneer witnesses in the Hindu context, and one of the great pioneers of Protestant mission history. The missiological importance of Tilak must be brought into clear focus so that lessons from his experience can be learned and applied to Christian ministry today.

Tilak was one of the most successful evangelists among Brahmins in the history of Indian Christianity. But he also experienced the typical frustration of the witness for Christ among Hindus: many Hindus had genuine respect for Christ but an unwillingness to surrender in full commitment. Tilak knew situations where people came to full intellectual conviction of the truth of Christ and His gospel, and thereafter studiously avoided Tilak and the subject of Christ. Tilak could not rest with some successes when unnumbered failures challenged his faith. Clearly in most cases of "rejection of Christ" theology was not the problem. The problem was the obvious fact that

Christianity in India is a foreign religion, and that conversion necessitated the breaking of ties with Hindu culture and community. Was it really necessary to do what Tilak himself had done and abandon one's people to follow a foreign and largely low-caste religion?

Following Christ with Hindu Forms

Torn by such thoughts Tilak was primed for another life changing revolution. Interestingly, he traced the roots of this also to a "chance" encounter on a train. In the first train incident, the Hindu Tilak met a Christian who pointed him to the New Testament and Jesus. In the second, the Christian Tilak met a Hindu who called him back to his Hindu heritage. It was an old Hindu acquaintance who approached Tilak on a train and reminded him of the magnetic hold he had had over his Hindu people before becoming a Christian. He asked Tilak to see himself now, and how his great potential had not been realized.

Tilak was shattered, and before God he came to the conviction that he had indeed failed to be what he should be...a fully Indian disciple of Jesus Christ. Tilak had gone far beyond most others in identifying with his nation, but he saw now how deeply compromised he still was with the foreignness of Christianity. He was still far short of the radical adaptation to the Hindu context that was necessary to bring Christ into Hindu cultures. Tilak now saw with final clarity that foreign methods and men could not win the Hindu heart, nor could hope be held out for the presently existing Indian church to vitally impact the Hindu world. His conviction was that work must begin "exactly on Indian lines and by Indian tradition and principles."³ Tilak himself was to be "a Tukaram and a St. Paul blended together."⁴

It took months before Tilak could take the momentous step he had resolved on, and finally only a vision of Christ enabled the break to be made. In late 1917, at 55 years of age, Tilak resigned from the American Marathi Mission and entered sannyasa, the last stage of life for a high caste Hindu man when all societal ties and worldly possessions are renounced in order to focus entirely on the spiritual and eternal world. Tilak did

not slavishly follow the Hindu renunciation ideal, but incorporated positive biblical content with an emphasis on love and service to mankind. He was given a home by the mission, which he promptly named as an ashram to which Hindus interested in Christ were welcomed.

Tilak's stated goal in his sannyasa service was to gather "a brotherhood of the baptized and unbaptized disciples of Christ."⁵ In this he was not questioning the theology of baptism, but facing the reality that baptism in India meant rejection of the Hindu community and its culture, and being grafted into the Christian community, adopting Westernized Christian culture.⁶ Tilak stayed in close fellowship with the mission and churches, aiming at their transformation along Indian lines, but his primary thrust was evangelism among Hindus. He himself set a personal example of entering the Hindu context in order to bring Hindus to faith in Christ within their own culture, lifestyle and communities.

In God's sovereign wisdom Tilak was called to heaven within two years of the start of this great venture. The visible results in that time were only about forty disciples joining the brotherhood, most from Christian backgrounds. Who can guess what might have happened in Hindu society if Tilak had lived some years longer? His pioneering contribution can be summarized in four points:

- Hindu communication techniques were filled with biblical content, particularly in the adaptation of Hindu poetic and musical themes and styles, and western forms of worship were abandoned.
- Tilak himself identified with the ancient Hindu tradition of renunciation in sannyasa, and evangelized and taught and served as a Hindu holy man.
- The ashram as a home and spiritual center for a guru or sannyasi was also adopted to provide a center where Hindus could comfortably (in the sense of cultural familiarity) learn the message of Christ.
- The development of a Christ-centered brotherhood which Hindus could join while still maintaining a Hindu social and cultural identity. The brotherhood was to support the church but also develop their own meetings, and there was a decided evangelistic purpose.

Lessons for Today

To go into detailed analysis of Tilak's vision and ministry is far beyond the scope of this article. The major lesson to note from his life is that the steps to effective Hindu evangelism are radical indeed. Throughout this present century Christian leaders of all denominations and theological perspectives have agreed that a church must develop in India that is both fully Indian and fully Christian. Tilak's observations and experience would suggest that to bring Hindus to Christ a slight but profound shift is needed in that goal: to be truly Hindu and fully biblical.

Tilak must not be uncritically praised, and his ministry was probably fatally flawed by aiming too high. Is it possible to radically enter the Hindu context while maintaining efforts to transform the Christian community? That few Hindus joined the brotherhood during its brief existence suggests that ties to the church and Christian community were too close to enable the overcoming of the deep-seated prejudices and objections of Hindus. It is also unlikely that Tilak's brotherhood could have survived long as a transdenominational interreligious fellowship of disciples of Jesus. Tilak saw clearly that a new kind of vital evangelistic fellowship was needed. Had he lived longer it seems inevitable that a new movement, perhaps looking more like a traditional Hindu sampradaya (sect, denomination) than what we know as "church", would have developed.⁷

Tilak's willingness to lay aside baptism must also be queried. Surely any disciple of Christ will want to obey His clear commands regarding baptism? It seems inevitable that Tilak's position on this point would have developed further had he seen large numbers of Hindus begin to join his brotherhood. How the brotherhood and Tilak's thinking might have developed cannot be known. The viability of Tilak's program also remains an unknown due to his early death and the tragic fact that no similar effort has been undertaken by others.

The Present Situation

The situation of Christianity in India today remains essentially that of Tilak's time. The need of the hour is new, contextual approaches to Hindu evangelism and church planting. There is talk of this

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in various circles, but little action. Even the talk rarely gets to the radicality that Tilak's experience indicates is necessary.

Over eighty years have passed since Tilak's death and still no vibrant Christ-centered movements have developed in Hindu contexts. Tilak and a handful of other pioneers have laid down some basic working principles, yet Hindu friends still are not hearing the gospel in their language and idiom.⁸ Will they be enabled to hear by new workers paying the necessary price in adaptation of thought and life, in study, and in prayer and fasting? Can Christian workers become all things to all men, becoming incarnate in Hindu communities (i.e. no longer "Christians") so that Hindus can hear of the biblical Christ and follow him within their own cultures and communities?

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calling others to give their lives for this great end. **IJFM**

Notes

¹ Tilak's early reformist ideals are evident in a story told by his later missionary friend Alden C. Clarke. The sister of a friend had been married as a child, and when in their teens before ever consummating the marriage the "husband" died the girl was doomed to the lonely life of a widow. Tilak decided to go against prevailing social customs and marry the cursed widow; in the end the girl herself refused to act so contrary to tradition. (See Clark, Alden H., *India on the March*, New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1922, p. 163.)

² Richard, H. L. *Following Jesus in the Hindu Context*, p. 21.

³ Richard, p. 86.

⁴ Richard, p. 87.

⁵ Richard, p. 95.

⁶ The Christian community in India is a legally recognized entity that has no

counterpart in the western world. It is roughly related to "Christendom"; all who have the Christian label in any sense are part of the Christian community, whether atheists, excommunicated from churches, etc. For a respectable Hindu to join the ill reputed (often for valid reasons) Christian community is truly a disgrace to the family and is clearly an entirely different matter from joining the family of the disciples of Jesus.

⁷ Sampradaya is literally "tradition", but also the community that upholds a traditional teaching and way of life.

⁸ For a survey of other work and workers in Hindu evangelism in the 20th century see Richard, H. L., "A Survey of Protestant Evangelistic Efforts among High Caste Hindus in the 20th Century," *Missiology*, Vol. XXV, No. 4, Oct. 1997.

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