

Aradhna: From Comfort to Discomfort, from Church to Temple

by Chris Hale

Editor's Note: Aradhna means worship and so is an appropriate name for a group that captures the beauty and dignity of India's bhajan devotional melodies in Christ-centered song. As fusion music that blends east and west, Aradhna is popular in India as well as the West. See aradhnamusic.com for more on the musicians and their music.

We have been talking in Aradhna for a long time about moving out of the churches and into the Hindu world. We now have four people in our group, but are still lacking one essential, which is a tabla (classical drum) player. So we hire tabla players, who are usually Hindu, and it is not always comfortable performing in a church with a Hindu tabla player. Likewise, it is not always comfortable as a worship group focused on Christ to perform in Hindu temple settings. It is really only in this last year through friends on three different continents that we have begun to be comfortable in the midst of this complexity. This paper will tell some of the stories that have impacted us, making clear that we are still far from having everything resolved.

It is through our Hindu tabla players that we have learned about being at peace with our own beliefs rather than always being on the defensive. Some of us were sitting in one of the pews of a church with Anand (name changed), our tabla player, next to us, having just finished leading the congregation in Hindi bhajans praising Christ. I had let the leadership know that our tabla player was a Hindu, and therefore to be as sensitive as possible. So care had been taken in the bulletin to avoid words such as “saving the Hindus,” etc. However, one can never know what will happen in a church that is not used to having Hindus regularly attending. A special guest, a missions leader, was invited up to say a prayer of blessing for the remainder of the service, and in his prayer he prayed for Hindus, that they would experience the good news of Jesus. This phrase, “good news for Hindus,” was then repeated again in other places in the service. Anand got up at one point and quietly walked out. He did not appear angry, but I was concerned so I rose and followed him. I put my arm around him as we walked, and apologized for anything that might be upsetting him in the service. He said, “It’s okay, I’m not really upset, I understand that is what these people believe, but honestly I just want to stand up and tell them, ‘We Hindus have good news for you, too.’”

Chris Hale was raised in Nepal and attended Woodstock School in Mussoorie, India. After music college at Berklee in Boston he returned to India and formed a band called Olio with some Indian friends. They performed all over the country in university festivals and independent concerts. While in India, Chris studied Hindusthani music and earned the Visharad degree in sitar. He continues to study the sitar with Partho Chatterjee, disciple of Pandit Nikhil Banerjee, and surbahar with his teacher Shubha Sankaran, disciple of Ustad Imrat Khan. Aradhna, which means “worship,” was formed in 2000 with Chris as lead vocalist.

Almost all of our tabla players are Hindus, Muslims, or westerners who associate themselves with the religious temperament of the East. We are constantly being invited to perform a concert on a Saturday night and at a church service on the Sunday morning, and often are asked to answer questions about our “ministry” among Hindus. We have been frustrated by the discomfort we feel when imagining what our tabla players would think if we invited them to the Sunday morning service or afternoon seminar. But after this incident, God began to free us from this. After all, what more could go wrong than had happened with Anand. Later that day, after the service, an elderly man had cornered him and asked him if he was “born again,” to which Anand had replied, “no.” The next moment he found himself praying the sinner’s prayer and being congratulated for becoming a believer. All of this did not adversely affect Anand. He took it well. He said, “I realized this man was putting his energy on me, and I received it as that. It was probably an experience that could be a blessing to me.” What spoke to us most was that Anand never felt differently towards us or even towards that church. The following year he brought his entire family there for the service!

It is we who began to change. The next opportunity for Anand to play at a church came a few months later in another state. This time I had a more thorough conference call with the church missions’ director and other leadership and we discussed in detail what would happen during the service. After prayer, we decided to invite Anand to perform with us there. So I called Anand up and asked him if his experience at the previous church would cause him to shrink from wanting to be involved again. His answer was an emphatic “no.” “I love playing with you guys, and I understand what churches believe. I’m cool with that.” So then I asked him if he would be willing to be asked some questions about his music and his faith as a part

of the service, and he was delighted to do so. The service was a great success, and Anand shared about why he believes the Indian philosophy of music has such deep resonance with spirituality. In turn each of the rest of us shared about why we performed Yeshu bhajans (devotional songs to Christ in Hindi), and there was no sense of needing to hide anything from Anand.

This experience paved the way for other encounters of our Hindu tabla players with the churches that invited us. At one Baptist church we offered to participate in a seminar with another

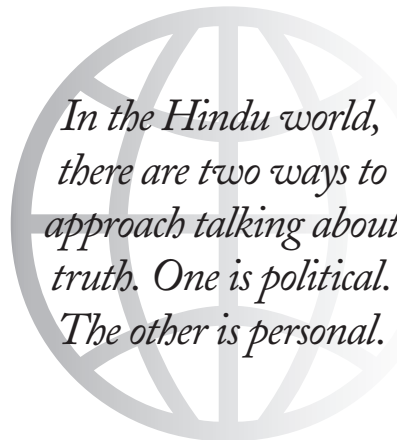


tabla player, a devotee of Sai Baba who is a living Indian guru who has millions of followers around the world. We had less control at this seminar than we did at the church service where the interview questions were fixed and designed not to offend. Here, anyone could ask anything! And they did.

I was asked the classic question, “Do you believe that there is only one way to God?” I answered as follows: “In the Hindu world there are two ways to approach talking about truth. One is political. The other is personal. In a village where there are high caste Hindus, Muslims, low caste Hindus, and some Christians, the political answer to the question, ‘How many roads lead to God?’ is ‘All roads lead to Him.’ Statements such as these are made to keep the peace that everyone knows is fragile. However, in the personal lives of Hindus, and in the various devotional movements that have swept through India in the last

centuries, there is no indication that Hindus actually believe that ‘all roads lead to God.’ There has been much fervent preaching against such things as idolatry, caste discrimination, and gender inequality by various devotional sects within India. Obviously those who preached this message and those who embraced it, faced persecution, because they were willing to stand up and say, ‘This road does not lead to God. We must change our ways.’ And so within Hindu culture and faith, the pursuit of truth is encouraged.”

I then went on to say that some Hindus over the years have been led to Christ in their pursuit of truth and have concluded that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. They are not only inwardly convinced of this but they preach Him freely among their relatives and neighbors. However, one will never hear them say, “This is the only way, your way is wrong.” In the Hindu way of thinking, a statement like this can only indicate a lack of maturity and wisdom. Such a statement is pure arrogance. Instead, a Hindu who is convinced of a particular truth will simply state the truth and allow the truth to do its own work, weeding out the falsehood around it. I concluded by saying that I viewed the question, “Do you believe that there is only one way to God?” in the same way. I have no idea about how many ways to God there are because I have not studied all the possible ways. God knows the answer to that question. I have experienced the truth of Christ and therefore in Aradhna I seek to sing of Christ alone who has brought me the forgiveness I longed for, and the peace that is beyond understanding, and the joy of friendship with God.

Some months later a western friend of ours was looking into organizing an Aradhna concert in a Hindu temple in his town. As part of the arrangements he asked me to call the trustee of the temple, who happened to be the manager of the local Holiday Inn. So I called him up and as part of the conversation asked him, “Do you have

any concerns at all?" He answered, "No, nothing at all. We are fine with it." Then he paused, and reconsidered. "Oh, there is just one thing. Some in our congregation have asked, 'Will they sing only Yeshu bhajans, or some bhajans to other gods as well?'" By this time God had given me a lot of peace that in the right moment the Holy Spirit would speak through me and I need not worry about what I would say. So I answered, "It is true that we sing bhajans to Yeshu only, because he is our Sadguru (Eternal Teacher), but we do not come in arrogance regarding that fact, but wish to come in humility as part of the Hindu world of bhakti (devotion), bringing the message of Christ to your congregation." He answered, "I personally have no problem with it since I believe that God is One, no matter what name you call him by. It's just that people were asking."

A few months later we were at that Hindu temple doing a sound check on a small wooden stage, not 10 feet away from a row of Hindu gods and goddesses, and a black statue of the Jain saint Mahavir. While we were sitting there, balancing the sound, three people walked in; a thin elderly Gujarati man, and a couple. I thought perhaps they were the organizers. When the elderly man saw that we had noticed him, he lifted his arm and made a sweeping gesture all around the room, pointing at all the deities. Then in a loud voice he addressed me and asked, "Do you like my gods?" The atmosphere in the room changed instantly from a rather light-hearted sound check to what felt like a major spiritual test of faith. What was I supposed to answer to a question like that sitting in the middle of their space? So I said, "Thank you, Uncle," which probably wasn't the most heroic answer. "No 'thank you,'" cried the old man, "say, 'jai Sri Krishna' (victory to Lord Krishna)." So I took refuge in the presence of the other couple who seemed embarrassed by their friend's behavior, and said to all three of them, "thank you for inviting us here." But the old man had not had enough, and moved on to

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our violinist, asking the same question, "Do you like my gods?" She followed my example with an innocent, "Thank you, Uncle," and got the same, "No 'thank you', say, 'jai Sri Krishna.'"

There was an awkward pause, and then the three of them sat down on the floor, right in front of us. I began to wonder what was going to happen when I sang the first song on our list by Birendra Choudhury, "*Ga ga mere manwa Yeshu bhajan*" (Sing my soul, the song of Jesus). I had a strong desire to switch the entire song list and put all the songs that emphasized Jesus' name right at the back, with the songs of praise to God the Creator at the front. But something in what we had been learning in the previous months prompted me to trust that everything would be all right.

What happened next was clearly God's way of confirming that. The couple, who up to this point had seemed silently embarrassed by the old man's behavior, leaned forward and said, "We are the parents of Anand, your tabla player on the West coast. He told us you were performing here in the East and so we drove three hours from our home to hear you today. We have been listening to your music and we love your group. Please be sure to sing that song, 'He' He' Prabhu.'"

That was all I needed to have the courage to go on with what God had called us to do there. The small hall filled up with around 100 Hindu devotees and a small group of followers of Christ who had come to pray for us and experience this unusual setting for themselves. We sang our bhajans. Many joined in, clapping along with the music. I spoke of our faith in Christ, using both Hindi and English, telling the simple stories of Jesus, and many were encouraged. And when we ended I handed the program back over to the temple

leader, who I had spoken with on the phone weeks earlier. He concluded the worship with words that reflected his Hindu worldview. He said that this temple prided itself in being ecumenical and therefore was very honored to have a group like Aradhna come and share the bhajans of Yeshu. He emphasized the Hindu belief that God is one, but is called by many names. He expressed thanks that a group like ours would come in such a spirit of humility and heart-felt devotion to bring such joy to their congregation.

This story goes on, particularly in the relationships that our American friends in that town continue to develop as they regularly attend their Hindu friends' social events and get to know them better. And the story goes on in the lives of our tabla player and his extended family who continue to enjoy working with us. Anand's father, who is a Hindustani classical music instructor, completed a booklet teaching the ancient raga musical system using the songs on Aradhna's albums.

Perhaps most importantly, the story goes on for Aradhna and for me. For many Hindus we will always be Christians (Isai) no matter what. It is a slow road to teach that Christ can be incarnated in every culture. No doubt He will always be a stumbling block, and usually we are the much larger stumbling blocks. As a Christian I can hardly model Hindu discipleship to Jesus, yet this is what most excites us. So perhaps it is no surprise that I have not yet met a Hindu who has worked with us in whose heart a light bulb has turned on so that he has said to us and to his friends about us, "There exist Hindus who believe in Christ as their Sadguru and yet they are not Christians but Hindus." But I believe that in time this possibility will grow in the consciousness of the Hindu people as we persevere.

I am learning that what I need to be concerned about before God is what my response should be when I am in the presence of friends, some of whom are Christian and some Hindu. How should I behave in that context? That is what Peter faced in Antioch. He was accustomed to behaving one way in Jerusalem and another way in Antioch, but he did not know what to do when people from both those cities were in the same place. He chose to please the ones whose threats were louder, whom he had more to fear from. I am realizing more and more how I have grown used to living one way among Christians and another way among Hindus. I am seeking to change that in my own life, seeking to adopt a vocabulary and behavior that is the same everywhere I go. One that is far more “Christian” among Hindus, and far more “Hindu” among Christians, rather than a lukewarm version of myself that might be acceptable to both. It is moving from comfort to discomfort in many ways, but to a truer, more real place.

On the road to becoming a Hindu to the Hindus, the greatest fear in me is that the essence of what it means to be immersed in Christ could be lost or grow so dim that it is no longer recog-

nizable for the unique incredible thing that it is. I sometimes lose my bearings when sharing my faith in totally different terminology, and using a musical genre that for centuries has been associated with the names of other gods. I often miss not getting to sing my heart out in the midst of my fellow believers in Christ where everyone is sensing the sweet presence of the Holy Spirit in songs like, “In Christ alone my hope is found.” Now I am in a totally different world where the name of Christ is on the same level or lower than other names, or perhaps even disliked by some. I want to fit in there too. I catch myself hoping that if I fit in, I will be accepted, and then my message will be accepted. But the truth in my experience as a westerner who lived in India and Nepal for 25 years from an early age is that one never totally becomes accepted anywhere, especially by trying too hard.

I am learning to accept that God wants to use me, and lead people to himself, as I blunder along. He is not waiting for me to become an expert at anything, least of all diplomacy. He is constantly reminding me that I have a few gifts and I need to use them along with the diverse gifts of my brothers and sisters around the world, in unity, love, and the

power of the Holy Spirit. Above all it is important to keep watch over my faith, to maintain a tender heart towards God, and a clear conscience in everything. I need to wait on the Lord, listen closely, and move forward in unity with my fellow musicians in Aradhna and with other believers who work closely with us. In this way, every year God is leading us further and further away from our comfort zones and more deeply into the lives and hearts of people He loves and cares for as much as he does us.

There are over 800 million Hindus in the world, and Hindu immigrants have become a very influential community in the United States. This is a great opportunity to get to know them, not only their food, movies and music, but the deeper areas of their lives. If I may suggest anything practical and immediate in this article, it would be that this year we all take the time to find out something about the Hindu’s biggest socio-religious festival of the year, *Diwali*, which falls on November 9th. Then let us all wish our Hindu neighbors a happy *Diwali* and see where God leads us. Moving out of comfort zones is an adventure God delights in as much as He did when He sent the world His Son. Let us delight in it also. **IJFM**

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