# The Transformational Potential of Jesus on Hindus

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## **Abstract**

This study demonstrates that worldview change is integral to the transformation of people’s lives. It examines how the revealed, historical, redemptive, and restorative love of Jesus impacts the lives of Hindus and causes lasting change.

**Using a qualitative participatory-action approach with an Indian NGO, based on a lifestyle of living among the people, and learning Hindi over the last eighteen months in New Delhi, I researched a community of Hindu background individuals that have experienced dramatic transformation out of fear and poverty through having chosen to believe in Jesus Christ.**

These transformed individuals portrayed five themes that lead to their transformative worldview change: relationships, storytelling, power encounters, understanding God as known, and knowing God is not a mystery.

Based on these results, it is critical for organizations to recognize that efforts towards development without an emphasis on the spiritual will lack longevity and efficacy. Authentic transformation as illustrated by this study is brought about by the person and presence of Jesus Christ.

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## India: An Ocean of Needs

### Issue

**Living in Delhi for the last two years, I am constantly confronted by an ocean of needs. I walk the streets with scantily clad children pulling at my arms begging for food. I sidestep homeless men and women strewn across the pavement, either asleep from exhaustion or obliviously intoxicated. Shantytowns are part of my everyday experience. The recurring question in my mind has been, what is the best way to go about helping these people?**

**As a Business major in my undergraduate studies, my mind naturally leaned towards an economic solution. Yet, as a believer in Jesus and transformative power, I wanted to combine Jesus’ teachings with economics. Integrating a theory of Biblical economics into self-help groups seemed a great place to start.**

**What I discovered during the interviews, however, caused a shift in my research focus. I had been expecting interviewees to describe their economic needs and potential means of sharing Jesus with SHG members. What they actually voiced, however, was that the real need in the community was mindset change, not just economic change. While a change in economic status might help lift a family out of poverty, it is not a long-term solution. The mindsets and social setting that contributed to the families’ initial state of poverty remain.**

**Consequently, the focus of my research shifted from biblical economics to looking at the most significant factors influencing mindset change among persons of Hindu background. The single largest resulting factor was, by far, the presence and person of Jesus.**

**Therefore, having established that Jesus is a potential change agent, my research concentrated on, *what life experiences have been most impactful for Hindus whose lives have been transformed by Jesus?***

### **Context**

**For the sake of simplicity, the terms Hindu and Indian will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. The intention behind this is not to create false generalizations but to limit the breadth of the research. To delve into the complexities of the different terms yields results far beyond the scope of this project.**

**This paper seeks to reveal that Indian individuals raised amidst the Hindu worldview, mindset, and cultural values are significantly affected by the characteristics of Jesus. I do not claim to present radical new findings on the nature of Christianity among the peoples of India. Rather, my findings affirm much of the research already done by native followers of Jesus as to the importance of incarnational, anti-institutionalized movements of Christ followers among the urban and indigenous people of India.**

**Indians have profoundly spiritual roots. They are perhaps the people group who has most ardently pursued understanding the divine and the meaning of life (McGavran, 1955, p. 63). Indians share this deep cultural, social, and religious heritage that is characterized by a complex and diverse set of belief systems. These varieties of beliefs and ritual practices have come to be known as the blanket religion of Hinduism (Pillai, 1998, p. 43-44).**

**Engaging with the vast labyrinth of beliefs and practices known as Hinduism is not the goal of this paper. Neither is there an intention to discredit the devotion of Hindus nor to say their beliefs are meritless. Instead, the aim of this research is to illustrate the potential for Jesus to transform the lives of those raised within the influence of Hinduism.**

**It is important to note that certain Hindu principles such as dharma, karma, and caste are laid out in this paper as generalizations for Indian society. These principles are generalizations and do not apply to the whole of the Indian people. This is far too brief a study to address all the complex cultural details associated with even one of the above listed concepts.**

**Therefore, all references to aspects of Hindu mythology and philosophy are by no means comprehensive. On the contrary, they are but scraping the surface of centuries long traditions that have shaped a millennia-old civilization. Any mention of these cultural elements is to give context to aid the reader’s understanding as to why the principles of Jesus are highly impactful on the life of the Hindu.**

### Partner Organization

I have partnered with Delhi House Society, a Delhi-based NGO focused on holistic development for the poor and destitute of the city. With their supervision and the help of their community development workers, the bulk of this research was made possible.

### Ethical Considerations

As a foreigner, it was necessary to take certain precautions throughout my research. First, I felt obligated to explain that the end product of my research would be read by numerous people. Though a few of my interviewees received a post secondary education, the majority have no concept of a paper being read outside the context of school.

Therefore, I felt it necessary to ensure that whatever they felt comfortable sharing with me they would be comfortable sharing with a wider audience. There were a few cases where very personal, intimate information was shared. In these cases, I followed up when writing the report to ensure that the interviewees were comfortable with me including their stories in my findings.

Due to the sensitive nature of the information, I made sure that the women were in comfortable settings and that no outsiders were listening in or could disturb them. I made sure to dress appropriately in Indian clothing and if I were interviewing a man, to never be in a room alone with him. For nearly all of the men, I interviewed them in their homes with their families present.

Additionally, I asked each interviewee whether or not they would like me to change their name. While most were all right with their names being reported, a few names have been changed for confidentiality throughout the report.

### Research Methodology

I chose a qualitative approach for my study due to the micro case studies based on interviews and participant observation. This approach was effective for my aim was not to accurately assess something but to pursue a holistic understanding of a complex reality (Desai, 2006, p. 117).

Focusing on qualitative research also seemed appropriate as it is based on being immersed within the research community as I have been in Delhi for the last eighteen months. Therefore, I was able to work from the relationships created within my community and interview people from a place of familiarity rather than suspicion (Desai, 2006, p. 119).

I compiled 26 hours of research from 20 individual, in-depth interviews. All the interviews were either semi formal or structured with each averaging a little over an hour and twenty minutes. Field notes and audio recordings were the primary method of collecting data (see appendices for interview questions). I asked open-ended questions, often letting interviewees go off on five or ten minute stories about their experiences.

This is a valid sample for a qualitative study. The findings are explorative rather than conclusive, discovering what could be analyzed at a much wider breadth.

### **Limitations**

Given the limitations of this study from a twenty-person data sample, the conclusions from research and observations do not provide definitive conclusions. Rather, the stories and data collected provide an outline for the potential ability of the Christian message to transform mindsets within a Hindu framework. The breadth of this topic is massive and could require a lifetime of study. Therefore, this paper takes a micro-lens approach by focusing on common themes impacting people in a Hindu context whose lives have been transformed through the message of Christ.

Choosing the interviewees and the questions to ask is a limiting factor in this study. Due to the time constraints of this project, I was only able to interview the people with whom I had immediate access. Were the study to be opened up to a much wider breadth, I believe the findings would be stronger. In addition, given my limited understanding of the complexity of culture and spiritual beliefs in India, my ability to choose questions that would unveil the most pertinent data was also limited.

My bias of belief in Jesus is evident throughout this study. I entered into the process and interviews expecting there to be stories of Jesus restoring people’s lives because I believe in the transformative power of Jesus. While I believe there to be good and honorable aspects to be found within Hinduism, I have concluded, along with many Indian leaders, that Hinduism is a set of beliefs and practices that has kept Indians in bondage for thousands of years.

Incarnational Style: The data are not perfect. It is far from complete. Yet I believe the present data are valid, despite its limitations. Having lived in Delhi for nearly two years, I believe the relationships I have made with both the organization and the interviewees greatly benefited the results of my research. Had I been a random person asking questions, I believe that many of the stories and insights would not have been shared. However, given that I am a known person in the community and indeed some consider me a close friend, I was trusted with this very sensitive and personal information.

Validation: The integrity of the data is significant based on knowing the integrity of the people who shared it over an extended period. Additionally, the concepts, findings, and analysis were reviewed by the community development workers and staff and found to be valid.

## Literature Review

### Christianity: A Stumbling Block in the Indian Mind

India’s perception of Christianity has been set as a foreign, aggressive, and indulgent religion. While there were real, ardent disciples of Jesus that came to the sub-continent (William Carey among the foremost[[1]](#footnote-1)), India’s main and lasting idea of Christianity was formed through imperialism. Removing the identity of Jesus from the conquering invaders represents a huge obstacle in presenting the Gospel. Not only was imperialism destructive, it paraded the image of Christianity as a foreigner’s religion, a Western religion.

The big difficulty (in bringing his country-men to share his conviction) was that the Christian religion had come to India in Western garb and allied with Western civilization…the onslaught of European civilization had destroyed much that was good and praiseworthy in India and in Indian institutions. Many Hindus had come to look on Christianity as a destructive force and on Jesus as a foreign prophet intent on sapping the very foundation of Hindu society (Staffner, 1987, p. 7).

Pillai recognizes the same negative association with Christianity. The biggest blow received by the Gospel in India was that the Gospel came to be identified with the conquerors and with the materialistic culture of an ungodly world of secularism, which was very unfortunate, especially so, in a religious-minded country like India. (Pillai, pp. 297).

Not just the British, but the Portuguese Roman Catholic Church firmly established Christianity as an imperialist religion (Staffner, 1987, p.106). McGavaran picks up on the same theme. He discuses how the Portuguese, French, and English all contributed to the Indian’s understanding of Christianity as an indulgent religion of materialists. “Lastly, when the white missionary appeared on the shore, as a non-colonist, with a sincere purpose, he could not earn for himself a spiritual image. By then, the Indian mind was set against all white skin”(1979, pp. 38).

Therefore, it is no wonder that, “Since the Christian faith was seen as part and parcel of this aggressive European civilization, *Hindus felt bound to repudiate Christ.* This repugnance unquestionably hinders the progress of the true spirit of Christianity in this country” (Staffner, p. 9). The way Jesus was presented was anything but attractive—it was repugnant.

### Western Christianity an Affront to Indians

In addition to the difficulty of Christianity being introduced in India as a foreign, Western, destructive, and aggressive religion, the very constructs and teachings of Christianity themselves are very strange to Hindus. They are difficult to understand and accept and, often, take a great deal of time until they are understood. George David, a native Indian of Mumbai, states that, “Through the centuries, one of the basic reasons Hindus have been one of the most resistant peoples to the Gospel is the teachings of Hinduism are so contrary to the teachings of the Bible” (David, 1998, p. 79).

Pillai (1998) writes that trying to covert Hindus to Christianity is futile.

Wanting an average Hindu to accept the organized religions of Christendom is only tantamount to bringing his physical existence into the fold of the more materialistic social order where his old religious mind will naturally turn to be hypocritical, carnal, and unscrupulous. Honestly speaking, the religions of India consider proselytization to be meaningless, absurd, rather a vulgarity of the hollow men of empty consciences. So, from the point of view of Indian religions what the religions of Christendom has to offer is only a new materialistic dimension of earthly living with added formalities and platitudes with still more ostentations and pretentions (p. 234).

### First Century Faith

What is needed in an Indian context, therefore, is steering away from the institution of Christianity and focusing in on an authentic expression of Jesus. Pillai (1998), speaks to the necessity of speaking with the power of the Holy Spirit and keeping the Gospel message pure:

It is not the religion of a nation or a culture that is involved in the proclamation of the Gospel but the universal person of Christ is the central theme. Especially in India, this is of greater importance as India developed a patter of profound religionism for about five thousand years. Anything other than the unadulterated Gospel of Christ preached in the power of the Holy Spirit will be of no avail. To keep the purity of the Gospel is of primary importance in the Indian situation. (p. 246).

The apostle Paul encountered this same principle in the Corinthian church. “I am determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). George David (2007) says that Jesus is the key and portraying cultural Christianity will only damage the message of Jesus in India.

Nothing other than the first century Gospel preached in the power of the Holy Spirit with the first century principles of the church can help India to know Christ. Those who do not follow this principle and only manifesting a cultural Christendom are only damaging the cause of Christ. Jesus is the light of the world, but those who come to that great light are led astray by those who stand just below that great light of the world. In India, this has been the greatest problem (p. 314).

### Contextual Necessity

The Indian church need not mirror the church in other parts of the world. When one considers the depth of heritage, complexity, and diversity of the nation, it is evident that Jesus must be integrated contextually into the Indian life. Donald McGavran (1979) writes, “Great India is a company of substantial nations each speaking a different language and some having distinct scripts of their own. The Church in Great India is therefore necessarily a very complex form of the Body of Christ” (p. 248).

In an earlier work, McGavaran (1965) writes on the detriment of institutionalism within Christianity in India: “Overemphasis upon institutions has often retarded rather than forwarded the missionary cause” (p. 250). Staffner (1987) says that steering away from institutionalism and incorporating Jesus into Indian culture are the main challenges. “Today, the task of defending the right of Hindus to follow Christ, without ceasing to be Hindus by culture and community, is equally urgent” (p. 77).

According to McGavran (1965) the two greatest factors influencing people coming to a belief in Jesus are the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit and the workings of humans. The work of God is not, however, an isolated element in church growth, but one that completely interpenetrates the basic human factors (p. 175). The following research findings investigate the ways in which both the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit and workings of man influence people towards Jesus.

### Contrasting Orientation to Deity

George David (2007) writes on the way Hindus relate to the gods.

The reality is their minds are filled with the teachings of Hinduism and their hearts are filled with devotion to various gods and goddesses. Moreover, they are filled with various fears of unknown spiritual powers (p. 67).

He goes on to say that one of the basic reasons that Hindus have historically been one of the most resistant peoples to the Gospel is that the teachings of Hinduism are so contrary to the teachings of the Bible. (George, 2007, p. 79)

For example, Hindus do not believe that relationship with the gods is possible because the gods are mysterious and unfathomable. However, Staffner (1987) writes that God communicates to man his own Spirit, his own nature and life, and thus lifts him to union with himself (p. 182).

Pillai details that much of Hinduism is operated out of fear of the gods rather than love. *Religion and spirituality signified awe of the mystery rather than revelation of the myster*y….worship was not of the one whom we know, but of the unknown and the unreachable (p. 23-24).

As a result of their gods being unreachable, Staffner (1987) describes how Hindus went about understanding the deity. “Each Hindu mythology is the attempt of man's mind to understand God**.** The result of the 100,000 gods is each man's own attempt to quantify the deity” (p. 125).

The need for reconciliation does not exist within Hinduism because the soul is possessed of a worth in its own right (Boyd, 2004, p. 212). However, Paul writes that all men have fallen short of the glory of God and are in need of God’s grace and redemptive salvation (Rom 3:23).

### Slowly, Slowly

Pillai (2001) stresses the importance that mass media evangelization will not be enough to reach a Hindu audience. He says that it is through relationships with believers in Christ that Hindus learn to understand the message of Jesus:

Typically this happens when we are addressing Hindus who have received a consistent witness from Christian friends for three, four, or five years….It is very rare for a Hindu who has had no exposure to the Gospel *or Christians* to respond to the Gospel after a one hour message (p. 66).

He goes on to describe that the most important principle of Christian communication is that it must be incarnational communication. When God communicates his love, he communicates himself in the human life of Jesus. Even today, Christ is revealed to others through the lives of His disciples (Pillai, 2001, p. 101). Transformation in a person’s life is a result of organic connection with believers. The bond of relationship was the bridge over which the faith passed (McGavran, 1955, p. 33).

George David highlights that disciples of Jesus need to emulate Christ’s sacrificial nature and to have no limits when it comes to extending ourselves to love and serve Hindus:

Greater love have no man than this-that a man lay down his life for his friends. One of the greatest failures of missions is theunwillingness to be flexible, thus creating a barrier for the communication of the Gospel which keeps people from hearing the truth (p. 102).

## The Urban Immigrant Community

All of the interviewees currently live in Delhi, though many originated from other states in India (see map in appendices). Each of the interviewees was raised in a Hindu context. At some point, either they or their families had an encounter with Jesus or his disciples and started following him. The goal of this study was to discover what the influencing factors or experiences were in their life that led them to make a decision to follow Jesus.

The interviewees come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. I was unable to discover the caste of a number of the interviewees as it is a sensitive topic and as disciples of Jesus they no longer follow caste. From observation and gathering background information, I was able to establish that at least three are high caste, six are other backward caste[[2]](#footnote-2) and two are Dalit, or without-caste.

My interview questions focused on which principles from Christianity were resonant or dissonant with a Hindu framework of thinking. In other words, which qualities or stories really resonated with them? Which concepts were really difficult to understand? What elements of life have influenced their conception of truth?

Fig 1: Interviewee Names and Origins (for full information see appendix)



## Research Results

### Relationship and Hospitality: Plowing the Field

There is significant resistance for Hindus hearing and understanding the message of Jesus. Hindu worldview, thought process, and orientation to life is vastly different to the principles and constructs of Jesus. George David, an Indian national born and raised in Bombay has been laboring for over 30 years in North India to spread the Gospel to Hindus. David (1998) writes that, "To interact with Hindu thought, to replace it and change it, is a long, drawn out process” (79).

David emphasizes the need for work to be done *before* sharing Jesus with people of Hindu background. David (1998) uses the imagery in Matthew 13 of the need for a field to be plowed before it is sown. He refers to this as pre-evangelism:

“Sometimes the minds and hearts of the people to whom we are communicating the Gospel is like ground that has not been plowed. Sometimes we can do nothing about it, but there are times when we can and should do something to plow the field….When we labor among Hindus, much of the spiritual land is like new land. But we take the seed of the Gospel and straightaway we sow the seed without thinking whether it is plowed ground, stony ground, or ground filled with weeds. Without any consideration we just go and sow. That means we are working like unwise farmers-no farmer would do the things we are doing in our evangelism” (David, 1998, 82-84).

Sadu Sundar Singh, a famousChristian *guru* of the early 20th century also uses the field metaphor. When asked why, in many of his teachings, he did not mention the Bible or the name of Christ, Sadu Sundar Singh replied, “The people to whom I am speaking are Hindus. Their minds and hearts are like a field that is unplowed. Which farmer will sow in his field without plowing first?”[[3]](#footnote-3)

One of the principle means of plowing the field revealed by the interviewees is through hospitality. Hospitality is defined as, “the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In the New Testament, hospitality in Greek is literally translated as, “love of strangers.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Opening up one’s home and showing love to neighbors is particularly significant in India as sharing food together is a core element of relationship. Hospitality is a means for building relationship.

Nearly every interviewee discussed the futility of preaching the Gospel without first having a relationship established. Six people independently mentioned the need for having an open door to introduce Christ, and how one of the primary methods of obtaining an open door is through relationship. Dr. Janaman Swalsing, a pastor in Delhi who has trained over 500 other pastors in the city, says, “The opening gate (to sharing Jesus with Hindus) is relationship. This needs to be built. It can be built through anything that is good, with a cup of tea, or sharing a meal.”

Yana is a community leader and trainer working for the past twelve years with the women in Zamrudpur, a slum community in Delhi. Yana says it is imperative to create relational ties with the women before sharing anything about Jesus. “First I have to make friends. You have to go in deeper. You have to ask her what is going on with her life. Sit with her. Listen to her. Have a meal with her. Visit her when she is sick.”

Faniel, a community leader, development worker, and pastor stresses the importance of not becoming discouraged with the amount of time it can take for an open door to be created. “You can’t push people towards Christ. You can’t make them accept him.” Instead, he urges, “Involve yourself with the people. Once you are involved with the people, you earn the right to speak about why you are doing the things you do. Speaking is far down the line, once they have opened the door. Better if they open the door, because they are going to be open to listening. You can’t bash down the door, you can’t say everything in a moment. Let your words be seasoned with salt so that you may make the most of every opportunity[[6]](#footnote-6).”

Dr. Swalsing cautions against entering into the relationship with an agenda. “Breaking the bridge is forming the relationship. I identify myself as a Christian at the beginning but you must take notice and be respectful of the culture. Be respectful to the timing. Don’t come with an agenda. Make it clear that you don’t want to get something from them. In my 20 years of experience, I have seen how many times we (Christians) make the mistake of entering a situation, relationship, or community with an agenda. Thinking somehow I am going to win this person doesn’t work. Be faithful to each other. Be a real friend. Be honest.”

In answer to a question about what the most harmful things Christians can do, Nivya, an enterprising young leader who has started her own church in a very poor neighborhood says, “If you are sharing in the church, always give people something to eat. That way at least people can come to eat. Hearing comes by faith. They have to hear. If we keep pushing all the time, the person can have a bad relationship with you. You can’t force it. You can do harm. Speak the truth but be respectful.”

In India, each religion has a different greeting. Hindus greet one another by saying “Namaste”; Muslims greet one another saying, “Namaskar”; Christians greet each other saying, “Jai Maseekee”, meaning praise the Lord. Shallu shares a story about a Hindu woman in her neighborhood. “Daily in life, I don’t identify with being a Christian, but if I have a relationship with them, I go slowly, slowly, slowly.” She goes on to share that there is one lady in her neighborhood who greets her every morning. Because Shallu knows that she is a Hindu, she says “Namaste” to be respectful as the lady is much older than she. Recently, however, Shallu says that the woman has started saying, “Jai Maseekee” when she greets Shallu. “You have to wait for the opportunity. Then, you take the open door like with this lady, “Shallu explains.

Included in this concept of offering hospitality is being present for people when they are experiencing times of crisis. Yana discusses the importance of visiting ladies when they are sick. “People are always wanting and willing to be prayed for,” she says. Faniel speaks of praying for those who have lost their jobs or become alcoholics. Kheem illustrates the need to be with people who have undergone a death or loss.

Expounding on this idea, Dr. Wolf says, “Weep with those who weep. Don’t feel like you need to say anything. Just be with them. Before you leave, ask if you can pray for them. Pray something short and commend them to God. Then walk away. While likely nothing will happen right away, for the rest of their life, they will remember that.”

Conclusions: Engage people in relationship through hospitality. Eat with them, walk with them, pray for them. Don’t force Jesus on them. Be a real friend, without any other agenda. Wait until they open the door. Then you can talk to them about Jesus.

### Sowing Seeds of Stories

According to the interviewees, it was not enough to simply hear the message of Jesus—they needed to see it in action and experience it through the lives of Jesus followers. “People can know the story, but they know the real evidence through the lives of Christians,” Kheem says.

The story of Jesus is not merely told through words but through the lives and deeds of those who follow him. “It has to sow from your life more than your words. People want to see the impact of Jesus on our lives,” Dr. Swalsing says. Faniel continues: “Before you speak, before you share the Bible, you should show it from your life. The most valuable thing you can do is show Christ in your life. Paul talks about the Christian life being like a fragrance[[7]](#footnote-7). It is recognizable. People will smell Jesus from our lives,” Faniel says.

Nivya adds an additional layer that not only do people want to see change occur in your own life, but they want to see change in the lives of your family. “They have to see change in your household,” Nivya says, speaking of her neighbors and friends to whom she wants to share Jesus. “If there is no change in your household, they will point back at you.”

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### Heli: A Story of Redemption

An example of the effect this life change or transformation can be seen through the life of Heli. Heli contracted polio at an early age. The name Heli, which is short for “helicopter”, was given him for the way he swung his legs over his head while he walked on his hands. Having lost his parents at a young age, Heli went to live with an aunt and uncle who treated him like a slave. Despite his physical handicap, he was beaten and given all of the labor-intensive house duties. He was never allowed to go to school and he slept underneath the bed the rest of the family slept on. “I did not receive any love,” Heli remembers. “I thought, ‘I want to run away. I want to build myself. So one day I left and didn’t say goodbye.”

Heli came to Delhi and started begging in the old city at red lights. He began sniffing glue, (a common street drug because it is cheap and readily available). “People took advantage of me because I did not have a good mind,” Heli says. “I became their slave. They made me pay money to them with no reason.” He tried to sleep out in front of shops but the police would come and chase him away. Though he can’t remember how old he is or how long he was on the street, Heli believes it was a period of 8-10 years.

After this time, a group of f*erguinis* who had started a center for food and education for the street people of Old Delhi invited Heli to visit the *ashram* where they worked. It was at the *ashram* that Heli was introduced to the person of Jesus, for the fergungis were Jesus followers. “I knew the name but not who he was or what he meant,” Heli says, referring to Jesus before going to the ashram. “But when I saw a different way of life (at the ashram) I decided I wanted to go and live there,” Heli explains.

Heli speaks to the transformation that took place in his life while he was at the ashram. “I was eating the food out of the trash that people threw away. For that is what I was like, the trash on the side of the road people have forgotten. But they (the people working at the ashram) were so good to me. They gave me so much love. This was not important to them. I was important to them.”

Today Heli not only has a new outlook on life, but thanks to many surgeries and the dedication of the ashram staff, he is able to walk with the use of a cane and leg supports. Heli loves to share his testimony of what Jesus has done in his life. “This is a good story for the people,” Heli says. “I went through lots of situations and have lots of experiences. I see the people on the street and I know what he is feeling because I was in their situation. People are very attracted to me and want to talk to me because they know I know what kind of people they are. Today, those same shop owners that called the police for me sleeping outside their shops today invite me inside to eat lunch with them.”

### Removing the Weeds

Many of the individuals interviewed had previously negative experiences with Christians that gave them a distorted understanding of Jesus. In order for them to be to open to hearing about Jesus, the weeds formed form these negative experiences had to be removed. One of the primary ways the distortions were removed was through direct contact with devoted disciples of Jesus.

Yana’s story was filled with weeds. She experienced intense verbal and physical abuse at the hands of her family who, among other things, professed a belief in Catholicism. She remembers hearing the name of Jesus as a child. “I knew the story of Jesus but I didn’t know what was true,” she explains. After many years, a friend brought Yana to a gathering of Jesus followers. There she was prayed for and experienced unprecedented love and acceptance. “I had never known love like this. I knew it must be Jesus,” Yana says with tears in her eyes.

Kheem, a 40-year-old man from Uttar Pradesh living in Delhi, grew up surrounded by missionaries. They embodied a Christianity he wanted nothing to do with. “I saw their life and knew they were false.” His father not only worked for the missionaries for over forty years and was never reimbursed for his toil, but they also promised Kheem money that was never paid.

All throughout the years of his childhood and later as an adult, these missionaries travelled around rural villages proclaiming the Gospel and showing the Jesus video. Speaking for him and his family Kheem says, “We knew about the Jesus movie, but we weren’t interested. We did not trust missionaries because of what happened. We did not trust Christians.”

After a few years of doing different jobs, Kheem came to work for a foreign couple living and working in Delhi. This foreign couple were true disciples of Jesus. Through experiencing their kindness and love, Kheem came to have a completely different understanding of who Jesus is. “Through them I understood what is a follower of Jesus. I understood what love is. I understood that the other people were not real missionaries.”

George David (1997) articulates this concept that it truly necessary for Hindus to experience the lives of believers in Christ in order to understand the Gospel:

 Our duty as evangelists is to demonstrate the power and beauty of the Gospel in our lives as practicing disciples and through our communities of practicing disciples. Only then do we convey the Gospel in ways that are digestible and meaningful to our Hindu friends (p. 76).

### Jesus’ Story: Historical and Real

Another resulting theme from the interviews is the impact of Christ as a historical reality on people of Hindu background. I had anticipated that this would be a factor; however, I had not anticipated the extent to which Jesus being a historical figure would influence people from a Hindu background.

“All throughout the Old Testament God makes promises. In the New Testament Jeuss makes promises. You can see throughout history how God kept his promises. This is so different to Hinduism where there are no promises. There is no trust. Jesus was faithful to God, and God is faithful,’ Abishek shares.

The importance of promises was brought up multiple times throughout the interviews. In particular, the promise and fulfillment of the resurrection was a key influence for many. “Why should I sell you Jesus Christ?” Dr. Swalsing recounts of a conversation at his Bible study[[8]](#footnote-8). “Buddha did not claim to have a virgin birth. Mohammed never claimed he would die and come back to life. Only Jesus did.”

Thom Wolf shares similar thoughts: “Sai Baba[[9]](#footnote-9) did predict he would rise from the dead, and when he died his followers were disappointed when he failed to do so. Only Jesus predicted it and performed it. Because Jesus’s life was real, the uniqueness is the resurrection.”

Rohit also mentions the resurrection when asked what the deciding factor was for him in choosing to follow Jesus. “Resurrection is not difficult to believe. Because he is God he can do anything. Jesus came, Jesus is the only one who rose again. Every person fears death. Even the rich will lose their life. Only Jesus rose again. This made me think, ‘Jesus is the real God’.”

In answer to the same question, Satya declares, “Jesus came to earth to save. Krishna is reborn many times on earth, but every time he comes he kills or steals or hides. We have a God who sacrifices himself for us. Kali is a god who demands children be sacrificed for her. We have history. They have mystery.”

### The Seed Gradually Grows

There is no way to predict how a person will respond to hearing the story of Jesus. Every person and every situation is different. On reflecting how God chooses to work in people’s lives, Keshav reflects, “The Gospel is like a bucket of fruit. One person might be touched by an apple, another by a banana. Everyone is impacted differently. And so you need the whole basket of fruit because who knows which one God will use to touch people?”

Nivya became a follower of Jesus eight years ago. Her brother has since come to believe in Christ, but the rest of her family remains committed Hindus. Nivya portrays the slow process of change in her family to be like that of an old tree:

“My family is like a tree with deep roots. When the tree is old, it takes time to cut. With one cut it will not just fall. The older the tree is, the longer it takes to cut down. You have to continue until you see the cracks.”

She goes on to describe how now she is beginning to see “cracks” in her family. Her grandma, for example, now asks her to pray for things because, “I know your God will answer,” she says. Another very significant change has come about recently. Nivya has been asking her family for years if they will allow her to marry a Christian man, but they have always insisted she marry a Hindu. Just this month, her father has agreed that she can marry a Christian man. “This shows me that even though they don’t say they believe, they can see the good. I know one day they will say yes to Jesus. It will just take time.”

George David (1998) speaks to this process of time needed for many Hindus to understand the Gospel:

“Evangelizing our Hindu friends involves communicating the Gospel message to them with words and without words by our actions…This process demands a great deal of patience. It may take several months or even several years” (David, 1998, p. 75).

Nivya also speaks to the idea of keeping things simple, not over complicating them through complex language. “Speak on their level. They are coming from the slum. Feed them *daal[[10]](#footnote-10)*. Give them little spiritual truths. Later they will eat *roti[[11]](#footnote-11)*. Just pray for them. It is up to the Lord to slowly change their heart.”

Shulpa gives an example of how the Lord slowly changed her heart. “Before, I did not know what was my life. After knowing Jesus, he starting showing me what was important. I used to think stealing is fine, it doesn’t matter. After knowing Jesus, it was like my mind turned on. Before I didn’t think. After, I thought about everything. I thought, I should give back what I stole.”

### Power Encounters: The Seed Multiplies

While it has been stated that the journey to Jesus out of a Hindu background is often long and slow, there is one notable exception that surfaced in the interviews. Those who either personally experienced or had someone in their family experience a power encounter with God started following Jesus almost immediately. Therefore, a power encounter is not only an unanticipated result from the interviews, it also superseded the other results in that it is not dependent on any of the others. Hospitality, storytelling, historical relevance, and mindset change are all interconnected and part of a gradual process of a person coming to believe in Jesus—without power encounters, that is. Those who have experienced a power encounter of some kind, the most common being healing, answered prayer or exorcism, appear to jump everything and arrive at an almost instant belief in Jesus.

To illustrate, I will share three of the five stories of power encounters found in the interviews.

*Faniel’s Father*

When Faniel’s father was 21 years old, he was playing soccer. A ball was kicked towards him and Faniel’s father tried to block it but over extended his leg. From that point on, his leg hurt. Many days the pain was so bad that he could not go to work. People asked him if he was taking medications and he would always respond with frustration that he had tried everything: medications, temple visits, witchdoctors, and nothing had worked.

At that time, Faniel’s father was invited to a prayer meeting. He received prayer for his leg and immediately the pain was gone. On the way home he threw the painkillers away and said he would never take them again. And sure enough, from that night on, Faniel’s father has never experienced the pain again.

Faniel’s father gave his life to Jesus and he and his whole “joint family,” as Faniel referred to it, started attending the house gathering of believers who had prayed for him. But there was pushback from the kingdom of darkness. Faniel recounts: “One of my aunties was possessed by an evil spirit. The evil spirit said out loud from my auntie, ‘You left me and so I want to kill her.’ We took her to the church and the pastor prayed and she was fine.”

Shortly thereafter, Faniel’s brother died and both his parents were in the hospitalized on different occasions. The family blamed everything that was happening on Faniel “turning Christian.” Yet as Faniel retells, “My father is a faithful person. He always hangs onto hope. A man came from New Zealand and offered to take my father and mother and me to work there. My father told him, ‘My life is to my family. If they turn to Christ, then I am free, and I will come.’ It has been thirty years now, and my whole joint family is in Christ.”

*Kheem’s vision*

As has been described previously, Kheem was raised by a Hindu family but had considerable exposure to both Christian missons and the story of Jesus. He came to work in the house of Julie and Bill (not their real names), devout followers of Jesus. This removed the misconceptions Kheem had of Christians that were formed by his ill-treatment throughout his life at the hands of other Christians, but it was not until he had an encounter with the Lord, that he himself would follow Jesus.

A few years back, Kheem’s father was sick. He died thirteen days after having a brain hemorrhage. Kheem says that though he is sure his father believed in Jesus, he never really talked about it. Therefore, when it came to bury him, the family were doing Hindu rituals and Kheem got very angry. “People were not treating his body right. I knew my dad would not want this. Jesus would not want this. That is when I realized I believed in Jesus and did not want to be a Hindu.” Yet it was not until after an encounter that was to shortly follow that Kheem decided to fully surrender his life to the Lord.

“Three or four days after this, I saw in a dream tall mountains with snow, white, white snow. There was green grass on the mountains, and under the mountain were great caves. Inside the caves a man was cleaning. I asked the man, where can we learn about the Bible? The man looked at me and said, ‘You only have to learn seven things.’ But then the dream ended. He never said what the seven things are. So I returned to Delhi (his father’s funeral was in Uttar Pradesh). Julie and Bill were away, so I asked some other people and they couldn’t give me any answers to my dream. Then Julie and Bill returned and I told them my dream. As soon as I had finished, Bill went and got something. When he came back, I opened up a folder and it said, ‘Seven things about Christianity.’ It was then that I thought, how can he know this? I have asked other people and they knew nothing. Only God could know this. It was then I realized that God was really real.”

*Sam’s Father-*

In response to a question about what is the deciding factor of someone giving their life to Jesus, Sam replies, “Miracles and people asking for prayer. In open prayer, when people are together, fasting and praying, and worshiping, that is when miracles happen.”

By way of illustration, Sam shares a story about his family. Sam’s family is from a village in the state of Gujarat. His father was almost totally deaf for all of his life. He had been to many doctors and daily applied some medicines that they gave him. People told him it was not going to get better. Sam recounts, “When my father started believing in God, he would walk across the mountains to another village to a church congregation because there was none in our village. People gave him a hard time because he still was not healed, but my father kept going faithfully. Every day he prayed that God would return him his hearing. Slowly, slowly, he started to hear. Today, he can hear just fine. It is a miracle and everyone in our village knows.”

## Analysis of Findings

### The Importance of Relationship

Relationships with Jesus’s followers are significant in Indian culture because they provide a window for Hindus to experience life outside of a culture ruled by *dharma*[[12]](#footnote-12) and *karma*[[13]](#footnote-13). In the West, karma is seen as a positive force weighing good against bad. However, karma in its original Vedic context is seeing everything around you as just and balanced—everyone gets what is deserved[[14]](#footnote-14).

Both *karma* and *dharma* have a strong emphasis on the self and the need for personal salvation. When a person’s “good or bad actions determine their future mode of existence” (Walker, 1990, p. 114), there is an intense focus on the betterment of one’s self. Dr. Swalsing, illustrates this principle as it is seen in daily life: “On the roads you can see everyone wanting the right of way and on the walls you can see the scriptures that India follows: my way, my corruption, my will. No one makes way for the other.”

Indian sociologist Naipaul (1977) writes that this is Hinduism’s “greatest flaw”; that in the ideal of self-realization, there is no idea of a contract between a man and a man (p. 132). “The attitude this fosters within Hinduism is one of non-doing, non-interference, and social indifference” (p. 25).

Therefore, in the midst of this environment of self-salvation and social indifference, relationships have considerable power because devotees of Jesus can demonstrate lives characterized by love, service, and graciousness. This love[[15]](#footnote-15) and kindness are not motivated by obligation or to accrue good works but by a desire to serve.

Service is very significant in India, as the majority of the population understands service through the lens of caste[[16]](#footnote-16). To serve not out of duty but out of love and without thought for personal benefit is unfathomable in India. “Hindus don’t understand grace. It’s a give-get world we live in,” says Priyanka. In his duty-bound, karma-controlled culture, the notion of Jesus as a suffering servant[[17]](#footnote-17) makes no sense.

In India, lower castes serve the higher castes[[18]](#footnote-18). It is not allowed to change or break with one’s caste[[19]](#footnote-19) and its specific dharma[[20]](#footnote-20). Service is obligation-bound. Contrast this concept of service with Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians to emulate Jesus:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross (Phil 2:5-8).

Only through relationships are Hindus able to comprehend Jesus, as they witness disciples of Christ emulating his mindset and serving others in love. Seeing this very different style of life sparks interest. As Kheem says, “Many people are just not interested to hear about other cultures. I was also not interested. But when we slowly grow and have a friend who believes in Jesus, then they introduce things, a different way of life, and slowly, the interest starts to grow.”

Shulpa says that this difference within Jesus’s followers flows from the nature of God:

God is a graceful, compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love. In his love, He gives himself. His disciples are to serve and give in that same love. That is the best way we can communicate the Gospel. Not through words as much as through living with people, and serving them as Christ loved and served us. Service is compulsory in India. No one serves if they don’t have to. Serving out of love and not duty is a powerful way to break barriers with Hindus.

Engaging in this kind of relationship allows Hindus to see and experience the undeserved, grace-filled love of Christ. There is no grace in karma. “As we have seen the Indian mind is one which is strongly inclined to the concept of good actions according to which one’s life is shaped. The emphasis lies on man is what he does. But the Gospel of Christ comes from a diametrically opposite premise, which is that action reflects what man is. It is not the doing that determines, rather it is the being that provides the basis for doing (Pillai, 2001, p. 32).

There is freedom within this “diametrically opposed premise” from the control of a karma-centric culture. However, to be able to fully understand it, people need to witness the effects through the lives of Jesus’ disciples.

### Incarnation

The interviews underscore that Hindus need to see and experience grace, humble service, and Jesus’s love through the lives of his followers to be able to understand God. The difference between the worldviews is so vast that Hindus require exposure to Jesus disciples to comprehend God’s nature and character. As Heli relates, “I knew the name [of Jesus], but not who he was or what he meant. When I saw a different way of life at the *ashram*[[21]](#footnote-21), I decided I want to go there. They cared for me and showed me love when I was lost and dirty. Now I know who Jesus is.”

Yana relates the importance of sharing Christ through your life. “Your life story is your most powerful evangelistic tool,” she shares. Twelve years after turning to Jesus and leaving her abusive family, Yana is now a leader in the slum community of Zamrudpur. She is a trusted confidant among the women as well as a teacher and friend. Many of the women share their similar pasts of grief and abuse with Yana. “When I speak with people, I say, ‘My story and your story are the same but totally different—my story ends with Jesus.”

Dr. Swalsing shares that living uprightly before the Lord and men has an impact even on those who are reluctant to change. “People really do not want to change their religion,” Janaman says. “People are not open to listen. Even so, there is power in the honesty and truthfulness of Christian lives that stand as story.”

Indian, George David (2007), writes that followers of Christ need to realize that incarnational living is paramount in sharing Jesus with Hindus. He says that Jesus followers do not do enough work to plow the field and yet complain that there is no fruit or responsiveness among the people. He says that to be most effective, believers should live within a particular *jati[[22]](#footnote-22),* adjusting to their culture, language, thought patterns, and decision making processes so as to best become a part of their community.

Sometimes we are tempted to think that doing all of this is not our business. We couldn’t be more mistaken….The most important principle of Christian communication is that it must be incarnational communication. When God communicates his love, he communicates himself in the human life of Jesus. Even today, Christ is revealed to others through the lives of His disciples (p. 101).

### Redeeming Love: An Outflow of Relationship

Within relationships and incarnational living, interviewees describe that above all else, it is important to love. Though it presents itself in various ways, love is the single most influential factor leading people to follow Jesus. Laxmi explains that, “Being loved changes people. You can see the difference on the street. One child is content. Another child is lost. What is the difference? The first child is loved.”

Satya continues the metaphor on the transformative influence of love. “Being loved is like filling up a jar. When the jar is empty, loving others can be challenging. But as the jar is filled, love begins to flow out of them.”

As interviewees began to feel the love of Jesus, they experienced a change within themselves. Kheem reflects on his personal change after working for years in the home of Bill and Julie. “Before, I worked because I had to. I needed money. Now, I am not working for money. I am working because I love.”

A person who is loved experiences an inherent sense of value and dignity. Faniel expands on God’s value for each individual through the parable of the lost sheep: “The Shepherd left the 99 just to find that one lost sheep. To know that God is not coming to scare you, he is coming to find you and to bring you back safely; to know that you are *valuable—*this is powerful for the Hindu.”

Yana shares of this same sense of dignity and the impact it had on her life. “For so many years I did not feel love,” Yana explains. “For so many years all I knew was torture. Because of this, I’m thinking my life is dirty water. But Jesus has made the lotus flower[[23]](#footnote-23) come up from the dirty water in my life.”

Thom Wolf, an educator and sociologist living in New Delhi, reflects on the Biblical concepts that particularly resonate with Hindus:

It has been remarkable to hear the intuitive, instant and inclusive insight people have that God created *me* with dignity. Both educated and uneducated Indians see this and articulate it. The village women, isolated and illiterate, can articulate this. ‘*I am special to God’.* This is not a theological truth—this is personal and concrete and cannot be taken away.

### The Known and the Unknown

Another crucial element revealed by the interviews is the revelatory nature of God. Relationship is possible with God because God has made himself *known*. Indian tradition understands the gods very differently. Rohit illustrates this difference. “For you to have relationship with me, you must know me. For me to have relationship with God, I must know God. But the Hindu does not think about relationship with the gods for the gods are not known. They are mystical. They are mythical. They are images.”

Jaqueline explains that Jesus’ intimacy and personability are distinguishing factors from the Hindu understanding of deity. “Jesus came to save us. He lived with us and he had relationship with us. Hindus don’t understand this because the gods aren’t interested in relationship with humans. Service and obedience, yes. But they don’t care about you as a person.”

In answer to what influenced him to follow Christ, Faniel says, “God is known. You know this passage in the New Testament where the people are making altars ‘to an unknown God’[[24]](#footnote-24)? This is India. India is the land of gods, yet Hindus have no idea who God is. They have no personal experience with God. Abraham, Moses, Paul, John, they all had an encounter with God. Even Mohammed only speaks about God. Muslims follow this, not a relationship with God. Only the Bible teaches about relationship with God.”

This is a radical notion to the Hindu mind whose concept of god is anything but known. “God is nothing that is,” the Veda describes. He is non-being and unknowable. Because of this, India’s people throughout the centuries have tried to realize god through myths, legends, and natural, visible things. Religion and spirituality for the Hindu “signified the awe of the mystery rather than the revelation of the mystery…Worship was not of the one whom we know but of the unknown and the unreachable” (Pillai, 2001, p. 23-24).

“We have hundreds of thousands of gods in Hinduism,” Kheem shares. “We don’t know who god is…People know that Vishnu, Ram, and Krishna are only stories. There is no proof. How do people believe these stories?”

In light of the inability to know God, theologian Paul Staffner (1983) writes, “Each Hindu mythology is the attempt of man’s mind to understand God. The result of the 100,000 gods is each man’s attempt to quantify the deity” (p. 125). Pillai describes the process of how the Hindu goes about relating to god:

The only alternative for him was to find God in his own mind. This he did, and thus he came to the beginning of millions of gods each in relation to the needs and aspirations of different peoples and cultures. In other words, God became the product of the fertile imagination of different people in different situations of life. Since there was no revealed God, the only alternative for each tribe and each culture was to create a god of its own. So each man created a god, each in his own image*.* (Pillai, 2001, p. 24).

Christ came to make known that which had previously been unknown (Rom 16:25-26). The prospect of knowing and having relationship with God is very strange to the Hindu mind centered on the unfathomability and mysticism of the gods. Yet as Faniel describes, being able to know God and relate to him is largely responsible for why he and others have chosen to follow Christ.

### History or Mystery?

*“From the unreal, lead me to the real” (Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, 1:3:28).*

The interviewees also reported that Jesus coming in history is significant for Hindus. “Hindus don’t believe history is important because they don’t believe it matters to the gods,” Deepak explains. “Jesus came in history. This shows that both life and history are important. Jesus says there is meaning in this life but Hindus say we must be freed from life.”

Nivya emphasized that history was central in her decision to follow Jesus. “In Hinduism there are no promises,” Nivya says. “The Bible has so many promises. There is a history. This happened. This is real. This led me to believe it is true.”

Shallu remembers how she heard the stories of both Jesus and the Hindu gods growing up. The difference she describes is that the Jesus stories were *real*. “This is not mythology. This is a real story. Jesus is a part of history. This is true, not stories made up by *sadhus.* Realizing this, I only wanted to hear stories about Jesus.”

History is especially relevant and purposeful in the life and teachings of Jesus. Hindu tradition, however, holds the opposite:

According to Vedic literature, there is no historical intervention of God; history has no purpose**.** There is in Indian religions no historical revelation and no redemption of creation; there is only the annihilation of creation. It denies the reality of the world; its existence is deceptive, and its appearance purposeless. In this sense, the Gospel is definitely new and inconceivable for the mind of Indian religions because of its revelatory nature and historicity of its foundation (Pillai, 2001, p. 241).

Not only do the historical and divine fail to intersect in Hindu mythology, they fall in separate spectrums of reality. Within Hinduism, the natural world comprised of matter is known as *maya* and *angyana,* illusion and ignorance. Hinduism views life like a long dream that ends in awakening to *satyam*, the true reality[[25]](#footnote-25). Satyamis unconcerned with history as all happenings within history are characterized by change and lack permanence.

This belief in ignorance gives way to a sense of futility:

Madness or sanity, suffering or happiness seemed all the same...In the rush of eternity nothing matters. Life and the world and all this is passing; why really bother about anything? Things are neither particularly right nor wrong but just balance themselves. There is really no need to interfere or do anything (Ilaiah, 2002, p. 68).

Interviewees described how the difference in mindset between Jesus coming in history to make known and reveal and Hinduism’s emphasis on illusion and denial of reality was very impactful in their decision to follow Jesus. “Why even care about your life if the world is maya? My life has no meaning. Knowing Jesus, my life has purpose. I have a reason to live,” Sonia shared.

### Power Encounters

Down through the centuries, when miracles happen, people turn to Jesus. The significance of healings and power encounters in India, however, can only be grasped with some understanding of how deities are viewed in India. Many of the gods in Hindu mythology have capricious natures. Shiva is known as the slayer, Durga the destroyer, and Kali “she who is death[[26]](#footnote-26).”

Sonia explained this in more detail. “Each year we have the festivals and times of *puja.* People worship, not because they believe the gods to be good but because they are afraid. We know they are bad and they can hurt people. That is why we are afraid.” One of the ways the gods are thought to harm people is by inflicting diseases or sickness on them. Thus, people try to control and appease these spirits so they will not hurt them (David, 2007, p. 80).

If a child is sick in India, his parents go to the temple and make an offering to the gods, asking for his healing. This may sound little different than a person praying to Jesus for the healing of a sick loved one. However, there is a crucial difference. Jesus heals with the intent to restore[[27]](#footnote-27). A person healed by Shiva, Durga, or Kali is momentarily delivered but indefinitely *bound.* Abishek, a practicing Hindu for more than thirty years illustrated this.“A bracelet around your wrist, or a tie around your heart, it makes no difference. The gods may heal you but you are not free. You are only a slave in even deeper bondage.”

Jaqueline recounted a story of one of her friends: “Every year we have the festival of Shivarastri[[28]](#footnote-28). My friend’s eldest boy for twenty years was going but this year he couldn’t go. The family was scared because the gods would be angry. If we do not obey, the gods curse us.”

David George portrays the relationship his fellow Indian brothers and sisters have with the deities: **“**The reality is that their minds are filled with the teachings of Hinduism and their hearts are filled with devotion to various gods and goddesses. Moreover, they are filled with various fears of unknown spiritual powers” (David, 2007, p. 67).

When people witness the power of Jesus at work to heal, restore, and make new, they recognize that there is a different power at work than the ones they fearfully worship or try to appease. Staffner describes people in India as being shocked at the creativity of Jesus’s miracles:

## People were startled by the fact that Jesus Christ had creative power. He merely had to command things and they happened. He told a leper, “Be clean” and at once, leprosy left him and he was clean (Mark 1:40-42). He told a man with a crippled hand, “Stretch out your hand” and he stretched it out clean. He stopped a funeral procession and told the dead man: “Get up” and he stood up alive (Staffner, 1983, p. 185).

### Life Transformation

As reviewed earlier, it is vital for Hindus to be in relationship with disciples of Christ in order that, through the disciple’s life, they might experience Jesus’ love and freedom. It is, however, perhaps even more important for Hindus to witness the transformation of one of their own community members.

Satya explains the importance of this within an Indian context. “It is easy to think of Jesus as the god of the foreigners,” she explains. “But when a family member or friend suddenly stops drinking, or abusing their wife, you wonder what changed? Then maybe you know Jesus is change. You realize without Jesus he drinks or abuses his wife. But with Jesus, he changes. This is powerful.”

“People want to see change, not preaching,” says Shallu, a 29-year-old woman raised in a Hindu family now following Jesus. “Hindus think all gods are the same. If you come with the Bible, I won’t listen to you. I will just compare your god. Gods are one in a million here. But your life speaks for itself. They want to see *change* in your life.”

Hina’s life reflects this principle of change. She received Christ five years ago and though her family faithfully visits the temple weekly to worship a variety of gods, Hina says she has noticed gradual changes in them. “My grandma asks me to pray for things because she tells me, “I know your God will answer,” Hina explains. When she first became a believer, her parents would not let her out to attend church or Bible studies. Now, it is almost the reverse. Whenever there is a choice between hanging out with friends from church or friends from school, Hina now reports, “My parents prefer that I spend time with my friends from church because they know they are safe and good people.”

Some might view such changes as insignificant, but cumulatively they are transformative. As Kheem says, “Slowly, slowly, slowly the change comes. When you see someone change for good, you remember, and you want that for yourself, too. But many times the process is very slow with a lot of falling.”

Such life transformation is a powerful influence on Hindus. As Thom Wolf says, “When a person follows Jesus and changes, the people who know them can see it and know it. It is the argument that cannot be out argued.” One of the reasons this is particularly significant in India is because the Hindu tradition does not require any kind of life transformation. “The kind of faith that involved commitment, life, and transformation was totally absent...Religious tradition in India did not demand regeneration nor transformation of being” (Pillai, 2001, p. 233).

Indian tradition is diametrically opposed to Christ’s claims. He came to redeem the whole of creation (Rom 8:22). Hinduism posits the annihilation of creation (Pillai, 2001, p. 241). The redeeming life that Jesus offers, is therefore, thoroughly intriguing to Hindus:

Now this is a revolutionary thought for the Indian mind, If man be in Christ, he becomes a new creature. No man is saved by doing anything. Everyone is saved by being. Doing is only a spontaneous reaction of being. For centuries, India has been wont to sacrifice being at the misconceived altar of doing and found in reality that every doing of man was tainted with the natural depravity of the fallen man till his being is changed by the power of the Creator, through faith (Pillai, 2001, pp. 32).

### Analysis Integration

Relationships allow people to experience the grace and love of Jesus. As a result, the primary way of sharing the Gospel is through life and actions. This gives Hindus a window to glimpse a life existing outside the structure of action-shaping karma and duty-bound dharma.

Interviewees are greatly influenced by the historicity and revelatory nature of God. Knowing that God wants an intimate relationship with people is opposite to the Hindu understanding of gods as unknowable and mysterious. Jesus came in history to reveal and make men new, generating a focus on life transformation. This is appealing to Hindus because within Indian religious tradition there is no focus on regeneration or transformation. The belief in maya, or that all of life is an illusion, is in conflict with Jesus coming to restore creation and make all things new. Therefore, Hindus are attracted to the relevance and purpose Jesus gives not only to this life but the one to come.

The presence of miracles and the workings of the supernatural powerfully attract people to Christ. While this is true the world over, it has added significance in India because the Hindu tradition is to worship gods out of fear and obedience rather than love. Therefore, when Hindus experience the restorative, healing work of Jesus, they recognize a power radically different in character from the one they have known.

Fig 2: Findings from the Data

Relationship & Hospitality

Storytelling: Sharing Jesus through your Life

God: Unknown to Known

History-Not a Mystery

Power Encounter

Life Transformation through following Jesus Christ

The four evangelical cornerstones depicted on the left of the diagram are synergistically in a process that transforms lives. In the lives of the interviewees, the process is as individual as they are and plays out over months to years.

Providing hospitality to Hindus and building relationship with them opens the way to sharing life stories. Within life stories, God can be revealed as known and real, not as an unknown and unfathomable mystery. Prayer plays an integral role throughout the whole process.

Power encounters are separated from the other cornerstones on the diagram because they work so differently. The cornerstones on the left of the diagram are incarnational in nature; Jesus, living in His disciples, is made manifest over time so that Hindu worldviews are upended and lives are transformed. Power encounters, on the other hand, have the ability to shatter worldviews in a moment. God’s reality overmasters the person’s belief structures and frequently results in instant faith in Jesus.

While all five cornerstones are significant in leading Hindus to follow Jesus, particular cornerstones are more influential for particular people. The most common occurrence is for a person to be influenced by a combination of factors working together to reveal the nature of God.

##

## Conclusion

## **What life experiences have been most influential for Hindus whose lives have been transformed by Jesus?**

The study began with the premise that worldview change was critical in the transformation of people’s lives out of fear and poverty. From the transformed people themselves, five fundamental factors were discovered that changed Hindu worldviews, and led to discipleship in Christ: relationships, storytelling, power encounters, understanding God as known, and God as an active participant in human history. These findings confirm previous research on Hinduism and the person of Jesus with added insights into what is needed for Hindu worldview change.

Further research is needed to determine in what ways power encounters are connected to the other four themes and how they together relate to a transformative worldview change.

### Recommendations

Proponents of secular assistance programs to the poor in developing nations argue, among other things, that religion creates barriers to those being helped. On the other end of the spectrum, some religious groups believe that only the spiritual is important. This study underscores the importance of the incarnational presence of Jesus among the poor in the persons of His disciples. Jesus’s love for the poor includes both resources to alleviate the suffering of the poor and the personal relationships formed between caregivers and those being cared for. Such incarnational living creates the potential for worldview change among Hindus, a prelude to transformed lives. That transformation includes, but is by no means limited to, the personal resources, motivation, and wherewithal to rise above impoverishment.

Therefore, my recommendation to the organization is to contrive to incarnate Jesus in its programs of education and economic development. True transformation of body, soul, and spirit is only possible through the worldview change, redemption, and restoration found in Jesus Christ.

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Appendix A

**The Caste System**



Appendix B

Glossary of Hindi Terms

*angyana-* ignorance of true reality

*ashram-* monastery

*dharma-* religion, system of belief, duty, righteousness, law.

*jati-* subcaste

*karma –* coils of activities both good and bad that bind a person to existence and mandate that he be reborn again and aagain (David, 1998, p. 182).

*Maya-* illusion

*Satyam-* truth which in Hindusim means existence without action (David, 1998, p. 183).

*Sadhu-* a wandering holy man on a spiritual quest

Appendix C

Interview Questions

My interviews focused predominantly on three groups of people: self help group members; self help group leaders or workers, and local pastors and/or their wives. For each different group I had a separate set of questions, and within each interview I variedS slightly from the list represented below.

*SHG members*

* What has been your favorite part about being in the SHG?
* What has been the most helpful?
* What are some ways you think the group could be improved?
* Do you remember any of the lessons from the beginning of sessions?
* Did you find the lessons helpful?
* Which was your favorite? Why?
* Which lessons did you not like or understand? Why?
* Would you like to learn more lessons in future groups? Why or why not?

*SHG leaders/workers*

* In your experience, what are the most essential elements for a successful SHG?
* Which Biblical lessons do you think were best received by the group? Why?
* Which Biblical lessons do you think were not well received or understood by the group? Why?
* Do you think that the lessons helped or hindered the overall effectiveness of the SHG? How so?
* Did you notice any change in the lives or actions of the members from the beginning of the group to the end?
* If you were to do the whole process again, what would you have done differently?
* How would you go about creating and implementing a training structure to for sustainable SHGs with a focus on Biblical economics?

*Local Pastors/ Pastor’s Wives*

* When working with groups of people, how do you introduce the Gospel?
* What do you believe are some of the most pivotal, or influential Biblical principles to introduce to Hindu background Indians? Truths that especially resonate with people?
* Which Biblical passages are difficult for them to understand/accept?
* Do you believe it is better to introduce your faith in Jesus when you first meet a person or to wait until there is trust in the relationship? Why?
* How do you go about this (the above question) yourself? What have you found works and doesn’t work?
* In your experience, what are some of the major obstacles to Indians being willing to hear the Gospel message?
* In your experience, what is the deciding factor of someone giving their life to Christ?
* In working with SHG or similar development projects here in Delhi, what do you believe is the role of the church?
* Do you believe the church partnering with such projects is more helpful or harmful? Why?

Appendix D

Interviewee Details

Interviewees:

1. Shallu: Age 29, Single. Family from Haryana
2. Yana: Age 36. Divorced, 1 child. Family from Haryana
3. Laxmi: Age 27, Married, No kids. Family from Anhdra Pradesh
4. Deepak: Age 39, Married, 3 children. Family from Madya Pradesh
5. Samuel: Age 24, Single. Family from Gujarat.
6. Kheem: Age 45, Married, 2 children, Family from Uttar Pradesh
7. Satya: Age 41, Married, 4 children. Family from Anhdra Pradesh.
8. Neelum: Age 38, Married, 3 children. Family from Uttar Pradesh
9. Rohit: Age 29, Single. Family from Maharastra
10. Abishek: Age 54, Married, 4 children. Family from Madya Pradesh
11. Priyanka: Age 26, Married, no children. Family from Maharastra.
12. Shulpa: Age 31, Married, 2 children. Family from West Bengal.
13. Nivya: Age 22, Single.
14. Heli: Age, believed to be 25, Single. Family from Uttar Pradesh.
15. Janaman: Age: 44, Married, 2 children. Family from Orissa.
16. Sarah: Age 42, Married, 2 children. Family from Tamil Nadu.
17. Faniel: Age 28, Single. Family from Punjab.
18. Sonia: Age 42, Widowed, 3 children. Family from Punjab.
19. Jaqueline: Age 45, Widowed, 2 children.

Local Experts:

Dr. Thom Wolf and H. L Richard

1. “The direct and indirect effect of the work started by William Carey is beyond explanation” (Pillai. Pp. 259). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See caste chart in the appendices [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Streeter, B. H., & Appasamy, A. J. (1921). *The message of Sadhu Sundar Singh: a study in mysticism on practical religion*. The Macmillan Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Webster’s Dictionary [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Strong’s Greek Concordance: *philoexenia:* love of strangers. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Referencing Colosians 4:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Referencing 2 Corinthians 2:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Not a typical, Western style Bible study but an informal, in-house gathering of people from all different backgrounds to talk about Jesus [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sai Baba, a well known spiritual *guru* who died in 2011. Read more here: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-13153536 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Traditional lentil dish [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Flat bread [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Dharma*, as found in the Veda means natural law and literally translated is “that which upholds, supports, or maintains the regulatory order of the universe” (Walker, 1990, 244). Dharma can also be thought of as duty, for it is the belief that justice and social harmony depend on individuals living in accordance with Hindu requirements. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In Indian religious tradition, *karma* is the “universal causal law by which good or bad actions determine the future modes of an individual’s existence” (Walker, 1990, p. 343). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Karma is the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm, for the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty to ourselves” (Naipaul, 1977, p. 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As laid out by the Law of Manu in Hindu scripture, a person is born and dies within their caste and has no ability to change this. Since a person cannot better his circumstances in this life, his best chance is to fulfill the required duties of his/her caste and hope to be reincarnated higher up in the next life. There are four levels of cast. The higher the caste, the greater the purity and the lower the caste the dirtier the individual. Brahmins lead the caste system as priests followed by Kshatriya warriors, Viasya merchants, and Sudra peasants. Then there are what the law of Manu refers to as “talking animals” who remain outside of the caste system (Walker, 1990, 178). They are considered so dirty that one is not to touch them, hence the name untouchables or Dalit people. The Dalits represent 20% of India’s population and depending on their birth are to be neither seen, heard, nor touched (Sardar & Wolf, 2007, p. 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 10:45). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Language, food, haircut, house, gods, behavior, marriage, clothing, career, vocation, all determined by caste. “The caste system has been abolished in India by legislation. But in actual practice, caste is the sole dominating force in every walk of life including politics, family and religion (Pillai, pp. 260). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Caste chart Appendix A [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Indeed, the noblest thing any person can do is to perform the prescribed duties of their caste and accept them without a single question (Walker, B. 1990, 114). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. A holistic rehabilitation center for the poor and destitute of Delhi. Started and continued by followers of Jesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Divisions and sub-castes within a particular caste [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The lotus flower is an aquatic plant in Asia that grows from dirty or even muddy water and yet remains unstained. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Referencing Acts 17:23 where the Greeks in Athens were “very religious” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “A man whilst dreaming, does not doubt of the reality of the dream, but this reality disappears in the moment of awakening to give place to a truer reality, which we were not aware of whilst dreaming” (Deusson, pp. 48). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Sanskrit meaning of Kali is “she who is black or she who is death” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. John 10:10 “The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, but I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The yearly festival where the oldest male in the family walks barefoot to Haridwar to retrieve the holy water and bring it back home. There he washes it over the Shiva linga, and is blessed. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)