

HIN



DUISM

in

AMERICA

A growing mission field takes root

By John W. Kennedy

Growing up as a Hindu in Asia, Sunita Rodricks considered herself a good person. She gave alms to the poor. She chanted prayers every day. She consulted various holy men in an effort to find peace. She earned excellent grades and pursued a master's degree.

Yet Rodricks felt no peace. She had a nagging feeling about the wrongs she had committed and why so much suffering existed in the world. Then a random act of kindness set in motion an event that changed her life.

A pastor in the drug- and gang-infested neighborhood befriended Rodricks. One day, Rodricks found herself locked out of her apartment during a blizzard. She called relatives and friends to come pick her up, but they all said driving in the storm would be too dangerous. Then Rodricks called the pastor, who drove right over and took her to an uncle's house.

"When my own family abandoned me a stranger came through for me," Rodricks recalls. A few days later at church, Rodricks poured out her feelings of guilt and accepted the minister's invitation to make Jesus her Savior.

"When I gave my life to the Lord I felt completely washed from the inside out," Rodricks says. "A huge burden lifted."

For Rodricks, friendship evangelism didn't result in an overnight understanding of the significance of Christ's death on the cross.

"It took me years to understand we live in a fallen world where there are consequences of sin," says Rodricks, now living in Chicago. "People who don't know Christ live for themselves. I was very arrogant, and tied up in legalism."

More than 90 percent of the world's 870 million Hindus live in India. In the United States there are around 2 million ad-

herents, but Hinduism is gaining ground because of an increasing number of immigrants from India. The relocation trend is likely to continue with India poised to become the world's most populous nation within a decade.

Some Americans looking for peace and acceptance are drawn by the religion's New Age appeal. Hinduism's subtle philosophical influences are now part of popular culture: yoga classes taught at the neighborhood center as a method to tone the body; transcendental meditation courses offered by a local corporation as a way to relieve stress; Alicia Keys singing "Karma" on the radio; the television series *My Name Is Earl*; Britney Spears taking her newborn son to a Hindu temple for a blessing.

But more importantly, the Hindu philosophy that every belief system must be tolerated has become a mantra in secular society, especially in the education system.

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Mark Maine (above) and Simon Gounder work with Hindus as Assemblies of God U.S. missionaries.

“Hindus believe all faiths are the same, that there is no wrong or evil, only mistakes and misguidance,” says David Grant, Eurasia area director for Assemblies of God World Missions.

Temples in the heartland

A swami dressed in saffron robes holds up a chalice to the stone idol’s lips as a drink offering. The devotee then carefully closes the wooden doors of the shrine and dims the lights so the statue can settle in for an afternoon nap.

The priest continues to move from station to station in the vast marble hallway, tending to the needs of the statues, which are decorated with colorful clothes, beautiful flowers and shining jewelry. Visitors reverentially heed the posted “Please maintain silence” signs around the temple. Followers bow and fold their hands in prayer.

This isn’t a depiction of some ancient pagan people from the Old Testament. It isn’t even a scene from modern-day Calcutta or Bangalore. This is a 30-acre site in suburban Chicago, home of Bocharanwasi Shree Akshar

Purushottam Swaminarayan Santha, the largest Hindu temple in the United States. The mandir in Bartlett, completed in 2004, is outfitted with more than 7,000 tons of Turkish limestone and ornately crafted Italian marble.

Hindu houses of worship incorporate a daily routine in which enthroned idols are awakened, bathed, fed, adorned and put to sleep. Across the nation suburban temples have sprung up where cornfields and cow pastures stood at the beginning of the millennium.

While many see its self-improvement methods as a route to self-actualization, Hinduism is actually a works-oriented religion that demands following ritual to the letter. For example, on a self-guided walk inside the Sri Venkateswara Swami Balaji Temple in Aurora, Ill., a visitor from Indianapolis informed me politely but insistently that I was headed the wrong way. If I continued to walk counterclockwise from shrine to shrine, it could cause bad karma for everyone inside the temple.

Thirty years ago Hindus met together in homes or rented public facilities for meetings. Now there are more than 1,000 Hindu temples in the United States, including the Swami Balaji in Aurora, the second largest city in Illinois.

Families, in search of economic prosperity, flock to the temples monthly or weekly. Priests recite Vedic verses to gods as a form of intercession. Participants pay for these prayers, or pujas.

Within the enormous Bartlett complex various shrine enclaves are located on the second floor.

Every morning swamis prepare idols with makeup to ensure they are presentable. A man presents an offering of fruit and then plops down cross-legged before an idol of Ganesha, depicted as a one-tusked elephant, a god who helps remove obstacles to prosperity.

Throughout the temple bare-chested gurus chant incantations in the Hindi language as incense burns. One priest blesses a family by means of a cone-shaped silver vessel, touching each person’s mouth after his hand passes through a flame. During the ceremony, the idol serves as the means through which followers gain approval.

Offerings spread along the floor include coconuts, oranges, almonds and flowers. A swami leads a family seeking forgiveness in Sanskrit songs. As a sign of blessing, a priest sprinkles a handful of crushed flowers or ash on the foreheads of devotees.

Drive to succeed

In many ways, Hinduism is an individualistic religion, where followers believe they can achieve whatever they desire. Obtaining knowledge is one path, and the reason so many value higher education and obtain graduate degrees.

An estimated 1 in 20 Hindus in America is a millionaire. Many have struck gold in the fields of medicine, technology and hotel ownership. Often devotees prostrate themselves before the idols in an effort to achieve health, prosperity and success in business.

Generally, Hindus believe in Brahman, an impersonal and unknowable supreme being who appears in various gods and goddesses such as Krishna and Vishnu. But Hindus may see their gods in plants, animals, rocks,

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weather and other forms venerated in the world’s third-most-followed religion. A faithful Hindu will keep gods at home, letting one rest in the bathtub, another at the breakfast table.

“There is no explicit creed or dogma that unifies the various segments, sects and denominations that claim to be part of the Hindu religion,” says Madasamy Thirumalai, author of *Sharing Your Faith With a Hindu*. “Ultimately, in the strictest sense, Hinduism is more a way of life than a religion.”

In addition to relativism, one of the hallmarks of Hindu philosophy is the belief that what goes around comes around, that a

good person will benefit from his good deeds.

“Followers have to earn merit through ritual, almsgiving or penance,” says Thirumalai, who as a youth in India sought favors of gods through animal sacrifices and sorcery. “It’s a sort of business transaction between the person and God.”

In contrast with Christianity, Hindus reject the notion there is only one path to God. Jesus is viewed as one of a multitude of acceptable

gods to be added to the blend. The concept of being born again is an obstacle to Hindus, who are on a continual journey to overcome a pattern of rebirth by karma and reincarnation.

Friendship evangelism

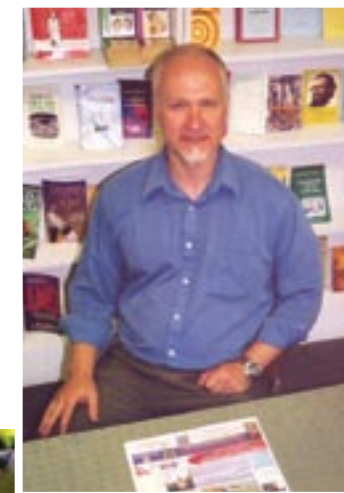
In the United States, evangelistic outreach specifically to Hindus is a rarity, although Assemblies of God U.S. Missions has three appointed missionaries engaged in such efforts.

Missionary Mark Maine is building relationships through his work at a YMCA in the Chicago suburb of Naperville. Maine has an infectious smile and is physically fit, which helps gain credibility in interacting with Hindus, who respect self-improvement techniques. At the YMCA, Maine has worked to open a family resource center.

Hindus want to fit into this culture, yet they also zealously safeguard their religious traditions with their children. Some younger Hindus have lost interest in the rituals, which they really don’t understand, yet they usually want to maintain the religion’s identity.

Hindus began arriving in the United States in large numbers a little more than 40 years ago when immigration restrictions eased. Those who have immigrated are disproportionately highly skilled in sciences and technology. They tend to come from upper castes and are hardened about the exclusive claims of Christ.

“Everything is postmodern



A Hindu priest (below) offers a food sacrifice. AG U.S. missionary Kevin Parker (right) has operated an outreach center in Chicago.



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relativism; nothing is black and white," Maine says. "It's all about whatever is right for the person."

Kevin Parker, another U.S. Assemblies of God missionary, has been interacting with high caste Hindus among Indians and Pakistanis in Chicago for two decades.

As Parker offers a cup of tea to a visitor who stops by the South Asian Friendship Center in the congested North Chicago neighborhood, it's just one step of a long process of building a relationship. Volunteers from area Bible colleges help staff the Devon Avenue center, which is open daily. It's a place where immigrants from India can take classes in English as a second language, receive assistance with immigration and citizenship is-

sues, watch cricket matches from India on television, read the latest Hindi language edition of *India Post* or receive a free Bible or Christian literature. The activities at the center are designed to give an opportunity to share the gospel with those who never have heard it.

Although many professional Hindus are migrating to the more affluent suburbs, this neighborhood, known as Little India, is still dominated by Hindu-run grocery stores, restaurants, jewelry stores and electronic and video shops.

Former Hindu Sunita Rodricks, now 55, is Women's Ministries director at the center.

"I was hungry for God, but freedom came little by little," Rodricks says. "It took me years to let go of myself and accept the Lord."

Evangelism opportunity

Some Hindu converts make a radical transformation, including Simon Gounder, an Assemblies of God U.S. missionary in Artesia, Calif. As a youth, Gounder chased evangelizing Christians away from the family's property in his native Fiji. But at age 17, a friend repeatedly invited Gounder to attend a youth meeting at his church. Gounder, looking for a fun place to hang out, finally relented.

"I heard the salvation message for the first time and began weeping," Gounder recalls. "I went into the church a Hindu and came out a born-again Christian."

Gounder pioneered four Hindi-speaking churches in Fiji before moving to California in 2002. He now spends his days evangeliz-

ing in Artesia, a city nicknamed "Little India" because many of its 16,400 residents are East Indian.

Gounder agrees that relationship building is necessary for a Hindu to be interested in Christ. Evangelism shouldn't begin with an affront that Hindu gods are false, Gounder says.

"When you invite a Hindu family into your home there are a lot of cultural considerations," Gounder says. "You shouldn't serve beef or pork and you shouldn't hug or even shake hands with the wife. Let them trust you before you share the gospel with them."

The overarching challenge is to clearly explain the exclusive claims of Christ as Savior.

"Because they believe in many gods, to add Jesus as one of the gods is not a problem,"

Gounder says. "Hindus believe there are many roads leading to one place."

Subsequently, evangelism methods to Hindus should focus on discipleship rather than salvation.

Grant says Hindus are responsive to sincere and transparent friendly relationships. "Seldom will a believer convince a Hindu intellectually through argument or debate," Grant says. "Ninety percent of the Hindus who come to Christ do so because of the vibrant, joyful witness of a Christian."

"Changing the heart is never brought about by facts and arguments," Thirumalai says.

"Transformation is accomplished by the ministry of the Holy Spirit."

Parker says a handful of designated missionaries cannot possibly evangelize the growing Hindu

mission field that has taken up residence in the United States.

"Only if Christians who know, work with or live near a Hindu will step out of their comfort zone, befriend them and share Christ will we see a significant impact among the Asian-Indian community in America," Parker says. "Believers should care about Hindus because Hindus need to know a Savior who loves them and can forgive their sins." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



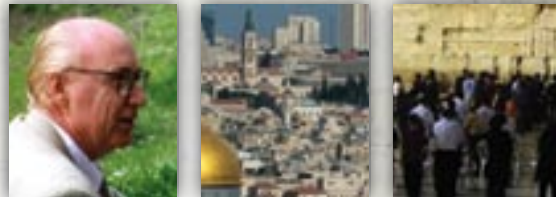
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