

A Hindu “Path of Jesus”: A Case Study of Modern Roman Catholic Contextualization

by H. L. Richard

In the latter stages of the transformative Vatican II gathering (1962–5), the Jesuits launched a new pioneering ministry focused on non-Dalit Hindus in the northern part of the Indian state of Gujarat. The pioneer missionary, Fr. Manuel Diaz Garriz (1932–) from Spain, is celebrated in a recent publication as “among the ‘missionary greats’ like De Nobili, Beschi and John de Britto for proving that one can fully belong to one’s *samaj* [social group/caste], and simultaneously, be a true *bhakt* (disciple) [devotee] of Jesus” (Rose 2011, 285; definitions in brackets are mine).

Yet that ministry today is not thriving. Garriz himself commissioned his younger Jesuit colleague, Fr. Jose Panadan, to “go deeply into this matter and study the causes by which the initial enthusiasm became dim.” (Panadan 2015: xxiv) Despite the passing of over half a century since the launching of this venture, this remains the only sustained outreach focused on caste Hindus that has been attempted in light of modern understandings of inculturation (or contextualization).¹ This paper will outline the approach of the mission to North Gujarat by exploring the insights that emerge in its initial success and, so far as can be discerned, the causes for its failure.²

This case study is based on three publications: *Mission in North Gujarat Volume 1: The Beginnings 1964–1989* was compiled by M. Diaz Garriz in 2004, was never publicly distributed, but was intended to help new mission personnel in North Gujarat understand the principles and roots of the mission; *Mission in North Gujarat II: The Way Ahead 1990–2011* was compiled and edited by Jose Panadan in 2011; and Panadan’s doctoral work, *Inculturation and Local Church: An Ecclesio-Missiological Investigation of the North Gujarat Experiment*, which was published in 2015.³ Jose Panadan pointed me to these resources when we met at the Fellowship of Indian Missiologists in October of 2017, and he also procured for me a copy of the obscure first volume. My sincere thanks to Jose for his help in preparing this analysis.

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The Approach in North Gujarat

There are two complementary angles from which to view the North Gujarat mission. One is to focus on the theoretical foundations of the ministry, the other is to carefully observe practical field engagements. The theoretical will be outlined first, and it is based on a paper by Jose Panadan entitled "The Mission Paradigm of North Gujarat from the Perspective of Inculturation" (2011a). Panadan spells out the missiological orientation quite clearly, and this section will follow the six points highlighted by Panadan in his paper.

1. Hindu by Culture, Christian by Faith

The understanding that one can be a Christian by faith but a Hindu by culture is noted from earlier cases in Indian Christian history, but Panadan suggests that "we did not see this approach being lived out concretely and historically in any community" (2011a, 28). Following Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861–1907), a distinction is made between faith identity (*sadbana dharma*) and social identity (*samaj dharma*).⁴ In keeping with this distinction, pioneer missionary Garriz avoided two terms: "to become" and "Christian." Panadan points out that

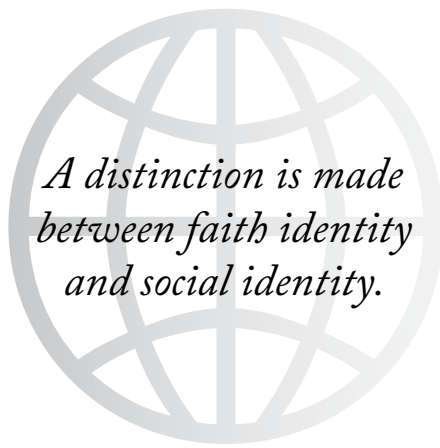
...instead of the expression "becoming" the word "accepting" is used. Thus, one does not become a Christian; rather, remaining within the Hindu fold, one accepts the message, the Way and the person of Jesus. This mode of proclamation inherently accepts Hinduism as a culture rather than a religion—thus the transformation is not a change of religion (*dharmaparivartan*) but the acceptance of a "Way of Life" (*panth*). (2011a, 28; emphasis original)

This understanding is rooted in the context-sensitive understanding of conversion that was spelled out by Hans Staffner:

As long as conversion signifies the discarding of the convert's social community our efforts at evangelization will always appear to them [Hindus] in the wrong light. This mixing up of religion and community obscures the

supernatural character of the Church, and mission work will always be suspect and be interpreted as a form of communal aggression. Every endeavour to spread the Kingdom of God will be seen as [an] attempt on the part of the Indian Christian community to increase its numerical strength at the expense of the larger Hindu community. It boils down finally to a struggle for dominance and a competition in all those spheres in which the interests of one civilian community are opposed to the interests of another civilian community: political and economic power, employment, privileges, etc.⁵ (Panadan 2015, 249–250, quoting from Staffner 1973, 490)

I discuss this approach more fully below (in point six) on the matter of caste as sociological habitat. The North Gujarat



Mission achieved a measure of success in this approach, but it still represents just the tip of an iceberg in terms of inculturation/contextualization.⁶

2. Jesus as *Purna Avatar* (full incarnation)

Whether Jesus should be thought of in terms of *avatara* ("descent" of a deity) is one of the hotly debated issues in Indian Christian theology, and Panadan has an extended discussion of the issue in his doctoral work (2015, 291–313). But at the practical level the term simply resonates with Hindus. As Panadan says in his brief article,

followers of Jesus while following Hindu culture accept the message of Jesus;

accept Jesus as their "Guru," as their Redeemer and as the *Purna Avatar*. Those who accept Jesus as the *Purna Avatar* acknowledge the presence of other traditions and other *avatars*, but for them, Jesus is the ultimate Guru, the way, the truth, the one who can lead them to salvation and the "definitive self-revelation of God." (2011a, 30–1)

3. Ecclesiology of the *Isupanth*

In North Gujarat, there are many *panths* (paths or ways), so the message of Jesus was presented as the *Isu panth*, his disciples being *Isupanthis*. Most of those who chose to follow Jesus came from the *Niranth Panth*,

a popular group of Hindus highly independent from dogma or institutionalism and it has no temples nor images nor gods. (Panadan 2011a, 31)

This [Isupanthi] terminology being inclusive, indicates that there is no separate social identity for one who accepts the gospel. After all, Jesus did not establish a new religion, rather he initiated a transformation within the existing religion. (Panadan 2011a, 31)

In his larger work, Panadan spells out what this means:

This ecclesiological vision would make more sense if we understand *Isupanth* basically as a movement within Hinduism. (2015, 438)

The rhetoric of the North Gujarat Mission thus is fully in line with what is now in Evangelical Protestant terms called "insider movements." The new Jesus movement is not to be "Christian" but rather a movement within Hinduism. But the reality of what happened is a more complicated story; was it or could it ever be possible for this type of insider movement to be realized in such a deeply institutionalized entity as the Roman Catholic Church?

4. Every Priest as a Guru

The context of the popular religiosity of North Gujarat necessitates that every priest be a guru. As Panadan states,

the people of Niranth Panth are extremely committed to their devotion

to a Guru and very much alive to *bhakti*—devotion, to the Supreme God. (2011a, 32)

But priests are not permanently placed, and the *guru-shishya* [disciple] relationship is dynamic. This can lead to some tensions. Panadan points out that

it is common to see in the Church of North Gujarat that, while every priest is accepted as a Guru, the personal Guru of a follower of Jesus may not be his/her Parish Priest. We need to remind ourselves that the term “parish priest” indicates an administrative job while the role of a Guru is more spiritual. (2011a, 32)

Related to the priest as guru is the development of a new contextual festival based on the guru veneration of the surrounding culture. This is part of a larger contextual Marian festival that will be discussed under the next point.

5. Marian Devotion

Panadan shares the contextual need that was filled by devotion to Mary:

In the popular tradition, each caste has an ancestral/family goddess who is worshipped with great personal love and devotion. However, this concept of goddess is alien to Christian faith and to Christian theology. On the other hand, the new followers of Jesus began to experience both a cultural and religious vacuum due to the absence of a family goddess. (2011a, 32)

In response, Fr. Girish Santiago S.J., with local Isupanthis, began to present Mary as *kulmata* (ancestral clan mother), and a shrine was eventually built using a local Hindu architectural style. Mary was designated Unteshwari Mata, Our Lady of Camels, related to the centrality of the camel in North Gujarat society.

The Isupanthis of North Gujarat do not follow the Western calendar and do not recognize any Western saints’ days. The main Marian festival is celebrated on the 8th day of the annual Navratri (Dashera) festival when Hindus focus on the goddess.

They accept caste by making “a distinction between the ‘caste system’ (inclusive of discrimination) and ‘caste diversity’ (exclusive of discrimination).”

The honoring of the priest as guru also takes place at this time. But there is also a regular monthly pilgrimage to Unteshwari at each new moon.⁷

The focus on Mary has been controversial, with some suggesting that “in the devotional practices of Isupanthis, Marian devotion takes precedence over a Christ-centred spirituality” (Panadan 2015, 447). Panadan rejects this perspective, however, suggesting that “a realistic observation of the Church does not subscribe to this argument” (2015, 447), and Mary is certainly not honored as a goddess.

6. Caste as “Sociological Habitat”

As Panadan states, “The caste phenomenon is an integral part of the Indian ethos and culture” (2011a, 33). Therefore, caste cannot simply be avoided or transcended. This goes against the traditional Christian approach, which Panadan outlines in his doctoral work. But he concludes that

although the tendency is to reject the entire system of caste, what seems to be more objectionable are the discriminatory and hierarchical elements within it. (2015, 364)

So, the North Gujarat position is to accept caste as one’s “sociological habitat,” making “a distinction between the ‘caste system’ (inclusive of discrimination) and ‘caste diversity’ (exclusive of discrimination)” (Panadan 2015, 368).

Garriz spelled out his position on this:

Do we accept caste? We accept and strongly believe that a Patel or Thakor Ishupanthis, must remain at all costs a Patel and a Thakor besides adhering loyally to his faith in Jesus. Naturally we cannot accept caste in the sense of “higher and lower” as laid down in Book One of the Manusmriti (Book 1, Nos. 31, 91–105). In Christ there is no Jew nor Gentile, no male

or female, no high or low. To accept a genetic distinction of higher and lower is simply absurd in New Testament values. Therefore, this is rejected. Before accepting baptism everyone must accept this. But caste has much wider implications than the “high and low” stratification demanded by *karma* and laid down by the Manusmriti. Caste constitutes for every person an essential part of its [*sic*] *dharmic* identity, its sociological habitat, a harmonious organization of society mainly for the purposes of “*beti aur roti vahevar*” [defined by Panadan as “a popular expression which refers to inter-caste marriage and inter-caste dining” (2015, 285)]. I well understand how Mahatma Gandhi could affirm that a change of “*dharm*” (*dharmic* identity) is an impossibility. One can accept a new *panth*, a new *bhakti*, faith in an up-to-now unknown guru or prophet, but “change” of *samaj*, change of your own family identity by “becoming” a member of a different *samaj*, is simply demeaning, alienating... in a certain sense “impossible,” as one cannot change what he really is... (1988, 376–7)⁸

This was one of a number of areas where the North Gujarat approach became controversial with other Christians, and the outworking of this social policy has not been without tensions, as noted by Panadan:

However, one cannot say that caste discrimination has disappeared completely among the Isupanthis, rather a qualitative change is visible and the followers of Jesus who belong to different castes are living fairly harmoniously with a genuine sense of *koinonia*. (2011a, 34)

The Development of the Mission in Practice

The mission began in 1964 when Fr. Garriz moved to a small village (Mokhasan) in North Gujarat. In a

later definition of the work of the mission it was stated that

the North Gujarat Mission was started in 1964 by a mandate of [the] Fr. General of the Society of Jesus with the specific aim to undertake direct evangelization among caste Hindus. (Sanand Declaration 2004, 41)

Although the focus was on higher castes, it was also on people in poverty, as pointed out by Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes:

The historical decision was to begin evangelization in a new area and among a new community of people who though neither Dalit nor tribal suffer the same economic and backward hardships prevalent among those who need special consideration to enter the mainstream of public life through education and health care and social empowerment. (2011, 12)

Fr. Garriz began slowly, seeking understanding and strong relationships:

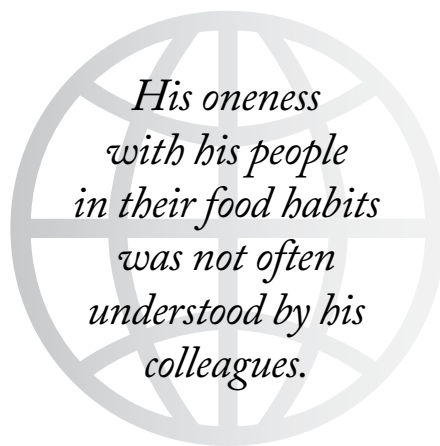
The first years were of slow and hard apprenticeship: what to do, what not to do. Four, five, six years of patient waiting, of praying, of reflecting. During the first six months in Mokhasan, I lived in the *dharamshala* of the Swaminarayan temple. Then for four more years I lived in the middle of the village, sharing a house with a kind Patel [forward caste] family, paying them a monthly rent.⁹ (1988, 372)

Garriz embraced (and demanded from other workers) a vegetarian diet, an obvious decision due to the strong Jain influence on North Gujarat society, but one not understood by many of his fellow Christians ("His oneness with his people in their food habits, too, was not often understood by his colleagues who considered it unusual" [Rose 2011, 288]).¹⁰ After the four years in a village home Garriz moved to a larger town, Kalol. He explained this move: "I saw that a small village did not afford sufficient privacy for people to contact me on a purely religious level" (2004f, 14). Despite his adaptability and simplicity, Garriz was necessarily a power figure in the local society.

Another set of six points (this time my summary of the data) will identify significant developments or trends from the first decades of the ministry.

1. Church Growth

Garriz spoke publicly about the work of the mission for the first time after nine years of ministry (Garriz 2004f). By then there had been about 2,500 baptisms. Most (1,500) were people of the backward (but non-dalit) Raval caste, and about half of those had come out of the Niranth Panth. There were 500 Thakors and 400 from two groups of Patels, these latter groups being forward castes. Most significant among these were two Raval Niranth Panth leaders (one came to faith in



1969, the other in 1971) who went on to win many others to faith in Christ (Garriz 2004f, 15–16).

In these early years it was established that one could maintain his caste community identity while following Christ. In 1967, some leaders of the Raval caste met with Garriz to request that a boarding school for boys be started. Garriz responded by asking if there would be freedom for these boys to embrace Christ, and an assurance was given in writing (Garriz 2004f, 18). In 1971, there was a move to expel Raval Catholics from caste, but when the Catholic Ravals rallied, that plan was abandoned (Garriz 2004f, 20). This raises the question of the viability

of movements to Christ, which will be looked at below. It is interesting that

most of our Thakor [higher caste] communities were originally contacted by the Raval friends acting as voluntary catechists. (Garriz 1988, 373)

2. The Centrality of Institutions

From the beginning Fr. Garriz drew on some Catholic nuns for assistance by providing medical services for the villagers:

For one full year Sr. Elvira and Sr. Martha had been going every Thursday in 1964–1965 from St. Xavier's Ladies Hostel, Ahmedabad to Mokhasan to help through medical service in the beginnings of North Gujarat Mission. So in 1972, our Superior Mother Zoila, welcomed the invitation of Fr. Arana, the Jesuit Provincial to accept the challenge of starting a new mission convent in Sanand. (Annakutty 2004, 145)

Initially Fr. Garriz remained aloof from educational institutions. He helped establish and taught in a village school that was handed over to the village (2004f, 13–4). But by 1972 a Catholic school was started and by 2011 there were 20 schools functioning (James 2011, 250–5). Writing in 1990, Garriz could say that "first contacts will usually be through educational, social and medical work" (2004c, 58).

Mission and church compounds, called *ashrams*, multiplied in relation to the schools and social and medical work. In describing the decline of response to the gospel, Archbishop S. Fernandes placed some blame on this institutionalizing trend:

The Church appears less as with a spiritual mission [than] as a socio-educational welfare non-government organization that circumstances placed on the shoulders of the missionaries. (2011a, 14)

The explanation for the last clause is then given, that in the first decade of work serious floods and then drought necessitated relief work, marking the missionaries as social workers.

3. Inculturated and Contextual Developments

Contextual *terminology* is crucial to this North Gujarat ministry; starting with the name Isupanthis, to priests as gurus, catechists as *bhagats* (holy men), and ministry centers as ashrams. But contextual *realities* are yet more important. Communication of the gospel has largely been undertaken by local Isupanthis serving as catechists using the local forms of *bhajan* (spiritual song) and *katha* (spiritual drama).

Everything in contextual ministry is a learning process. Garriz gives a good example of this in engaging catechists:

When we began this mission among caste people in 1964, the greatest difficulty we faced was lack of catechists. As the first converts began coming, our first concern was to choose catechists among them. The first catechists whom I tried to train were chosen from among educated young men. Experience soon taught me that the social pattern in rural India is deeply "patriarchal" in the sense that young people (even with university degrees) are not allowed a say in the affairs of the caste, family, etc. Age is still an essential requirement for being accepted as an active member of the social group. Today all our catechists are above 35 years of age with many of them well in the fifties. Many of them do not have any formal education. What counts is their personal integrity, practical wisdom, etc. (2004e, 26–27)

Elsewhere, Garriz points out that a catechist

may be illiterate but must be a good "contacter" and better if he is also a good singer of *bhajans*; and obviously he should be deeply pious. (2004c, 58)

The importance of *bhajan* in North Gujarat is well illustrated by this testimony of Garriz:

Though educationally backward, those Thakors who have been influenced by *bhakti* traditions possess a very beautiful religious culture of their own, with *bhajans* of very

Communication of the gospel was undertaken by local Isupanthis using the local forms of bhajan (spiritual song) and katha (spiritual drama).

profound religious content. I have certainly had unforgettable religious experiences sitting down for hours in their *bhajan mandalis*... (2004f, 17)

Hundreds of *bhajans* have been written and thousands of *katha* performances (related to the life of Christ but also addressing pressing social issues) have been developed and presented in North Gujarat (see Macwan 2011 for details).

It seems odd that there is no discussion of contextualized baptism, although it is pointed out that family/group baptisms were performed rather than individual ones (Garriz 2004c, 60). As noted above, contextual festivals developed related to Mary, and a contextual marriage and funeral service were also prepared (see Mascarenhas 2004 and Santiago 2004). The end result was that

there really is a different *cultural* identity (or at least there *should be*) between the Isupanthis (Hindu-Catholic) and the "old Christian." (Garriz 1988, 379; italics original)

4. Opposition

In 1974, severe persecution broke out against the Catholic institutions and new local Isupanthis. The persecution lasted for six to eight months (Garriz 1988, 373 says six months; Garriz 2004d, 247 says eight months). There had been opposition previous to 1974, but large numbers of baptisms set off a major outbreak of persecution, as described by Garriz.

...when groups of families began to ask for baptism and there began to emerge in various villages new Christian communities, a stormy reaction was inevitable. Fundamentalists of our region invited a group of Bengali Hindu monks.... For various weeks two Hindu monks wrapped in their saffron robes went about the streets of

Kalol (which had then a population of about 80,000) surrounded by groups of youngsters shouting "*Christiano nash karo*" [destroy the Christians]. For six full months, week after week, public meetings were organized in the towns of Kalol, Mehsana, Sanand, etc. to instill hatred in the people against Christianity. (2004d, 243–4)

Every single village where we had Catholics or catechumens were [*sic*] visited by a group of Sadhus with film slides, tape recorder, etc. They systematically excited the feelings of the people against the Christians specially on the issue of "cow-butchering." In several villages the converts were physically pushed to the Mandir [temple] for aarti [worship]. They were threatened with expulsion from the village, with the burning of their houses, some were beaten, an attempt was made on the life of our lay leader (R. D. Patel), a trumped up case was put against me and I had to appear in court several times. (1988, 373)

Most of the believers stood firm in the face of this opposition. Garriz later concluded that

as a matter of fact, the persecution which lasted eight months had the opposite result of what the fanatics expected. Our Christian community emerged from the persecution purified, stronger and more confident for the future. At a meeting at Kalol of the main leaders of the Christian Communities, Raval Mangal Kushal of Mandali expressed the sentiments of all saying, "After all that we had passed through these last six months, we feel confident that nothing in the future will be able to move us from Christ."¹¹ (2004d, 247)

There was other opposition against new believers and workers, but nothing again on the scale of this 1974 outbreak. John Rose suggested that

perhaps, the persecutions that the infant Church of Kalol went through in 1974 will never be repeated, as we

have won the hearts of our enemies through our institutions. (2004, 169)

5. Arrival of New Tribal and Dalit Believers

In 1971, Catholic Christians from tribal background were discovered in the far northwest corner of Gujarat. Garriz responded with assistance for those desperately poor and long neglected people, who had become Christians in what is now Pakistan, and who had then migrated to India in the time of Partition (1947). As institutional work developed in that area, numbers of Dalits of the Vankar community also joined the church. Garriz later wrote to the Jesuit Provincial (future archbishop S. Fernandes) pointing out that manpower was more focused on the tribals than the caste Hindus:

We have two types of Mission here in this [North Gujarat] area...mission to Adivasis [tribals] and to Caste Hindus. At present there are in this area five Jesuit missions to Adivasis...with 9 Jesuit priests and 2 lay brothers. The mission to Caste Hindus is only at Dhandhuka, Sanand, Kalol and Mehsana with 6 Jesuit priests and 1 scholastic. You can see there is already an imbalance in favour of the Adivasi mission. This imbalance becomes all the greater if we look at the picture of the entire Gujarat Province.... I have nothing against this situation. It is the product of historical, sociological and many other valid reasons. But certainly the fact remains; there is imbalance in personnel and resources against our caste-Hindu missions. (2004b, 212)

As will be noted below, the response to Christ from higher castes has been slow. Dalit and tribal peoples more readily join the church and so attention and manpower easily drifts away from the higher caste groups.¹²

6. Separate Housing Arranged

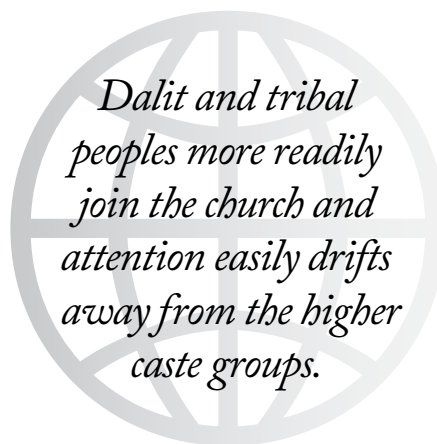
There has been great concern about whether a "viable community" of Isupanthis would develop in North Gujarat. Panadan describes the concern and the concept:

By and large, in India, particularly in the rural areas, caste pervades

everything to the point that a community can survive and flourish only when it is socially viable. By social viability we mean a substantial number of stable and committed members in each group who can remain firm and steadfast especially when adverse situations arise. (2015, 423)

As people came to Christ from various scattered villages it was felt that consolidation was necessary, and this was done through what are called Xavier Nagars.¹³ Panadan again gives a clear description:

Xavier Nagars are settlements of Isupanthis families which are established adjacent to the parish church. The rationale of this initiative is that it is believed that unless the appropriate situations are created for the new



converts to practice their faith, it is not possible to sustain their faith. At present there are five such Xavier Nagars in North Gujarat. (2015, 383n)

In his defense of the Xavier Nagar concept, Garriz appeals for support to the Christian villages developed earlier by Protestant missionaries (2011, 261). Yet the basic concept here seems to be in direct contradiction to the incarnational idea of maintaining one's caste identity as their sociological habitat. This seems a fundamentally extractionist approach. This counter position is well stated by Archbishop S. Fernandes:

The original vision of the Isupanthis remaining in the village community set-up needs to be maintained, especially when they are a good

number of families. They have their role in the village. To segregate them even though with the good intention of protecting their simple faith, will only keep them away from the mainstream of society and decrease their sense of self-confidence. They must take charge of their lives and the newfound faith must remain rooted in their village of origin. (2011b, 225)

It is also interesting that Panadan suggests that "Today everyone recognizes that the creation of such Xavier Nagars is no more economically viable" (2015, 427-8). What will develop in future years related to this approach will be interesting to observe.

Some Observations

Before drawing some conclusions from this case study, I will make five observations related to points of importance not highlighted above. The first should be obvious from what has already been stated but needs to be emphasized: that is, in agreement with John Rose's quotation in my first paragraph, Fr. Manuel Diaz Garriz is a remarkable missionary whose work should be known, studied, and followed.

Garriz consciously followed in the path of de Nobili and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, and had mentors like Hans Staffner who supported his approach. Yet he is a singular figure in implementing a vision of "radical inculturation" in a pioneer ministry (this is his terminology, see 1988, 375). His patient start, which involved building relationships and deep learning about local realities, and his readiness to listen and learn (as seen in the case of the age of catechists in the instance above) are truly praiseworthy.¹⁴

Garriz is a striking example of a missionary who cultivated reticence. His involvement with the tribal Majirana Catholics led to participation in a syncretistic festival mixing Hindu gods, praise to Jesus, and tribal history. His comments on the confusion of the situation:

I should confess that I do not see any easy and clear solution to this problem. The easy way out would be to ban the

Catholics from attending the festival and establish a rival festival instead. Our Catholic Majiranas are loyal and would do what I tell them to. But that would not be a solution. That would be escapism and it would introduce an element of alienation in the conscience of the Christian Majiranas. We will have to go on thinking of a solution in the coming years. (2004a, 209)

Similarly, in the incident referenced above where Raval Isupanthis were threatened with expulsion from their caste, Garriz was clear: “The catechists and leaders among the Catholics came to me asking what to do. I told them to decide for themselves” (2004f, 20). In the making of the shrine to Mary, Garriz had numerous ideas that were overruled by the local disciples, and in the end a local artist was hired and given instruction on Mary in Christian iconography, then was left free to do what he thought best.¹⁵ Garriz proposed an image of Francis Xavier with four arms in accord with Indian artistic symbolism, and was disappointed at the hostile response that killed this idea (2004g, 190).

Finally (on Garriz), he continually emphasized the long slow process that is necessary for genuine inculturation/contextualization. His self-definition of his venture in 1988 was “Our work is a groping in faith and in love” (375), which he later clarified:

I am deeply convinced that it is not for us, the first generation of missionaries, to try to create a neat blue-print for inculturation. It is the living experience of the new communities that will go on creating—out of the joint existential reality of their Hindu culture and their faith in Jesus—the modules of this new way.... (1988, 379)

In a paper written in 1994, Garriz suggested that one to two generations or 30 to 60 years will be needed to establish his work (2004h, 259).

The second observation is that it cannot be a great surprise that dependency has become a big problem in North

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Gujarat. The influx of personnel and the building of institutions made this almost inevitable. Panadan comments that “many missionaries admit that this dependency is very much present even today among those who are practicing *Isupanth*” (2015, 429n). Fr. Alex Thannipara, after forty years in service among the *Isupanthis*, stated that

once the people experienced how benevolent the missionary was other needs also surfaced and so to satisfy them they were drawn to *Bapu* [father, i.e. Garriz]. As a result of responding compassionately to all the material needs of the new *Isupanthis* they tended to become lazy and dependent on the missionary even in matters where they have resources to manage themselves. Hence we need to reverse the present trend. (2011, 230)

The third observation, not unrelated to dependency, is that attrition and lukewarmness are too much in evidence. One testimony in this regard is from Sanand: “Down the years many among the baptized people stopped being part of the Catholic community because of various reasons” (Kodithottam 2011, 58). Girish Santiago outlines the complexity of such matters:

[The] participatory inculturation process has enabled and enhanced them to feel at home with the Christian cultural incarnation and inter-faith dialogue. Besides such spiritual hunger, we come across, at regular intervals many of our people who highly aspire for the material prosperity in their life at the expense of our institutions (ashrams). Though, due to our ongoing accompaniment, many have come up in their integral life, still some are very comfortable to be ever lazy and lame for they feel that they give an opportunity to Fathers and Sisters to serve them relentlessly and to reveal [to] them the loveable, graceful and merciful face of God. (2011, 277)

Panadan identifies the same problems:

Another major pastoral concern is that a good number of *Isupanthis* have cut themselves off completely from the Church and from Church related activities. (2015, 428)

Further:

The excessive preoccupation of the Christian community for material assistance is a counter witness to the true propagation of the Christian faith. (2011a, 35)

Panadan also shares concern about Ganesh (*Ganpathi*) related to marriage celebrations:

Among the Hindus, one of the common religious practices as part of the entire celebration of wedding is what is known as *Ganesh Sthapan* which is an event that happens a few days prior to the marriage in which the blessings of god *Ganpathi* is sought for the upcoming auspicious occasion. The researcher has observed that this practice is very common even among the *Isupanthis*. The researcher has also verified it by glancing through about ten wedding invitation cards printed by *Isupanthis* for their marriages. (2015, 375n)

That leads to the fourth observation, that there is nothing more complicated in the North Gujarat Mission than the range of issues related to marriage. The contextualization of a marriage ceremony was mentioned above, yet that seems to have been an attempt at creating a common service for all *Isupanthis* rather than letting each caste group take possession of their own traditions in appropriate ways. Some pastoral guidelines for issues related to marriage were drawn up by outside Jesuit leaders and then presented to local *Isupanthis* (A. Fernandes 2004a).

Apart from marriage ceremony issues, the core principle of staying within one’s caste as sociological habitat is never more clearly tested than in marriage. There have been *Isupanthis*

marriages with traditional Christians (Panadan 2015, 402) and most Isupanthis are marrying outside the faith. Garriz stated this as a goal of genuine acceptance within the caste community:

A community will be "sociologically viable" if their members are accepted as Thakors, Ravals, Koris, etc. and *at the same time* as Ishupanthis within their own caste, particularly for the purpose of marriage. (There are still other aspects of a "viable community"—economic viability, spiritual viability—which are less important for the purpose of the present reflections.) (1988, 380–1; emphasis original)

Panadan is perhaps speaking a bit more cautiously when he states that

as far as the question of mixed marriages is concerned, in the present situation, it is unavoidable. Such occasions can also be wonderful means of evangelization and dialogue. (2015, 447)

One final complexity is that many marriages in North Gujarat involve legally underage brides and/or grooms (Panadan 2011a, 35) and the Catholic priests clearly do not want to be involved in these weddings (Panadan 2015, 331; A. Fernandes 2004, 79, 81).

Finally, it is my observation that there have been some serious failures in applying inculturation principles. One of those would be in the area just mentioned, where outside priests drew up marriage guidelines which were communicated to the local disciples. The development of Xavier Nagar residential communities is another example already mentioned. It seems oddly inappropriate that the first baptism (Patel 2011, 201) and the first Patel Isupanthis marriage (Garriz 2004f, 19) were celebrated in the city cathedral in Ahmedabad.¹⁶

Nothing can be of greater concern than the flagging of faith and of the original vision. One of Panadan's conclusions to his doctoral research was that the church will not grow:

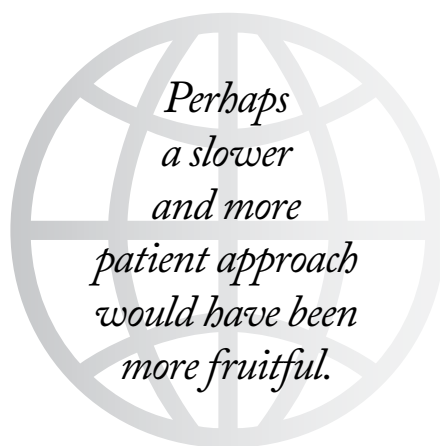
Our investigation confirms that while the community of Raval Isupanthis, who form the major bulk of

the Isupanthis in North Gujarat, has reached [a] certain level of social viability, the other Isupanthis communities like Thakors or Koli Patels, etc., are far from this ideal and in the current socio-political scenario the possibility for further numerical growth is very dim. (2015, 423–4)

This is by no means an isolated opinion, as Archbishop Fernandes (among others) also drew attention to the changing political scenario:

The changing socio-political scenario since post [*sic*] 1990 is our present day experience. The so-called Freedom of Religion Act has halted any new baptismal entry into the Church. (2011a, 14)

This raises questions again about "contextual baptism" and about how



truly new believers have been able to maintain their caste identity. The problem of foreign personnel also comes into play here. George Kodithottam wisely pointed out that

if we agree that we, Christians as a community and Jesuits as a religious body, do have some role to play in the emerging Gujarati society of tomorrow then, it can't be done through importing personnel from outside, whether it be from Spain, Bombay, Goa, Kerala or Tamil Nadu or any other part of India. It has to come from the soil of Gujarat. (2004, 66)

The Jesuits can certainly be commended for their efforts to raise up local leadership; note on the inside front cover of Panadan (ed. 2011) a picture

of three Raval nuns and a Raval member of the Society of Jesus. But a massive influx of outside personnel has also been necessary to maintain all the institutions, and Panadan points out that

lack of committed missionaries who are convinced of this particular way of being a local Church has been a major setback for the on-going faith formation of the Church in North Gujarat. (2015, 431)

Perhaps a slower and more patient approach would have been more fruitful in the long run.

Conclusions

The North Gujarat Mission clearly identified and defined the central issue in contextualization in India. It is neither culture nor theology (although these are also crucially important), but rather community identity. Garriz very clearly and accurately defined the goal:

The ideal should be that persons and families are accepted within their own caste group (Patel, Gajjar, Thakor, Panchal...) *and at the same time* as disciples of Jesus as a totally natural and acceptable phenomenon. (1988, 380)

George Kodithottam also stated it quite clearly:

Evangelization today necessarily requires a new way of being Christian, i.e., *being a disciple of Jesus without losing one's cultural roots and social belonging*. It should not be about creating new culturally rootless and socially disenfranchised groups, but about making disciples who are capable of influencing their cultures and societies through their discipleship and contribute to the evolution of their communities and societies toward *kingdom communities*. *That is only possible if these disciples remain an integral part of their social groups and cultural communities*. (2011, 60; emphasis original)

The traditional ideal of a new believing community which transcends and refuses to recognize caste is simply

not feasible. It leads to situations like Garriz described:

One of our sincere converts, Shri M.B.P. recalls how when he first approached, 20 years ago, a Protestant Padre in Ahmedabad for baptism—after a thorough study of the New Testament—he was told to his utter surprise that as a sign of his “new life” he should eat meat, and that eventually he should marry his sons and daughters within the “Christian” community. (1988, 380)

Even with such clarity of understanding and vision, the mission in North Gujarat still failed to live up to its ideals. It failed by relying too much on Christians and institutions; note George Kodithottam’s warning that “We [Christians] seem to have an exaggerated sense of our own importance both individually and collectively” (2004, 65). It failed to maintain the type of long-term consistency necessary for the work that was undertaken. Panadan comments on this:

The pastoral ministry of the Church will be effective and fruitful only if the process of inculturation initiated right from its origin and pursued down the years is understood in its perspective with all its nuances, respected and promoted by the present and the subsequent generation of missionaries. (2015, 444)

For those interested in new attempts to share the good news of Christ with non-Dalit Hindus there is much to learn from the North Gujarat Mission. It appears that everything will militate against success; the existing church and mission movement will not support what needs to be done, working against best practices (usually out of ignorance and/or misguided zeal). The general Hindu population will not understand what is being done or why. New disciples of Christ will require generous space to determine just how they should live for Christ among their own people, and outside friends will find it challenging to offer

Even with such clarity of vision, the mission still failed to live up to its ideals by relying too much on Christians and institutions.

sufficient faith and patience that allows for this space.

Daunting challenges lie ahead for people who attempt to share Christ contextually in high caste Hindu contexts. Rather than inducing paralysis, this case study should lead to a realistic understanding of the nature of the task. Lessons from this modern Roman Catholic effort point towards less expectation of rapid results, more investment in patient learning, and deep adaptation. Patient trust in God and in the resources of the people group may well in time lead to the type of faith response that many of us dream of in Hindu contexts. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹Roger E. Hedlund claimed in 1995 that “despite Christianity’s success in India, however, its track record in evangelizing the Hindu majority could best be described as massive neglect” (1995, 82). That remains the case today, as Protestants cannot even show a failed effort at systematic contextualized outreach to caste Hindus like this one lone Roman Catholic attempt.

²In making this statement I am going against Jose Panadan, who wrote, “We must get rid of any language of the ‘failure of mission’ in North Gujarat” (2015, 448) since the basic paradigm has proved valid even though fruit from higher castes has been less than anticipated.

³Panadan’s title should be clearly explained: inculturation and contextualization are largely the same, the former term being preferred by Catholics and the latter by Protestants; both will be used in this paper, including the verb form “inculturated” which is not common among Protestants. “Local church” has a distinctive meaning, quite different from the Protestant understanding of a particular local congregation. A “local church” is understood as a church that is genuinely inculturated and reflects the character of the society within which it exists; it is thus much more than a single congregation. Panadan quotes the International Theological Commission definition: “the criterion

for the identity of a particular Church (i.e., a diocese) is essentially theological, while the criterion of a local Church (i.e., an organic group of particular Churches) is primarily socio-cultural” (2015, 72, quoting from Komonchak 1986, 15).

⁴For more information on Upadhyay, see *IJFM* 18:4, 195–200, “Brahmabandhab Upadhyay and the Failure of Hindu Christianity” by Madhusudhan Rao.

⁵For more on Staffner see *IJFM* 24:2, 87–97, “The Possibility of a ‘Hindu Christ-Follower’: Hans Staffner’s Proposal for the Dual Identity of Disciples of Christ within High Caste Hindu Communities” by Brian K. Petersen.

⁶It should be noted that fear of conversion remained a problem; as late as 1998 all the boys ran away from a new hostel “for fear of religious conversion” (Malar 2011, 107). Some of the reasons why this problem persisted will become clear below.

⁷The Unteshwari Mata shrine can be seen at <https://archgandhinagar.org/parishes-missions/parishes/kadi-unteshwari-unteshwari-mata-maria-mandir/>. There is a substantial article focused on the architecture of the shrine and three smaller articles in the *Mission in North Gujarat I* volume (Garriz 2004g, A. Fernandes 2004b, Vedamuthu 2004, Girish 2004). There are five Unteshwari focused papers in *Mission in North Gujarat II* (Manickam 2011, Panadan 2011b, Poothokaren 2011, Chakranarayan 2011, Vedamuthu 2011); the best description of the priest-guru celebration is in Chakranarayan (2011). See also Panadan 2015, 324–7, 332–3.

⁸Ishupanthi and Isupanthi are alternative spellings, the former obviously preferred by Garriz.

⁹I have made some minor corrections to these sentences based on corrections made in the paper as republished in *Mission in North Gujarat I: The Beginnings 1964–1989*, 43–57.

¹⁰Vegetarianism is also now being abandoned by some, as noted by Panadan: “Vegetarianism is followed in the Catholic Ashrams of North Gujarat Mission as a way of respecting the local culture and local sensibilities. However, this seems to be disappearing from certain centers without a collective process of discernment by the

missionaries working in the same region" (2011a, 35).

¹¹ It is rather disconcerting to note Garriz using such Christian terminology in this statement. Obviously he was writing for Christians, but arguably he was affirming their wrong terminologies and perspectives by writing in this way. In an email to me of May 23, 2018, Jose Panadan clarified the use and understanding of terms in North Gujarat today: "The local Christians [*sic*] understand themselves as Isupanthis and not as Christians. But the non-Isupanthis (people of other religions) think of the Isupanthis as Christians. They cannot understand the possibility of being followers of Jesus by being part of the Hindu society. The new generation of missionaries (who do not know the history, who do not care for inculturation) often uses the expression Christians.... Although the term Isupanthis is found in Gujarati Christian literature, many Christians outside of North Gujarat do not really understand the meaning in its context."

¹² This problem developed already in the iconic experience of Robert de Nobili (1577–1656), as lower caste converts overtook his original focus group, the forward castes (see Rajamanickam 1995, 396–400, *passim*).

¹³ The abandonment of local terminology for a European Christian name is striking.

¹⁴ Patience is often not recognized as a virtue in mission work. In December of 1965 there were complaints that Garriz's new work was "a waste of time." The matter was referred to Rome, with a response that "the experiment must continue" (Garriz 1990, 372).

¹⁵ The result was not pleasing to many traditional Christians but was very satisfying to the Isupanthis (Garriz 2004g, 189–90).

¹⁶ Jose Panadan pointed out to me that this was because there was not yet a church structure in North Gujarat.

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