

# Hindu *Dharma* and Experiencing God

by Timothy Shultz

*Editor's note: This article is an excerpt from Timothy Shultz's book, Disciple Making among Hindus: Making Authentic Relationships Grow (William Carey Publishing, 2016), taken from chapter 4, pp. 67–77. Reprinted by permission.*

**G**ospel witness to Hindus is a profoundly experiential thing. It is something that *happens* to us—both to the disciples of Jesus who are bearing witness and to the Hindus who are receiving that witness. It happens to us because Jesus is doing it, within us and through us. Experience is a critical part of gospel witness, because it is at the center of a Hindu worldview about truth and religion and God. They want and even *need* to experience Jesus. Furthermore, they will seek to experience him on their own terms, in ways that feel most natural and trustworthy to them. Indeed, *all* human beings approach God in their own way; we cannot help doing so because we are who we are. The fact that God welcomes us however we come to him is a wonder.

In his book *The Hindu View of Life*, the legendary Hindu scholar and first Vice President of Independent India, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, explains the relationship between reasoning and intuition, and the role of experience in grasping truth about God: “Religion . . . is a kind of life or experience. It is insight into the nature of reality or experience of reality. This experience is not an emotional thrill, or a subjective fancy, but is the response of the whole personality” (1927, 13). He further emphasizes the central role of intuitive experience about religion: “Religious experience is of a self-certifying nature. It carries its own credentials” (1927, 13).

Radhakrishnan links this self-certifying, intuitive experience to reason; but he uses reason to clarify the experience rather than using experience to complement or illuminate reason. The experience stands until reason catches up:

In order to be able to say that religious experience reveals reality, in order to be able to translate religious certitude into logical certainty, we are obliged to give an intellectual account of the experience. The chief sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the Vedas, register the intuitions of the perfected souls. They are not so much dogmatic dicta as transcripts from life. . . . The truths in the Vedas can be re-experienced in compliance with ascertained conditions. (1927, 14-15)

*In this book the author describes how Hindu people experience and respond to Jesus Christ. He addresses their core values, the rhythms of their cultural world, and the patterns of community and family that make up their covenantal relationships. It is more than a manual for contextualization, for the author compels the reader to discover the beauty of Hindus as Jesus sees them—and the beauty of Jesus through Hindu eyes. In chapter four, “Experiencing Jesus Christ,” he examines the apologetics of Jesus and applies them to the Hindu context.*

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Hindu people may look for truth in the sense of a reality that someone has intuitively experienced, and which they can explain and demonstrate how to reproduce. Truth is found within the reasonable narration of the experience, and the proof of the legitimacy of the narrative is that the experience can be reproduced in the real world.

What is the context in which Hindus seek to experience reality? It is *dharma*. Hindus seek to experience reality that makes a positive difference in the totality of their lives according to Hindu dharma. We must reiterate Bharati's point about the nature of Hinduism:

The most basic point to grasp is that Hinduism is not a religion like other religions, but a dharma. So for an average person, dharma is a comprehensive word which includes spiritual, moral, social, and even secular values. (2005, 21)

Bharati quotes Benjamin Khan, who further points out that intuitive experience of truth that makes a difference in someone's life will take place in harmony with life in their larger society:

For to create mental and spiritual fellowship among men is the aim of dharma. So the term dharma is a very extensive term and includes all that activity that a man, if he has to live fittingly, is required to contribute under the fixed order of things; it is activity conforming to the norm of the universe which is good and should not be altered. (Khan 1983, 34)

All of this helps us establish a foundational philosophy for experiential gospel witness to Hindus. We are free to apply the insights of Radhakrishnan, Bharati, and Khan because of what Jesus said about an experiential apologetic based on deeds in the Gospel of John.

We can learn at least two things from the material quoted above. First, it is imperative that we learn to conceive of Christianity as the experience of the presence of Jesus within the lives of Hindu people. Wherever and however people experience the presence of Jesus is where his kingdom has come. The Gospel narratives reveal that to experience the presence of Jesus is to be loved by him in a way that is often referred to as blessing: he demonstrates his love by his deeds. In other words, Jesus will reveal himself to Hindu people by blessing them in a manner that they can receive, according to their dharma.

Because their dharma teaches them to live within a highly networked culture of relationships, the presence of Jesus will be experienced by Hindus in such a way that the individual, their family, their community, and potentially even the entire society is blessed. Helping people experience Jesus with a view to their family or larger society is entirely appropriate, because the examples that Jesus left of dealing with people were of blessing, provision, and deliverance, rather than of chaos and conflict.

The second thing we learn is that Hindus want to experience Jesus in a way that is intuitive, reasonably explainable, and reproducible. The intuitive experience of Jesus is something that Hindus perceive as righteous and peaceful. They sense the presence of Jesus in the loving deeds that they are experiencing from his disciples. This means that a highly programmatic ministry will not be effective (or even welcome) unless the programs serve to position people together so that they intuitively sense the presence of Jesus among them.

Reasonably explainable experience means that the deeds can be clearly traced as originating with God, who has come to them in Jesus' name, and is not a product of the efforts of people. For example, the Hindu people can point to a prayer ceremony when a certain need was presented to God in Jesus' name—a prayer for healing or deliverance, for example, or a portion of Scripture that shed light on an intractable problem and was the beginning of good news. Verbalizing the gospel message becomes the explanation of how and why we are experiencing Jesus in such a positive way. Stories, examples, and nuggets of truth that sticks are preferable to Christian theology at this point.

Reproducible experience is not formal ritual but something that fits into the Hindu way of life. It is accessible, and Hindus can share it with their family and friends. In fact, this is exactly what Jesus said when he pointed to his deeds as the evidence of the truth of his words, and when he promised his disciples that they would be able to offer the same experience to others through their loving deeds.

The Sanskrit word for this experience is *anubhav*. Anubhav takes place within the soul. It is not the dubious faith of feelings or something that is grasped in a limited way by the senses. Nor can it be reduced to cold rationality, nor taken apart and proven by evidentiary trial, nor weighed by the logical rules of rhetoric. Anubhav is the way God communicates or reveals himself deeply within people. It is the difference between studying the menu and eating the meal, between planning a trip to the beach and actually walking on the beach. It is a sure experience of hope that the kingdom of heaven can come to earth.

For Hindus, this anubhav is an introductory experience of the benevolent power of Jesus Christ, who surprises them by revealing Himself to them. He enters their world, demonstrating His love and grace. Anubhav may be dramatically powerful, such as the physical miracles performed by Jesus, but it is not strictly a power encounter. It may also be the superb social and relational character that Hindus see in a disciple of Christ who is supporting them in trying or complex circumstances. It may be a startling question that a child asks an adult about the absurdity of biological inequality between

groups of people, which unmasks the dark heart of human prejudice. It may be a heartfelt gesture of sincere respect for elders, which pierces the heart of a Hindu family who did not expect to be treated so graciously.

Anubhav can also be a flash of intuitive realization close on the heels of an event that is orchestrated by God, a visible and dramatic answer to a prayer offered to God in Jesus' name, a dream or vision, or an experience of worshipping Jesus in a Hindu manner. It may even simply be peace (*shanti*) in the heart of the Hindu family that "surpasses understanding." Ultimately, the power of anubhav is that it speaks to the Hindu people in a way that awakens their hearts to the reality of Jesus. When experienced consistently and authentically, anubhav gives them assurance about the truth of the gospel.

Anubhav often starts for Hindus when they become convinced that the presence of Jesus is manifested in the lives of his followers. This happens when the disciples have learned not only how to experience Jesus but also how to translate that experience to Hindu people.

Ask yourself this question: How do I experience Jesus? Answering it may require that you adjust your thinking about your relationship with God away from right believing and right doing within an extracted Christian community, and instead direct it toward *experiencing Jesus in everyday life*. Once you have done this, ask yourself a second question: How do I translate this experience into words and practice that Hindu people can intuitively understand, access, and share with others?

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Disciples who know how to translate their experience of Jesus into stories that Hindus can access will find it easier to develop a deeper level of trust in their relationship. Their Hindu friends may share a concern or a need, or even an aspiration that they have in their lives, with the believers. They may even share that they want to experience Jesus as well. When this happens, the disciple should listen quietly and respectfully, aware that they are being entrusted with a great treasure.

After the disciple is sure that they understand everything clearly, they can assure the family that they will pray to God in Jesus' name about this issue. It may be best to pray for the need privately, or perhaps even arrange a time when they meet with the Hindu family and have a formal prayer ceremony, performed in a Hindu-friendly way. This may include bathing before people gather for the ceremony, sitting on the floor around a small table with burning incense and little candles, and ringing a bell before beginning.

It is best not to push for this, however. Just remain patient and humble and allow the Holy Spirit to show you how to proceed. As you pray, your Hindu friends are in the perfect position to experience the benevolent power of Jesus. Jesus can provide jobs and places to live. He can guide people who are confused about their lives, restore broken families, and heal minds and bodies. When believers and Hindus who are living in authentic relationship share these types of experiences with Jesus, many barriers between them and Jesus can be broken down.

### *Stories of Anubhav*

Shalini (not her real name) was about sixty when she began attending our ESL classes. She was a charming and friendly person, though it eventually became clear that her quick smile was hiding deep inner pain. One day, after a session in which we had shared our issues and sought prayer in Jesus' name, Shalini told us how frightened and worried she was about her grandchildren. They had grown up in an eastern city in the US and were not always on the same page as her, culturally or morally. Although we had not had this same experience, we could pray for Shalini with insight, because we had lost count of the number of times we had heard this prayer request from other immigrants. Next week she came back and told us the following story.

That week Shalini had been doing *aarti* in her home, just as she had done hundreds of times before. (*Aarti* is a special time of worshiping Hindu deities.) While she waved the small burning wick in the stainless steel plate and prayed, a shining figure dressed in white appeared before her, right there among the idols and pictures and garlands and incense. The person identified himself to her as Jesus. He said that he had heard the prayers she had offered to God in his name for her family. He assured her that all would be well, and then vanished. Shalini wept with joy and awe as she told us this story, and we rejoiced with her.

After this landmark event, we celebrated in Shalini's home with *satsangs*. (*Satsang* is a pan-Indian term meaning "gathering of truth.") We would sing devotional songs called Jesus *bhajans* and have an opportunity to share the gospel with her family and friends. This is an example of anubhav.

Another story is that of Prakash and Jaya (not their real names). The couple had recently moved and misplaced Jaya's gold wedding bangles. They searched their apartment high and low but couldn't find the lost treasure. This was terribly upsetting, and a sense of foreboding about bad luck settled on them. A disciple of Christ who happened to be their friend assured them that he would pray about this situation. The very next day they found the bangles and gave glory to Jesus—right in front of their family! This is also anubhav.

One of the more powerful examples of anubhav is how disciples of Jesus handle adversity and loss. Peace in the midst of trouble is an incredibly powerful anubhav experience for Hindus. A young couple I know had decided to convert to Christianity. They had made the decision to leave self-identification in their birth community and declare Christian identity through church baptism. This was especially complex because the wife was Muslim and the husband was Hindu. They thought conversion would clarify many things in their troubled world, but it had the opposite effect: their families became even more frustrated with them, and then the man lost his job. Since he was in the jewelry business, we talked with them about how trials are more valuable than gold. They decided to persevere and prayed about every issue in their lives. We prayerfully walked with them through this time, and God faithfully guided and provided for them. In the end, their family became completely accepting of their new way of life in Christ. This is anubhav.

A man I'll call Sanjay was also attending our ESL classes. He never missed a session, and I really enjoyed chatting with him and his wife. They were cultured people with attractive personalities, an excellent living example of the wise, temperate, spiritual ideal that Hindus value. One day Sanjay told me that he had begun to notice how every new word or phrase he learned in our class was used in his workplace, just as we said it would be. He saw this as anubhav, an experience of Jesus Christ blessing him because of our love for him, and he died a disciple of Jesus.

Another man came to believe that Jesus' presence was in our lives, and since we were outside the Hindu community he felt safe with us. One summer his son fell very ill and was hospitalized. Our friend blamed himself for this. He had heard from us and from Christians in India that Jesus was the God who would forgive sin. Anubhav was working in his mind. One day he arranged to meet me and confessed horrific sins he had committed in India, hoping I would bring

him to Jesus so he could escape what he saw as God's wrath. Many Hindus believe that their bad karma is worked out in the lives of their children. I listened carefully to his confession and prayed with him. I urged him to join me in the process of seeking Jesus for forgiveness and a new life. This brother truly sought the Lord, but his wife hated us and destroyed any further attempt at witness.

A transformed life is a powerful anubhav for Hindus.

We know of a young man from the global Hindu diaspora who had fallen into a life of substance abuse. However, his conversion to Christianity, which involved water baptism in a church and referring to himself as a Christian, completely changed his life from hatred to blessing. This led his family to become Christ *bhaktas*, followers of Jesus who retain a Hindu identity.

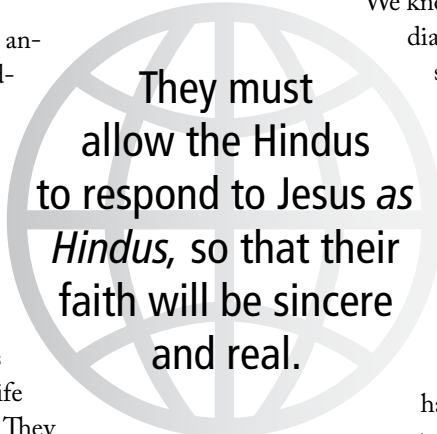
Experiencing Jesus through answered prayer is another powerful form of anubhav. A man we know came from an upper caste family that was filled with chaos and self-destructive tendencies. He had experienced provision in Jesus' name, which, through a series of events, helped him rescue his sisters from disastrous arranged marriages. This man grew rapidly in his faith, and was once even invited to share the gospel in a leading Hindu temple in India! His father eventually accepted his Christ *bhakti*—devotion to Christ—and one of his sisters became a Christ *bhakta* herself.

### *Devotion or Conversion*

After a Hindu family has had an introductory anubhav, they may become very open to welcoming Jesus further into their lives. This is a crucial moment or period of time for Hindus on their journey to Christ, so the believers must allow them to respond to Jesus from the heart. In other words, they must allow the Hindus to respond to Jesus *as Hindus*, so that their faith will be sincere and real.

Hindus usually don't respond positively to Jesus or "get saved" like nominal, unregenerate Christians. They respond positively to Jesus like *Hindus*, through devotion that motivates them to seek to worship him. This worship will deepen the anubhav that the Hindus have already had and make Jesus even more attractive, convincing them that they can approach Jesus and relate to him from an undivided heart.

Often, however, our fears about syncretism, doctrine, and "the way we were raised" prevent us from understanding this process. We assume that all people receive Christ in much the same way, so we ask Hindus if they are willing to accept Christ as their Savior. "I already accept Jesus," they think, and



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say yes. At this point we disciples, anxious to be faithful to the gospel, press the Hindus to understand and accept that Jesus must be their only God.

Hindus may not understand what accepting Christ really means to the disciple. But if they get the sense that the *anubhav* comes at the cost of being pressured to become Christians, we are likely to lose any ability to help them further understand who Jesus really is and what he would like to fully accomplish in their lives. We may deeply offend them and never even know it—they might gradually distance themselves from us because they think we are insisting that they convert to Christianity.

A ministry philosophy that emphasizes conversion as the basis of devotion will almost always have this effect. This is not what is meant by the offense of the gospel. It is just inappropriate ministry practice.

Believers may want to push for conversion, but it is much better to empower *devotion*. Hindus refer to this as *bhakti*. *Bhakti* means devotion, and that devotion can certainly be focused on Jesus, regardless of whether the *bhakta* has said the Sinner's Prayer. Devotion through worship is the heartbeat of how Hindus respond to God after a positive initiatory experience of Jesus. The revolution for believers is not only to accept

this but to actually empower Hindus to worship Jesus, even if they have not yet confessed the lordship of Christ. Experience that is followed by worship is the very best way to reproduce the experience of truth, according to Dr. Radhakrishnan—and more importantly, according to Jesus in John 14.

Jesus-focused *bhakti* motivates the Hindu family to truly consider the feasibility of life as disciples who are devoted to Jesus. As they wrestle with the implications of this life-changing and unexpected revelation, they will naturally need to consider how other Hindu people will respond to their new devotion. Will their family and friends continue to accept them, or will society reject them? This is often the point where everything breaks down, but it does not have to be the end. There is an alternative.

This other possibility is for the Hindu family to consider that their devotion to Jesus as Hindus, not as converts to Christianity, could be acceptable—even attractive and inviting—to their family and friends. They might come to believe that the people they love could also experience Jesus, that they too could pray to him, worship him, learn about him, and witness to others about him. **IJFM**

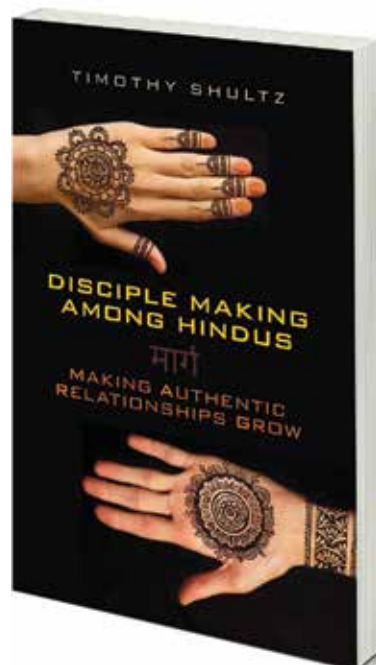
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