

Chanchal Gayen

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## Contextualization of an Indian Christian Marriage: A Case Study

In July 2018 I was invited to solemnize a wedding in Cooch Behar, North Bengal, India. The groom belonged to an orthodox Bengali Anglican family and the bride to the Rajbanshi Bengali people group. Rajbanshis are an influential people group with approximately 475,000 members spread all over North Bengal and North-East India. Most of the Rajbanshis are orthodox Hindus, and it is very rare to find first-generation Christian converts. The work in their area is done by a small charismatic church and most of the converts live in the small district town Cooch Behar. The bride lived with her parents in a village which is about an hour's drive from the district town. The bride's family is the only Christian family in the village; all her other relatives practice Hinduism. Therefore, the relatives in the village were not very appreciative of the fact that she was getting married to a Christian. To them, it seemed like she was rejecting her own community. The bride's family was unsure about the way the marriage ceremony would be conducted and had many questions regarding the credentials of the officiating priest and how the ceremony would proceed.

When I reached the bride's village, her family requested that I conduct the *Pheras* during the wedding ceremony. The *Pheras* are the most important ritual in a Hindu wedding ceremony, which is usually conducted under a well-decorated canopy known as *Chadnatola* in Bengali (one of the 22 major languages spoken in India). Under this canopy, along with many other items of significance in the Hindu religion, is the altar of the fire god, who is considered to be the witness of the ceremony. After the preliminary rituals, the couple is expected to walk around the altar seven times, while the priest reads from their holy books. Without the *Pheras*, a Hindu wedding is considered incomplete. In Hinduism, the *Pheras* signify a bond between two individuals, who are entering into holy matrimony, but also for the next seven births because Hindus believe in reincarnation. For each *Phera*, the bride and groom make a commitment of support and

faithfulness to each other during the different situations and stages of life.

Christianity in India has been strongly influenced by Western missionaries and this is seen in most Christian wedding formats. Like in the West, the guests are seated in a church or a hall, the bride, dressed in her white or ivory attire (gown or saree) walks in accompanied by her father or someone older, while the groom waits in the front for her arrival. At almost every Christian Indian wedding I have attended, the best men, bridesmaids, flower girls, and Bible boy have been present. However, according to the Hindu tradition or even in the Indian tradition, these elements are not necessary and have no significance.

Another disturbing factor is that while the color white is associated with purity, it is also the color widows wear after the death of their husbands. In the Indian context the goddess Saraswati is often seen dressed in white sarees, symbolizing her purity. The color red, on the other hand, is the color of celebration for Hindus. Traditionally, most Hindu brides dress in red or in bright colors, never in white.

At the wedding that I was solemnizing, the groom was in a suit though the weather did not call for it, and the bride was in a cream-colored gown. I was assisted by two pastors. One was a Baptist pastor in his white robe and the other, an Adventist pastor in his suit. I was in traditional Indian wear, *dhoti* and *kurta*. We started with prayer and a word of welcome, after which I delivered a short speech. There were chairs around the canopy and the groom's family members sat in those chairs as they do in the church, whereas the bride's family members, from the village, did not occupy the chairs but came close to the canopy and almost surrounded the bride and groom. According to the Hindu tradition, people do not sit on chairs at a distance while the marriage is being solemnized. They usually stand around the couple. It is an expression of the involvement of the community in the wedding. In this way, the community also becomes the witnesses of the marriage.

In order to accommodate the *Pheras* and give it Christian significance, I replaced the fire alter, which signifies the fire god in Hinduism, with the Bible, a candle, and a cross. I explained to the congregation that these three items symbolize God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and that I was solemnizing this wedding in the presence of the Triune God. I used John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" to explain that the Word is God and the Bible symbolizes the Word. I also quoted from Acts 2:1-3, "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them." This

text talks about the Holy Spirit, which came in the form of tongues of fire, the flame of the candle being used to symbolized the Holy Spirit. Finally, I quoted Colossians 2:13, 14, to help people understand that the Cross represents Jesus Christ, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” Each time I mentioned the word Bible I used the term “Holy Scripture Bible.”

The wedding ceremony began with singing followed by my sermon. After the sermon was the *Kanyadaan*, which when translated in Sanskrit means the giving away of the bride to the groom, which was followed by the exchange of rings and garlands. The couple then exchanged vows and the last portion of the ceremony was the *Pheras*.

As mentioned above the *Pheras* consists of the bride and groom making seven circuits around the fire. I asked the attendees, “How many days are there in a week?” The answer was an obvious seven. I explained the significance of seven days from the book of Genesis, which talks about creation in six days and the seventh day was a rest day to be kept for holy purposes. Then I asked the congregation, “If this couple makes a commitment to God to live as an ideal, loving, God-fearing couple for all seven days of every week will there be any day left for them to live as a bad couple?” Again, there was an obvious “no” from the attendees. I then invited the couple to walk around the *Pheras* and make known to the attendees that each *Phera* (circuit) represented a day of the week and their commitment towards their marriage throughout each day of every week. While this was taking place the attendees sang a Bengali song that had the message about a merciful God blessing everybody. The wedding ceremony ended with a prayer. Soon after the ceremony there was a reception, for which the bride and groom changed into their Indian traditional attire. The bride was in her bright red saree and the groom in his sherwani.

## Missiological Implications

One of the challenges of sharing the gospel in India is the heavy Western influence on the ways Christianity is shared and practiced in the various aspects of life. This has further been promoted by Indian movies, which have a powerful impact on the Indian masses—approximately 70% of the population. In most Indian movies, Christian weddings are portrayed in a Western style and format. The bride is in a white gown and the groom is in a three-piece suit. People in India hesitate to embrace Christianity, and one of the barriers is their fear of losing or going against

their culture, which can cause them to be officially or unofficially excommunicated from their surrounding community.

It is important to remember that Indians are a collective community-oriented people and that many of their decisions are influenced by the community. Therefore, efforts need to be made to allow as many of the cultural practices to remain as possible as long as they do not go against biblical principles. Instead of using Western practices for important life events, it is vital to use Indian practices and only change those elements that go against biblical principles. This approach allows people to see that Christianity is not against many Indian customs and also that Christianity can be communicated using Indian forms.

In this case study the *Pheras* ceremony was reinterpreted, but many of the cultural elements were retained. Biblical meanings were substituted for the cultural meanings that went against the teachings of Scripture. When doing this type of contextualization it is important to constantly pour Christian meanings into the cultural practice. Good biblical teaching is the antidote to syncretism, a danger that is always present while doing contextualization.

The local people appreciated the fact that the wedding ceremony incorporated local cultural elements that were important to them. This approach also communicated the idea that Christianity is not a Western religion, but is for all people in all cultures.



Chanchal Gayen worked as an associate professor at Spicer Adventist University in India before moving to Trinidad where he is an associate professor of mission and the director of the Caribbean Adventist Institute of Mission at the University of the Southern Caribbean.