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# A Brief Stretch of Adventist Witness to Hindus in Guyana

## Introduction

The Adventist message came to Guyana in 1884, about fifty years after Hinduism was introduced in the region. After observing current church membership in Guyana it seems that after 130 years of evangelism the Adventist church has been largely unsuccessful in bringing Hindus to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The challenges faced by the Adventist Church in the beginning are similar to the ones the church faces today as they witness to Hindus. This paper will briefly examine the history of how the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Guyana has worked to evangelize Hindus by looking at the growth, decline, leadership, and progress in taking the gospel to Hindus.

## Brief History of Guyana

Guyana (formerly British Guiana) is located in the northeastern corner of South America but is politically and socially considered to be part of the Caribbean due to strong cultural and linguistic ties. Guyana was ruled by three superpowers during the colonial era prior to gaining its independence in 1966. The first European nation to occupy Guyana was Spain in the 15th century followed by the Netherlands in the 16th century. The British forcefully took over the territory in the 17th century (Daly 1974:34-36).

England's colonization brought many ethnic groups to this land. First were the slaves from the African continent. When slavery was abolished, Chinese and Portuguese replaced the freed slaves on the sugar plantations; however, they were not able to work effectively in the tropical climate. The British then turned to India for indentured laborers to work their estates. By the middle of the 20th century there were about 183,950 freed African slaves; 267,797 East Indians; 4,074 Chinese; 25,453 Amerin-

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dians; and 3,217 Whites living in British Guiana (Singh 1993:21).

After independence in 1966, the British withdrew from political leadership leaving Guyana in political and ethnic turmoil. Forbes Burnham, an Afro-Guyanese, ruled the country from 1964 to 1985 and was considered by most East Indians to be a dictator. A free and fair election was held in 1992, which marked a new era for all Guyanese, especially for East Indians (Carter 1992:9). Today, the country is still trying to heal from the racial and political turmoil of its past.

### Hinduism in Guyana

Hindus in Guyana trace their history back to the Indentured Period from 1838 to 1917 when their ancestors were transported from India to Guyana. According to Odaipaul Singh, the majority of them came from North India, namely (1) Chota Nagpur, (2) Western Bihar, and (3) Eastern and Western Uttar Pradesh. Other places where Indians were taken from include Oudah, Calcutta, Madras, Bengal, and the northwestern states. Most of them were teenagers from five classes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and the 'outcastes' who are categorized as untouchables (dalits). The majority of the immigrants were from the "low and agricultural class" (Singh 1993:43).

### History of Adventism in Guyana

There are two versions of how the Adventist message came to this English-speaking country. One tells how a sea captain fulfilled his promise to the International Tract and Missionary Society in New York by dropping a carton of *Signs of the Times* magazines on the wharf in Georgetown. A woman who read a copy began keeping the Sabbath and subsequently shared what she learned with others, including a friend from Barbados (Haysmer 1924:26). The second account says that the Adventist message came to Guyana through Joseph Brathwaite. According to the *Adventist Review*, he accepted the Sabbath in Ohio around 1874 after he "attended a course of lectures." After a period of backsliding, his interest in the Advent message came alive when a sea captain placed in his hands a copy of the *Adventist Review*. This re-ignited his passion for truth and led Brathwaite to British Guiana where he circulated the *Adventist Review*. As a result of this work, several accepted the message (*Year Book* 1888:135).

According to the International Tract and Missionary Society, tracts and periodicals were sent to Guyana on a continuous basis (Huntley 1883:11). In 1885, R. L. Jeffery, presumably an Afro-Guyanese, travelled to the General Conference headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan, and made a request for a minister to come and organize a church with the twenty persons keeping the Sabbath in Georgetown, Guyana. His second request

was for an opportunity to study in the United States in order to prepare himself to witness to his own people. A committee comprised of J. Fargo, G. G. Rupert, and A. R. Henry was organized to review the two requests of Jeffery (Huntley 1885:6). It seems that the report from the small committee on Jeffery's two requests was rejected and referred back to the small committee (8). A subsequent report by the small committee was adopted. The first request was met by sending Elder Rupert and George King to Guyana. It appears that Jeffery's second request was denied by the committee (Bulter 1886:8). In three years the church membership increased rapidly to include over 200 Sabbath keepers in about ten worship sites across Guyana. At that time a vote was taken to find a suitable leader from the United States to lead the work (Moon 1898:20).

### **A Brief Historical Sketch of Seventh-day Adventist Work among Hindus in Guyana**

In 1892, the *Adventist Review* recorded the first baptism of Hindus in British Guiana. L. C. Chadwick, a General Conference missionary wrote, "I went out eighty-five miles in the country, held a few meetings, and baptized eight, and later sixteen were baptized in Georgetown, of whom three were Hindus. The church was strengthened, and I left it with a membership of forty-one" (Chadwick 1892:12).

According to the report by Chadwick, from the very beginning of the work among the Hindus only a few accepted the gospel. However, a change of leadership in 1899 from Elder Hale to Elder David Babcock, who was transferred from Trinidad to Guyana, brought renewed effort among the East Indians (*Year Book* 1901:238). It appears that the new superintendent, Babcock, was an excellent planner and organizer of the church's mission of sharing Jesus Christ with all people groups. In the first six months of his leadership, East Indians in Guyana were mentioned in the *Adventist Review* and \$250.00 was voted to carry out the work among them (1901:238).

Some other accomplishments of David Babcock include (1) the hiring of Brother Hyder from India to witness to his own people, (2) addressing the challenges of reaching Hindus by requesting a separate meeting tent because the Hindus would not come under the same tent with Afro-Guyanese, (3) expanding the work in strong Hindu communities such as on Leguan Island, (4) using education as a means to reach Hindus, and (5) empowering the East Indians to lead the work among their own people.

The challenges of sharing the gospel with Hindus were evident in this period. Babcock stated that Hindus would not attend meetings where Blacks were present; therefore, he requested a separate evangelistic tent for the "twenty-three thousand of these darkened souls" (Babcock

1903:12). On November 19, 1902, Babcock complimented Brother Hyder for his work on Leguan Island because it was the first time he had seen twenty-five Hindu women present at a meeting along with fifty men (Babcock 1902:15). Brother Hyder stated, "It seems very difficult to associate the different nationalities of this colony in religious services." However, he observed that once people join the church they seem to unite under one roof for worship (15).

The leaders of the churches in British Guiana during the 1900s were willing to try different approaches in reaching Hindus. The first approach, noted above, was to hire a person from India to work among Hindus. A second strategy was the use of education as an evangelistic tool. Babcock writes, "After considering the question with the young man and Brother Hyder, it seems to me that the best results can be obtained by school work among children." He continues by saying that Hindus can be reached through their children; because once you win the confidence of their children through education, we, the leaders, have access to their parents (Babcock 1903:14).

After Babcock, Hyder, and Belgrave left the mission field in British Guiana for other parts of the world, it seems that the mission focus moved from East Indians to Amerindians. E. C. Boyer, the President of the newly organized South Caribbean Union, stated in his report that the Roman Catholics were evangelizing the Amerindians and appealed for missionaries to go there to prevent a Roman Catholic takeover of the mission field; however, he also mentioned that the young East Indians should be reached by our schools, seeming to imply that traditional public evangelism had not been successful among Hindus (Boyer 1918:17).

Thirteen years after the last major emphasis given to evangelizing East Indians, a general meeting was held in Georgetown attended by all twelve churches. The leaders said, "Although a few of this race are faithful members of our church, it can hardly be said that our work for them has begun. In Trinidad there are more East Indians than in Guiana; still we do not have a worker in either place devoting his time to this people. Urgent calls are coming from them; and to these calls we must no longer turn a deaf ear" (Andross 1925:21).

Hollister recounted a special evangelistic campaign for East Indians in 1927. He noted that on the night when the topic, "Prophets, False and True" was presented over 400 Hindus and Muslims came out with many questions before and after the presentation. The priests of both religions sat on the front row. After the meeting the presenter was surprised when all the East Indians shook the hand of the preacher and asked for another small meeting to ask more questions (Hollister 1928:20).

David Babcock seems to have championed the work among Hindus

during the period he was in the area. He made a profound statement that continues to be relevant in the 21st century as the Adventist Church still struggles to effectively reach out to Hindus. He stated, "Persons who have never labored among this class of people cannot realize the many difficulties [there are] to be encountered" (1904:17).

Two decades later Roy McGarrell recalls that in the 1950s the first East Indians to begin witnessing to Hindus in Guyana were from Trinidad, including Pastor Charles Manoram, Pastor Charles Dirgoonanan, Pastor Paul Rambharose, and his son David Rambharose. The first Indo-Guyanese pastor to serve in Guyana was Pastor James Persaud. Another was Pastor Subramani Wailu who began his ministry in the 1960s and continues to fund church planting projects in Guyana today (2013). Two other notable pastors are Peter Dookie and Bertie Toolsiram. Dookie was a very successful evangelist among all ethnic groups especially Hindus. Later on his ministry continued in New York City where he planted a church. Toolsiram also worked tirelessly among the Hindus.

Philbert Ramotar, a Guyanese pastor, was one of the most successful at witnessing among Hindu people. Many of the Guyanese pastors mentioned above came into the church due to his ministry. In an interview with Roy McGarrell (2013), he mentioned that Pastor Ramotar's ministry began in the 1950s and continued into the 1990s with many churches planted from his work in Hindu villages. He was known to bring many Hindus into the church through praying for them when they were sick and casting out of evil spirits. Ramotar also testifies of a miracle that took place when an attacker tried to kill him with a dagger. "The Dagger would not go," said the assailant whose hand became paralyzed for seven days.

After four years, during which time seven evangelistic campaigns were held, 107 persons were baptized and even his attacker started Bible studies (Fearing 1960:22-23). Sadly, after Ramotar left one village to move on to another one, the church that he had planted there would often fall apart because there was no system in place to care for the new believers. Pastor Margret Ramsarran, treasurer of the Guyana Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, was one of the persons who joined the Adventist Church through a campaign held by Brother Ramotar. In an interview with her in 2012, she concurred that most of the former Hindus eventually left the church due to poor mentorship.

In 1983, the Caribbean Union took some proactive steps to continue the work among Hindus. They invited Pastor Justin Singh, an evangelist from New Delhi, India, to conduct evangelistic work in their territory. In the 1980s, he used Hindi music as a bridge to reach Hindus. This approach was very successful in bringing Hindus to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ; however, many of these former Hindus left the church soon after.

An example of this is found in the history of the LBI church (the home church of the author). After a series of meetings held by Singh, about 46 persons of Hindu background were baptized. After three months passed, only one of these continued to attend church.

### Implications of an Ethnocentric Church

In the Caribbean, the Adventist Church is mostly an Afro-Caribbean church based on the identity of its leaders and its leadership style. The church is about 95 percent Afro-Caribbean even though the Indo-Caribbean peoples are the largest people group in both Guyana and Trinidad. One of the challenging questions first raised in the 1900s is still relevant today: "Is there room for former Hindus in the Adventist Church?" This question has many facets and would require another paper to explore completely.

In summary, the church in the Caribbean does not appear to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate other people groups. It tends to impose many of the same non-essentials that the Western missionaries imposed on native Guyanese a century ago when they presented the Adventist message. One of the unwritten rules of dress is that men must wear a Western suit to preach or to participate on the platform rather than being accepting of native formal wear that is more appropriate to the climate. All of the photos examined in the *Review and Herald* indicate that both foreign and indigenous leaders wore a jacket and tie in temperatures that are always above 85 degrees Fahrenheit (Delafield 1951:19). There seems to be an underlying attitude that tends to purport that to follow Christ one must adopt the culture of the majority in the church as well. Currently, it is the dominant group in the church that is imposing and adding many cultural requirements to the gospel and implying that for a Hindu to follow Jesus he or she must become "one of us" by dressing, talking, eating, and behaving in the same manner as the majority ethnic group.

This paper defines an ethnocentric church as one that ignores the uniqueness of other people groups and forgets that each ethnic group has a culture that shapes its identity. This identity is what each person carries with them wherever they go, including to church, and that ethnic identity is not necessarily against biblical teachings (Hiebert 1999:378). One example of ethnocentrism is the *Church Hymnal* used in the Caribbean. It is made up entirely of Western hymns adopted from the United States. The issue is not these songs but how local music written in the context of the culture is viewed and treated. The indigenous songs of East Indians are treated as inferior to the songs in the hymnal even though the message and composition of the songs meet biblical standards.

Another challenge to any ethnocentric church is the difficulty of engaging members on important issues regarding cross-cultural evangelism.

The prevailing attitude is that the issues would be resolved easily if the minority would just accept the policies of the majority. This has created major problems for issues of integration in the Caribbean Church.

### **Forms and Meaning in a Cross-cultural Setting**

One of the challenges faced when a missionary-led church transitions to indigenous leadership is the issue of form and meaning. "Form" is defined as "what we want to say" and "meaning" is "how we say it" (Winter 1999:485). For example, a guitar is a form and the music one plays on it is the meaning. This is another area in which the Caribbean church needs to grow and show flexibility because taking the gospel to Hindus requires a unique, though biblical, approach and style of worship. The traditional church in the Caribbean sees its forms as the only accepted way to worship, and changing any of its practices is considered unbiblical. For example, many church members believe if East Indians sing Christian songs in Hindi they are somehow following Hinduism. Many church members have been unable to separate the form (the language used) from the meaning (the ideas expressed). Further research needs to be done in this area.

### **A Way Forward as the Caribbean Church Engages Hindus with the Gospel**

Credit needs to be given to the Caribbean Adventist Church for trying to make a difference among Hindus. In the last five years, major efforts have been carried out by leaders such as Dr. Kern Tobias. His leadership introduced for the first time the appointment of Adventist-Hindu Relations coordinators in the local conferences. This drive was brought about by an initiative led by the previous president of the Caribbean Union Conference, Dr. Eugene Daniel. This initiative resulted in the General Conference setting up a Global Mission Center for Adventist-Hindu Relations in the Caribbean.

These recent developments are encouraging. A new era of Hindu ministry in the Caribbean is beginning. The suggestions that follow are based on an analysis of historical and current issues and are meant to offer guidance to future efforts.

1. It seems it would be good to create a department that focuses on Hindu ministry in each field and in each church in order to place mission work at the forefront of the conference/mission agenda.
2. A forum needs to be established for current members with Hindu backgrounds to contribute to evangelism among their own people group.
3. Church members need to be empowered by teaching them how to effectively establish long-lasting relationships that will allow them to share the gospel with Hindus.

4. East Indian pastors need to be recruited and trained in order to effectively carry out work among their people group.

5. The issue of racism needs to be addressed. This problem has existed in society since the 1900s and is present among all people groups. It seems that the Adventist Church could become known as a church of reconciliation and peace making.

6. The ethnic make-up of the leadership of the Adventist Church in the region needs to reflect the ethnic make-up of society and should include all the various ethnic groups in society.

The task of working with Hindus is absolutely a biblical mandate given in Matthew 28:19. The Adventist Church has been a mission-oriented church from its inception. Any mission-oriented church faces many challenges as it tries to share the gospel cross-culturally. If leaders and members approach this task with an open and honest attitude, the Holy Spirit will empower the Adventist Church to fulfill the gospel commission to people of a Hindu background and all the other people groups in the area.

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