

# A Hindu Village Turns to Christ

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TAKING CHRIST'S LOVE TO THE WORLD

## REPORT ON INDIAN VISIT 2011

This account includes a report on several Hindu villages where many of the villagers have turned to the Lord. There is also a visit to a Leprosy Hospital, concluding with a comment about my working with a church in forming an eldership. You will get snippets about life in the Seminary as you read through.

### HINDU VILLAGERS HEAR FOR THE FIRST TIME ABOUT JESUS

**Saturday, 25<sup>th</sup> November (*Diary 2011*)**

It seems incredible that after nearly 2000 years of Christianity the gospel has only just reached a number of villages of outcast Hindus near the city of Allahabad where I am staying. The first village that I visit is a rural community which is accessed by a rough mud hardened road which winds its way through fields which are set out neatly in rectangles. The ground is flat, reminiscent of one of Van Gogh's paintings<sup>1</sup> of the French countryside. The subject of the picture is harvest time when the fields are full of activity as men and women attend to their crops. Here there is also lots of activity of people in the fields. We drive past two large cows ploughing up the ground with a wooden plough as they would have done in Bible times. The rutted and winding road leads into the village and we stop next to a large tent structure which is like a large yellow and white striped box made of canvas with a stage at the far end. The loud speaker is blasting out the Christmas programme as children and adults gather informally. The children have been preparing for weeks for this presentation of carols and reciting Scripture verses followed by a puppet show, a preaching and acting out of the Nativity stories. Quite a number of students and staff from the Bible School are involved in the event.

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Vincent van Gogh, "Harvest At La Crau with Montmajour In The Background" (1888).

After the two hour programme I meandered down the road to the large lake at the end of the village. The setting must be similar to Palestine in the times of Jesus. The houses are made of bricks locally resourced with clay and fired in the village reminiscent of Africa. The roof tiles are also made in the village and they are used on top of a rough timber framework for roofing their homes, although some homes are roofed with thatch. Inside these homes the walls are of dried mud and very low. One could only walk around inside by bending over.

Goats with their kids, calves and cattle are tethered with enough rope to give them the illusion of some freedom. They mingle with the wild dogs, the hens and the constant coming and going of people on the road. It always amazes me in India and Africa how people are always going somewhere either on foot, bicycle, motor bike or some other means of transport. Roads in India are full of the confusing activity of people, animals - camels, elephants, cows, pigs, dogs and vehicles. In contrast the rural setting has the appearance of a country paradise undiscovered by the outside world. We visited the village like Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem at barley harvest time. Often in India you will see a woman bearing on her shoulders a great mountain of hay from the harvest field. Alongside the intensive labour of the old ways there are tractors pulling trailers loaded with hay from the fields; men were unloading the hay while the outdoor events were in progress.

We are privileged to watch the programme sitting on plastic garden chairs (common the world over, in Raphael's church they are a royal blue in another village they are red). As the event proceeds more and more people are coming. On our arrival several local Christian women are on the stage singing and what stands out to a visitor is the fact that they cover the whole of their faces while they sing, although when they sit down on the ground they are not veiled. They veil their face with the loose head covering that drapes their shoulders. It is very light material which is also used for their sari. There are a significant number of these young women who are now Christians. I think we could better understand Paul's teaching on Christian women being veiled in the assembly if we could back into the cultural issues at Corinth. The men congregate at the rear of the crowd standing throughout the proceedings, they are attentive to the message and there is no disrespect or joking. When prayer is made all bow their heads with concentration and reverence

– including the children. There must be about 50 children all actively engaged in the songs and choruses, in the action of the nativity and in reciting Bible verses. I can see on a high mound overlooking the crowd an old man who is a herdsman like Amos with his long stick and between his legs a young boy is sitting who must be his little grandson. There are a lot of teenage girls with babes on their hips or sitting between their legs. Some of them seem too young to be mothers. In some of these village girls are married off between the ages of nine to fifteen, other villages marry off their girls between the ages of sixteen to eighteen.

I guess there must be about 60 people present today excluding the crowd of children who are all sitting in front of the stage. Indian people squat on the ground, something we have never learned to do. These people are the lowest in the caste system, they are despised and of no worth. When the folks from ABS (Allahabad Bible Seminary) came to the village the people recognized they were respected and of worth and so they responded to their teachings from the Bible. A key family opened their home for meetings and so the work began and has been going on for four years. The preaching was in Hindi and quite long but no one left during the preaching. The programme came to a conclusion with the puppet show and the presentation of gifts to those involved and those present who were deemed to warrant special recognition. We all had Indian sweet tea in disposable Nescafe cups with a sweet meat to finish. By this time it was getting dark and the mist was shrouding the lake in a gentle haze. On the edge of the lake is a simple building painted pink with a pointed dome and inside a room with barred doors where there is a shrine for the local Hindu gods. Not a single soul can be seen here, the sacred shrine appears to be deserted. Until now the message of Jesus has not been heard in thousands of villages and towns in India. Praise the Lord that the gospel has at last arrived among these wonderful people who Jesus loves and for whom He died. There are 70-80 baptized believers in the church and about 25-30 children – more boys than girls. Their leader is a young evangelist in his early 20's (he looks so young!).

**Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> November.**

My friend Samuel Noel preached in the College chapel. It is the beginning of Advent and so the Nativity will be kept in focus throughout the month. India is a land of

festivals and the birthday of gods. Beware of going to the Indian Embassy on the birthday of one of their gods or holy men.

We return today to the village adjacent to the one we visited yesterday. The big tent is there and children are sitting in front of the stage. It feels a little more formal with village women sitting on chairs and the men again standing well to the rear although there is a very old couple squatting close to me and men are sprinkled around in the general mix. There has been more thorough preparation here involving children of all ages with teenagers well represented. The crowd is larger today. Mums are breast feeding children who are older than would be the case at home. It is interesting to see women present and warmly participating who have the rich red markings of Hinduism on the centre of their head where their hair is parted. They all wear their saris in such a way that their heads are always covered and they can also quickly cover their face. It is a long presentation, including the whole of the nativity scenes, reciting Scriptures (all ages from little boys to late teens); the puppets perform the same as yesterday and the preaching by my friend Sundara Raj who is the Principal of the Seminary. The final programme was concluded with lots and lots of gifts for those who participated including locals, staff and students. The crowd of about 100 had sweet tea in Nescafe disposable cups which were later dropped anywhere on the ground.

We then walked through the village which was a new experience for me! We arrived at the sight of the new church building. The brick foundations are all in place and materials are waiting for the erection of the walls and roof to take place (I think funds have dried up). Adjoining the church foundations there is a brick built house which has painted on the wall a rough sign of a cross. I know that one family in the village has given land to the church for the construction of a simple building. I keep saying that it is too small. I must confess that I like the fact that on occasions like yesterday and today the crowd is too large to be contained in a building. The great advantage of this is that the Christians have to sing and speak to the Lord in public giving an for the Spirit of God to speak to those who otherwise would not be seeing or hearing the believers gathered together under an open sky to celebrate Christ's birth.

**Wednesday, 30<sup>th</sup> November**

This third village is poorer, but apparently the believers are more fervent and bold. The pastor works in close relationship with one of the faculty members from the college. The students love village evangelism and one can see why. Some children view the meeting from the flat roof of an adjoining house reminding one again of houses in Bible times. The Old Testament regulation in the Law was that these flat roofed houses should have a wall surrounding the roof so that no one could fall off the edge. You may remember in Matthew Ch.24 when Jesus spoke about escaping from Jerusalem from the Roman armies. The Jews obeyed this word of Jesus by running across the house tops by means of jumping from house to house and thus escaping.

The Christians here number thirty to forty baptized believers with quite a number waiting to be baptized. Their meeting room is in an enclosed yard with a high wall, but with no door in the opening to the yard which also contains the home of one of the Christian families. The meeting room is an old outhouse and has a door opening but no door. You enter by a step into a room with no window, an uneven mud compacted floor and no chairs. Christians squat as they pray, sing and share the Scriptures together. How I would love to be an observer at such a gathering, but better than an observer how wonderful it would be to encounter the Lord speaking by His Spirit through one of these precious souls for whom Jesus died.

How deep is their Christian experience? They have begun their journey and made their first commitment. What potential, but what wisdom is required to take them on; to mentor them and to disciple them. Who is going to live among them and teach them? Wow, what a task. The plan is to supply them with a young pastor from the seminary. What about other villages like these, will they be reached with similar results? The fire of God must ignite them and do His work among them and then there will be a moving of God that will spread like fire among the poor people in this whole area. Praise God for the beginning, it may be a little spark, but thank God for it. There are sceptics (outside the college) who point to the shallowness of the response of Hindu's and tell you that baptism is nothing, but I do not want to believe that, I want to believe because God is so gracious and kind towards all. I cannot judge this work either way because I have not seen the believers gathered

together in their prayer meeting and I have not been able to sit down and talk to any believer from this group.

*“Build your church Lord! That which You have begun you are well able to perfect. Please give these Christian workers from the Seminary wisdom step by step as the work develops. Establish these young believers in Your truth and give them a hunger for Your Holy Spirit fore without Him the work will fail. We long to see the stamp of God on this work and not the carnal imprint of men.”*

There is something exciting is seeing a genuine work of God emerging from a community that have never heard the gospel before. I recall Paul’s words at the conclusion of his letter to the Romans,

*“of those things that Christ has wrought by me, to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed, Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God; so that from Jerusalem, and round about to Illyricum, have full preached the gospel of Christ. Yes, I have so strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation” (Rom.15:18-20).*

### **Saturday, 3<sup>rd</sup> December**

We visit the most beautiful and picturesque village I have visited (I am writing this having returned home almost a week ago). My laptop cleaned itself, wiping out all my material from the past year. When I returned it was so clean it was like a brand new laptop! All my photos were gone as well as my Diary for my recent trip to India.

The floor of the village was compacted earth covered in discarded rubbish and fine dust. Mud homes were scattered randomly around the village with washing lines, with rich coloured materials hanging out in the sun to dry. Outside one home is a rickety old bed with one grimy pillow laid on the top of the bed frame which has been woven with some kind of string. Outside another home in the distance through the large overhanging trees I can see a large grey cow tethered with its young calf which patiently enjoys its mother’s attention as she licks her back and

flank with her large hairy tongue. These cows appear majestic as they watch you with their languid eyes; perhaps this is why they became a symbol of sacredness in religion. I suspect it was more the result of the belief in incarnation – be careful because by mistreating an animal you may be mistreating an ancestor. I see a dark brown goat with her kid strung to a tree, what beautiful eyes and what a plaintiff bleating. This village is to the eye like a paradise of primitive life. Of course that statement takes no account of the social relationships in the community nor does it hint at the lives of the families in their homes.

These Christians meet together in the open-air in public view of the whole village. Why do people always want to get away from the basic simplicity of Christianity? Jesus never built a synagogue or hired a hall. I don't think any building could have contained the multitudes that followed Jesus. As we approached the village the faculty members in our vehicle had stopped to show us the foundation of the new church building adjacent to the road side. The foundations of brick had been filled in with earth. This earth will be compacted and become the floor of the new meeting room. Surely we are reproducing over again the Christianity we have been brought up within the context of evangelicalism. The meeting hut is to them a tangible evidence of identity but once the believers are inside they are confining themselves to a building and meeting in private instead of meeting in public view. The next step up will be to get a pastor from outside of the village who has been trained in the Seminary. The new building will be separate from the village a little way towards the main road.

Seated with the villagers we watch again the Christmas presentation. I can hear pigs squalling for attention close by. Next to where we are meeting there is a mud home which also includes under the same roof a room for the pigs. The owner opens the door and the pigs rush out into the open area where villagers are glued to the proceedings. I am reminded of the demented pigs that ran down the hill into the Lake and were drowned. These ones squeal with excitement as they scavenge among the rubbish raising clouds of dust in their frenzied search for food. I notice a little pig with a harness and trailing behind it is a long rope that has snapped. It moves so fast, parting the rubbish with its sensitive snout like a snow plough parting the snow in two as it forges its way through a blizzard. The young pig could have successfully auditioned for the role of "Babe."

To-day the P.A. system is not working due to the diesel generator which cannot be started. Hence the programme is much more low key and much shorter. At the conclusion of things we are ushered through narrow lanes between brick enclosures and houses compacted together to the house of a Christian family and we climb stairs onto a large roof top. There are no walls for safety and we are instructed to sit down and issued with a disposable plate made of leaves sown together with sinews from a plant. Dinner is vegetables stewed with potatoes and ladled onto the plate. We drink water pumped from underground. I love to watch the water being drawn by the children and young adults. One can imagine women in Bible times gathering round the well and sharing the village gossip as they drew water from the well (Isa.12:3). Eating on the roof top is quite a public attraction, although we are watched discreetly. We also can look down into private enclosed yards that would be hidden from view from those living at ground level. We are served by the young men from the church who had prepared the food for us. I miss visiting the next village where the whole community turn out for the Christmas programme. Over 500 people attend – the entire village!

### **The Leprosy Mission Hospital**

I met an older couple who were Doctor's at the Leprosy hospital who were planning to extend their medical work into these villages. Leprosy is not recognized generally by the medical profession and thus goes undiagnosed with tragic results. Each day in the Leprosy Hospital 10-15 new cases are diagnosed. Most people visit as outpatients but there are 150 beds for medical cases. There are several elderly patients who will live out their days here enjoying the care of the Christian community. When the local community see the evident marks of leprosy in a person they are instantly ostracised and often cruelly treated and they are sometimes dumped outside the hospital compound with no more contact from their family.

I meet my doctor friend who is busy with a long queue of patients who are patiently resigned to waiting their turn. There are children squatting on the ground as well as young people and older ones. I am introduced to a young man who is evangelist and carer in the hospital. He takes me to a room full of people (again all ages).

Several are preparing for surgery on their hands that are twisted up by the disease. They are soaking them in a bowl of water and rubbing them to loosen them up a little prior to surgery. Patients showed me with smiling faces hands that now could close and function again to some degree. You may have read some of the books by leprosy surgeon Paul Brand. His pioneer work has been adopted by leprosy hospitals world-wide. I met a young man whose eye-sight had been saved by an operation that helped him to open and close his eyelids. He also had surgery on his hands and feet to cause them to work again. He was a happy young man! I met a young woman whose University Course had come to an end resulting from leprosy, but resulting from surgery she could resume her studies financed by the Leprosy Mission. As I sensed the atmosphere in that room I would put one word above the door, "HOPE" replacing despair and rejection. Jesus healed people in anticipation of their salvation. Often these great Christian institutions established by mission organizations over a century ago (this hospital goes back 150 years) lose their spiritual dynamic. The chapel is served by the students from the Seminary (ABS) where I am staying.

Leprosy deadens the nerves and thus removes all sense of pain. A person could walk through the embers of a dying fire and feel no pain. I saw a man with his foot upraised on a stand with a huge hole gouged out of the centre of the sole of his foot but devoid of all pain. Others had hands and feet lost through leprosy and due to late diagnosis. I have heard discussions about whether Christian missions should engage in medical work. My friend if you were diagnosed with cancer would you avail yourself of medical treatment? I did. Jesus probably healed thousands of people simply because He was compassionate. They did not have to sign up first to be a disciple of His. I thank God for these dedicated people who have devoted their professional careers to serving the marginalized and the rejected peoples of this world. I believe the work is supported by the sacrificial giving of Christians and the faith of those who depend on the Lord for the vast needs of this hospital.

If you wish to know more about this work you can visit their website:  
<http://www.tlmnaini.org/>

I went to teach in Allahabad Bible Seminary. Barbara and I had been missionary candidates with the Oriental Missionary Society while still at Bible School in Birmingham. The Indian government closed the door to all missionary visas and so

we could not go to Allahabad Bible Seminary; it is forty nine years ago and I find myself looking down the driveway lined with trees where we would no doubt have viewed the campus of ABS as young missionaries.

I did very little teaching on this visit! The journey which should have taken eight and a half hours took twenty two hours. I arrived at the beginning of Advent and heard so many messages on the events surrounding the birth of the Lord Jesus. This climaxed on the Sunday before I left with Nativity celebration of over 300 people and evening candlelight service for an estimated 700 people. The return journey should have taken six and half hours took twenty two hours. I was on a train with three tiers of bunks. We kept pulling into sidings to let the express trains through!

Soon after my arrival I met an Irish missionary friend who brought along with him a local pastor who seemed familiar to me. He assured me that he had not met me before. Later I met his wife and another couple from his church. When I met her I remembered that when I was here eleven years ago she had just been completing a forty day fast. Their church was over twenty years old and was not growing and folks were not happy. I preached on the following Sunday and the Lord did a special work of open reconciliation among the brothers and sisters in the church. My responsibility then was to work through with them on forming a leadership team of elders. This took up a lot of time, seeing couples individually and the eldership together. I think this was the primary purpose of my visit.

When I am away I get down to working on my laptop, completing articles and following through on messages by putting them into writing. Some of these will be translated into Hindi. I misread an instruction on my laptop that appeared from nowhere and when I came to it again it had wiped out everything on my laptop and all my photos from the last year. I realized immediately that I had to handle this properly before the Lord, rather than reacting to a crisis that for me was of major proportions. Thankfully all my work on Drop box was saved.

I arrived home a few days before Christmas and spent Christmas with Katie and family. Barbara picked up my cold virus from travelling and has been ill over Christmas. Thanks for your prayers which have been effective especially in regard to my spiritual life with the Lord. Thanks so much.

Every Blessing in the Lord Jesus, I am reminded of the words of Jesus to Martha concerning her sister Mary, "Mary has chosen the better part," referring to her choosing to put devotion to Jesus the first priority in her life. I want that to be my priority in 2012.

Derrick and Barbara Harrison December 2012