

Indigenizing Worship: How Far Should We Go?

Raja Krishnamoorthy

Introduction

The very thought of indigenizing worship raises our eyebrow and makes us uncomfortable. Generally evangelical Christians equate it with syncretism, seeing it as an attempt in the direction of Hinduizing Christianity or Christianizing Hinduism. What do we mean by “indigenous” in general? Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as “having originated in and being produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment, or innate, inborn.”¹ This means that a worship pattern that is innate or inborn in the Indian cultural context can be called as “indigenous worship” in India.

Most of the Indian churches follow worship patterns inherited from the west or a slightly modified form of the western pattern. This brings before our eyes the churches built in the architectural style, stained glass windows, altar with an ornate cross, dark brown wooden pews and a beautiful pulpit. The familiar worship scene includes the music from the organ, people in their Sunday best and the pastor in the flowing white robe. Are all these things indigenous, born in the Indian context or what the western missionaries thought well suited for the Indian conditions?

The call for indigenization in general

The call for indigenization of the Indian Church, its mission, worship, finances and leadership is not a new one. With the rise of the national feelings in the early 19th century and quest for national identity impacted the Indian Church too, which resulted in the formation the Indian mission societies which aimed at Indian leadership, Indian finances and Indian ways of worship.² Times have changed since then. But the call and the challenge of indigenizing the Indian Church are still relevant. With the resurgence of right-wing Hindu organizations and their own brand of cultural nationalism the question of indigenization has come to focus again and has gained urgency. The huge task of evangelizing our country and the resultant Church planting among diverse linguistic, ethnic and cultural people groups also calls us to scrutinize our way of worship and witness.

Is true indigenization (without syncretism) possible? ‘Yes’ says Roger Hedlund in his preface to the book “*Quest for identity*”. He asserts that the rapid post-colonial Church growth is truly indigenous, that is “distinctly Indian, not only in antiquity, but in vast variety and diversity.”³ The rich missiological evidences from various mission agencies such as Friends Missionary Prayer Band, Indian Evangelical Mission, etc who have successfully used indigenous methods and indigenous worship patterns compel us to rethink the way we worship.

Another important point to consider here is the suggestion that the cause of poor Church growth in the Asian context (particularly Indian) is due to the failure of the churches here to contextualize or indigenize the Christian thought to suit the Asian mind. This thought is found as early as the last quarter of the 19th century in the mission endeavors of the Wesleyan missions.⁴ At the height of British Imperialism the Wesleyan missions began their work in India with the goal of “conversion of the whole of India”. But this vision had little progress, which gave way to reflection,

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Electronic Edition, 2004.

² Stephan Joseph, *The Use of Mission Records and Publications for Academic Research*. (Chennai: Dharma Deepika, 2003), 75.

³ Roger E Hedlund, *Quest for Identity: India's Churches Of Indigenous origin: The “Little Tradition in Indian Christianity”* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), xv.

⁴ Christi-An C Bennett, “*Seeking the Soul of India: Wesleyan Discussions 1886-1990.*” *Journal of Asian Mission* 4:2, (September, 2002), 257.

and the outcome was the call to indigenize the Indian Church. According to them, the Indian Church should be “self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating, doctrinally and morally pure and culturally relevant.”⁵ Timothy C Tennent⁶ and Dayanand Bharati⁷ also add weight to this argument. Both of them call the Indian Church to express the truth of the gospel in Indian thought patterns.

Now what should be our aim in attempting to indigenize our worship pattern? If it is to make our worship attractive to the people of other faith then it will be “artificial”⁸ and will not achieve any good. The objective of worship is to praise, adore, glorify, and call upon the name of the Lord. When we do this in our own particular way we glorify God who created us as Indians and ordained our cultures and languages. Such worship will strengthen our brothers and sisters who have come from different faiths and also draw our countrymen to Christ.

Now there are numerous views concerning what is indigenous and what is not. So the concept of indigenization should be discussed in general and then applied particularly to the Christian worship following which evaluation and suggestions should be made in the light of the Reformed principles of worship.

So in this paper the author will discuss the problems of understanding the concept of indigenization, try to arrive at some agreeable definition of ‘indigenization’ and in that understanding evaluate how far our worship is indigenous and suggest how far can we proceed without crossing the scriptural boundaries.

Conceptual problems

We have to admit that there is no single, exclusive tradition that can be called as “Indian cultural tradition”. Bishop Sundar Clarke disagrees with this saying that, “There may be regional variations. But there is a core of commonness which is bed stream of Indian culture.”⁹ But this is an oversimplification of a complex group of cultures, languages and peoples. Indian history dates back to 3000 years and the Indian civilization is constantly evolving. The invasion by the Aryans, Moguls, British and others has left an undeniable mark on the Indian religious, cultural and philosophical thinking. So there is no single homogenous, exclusive culture that can said as the Indian culture.

Even the cities and the villages vary in their style of living, and worshipping. The impact of globalization and increased urbanization has created a great gulf between the rural and the urban life. Increased urbanization has created a two way movement. One is toward an urban-western (or international) culture: The younger generation is attracted toward western music, dress and way of living. Even the village youth are no exception to this. This has resulted in many churches adapting to modern music in their worship - heavy drums, clapping and swinging to music is a common sight in the city churches. The second is the movement in the opposite direction: People who are disillusioned with the materialistic western way of living, returning to their spiritual and cultural roots to find solace and strength. All these pose a great challenge to any one who likes to study Indian culture and present the good news in a way that is culturally relevant and at the same time true to the scripture.

Our God is the source of all culture, customs and languages (even though it is marred by sin). His plan of redemption is historical and beyond all culture; but it can be translated into any culture. Church history testifies to the universality and translatability of the gospel into any culture. The glory of God and his works have inspired people of all languages and culture to worship him in a way that is natural to them through which they can express their love and devotion. So we can

⁵ Ibid., 263. Emphasis mine.

⁶ Timothy C Tennent, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations: The Legacy of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay* (Delhi: ISPCK, 200), vii.

⁷ Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water And Indian Bowl* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 5.

⁸ T. Dayanandan Francis, Ed., *The Christian Bhakti of Appasamy* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1992), 99.

⁹ Sundar Clarke, *Let the Indian Church Be Indian*. (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1985), 12.

understand ‘indigenous worship’ as *the worship of the true God of the scripture in ways that is natural and native to a particular place or people and which do not contradict the expressive commands of scriptural principles of worship*. This is neither syncretic nor compromising. This is the question of relevance without sacrificing the reverence. So this kind of worship will be unique to a given situation and will vary from place to place.

Scriptural example

Scripture provides us with ample evidences of ‘contextualizing or indigenizing’ of their truth in different situations. The development of the synagogue is one. Synagogues arose during the days of captivity of God’s people. When the temple was destroyed and God’s people scattered, the need for religious instruction and worship of Yahweh resulted in the development of synagogues. Even after the return of the exiles and the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple the synagogues continued to function as the centers of Jewish worship and religious instruction.¹⁰ The early Church patterned its worship and instruction after the model of the synagogue.

In the history of the early church we see this kind of contextualizing by the apostles as well as the Christians. To the Jews they proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the hope of Israel. This is reflected in the Peter’s Pentecostal preaching, Stephen’s address to the Sanhedrin and Paul’s preaching to the Jews. But when the gospel crossed the Jewish borders they proclaimed him as the Lord and Savior (Acts 11:20);¹¹ as the creator who created everything and so commands every one to repent and believe in him (Acts 17). Jews were asked to repent of their sin of rejecting and crucifying the Messiah whereas the gentiles were asked to believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved. The book of Psalms provided the early Christians with a ready hymnbook. But slowly Messianic songs and affirmation of faith was put to tunes and sung by the early Christians. As the gospel penetrated into more areas it was translated into the cultures in which it took root. Church history provides us with evidences for this.

Evaluation of our worship

In evaluating our worship patterns we should keep in mind the cultural, social and religious realities of our context and the particularity of the gospel and the New Testament worship (especially the regulative principles of worship). In this aspect we should understand some of the fundamental truths that set Christian worship apart from the others.

First the concept of God’s presence: The Hindu or Buddhist shrines or temples affirm the presence certain gods or goddesses there. The sanctum sanctorum is the place where the deity dwells. So worship is offered there. This idea governs their temple architecture and the things associated with it – such as, a pond for ritual washing before worship, removal of shoes before entering the temple, standing sitting or prostrating before the deity, coming around the temple, offering of flower and food to the deity etc. The Muslims face toward Mecca while offering ‘Namaz’ or prayer. But in Christianity we are in the time when those who worship the Father worship him everywhere in Spirit and in Truth (John 4:22-24). Where two or three gather together in the name of our Lord, Christ is present in their midst (Matthew 18: 20). There is no literal God’s presence dwelling in any place. God dwells in the heart of believers through his Spirit.

Secondly the concept of the ‘body’: In the south Asian context and especially in India people are in communities or societies mainly based on caste, or tribal identity. Though there are communities based on religious faith, it is the society that controls a person. As long as a person abides

¹⁰ Henry H. Halley, *Halley’s Bible Hand Book* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 1999), 410.

¹¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts. The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 201. John Stott calls it “the bold innovation which was richly blessed by the Lord.”

by the rules and customs of the society he is free to pursue his quest for religious truth.¹² This does not mean that the Asian religions (like Hinduism) are individualistic. People visit places of worship individually or as families and occasionally as a clan or village. But the Church is the “body of Christ” and each member is committed to one another because of their relation to the head, Christ Jesus. The emphasis in the Church is on the corporate worship. Because of this basic distinction the concept of Hindu “pooja” and Christian worship cannot be equated as the same.

Thirdly the unique Christian theological concepts: The Christian concept of monotheism, Trinity, kenotic incarnation of Christ, the doctrine of grace, vicarious death of Christ, one life and then facing God’s judgment, worship without any idols or symbols, inspired scripture as God’s revelation of himself etc against the backdrop of idol worship, pantheism, ancestral worship, many avatars (incarnations), and numerous philosophies should also be kept in mind. There are many scholars who see the doctrine of grace, or some form of it and other doctrines in other religions also.¹³ There may be similarities on the surface, but they differ greatly in details. Keeping these things in mind let us proceed to evaluate our worship.

Before continuing with this topic the author wants to make it clear that he is not familiar with the worship patterns in the Northeast churches. He is familiar with the worship patterns in the Church of South India in Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, with the Pentecostal churches in Southern states, and the Covenant Reformed Presbyterian Church in Dehradun. Let us analyze the various parts of the worship;

Time

Without exception all our worship services are on Sundays with rare special services on the other days (i.e if Christmas falls on a week day). Usually the worship services run for an hour or little more than that in the mainline churches and it may be two to three hours in the Pentecostal churches. This is very much alien to our context. Here in India, worship is not restricted to any particular day or time. There are special days and festival seasons on which special prayers are carried out. In the villages new moon days are special days when people spend several nights in signing *bhajans* and *keertans*. Apart from this there are religious discourses in the special month of shravan. Though we need not follow these things completely, we should consider the situation in which we minister and our converts come from. When a believer wants to commune with the Lord individually or wants to meditate and reflect on God’s word, where will he go? Many of the Indian Christians are from poor or middle class families. So they do not have places for personal meditation and prayer. In such a situation keeping the Church open for all the seven days will help and encourage the Christians, the new converts and even helpful in witnessing.

Even the Sunday as the day of worship needs our attention. Almost universally Sunday is an accepted holiday (not so in the Middle East or Nepal). But in several places in our country the rural folks are given Monday as holiday. In the northern Karnataka Monday is observed as the “day of Basavanna (the Ox)”. Can the Church in these areas rest and worship on this day rather than Sunday (till the times change)? We need to consider this more sympathetically.

Music

This aspect is criticized by many who have called for the Indigenization of the Indian Church. Usually in the churches an organ or a guitar or both are used to lead the singing. The English

¹² Dayanand, Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 31.

¹³ T. Dayanandan Francis, *Aspects of Christian and Hindu Bhakti* (Madras: The Christian Literature society, 1987), 57.

and German hymns translated into the vernaculars are sung. Lyrics are also sung (utmost one or two). Pentecostal churches as a reaction to the mainline churches completely avoid singing hymns and use songs composed in the vernaculars to the music of harmonium and a drum or tabla. This is quite welcome. Some of our churches still prefer to sing hymns with Victorian English, which does not make sense even to many of the Christians. There is a recent spurt in singing and contemporary music with the accompaniment of keyboard, guitar and drums. There is nothing wrong in the music instruments itself; but the trend of ‘worshipping the worship’ with the songs borrowed from western worship albums is worrisome. H.L.Richard, after analyzing the spiritual life of the great Marathi poet Narayan Vaman Tilak, advises the Indian Church to “appreciate and develop the use of traditional music form”. The reason is “Popular Hinduism has grown mightily through poetry and song. There is a little hope for Biblical teaching to enter the minds and change the hearts of the Hindus without communication in traditional poetic and musical styles.”¹⁴

Language

Christian worship is overwhelmingly verbal. So we need to critically evaluate our songs, prayer, Scripture reading and preaching to see whether they make sense to the hearer. First, let us begin with the Scripture. Is the language of the Bible that we use understandable to people? Is the language relevant? While the English version is going through many changes, our vernacular versions are static and so are hard to understand by those who accept Christ from other faiths and even to our younger generation. We are hesitant to use the words that our non-Christian friends use for ‘God’. But the New Testament writers used the Greek word for ‘God’ when they wrote about the true God of the Bible. While trying to explain God’s redemptive purposes, they freely drew their imagery from the market, and court places. Even the concept of “Hades” is from the Greek mythology. But we have created our own pulpit vocabulary. Rather we should use the existing language and give the Christian meaning to it. There are several words that can be adopted and given a Christian meaning, such as – avatar (for incarnation), Guru (for Rabbi or teacher), Mukti (for salvation), Prasad (for Lord’s supper) etc;¹⁵ these are some of the words recommended for the Hindu context; but we should find words that aptly express our faith, love and devotion for God. Usage of obscure words (like hallelujah and Amen) and the reason behind our postures and words used should be explained to the worshippers every now and then. There also should be time for silence, which can be useful in the confession of sins or meditation of the word taught.

Much work has been done especially by the Catholics, in expressing Christian thoughts and prayers in Sanskrit (according to the Vedic traditions), the ancient religious language of India. This is very much criticized by the “Dalit Theologians” who feel that this may pave way to a kind of “Brahminical Christianity”. They feel that “God’s word should be expressed in the language of the ordinary people”. We should encourage both so that the glorious riches of word of God may be communicated to the people.

We need to strike a balance between preaching of the Word and worship through songs. Reformation restored the centrality of preaching of the word of God in worship. Zwingli removed every thing that will distract God’s people from the word of God. It also brought renewal in the congregational singing. Martin Luther composed hymns that could be sung by the congregation.¹⁶ But the increased emphasis on the preaching of the word of God should not reduce God’s people to mere spectators. In many Indian cultures singing forms the important part worship. People sing Bhajans

¹⁴ H.L.Richard, *Christ-Bhakti: Narayan Vaman Tilak and Christian work among Hindus* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1991), 116.

¹⁵ Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl*, 57. Here he gives many words that can be adapted and used specially in a Hindu context.

¹⁶ LaMar Boschman, *A Heart of Worship: Experience a Rebirth of worship* (Florida: Creation House, 1994), 148-150.

several hours without even a songbook. In such a situation we should explore avenues to put doctrines, scriptures to songs set to the native tunes so that it gets to the heart of God's people. These songs can educate, edify and even warn people of God. Also is the non-offensive form of witnessing and it increases the participation of the laity in worship.

Posture and attitude

Much has been said and written about this. Our posture expresses our attitude. In the Indian context usually people sit down in acknowledgement of the divine presence. There is nothing wrong in continuing with this tradition. In fact it is desirable. Closing our eyes in prayer, bowing heads, folding hands in a posture of prayer are all very much suitable for our context. Can a person prostrate oneself in God's presence as mark of complete surrender to God? Bishop A. J. Appasamy once experimented with this and was impressed with the outcome. He feels that it is a symbol of complete surrender. But this he tried in an Anglican setup, which has an altar toward which the people prostrated.¹⁷ We do not understand God's presence that way. If a worshipper is overwhelmed by God's presence and prostrates himself, he should not be discouraged. Also we cannot force every worshipper to prostrate during worship.

Festivals

The attitude of Indian Church toward Indian festivals is one of indifference and even hostility. This is like the approach of early missionaries who blasted the superstitious and idolatrous elements of Hinduism. They looked at all of the Indian culture and customs with suspicion. But later that approach changed.¹⁸ But the Indian Church's attitude toward the Indian festivals has not changed much. Several of the Indian festivals are based on the cycles of nature (like Pongal of Tamilnadu and Baisakhi of Punjab which are harvest festivals) and on important events of life (like birth, pregnancy, marriage and death). They may be closely connected with religious worship. But why can not the Church adopt it and give Christian meaning to it? All of us know that December 25 is not the birthday of Christ. Yet it was adopted from the festivals of that time and made into the birthday of Christ (*dies solis invicti nati* - "day of the birth of the unconquered sun").¹⁹ We can have New Year services on the regional New Year day according to our regional calendar. Also the Church should develop a positive attitude toward some special festivals like Raksha Bandhan and the festival of lights, Deepavali. Having special services on the local cultural festival days will give people an alternative, which is rooted in their culture and connects it to the Christian faith.

Church architecture

Bishop Sundar Clarke while commenting on Church architecture says that Indian church built on the Gothic style is a misfit to our context. He asks, "Do we think of Indian gopuram or of Pallava architecture or Chola beauty?"²⁰ This will be the shift in the opposite direction. Building Churches like temples will not serve our purpose, as we do not believe in a 'literal deity' residing there. Church is a place where God's people meet to worship God and to be instructed in the way they should conduct their lives. This uniqueness should be maintained. Firstly, we cannot afford to build

¹⁷ T. Dayanandan Francis, Editor, *The Christian Bhakti of A. J. Appasamy (A Collection of his writing)* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1992), 94-100.

¹⁸ H.L.Richard, *Christ-Bhakti: Narayan Vaman Tilak and Christian work among Hindus*, 12.

¹⁹ Hans J Hillerbrand, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Electronic Edition, 2004.

²⁰ Sundar Clarke, *Let The Indian Church Be Indian*, 20.

grand temples. Secondly when the congregation grows large it should be divided into small groups, which will help better growth and administration rather than attempting to build huge cathedrals.

Other areas

In the same way other things like the dress of the minister, the title of the minister, whether to use an offering bag or keep a brass vessel where people can come forward to give their offerings, the possible usage of symbols like a lamp, should be discussed using the Christian prudence. “Ashram movement” also is a forgotten area. Despite its services in the past it has lost its relevance in the recent years. Ashrams can be used by the Church, not as a means to run away from the world or from one’s responsibility but to retreat, recharge and go back to the world with renewed vigor. All these issues call the Church for a sympathetic consideration of our culture and our spirituality. Also Reformed churches should work out its stand toward the ancient heritage of our country, especially the literature, and the great saints of the past. The possibility of “fulfillment theology” in the light of the doctrine of common grace should be explored.

Conclusion

Worship is the greatest privilege God has given us as his children. He has also set in his scripture about how should worship him. So God’s word guides us in the essentials of worship. On the peripherals the Church should show more charity. Elders should be taught to work out worship services in a culturally relevant way. Each session should constantly evaluate the relevance of their worship in a given context.

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