Mission Dynamics Among Biharis: Toward Contextualized Approaches

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Abstract

One of the main reasons why South Asia is among the most challenging contexts for world missions is Christianity's Western heritage. More specifically, Biharis, despite efforts for more than two centuries, are among those who have either adopted Christianity as a foreign religion or completely resisted it. Contemporary missiological understanding has emphasized that approaches that take into consideration local culture are an unavoidable path to a better interreligious understanding of the Christian faith. Based on the concept of contextualization, what are some essential cultural elements of Bihari culture that Christian missionaries have to take into consideration in communicating the gospel to people from that region? This article discusses these mission dynamics from various perspectives, including that of a former Hindu Bihari. The article discusses examples of Bihari religious concepts, terms, and practices that Christian mission should address in order to find relevance in its approaches.

Key Words: Bihar, Christian mission, contextualization, culture, India, missionaries, traditions

Introduction

"Why are you preaching a foreign religion?" is a common question posed to mission workers in India because of how Christianity is perceived to be a foreign belief system. Kanjamala contends that all artistic, cultural, and theological representations are inherently human. Indian Christian artist Jyoti Sahi highlights the difficulty many Indians face in imagining a non-foreign Christ, since the dominant image is of a white foreigner, which obstructs the visualization of a Christ with any other cultural identity, including an Indian one (Kanjamala, 2014, 6). Christianity's Western heritage remains a significant challenge for Indian Christians (Joseph, 2014).

Rupa Vishwanath narrates the early efforts of missionaries, noting that they concentrated on high-caste elites, believing religious change began at the top of the social hierarchy. This top-down method, focusing on belief transformation, educated English-speaking elites, but yielded few actual converts, reinforcing the view that Indian missions were failures. Many Hindus avoided Christianity because Christians, by rejecting caste practices, were often linked to so-called Pariah Christians and foreigners, leading to social disapproval (Vishwanath, 2014, 41).

Over the last half millennium, foreign thought and practices have often been introduced into India through missionary activities. Colonial exploration began with Vasco da Gama's arrival (1498), followed by the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, and notably English regimes (from the early seventeenth century to 1947) (Shulai, 2017). Christianity had actually been introduced much earlier in South Asia. The Syrian Church of the St. Thomas Christians on the Malabar Coast, the oldest, traces its origins to Thomas the Apostle of Jesus (Kanjamala 2014, 6).

Arun W. Jones has examined a nineteenth-century North Indian Protestant debate on a suitable Christian culture. At an 1872–73 missionary conference in Allahabad, European missionaries were concerned that Indian Christians had quickly adopted Western lifestyles. Church Leaders in india, such as Rev. K.C. Chatterjee, supported a form of conversion that would blend Western missionary methods with local culture, resulting in a new, mixed Christian identity. Jones cites historical

examples of Indian Christians that have incorporated foreign cultural elements into their faith (Jones, 2022, 11). This response of indigenous converts indicates that foreign missionaries have often carried cultural identities with limited understanding and sensitivity toward them.

The Apostle Thomas, Mother Theresa, and others launched various indigenizing efforts with distinct focuses and methods (Hedlund, 2017). Even so, contemporary missiological analyses show that Christian churches have largely struggled to be recognized as *Indian* churches through their appearance, approach, practice, lifestyle, language, and theology. Schultz identifies Christianity as an alien faith in India and as the main barrier to engaging Hindus (Schultz, 2016).

These perceptions also reflect the historical presence of Christian missionaries in the northern Indian state of Bihar. Bihar is one of the world's oldest inhabited regions, boasting a history dating back to ancient times. During the Maurya and Gupta empires, Bihar was a major center of learning. Bihar's long-standing role as the heart of ancient India has significantly influenced the nation's culture, traditions, politics, and religion.

Bihar is a historically significant region particularly for religion, being the birthplace of Buddhism and Jainism. However, it has been known as the "graveyard of missions" for Christianity due to numerous evangelization challenges (Goh, 2008, 130). A Jesuit mission was established in Patna in 1620, and since 1745 the city has had a continuous Christian presence, with Roman Catholicism notably influencing education and healthcare. The oldest Christian structure in Bihar, the Roman Catholic Church "Padri ki Haveli," was built in 1713. In the eighteenth century, Bettiah saw substantial missionary activity, leading to conversions among lower castes, including Dalits and groups such as Chamars, Dusadhs, Doms, and Musahars (Kumar, 2023, 3-4).

Since its inception in Bihar, Christian mission has had limited success, with Christians comprising only 0.12% of the population (Kramer, 2021). Although Christianity has positively impacted social aspects, it has struggled to fully understand, connect with, and engage the local population. The remainder of this article explores how the missiological concept of contextualization can help identify the essential cultural elements that Christian missionaries must consider when conveying the gospel to the Bihari people.

This article presents diverse perspectives from the three authors, who have varying degrees of involvement in the context. The first author, born and raised in Bihar in a devout Hindu family, provides insights based on his lived experiences with Bihari customs, rituals, traditions, and worship styles. The second author, originally from West Bengal, India, is a senior researcher on mission dynamics among Hindus and has advised on multiple mission projects in India and other countries. The third author, born in South America and trained as a missiologist in North America, has been developing community projects in Bihar and in other regions of India since 2015.

Mission in Bihar

Bihar has been a religious hub for Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Hindus in Bihar worship various deities without a strict identification as Shaivites, Vaishnavites, or Shaktas. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, Buddhists primarily follow the Theravada tradition, and the Jains are divided into Digambar and Svetambara sects. Christian missions have historically faced challenges in Bihar.

That Christianity has faced challenges in Bihar does not imply a complete rejection, however. In 1620, Jesuit missionaries attempted to establish a mission in Patna aiming for Tibet, but the

effort lasted less than a year. Italian Capuchin missionaries reestablished their mission in 1706, using Bihar as their base until 1745 (O'Malley, 1924, 73; Pallavi, 2015, 2474). Protestant missionaries, including the Fellowship of Christian Assemblies (1880), Methodist (1884), Zenana Bible and Medical Mission (1890), Seventh-day Adventist Mission (1898), British Churches of Christ Mission (1909), Brethren in Christ Mission (1914), and Assembly of God (1914), arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on Bihar's untouched cities and villages (Horo & Kalpura, 2014, 199-213).

Despite initial obstacles related to personnel and finances, numerous educational, medical, and religious institutions have been established by various mission societies, which have also succeeded in forming small faith groups and churches, although challenges have persisted (Horo & Kalpura, 199-213). The Catholic community is the oldest and has the largest following among Christian groups in Bihar. The three major ethnic Christian communities in Bihar are Bettiah Christians, Tribal Christians, and Dalit Christians, primarily located in the West Champaran district in North Bihar, the Chotanagpur Plateau in former southern Bihar, and the central plains of Bihar, south of the Ganges (Pallavi, 2015, 2474).

The Challenge in Bihar

Despite rapid urbanization in recent decades, village roots and rural traditions remain strong, preserving family and community values. Many Bihar residents relocated from villages to cities seeking better livelihoods, with some leaving the state for employment and improved living conditions. However, most migrants wish to return to their ancestral villages after retirement or visit at least once in their lifetime (Jha, 2013). Bihar has India's second largest rural population, with 92.34 million people constituting 88.7% of Bihar's total rural population (Bihar Population Census, 2011).

Christian missionary work in Bihar faces numerous challenges: poverty, the caste system, women's status, social structure, family, pluralism, and fear of Kuladevata—family or clan deities that can be male, female, animals, or holy stones (Selvakumar, 2018). These issues stem from widespread illiteracy, fostering a narrow mindset and superstitions. Bihar ranks lowest in literacy among Indian states, though it has improved from 33.57% in 2001 to 61.8% in 2011 (Bihar Population Census, 2011).

Owing to limited educational opportunities, many individuals in Bihar have a fixed understanding of religion. Hindus typically follow their faith without questioning or exploring their identities. Muslims maintain their religious identity, and this trend persists among other faiths as well. The lack of education in Bihar restricts individuals from engaging in intellectual and rational exploration of religious matters, resulting in religious continuity across generations. Biharis have not learned or been taught to critically reflect on their religions and practices. While some missionaries did not deeply understand the cultures they encountered, many made sincere efforts to respect the local customs, traditions, and beliefs. However, instances of cultural bias or lack of understanding have led some missionaries to impose their beliefs, causing cultural clashes and erosion of native traditions (Ronda, 1977; Yanger, 2017).

Noteworthy mission work, especially among the Maltos (Dhanabalan, 1996), primarily involved tribal groups from regions no longer part of Bihar since the 2000 political division. Currently, Bihar is defined more by castes than by tribes, since the tribal population is now in

Jharkhand. This shift reduced the impact of past efforts in Bihar, as evident from the low Christian population of 0.12%. Bihar is thus one of the least-reached states in India.

In addition, the gospel presented by missionaries, shaped by Western thought and practice, lacked sensitivity to the Bihari context, leading to the perception of Christianity as a Western religion associated with behaviors such as drinking alcohol and consuming beef and pork, and lacking shame as a moral standard. Accusations that new converts are encouraged to eat beef have brought disrepute to missionary work, although it remains unclear which missionary society or church made such offers (Osuri, 2013, 129).

Missionaries who ignored local cultural values made Christian missions in Bihar targets of criticism, accused of eroding local identity. Christian mission societies' expectations for new converts to change their dress, adopt English hymns, and embrace luxurious lifestyles have fueled the perception that converts are losing their "Bihari" identity. Beyond attire and lifestyle, the primary issue is that Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion, distinct in a society that is deeply tied to concepts of shame and honor. Thus, the critical challenge is to align Christianity more closely with the Bihari culture for broader acceptance.

Contextualized Mission Approaches

Twentieth-century studies on Christian missions have highlighted an evangelistic approach focused almost exclusively on verbal proclamation, coupled with a negative view of culture and society (Stott & Wright, 2015, 16-17). This direct evangelistic method undermined local culture, making Christianity seem foreign and disregarding the recipient's worldview and values. Communication studies have significantly influenced the rise of new missionary strategies. As Smith notes, "Communication is a relationship. Involvement is the foundation of all communication, and cultural differences only underscore its importance" (Smith, 1992, 39).

Contemporary mission discussions often address the demonstration of the gospel. Stott posits that social action and evangelism are interrelated; one can be a "consequence of evangelism" and the other a "bridge to evangelism" (Stott & Wright, 2015, 44). Biblically, Jesus's Incarnation serves as the missionary paradigm: "The word became flesh and made his dwelling place among us" (Jn 1:14). Jesus's public ministry exemplifies this combination, as he both fed the hungry and healed the sick, intertwining *kerygma* (proclamation) and *diakonia* (service).

Contextualization is crucial to enhance missionary approaches. Tippett, cited in Gunter Krallman, asserts that "contextualization includes not only cultural forms but also the political, social, and acculturation realities of the present day" (Krallmann, 2002, 166). Scholars have linked contextualization with Christian missionary practices, notably through Andrew Walls's indigenizing and pilgrim principles and Lamin Sanneh's translatability concept. This study refers to these contextualization concepts.

Paul G. Hiebert, a distinguished missiologist and anthropologist, made significant contributions to missiology, particularly in contextualization. His critical contextualization approach stresses a deep understanding of local cultures and a critical analysis of the interplay between faith and culture in disseminating Christianity. Critical contextualization avoids a monocultural viewpoint and rejects the idea of incommensurable cultural pluralism. It aims to establish metacultural and meta-theological frameworks to facilitate the cross-cultural understanding of messages and rituals with minimal distortion (Hiebert, 1987, 110).

According to Hiebert, the initial step of "critical contextualization" involves cultural exegesis, which means studying local culture phenomenologically. Missionaries should uncritically gather and analyze traditional beliefs and customs related to the issue at hand (Hiebert, 1987, 109). The aim is to articulate Christian faith within a specific culture, ensuring that adopting Christianity does not require accepting foreign cultural practices (Hiebert, 1987, 104).

Toward Contextualized Approaches in Bihar

Gideon Petersen observed that spreading the gospel to the Himba people of Namibia has been challenging, particularly insofar as the Himba are an oral people. Petersen emphasizes the need for sensitivity to oral communities, as Western rhetoric often renders the gospel incomprehensible to them (Petersen, 2009, 1). Similarly, Christian missions must carefully consider various Bihari community concepts, terms, and practices in a non-Christian religious context. Since Biharis are an oral people as well, missionaries must adopt contextualized approaches that respect and engage with local traditions, stories, and modes of communication. Failure to do so may result in miscommunication and resistance, as the message would be seen as foreign or irrelevant.

Currently, some Bihari individuals attend churches without a basic understanding of Christian principles and doctrines. Moreover, some people identify themselves as Christians while still practicing their traditional customs, resulting in unique syncretism.[1] Despite numerous educational institutions aimed at societal improvement, Jesuit and Protestant mission societies providing education in suburban and rural areas have largely failed to impart core gospel teaching.

I (the first author) was raised in Bihar's capital and attended Catholic schools throughout my education. Despite this, my knowledge was limited to the names "Jesus" and "Mary." Christian educational institutions have failed to significantly impact society, even with access to young children. The gospel rarely reached their homes, explaining the current Christian population. These families, comprising both literate and illiterate members, seldom heard of the gospel, particularly not through the schools.

Various sources have spread the gospel in Bihar, notably hospitals and small prayer groups. Patients and relatives encounter God through hospital chaplains and staff members. I first learned about Jesus's healing story at the Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore, India. Despite attending Catholic schools, I have never experienced teachings on love, sacrifice, miracles, or healing. This was unfortunate, as missionaries eventually stopped discussing God directly in educational institutions.

Successful missionaries managed to engage in lower caste division while respecting their cultural values (Marak & Jacob, 2004, 96). Herbert E. Hoefer notes that in South India, some priests advised against baptism because its practice differed significantly from local religious customs and cultural norms (Hoefer, 2001, 12). Permitting natives to comprehend and embrace the gospel within their traditions may significantly enhance a more contextualized gospel.

Recently, missionaries' perspectives have shifted to incorporating more relevant and contextualized approaches. For instance, Augustine Jebakumar, founder of the Gospel Echoing Mission Society (GEMS) in Bihar, has successfully used contextualized methods to engage with the community since the 1970s. In contrast, despite careful planning, Christian missions have struggled to reach the native population, especially the oral population of Bihar.

Christians from various denominations have traditionally used Western-style evangelism, adapting methods, languages, and terminologies suited to these contexts. Although effective in some cases, a uniform approach persists in reaching people of diverse faiths across Bihar and other Indian regions. Given India's linguistic diversity, applying a single language consistently is challenging. Although Hindi is a major language, its forms and meanings vary by region, including in Bihar. Building on critical contextualization in missionary strategies, the authors examined initiatives tailored for Bihar, addressing religious concepts, terms, and practices.

Religious Concepts

Iṣṭadevatā is a deity Hindus worship without disregarding the clan's god *Kuladevatā*. Traditional Indian Hindus maintain ancestral connections through various methods (Kumar & Činčala, 2020, 157). These methods include festivals such as *Pitratarpan*, fasting for ancestors, and offering worship during significant family events, such as marriage and initiation. Such practices link family members to their extended families and the past. Acknowledging the *Kuladevatā* is one such practice, but it does not require the *Iṣṭadevatā*. Devotional expressions, regardless of form, ultimately align with the supreme divine (Prabhupāda, 1986).

Kuladevatā refers to the family god or clan deity, with identities ranging from male, female, animal, and even stone, the last type particularly revered by the Biharis. Regardless of their residence, Biharis seek blessings from their *Kuladevatā* during significant events, such as marriage or death (Selvakumar, 2018). Defying *Kuladevatā* is believed to bring curses and poverty to families. Hoefer noted the deep-seated fear of family gods' wrath, which is thought to curse the family (Hoefer, 2001, 13). This fear can impede the acceptance of the gospel, as ancestral or family gods hold crucial cultural and religious significance. Adopting a new faith, such as Christianity, might be seen as betraying ancestral beliefs, risking social ostracism or familial conflict.

In considering critical contextualization, can the church present Jesus Christ as both *Kuladevatā* and *Iṣṭadevatā*? The Old Testament provides numerous examples in which God identifies Himself as the God of Israel, tribes, clans, and families, urging Israel to teach his precepts to their children, signifying his presence in both nations and families. Drawing parallels between these Old Testament depictions and traditional roles allows for a deeper connection between the new faith and existing beliefs.

Presenting Jesus as *Kuladevatā* acknowledges his role in guiding and protecting the family lineage while also being the personal God for individuals. Balancing cultural integration with doctrinal integrity is essential for maintaining faith authenticity, while making it accessible to the local community. Therefore, presenting Jesus Christ as the head of the nation, tribe, clan, and family could be an effective contextualized approach.

Kulaguru refers to the clan's priest, responsible for all rituals and ceremonies. *Kulaguru* have a higher status than the heads of families, and their words are regarded as commands. This authority presents a significant challenge to evangelizing any family, as defying the *Kulaguru* is believed to bring a curse. The first author's family has a *Kulaguru* who visits annually. Before his arrival, the house is thoroughly cleaned and a special bed is prepared for his stay. During his visit, only vegetarian meals are served, although he smokes cigars, which the parents dislike but do not object to. Upon his departure, items such as shoes, a watch, and clothes typically go missing, taken by the *Kulaguru*; yet, no one confronts him.

Many families share similar experiences of being mistreated and exploited by their *Kulaguru*, but they refrain from opposing him due to fear of repercussions. Gurus in the Hindu community maintain a special bond and respect with families, both living and deceased, as they act as mediators between the devotee and god. If the guru are physically dead, a nominated successor takes on the role. Without a *Kulaguru*, disciples are likened to "sheep without a shepherd."

Religious Terms

The term "grace" (*anugraha*) is largely incomprehensible in Bihari dialects. The term *anu-grah* signifies "to support, uphold, provide, or treat with kindness, favor, or oblige" (Malkovsky, 2001, 162-163). Among Bihari Christians, phrases like "grace of God" or "saved by grace alone" are nearly meaningless, except for those familiar with mainstream Hindi, where words like *dayā* or *kṛpā* hold more significance.

Dayā signifies "sympathy, compassion, or pity." Malkovsky cites Panikkar, defining *dayā* as "mercy": "*dayā* is the mercy prompted by the sense of compassion and sympathy." Śaṅkara, an early eighth-century Indian philosopher and theologian, used *dayā²* to convey divine grace but distinguished that from *anugraha* and *prasada*, which are non-Vedic (Malkovsky, 2001, 163).

Parameśvara, or *Parmeshwar*, denotes the supreme being and is well-known among Hindi speakers, but not in Bihari dialects. In Bihar, *Bhagwan* is a common term for God and is easily understood as the supreme being. As Hindi-speaking Christians often use *Parmeshwar*, this term may alienate or confuse new believers, disconnecting them from God because of their unfamiliarity with the word.

The Persian term *Khuda*, originating from the ancient Zoroastrian concept of God, is widely used by Muslims and Christians in northwestern India. Many Christians in this region use *Khuda* or *Rabb* to refer to God in the Bible. In Bihar, however, the term is predominantly used by Muslims, causing confusion among the new Christian converts.

Religious Practices

During my upbringing, I (first author) observed the significance of music in Bihari culture. Temporary tents were erected and large crowds gathered to listen to stories in song form, known as *Birha* in Bihar. *Birha*, an ethnic Bhojpuri folk genre, is particularly popular in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Derived from the Sanskrit word *Viraha*, meaning "separation," *Birha* primarily depicts the separation of lovers (Narayan, 2016, 134). In Indian poetry, *Birha* often conveys themes of pain, separation, and suffering. This genre serves both entertainment and social teaching purposes, and it is popular in both urban and rural areas. Notably, *Birha* singers are amateurs without specialized training. This musical form has also spread to the Caribbean and Suriname among Bihari immigrants (Manuel, 2015, 43).

Birha can be used to depict the separation between humans and God in Genesis, disobedience in Exodus, and God's unconditional love on the Cross. Numerous songs can be created to convey the gospel using this popular singing style. An evangelistic gathering featuring *Birha* singing, prayers, and testimonies could be held instead of preaching. This oral gospel presentation can significantly impact the community. It is essential to use simple terms understood by Biharis.

Katha, an Indian storytelling style, is highly cherished in India. The major Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharat, along with the Puranas, are classic examples of story repositories. The

Sanskrit term *Katha* means "narration" or "story" and is derived from the verb *Kath*, meaning "to tell." Historically, *Katha* has been used to convey religious or social messages (Singh & Saxena, 2023, 228). In religious contexts, the functionary imparts the message. *Puja* (worship) often accompanies *Katha* in many households, and numerous temples organize *Katha* events. They are an integral part of Indian life. In 1932, *Akashvani* (All India Radio) broadcast a two-hour and 15-minute *Katha* program, *Mahishasumardini*, in Kolkata (Mukerjee, 2014). Remarkably, this *Katha* remains popular in West Bengal even after nine decades. In the mid-nineteenth century, indentured laborers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh introduced the *Katha* tradition to the Caribbean.

In 2013, three ministries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church implemented this *Katha* method. The Center for Southern Asian Religions (General Conference) collaborated with the Caribbean Union Conference and the School of Theology and Religion of the University of the Southern Caribbean, Trinidad, to launch a program called *Yeshu Jeevan Katha*. The stage was elaborately decorated with a podium for the preacher and a platform to enact gospel events while projecting the texts. A choir, called the *Bhajan* Group, was seated on stage; *Bhajan* in Hindi and Bhojpuri refers to worship through singing. The two-week program featured a preacher in Indian attire, narrating the gospel melodiously and drawing lessons from the Bible story. The narration was accompanied by enactments and Hindi songs from the *Bhajan* Group. Scripture portions were read in English, with another individual reading selected portions from the Hindi Bible. Utilizing these traditional methods bridged the gap between the church's message and the community's beliefs, fostering an understanding, acceptance, and trust. The church in Bihar should consider training teams to communicate messages through *Katha*, *Bhajans*, *Kirtans*, and *Birha*.

Hindu worship manifests in two forms: domestic and corporate. In Bihar, most Hindu households feature either a shrine or *Pooja* room for daily worship. Some homes also have a Hanuman flag as a place of worship, and occasionally both are present. Corporate worship occurs in temples and tents.

Typically, one family member conducts rituals, while others join in worship or receive blessings. For special *Poojas*, a priest performs rituals at home with the participation of family members. Corporate worship involves a priest, with worshippers standing alongside them. I (second author) noted the participatory nature of Hindu worship, where the priest conducts rituals but the devotee offers *Pooja*, makes offerings, and often recites chants with the priest. The priest assists, but the devotee receives blessings. Teaching (*updesh*) was conducted separately.

Tangibility is crucial for Hindu worship[3] and typically involves seeing the deity (Darshana), making offerings, worshipping, and receiving blessings. Hindus prefer the divine presence at home or in temples, conducting many rituals like *Satyanarayan Poojas, Lakshmi Poojas, and Diwali Poojas* at home. Temple visits are usually reserved for special occasions.

Hindu worship contrasts with traditional Christian Church settings. The Church's challenge is to offer a tangible divine experience. In the Old Testament, Israel encountered divinity tangibly through the temple, the Ark of the Covenant, and through sacrifices. In the New Testament, this tangible experience occurred at Pentecost, with church members baptized by the Holy Spirit. Thus, there is a parallel between Hindu worship and biblical worship.

The Church's worship in Bihar requires further contextualization to better resonate with local believers. The worship format should be revisited to ensure that it remains sacred, while being more meaningful to Biharis. As G.,T. NG suggests, worship should be presented in a familiar

contextual mode (Ng, 2005, 62). One approach is to make worship more participatory, involving devotees in every aspect, so they feel the worship is their own and not conducted on their behalf.

The current Christian worship format primarily includes cottage prayer meetings or church worship, typically involving sermons. For over half an hour, the attendees listened without participating. The Bible does not prescribe a specific format for worship but offers guiding principles. Worship should be conducted "with solemnity and awe, as if in the visible presence of the Master of assemblies" (Dunham, 1968). It is essential to recognize that "a basic missiological principle is that God can be worshipped in ways relevant and understandable within each local culture" (Bauer, 2009, 39). Through contextualization, Christ's followers perceive their faith as fulfilling Hinduism's aspirations and truths, discovering God's true nature in Jesus (Hoefer, 2001, 9).

I (second author) recall attending three house Poojas hosted by three families. An informal group comprising four Hindu families and my own participated in each event. This experience exemplifies the notion of a house church within Indian Hindu communities and highlights their community-oriented nature. The Poojas are celebrated with close relatives and friends, and the flow of attendees was seamless. People find comfort and enjoyment when conducting religious activities at home, occasionally alternating between corporate worship and temple visits.

Recently, churches have recognized that small groups are crucial for the future. Don James asserts, "Small groups are among the most effective ministries for equipping, discipling, and growing the church, and they are adaptable for restricted access countries and urban contexts. Small groups are the model for urban churches" (James, 2014, 142). Although James's comment referred to New York City, it also applies to Bihar. The COVID-19 lockdown shifted church activities from buildings to believers' homes. Hindus worldwide already practice their faith at home, indicating that house churches should be the church's foundation: "Today, eight of the ten largest churches globally are based on small groups, and many rapidly growing world-class churches are small group-based" (James, 2014, 138).

Conclusion

Bihar has historically resisted the Christian faith, partly due to the Westernized forms of Christianity introduced there, which lack cultural relevance and sensitivity. For the Christian faith to be seen as indigenous, the concepts, terms, and practices of Bihari religious culture must be considered. The Church must understand that the gospel aims to transform faith, spirituality, and life without eradicating cultural practices by integrating Jesus within the cultural context while adhering to biblical principles. Various mission approaches have been attempted globally; however, significant areas remain unexplored. Effective engagement requires missionaries to understand cultural and social dynamics and tailor their approach to recipients' cognitive and communicative capacities, thus enhancing mission dynamics through cultural responsiveness.

Endnotes

[1] I (first author) conducted a comprehensive research project in Bihar among a Bhojpuri speaking community and discovered the issues of low biblical understanding and of syncretistic practices. That research was part of my doctoral program and was funded by Andrews University Graduate Grant Aid.

[2] *Adi Śaṅkara or Śaṅkara* is credited for solidifying the doctrine of *Advaita Vedanta*. *Advaita Vedanta* is a school of Hindu Philosophy and religious practices. It is the most popular, studied, and practiced religious school of classical

Indian thought. Brannigan, M. C. (2010). *Striking a Balance: A Primer in Traditional Asian Values.* Lexington Books.
[3] When the Bihari people reached the Caribbean in the late nineteenth century, they missed this component of their religious life. They did not hesitate to accept a statue of Mary as the Indian incarnation of divinity. For more details, read Gayen, Chanchal (2013). Siparia Mai: An Illustration of the Tangibility Factor in Faith by Hindus in Trinidad. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*. Vol. 9, No. 1: 31-44. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol9/iss1/5/

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