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The Anointing of the Airwaves: Charismatic Televangelism's Impact on the Church and Community in urban India

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The Anointing of the Airwaves:
Charismatic Televangelism’s Impact on the Church and Community in urban India

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Abstract

The Indian Government’s open policy on satellite television is attracting a plethora of American-based charismatic television ministries in India. This study, albeit based on preliminary findings from a limited study of church and Hindu community leaders, shows that Charismatic pastors are more positive about Charismatic televangelism than non-Charismatic pastors. Both groups, however, have strong reservations on issues like fundraising, dress code and western dancing. The high-caste Hindus revealed during the research that they were resistant to any form of Christian evangelism including televangelism. Besides caste, class, language and gender, televangelism faces cultural barriers in reaching Indians. The prosperity, success and healing doctrines of Charismatic teaching seem to appeal to Hindus from the middle to lower level economic classes. Concerns have been expressed, however, by Christian leaders that these Hindus who are attracted to Charismatic televangelism may be espousing a form of Christianity (loosely termed “popular Christianity”) that focuses on personal fulfillment rather than personal holiness and accountability within the life of the Christian community.

Introduction

[1] The largest event in the history of Indian Christianity took place in February 2004 when American-based Charismatic Evangelist Benny Hinn conducted his “Festival of Blessings” Crusade in Mumbai. It was reported in the local media [1] that 4.2 million people attended the three-day meeting (the biggest crusade held by Hinn thus far) at the 1.2 million square meter MMRDA grounds at Bandra-Kurla Complex. The event was carefully orchestrated, with 20,000 volunteers, a 1,000 member choir, 32 giant TV screens, an enclosure for 17,000 sick and disabled people, and parking facilities for 100,000 cars [2]

[2] Benny Hinn had not previously visited the Indian subcontinent. So why was his crusade so successful? The success may be attributed to a number of factors including the fact that Hinn’s huge Florida-based Church entity had broadcast his healing and teaching programs through satellite television to India for more than five years. Benny Hinn, whose TV program is seen in 200 countries, is an example of the growing number of Charismatic televangelists whose ministry has entered the global arena through new technology.[3]

[3] The present study has been prompted by the observations of one of the authors (Jonathan) who has visited India for the past ten years in his capacity as mission director of an interdenominational Christian organization. During this period the author noticed several
dimensions of change in the Church scene in India. In the main, the style of worship, the emphases and priorities for ministry, and the techniques of pastoral ministry have slowly become more like the American model of Church ministry than the older models inherited under colonialism. During the same period the airwaves in India have become more and more open to religious broadcasts, many originating from overseas countries. The question arose: could there be a link between the changing shape and form of Christianity and the opening up of the airwaves in India? [4]

[4] Stephen Neill [5] describes the work of Christian missions in India in several phases: first, there was the Syrian phase (which church tradition believes was inaugurated by St Thomas between 50-52 AD); second, the Portuguese in the early 15th century; third, the Roman Catholic Jesuit phase in the middle of the 15th century; and fourth, the Dutch and English phases in the early 17th century. Is televangelism another missionary phase in India? If so, what new challenges will the church and the community encounter as this new missionary strategy takes root in India?

[5] The study also reveals that, unlike the seminal missiological analysis developed by Andrew Walls [6], that the centre of gravity of Christianity is moving from the North to the South and from the West to the East, international Christian television is still very much the domain of the Western nations and in particular of the USA. This study also differs from the findings of Robbie Goh: that there is a new Asian Christian movement that is developing ministries in Asia from networks and hubs driven largely by Asian organizations and agencies. [7] Our study shows that while it may be true that the Asian missionary movement is becoming more indigenized, the realm of international television ministries in Asia, particularly in India, is still largely driven by the United States of America. Furthermore, these American televangelistic ministries, by and large, are not truly contextualized to the local Indian situation, thereby creating several tensions within the Church and the larger community.

[6] In this study we delineate the scope of the paper, define the terms and categories, introduce the methodology, give an overview of evangelical Christianity and identify some of the points of distinction between Charismatic Christianity and Pentecostalism. We then share some recent research findings, explore the place Charismatic televangelism has in urban India today, touch on its methods and rhetoric, and analyze its overall impact on the church and community.

**Scope, Terms and Methodology**

[7] The study does not seek to provide a sustained critique of televangelism in India but rather it reveals preliminary findings of the views and opinions of both the church and Hindu Community leaders with respect to the impact of Charismatic televangelism on contemporary urban India. Even though a few Muslim responses are recorded in our study, the conclusions are based primarily on the findings from the leaders of the Hindu community. [8]

[8] In our study “church” refers both to the mainline churches[9] of the Protestant church as well as independent Charismatic Churches in India; and “Christian” generally refers to an individual or organizational member of the Protestant denomination. Charismatic Christians or pastors are those who have experienced a ‘second blessing” (see Table 1, #5) of being filled with the Holy
Spirit. They also believe that all the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament are available to the church today. Non-Charismatics believe that accepting Christ as Saviour and being filled with the Spirit is a one-stage experience that does not necessarily result in the ‘speaking of tongues.’ Furthermore, non-Charismatics believe that not all the spiritual gifts are available to Christians today. The term “Charismatic” is an umbrella term referring to Christians who believe that gifts such as healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues are available to all in the Church today. Although Charismatic theology was inspired by Pentecostalism, differences prevail in certain respects (see Table 1). Charismatic Christians are not exclusive to any single Protestant denomination. Hence Methodists and Episcopalians could equally be termed “Charismatic.” In the last decade or so, independent Charismatic churches (of a non-denominational nature) have started springing up all over the world. Charismatic television refers to Christian television programs that demonstrate or teach the following: first, salvation is a two-stage experience involving accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour and then being filled with the Holy Spirit; this then results in speaking in unknown tongues, and assumes that signs and wonders, prophecy, healing, prosperity and success are the will of God for all Christians.

[9] Throughout the paper we use terms such as “community,” “Christian,” “Hindu” and “Muslim,” all of which can be problematic in the Indian context. Traditionally, India has been perceived of in terms of communalism, which we understand to be a term whereby people are identified and discussed in terms of their primary religious affiliation. When using the term “community” we use it in this broad sense and where necessary we qualify our discussion with more specific terms. However, it is worth noting that 80 percent of India would regard themselves as Hindus according to the most recent census data. However, the use of the term in the context suggests a homogeneity that is clearly not there. Like other religions, Hinduism is pluralistic, with many sects and ideological differences. Moreover it is hard to ignore the political ramifications of the term in recent years. Since our research concerning Hindus is limited to sources from leaders of temples and Hindu movements within India, our understanding of the term is based on conventional usage that is to see Hinduism as a religious tradition, albeit interwoven into a way of life. A “Hindu”[10] is an adherent of the philosophies and sacred texts of Hinduism and the cultural and religious system of the Indian subcontinent. [11] Hence Hinduism has a religious component but is more than a religion; it is a way of life with adherents involved in a continuum ranging from socio-cultural to religious practices.[12] Using a couple of analogies of a banyan tree and a family, renowned Indologist Julius Lipner sees Hinduism in a polycentric way as “an ancient collection of roots and branches, many indistinguishable one from the other.” Hinduism, according to Lipner is also “an acceptable abbreviation for a family of culturally similar traditions. It is a family term.”[13]

[10] A triangulation research design was employed for this study. It consisted of a content analysis of various televangelistic programs, survey research involving 30 Christian Pastors, and qualitative interviews of 20 Senior Christian Leaders (primarily in Mumbai, but also from Chennai, Indore and Hyderabad) and 35 Hindu and Muslim Community leaders from Mumbai. [14] Qualitative interviews were also conducted with five academics from the Communications and Folklore schools of the University of Hyderabad.

[11] The content analysis involved the researcher watching twelve hours of the Christian television network Miraclenet (6 am till 12 noon and 6 pm till midnight) and a further twelve
hours watching the second network, *God TV* (same time slots). Both these telecasts were viewed in the city of Mumbai on weekdays (Monday and Wednesday), with the whole process being repeated on Sunday. Another content analysis was undertaken for the Hindu channels: *Aastha* and *Sanskar*, with the researcher watching six hours of Hindu television (6 am till 12 noon on *Aastha*) and a further four hours on *Sanskar* (6 pm till 10 pm). Both these telecasts were viewed in the city of Mumbai on Friday and Saturday.

[12] A survey using a questionnaire for 30 middle-level Pastors from both Charismatic and non-Charismatic persuasions was conducted in the city of Mumbai. The results of their views on Charismatic televangelism were then discussed in a qualitative interview with 20 Senior Christian Leaders. Qualitative interviews were also conducted with 35 Hindu and Muslim community leaders and 5 academics who addressed the issue of Charismatic televangelism and its impact on the community. Owing to the sensitive nature of the research, community leaders have been assured of confidentiality and whilst no names will appear in the study, the field notes will identify the respondents broadly as ‘senior Christian Leader/s,’ “Hindu Leader/s” and “Muslim Leader/s.”[15]

**Evangelical Christianity, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement**

[13] The term “evangelical” refers to the body of Protestant Christians who claim to adhere to the historic and biblical understanding of the Christian gospel. Evangelical theology, which is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ and its doctrines according to its proponents, can be summarized in the following categories: the sufficiency of the bible, the sufficiency of the person of Christ and his work on the cross, the need for conversion through faith, and the active demonstration of the gospel in evangelism and social service.[16] Based on these, evangelicals believe in some “fundamental” (as opposed to “incidental”) doctrines such as the inspiration of the bible, the deity of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Christ.

[14] Pentecostalism grew out of the Holiness Movement originating from the Methodist and Baptist denominations during the late nineteenth century.[17] In 1901 in Topeka, Kansas, Charles Parham, a former Methodist minister, taught his students at Bethel College about baptism in the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues, as an experience distinct from Christian conversion. In 1906 William Seymour, one of the graduates of Bethel College, taught this doctrine at his Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission on Azusa Street, Los Angeles where “revival” broke out. From here Pentecostalism spread to the four corners of the world.[18] If Charles Parham is the father of Pentecostalism, Dennis Bennett, an American Episcopalian, is the father of the Charismatic movement.[19] In 1960 Bennett announced to his Van Nuys congregation that he received the outpouring of the Spirit. Later Bennett visited Vancouver, BC and conducted seminars on the Holy Spirit. Thousands of Anglicans and other Orthodox churches in North America were influenced by this renewal movement. In the United Kingdom, organizations like the “Fountain Trust” and men like Michael Harper and David Watson helped to popularize Charismatic teachings throughout the U.K.[20]

[15] The Charismatic movement (so named from the Greek, *charisma*, a gift of God’s grace) is historically and theologically linked to Pentecostalism (and was originally labelled “neo-Pentecostalism”), but unlike Pentecostalism the movement initially stayed within historic
evangelical churches.[21] The movement today “exists almost totally outside official Pentecostal denominations.”[22] Today there are many Charismatic independent churches and several of these have become denominations in their own right, like New Life Church in Mumbai, India. Therefore although the terms “Charismatic” and “Pentecostal” have been used interchangeably, there are reasons why the Charismatic movement can be seen as a separate movement in its own right.

[16] Table 1 shows seven points of distinction between the Charismatic movement and the Pentecostal denomination.[23] In the main, the differences lie in the following: the origin, Christian roots, church structure, hermeneutics, key doctrines, church worship styles and socio-economic makeup.

[17] Figure 1 comprises three concentric circles that show how Charismatic Christianity relates to Pentecostalism and the broader category of evangelical Christianity. By our definition many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches will fall into the category of evangelicalism. However, given the dynamic nature of these movements, especially the Charismatic movement, which does not have defined denominational affiliations, some new groups with experiential theologies may fall outside the body of historic evangelical Christianity.

Table 1: Distinction between Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POINTS OF DISTINCTION</th>
<th>PENTECOSTAL DENOMINATION</th>
<th>CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Time of origin</td>
<td>1900 onwards</td>
<td>1960 onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Christian roots</td>
<td>Protestant “holiness” movements originating from Methodist and Baptist backgrounds</td>
<td>Protestant Pentecostal roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Church structure and polity</td>
<td>Traditional denominations (like Assemblies of God, Foursquare etc) with various forms of Church Government</td>
<td>· Not a denomination - in the early days it transcended denominations and taught the Pentecostal beliefs to other Protestant denominations as well as to the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>· Today there are many Charismatic Independent Churches and several of these have become denominations in their own right (like New Life in Mumbai, India)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>· Some like Hillsong (Australia) are still part of the Assemblies of God Pentecostal denomination but their growth and success are so remarkable that they can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4 Hermeneutics</strong></td>
<td>Historical and grammatical system (like Orthodox Evangelicalism) as well as a “pneumatic” or “experiential” system of interpretation on certain doctrines and issues</td>
<td>Historical and grammatical system but moving more and more to the “pneumatic” or “experiential” system of interpreting the Bible—the common phrase “the Bible says” is being replaced with “the Lord told me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 Doctrines</strong></td>
<td>To be a Christian involves a 2 stage experience—accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour (for forgiveness of sins) and then being filled with the Holy Spirit, resulting in the evidence of ‘speaking in tongues”</td>
<td>To be a Christian involves a 2 stage experience—accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour (for forgiveness of sins) and then being filled with the Holy Spirit. This second stage experience may result in “speaking in tongues.” Many Charismatics believe other signs and spiritual gifts follow like “being slain in the Spirit,” “laughter” (Toronto Blessing), prophesy, signs and wonders, miracles, health and prosperity. etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Being a Christian and speaking in tongues “glossolalia”</td>
<td>Strong and defined positions on holiness (and almost “perfectionism” in this life) and sanctification—growing in holiness and Christ-likeness</td>
<td>Very few groups emphasize holiness and sanctification—this has led some to carnality and abuse of Christian liberty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Holiness Sanctification</td>
<td>Spiritual gifts are operated by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Church</td>
<td>Spiritual gifts are generally given by the Holy Spirit for believers to use as they deem fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Spiritual Gifts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6 Church worship style and emphasis</strong></td>
<td>Strong emphasis on worship and singing (hymns and choruses), preaching and evangelism</td>
<td>Strong emphasis on worship and singing (mainly choruses, referred to as “praise and worship”) teaching especially on healing, prosperity and involvement in warfare (waging war on Satan and his hosts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7 Socio-economic makeup</strong></td>
<td>Initially only black and white lower class people with limited education—now more encompassing of all groups</td>
<td>Encompasses all socio-economic sectors of society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: Charismatic Movement in the Christian context*
Televangelism in the Indian Context [24]

[18] The hybrid term “televangelism” was coined by Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann in their book Prime Time Preachers. [25] It comes from the merging of the words “television” and “evangelism” with reference to the phenomenon of a new breed of Christian evangelists who use the medium of television to get their message across to the masses. [26] Hadden and Shupe argue that televangelism’s roots are more than a century and a half old, going back to the revivalist movements of nineteenth century America. [27] Razelle Frankl goes a step further to show that televangelism today is a direct descendant of the revival ministries of Charles Finney, Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday. [28] Quentin Schultze explains that televangelism is based on the following features: like its ally commercial television, it is dependent on audience support, works best with strong and media-savvy personalities, and it reflects aspects of the American culture in its materialistic and consumerist value system. [29]

[19] The Indian Government’s open policy on satellite and Cable TV since the mid 1990s has created a miniature media explosion. There are currently four 24-hour Christian networks—MiracleNet, God TV (both of which are owned by Charismatic Christians) and a Catholic network, EWTN. Another Charismatic 24-hour network, DayStar, was launched in early 2006 after the initial field research was completed. The religious fervour and flavour in India is further evidenced by the existence of a 24-hour Islamic TV channel (Q Channel) originating from Pakistan and a 24-hour Hindu TV channel, Aastha. There are five other Hindu TV channels; however, they did not operate on a 24-hour basis at the time of the research. This openness to religious television is remarkable in light of the latest census figures depicting the population by religion: Hindus 80.5 percent, Muslims 13.4 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, Sikhs 1.9 percent, Buddhists 0.8 percent, Jains 0.4 percent and others 0.6 percent. [30] Based on the number of 24-hour religious channels, Christians do seem to be a growing force in the religious television scene in India. In the balance it must be pointed out that in keeping with our definition of Hinduism as a way of life, many elements of Hindu myths, folklore and practices are routinely featured in many commercial programs on television such as TV movies, talk shows and advertisements.

[20] According to the Satellite and Cable TV Industry Magazine in India, the 2005 figures show that there are 67 million cable TV homes and 106 million TV homes in India. [31] Business Line, a financial daily from the Hindu group of publications has stated that, based on a Television
Audience Measurement (TAM) report, “religious channels had a viewership share of 0.63 percent of the total television pie in 2004, and it rose to 0.72 percent in 2005, which when rounded off, is almost equal to the viewership from the music channels (1 percent).”[32] The article also mentioned that “religious channels like Aastha [Hindu] and God TV [Christian] had an all-India viewership share of 28 percent in 2005.”[33] Given India’s population of 1.2 billion people, this may not seem significant. However, the number of cable homes is rising every year and the costs are getting more and more affordable at approximately Rp. 300 (US $5) per month for nearly 150 channels. Therefore, community leaders are predicting more and more Indians will be able to access cable TV in the ensuing years.[34]

[21] The following results are based on a content analysis of the two 24-hour Christian channels—MiracleNet and God TV in Mumbai, India. About 85 percent of Christian television originates from Western countries such as the USA, Great Britain and Australia. Approximately 90 percent of all Christian television is based on or contains strong elements of the Charismatic Christian persuasion. Messages on financial prosperity, “wealth transfer,” healing, success and miracles seem to predominate.

[22] The Indian televangelistic programs amount to 10-15 percent of the total programs. Ninety percent of Indian programs are also of the Charismatic Christian persuasion. Some well-known Indian Charismatic televangelists include: Brother Dinakaran, K.P. Yohanan and Sam Chelladurai. Brother Dinakaran follows the methods and style of the American Televangelist Oral Roberts from Oklahoma. Both TV programs by Dinakaran and Roberts are hosted by a father and son team and have a strong emphasis on encouraging listeners to send in personal prayer requests. Both ministries have built huge “prayer towers” at their respective headquarters where prayer requests from viewers are prayed for on a 24-hour basis.

[23] An interesting phenomenon is the availability of televangelistic programs originating from Asia, namely Singapore and Indonesia. While Western countries are currently dominating the Christian media flows into India, a few Asian countries are also moving into global media evangelism ministries. Charismatic televangelist Kong Hee of City Harvest Church, Singapore represents the new pattern of Christian media flows from Asia. Hee’s broadcasts are taped for telecast to Asia from his Sunday services and the worship segment resembles the American and Australian (Hillsong) model of entertainment-oriented, rock-style singing. Hee is decidedly charismatic in his preaching content and approach. You can be a millionaire was one of the titles of his sermons telecast on India’s God TV.[35]

**The Construction of Charismatic Television in India**

[24] The following results are based on a content analysis of the two previously mentioned Christian TV networks and qualitative interviews with Senior Christian Leaders in Mumbai. Ninety percent of all Charismatic programs are based on the genre of “straight preaching.” In other words, the programs are basically the weekly church services broadcast to the masses with some editing. The remaining 10 percent of programs have the following formats: teaching, drama and magazine, that is, two to three segments such as interviews, short reports and news. Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), an American-based Charismatic media agency, is the forerunner in the development of what one of the authors (Jonathan) terms “indigenous or
localized televangelism” in India. This novel approach to Christian television will be the subject of a forthcoming study by the authors.

[25] Seventy-five percent of all programs are produced in the English language. Four out of five Charismatic programs touch on prosperity theology, healing, miracles and “slaying in the Spirit,” which are teachings generally associated with the Charismatic doctrine.

[26] A common word used in Charismatic programs is “anointed” or “anointing” (which usually refers to a person or object set apart for a divine task and imbued with God’s special power). Both American Televangelist Oral Roberts and his Indian counterpart Brother Dinakaran give the impression that because of the “anointing” on them, prayer requests sent in by viewers are answered favourably by God. Other words commonly used by televangelists include: “miracle,” “prosperity,” “success,” “faith,” “blessing,” “favour,” “sacrificial giving,” “riches” and “healing.”

[27] Almost all programs have a “multi modal” flavour, because products (CDs, DVDs, books, anointed handkerchiefs, religious jewellery, etc.) are promoted for sale and viewers are encouraged to download messages and other information, or purchase products from the respective websites like God TV’s Godshop (www.godshop.com). Benny Hinn’s worldwide crusades are accessible on the internet as webcasts. Eight out of ten televangelistic programs have a local telephone number for prayer and product purchase and some have a 24-hour prayer line.

[28] About 10 minutes of airtime per half-hour program are spent raising funds and asking for donations for specific projects. Although these programs operate on a semi-commercial basis, they are dependent on viewer funding and product sales to keep them on air. Most of the funding appeals are direct and some are embarrassing to local Indian Christians, as in the case of some televangelists who say “send us Rp. 500 and we will pray for you … send us Rp. 1000 and we will put your name on a 24-hour prayer chain.”[36]

[29] Benny Hinn’s *This is Your Day* half-hour program, aired on God TV in Mumbai, was analyzed in terms of the time allocated for various segments of the program (see Table 2). This program, like most of the other televangelistic programs, is recorded during Hinn’s crusades around the world and edited for television broadcast. The table shows that greater importance was given to the miracles of healing and fundraising than the preaching. References were made by Hinn during the preaching to political dignitaries like the Prime Minister of Fiji. Hinn has local politicians seated on stage in almost every crusade. This was not well received in the Indian context by the press and other media agencies. *The Star of Mysore* went so far as to quote a well-known Indian dignitary who saw a link between Sonia Gandhi and the Hinn movement, when told that six Chief Ministers of the Congress–ruled States were in attendance at Hinn’s various crusades.[37]
Table 2: Program Analysis of Benny Hinn on God TV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>SEGMENTS</th>
<th>FEATURES</th>
<th>KEY STATEMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40 seconds</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>“... featuring Benny Hinn’s Miracle Crusade”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 minutes</td>
<td>Choir</td>
<td>All Fijians from the Fiji Crusade singing traditional hymns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 minutes</td>
<td>Hinn’s preaching</td>
<td>Excerpts of his preaching on Jesus the Healer. Makes reference to the Fijian Prime Minister who is seated on stage</td>
<td>“Jesus came to heal”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 minutes</td>
<td>Miracles on stage (interviews and ‘slaying in the Spirit’)</td>
<td>A woman deaf for 30 years can now hear and a man from New Zealand testified how he was healed from a previous crusade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 minutes</td>
<td>Appeal for funds</td>
<td>It costs on an average $1.5 million per crusade New TV equipment needed for the Headquarters</td>
<td>“If you send $1500 your name will be on the Tree of Remembrance at our Florida Headquarters”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 seconds</td>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>Send us your email address so you can receive our monthly e-newsletter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL: 28 mins. 20 secs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From: Benny Hinn’s *This is Your Day* on *God TV* (Mumbai) on March 9, 2006 at 7:30 pm.

**The Impact of Televangelism on the Church in India**

[30] The amazing success of the Benny Hinn crusade (in part due to massive TV advertising) in Mumbai and other Indian cities has shown Christians the power of the media in amassing support for such a wide-scale public gathering; this was in spite of resistance and opposition from the pro-Hindu BJP party, the media and the Catholic church in Mumbai who warned its members against attending the meetings. Cardinal Ivan Dias, of the Catholic church, in a circular said: “Hinn … is not accepted even by many of his own colleagues … Hinn’s teachings can easily mislead those who lack a deep faith.”[38] The circular went on to say that concern had
been expressed about Hinn’s “doctrines, false prophecies and alleged visions of angels.”[39] In spite of this warning, many Catholics were reported to have attended the meetings.[40]

[31] The following results are based on survey research using a questionnaire for 30 middle-level Pastors in Mumbai, India as well as qualitative interviews with Senior Christian Leaders and the Manager of a Christian Music distribution outlet in Chennai, India. Thirty-three percent of Charismatic Pastors reported they were “very much influenced” by Charismatic televangelism, while only six percent of non-Charismatic Pastors reported they were “very much influenced.”[41] All respondents (100 percent) from both Charismatic and non-Charismatic persuasions named three televangelists as their most popular Charismatic TV evangelists: Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn and Creflo Dollar. Under the aspect of what influenced them positively, the Pastors mentioned two issues: preaching and worship, as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3: Positive Influences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Charismatic pastors</th>
<th>Non-Charismatic pastors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preaching content</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further analysis revealed that the 40 percent of non-Charismatic Pastors who were influenced by the “preaching content” were impressed by the delivery techniques of the preachers and the clever ways in which the sermon was put together (e.g., the use of alliteration) rather than the content *per se*. In contrast to this, 73 percent of Charismatic Pastors expressed that they were influenced both by the preaching content as well as the delivery.

[32] Under the negative aspects of Charismatic televangelism several areas were raised, as reflected in table 4.

**Table 4: Negative Influences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Charismatic pastors</th>
<th>Non-Charismatic pastors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local church affected (e.g. funds, attendance)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficial content</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercialization of the Gospel</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fundraising appears to be one of the most talked-about issues by both Charismatics and non-Charismatics. According to one senior Christian leader, the average Indian Christian is not materialistic; in fact “he or she is attracted by one’s resignation to wealth and prosperity rather
than the possession of a lavish lifestyle such as that seen on many Charismatic programs.”[42] Senior Christian Leaders expressed concern that Charismatic televangelists give the impression that “if you want blessings or favours from God … give to our ministry.” This, according to the leaders, is tantamount to “twisting the Scriptures.”[43] Senior Christian Leaders added that Charismatic televangelists should add this disclaimer in their appeals: “Do not neglect the work of your local churches when you give to us” as local church pastors have been affected by church members giving to other ministries rather than the local church.[44] Senior Christian Leaders also lamented the absence of balance in the teachings of Charismatic preachers, pointing out that there is an “unhealthy emphasis on healing, prosperity, and miracles rather than the teaching of the main tenets of Scriptures and leading people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”[45] Senior Christian Leaders referred to the Benny Hinn crusade in India as a good example of the current craze for healing and the spectacular manifestation of gifts mediated through the televised “aura” of Hinn.[46]

[33] Under the aspect of “what was culturally inappropriate” in Charismatic televangelism, strong views were expressed in the areas of dress code, liberal trends and again the perceived overemphasis on fundraising.

**Table 5: Culturally Inappropriate Issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dress code/liberal trends</th>
<th>Charismatic pastors</th>
<th>Non-Charismatic pastors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Further analysis revealed that “dress code” refers to females wearing short skirts and low-cut tops as well as males being “overly casual” in their dress. The editor of an evangelical magazine in Mumbai confirmed the conservative nature of Indian Christians even in a media-savvy city like Mumbai. He shared that he receives many negative letters to the editor over the issue of dress code on Christian television.[47] Senior Christian Leaders also felt that more attention should be given to the Indian culture with regard to dress code … “Televangelists should change from wearing suits and ties to Indian-style clothing so as to be more connected with our culture.”[48] “Liberal trends” refer to dancing during worship, somewhat like a rock concert, lavish sets where the broadcasts are taped and Western-style churches. A well-known senior Christian leader commented that Indian Christians are not comfortable with the blending of the sacred and the secular entertainment aspects of televangelism as “it seems to take away the reverence and awe of Christian worship.”[49] The Manager of India’s leading Christian music outlet confirmed some of these findings when he revealed that Australia’s Hillsong Music, although a hit in many Asian countries like Singapore, is not catching on in India.[50] This could be due to the “rock concert” flavour of Hillsong. In contrast to this, *The Gaither Vocal Band*, a conservative hymn-singing American group is currently leading the sales figures of Christian music in India.[51]

[34] Charismatic televangelism seems to be influencing the Charismatic pastors more positively than the non-Charismatic Pastors in India. However, both Charismatics and non-Charismatic pastors have strong reservations about the following: fundraising and cultural issues such as
dress code as well as Western practices and ideas. The way the Christian message is packaged in certain Western cultural ways seems to be a hindrance to its overall effectiveness in India.

The Impact on the Community in India

[35] The following results are based on qualitative interviews with 55 community leaders from Hindu, Muslim and Christian backgrounds from various cities in India [52].

[36] According to a Hindu leader “Conservative Hindus do not watch Christian television. They are not interested in Christian sermons and Charismatic messages.”[53] It was estimated by Hindu leaders from two well-known Hindu organizations that approximately 20-25 percent of India’s Hindu population would be in the conservative category. These Hindus would resist the religious flows of Charismatic televangelism because of their strong devotion to Hindu Gods and beliefs as well as the very strong supportive network of family and friends. The sense of belonging is strong among conservative Hindus and associated with this are the emotions of honour and shame. These emotions seem to keep the conservative Hindus rather intact as a community.[54] According to the two Hindu leaders, most of this 20-25 percent of Hindus would also be members of the high caste.[55]

[37] Senior Christian Leaders, while agreeing with the 20-25 percent resistant Hindu figure, gave evidence of a few individuals from this group who, because of crises such as illness, unemployment and financial loss became more open to the Christian message through televangelists.[56] The Leaders were quick to point out though, that from their congregational records, the actual number of conversions from televangelism is very small.[57]

[38] Other groups of resistant people among the Hindus, according to Christian leaders, are those belonging to the upper middle and high class. These are the Hindus who would have a monthly earning capacity of approximately Rp. 15,000 (US $275) and above.[58] The writings of Indian ecumenical Christian leader, M.M. Thomas, and veteran American missionary, Stanley Jones, indicate that historically Christian conversions took place among the middle to lower classes of Hindus and especially the low castes, who saw conversion as “a liberation from caste oppression.”[59]

[39] Muslim and Hindu perceptions of Christians can be a barrier to Christian televangelism. Many Muslims see Christians as “wine drinkers, pig eaters and our parents say to us “do not mix with Christians.” Some Hindus also see Christians as “beef eaters” or “those who go for dances.”[60] Senior Christian Leaders commenting on these responses said that such perceptions are fairly ingrained in many non-Christians and added that when people see worship services on television conducted like rock concerts, with dancing and loud music, “this simply reinforces the wrong perception that many Hindus and Muslims have of Christians and Christianity.”[61]

[40] Many Hindus and Muslims do not differentiate Christian television programs on the basis of denominations or groupings like “Charismatic” or “Catholic.” According to one Muslim leader, “We see all Christians as one.” About 60 percent of the Hindu leaders testified that they heard of the term “Charismatic” for the very first time during this particular research. Hindus, therefore, would place Charismatic televangelism programs in the category of “Christian” rather than in
denominational sub-sets. Senior Christian Leaders agreed with this perception of Christian televangelism but added that there is a grave danger in this as one aberrant televangelism program could bring the whole ... “Christian witness to shame and ridicule or, worse still, create a backlash in the community among resistant and fundamental Hindu groups.”

[41] The groups that would be most open to Christian television are those from the middle class and below. The content of Charismatic televangelism, with messages on “prosperity” and “success,” would strike a chord with these groups. Many Hindus in these groups would view televangelism programs and pick and choose whatever is helpful to them. Hindu leaders who are familiar with Charismatic programs commented that many of them would have no problems with the ideas put forth by certain televangelists, pointing out that some of the teachings would make them and the Hindus who watch these programs “better Hindus.”

Senior Christian Leaders commenting on this finding warned that a new form of “Christo-Hinduism,” a fusion of Hinduism and Christianity, may eventually come into being as a result of this one-sided preaching of the Gospel. This concern is reinforced by Peter van der Veer’s research findings that in India religious identities can be shaped over periods of time by various social and cultural forces, which include the media. A similar form of this syncretistic Christianity, which the Indian Christian leaders are concerned about, has developed in the Korean context where according to Mark R. Mullins, Charismatic Christianity has effectively blended Shamanism with the Gospel.

The Christian leaders also warned that this new form of syncretistic Christianity, which they loosely label “popular Christianity,” does not call for any commitment in the areas of church membership, accountability or Christian maturity and discipleship. David Lyon in his book Jesus in Disneyland alludes to this reality when he says that in today’s “post-denominational world … believing without belonging is an increasingly popular religious position.” The Indian Church is far from being in a post-denominational context but should the trends, as indicated by the leaders, continue, it would seem that denominational categories would be challenged. The authors agree that more research is needed in establishing a causal relationship between televangelism and the so called phenomenon of “popular Christianity” mentioned by the Christian leaders.

In contrast to the 75 percent of televangelists who preach in English, American female televangelist Joyce Meyer, who is also of the Charismatic persuasion, is heard in seven Indian languages several times a day on Indian television. Meyer’s programs are dubbed into the following languages: Hindi, Tamil, Punjabi, Malayalam, Marathi, Telegu and Kannada. It is not surprising, therefore, that 100 percent of the Pastors rated Joyce Meyer as the one of the three most popular Charismatic Televangelists, whereas 90 percent of all the women participants from both Christian and Hindu persuasions recognised Joyce Meyer’s name. Furthermore, a total of 60 percent of these female respondents said they found her programs helpful and uplifting, with 20 percent expressing reservations about her lavish settings, expensive wardrobe and casual references to spiritual matters.

Joyce Meyer’s effectiveness could also be due to the fact that unlike most foreign televangelists, she and her team make regular visits to India and have established local representatives in some major cities who administer funds for relief operations as well as ministries to women and children in India.
In the main, caste, class, language and culture are the main barriers to Charismatic television. As these barriers are overcome, the resistance to Christianity may soften. Females seem to respond positively to the messages given by women televangelists, which signifies that the issue of gender identification plays an important part in the overall process of the receptivity of the message.

The watering down of the Christian Gospel and the widespread preaching of the health and wealth message by televangelists might mean more Hindus turn to Christ for practical benefits while still maintaining their Hindu beliefs and practices.

The Emergence of Hindu Televangelism

An interesting development in our research is the discovery of the growth of Hindu televangelism in India during the last decade. Although, not the main focus of our study, the fact that Hindu televangelism emerged shortly after the introduction of Charismatic televangelism, suggests that Charismatic televangelism may be having some influence on the evangelistic activities of Hinduism. This is not to say that televangelism is having an influence on Hinduism but that the modes of communication utilized by the Christian broadcasters are being observed and adapted by Hindu broadcasters for their own ends.

When one of Hinduism’s sacred texts, the Ramayana, was serialised in 78 episodes on public television between 1987 and 1988, it was estimated that up to 100 million people watched the most popular episodes—bringing Indian life almost to a standstill. What was equally extraordinary was the impact on various Hindus, including: those who did not understand the Hindi language, the untouchables, and middle class Hindus—all of whom had their own share of spiritual responses. Many Hindus claimed to have a darshan, “a glimpse of the sacred” during the viewing. Other viewers took part in elaborate rituals and purification prayers before the start of each program. The medium became the message when, in public places, “the television itself was often garlanded with flowers or incense.” This television phenomenon helps us understand, in part, why the style, content and viewing of Hindu religious television differs from Christian television. Hinduism is an orthopractic religion—it has a lifestyle orientation as opposed to a theological orientation. This lifestyle orientation explains why, among other things, Hindu folklore and practices find their way into public and commercial television programs as they do into many other aspects of life. It is important to note that what is different in the last decade in Hindu televangelism, is the establishment of separate Hindu TV Channels that operate on a semi-commercial basis like their Christian counterparts.

Kanchan Gupta, writing in the Sunday Pioneer, says that in recent years Hindu Gurus are filling the vacuum after a long period of silence when there was no united Hindu voice in India. Today, television channels like Aastha, Sanskar, Maharishi, Sadhna, Jagran and Om Shanti feature Hindu televangelists. Gupta gives an instance when Hindu televangelism was used to mobilize Hindus for a cause when Hindu televangelist Bapu, one of several Hindu Gurus, went on air preaching the gospel of Hinduism:

The fact that Hindu televangelism has succeeded in great measure to mobilise Hindus, irrespective of their caste or their personal preference for a god or goddess was evident in ample
measure when Asaram Bapu joined the BJP’s dharna to protest against the arrest of the Shankaracharya of Kanchi … Thousands of men and women who regularly watch Asaram Bapu’s telepravachan joined the dharna … a demonstration of emerging Hindu unity …[76]

[49] The following results are based on a content analysis of the two Hindu TV Channels. Eight out of 10 programs are in Hindi or one of the Indian vernacular languages. Nine out of 10 programs are based on “lifeskills,” for example meditation, yoga demonstrations, breathing or stress reduction. Seven out of 10 programs show the priest or teacher seated in the yoga position and keeping at all times to that space. This is in contrast to Charismatic televangelists who move all over the platform. It is interesting therefore that three out of the 10 programs involve teachers or priests who move around the stage, like the Charismatic televangelists; and two out of 10 teach in English, both using a “three point sermon” outline, a popular technique used by Christian preachers. Swami Sukubutananda, who is known for his “relax your mind, transform your mind” rhetoric, communicates with passion like the American Charismatic televangelists. Congregational singing and healing miracles, as well as a 24 hour prayer line, are some of the techniques that seem to have crossed over from Charismatic televangelism to the Hindu channels. Books and CD’s, amulets, special oils, chains with pendants are all heavily advertised during and after the program. There are two daily time slots (6.30 am-8 am and 5.30 pm-7.30 pm), which Hindu televangelists consider holy times for prayer, worship and the singing of bhajans (Hindu worship songs). During these times an average of 6-8 channels would feature Hindu televangelists.

[50] Whereas there are differences between Hindu televangelism and Christian televangelism, the similarities between the two are quite striking. A leading business paper discovered that many of these daily programs, like their Christian counterparts, are recorded during 5-10 day festivals and the messages by Gurus are edited into twenty-minute segments and telecast on religious television.[77] The Gurus are aware that they are being recorded for broadcast at these live preaching sessions so they start ‘summing up their message every 19 minutes or so. That simplifies the editing process.”[78] Bapu, as well as a few other Hindu TV preachers, like the Christian Charismatic televangelists, offer Hindu products on air, and there is a prayer line that viewers can call. Businessworld quotes a study by Samit Mehrotra who says the Gurus are master communicators “their dialectic is a mix of religion and entertainment … they make deft use of metaphors.”[79] Another example quoted by the paper is a study by sociologist Shiv Visvanathan who says: “They (Gurus) will not tell you to renounce everything and lead frugal lives, instead they offer “market-friendly” techniques to deal with life’s stresses and problems.”[80] A senior communications scholar at the University of Hyderabad sees a direct link between the upsurge of Christian televangelism and the growth of Hindu televangelism. Professor Pavarala firstly sees the Hindu channels as a “social oddity” as Hinduism historically does not have a tradition of discourse like the Judeo-Christian faiths.[81] Secondly Pavarala describes Hindu channels as “imitative and reactive” in that they are “aping Christian television and reacting to the hyper Hindu sentiment of the previous Government.”[82] Historically, there is a link between Christian movies and the great Hindu mythologies on film. In 1912 the film The Life of Christ premiered in Bombay. Dhundiraj Govind Phalke watched this movie and was seized by an urge to produce movies that depicted Hindu mythologies. He left for England to study cinematography and upon his return, on May 3, 1913; he released the Hindu mythological film Raja Harishchandra—India’s first full-length, indigenous, silent film. This was to be
followed by many Hindu mythologicals on film. George Davis argues that starting in the nineteenth century, Hinduism underwent a gradual transformation largely through the influence of Christian missionaries. Many of the changes were in the areas of religious concepts, techniques and strategies like the introduction of public worship and united prayer in Hindu temples.

[51] Is Hindu televangelism showing signs of being influenced by Christian Charismatic televangelism in keeping with the historical parallels of influence in Hindu cinema and temple worship? Although more research is necessary in this area it appears that Hindu television while not being influenced by the biblical message of Christian televangelists, is influenced by the methods, marketing techniques and even the rhetoric of Christian televangelists. In time to come this influence may increase. Journalist Gupta, who is critical of Christian televangelists, sees this coming: “Yes, there will be contemptible attempts to tar Hindu televangelists … We will hear of allegations of “crass commercialisation” of “telemarketing spiritualism,” of catering to the “lowest common denominator.”

The fascinating phenomenon of Hindu televangelism will be the subject of further research by the authors.

Conclusion

[52] India has witnessed considerable expansion of Charismatic televangelism ministries in the past decade, arguably the consequence of the introduction of satellite and cable television and the changing Indian mediascape. The numbers these ministries draw and the methods they incorporate into their activities have attracted church, community and media attention. However, it is worth noting that the plethora of Christian broadcasting is not commensurate with the Christian proportion of the Indian population and that according to Christian leaders, there is no discernible increase in church membership resulting from this broadcasting. The inspiration for this religious activity is clearly American. Both the Charismatic movement, as well as the hybrid phenomenon of televangelism, have their origins in the United States of America. The study reveals that Charismatic televangelism is creating tensions in the Church and community in India. Our study, preliminary in nature and limited in research sources to community and church leaders, would no doubt need to be verified by other sources. Notwithstanding these limitations, what is seen here, through the eyes of a select group of leaders in India, is an indication of the world-wide spread of Charismatic televangelism emanating from the USA.

[53] The plethora of American televangelistic programs and the marketing techniques that accompany them have influenced local Charismatic televangelists and we suggest even Hindu televangelists to use the new assortment of communication technologies in more sophisticated ways. Worship becomes a form of entertainment. The medium indeed becomes the message. However, as we have shown, the extent to which the message and medium are shaped to reflect local conditions, rather than unthinkingly mimicking mid-Western demagogues, will determine the power and effectiveness of the Charismatic televangelists.

[54] In the Christian church, the Charismatic pastors are more in favour of Charismatic televangelism than non-Charismatic pastors. In the Hindu community, the members of both the high caste and the high class are resistant to charismatic televangelism, whereas the middle to lower level economic classes seem to be the ones most open to Charismatic televangelism. There
are fears expressed by Christian church leaders from both Charismatic and non-Charismatic persuasions, that the Charismatic message with its emphases on prosperity, blessings and spiritual experiences may introduce a new form of syncretistic and what they term “popular Christianity” without allegiance to Christ and membership in the community life of the local church. The phenomenal Benny Hinn campaign in Mumbai has been perceived by some Christian leaders as a symptom of today’s society where the masses seek the miraculous rather than meaning, entertainment rather than exposition of the text.

[55] The spiritual encounters of missionaries in the colonial era would have no doubt brought about their own challenges and tensions in India. Today a new form of missionary enterprise, Christianity mediated through communications technology, is making its mark in India. It would be interesting to observe and study closely how this new phenomenon could have long-term effects on the nature of Christianity and its impact on the community. While it is too early to predict the overall growth and significance of charismatic televangelism, it does appear from the preliminary findings that the religious contours of India are being challenged, if not reconfigured by this new phenomenon that is pervading the airwaves.

Notes


[4] The other author (Brian) had also noticed the prevalence of Christian broadcasting on television channels post-1997 but from a different perspective. His concerns were primarily about the potential impact of the new technologies in bringing about social change. This paper represents the converging of the respective views of both authors.


As many of the Muslim leaders were not able to make it to the research meeting, it was decided that the research would focus mainly on the Hindu community leaders.

“Mainline Churches” refer to mainstream Protestant Churches ranging from evangelical orthodox to liberal, although generally, theological moderation is what underpins mainline churches. In India, the mainline churches like Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian and Episcopalian have joined forces to form a united church under two regional groupings—the Church of North India (CNI) and the Church of South India (CSI).

The word “Hindu” is neither Sanskrit nor Dravidian in origin and is thought to be derived from the word “Sindhu,” probably used by ancient Greeks and Armenians to refer to a river flowing into the subcontinent. “Arya dharma” was the old inclusive term for “Hindu” according to Jawaharlal Nehru in The Discovery of India (Calcutta: Meridian, 1964), 62.


This in part explains the reason why although the official census figures state that around 80 percent of India’s population are Hindus, in reality it is hard to determine the proportion of those who are truly religious worshippers and those who follow Hinduism as a way of life in terms of a socio-cultural identity system.

Julius Lipner, Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1998), 5. Paul Hiebert has come up with five categories of definitions of the term “Hindu”: geographic; socio-religious (Brahmanical); orientalist (product of the West’s encounter with India); political and religious in Missiology: An International Review 28,1 (2000): 48.

The states where the cities are located are indicated in parenthesis: Chennai (Tamil Nadu); Indore (Madhya Pradesh); Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) and Mumbai (Maharashtra).

The end notes identify the Senior Christian Leader/s as “SCL,” Hindu Leader/s as “HL” and Muslim Leader/s as “ML” with respective numbers at the end.


Ibid.


[22] Ibid.


[33] Ibid.

[34] Field notes, HL 3, 6; SCL 1, 4.


Sonia Gandhi, the current leader of the ruling Congress Party is the Italian-born wife of the late Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi.

Light of Life.

Field notes, summary of answers to questionnaire.

Field notes, SCL 2.

Field notes, SCL 1, 3.

Field notes, SCL 1.

Field notes, SCL 1, 15

Field notes, SCL 1-9.

Field notes, SCL 1.

Field notes, SCL 1, 3.

Field notes, SCL 5.

Field notes, Interview in Singapore, February, 2005.

Field notes, SCL 20.

The authors acknowledge that although this is a small sample it was clear during the research that the respondents (leaders) would claim the right to speak on behalf of the communities by virtue of their position within the respective communities.

Field notes, HL 4.


Field notes, HL 1, 2.

Field notes, SCL 3, 4.

[58] Field notes, SCL 3, 5.


[60] Field notes, ML 1, 2; HL 2- 4.

[61] Field notes, SCL 1, 4.


[63] Field notes, SCL 3, 4 -5.

[64] Field notes, HL 4, 5.

[65] Field notes, HL 4, 7.


[67] van der Veer, ix-x.


[69] Field notes, SCL 1, 4, 6.

[70] Lyon, 72.

[71] Field notes, HL 1- 35.

[72] van der Veer, 175

[73] van der Veer, 175


Ibid.


[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Field Notes, Interview in Hyderabad on November 24, 2006.

[82] Field Notes, Interview in Hyderabad on November 24, 2006.


References


