

Sunder Singh and N.V. Tilak: Lessons for missiology from 20th century India

David Emmanuel Singh

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

Introduction

Early centuries of the Christian era were charged with followers of Jesus crisscrossing their world. There are not many parts of the world that can boast of having had a somewhat direct part in Jesus himself. Early disciples travelled to witness to their faith in Jesus. St. Thomas is believed to have come to India. Whether one believe in the tale of St Thomas or not, one can have a taste of a faith that is truly ancient. Christianity by far predates modern missions in several waves and, yet, Christianity has remained one of the smallest minorities in the subcontinent.

Why has Christianity done so dismally in terms of numbers in the land of the great world religions? There is no single answer to this; but one can advance a possibility: India has had a lot of Christianity but not enough of the person of Jesus. This is certainly what Gandhi believed the fundamental problem with Indian Christianity was. There were the usual trappings of a well organised religion with clearly fashioned dogmas, church hierarchy, implicit or explicit displays of power – but not enough of Jesus likeness in terms of a truly incarnational and vicarious life!

I would like to present here two examples of Indian Christians from the heartland of Hindu India. They bore the marks of the living Jesus and, despite short lives, showed what was possible. Their model of Christian life was consigned to the margins and soon forgotten. A robust (and at times arrogant and triumphalistic) enterprise of missions has gained converts from the among the margins of society but never succeeded in winning the heart of Hindu India. Some may find them inspirational if not for emulation then for further enquiry.

Christian ‘sanyasis’¹: Tilak and Singh

Indian railways is the largest public enterprise in India. Today, it employs one and a half million people and generates a revenue of 20 billion dollars. It was not as busy and as profitable in early 20th century but was still a popular and happening place then as it is now. Stories of Tilak and Singh are connected strangely to trains. Tilak was ‘saved on’ the train whilst Singh was ‘saved from’ the train!

‘Saved on’ the Train: Narayan Vaman Tilak

Tilak (1862-1919) was a brahmin from an elite sub-group in western India. His father was mostly away on state duties which brought him closer to his mother. But, when his mother passed away he withdrew into his own imaginative world for comfort and security – this seems to have had a rather positive effect on him as it turned him eventually into a great Bhakti poet. His hymns are still sung in Marathi and in Marathi speaking churches.

¹ A Sanyasi is one who has either reached and adopted the fourth stage (*ashrama*) of the ideal Hindu life or has embraced it by bypassing the intervening stages.

As a brahmin from the Maratha region, it was not surprising that he spoke Sanskrit and had an intimate knowledge of the key ancient texts. Early on, he chose the life of a wandering *sanyasi* (Hindu mystics) giving religious discourses and performing Puranic² recitals. In one of his journeys on a train, he was introduced to Jesus. An unnamed gentleman on the train gave him a copy of the Bible. He read the Bible expecting nothing good to come from it but only because he had promised the gentleman he would. His reading (especially of the sermon on the mount) led him to see Jesus naturally in terms of a Guru (teacher) and, subsequently, as his God.

He continued his *sanyasi* and migrant lifestyle. But, in place of giving discourses on the Puranas, he spoke of Jesus. Jesus and his teachings were a natural fulfilment of his aspirations as a Hindu. His enormous corpus of writings including some 700 hymns are still widely sung!

'Saved from' the Train: Sadhu Sunder Singh

Singh (1889-1929) was born in a Sikh family in the undivided Punjab. He was raised by his mother as a Sikh and a follower of the Hindu Bhakti (devotional) tradition. He was not a brahmin like Tilak but was a Khashtriya (another higher caste). It was, thus, strange for him to have learned the Bhagawat Gita (Song of God; 2nd c. BCE) by heart. He was familiar too with the Upanishads (scriptures from well before the Gita), and the Qur'an. His mother was a deeply religious person, and often took him to visit *sanyasis* for blessings. He attended an American presbyterian school where he was introduced to Christianity.

At 14, when his mother died, in despair he turned against Christianity. We know he burned a copy of the Bible in public as a deliberate act of rebellion against Christianity. Being deeply disturbed by his own action however, he fervently prayed to God. But his unrest increased and, so, he prayed he would commit suicide by throwing himself on the rail track if God did not reveal himself to him. He saw Jesus instead and, this changed him.

Singh was denounced by his father when barely 15. He was baptised in Shimla at a public ceremony on his 16th birthday. Like Tilak, he had an uneasy relations with the institutional Christianity. Although, he attended St John's Anglican theological college in Lahore, he left after 8 months of struggling to adapt to the life and not a little distaste for academic theology. Later, he surrendered his preacher's licence to the Anglican Bishop in answer to the call of God to work freely with all people.

Singh became a *sanyasi* and became a wandering preacher. He had a special call for Tibet where he went several times on foot over the passes and died in 1929. Unlike Tilak, Singh did not write much (7 short-tracts and all written towards the end of his life), but his influence has been more widespread than Tilak.

Christo-centric sanyasa

Both Tilak and Singh had some association with mainstream Christianity of their time but, in terms of their ministries, largely operated outside its institutional/social boundaries. They believed they were called to focus on the person of Jesus and direct contact with peoples; and not be sidetracked by institutional obligations. So, what is it about Jesus that attracted them?

² *Puranas* are literally that which is ancient. These are ancient (post-Vedic) texts containing a mythic history of the universe from creation to destruction including stories of heroes (gods) and (philosophy).

As is normally the case with individual (as opposed to group *or* mass) conversions in India, both Tilak and Singh believed they were called by Jesus to a personal and direct life in him. Although, they loved their Bible, it was the NT and, within it, the Gospels, whose narratives they imbibed and identified with the most. Their language and thought about God were Christo-centric. They began with their direct experience of Jesus rather than with an unspecific theistic experience or intellectual consideration. E.g. Singh says:

The first time I entered heaven I looked around about and asked, 'But where is God?' And they told me, 'God is not to be seen here any more than on earth, for God is Infinite. But there is Christ, He is God, He is the Image of the Invisible God and it is only in Him that we can see God, in heaven and on earth.' And

streaming out from Christ I saw, as it were, waves shining and peace-giving and going through and among the Saints and Angels and everywhere bringing refreshment...And this I understood to be the Holy Spirit.

Experience of Jesus

Thus, the fundamental basis of Singh's and Tilak's faith is the 'direct experience of Jesus'. The Jesus who appeared to his disciples, was alive and this was not something they accepted simply by faith but through what they believed to be their actual encounter and continued spiritual communion through prayer. Their prayer was dialogical and it was set in the context of a real relationship not self-immersion. Jesus was their lord, guru, father and mother; they were merely his disciples-servants, *shishyas/dasas*.

Like most children of the time, both Tilak and Singh were closer to their mother than their father. Fathers were generally considered to be the providers and thus distant from their children. The father represented the notional headship of the family. The mother was the real person children related with and were taught by and not the father. This is where, I suppose, the idea of Jesus being the Mother-Guru comes from! But the ideas of father-mother need to be understood not in the gendered sense but as cultural types representing the characteristics of transcendence-intimacy, wrath-mercy, justice-love.

Jesus: Mother-Guru

Tenderest Mother-Guru mine,
Saviour, where is love like thine
A cool and never-fading shade
To sould by sin's fierce heat dismayed
Right swiftly at my earliest cry
He came to save me from the sky
He chose disciples – those who came

Consumed by true repentance' flame
For me, a sinner, yea for me
He hastened to the bitter tree
And still within me living too
He fills my being through and through
My heart is all one melody
Hail to thee, christ, all hail to thee

But, there is always the danger with over familiarity. The mother is also a guru, teacher, and likewise familiarity with Jesus needs to be balanced by reverence for him.. The following poem reflects this struggle:

I cannot describe it, O Christ...
At one time I said, 'thou art my guru

I must be careful to behave with thee as a
disciple'

I sat at a distance in reverential fear
I tried to gain intellectual comprehension of thee
But you spoilt it all with a smile
...
I jumped up and ran to you and flung my arms
around your neck...

O Lord, I cannot keep my proper place with thee

The *dasa* says – how can disunion and friendship
ever remain together?

Although there is an assumed notion of God the Father, this Father maintained strict discipline; and he is often also the agent of punishment. Jesus, like the mother, was the face of the Father. Jesus represented that side of God that was beautiful, tender, forgiving, consistently loving, caring and, most importantly, self-sacrificing. But, like the mother, the Jesus of their direct awareness also combined in himself the roles of the what is the best in fatherhood and motherhood and, thus, the struggle to hold both distance and friendship in tension:

Father and mother both thou art
Whence may I fonder title seek
Yet even these are all too weak
To show the love that fills thy heart

Love that no man can name in word
Yet in experience all may prove
Steadfast, immortal, holy love
Such is thy nature, sovereign lord

God's transcendence and his immanence had a human metaphor (a typical Indian family)! Even with Jesus, the object of their direct relationship, there was a need to maintain reverence (as the Guru). Jesus as the 'mother' fulfilled their deepest aspiration for actual friendship, intimacy, loving communion.

Jesus: Master

Both Singh and Tilak also related with Jesus as their Lord and Master. Their writings are full of references to themselves as the *dasa*, slaves or servants.

As lyre and the musician
As thought and spoken word...
As flute and breath accord
So deep the bond that binds me
To Jesus **my Lord**
 As mother and her baby
As traveler lost and guide
As oil and flickering lamp-flame

Are each to each allied
Life of my life, christ bindeth
Me to his side
 As lake and streamign rainfall
As fish and water clear
As sun and gladdening dayspring
In union close appear
So christ and I holden
In bonds how dear

Tilak also thought of Jesus' Lorship in terms of the idea of 'yoga' in Hinduism. In the Hindu Bhakti tradition, the notion of 'union' (*yoga*) is significant both as a means (certain practices) and as the experiential intimacy with a personal God.

But this alone I know, that from that day
This self of mine hath vanquished quite away

Great Lord of Yoga, thou has yoked with thee
Saith *dasa*, even a poor creature like me.

This union is however, not absolute in the monistic or Vedantic sense but it is something that allows the disciple to 'live, move and have his being' in God through Jesus (see Gal.

2.20). Jesus has the dominant role in this experience of unity as he replaces what is tarnished in the human 'self'.

Singh says: 'if we want to rejoice in God we must be different from Him; the tongue could

taste no sweetness of there were no difference between it and that which it tastes'

So, despite their emphasis on intimacy, they maintained the need for difference: conceived in terms of Lord-Servant, Guru-disciple (see Singh *at the Master's Feet* (1922) and *With and without Christ* (1928) *The Real Life* (1927), *The Spiritual Life* (1925)).

This was a natural way of thinking about God within their personalistic Bhakti Tradition!

Suffering/Sacrifice of Jesus

Hindu culture has a special place for suffering and sacrifice – not suffering caused by others or accidental suffering but voluntary suffering. Bhakti is meaningless unless it is single-minded and involves some experience of voluntary suffering. Love of wealth, material possessions do not go with the Sanyasi ideal of self-sacrifice - attachments can distract the disciples from their devotion to God. This is why those that become Sanyasis and accept suffering for a cause become objects of veneration (e.g. Gautama Buddha, Gandhi, and even ordinary Sadhus and Sanyasis).

The closest Sanskrit word for voluntary sacrifice is *tapas* (lit. heat). It is associated with the Sanyasis who are searching for the *yoga* (unity with a personal God). This is the highest form of devotion to God by means of asceticism (also called Bhakti Yoga – as opposed to Karma and Gyana Yoga). It is a way of 'burning off' 'sin' and making way towards progressive 'sanctification' and leading to intimacy with one's God.

Many Examples of Hindu Tapas: Ravana (1000 years to please Shiva); Vishvamitra (1000 years) tapas raises his status from Khatriya to Brahmin. Bhagirathi a king brought the river Ganges down to earth! (and a Buddhist Monk who starved himself to death as a mark of self denial and as a sort of community service!).

But this celebration of suffering is not either for its own sake or for the sake of attaining salvation (*moksha*) of one's own self (although, that is an aspect of it); it is primarily to bear witness to Jesus and his sacrifice – the prospect of seeing Jesus face to face was a motivation too (Singh for example, wanted to die young!). Even in extreme persecution, Singh believed Christ's presence turned his suffering into a heaven of blessing.' It is easy to see therefore why Indians are especially attracted to Jesus suffering voluntarily and selflessly for others!

Through suffering God strikes us in love. The Cross is the key to heaven...The Cross will hear those who bear the cross, until it bears them up

to heaven, into the actual presence of the glorious Redeemer.

[W]hy then am I to be great
With stripes the wicked ones beat your back
Then do't I want them too?
They made you lift your heavy cross
Then who will hinder me?
On your head they placed a crown of thorns

Such shall be my glory
They nailed you at the last upon the tree
My death shall be the same...

Has thou ever seen the lord
Christ the crucified?

Hast thou seen those wounded hands
 Has thou seen his side?
 Has thou seen the cruel thorns woven for his
 crown?
 Has thou seen his blood dropping down?...

Has thou seen he who came to save
 Suffers thus and dies
 Has thou seen on whom he looks

With his loving eyes?

Hast thou ever seen
 Love that was like this?
 Hast thou given up thy life
 Wholly to be his?

Come now, let us two together.

In some of Tilak's poems, one can read a certain contempt for this world, not because it is necessarily evil or illusory but because it prevents the actual union of the follower with Jesus. Place/location ceases to have any significance when the encounter does happen - everything else pales into insignificance! There is also a sense of urgency about hastening death so as to actualise the potential meeting with Jesus.

Laugh and weep and sit and sleep
 Now O christ, shall mine and thine
 Come to an end forever
 Although this is not possible in body
 That matters not to me
 What joy is more blessed
 Than to be rid of this body
 Saith *dasa* when we are one
 Who reckons 'here' or 'there'?

Ah, Love, I sink in the timeless sleep²

One image stands before my eyes
 And thrills my bosom's deep
 One vision bathes in radiant light
 My spirits' palace halls
 All stir of hand all throb of brain
 Quivers and sinks and falls
 My soul fares forth – no fetters now
 Chain me to this world's shore
 Sleep, I would sleep, in pity spare
 Let no man wake me more.

Singh too desired to die young like Jesus – extreme asceticism may have been a deliberate means for this to happen. One can critique this as being typically otherworldly but nothing can be further from the truth. The pursuit of suffering was two fold: emulating the master so as to be with him/in his company even in suffering and to touch lives of others who might be searching God:

Once on a dark night I went alone into the forest to pray, and seating myself upon a rock I laid before God my deep necessities, and besought His help. After a short time, seeing a poor man coming towards me I thought he had come to ask me for some relief because he was hungry and cold.

I said to him, "I am a poor man, and except this blanket I have nothing at all. You had better go to the village near by and ask for help there." And lo! even whilst I was saying this he flashed forth like lightning, and, showering drops of blessing, immediately disappeared.

Alas! Alas! it was now clear to me that this was my beloved Master who came not to

beg from a poor creature like me, but to bless and to enrich me (2 Cor. viii.9), and so I was left weeping and lamenting my folly and lack of insight.

If we resist evil men, who would do us harm, then neither part is likely to be profited; probably both will be injured, as in the collision of two trains both are shattered. But if, by not resisting, we suffer, then, on the one hand, the cross-bearer is benefited spiritually, and on the other hand, the oppressor will be impressed by the forgiving spirit, and will be inclined towards the truth.

Suspicion of Doctrinal and Institutional dimensions in Christianity

Both Singh and Tilak chose to be outside the institutional boundaries of the organised church (Tilak much later in life than Singh). Singh was baptised as an Anglican but dropped-out of his theological college, surrendered his licence to have the freedom to work with all and witness to all. He was not interested in the church as an organisation/institution. For Singh, for example, church was the body of Jesus and he belonged to this body:

I belong to the Body of Christ, that is the true church, which is no material building, but the whole corporate body of true Christians, both

those who are living here on earth and those who have gone into the 'world of light'.

When asked which church he belonged to, he would reply, 'to none. I belong to Christ. That is enough for me.' This way of thinking about the organised church encompassed organised doctrinal/theological positions churches held:

We Indians do not want a doctrine, not even a religious doctrine; we have enough and more than enough of that kind of thing; we are tired of doctrines. We need the Living Christ. India

wants people who will not only preach and teach, but workers whose whole life and temper is a revelation of Jesus Christ.

It is quite natural that no form of church service can ever satisfy deeply spiritual people, because such persons already have direct fellowship with

God in meditation, and they are always conscious of His blessed presence in their souls.

For both, Tilak and Singh, it was the Bhakti and not Gyana or Karma that appealed the most.

Discussion

Why do Christians like Singh and Tilak see devotion to Jesus as a way to be Christian in India? And why should we even consider their example as a model for Christian life?

Ninian Smart is perhaps not the sort of scholar one would seek for help in missiology. His analysis is helpful however because he speaks of the dimensions of religions which resonate with the notion of the *margas*: Bhakti, Gnana, Karma. If one compares Tilak's and Singh's preference for Bhakti against Smart's dimensions they predictably appear 'strong' in the emotional, narrative/mythic, practical/ritual dimensions but 'weak' in social/institutional, doctrinal/theological/philosophical, and material dimensions.

This means great buildings, monuments of human or religious achievements and great theological systems did not impress them as might also be the case with a fair majority of those impacted by the great Hindu culture. Abandonment, seclusion, suffering, lack of wealth, personal experience of God and sacrifice would be instantly recognised and appreciated. An individual who encompasses all of these 'virtues' would be seen as an *avatar* or God-man.

One needs however to add that Singh's and Tilak's example of a culturally rooted faith would not be unproblematic from some perspectives. Depending on where one is viewing these from, for a start, their faith might seem too much like truncated Christianity. But the question would be: despite this and several other difficulties, can their examples be appreciated (at least) for the possibilities they might hold for Christian

life? I do think this is possible and, so, in critiquing Singh and Tilak I would like to focus on a number of locations of creative tensions.

Non-material-Material:

Both materialist and non-materialist traditions exist in the Hindu culture. Charvaka, for example, is a materialistic and atheistic (*nastik*) philosophy. This is distinct from the traditionally orthodox *shad darshan* (six systems of *astika* or theistic philosophy). Jainism and Buddhism are not materialistic but are in their origins, *nastik*. This sort of extremes are not seen as problematic. A good number of prominent Indians have been *nastik* and yet no one has ever questioned their identity as Hindus. The mainstream traditions of philosophy, popular Bhakti spiritualities etc. however have been *astika*. The Bhakti cults, have essentially always been person or avatar centric. The Puranas dating from 3-5th centuries CE are theistic and like, Mahabharata and Ramayana have been hugely influential in shaping modern Hinduism.

Astika tradition has similarities with the *nastik* (particularly Buddhist/Jain) but also significant differences. One emphasises god-centredness and the other does not but both exalt voluntary suffering, sacrifice and renunciation. *Astika* tradition however incorporates material life and relations in a life consisting of different stages (*ashramas*). Those who deny themselves the stage of *grihastha* (householder fulfilling duties to ancestors, family, society and gods), normally following *brahmcharya* (student marked by chastity and desire for learning), and progress to *vanaprastha* (retirement) and *sanyasa* (absolute renunciation) are honored as gurus and god-men.

Here, because of the absence of the second stage, material pursuits get completely bypassed. In any case, even with *grihastha ashrama*, material concerns remain only a very small part of life. All of one's investments in material culture, family life etc get eventually left behind and, thus, are not considered of eternal value. Material objects are often seen in Hindu culture as the sources of attachment and power – both being futile in terms of their effects on the aims of *moksha* (liberation). Power and control replace service and sacrifice as the ideals of a sacred life. Absolute renunciation is like new birth – something that defined the conversion of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (c.563-483 BCE), the founder of Buddhism. One needs to not however, that the need for *moksha* is not felt equally by all Hindus. It is associated with the last stage of life. So, unless one renounces the world at an early age, one goes through other stages of life until one naturally reaches the stage of retirement and renunciation.

Jesus-God (personalistic-impersonalistic)

Having been deeply influenced by theistic Bhakti traditions, both Tilak and Singh, even as Christians, assume a theology but do not see a need to waste their time in defining its content and providing rational explanations of beliefs and practices. Apologetics (and polemics) are not worthy objectives for them. Life in Christ is to be enjoyed, celebrated and shared not argued about. Both Tilak and Singh do not dwell on explaining the great Christian mystery of the Trinity. Christ is the only face of God the Bhakta can relate with and so he is the one who is talked most about. Their emphasis is not on 'setting up their booths' but on living as the disciples of Jesus, their Guru and God. They can meet with Jesus in spirit but that is not the same as meeting him face to face. There is therefore a sense of urgency in their mission as they want to be with Jesus. They have had a foretaste

of this Jesus in their experience and now they want others to follow him and be blessed by him.

The existence of God as the Absolute and Transcendent (Father) is assumed but this God is fully incarnate in Jesus, the *purna-avatar* (complete incarnation comparable in the Hindu tradition to Rama and Krishna, as opposed to partial avatars such as the *varaha*, *matasya*, *narasimha* etc.). God, as the Father is the *nirguna* (God-in-Himself) aspect of Being who can only be known and experienced in his avatar, Jesus. This avatar is the *saguna* (God-for-us) aspect of Being. God relates with people only through Jesus and this is sufficient for the Bhaktas both here on earth and in heaven. In thus distinguishing God-in-Himself and God-for-Us, Tilak and Singh are broadly consistent with the mystical traditions within Christianity and Islam as well.

NT-OT

In appraising Tilak and Singh, we must address the issue of the unity of the Bible. It is clear that Singh and Tilak show relatively less interest in the Old Testament (OT). Although, nowhere in their writings do they ever suggest a truncated Bible containing the New Testament (NT) only as the source of inspiration. But there is a unspoken suggestion that Hindu traditions and scriptures point to the Jesus of the NT whom they encounter in their experience. This assumes continuity between Indian texts/traditions and Jesus. Thus e.g., to them, the ‘channels’ for the appearance of Jesus were also dug by their sacred traditions/texts who is the complete and final *avatara* of God.

Missionaries to India largely did not have a clue how to relate with a complicated Sanscritic culture with countless ancient religious texts in a number of different classical languages. It almost seemed like there were many different spiritualities all somehow co-existing without central figures of authority, churches/communities and institutions. With the exception of some like D’Nobili, most concentrated on the ‘outcastes’ and the ‘untouchables’ with encouraging results! The caste Hindus were largely left alone and they in turn left missionaries to their own devices notwithstanding the characteristic disparaging and antithetical attitude missionaries had towards everything to do with the Hindu culture.

The orientalist translations of Sanscritic-Buddhist texts were an eye opener but the intellectual attempts at relating with Hinduism were and remain marginal. Farquhar’s (*the Crown of Hinduism [1913]*) idea of fulfilment was based on his exposition of Mt. 5.17; ‘I came not to destroy but to fulfil’. This assumed an evolutionary connection between Hinduism and Christianity – as lower to higher – so what is foreshadowed in Hinduism was fulfilled in Christianity. This took care of the problem of the OT!

Singh and Tilak were contemporaries of Farquhar and though there are similarities, they stood outside academic developments in mission thinking. They saw themselves primarily not as Christians in the sense of belonging to an institution or denomination but as the followers of Jesus. They chose to follow Jesus not because someone told them to but because they believed they saw Jesus and conversed with him. Everything they knew in their own tradition seemed to lead to Jesus and all their needs met by him through an ‘actual’ and not simply a ‘faith’ encounter! Christianity as understood by them was the fulfilment of Hinduism.

Singh say: Hinduism has been digging channels. channels.
 Christ is the water to flow through these

Jesus' location within the Jewish-OT context is not attractive to any self-respecting Hindu. There is no room in traditional Christianity for the rich Hindu culture, traditions and scriptures. The submission to the authority of such a Guru/god-man, would be tantamount to rejecting one's sacred traditions and one's identity. It would also mean adopting a foreign Jesus culturally remote to the world of the Hindus. The membership with a foreign organisation such as the churches would mean severing one's connections with other forms of relations where God is manifested and experienced.

Devotional-non-Devotion (Extrinsic)

Not everyone is charitable to devotional faiths. Such faiths do come in for a fair bit of criticism because the dominant culture we live in is positivistic. We are often under pressure as people of faith because we have to negotiate the worlds of faith and reason. This is why often our emphasis on experience tends to get suppressed or looked down on. Some might find Tilak's and Singh's emphases on direct experience of Jesus 'outside the boundaries of the institutional church' problematic. We might argue that if there no clearly defined community and theology, experience can 'get out of hand.'

To be fair to Tilak and Singh one must say that their experiential spirituality is not without foundation. They were churchmen but resigned their place in the church/mission organisation's hierarchy not to lynch the concept of the institutional church but to be free to fulfill their call to mission. Their concept of the church was very NT. To them the church was the people – not necessarily believer but followers of the living Jesus. This was the community they were part of and accountable to.

Their experience was not exactly without foundations too. They identified the Jesus they conversed with, with the Jesus of the NT.

Individual-Institutional

Were Tilak and Singh social misfits? They did appear to love solitude but they also enjoyed the company of people. Tilak was a family person and we have stories of close friendships of Singh with others. But, why did they feel the need to distance themselves from institutional Christianity? Hindu society can be seen in many different but inter-related ways. We might not think of Hinduism in this way but there is a lot of flexibility within the different ways in which individuals group themselves in it. This is the reason why individual conversion will never be comprehensible to Hindus.

The Caste is one way of describing Hindu society. Too much of attention has however laid on it. It is undeniably central to Hindu society but is by far not the only example of social and religious life. One is born into a caste. One cannot convert to it or from it. One's conversion could have two outcomes: It could be seen as a defilement of the place of one's birth and one's sacred station in life. Conversion has the potential of erasing one's identity. It would be easier for the so-called 'untouchables' to give up their identity (as it brings them nothing but pain/suffering) but not a 'caste Hindu'! What one needs to realise is that the Hindu society has internal 'safety valves' which has ensured its survival this long. There are, apart from caste, informal structures or social or religious groups within it – many of which are 'trans-caste'.

Sampradaya (traditions) is one of them. It is an delicate network of individuals from any castes. But these are often for scholars! Likewise, the idea of *satsang* describes another way in which groups form within Hindu society. A Satsang (*sat* (truth/God) *sang* (fellowship)) is the fellowship of those who worship a personal God. There is no strict system of membership as in an institutionalised church or religious order. People are free to come and go. there is no competition between them. They are focussed on an individual at the centre of this: a living Guru who is often seen as a representative of God. The Satsang can thus mean fellowshiping with the Guru or God. The Satsang can also mean ‘devotional speech’, ‘song’, ‘dance’ or all of it. New Satsangs are perfectly valid. One can belong to a *sampradaya* or caste to which one is born in and yet choose to be part of a Satsang.

Darbar (court of the king) is another extremely innovative way of defining internal groupings in Hindu society. We know Tilak experimented with this idea. Sadly, this was not continued after him and so we do not know what could have been achieved. In recent times, Rajinder Lal of the Allahabad Agricultural Institute in Allahabad has revived this model. It deserves to be studied further as various reports suggest its consistent mass appeal.

Ashram (hermitage) is another age-old model of socio-religious groupings within society. One of the earliest model of an Ashram is that of a learning community of *brahmcharies* (student ascetics). Here the Ashram parallels the Gurukul (the domain of the Guru; a sort of an extended family of the Guru). The *shishyas* (disciples/students) form the main group of members. The disciples live and grow up as part of the extended household. They may have time set apart for formal learning, but their whole life in the Gurukul is part of the process of intellectual and spiritual growth. Everyone here is an equal. Jainism, Sikhism and even Buddhism (in various degrees and forms) follows this tradition. A number of Christian Ashrams were established in India, some which continue on the margins of the institutional church – often as mere appendages or exotic experiments. Sat Tal was established by Stanley Jones (1884-1973). He was known to Gandhi and this may have been his version of Gandhi’s own experiments with Ashrams. In Gandhi’s case Ashrams replicated simple, slow moving rural idylls but were also powerful centres of spiritual regeneration and moral politics of Gandhi. Christian Ashrams were never this relevant and soon became rather fossilised into rigid institutions. Most people saw through them as a contrived re-invention of the western churches!

Experience-Knowledge

Knowledge for its own sake or for defence or argumentation was not thought necessary. It for the specialists who were called to pursue the *marga* of Gyana (knowledge). Tilak and Singh were not called by theologians or apologetes. They had an abundance of Jesus and so they simply invited people to experience this for themselves. One needs however to bear in mind that Tilak and Singh were not thinking of experience and knowledge as necessarily opposed to each other. Experience too leads to knowledge but this knowledge is qualitatively different to the knowledge gained from theologising. The Bible reveals God to us and encourages us to enter into a real communion with the living Jesus.

Their choice for an experiential faith was not accidental. They were steeped in their respective traditions before they read the Bible. They were looking for an encounter with God but not Jesus. This was to them the greatest sign of truth that Jesus found them

even when they were not looking for him. When in crisis they called on God but Jesus and not Krishna or Rama appeared to them. They then read about this Jesus in the NT. They did not start with reading books – even the Bible, they read it properly after their encounter with Jesus!

The emphasis on experience also attracts the criticism of it being ignorant of the the body of knowledge contained in the great historic traditions of Christianity, great developments in theology and scriptural interpretation. To them there was nothing truer than what the living Jesus commanded. They enjoyed great freedom in Christ and from the fear of being wrong in doctrine/theology. Thus, for example, baptism as a doctrine and practice was problematic. It caused irreparable separation of the converts from their family, society and culture. Tilak spoke of alternative ways of appreciating the import of baptism in terms rooted in the Hindu culture. *Diksha* thus, for example, was a sort of an initiatory sign offered upon one's induction into the Satsang/sampradaya/darbar of Jesus, the Guru?

Local-Non-local

Singh and Tilak raise several significant questions for a context sensitive mission thinking. Today, there is a pragmatic reasons for taking the local context seriously: Firstly, mass conversions to Buddhism have been widely publicised. Buddhism is deemed to be an indogenous/local religion! There have been four such conversions since 1957: 1957, 2001, 2006 and 2007. Secondly, the fact of isolation of Christianity in India where it is still sadly considered a Western religion. Christian worship has none of the vitality and flavour of the Indian Bhakti. Its forms are distinctly dogmatic and creedal rather than simple relived stories such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Puranas. Thirdly, The colonial power is no more and yet Christianity is still associated with power and much real estate. The rapid economic development is a relatively recent phenomenon. Suffering is still seen as a common experience of the majority. Even among those who are benefiting from economic development, the idea of suffering strikes a chord. Even among the rich, self-denial is seen as a godly virtue. In this context too the Cross and the suffering ideal of Jesus Christ remains in background.

In writing about Jesus, George (1960 12-13) says, 'It was Gandhi who made Jesus and his image real to me.' Stanley Jones (1925 91-92) devoted a chapter to Gandhi to show that here was an example of an Indian who was deeply impacted by Christ (but not through the institutional church which was seen to be too foreign, self-assured and quite above suffering). Gandhi taught Jones a new understanding of the Cross: '...the Cross has become intelligible and vital...with the teaching of Gandhi that they [Indians] can joyously take on themselves suffering for the sake of national ends, there has come into the atmosphere a new sensitiveness to the cross.'

This tradition of sensitivity to the cross continues in some aspects of contemporary Indian Christianity (Dalit) where Gandhi challenges Christians to live like 'Jesus the servant' and not like 'Jesus the Lord' and Christianity to do a serious 'Christology of servanthood' not 'lordship'. Tilak and Singh, like Gandhi call Christians 'to learn the full meaning of vicarious existence from Jesus and apply it to worship and missionary action (Jesudasan 1984 127)

The particular institutional/social dimension of Indian Christianity associated with the mission or church compound creates (in some places) a greater degree of opposition and

distance than is helpful! It creates a sense of physical distance and enhances cultural and doctrinal separateness that conversions, when they do happen, only serve to exacerbate. Hindu culture is founded on the principles of community, compromise, adaptation, diversity, tolerance. Diversity is appreciated and valued if it co-exists within the broader boundaries of culture.

Tilak and Singh illustrate many points of inadequacy and failure of mission to Hindu India. Both were sadly ripped off from their families and society as the only option they had when they found Jesus was to align themselves with the church/mission that already stood 'outside the Hindu culture' – it called Hindus to it rather than going to them and incarnating among them! Biblical pattern for mission is to enter another space and culture and inhabit it and be clothed by it. Years from the short lives and precious mission work of both these men were wasted in exile from their family and society!

Conclusion

Tilak and Singh might seem strange and eccentric people to many but to me they model the idea of 'the water of life in the Indian cup'. Their model is not unproblematic, but it presents to us a different way of thinking about Christian life, something akin to the heart-beat of India and Jesus himself! They were steeped in their cultures, and deeply respectful of their ancient traditions and scriptures. Their faith in Jesus preserved this flavour as they nurtured continuities and linkages dismissed by the often arrogant missionary enterprise. Mission was not for them something they did or thought about, it was part of their Christian life – they lived and breathed it with Jesus.

Three further comments should suffice: Firstly, it is an anomaly of history that India as a deeply divided and religiously complex region has managed to remain a single democratic republic. This is a subject for research by historians, political scientists and sociologists. What is relevant for us here is the recognition that a vast variety of spiritual impulses here have deeper roots from antiquity than the universalising and neat notions of 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', 'Sikhism', and 'Jainism'. These notions were externally imposed or/and acquired and remain secondary to the fundamental facts of religious preferences: philosophical (theological/doctrinal) [Gyana], activist [Karma] and devotional [Bhakti]. People belonging to different sets of identities often transcend their particularities to subscribe to these. There cannot therefore be a single approach to relating with 'Indians'. Christian life and practice in India must pay serious attention to this diversity of preferences – all considered legitimate 'paths' or *marga*.

Secondly, the notion of a strictly defined, theologically delimited religion was an import within India. Christianity and Islam for this reason seemed strange 'beasts' to Indians and it intrigued them (still do) when they were described as 'Hindu' or 'Sikh'... Indians in general had and have no problem in living happily with differences and even contradictions but if these seem associated with things foreign they tend to be suspicious and distant. Despite, its age, Christianity in India has been criticised for being foreign in its pedigree and practice. It is not surprising that in about 2000 years Christianity in India is still a tiny minority (even less than Islam which appeared about a 1000 years later).

Thirdly, in matters of faith, generally most Indians prefer the devotional route – particularly one that encompasses the ideals of sacrifice, renunciation, and the simplicity of the person of the guru-sanyasi. They appreciate rituals and theological debates but are suspicious of the specialists who like Brahmins might use knowledge (doctrines, theology,

philosophy and their expressions in ikons, arts, buildings etc.) as a means for power. Bhakti was and is a powerful equaliser; it enables people to transcend differences. This means a 'crossover' from a particular local identity to another would not seem starkly like the rejection or abandoning of one identity, history, culture, family etc but rather like progressing on to something one can value as the fulfillment of their inner aspirations – fulfillment of their own faith tradition or a personal preference or choice.

Jesus is no threat to India and to the high minded Hindus. Indians are expansive and open-minded. Jesus would be revered and followed if he incarnated as an Indian and lived as an Indian and died as an Indian. What Indian Christianity lacks is the principle of incarnation. No true translation is possible without this. Singh and Tilak remain fine examples of this.

Bibliography

- Allport, G. W. and J. M. Ross, 1967
 "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5:432-443
- Appasamy, A.J., 1958
Sundar Singh Cambridge: Lutterworth
- Boyd, R.H.S 1975
An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology Delhi: ISPCK
- Collins, P.M. 2007
Christian Inculturation in India, Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Creel, A. & Narayanan, V. (eds.) 1990
Monastic Life in the Christian and Hindu Traditions: A Comparative Study, New York: Edwin Mellen Press
- Davey, C.J., 1963 & 1980
The Story of Sadhu Sundar Singh Chicago: Moody Press (reprinted as *Sadhu Sundar Singh* Bromley: STL Books
- Francis, D., ed. 1989
The Christian Witness of Sadhu Sundar Singh Alresford: Christian Literature Crusade
- George, S.K. 1960
Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House
- Hoerschelmann, W. 1998
 'Christian Gurus': *A Study of the Life and Works of Christian Charismatic Leaders in South India*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute
- Jacob, P.S. 1979
The Experiential Response of N.V. Tilak Madras: The Christian Literature Society
- James, W. 1997
Varieties of Religious Experience, New York, Touchstone
- Jesudasan, I. 1984
A Gandhian Theology of Liberation, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books
- Jones, S.E. 1025
The Christ of the Indian Road The Abingdon Press
- Lincoln, B., 2003
Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11, Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Oldmeadow, H. 2008
A Christian Pilgrim in India: The Spiritual Journey of Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saix), World Wisdom, Inc.
- Philip, P.O. 1946
 'The Place of Ashrams in the Life of the Church in India' in *The International Review of Mission* 35
- Radhakrishnan, S 1940

- Eastern Religions and Western Thought* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Ralston, H. 1987
Christian Ashrams: A new Religious Movement in Contemporary India, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press
- Richards, H.L. 1991
Christ-Bhakti: Narayan Vaman Tilak and Christian Work among Hindus, Delhi: ISPCK
- Schouten, J.P. 2008
Jesus as Guru: The Image of Christ Among Hindus and Christians in India, Rodopi
- Singh, S.S. [see his booklets]
- Smart, N. 1998
World Religions Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Smart, N. 1998
Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press
- Streeter, B. and Appasamy, A. J., 1923
The Sadhu: a Study in Mysticism and Practical Religion. London: Macmillan
- Sugirtharajah, R.S. & Hargreaves, C. (eds.) 1993
Readings in Indian Christian Theology, vol.1, London: SPCK
- Tilak, L. 1956
From Brahma to Christ: The Story of Narayan Vaman Tilak and Lakshmi Bai his Wife, New York: Association Press
- Vandana, Sister (Mataji) 1978
Gurus, Ashrams and Christians, Delhi: ISPCK
- Watson, J.L., 1975
The Saffron Robe London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Winslow, J.C. 1930
The Christian Poet of Maharashtra, Calcutta: YMCA