

# Glimpses of Mennonite Engagement with Hindu Thought and Practice

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*We must learn to affirm pluralism of all kinds. — Frances Hiebert<sup>2</sup>*

*The gospel always appears in a certain cultural cloth. — Alle Hoekema<sup>3</sup>*

*My views regarding India are like the price of sugar, subject to change.*

— Peter A. Penner<sup>4</sup>

*Conversion is one of the most politically charged acts  
in contemporary India. — Chad Bauman<sup>5</sup>*

While it is not a thorough analysis of Mennonite understandings of Hindu experience, this article selects from anecdotes as well as formal writing from an extensive bibliography gathered by the writer. That bibliography will enable

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2 Frances Hiebert, “Doing Mission with a Universal Gospel and Cultural Diversity,” *Direction* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 81. Hiebert is a Mennonite Brethren missionary to India.

3 Alle Hoekema, “Why the Dutch were the First Mennonites to Send Missionaries Overseas,” in *Toward a Global Mennonite Historiography*, eds. Wilbert R. Shenk, James C. Juhnke, A.G. Hoekema, et al. (conference proceedings, Elkhart, IN: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, April 4–7, 1995), 32. Hoekema is a Dutch Mennonite theologian.

4 Peter A. Penner, “Bharatiya General Conference Mennonite Kalisiya, India,” [http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Bharatiya\\_General\\_Conference\\_Mennonite\\_Kalisiya](http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Bharatiya_General_Conference_Mennonite_Kalisiya). Information compiled by Matt Yoder (research paper for Anabaptist history class, Goshen College, Spring 2009; accessed June 8, 2014). Penner is a General Conference Mennonite missionary to India.

5 Chad Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868–1947* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 3. Bauman is a Mennonite and a religious studies scholar.

future writing on present or related subjects. A key desire for this article is to commend, and make better known to western readers, writers from three Mennonite groups who have observed and studied Hindu thought or practice. Indian voices appear along with both academic and missionary writers, with no intent to contrast them.<sup>6</sup>

This article reflects more from the historical experience of one body of Christians engaged with another dominant religion—Hinduism—than it does from the typology that often characterizes the “theology of religion,” the overall theme of this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*. Thought about God and “faith seeking understanding”—ways to express theology—appear here. But the focus is less on how value or meaning within religions surface and more on how writers of one faith attend to the features of another. Whereas theology of religion (or its plurals) may emphasize how different religions explain or prioritize terms like revelation, faith, or salvation, this article avoids comparison with intent to evaluate.

This writer cares for how Mennonites write and interact with Hindu themes and people. Her current concerns include the following: being a loyal Christian open to learn from faithful others who differ; combining another’s religious self-description with an awareness of the limits of personal bias; being alert to Hindu perception of Hindu tolerance toward difference and Hindu dislike for the seeming arrogance of “only/best/final” language used by Christians. Some views and convictions differed a century ago. The intent here is to report on, not judge, time periods.

Alongside many Christians’ *exclusivist* view that salvation comes only through Christ, a view that has been dominant since the fifteenth century, and a more *inclusive* option that was added in the sixteenth century—a view that is more open toward people loyal to other religions but intends eventually to seek Christ among them based on points similar to Christian belief—a more recent *pluralist* stance has emerged that sees multiple possible ways to realize

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6 As the term “missional” is in use today, the term “missioner” replaces “missionary” throughout this article. Research resulted in an extensive bibliography including materials from Mennonite Church US Archives (Goshen, IN) and Bethel College Archives (Newton, KS). Librarians to be thanked include: Colleen McFarland (Mennonite Church Archives), John Thiesen (General Conference Mennonite Archives), Eileen Saner (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart), and Joe Springer (Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College). Dr. Mary Eleanor Bender and family members of the writer graciously read and advised about earlier manuscript drafts.

salvation.<sup>7</sup> Rather than misjudge pluralism—as some exclusivists might, for example, when faulting a pluralist to mean by *relativism* that “all religions are equally true” rather than that it means *limited*—the present writer claims pluralist views as worthy of consideration and here to stay. She especially values Jesus’ example of openness to learn from people of diverse, non-Jewish religions and his consistent call to followers to witness to *God’s* universal kin-dom.<sup>8</sup>

Early Mennonite missionaries, as well as most people whom they represented in the west, were more exclusivist than Mennonites sensitive to Hindu integrity today will choose to be. Early missionaries also faced harrowing conditions of poverty, economic hardship, little education, and medical limits, all conditions that needed immediate attention. Future interfaith engagement will combine basic elements of given religions. This combination will occur, not via syncretism—compromised belief from several religions—or synthesis—combining faiths to make a whole—but through and toward symbiosis: shared, diverse views of faith that enable living and working together. Relationships across religions during the next century will require loyalty and conviction, deep knowledge of the other, honest exchange, and shared rituals and worship. To plan for the future requires keen awareness of past patterns to understand why a belief or practice matters, how best to transition, and what remains flexible within

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7 Many have written about this typology. While Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen reflects an exclusivist stance in *Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), other options include: Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), where the author offers a fourth term for the typology as well as alternative words for all four terms; K.P. Aleaz, *Theology of Religions* (Calcutta: Moumita Publisher, 1993), in which Aleaz offers a strong Asian alternative to western schemes that he calls “pluralistic inclusivism”; or the book of essays in Aleaz’s honor, edited by V.J. John, *Many Ways of Pluralism* (Kolkata: Bishop’s College, 2010). In addition, see writing on the subject by Shirley Guthrie, S. Wesley Ariarajah, and Kwok Pui-Lan.

8 Writing on theology of religion by Dorothy Yoder Nyce includes: *Multifaith Musing: Essays and Exchanges* (self-published, 2012), 30–34, 140–43; and “Sharing God’s Gift of Wholeness with Living Faiths: Biblical Examples,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 15 (2007): 60–61. From the experience of living in India multiple times and through sustained friendships with people loyal to Hinduism, she wishes to be a Christian sensitive to the integrity of multiple faiths. For her, multifaith sensitivity includes the conviction to honor Jesus’ emphasis on the One God’s inclusion of all nations rather than that he himself be idolized. Further, she welcomes the vision possible through feminist thought, beginning with Mujerissta theologian Georgene Wilson’s use of “kin” to refer to divine compassion for all people, rather than being skewed by patriarchal bias through “kingdom.”

plural reality. Therefore, this present look into history is offered.

## Mennonites Meet India and Hinduism

Hinduism, the oldest living, formal world religion, has added to its complexity during the past five thousand years as it absorbed aspects of other religions and cultures.<sup>9</sup> I.P. Asheervadam, a Mennonite Brethren historian, observes how religions that were welcomed into India also absorbed distinct Indian and Hindu features.<sup>10</sup> The misused, secular word “Hindu” originates from the Sanskrit word Sindhu, the ancient name of the Indus River found in the subcontinent’s northwest. The name “Hinduism” was not attributed to the religion dominant in this region until centuries later.<sup>11</sup>

### *Mennonite groups*

Three Mennonite groups receive attention here: the Mennonite Brethren (MB) who first went to India in 1889, the Mennonite Church (MC) who went to India ten years later, and the General Conference (GC) who arrived a year after that. Although MC and GC groups merged in North America in the mid-1990s, the two remain distinct in India. Smaller Anabaptist groups—Brethren in Christ and United Missionary—also exist there.

Mennonites encountered Hindu thought when two MB couples first went to India from Russia. For nearly fifty years they joined American Baptists with

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9 Among many sources about Hinduism that a reader might consult are: Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009); Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, rev ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981); Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: Unwin, 1927) and *The Bhagavadgita* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963); and Louis Renou, ed., *Hinduism* (New York: Washington Square, 1963). Among worthy non-Indian writers, see: Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for All God’s Children* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998); Antony Copley, ed., *Hinduism in Public and Private* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); Abbe J.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906); and Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1981), *Encountering God* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), and *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Harmony, 2012).

10 I.P. Asheervadam, “The Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” in *Churches Engage Asian Traditions: A Global Mennonite History*, eds. John Allen Lapp, C. Arnold Snyder, et al. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2011), 128.

11 Hinduism has no single starting point or charismatic leader. One writer calls it “the relentless pursuit after truth” while another describes “a kind of coalition of religions.” By the thirteenth century, the term Hindustan (“land of Hindus”) became an alternative name for India. Centuries later, British writers applied “Hinduism”

mission efforts that had begun in the Telugu language area of Hyderabad State in 1875.<sup>12</sup> The earliest MB missionaries from the United States, N.N. and Susie (Wiebe) Hiebert, arrived in 1899. I.P. Asheervadam observes that early Mennonite missionaries who located in Central Provinces (later called Madhya Pradesh, now Chhattisgarh) seemed unaware of the Russian MB work that was already active. The first MB church was begun in 1904; in part due to mass conversion movements, 964 congregations with roughly 200,000 members now exist.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas Dutch Mennonites established a mission organization in 1847 for work in Indonesia, famines and philanthropy prompted North American Mennonite missions. Individuals concerned about the 1894–95 famine in India preceded missionaries from MC and GC agencies. George Lambert (MC) from Elkhart, Indiana, and David Goertz (GC) of Halstead, Kansas, had gone separately to observe conditions before returning to India to oversee the distribution of tons of aid gathered by North American Mennonites. After the great Indian famine of 1897–98, the first MC missionaries William (a physician) and Alice Page and Jacob Ressler arrived in the Hindi/Chhattisgarhi-speaking state of Central Provinces.<sup>14</sup>

The first GC Mennonite missionaries, Peter A. and Elizabeth Penner and John F. and Susanna Kroeker (the latter couple from Russia), also went to CP state. While finding a region in which to locate, those four lived and studied Hindi for ten months with MC missionaries already located in Dhamtari, CP.

### *Religion and culture*

As the predominant North American worldview contains Greek and Judeo-Christian influences, so the majority philosophy of life of South Asian In-

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to the beliefs and practices of the majority Brahmanic people of India. In addition to Internet information regarding origins of the term “Hinduism,” other resources to consult include: Philip H. Ashby, *Modern Trends in Hinduism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); John Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Hinduism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); K.M. Sen, *Hinduism* (London: Penguin Books, 1961); Ed Viswanathan, *Am I a Hindu?: The Hinduism Primer* (San Francisco: Halo Books, 1992); Karel Werner, *A Popular Dictionary of Hinduism* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1997); and R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

12 This south central state, later called Andhra Pradesh, was more recently divided with Telengana.

13 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 135. MC and GC membership remains much less than MB in India.

14 Later named Madhya Pradesh, this is now divided between MP and Chhattisgarh states.

dians is partially shaped by Hindu thought. As an Iowa farmer might turn to the biblical Noah to ponder a summer flood, so Viola Wiebe (MB) accepted in the 1940s her Indian friend's consulting an astrologer regarding the auspicious timing for a journey.<sup>15</sup> After living decades in south-central India, anthropologist Paul Hiebert (MB) wrote that villagers' religion had less to do with formal Hinduism and more with local spirits living in trees, rivers, or hills. Christian converts might no longer go to Hindu temples, but they continue to struggle with realities of spirits, magic, or ancestors. Therefore, Hiebert nudged missionaries to understand village beliefs and practices, and not only to study formal Hinduism.<sup>16</sup>

Paul Hiebert's 1960s PhD field work centered on the dynamics of culture and religion in the village of Konduru.<sup>17</sup> Not only did he write about encountering dozens of caste groups; he also pondered the honor given to higher animals such as cows. He learned how customs regulate caste, how castes cause factions. Using anthropological, comparative categories and aware that people might worship deities named Shiva or Vishnu of the Hindu Great Tradition alongside supernatural beings of Low Religion, Hiebert asked how best to translate the basic word "God." For village folk "see gods as part of the present illusory universe" or know "only gods who share in the weaknesses, rivalries, and sins of the rest of creation." Further, since Indian villagers knew little of a role such as "missioner," their options being landlord or ranked, superior policeman, Hiebert asked how to be "brothers" with national church leaders.<sup>18</sup>

P.B. Arnold, physician and MB national leader through several decades, notes the importance of approaching Asian cultures and religions with genuine love and empathy. Rather than rejecting other people's cultural values and meaning or conveying a judgmental spirit, observers will "appreciate all that is good and genuine in them," he said. That pattern suggests building upon

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15 Viola Berghold Wiebe and Marilyn Wiebe Dodge, *Sepia Prints: Memoirs of a Missionary in India* (Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1990), 96.

16 Paul G. Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religion A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, eds. R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tienon (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 9.

17 Paul G. Hiebert, *Konduru Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

18 Paul G. Hiebert, "Missions and the Understanding of Culture," in *The Church in Mission: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to J.B. Toews*, ed. A.J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967), 256, 259–60. See also Jacob Loewen, "Which God Do Missionaries Preach?" *Missiology: An International Review* 14, no. 1 (January 1986): 3–19.

Hindu thought that calls for complete surrender to and absorption into God (*moksha*). It involves genuine befriending of others rather than seeing them as “trophies to be won.” Arnold states that the Indian church will best express faith “in its own way,” shaped by its sociocultural context that includes religious pluralism.<sup>19</sup>

### **Mennonite Encounter with Religious Difference**

Writing in the early 1900s amidst famine, poverty, and very limited study, Peter Penner (GC) described Hinduism as: “a conglomeration of philosophical systems, pantheism, fatalism, ceremonies and ceremonial washings, and downright, common idolatry.” He thought of high-caste Brahman Hindus as “arrogant and pedantic”; although degraded, low-caste Chamars were “willing to listen.”<sup>20</sup>

Dutch Mennonite missionary and writer Alle Hoekema writes that early sending boards and missionaries “did not consider theological education to be important either for missionaries or indigenous believers.” Nor did they emphasize Anabaptist identity.<sup>21</sup> John A. Lapp (MC) and James Juhnke (GC), historians working in the 1970s and 1980s, noted the limited understanding—of Indian life and culture, of Christianity in relation to world religions, or of how to make the gospel relevant—that missionaries took with them to a Hindu land. Juhnke adds that although Mennonite missionaries saw “value in being well informed,” none of them “ever became notable authorities on Hindu religion and custom.”<sup>22</sup>

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19 P.B. Arnold, “Witnessing Discipleship in Asia,” *Mission Focus* 14, no. 4 (December 1986): 49–52.

20 James Juhnke and Robert Kreider, eds. “India,” *Mennonite Life* (June 1980): 10–14. Also James Juhnke, *A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Mission* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1979), 20–42.

21 Alle Hoekema. “Christianity in Asia,” in J.A. Lapp, Snyder, et al., *Churches Engage Asian Traditions*, 18.

22 John A. Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1972), 39, 68–9; Juhnke and Kreider, “India,” 10; Juhnke, *People of Mission*, 24. However, two Mennonite Brethren writers did become notable authorities—Paul Hiebert in anthropology (second generation in India) and Paul Wiebe a sociologist (third generation). Their extensive writing and experience in India as scholars and professors commend them. Several later MC missionaries also pursued serious study of Hinduism, but their studies were rarely publicized. Further, several world religion professors, with background or loyalty among Mennonites—Ronald Neufeldt (MB), Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger (GC), and Chad M. Bauman (MC)—today are disciplined scholars of Hindu thought and practice.

Missioners arrived in India with love for people and concern to “save souls.” Although they had little professional preparation for their work, they proved effective in immediate tasks. For example, Jacob Ressler (MC) confessed: “How little I knew the workings of the Indian mind.”<sup>23</sup> But already in 1900 he had become “honorary famine Relief Officer,” a program that fed fourteen thousand people twice a day in forty-one kitchens located in thirty-eight villages not far from Dhamtari.<sup>24</sup> And on several occasions Peter Penner (GC) was honored by the Viceroy of India for his notable work with leprosy in the leper home.<sup>25</sup>

Asheervadam also credits Indian Christians. Throughout decades MB Indian leaders carried the main work of evangelism—via organizations of Church Extension Workers and Interfaith Ministries—of going from village to village to preach. They knew sacrifice, selfless service, and tribulations within their own communities.<sup>26</sup> Asheervadam describes MC national leaders Stephen and Phoebe (Sheela) Solomon, who were active with established programs. They grew up in mission hostels and later both were graduated from universities. Stephen became a prolific writer, musician, ordained pastor, and translator with the Bible Society of India. Phoebe, an ordained deacon, became a notable teacher.<sup>27</sup> Existing accounts do not disclose how those capable leaders engaged their Hindu neighbors which presumably they did through holiday celebrations, meeting Hindu parents of students whom they taught, and friendship with local shopkeepers.

Several MC missionaries shifted location north in the 1940s and 1950s to Bihar state (now Jharkhand state from 1999 when Bihar divided). New churches developed among numerous tribal languages in addition to Hindi. John Beachy’s seminary study, pursued after years as a missionary, focused on coun-

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23 Jacob A. Ressler, *Stories from India* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald), 73.

24 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 156, 158.

25 Penner received Kaiser-i-Hind silver medals in 1926 and 1941, medals given for public service in India from 1900 to 1947. “Biographical Sketch” for Penner, GC Mennonite Archives form, Newton, KS

26 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 140–41. Indian Bible women who took the Christian message into homes could also be credited here. Missioner Thelma Miller Groff describes Bible women as effective—good at meeting women, telling scripture stories, and authentic prayer—in a video created by Dorothy Yoder Nyce, “Holy Respect—No Less,” (1996), 31 minutes. Also informative is Indian James Taneti’s “Telugu Women in Mission” (DMin thesis, Western Theological Seminary, 2012). Taneti is known to present MB leaders in Andhra Pradesh.

27 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 159.

selling among Oraon and Munda tribal groups. He understood their animist belief in and worship of a hierarchy of spirit beings alongside one Supreme Being.<sup>28</sup> Often motivated by fear, the people might express allegiance in order to appease evil or hostile deities. Tribal folk who claim Jesus as their *guru* (teacher) may return to former rituals or ceremonial activities in times of crisis. So, Beachy wrote of being pastoral alongside acknowledging Hindu influence.

Broader ecumenical links emerged through the decades, writes Asheervadam. P.J. Malagar, certified by the South Indian Bible Seminary, was the first Indian MC ordained bishop (1955). He helped form and lead an ongoing, inter-Mennonite group, Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India. It sent the first Indian missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. R.S. Lemuel (MB) to Bangladesh, where the Islamic religion dominates.<sup>29</sup> The first inter-Mennonite conference was held in Dhamtari in 1971. Paul and Esther Kniss (MC) managed a bookstore, called Good Books, that was useful for non-Christian customers. Strong Indian leadership also made possible the 1997 Mennonite World Conference that convened in Kolkata, India. For that event, Bishop Shant Kunjam (MC) composed words and music for the conference theme, “Hear what the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches.” Public ecumenical gatherings—with Lutherans, Methodists, Disciples, and Pentecostals—increased Mennonite self-confidence and provided occasions for pilgrimage or festival events, for praising God together.

Encounters with Hindus recurred; illustrations of this fact appear in anecdotes from Peter Penner’s experience. Physician Herbert Dester (GC)<sup>30</sup> reports that Penner bought lots of rice for the leprosy home that he managed. Asking a merchant for a donation for the home, he heard this reply: “I’d rather give for the upkeep of a *guy shalla* (home for old cows) than for those with leprosy who are being punished or ‘getting their due’ from God.” Whether Dester understood the Hindu’s strong view of evil or good consequences (or *karma*) is unclear.

After Tina Block (later Ediger, GC) worked for a year as secretary-treasurer at the evangelical seminary in Yeotmal, India, where Mennonites both studied and taught, she returned to Newton, Kansas. In a paper about Pen-

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28 John Beachy, “Pastoral Counseling: Counseling the Christian, former Animist, in Crisis Experience” (General or Student Papers, AMBS Library, January 11, 1968).

29 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 159, 161.

30 Herbert Dester, *About Hinduism* (North Newton, KS: Women’s Missionary Association of General Conference Mennonites, 1946).

ner for a Mennonite history seminar,<sup>31</sup> she describes his early encounters with Hindu practices. Some troubled him; others humbled him. On one occasion of the festival of Dashera, the local *zamindar* (village owner) sent the missionaries greetings and gifts: rice, flour, sugar, salt, lentils, peppers, bananas, and a goat. Recipients gratefully received such generosity, aware of the Hindu need to gain merit or find favor with deity. But Penner agonized on seeing Hindus pay hard-earned rupees for images of god forms, intent to worship them.<sup>32</sup>

Block further reports the time that a Hindu begged Penner to come to where a mother of the Kurmi caste lay dying. Her small room was full of people. After water and sour milk were poured into the dying woman's half-open mouth, her husband sprinkled sandalwood ashes into her mouth. Then a calf was brought into the room, and its urine poured into her mouth while the woman held to its tail. Penner could only reflect, "Poor, blind people." He recalled another occasion of death when people called upon "Ram-Ram" for assurance and performed a religious dance, each movement of which was significant.<sup>33</sup>

## Mennonites Write about Hindu Themes

### *General*

Writing in 1921 when a professor at Hesston Academy in Kansas, J.D. Charles (MC) includes chapters on several religions in his book, *Present Day Religion*.<sup>34</sup> Topics from Charles' chapter titled "Hinduism (Brahmanism)" include: origin, caste, scriptures, the Supreme One (Brahma), and salvation. He notes shifts in Vedic hymns from belief in one God (monotheism) to seeing God in everything (pantheism) to belief in many gods (polytheism). In addition to commending the prominent place given to prayer by Hindus, Charles faults several features of Hinduism: that touching a low-caste person is not to be pardoned; that the duration or number of re-births might be reduced through strict adherence to law or acts of merit; that widows consecrated to Krishna

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31 Tina Block, "'That They May Know Him': P.A. Penner's First Term in India, Dec. 9, 1900–Mar 10, 1908" (seminar paper, North Newton, KS, 1965).

32 Western Christians often negate sacred Hindu images or god forms as mere *idols*. They may in turn overlook their own "idols" (replacements for God). To negate diverse forms and names of Hindu images may prompt critics to fail to understand that whereas illiterate village folk may indeed worship an object before them, educated Hindus understand their diverse images to represent the One Universal Being.

33 Block, "'That They May Know Him,'" 29, 32.

34 John D. Charles, *Present Day Religion* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1921).

may become prostitutes when resident in temples.<sup>35</sup> In the study of religions, Charles cautions against either becoming liberal to the point of granting salvation through them all, or so narrow as to refuse to learn or receive good ideas from others. Since all religions provide interest and instruction, he expects a student who compares religions to keep focused what is “true.”

George J. Lapp (MC) and his first wife, Esther, went to India in 1905. Esther and a daughter, Pauline, were among the missionaries and children who died and were buried in India. An intellectual and alert observer, George wrote about themes of Hinduism for diverse occasions and in numerous journals: caste, transmigration of the soul, Hindu scriptures and mythology, philosophical schools, religious fears, and Hindu practice with images and festivals. He wrote sensitively of Hindu *pandits* (teachers) for missionaries when studying Hindi, ecumenical ties, the hermit saint Maharishi of Khailash, “Gandhi’s Gospel,” and a visit to noted social activist Pandita Ramabai at Kedgaon. Mission administrators encouraged his seminary study and writing during a 1930 furlough.<sup>36</sup> During his forty years in India, Lapp absorbed religious and cultural features at a profound level; his writing communicated them effectively.

A 1972 PhD dissertation by historian John A. Lapp (MC) notes George J. Lapp’s undergraduate study titled “Strength and Weakness of Hinduism.”<sup>37</sup> Regarding Hindu scriptures, John reports that George saw “outstanding literary qualities” in the Upanishads and called the Ramayana epic a “wonderful piece of literature.” He defended important deities of Hinduism and its six philosophical systems. John A. Lapp also refers to the elder Lapp’s writing about superstition, festivals, and pilgrimage. Weaknesses for which George J. Lapp faulted Hinduism included: shortness of life due to early marriage, regressive medicine, promotion of poverty, denial of education for the masses, and tyranny through certain customs.

In his 1939 book titled *Our Mission Work in India*, M.C. Lehman (MC) reviews six principles within Hinduism, India’s main religious force.<sup>38</sup> The first refers to the One yet Many concept of deity: the three main God names of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva known alongside numerous subdeities and incarnations. The second concerns written texts: belief in four Vedas—Rig, Atharva, Sama, and Yajur—plus Brahmanas, Puranas, Upanishads, the Ramayana and

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35 Ibid., 27–31.

36 George J. Lapp, “Strength and Weakness of Hinduism” (Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, IN, History mss. 1–143, Box 4).

37 J.A. Lapp, *Mennonite Church in India*, 81.

38 M.C. Lehman, *Our Mission Work in India* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1939), 10–11.

Mahabharata epics, and the Suras. The third principle is transmigration of the soul, in which Lehman stresses the influential caste system shaped by *karma*. *Karma* results from good or evil actions that lead to the fourth principle: “final salvation through successive rebirths until released from evil.” Wholeness is achieved through observing caste rules. A fifth principle calls for obedience to *guru* teaching, and the sixth combines worship of a god form with sacrifice and ceremonies required during holidays.

Lehman exposes readers—primarily Mennonites in the United States and Canada—to the religious context for those engaged in “mission endeavor” in India. He commends knowledge of and integrates what centrally matters in India. Although his brief book does not elaborate Hindu practice, he introduces western readers to realities that both differ from and resemble their own attention to doctrines. Both God-concept and salvation matter, writes Lehman; how each is explained is important in a missionary’s presentation. For a missionary to tell biblical stories without listening to and learning from Hinduism’s two main epics creates a gap in understanding. Lehman proposes two steps: (1) effective communication of Christian thought to God’s people immersed in Hindu belief and culture, and (2) a new capacity among western Christians to examine their convictions in light of Hindu thought.<sup>39</sup>

Writing in 2009, pastor and part-time teacher John Murray (MC) expressed concern that Christians deepen their understanding of and respect for other religions.<sup>40</sup> His direct encounter with Hinduism occurred through the Menno Clinic India, located in Andhra Pradesh state, founded by Subbarao and Olga Yarlagadda, former Hindus. Murray has accompanied several groups of nursing students from Hesston College (KS) to the clinic for short-term, cross-cultural learning. Staff members there include Hindus: a priest administrator, and a nurse practitioner who faithfully worships through multiple senses in a Shiva temple. Murray writes about the “manyness of God” for Hindus—God’s reality being perceived, revealed, and known in many ways. Murray hopes that students value the Hindu view that God is within each individual (which the greeting *Namaste* suggests); develop and reflect on friendship across religions; discover how truth exchanged enhances personal faith; and

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<sup>39</sup> Lehman’s Yale dissertation about the Hindu poet Harishchandra’s God-concept deserves attention as does Jacob Loewen’s (MB) five-lecture series titled “A Fresh Look at the God Concept” given at the Mennonite Missionary Study Fellowship (March 12–14, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> John Murray, “Breaking down the Dividing Wall of Hostility: Toward Life-Giving Encounters with Persons of Other Faith Traditions” (paper for AMBS Great Plains course, fall 2009).

understand the purpose of Hindu images. Such insight reminds the observer of “Universal Reality”—the Supreme Lord or highest concept of religious philosophy—beyond the image. He notes key Hindu scriptures and describes the four yoga paths that undergird the view that “many roads lead to the top of the mountain,” a view with which he differs.<sup>41</sup>

A Hindu theme that deserves careful attention is *karma* with its inevitable rebirth; for this concept meanings can vary. Ronald Neufeldt (MB), retired professor of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, has written more than other Mennonites about *karma*.<sup>42</sup> Most Hindus believe that they experience multiple lives on earth; after death, the soul transmigrates to a new incarnation or rebirth. Acts in this life are duly “rewarded” in the next, a process that is central to the concept of *karma*. Salvation occurs at the conclusion of transmigrating cycles. Herbert Dester (GC) wrote of two incidents that reflect this theme. When Dester asked a *sadhu* (Hindu holy man), “Have you received salvation?” the man replied, “Salvation is far away.” On another occasion Dester and two other missionaries trekked 125 miles to a source of the Ganges River at an altitude of 10,000 feet. There a nearly naked, silent *sadhu* lived year-round. Asked by one of the three what merit the *sadhu* expected, his *chela* (disciple) explained his hope for release from present existence and rebirths. He expected his body to be offered to the Ganges River.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Caste System*

The caste system based on *varna* (color) remains the social foundation of Hindu experience. Mrs. H.T. Esau (MB) writes: “For twenty-five centuries Hindu people have had every detail concerning occupation, kind of food, type of dress, mark or caste, home and marriage decided for them by rules of caste to which they belong.”<sup>44</sup> A person’s birth shapes identity and dignity, and determines occupation and position within the local hierarchy of castes. Thousands of sub-castes or *jatis* follow the four main groups: *Brahmins* (priests/teachers), *Ksatriyas* (rulers/soldiers), *Vaisyas* (merchants/traders) and *Shudras* (laborers/

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41 Murray, “Breaking Down,” 6.

42 Ronald W. Neufeldt, ed. *Karma and Rebirth: Post-Classical Developments* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986). Neufeldt’s chapter “In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement” describes the Theosophical Movement’s distinct approach to *karma* (233–56). The present author’s future writing will give more attention to Neufeldt’s broad writing and understanding of Hindu concepts and scripture.

43 Dester, *About Hinduism*, 5–6.

44 H.T. Esau, *First Sixty Years of M.B. Missions* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1954), 73.

artisans).<sup>45</sup> People outside the *varna* or caste system—over the decades known by names like Untouchables, Children of God, or Dalits—are assigned tasks that may pollute or defile them. Through time they may have been refused temple entry or the use of public wells.

After serving as a hospital administrator in India from 1962 to 1968, Paul Dyck (GC) wrote a thesis on new castes in India.<sup>46</sup> He found Indian caste to be “one of the most highly elaborated systems of social stratification in the world.” Its bases are multiple, such as labor specialization, distance between segments of society, or views of purity and pollution. Dyck’s writing centers on tribal peoples—Gonds, a dominant political force, and Santals, known for an 1855 rebellion—from 1850 to 1950, in the Chhattisgarh region of India (then Madhya Pradesh state). Tribes that transform into castes rarely give up all of their cultural traits. While “Christian” may become a new caste name, converts retain their caste status though they may take on newly emerging occupations, Dyck reports.<sup>47</sup>

*India Calling*, a General Conference Mennonite newsletter, includes many missionary anecdotes from the 1940s and 1950s that reflect the realities of the caste system:

- A caste *guru* (religious leader) faulted a man for continuing to eat with his granddaughter whose father had become a Christian;
- An employer said to a newly baptized person: “You have dishonored the caste and blotted our religion. Leave work immediately”;
- A critical situation transpired in a Mennonite boarding school when caste Hindu boys moved out as a group because an outcaste fellow began to eat and live among them;
- Caste restrictions are crumbling, especially in cities, but a rural, orthodox Hindu may go thirsty rather than accept water from a lower-caste person.<sup>48</sup>

While B.R. Ambedkar, the well-known advocate for Dalits, enabled many to become Buddhists, other Dalits and tribal folk (25 percent of India’s pop-

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45 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 129.

46 Paul I. Dyck, “Emergence of New Castes in India” (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1970).

47 Dyck, “Emergence of New Castes,” 80, 107. Current political efforts among strident Hindus strive to “make India Hindu.”

48 *India Calling* (GC newsletter, 15 November 1941, 30 January 1942, June 1947, 19 March 1956). See also, Arthur Mosher, “This is India,” *Mennonite Life* 5, no. 3 (July 1950): 18, 20.

ulation) have converted to Christianity, Islam, or Sikhism.<sup>49</sup> Ninety percent of MC Indians are from low caste, Satnami or tribal background. Outside of caste and perhaps not self-identified as Hindu, tribal people may prefer for themselves the term *adivasi* (first inhabitants).

## Mennonites Encounter Hindu Worship

### *Puja in home or temple settings*

*Puja* refers to worship. Within Hindu homes will be a small room or alcove, perhaps a portion of a kitchen counter, where a family member performs daily rituals. Verbal expressions may accompany gifting with grains, cut flowers, incense, or colored powder. Photos or posters of a form being honored appear; small brass plates or silver cups used for distinct ritual steps take on meaning with specific requests. *Puja* may also involve going to a temple to perform rituals. Small temples may stand along a roadside: a stopping place for a bus driver beginning a journey or a farmer headed toward a field. Or they may loom large in a bustling city. In each of several areas of a temple a distinct form is honored; a high tower designates the sacred sanctum location; steps may descend nearby into a pond for ablution rituals.<sup>50</sup>

In his extensive research notes on eastern religions, J.D. Graber (MC), missionary and missions administrator, describes *puja* as practiced by an individual or family or within a temple.<sup>51</sup> Graber notes varied features of Hindu worship: daily morning care of *ishta-devata*—attending to a personal god form that best suits personal needs; *sucertas*—five representative forms to honor; or *advaita* (meaning non-dual)—the worship of One Great Being. “The Hindu monotheist does *puja* to only one God,” Graber says. A worshiper goes to the temple, where God dwells in a single or multiple forms, to offer gifts, ask for strength or a particular benefit, have sin destroyed, or appease the god.<sup>52</sup>

Florence Nafziger (MC), missionary nurse and educator, reports on visits to Hindu temples. The goddess form located in the peaceful interior of a Jain temple in Calcutta impressed her more than did the pot-bellied, “ugly” form with an elephant-shaped head and “superhuman,” multiple hands located in a small brick structure set within the temple garden. Inside a small, whitewashed

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49 Asheervadam, “Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in India,” 130. See also Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*.

50 These details reflect the author’s experience in homes with Hindu friends. See also parts of chapters 6 and 10 in her *Multifaith Musing*.

51 J.D. Graber, “Hinduism” (HM 1 -503, Box 3, Folder 3/2, no date).

52 Ibid., 7–8.

temple of two rooms in Dhamtari, Nafziger observed colorful posters of deities, and a huge cobra carved in stone; the latter reminded her of ancient religion. In a nearby village temple Nafziger noted the small bed on which god forms sleep each night; a temple bell and conch shell announce both bedtime and morning awakening rituals for the god form.<sup>53</sup>

Paul Hiebert (MB) reports worship related to the goddess of smallpox, Misamma.<sup>54</sup> A Christian father, on feeling his daughter's fevered forehead and seeing increased, red spots on her body, struggled with whether to give even one paisa (small coin) to satisfy the angered goddess. Pressure from Hindu brothers and the village mounted. Hiebert writes that when the village diviner concluded that the local godling or spirit, Misamma, was angered by the village folk, donations were gathered from every household to sacrifice a water buffalo on the village's behalf. High-caste elders resent Christian claims that loyalty to the God of the Bible makes impossible such donations; to disobey the village elder can be unforgivable. Hiebert knew that noncooperation could lead to banning the Christian from the common well or access to irrigation, or from being free to work in his field.

### *Hindu festivals, holidays, and celebration*

At least twenty-eight Hindu holidays are faithfully observed during a year. A new convert notes the contrast with the Protestant celebration of primarily only Christmas and Easter plus a Thanksgiving or Harvest occasion. Feasts, fasts, and holidays honor religious details of story, deity, and season. Diverse descriptions explain practices and purpose according to location.

Diwali, perhaps the most significant Hindu holiday, honors the goddess Lakshmi, who is known as the consort of the god form named Vishnu. Little flames in clay holders line home windows, verandahs or balconies as well as shop doorways and ledges along streets. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger (GC), currently professor at Emory University, a researcher, and a sensitive writer, describes the dance that accompanies inviting Lakshmi into homes and businesses. Goddess Lakshmi, linked to wealth and well-being, is symbolized by

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<sup>53</sup> Florence Nafziger, "Temples I Have Visited in India," *Youth's Christian Companion* (July 1931), 658, 664. See also Dorothy Yoder Nyce, "Crossing Cultures in Sacred Arts: Drama, Dance & Temples," in *Multifaith Musing*, 47–57.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Hiebert, "A Sacrifice to the Goddess of Smallpox," in *Case Studies in Missions*, eds. Paul G. Hiebert and Frances F. Hiebert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 126–28. See also Christina Duerksen's account of appeasing Indra, god of thunder, in her *Come with Me: 19 Children's Stories* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1971).

the elephant or lotus.<sup>55</sup> Family gift-giving and celebrative meals accompany nights marked by sizzling, booming firecrackers.

Burkhalter Flueckiger (GC) also explains Dashera, a Hindu festival “to mark the killing of the demon raven by the deity Rama. The act of burning Ravana’s effigy is often interpreted as the triumph of good over evil.”<sup>56</sup> Friends greet each other, “Happy *Durga puja/Dussebra!*” Gangadashura is a day for worship of the Ganges River. Some Hindus believe that King Bhagirath brought the Ganges down from heaven to enable salvation for ancestors. Through bathing in the river, giving alms to the poor, or pouring water on one’s head the festival continues.<sup>57</sup>

Some missionaries wrote of their dislike for Holi festival; they avoided being included among the revelers. While some Hindus draw from an ancient story and practice, others see the hilarious occasion as mainly an opportunity for throwing colored powders on each other. A historic account tells of people gathering wood for a fire around which they marched, throwing sweet-smelling objects into it to purify them while singing lewd songs.<sup>58</sup> All then squirted deep purple color onto others. The original account, according to a missionary, suggests that a father, unable to persuade his son to worship the same god form as he, asked a daughter named “Holi” to sit in the fire with the son. Since the daughter, not the son, was consumed, the day is observed to remember Holi.

### Bhakti and bhajans

When Stanley Friesen (MC) reflected with the present author on Mennonite perceptions of Hindu thought or practice, a memory from his missionary father, John Friesen, linked *bhakti* (Hindu devotion) with *bhajans* (hymns) sung by Christians.<sup>59</sup> Both express *devotion* to the Divine; both express longing to be near or desire to be faithful to the One God. *Bhakti* is one of three key Hindu *marga* (spiritual paths or ways) toward salvation, the other two being *jnana* (knowledge) and *karma* (action).

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55 Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 101–2. See also the Mennonite Church resource, *India Mission News* 5, no. 11 (November 1926), 4.

56 Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger offered this description on a Facebook post (October 3, 2014). She has written extensively about Hindu celebration, including in her book, *When the World Becomes Female: Guises of a South Indian Goddess* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

57 *India Mission News* (June 6, 1926).

58 *India Mission News* (April 4, 1926).

59 Personal conversation in Elkhart, IN (August 26, 2014).

A helpful resource by R.R. Sundara Rao reveals how complete surrender to the *istadevata* (favored God) was adopted from Hindu culture for Christian purposes. Rao suggests that two-thirds of Indians today look to *bhakti*, a phenomenon known for twenty-five centuries, for spiritual redemption.<sup>60</sup> That Indian Christians—literate or illiterate—sing faith or also express *bhakti* through *bhajans* is equally clear. Aware of ancestral composers brought up with intense *bhakti* in Hindu temples, Christian *bhajan* writers glorify the Son of God through names like Giver of Life and Personification of Light. The first Protestant Telugu hymn was written by Purushotham Choudhury on the occasion of his baptism in 1833. Of his additional 130 hymns, 20 appear in present Mennonite Brethren hymnals.<sup>61</sup> Through *bhajans* Christians witness to a desire for stability in life, the Lord’s divine presence, and the Spirit’s guidance from darkness to light.<sup>62</sup>

Chad Bauman (MC), currently professor of Asian religions at Butler University, has written about themes of conversion, Hindu–Christian violence, Indian “Christian” womanhood, and Hindu Sathya Sai Baba’s many devotees. Bauman describes “blind Simon” from India’s Chhattisgarh region where Mennonites are located. Whereas Hindus might link Simon’s blindness to *karma* (his previous negative action), Christian Simon openly praises God through it. He links his musical skills to *bhajans* about healing. He conveys biblical stories and expresses devotion to Jesus. As Hindu scriptures often appear in poetic form, Simon creates Christian lyrics. Bauman reports that Hindus familiar with their major epics know stories similar to blind Simon’s accounts from Hebrew scripture. His 250 *bhajans* are sung in church settings; some incorporate music from Hindu folk songs while others focus on Christian doctrine.<sup>63</sup>

## Mennonites Interact with Hindu People

### *Gandhi*

Numerous Mennonites have written about the notable Hindu, Mohandas K. Gandhi. Among others, MC authors include Weyburn Groff, J.N. Kauffman, and John Howard Yoder; MB authors include Henry Krahn, Jacob Loewen,

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60 R.R. Sundara Rao, *Theology in the Telugu Hymnal* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1983), 20. Mennonite Brethren are located primarily in the Telugu language area.

61 E.D. Solomon (Indian MB) recently completed a PhD dissertation on Choudhury. Thanks to Paul Wiebe for his email of October 24, 2014 that reports this and related information.

62 Rao, *Theology in the Telugu Hymnal*, 7, 12, 77, 80, 100.

63 Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 200–9.

and Ronald Neufeldt; GC authors include Ella Bauman, Luben Janzen, and Orlando Waltner. Gandhi's nonviolent stance—*ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*—explains in part this attention. From direct conversation with Gandhi at his ashram in 1929, M.C. Lehman (MC) learned that Gandhi's belief in nonviolence stems from Hindu scripture rather than being purely politically motivated.<sup>64</sup> Several Mennonites received mail directly from Gandhi, including Gilbert Gehman (GC) in 1931 and J.N. Kaufman (MC) in 1947. The former had in a sermon commended Gandhi's nonviolent way of life; the latter, with others, had requested that conscientious objection status be built into India's new constitution.<sup>65</sup> James Pankratz (MB) describes Mennonite nonviolence as "obedience to God and a symbol of separation from the world." He writes about both caution among some Mennonites living in India prior to independence in 1947 regarding Gandhi's confrontational noncooperation with Britain, as well as Gandhi's dislike for Christian clergy who "blessed killing" on battlefields.<sup>66</sup>

Indian Mennonite Church member Shant Kunjam's MA thesis on Gandhi adds perspective. He identifies the Hindu Gandhi's personal characteristics as sincerity, disciplined determination, selfless service, identification with the masses, untiring energy, and harmlessness. Kunjam further observes that:

Gandhi claims no perfection.... A firm believer in God, his sole object was to know God face to face.

Honesty, truthfulness, and openness in personal life are central qualities that he chose to develop.

Gandhi believed in one God, rebirth, and salvation.

Gandhi did not realize that God is dynamically present and active in the world.<sup>67</sup>

### *Other Hindu friends*

In addition to the more formal writing identified here, more definite anecdotal

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64 M.C. Lehman, "Gandhi's Program of Non-Violence—A Critical Estimate from a Christian Point of View," *Goshen College Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (May 1936): 2.

65 Griselda Gehman Shelly, "A Letter from Mahatma Gandhi," *Mennonite Life* (June 1983): 27; Leonard Gross, *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, 44, no. 2 (April 1983): 5–6.

66 James Pankratz, "Gandhi and Mennonites in India," *Conrad Grebel Review* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 136–61.

67 Shantkumar S. Kunjam, "An Exploratory Examination of the Ethics of Gandhi in the Light of Biblical Teachings" (MA thesis, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1982), 26, 41, 56, 72.

writing appears in archival materials. Anecdotes appear in letters, missionary accounts from events in India or when “on furlough,” and mission newsletters or reports via journals, like *Christian Monitor* or the *Gospel Herald* (MC).

Irene Lehman Weaver (MC), daughter of missionaries Lydia and M.C. Lehman, reports playing inside their Dhamtari compound (property) as a three-year-old. A troop of elephants stopped when going by. A *rajah* (Indian prince) traveling with his entourage noticed her and invited her to have a ride. Seated between the *rajah* in his gold and blue chair and the *mabout* (driver), she watched the latter lead the elephant by pulling its ears or prodding it with a stick. The Lehmans remained connected with that rajah who later sent Irene a pony.<sup>68</sup>

Single missionary Martha Burkhalter (GC) served in India over forty years, retiring in 1959. A Bluffton College graduate, she received the advanced B.R.E degree in education from New York Biblical Seminary in 1934. She described in verse the missionary’s 1927 January and February “touring.” Those were weeks spent “tenting” in villages: preparing meals, conversing informally during the day with villagers, and gathering in the evenings to sing and share gospel stories. Hindu villagers did not always welcome them:

.... But what happened? Late one evening  
 Came a crowd of angry natives,  
 Pelted tent with stones and mud clots  
 Tried to drive the missionaries....  
 Long and tedious were the dealings.  
 Finally it was decided  
 That a tract of wooded acres  
 Would be given in the jungle  
 In exchange for what the natives  
 Had been fighting for that evening....<sup>69</sup>

The dramatic ever characterized Burkhalter: she was known to hail a train to stop for her to board when she had missed it at a station. She adopted an In-

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68 Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, “A New Day in Mission: Irene Weaver Reflects on Her Century in Ministry,” *Missio Dei* 8 (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2005), 3.

69 Martha Burkhalter, *A Fragment of Missionary Life* (Bluffton, OH: Women’s Missionary Society, 1927).

dian daughter, Dilasie. Missioners, Indians, and students valued Burkhalter's administrative skills, for elementary- or seminary-level schools. Her "energy and vivid, dramatic methods of teaching" were often recalled.<sup>70</sup>

Blanche Sell (MC) wrote several times to family and friends about her deep, abiding friendship with a Jain family named Shah.<sup>71</sup> Ever open to their possible conversion, she never relinquished the friendship because of their strong loyalty to another religion. The mother, "so full of love," asked her sons to read Jain scriptures for her. Sell writes of often praying with her. When Sell accompanied her to a hospital via ambulance, Mrs. Shah asked the driver to stop at a Hindu temple so that she could offer a small sacrifice to the image. She died calling out, "*Paras Ram.*"

Sell wrote her conviction: "I will not manipulate or demand that they convert.... Although I believe that Christ is the way to salvation, I cannot judge another.... I can never hold a grudge.... I do not need to defend myself or prove that I'm right."<sup>72</sup> A doctor son of Mrs. Shah closed a letter to Blanche requesting information about medical supplies, "With prayers, Yours Always." Believing that "there are many ways to believe in God," he read the *New English Bible* that Sell gave him because "his one mother is Christian."<sup>73</sup>

Two accounts from more current experience in Kansas conclude this article. Having worked at Union Biblical Seminary, an ecumenical school that Mennonites attend in India, Tina Block (GC) welcomed a Hindu Indian woman arriving to study at Wichita State University. Their friendship deepened. While the Hindu woman earned a master's degree in city planning, she valued time spent with Block. She observed and discussed details: from an abundance of pillows on a bed to prayer before meals and worship at church. Block too learned: about fatalism when the guest's best friend was killed, about Indian family adjustments when her friend married a man of lower caste than she, about living one's faith without "pushing" another to change her religious loyalty.<sup>74</sup>

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70 "Burkhalter, Martha Rose (1889–1965)," *The Mennonite* (October 19, 1965): 654. Available from the online Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College, Kansas (accessed June 8, 2014), [https://mla.bethelks.edu/mediawiki/index.php/Burkhalter,\\_Martha\\_Rose\\_\(1889-1965\)](https://mla.bethelks.edu/mediawiki/index.php/Burkhalter,_Martha_Rose_(1889-1965)).

71 Jainism is a religion that broke from Hinduism.

72 Sell, "Notebook" (MCUSA Archives, Goshen, IN, HMI 183, Box 2/12).

73 Sell, paper from September 21, 1964 (MCUSA Archives, Goshen, IN, HMI 183, Box 1, Papers, *circa* 1900–2001).

74 Block Ediger's conversation with the author took place in Newton, KS, July 7, 2014.

LaVonne Godwin Platt (GC) worked in service projects in Indian villages in the mid-1950s with a Hindu friend Bela Banerjee. Platt describes Bela as a “dear friend” to many, as fluent in Indian languages, and as skilled with “treating patients, delivering babies, teaching health workers, and visiting with villagers.” Platt also writes of Bela’s final visit to the United States and Canadian friends in 1992.<sup>75</sup> When faithful Hindu Bela died in Platt’s living room, they acquired authorization from her family in India for cremation. They planned a memorial service in harmony with Hindu tradition, incorporating a garland of marigolds, an oil lamp with incense, a coconut, tape recordings of Indian songs, plus poems and music by noted poet Rabindranath Tagore. Dwight Platt later delivered Bela’s cremains to be scattered in the Ganges River.

## Conclusion

Culture, change and conversion, all part of pluralism, are both revealed and lie behind the scene in this manuscript. More Mennonite voices regarding Hinduism—as from United Mission to Nepal or Mennonite Central Committee workers beyond Kolkata, committed missionaries, and academic professors—deserve extended hearing. More reporting from the author’s bibliography will follow. What diverse Mennonites have experienced and written from living among or study of ever-complex Hindu thought and practice is a gift to treasure. All who live with and learn from diverse religions, all who need neither to apologize for nor misrepresent personal loyalty, have insight to share. Better understanding the “God of all nations” will enhance Anabaptist witness for years to come.

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<sup>75</sup> LaVonne Godwin Platt, *Bela Banerjee: Bringing Health to India’s Villages* (Newton, KS: Wordsworth, 1988), ix; LaVonne Godwin Platt, *In Memory of Bela Banerjee: A Coda to Her Biography* (Newton, KS: Wordsworth, 1996), 19–33.