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Faith, Force, and Fear: Factors that Influence Ancestral Worship among Hindus

As a young boy in India, I (Santosh) grew up in a traditional Hindu home. My mother was extremely religious. In fact, she was a public preacher for the god Shiva.¹ We celebrated many festivals in our household; every week it seemed as if we observed one holiday or another through rituals and fasting. My mother also fed wild animals and birds in the area, specifically crows, as she believed that feeding these creatures meant the food reached our dead ancestors. In some parts of India, clay pots full of freshly cooked food are hung from trees (mostly outside the village) for the dead to eat. Many families offer the first cooked meal of the day to the crows, believing that their ancestors accept the first share of the food (Amarujala 2017). Hinduism was not just a part of everything we did, but it was who we were.

In spite of my family's strong connection to Hinduism, I felt as if something was missing. In Hinduism, one's association with the gods is not relational. Rather, it is based on the devotion of a follower to the divine and provides a systematic way to move a believer towards their goal, thus improving *karma*.² As such, there is a strong focus on good works in Hinduism. Additionally, ancestral worship is deeply ingrained in the Hindu religion. While many Hindus attribute their devotion and the accompanying actions to faith, my personal experience suggests that there are often other factors at work beneath the surface.

While this was the world in which I grew up, when I was exposed to Christianity, I found that the Hindu ways were less rewarding than the

ways of Jesus. Because of this, in 2007, I was baptized and dedicated my life to Jesus Christ. However, my conversion to Christianity had unfortunate familial consequences.

Based on my upbringing and experiences with Hinduism and subsequent conversion to Christianity, I have identified three factors that highly influence adherents to Hinduism in the practice of ancestral worship: faith, force, and fear.

Background to Ancestral Worship

Reverence, obedience, and the transmission of traditions/values from one generation to the next are some of the most profound human responsibilities for families, clans, and tribes. One of the values that is transmitted in many cultures is respect for elders. However, the ways values are expressed differ based on culture and religion. From a Christian scriptural perspective, the Bible says, “Honor your father and mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you” (Exod 20:12).

Hindu believers abide by a similar principle. The Hindu scriptures, *Padma Purana*, state that an ideal Brahmin (that is, someone of good virtue, but not of the priestly class) shows respect to his parents and observes the rituals mentioned in *Vedas* (*Padma Purana*, 2.1.12). *Taittiriya Upanishad* 1.11 tells us,

देवपत्निकार्याभ्यां न परमदत्तियं। मातृदेवो भव। पतिदेवो भव। आचार्यदेवो भव। अत्थिदिवो भव। यान्यनवधानि कर्माणि। तानि सेवित्व्यानि। नो इतसाणि। यान्यस्माकं सुचरितानि। तानि त्वयोपास्यानि। नो इतराणि।

Never swerve from the rites due to the gods, and to the manes [Manes refers to the ancestors]. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.5.16 mentions “the world of the Manes” (*Pitriloka*). Let thy mother be to thee a god; let thy father be a god to thee; a god let thy teacher be unto thee, and (so also) let thy guest be unto thee a god. Let only those works be done by thee that are free from blemishes, and not others. Only those deeds of ours should be followed by thee, that is good, and not others. (Sharananda 1928:42, 43)

According to Hinduism, the absence of such respect brings disgrace to one’s family, specifically the ancestors. Ancestors are an integral part of one’s existence (Hertz 2017:1) and a source of identity. For Hindus, honor and reverence are always in tandem.

Because of the importance of ancestors, ancestral worship is commonly practiced in India and exists in many forms (Griffith 2003:50). To understand

who ancestors are, it is crucial to understand the definition of this term and to whom the term refers. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines an ancestor as “one from whom a person is descended;” this includes one’s parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents. According to the *Rig Veda*, ancestors are considered as semi-divine beings or demigods. While these beings do not possess the power to punish sinners, as do the gods, the ancestors are the source of beneficial gifts and have the ability to dole out curses (Sayers 2013:26).

While ancestors can be both living and dead, it is important to differentiate between the two. The ways of the elderly are highly respected, strictly followed, and taught to the children to carry on tradition. However, a Hindu family’s regard for their dead ancestors is far superior to that given to those alive.

The ancestral funeral offering is one of the triad concepts of Hinduism, alongside several others (triad refers to the triple deities of Hinduism). Wendy Doniger states that “triad” represents the number “three” as both plural and complete and is used as a short form of “lots and lots” (1981:23). In Hindu thinking, each person is responsible for three debts, which is considered the *dharma* (duty) of every person. The triad duties consist of studying the sages, presenting funeral offerings to the ancestors, and sacrificing to the gods. When a family member dies, the family performs many rituals to benefit the spirit of the dead, specifically to ensure that s/he has a better afterlife. This motivates Hindus to practice the rituals and sacrifices mentioned in the *Rig Veda*.

Discussion about the dead, as well as the worship associated with them, would not be complete if the concept of death is not clearly understood. Life and death play a crucial role in almost every culture. Every society, culture, community, family, and individual places significant attention on certain events in life: birth, puberty, marriage, and death (Grunlan and Mayers 1988). Death stands out among the stages, as almost every culture looks at death as a curse, a loss, or an incident that cannot be postponed or avoided. Yet not every culture or person reacts to death in the same way (Aiken 2001:210).

For example, in Rajasthan, located in northern India, it is common to hire professional weepers to lament with the family when a death occurs. These mourners are called “*Rudaali*” and dress in black (color of *Yama*, the god of death) (Bains 2017). Sometimes, due to the shock of an untimely death, a family may struggle to express their grief; the professional weepers help convey the family’s grief to the community. In southern India, Tamil people dance and set off firecrackers during a funeral procession. It is believed that the soul must be sent off with happiness as it transitions from the old body to its new status. Regardless of local traditions, the

importance of keeping the dead happy does not change, thus a series of rituals are performed to keep the soul of the deceased at peace. The various ritualistic performances in honor of the dead are the essence of *dharma* (duty) and remains the crux of ancestral worship.

Ancestral Worship in a Modern Hindu Family

Even in modern culture, ancestors play a central role in a typical Hindu family. Additionally, most families maintain connections to their ancestors who are physically dead, believing that the spirit of the ancestor remains alive, watching over and protecting them. The worship of ancestors involves many rituals and often food offerings. The process of feeding the departed ancestors is an important religious ceremony in Hindu homes (Bhattacharyya 1885:31).

However, today's fast-paced world and continued urbanization have influenced many within Hindu society to give up some of the practices of their forefathers (*gotra*). In Hinduism, *gotra* is related to the patrilineality of a family. The purpose of *gotra* is to keep a family's lineage unbroken and avoid incestuous marriages. In Hinduism, *gotra* plays an essential role in relation to families. For example, marriages are not allowed within the same *gotra*. In addition, every *gotra* worships a specific god and guru alongside the mainstream gods and demigods. Even in the absence of practice, the centrality and identity of a Hindu family are linked to their ancestors; therefore, the participation of a Hindu family in ancestral worship is considered essential, even if it is not always practiced.

Many modern Indians no longer live within a joint family (i.e., many family members, including grandparents [mostly paternal], uncles and aunts, cousins, etc., all living under one roof). Because of this, family values, rituals, and customs, including ancestral worship, are often not being well-taught or passed down from generation to generation. However, there are families who respect and follow a few general instructions and guidelines towards their ancestors while not following or conducting all the rituals as required by tradition.

Methodology

Since Hindu customs are essential for ancestral worship, this study examined the three driving forces behind those rituals: faith, fear, and force. Throughout my own Hindu upbringing, I (Santosh) worshipped and participated in the rituals conducted by my family. However, today as a Christian, I can clearly see that the practices in and around my family and society were underscored by these three factors.

A multi-method study was conducted to learn more about the Hindu perspective on ancestral worship and the factors behind the conducting of those rituals. For the first phase, 198 participants (119 males and 79 females) filled out a survey about their understanding of and participation in ancestral worship. Participants were between 18-70 years of age. This phase included Hindu believers from various cities across the country, including those who spoke a variety of languages and dialects. As India is a diverse nation, participants from various regions of the country were able to add value to the research data collected.

For the second phase of this study, seven participants (four males and three females) were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of their beliefs and participation in ancestral worship. Participants were between 18-36 years of age. The intention of selecting people from this specific age-group was to understand how the younger generation views the cultural and ritualistic practices of their religion. This does not mean that elderly participants' contributions would not have been insightful, but the age limit of this study to the contemporary world and the new generation community was intentional.

Using purposive sampling, research questions addressing the role of the ancestors in an individual family and major factors that influence ancestral worship were used (Ray 2012). The primary source of data was telephone interviews conducted at the participants' preferred time. The interviews were conducted in both the Hindi and English, depending on the comfort of the respondents. Conversations were audio-recorded using a narrative inquiry method (Clandinin 2006:77-79). The data were then analyzed to determine themes.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data, collected via questionnaires, indicated that over two-thirds (68.2%) of the respondents believe in Hindu practices. When the same respondents were asked if they believe in family ritual practices, a similar number (63.3%) reported that they do. However, when asked if they believe in the ceremonies related to deceased members of the family, only three in five (60.6%) reported that they believe in such rituals.

Qualitative Findings

Sharing or following traditions as a member of a family and a community is essential as an indication of one's faith. If a person has faith, then s/he needs to put that faith into action (Rinehart 2004:3, 102). Though the expectation of the society for each individual is evident, one must also

take note that the changing world is also changing society. Urbanized communities are populated from the outside but isolated from the inside; however, there is no intention of giving the impression that the urbanized community has divorced culture and tradition. To better understand current Hindu beliefs, several Hindus were interviewed concerning ancestral worship, with their responses listed below.

Respondent 1: Krishna

Krishna is married and works with a company in a metropolitan city. With his wife, children, and younger brother, Krishna left his father's home to earn a living in a bigger city. He is from a high caste and takes pride in his community and its contribution to society, especially in connection with the temple. Krishna indicated that his wife is the one who mostly practices spiritual exercises, but he does not have much interest in participating. Krishna is not a religious person himself, but he is supportive of his wife's performance of rituals or *puja*. When asked about his understanding of the departed ancestors, he expressed, "I greatly honor my father's ancestors, and I feel a sense of pride in my lineage."

Krishna acknowledges that the ancestors must be revered as commanded by the elders. He also asks them for blessings whenever needed. However, he also said that performing rituals in honor of the ancestors is practiced only at his father's home but not at his house in the city. (When Krishna lived with his father, he had no right to make decisions on his own because he was not the head of the family; however, since he moved to a different place, he is now the head of the family and makes almost all the decisions by himself. At times, he allows his wife to be involved in the decision-making.)

Krishna believes that his reverence toward his ancestors is out of pure faith, and he regrets that he is often unable to perform this duty in a city far from his home. He states that since he lives in a city, "there is no place to conduct worship and follow rituals in my building. Everything is fast-paced, and I work almost every day of the week, sometimes even on Sundays. There is absolutely no time, situation, or even the finances to spend for this occasion. I revere my forefathers with all my heart, and I hope they will understand my situation."

Respondent 2: Radha

Radha recently completed her studies and is preparing to study abroad. Her family maintains fairly modern thoughts, and her parents are open-minded. Both of her parents work, which makes for a very busy lifestyle.

Hence, Radha did not spend much time at home since she attended a boarding school. She does not have a lot of power over decision-making for the family, but her parents respect her choices and opinions. In response to the interview questions, she says, "I am not a practicing Hindu. I believe in god but I don't have to do all the rituals and observe fasting to show my respect to god. I visit temples with my parents, especially on my birthday or when there is something good happening in our house."

Radha gives to charity but is not actively involved in spiritual programs or rituals. She says that she knows about ancestral worship but has never participated in such a ritual. She mentions that her immediate family hardly associates with the rest of their larger family. Hence, most occasions or festivals are spent only with her immediate family. Radha fears the spirits of the departed ancestors and does not desire to encounter any. Therefore, she is willing to participate in *pujas* that may require her to honor her ancestors, if need be. Radha states, "I deeply respect my forefathers and seek their blessings to help me make the family proud of my success in life."

Respondent 3: Gopal

Gopal is a married man who works in a private company in a small town. He lives with his widowed mother, his wife, and one son. Gopal lives in his ancestral house, which was built by his grandfather. To support themselves financially, the family rents out part of their house to tenants. The family requires that the tenants be Hindu.

After his father died, Gopal had to take up the responsibility of the house, which did not allow him to study beyond high school; thus, he ended up working for a small company. He says, "I feel my family and I are cursed by someone, and that is why we have one problem after another." He feels that the financial predicament and loss of family members could be because his forefathers are unhappy. He states that his mother makes sure to take every opportunity to please the ancestors and the gods are asked to bring back peace and prosperity. However, nothing seems to be working now. Gopal states, "For the sake of peace in the house and respect for my mother, I do not oppose any kind of worship at home but I do not believe in the ancestors' protection over me. If they were really concerned, they would have helped us and protected us. In my heart, I feel scared of them." He is scared to displease any dead spirit, and therefore does not want to do anything to put the family or himself at risk.

Respondent 4: Madan

Madan is a college student who lives with his parents and siblings. His father is the head of the family and is the primary decision-maker. Religious practices are common in his house, and a *puja* is conducted twice daily, in the morning and evening, at the shrine of the house. Madan mentions that although there are spiritual activities in the house, participation from everyone is not expected. The priest usually visits them for special worship or rituals where only the parents are involved, specifically his mother. Madan states, "I do not have sufficient information on my ancestors, and my family does not engage in any such worship. We are only instructed to observe Monday seriously. On that day, we do not wear new clothes, set marriage dates, or buy things because my grandfather died on that day." It is believed that it is auspicious and dangerous to do anything on Mondays.

To a follow-up question, Madan responds that the sacred days are only observed for the paternal grandfather. Interestingly, no such days are observed for any departed female. Madan states that the family is always careful not to use any such days for important programs or events. He states that he wishes to keep his ancestors happy, but does not believe in the rituals, such as feeding the ancestors by hanging food in the trees outside the village or the community. He does not want to get involved in worshipping the departed beings, stating that he would rather feed the poor and worship the deities.

Respondent 5: Sita

Sita is a homemaker and supports her husband by raising the children and taking care of her in-laws.³ Sita comes from a well-to-do, modern family. Since she married into a conservative family, she has had to give up her desire to hold a job. She discontinued her studies and has almost given up on ever continuing because her in-laws may not allow it. Sita mentions that her in-laws are very good people but are not modern in thought. She has no role in decision-making, not even in the clothes she wears, and is required to wear a *sari* (typical Indian attire) throughout the day at home. She mentions that her husband's family worships their ancestors, and there are many days in a month when there are different types of *puja* conducted and fasting is often observed.

Sita mentions that although she believes in gods, she has no interest in worshipping the dead. She states, "I feel frightened to engage in the worship of departed people. In my husband's house, there is a small room that is always locked and dedicated to the first dead son. The belief is that

the spirit of the son lives in that room, and therefore it is locked and kept dark." When feeding the dead, the room is opened by Sita's mother-in-law to perform rituals and offer food.

Sita does believe the ancestors are helpful and shared an incident that happens frequently. "Every time when we leave our terrace dirty, that night, the dead spirit sweeps the entire terrace, and in the morning, it is all clean." She mentions that there are several incidents when the dead spirits have helped the family in difficult situations.

Sita emphatically states that she will do away with these practices when she becomes the elder of the house, and she will not teach her children to observe them. She mentions that respect for the ancestors is essential but creating an ambiance of fear in the house is not acceptable.

Respondent 6: Devi

Devi married into a Brahmin family and lives with her husband and two children. Devi is a teacher by profession, and her husband serves in the government sector. Her parents arranged Devi's marriage, so she did not have any choice in the selection of her husband; however, she is content with her life and focuses on continuing the family and its values into the next generation. Devi believes that "our ancestors were once humans, but after death, they joined the gods and now they are among them. Therefore, worshipping the ancestors is as equal as worshipping any god."

Devi believes that there is no reason to fear the departed; instead, one must follow in their footsteps and receive blessings and prosperity. She mentions that the rituals and practices honoring her ancestors are as crucial as keeping her family alive. She states that "once a family, always a family," and even when gone, it is unacceptable to leave the ancestors hungry or thirsty. "I regularly feed cows and crows on the rooftop so that the food reaches my departed ancestors and blesses my family."

Devi strongly believes that the dead are not dead but alive in spirit and must not be thought of as if they were dead. She intends to earn good *karma*, which may benefit her now as well as in the afterlife.

Respondent 7: Madhav

Madhav is a married man and lives with his wife and parents in their paternal house. Madhav has been married for six years but does not have children and preferred not to talk about that topic. He is not the head of the family, but since he is the one who supports his family financially, he makes all the family decisions.

In response to ancestral worship, Madhav states that his duty is towards his parents, and he will honestly do that, but he does not want to be involved in any rituals for the ancestors and does not feed their spirits. He mentions that since life is short, he must focus on what he can see and touch. Therefore, spending on the unseen is not his way.

Responding to a question of whether the ancestors could curse him and his family, with hesitance, Madhav responds, “Yes, that perhaps may be possible, and that is why I do not have children even after consulting several doctors, witch doctors, etc.” He mentions that a priest once told him about performing a ritual to call upon the dead spirits so that they would bless him with a child.⁴ However, he states, “I do not really believe these priests, they are always interested in making money. I don’t understand how the dead can give life.” Madhav states that he respects the forefathers but does not intend to associate in worshipping them in the near future.

Themes: Faith, Force, or Fear

Ancestral worship is a requirement for every pious Hindu. They offer rituals to keep their ancestors satisfied and living in peace in the other world (Thirumalai 2002). Therefore, engaging in the rituals is a societal obligation in which most individuals participate. Reflecting on the stories above, there appear to be three factors that influence ancestral worship in a Hindu family: faith, force, and fear.

Faith

Faith is a phenomenon that is both seen and unseen. The act of worship is a seen experience, and, on the other hand, faith in the divine is an unseen experience. Faith can be defined over a diverse spectrum, depending on the context. Similarly, the understanding of the term “faith” in Hinduism can have numerous interpretations, depending on the community. It is crucial to understand that Hinduism is a diverse religion and that theological understandings and interpretations vary from place to place (Rinehart 2004:64). While it may appear that faith is present through practice, practice does not require a deep understanding or true faith. It is the act of devotion that is important, not the meaning. Therefore, many Hindus follow what they have been instructed to do by their elders and complete rituals as a responsibility while not internalizing the act as personal faith (Rinehart 2004:64).

The quantitative data showed that a majority (68.2%) of those surveyed believe in Hindu practices. Over one-fourth (28.6%) of respondents believe that if the proper rituals are not performed, the ancestors may get

angry and cause bad things to happen to the family. Those who speak Hindi reported a higher rate of belief in the anger of the ancestors (32.5%) than those who speak other languages. Additionally, respondents were asked if they believe that their ancestors can harm the family if they are not worshipped; 36.4% of all respondents shared that belief or believed it might be true. However, among Hindi speakers, 47.4% shared this belief.

Although a mixed understanding of faith and Hindu beliefs can be seen among the participants, there are common grounds on which almost all participants agreed, such as in the existence of their ancestors (in spirit/demigod form), respect for them, and the blessings or curses that come from them. It was observed that almost every interviewee expressed their respect for their ancestors, and a few of them were even willing to do rituals and *puja* to please them. As Krishna (respondent 1) said, “I greatly honor my father’s ancestors, and I feel a sense of pride in my lineage.” Other respondents expressed that, due to some circumstances, it is not feasible for them to participate in rituals for the ancestors.

Force

In several interviews, participants indicated that some form of force pressures them to be involved in ancestral worship. The force to participate in such worship comes from the desire to advance and prosper in life. It is also believed that such practices will exorcise negative and evil forces, thereby protecting the family. The quantitative data showed that 30.5% of survey respondents reported that they feel forced to follow rituals related to ancestral worship. It is also believed that doing noble acts towards ancestors will add to good *karma* (Foor 2017:190-192).

Based on participant responses, *force* can be divided into three categories: (1) force from family, (2) societal expectations, and (3) force from spiritual gurus or priests.

It is important to identify that the expectation to participate in ancestral worship or rituals begins at home for many, especially within families where traditional values are upheld. When the number of those who live in joint homes and were forced to practice rituals was cross tabulated with those who do not, a much higher number (42.9%) reported being forced to follow rituals than those who do not live in joint homes (23.3%).



Figure 1. Joint family v. Non-joint family

Societal expectations are not seen as a contemptuous force but instead as a legitimate part of community. In Hinduism, society is as important as family, and thus society's expectations cannot be disregarded. Historically, sati,⁵ female infanticide, and the caste system have been a part of the community; fulfilling societal expectations has been a requirement to remain a part of society. Failure to abide by this could result in excommunication from society. Therefore, a sense of force can be seen among the communities in India.

This societal force includes participation in ancestral worship. One third (33.3%) of survey respondents shared that they believe it is shameful for society at large if ancestral rituals are not followed. Another 10.3% answered that "maybe" such behavior is shameful. Interestingly, a higher number of males (38.8%) reported that ignoring ancestral rituals is shameful than females (26.0%).

Table 1.

Do you believe that if the rituals are not performed, it can be shameful in society?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes 1	65	32.5	33.3	33.3
	No 2	105	52.5	53.8	87.2
	Can't tell 3	5	2.5	2.6	89.7
	Maybe 4	20	10.0	10.3	100.0
	Total	195	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	5	2.5		
Total		200	100.0		



Figure 2. Male vs. Female

The third factor that imposes force towards ancestral worship is the presence of spiritual gurus or priests. These religious figures influence both families and societies. Their words are considered more authentic than the holy scriptures, yet no one verifies their statements. Spiritual gurus direct individuals to be responsible and fulfill their *dharma* (duty) towards their religion, family, and community, and to improve their *karma*.

Madhav (respondent 7) said that "the spiritual gurus often connect their problems with the spirit or the planets (astrology)." He also mentioned that the words of the priest is very important and disobeying them can bring unwanted consequences, especially when they live in a close community.

Fear

In many ways, the factors of force and fear overlap, as the pressure of family, societal pressures, and the presence of gurus ultimately result in fear. However, there are some additional aspects of fear that drive Hindus to participate in ancestral worship.

Doniger states that nearly all Hindus think that the dead are to be feared and avoided (2014:89). The fear of the dead leads to a fear of death; that is, Hindus fear that the departed ancestors will bring death to them, personally. Interestingly, the fear about death seems to be centered on a fear of losing everything behind once dead (Ali 2004:158). Worldliness is deeply inculcated in the Hindu mindset, leading them to fear their dead ancestors if religious practices are not fulfilled. The feeling of fear was seen in nearly every qualitative interview. The fear of the dead tormenting them or bringing a curse to the family are some of the primary reasons why Hindus do not intend to upset their ancestors. In fact, over a quarter (28.6%) of surveyed respondents reported that they believe that if they do not carry out the proper ancestral rituals, the ancestors will be angry and will cause bad fortune to befall the family. Several such fear incidences led people to take extreme steps and become involved in occult activities and witchcraft to either protect themselves from the dead or to please them.

Missiological Implications

In Mark 16:15, Jesus tells his disciples, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.” Christians have been given the command—and privilege—to share the good news of Jesus with the world. However, when ministering to those within the Hindu context, there appears to be many barriers. How can missionaries effectively share the gospel in this setting, overcoming faith, force, and fear?

Overcoming Fear of the Dead

As seen in the above study, Hindus’ practice of many traditions and rituals are based on three factors: faith, force, and fear. Yet the Bible discusses people’s involvement in ancestral worship and provides several texts rejecting such practices since they are closely linked to idolatry. Leviticus 20:6 states that God turns away from those who turn to mediums or spirits.

While presenting Christ to the Hindu community, it is crucial to help them address their fear of the dead and assure them that in Christ, the dead do not have any power over them. Since the devil has deceived the

minds of people, convincing them that the dead are still alive and continue to participate in a human's life (Kraft 2017:83), a biblical approach, filled with the Holy Spirit, is crucial for setting the people free from their burdening rituals.

An Intimate Relationship with God

The gods of the Hindus maintain their distance; there is no human-god relationship. In fact, most of the interactions between humans and the gods involve fear. However, the One True God, the God of the universe, craves intimacy with his people. He desires to know them and to, in turn, be known. This is seen again and again throughout Scripture: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (Jas 4:8), "Abide in Me, and I in you" (John 15:4), "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me" (Rev 3:20).

While this concept may seem foreign to those who have spent their lives in fear of distant gods, what beautiful, unique truth these verses reveal about God's character. Humans were created to be in loving relationships. If people truly love someone, they cannot (and will not) force them to do something. Fear and love cannot go together. Therefore, if God is love, force and fear cannot exist in that relationship. God offers freedom to his followers. What a juxtaposition to the way in which Hindus view their gods!

Work within Familial Limitations

Many traditional Hindu families live in joint family homes where the head of the household makes most, if not all, of the familial decisions. Because of this, many people are not at liberty to learn about Christianity. However, if the elder of the family is led into a knowledge of Christ and into a relationship with him, many times the rest of the family will follow.

Additionally, educated families are also more likely to listen to alternate views and ideas, including about religion and Christianity. This is linked to the fact that many of these more educated families are less tied to the past and its customs.

While Hinduism is considered one religion, it is incredibly nuanced. This makes it impossible to prescribe one method to reach all the various Hindu groups. However, one way that has proven consistently effective in reaching the various people groups is through the development of relationships. Perhaps a household elder will not be interested in hearing sermons about Christianity, but he may be interested in having a friend sip tea with

him. He may not want to have his long-held rituals questioned, but he will likely be pleased to have someone come and spend time with the elderly in his family.

Works vs. Grace

As discussed above, Hinduism is a religion based on works. Yet Christians believe that Jesus has already committed the ultimate work—death on a cross for our sins. This belief may be hard for those who have previously adhered to Hinduism, as the need for a works-based faith has likely been engrained in them for their entire lives.

When working with such people, it is important to teach the truth of salvation by grace. There are certain actions that set Christians apart from other religious groups. These actions are not meant to earn salvation or to prevent a curse from hurting the family. Instead, these actions are a marker by which God's people can be recognized. As stated in John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" and "for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10).

Conclusion

This article brings a unique perspective on ancestral worship among Hindu believers—unique because behind this article is a story of someone (Santosh) who grew up in a Hindu culture, and, as an adult, converted to Christianity despite unpleasant consequences. For Santosh, there is no doubt about the value of being Christ's follower and believing in a loving Heavenly Father who pours out his Holy Spirit upon his people.

Santosh desired to research various practices connected to ancestral worship in order to determine to what degree the dynamics he experienced in his childhood are in place with other Hindu believers. From his own experiences, Santosh understood that the spiritual presence of deceased ancestors is not taken lightly in the Hindu worldview. Thus, this article has examined the deeper values associated with ancestral worship that may not always include heart-felt devotion.

The quantitative research confirmed that most Hindu homes deal with, at some level, the issue of ancestral worship, whether it is because of generational beliefs/values, because of fear of the spirits (for bringing shame on the family), or simply being forced to follow familial practices. Hindu customs are indeed for the most parts motivated by faith, force, and fear. The qualitative research allowed for a better understanding of

the complexity of this issue and for the reader to “walk in their shoes” for a moment, allowing a better understanding and empathy.

A contextually relevant missiological approach is needed to free those imprisoned by ancestral worship. This article has offered several suggestions for bringing encouragement to Hindu people, perhaps new hope, freedom, and victory over the bondage they experience. We hope this study will bring deeper insights into the inner world of Hindu people, as well as inspiration for how to relate to them in positive ways and possibly bring them into a better quality of life aligned with the gospel. All of this, thanks to the desire God placed in Santosh’s heart, to reach out to the Hindu people of his homeland.

Endnotes

1 Shiva is one of the most prominent deities, is predominantly worshipped among Hindus, and is also known as the “*Bhootnath*,” Lord of the ghosts. Shiva is the destroyer of the universe when sin prevails.

2 Karma means action, works, or deeds. Karma is referred to as the principal factor that effects the future of an individual. It also affects the rebirth of a Hindu, depending on good or bad Karma. See Elizabeth Clare Prophet and Patricia Spadaro. 2001. *Karma and Reincarnation: Transcending Your Past, Transforming Your Future*. Gardiner, MT: Summit University Press.

3 In India, it is common for parents to live with their son and his family, but not with their daughters. It is lawful and essential for the son to take care of his parents to receive the blessings in life now and after.

4 A fascinating fact associated with this incident can be found in *Rig Veda* 9.83.3 and 10.64.14. It is believed that if the ancestors are respectfully called upon, they may place their seed (semen) in the womb of the desiring woman, and she will thereby bear children.

5 *Sati* was a historical practice, mainly in the northern part of India, in which a widow had to sacrifice her life by sitting atop her husband’s corpse and allowing herself to be burned to death during his cremation. See Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 215, 216.

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