

The Effect of Christian Perceptions on Evangelism among the Asian Communities in Kitale, Kenya

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Abstract

In the Gospels, Jesus Christ commissioned his disciples to proclaim the gospel globally. The call to witness to people of all races, tribes, and ethnicities remains the primary call of the church across all ages. The Asian community in Kitale, Kenya, is still largely unreached with the gospel. This study aimed to establish the perception of Christians on Asians and the effects of the perceptions on Asian evangelism. The research employed a qualitative approach and phenomenology design. The study targeted 180 churches in the municipality, and eighteen pastors from different churches were sampled and interviewed. The study found that Asians are perceived variedly, positively, as open to the gospel, respectful, wealthy, and classy, but negatively as intolerant, pagans and idol worshippers, as well as people with closed socio-cultural structure. These mixed perceptions have significantly and negatively impacted Asian evangelism. The study recommends Asian awareness training, strengthening discipleship programs, Hindu training in theological schools, partnerships with like-minded ministries, and obedience to the Great Commission to ensure all people groups hear and respond to the gospel.

Keywords: Church; Indians; Gospel; Evangelism; Asian Evangelism in Kenya.

Introduction

Indians form one of the most populous communities in the world. By 2012, there were approximately one billion Indians globally, representing 15% of the world population.¹ Over

¹ Philip Dungal, “Understanding the Worldview of Hinduism for Evangelism Purposes,” 2018, 1, <https://dspace.um.edu.mx/handle/20.500.11972/1099>.



50 million of them are diaspora Indians scattered across the globe.² Asians have been in East Africa for well over 100 years. During the railway construction, the British employed over 30,000 Indian coolies, according to estimates. When some indentured Indians returned to India, this number significantly reduced.³ Those who remained chose to settle and establish themselves across East African countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. By the eve of independence, there were approximately 100,000 Indians in Kenya, most of whom were Hindus.⁴ Before the 2017 election, the Kenyan government officially recognized Asians as the 44th tribe in Kenya.⁵ Since then, the number of Kenyans of Asian descent has continued to increase in major towns such as Mombasa, Nakuru, Eldoret, and Kitale.⁶

In most sub-Saharan countries, such as Kenya, Christianity is the dominant religion numerically. According to Droz and Gez, Christianity accounts for 85.5% of Kenya's population, while Islam accounts for 11%.⁷ After the work of the missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries, churches continued with evangelism and missions to unreached people groups. However, as much as Christianity is statistically thriving, Kenyan Asians remain primarily unreached. Commenting on the status of Asian evangelism in Kenya, Kibuthu observes, "Kenyan Asians are among the unreached people groups known as 'hidden people,' who lack indigenous, self-replicating churches, and only less than 0.1% of Kenyan Indians are Christians."⁸ While Evangelism among Indians began in Nairobi in 1957, according to Kibuthu, it is engaged by only about five churches and para-church organizations in Nairobi. He notes that the figure is only a tiny fraction of Nairobi's number of churches.⁹

In Kitale, a north-west town in Kenya, data regarding Asian evangelism is glaringly missing, thus making this area of study critical. Kitale is one of Kenya's cosmopolitan towns that hosts various ethnicities, including a high settlement of Asians. Unfortunately, however,

² Isaac M. Kibuthu, "A Study of the Asian Community in Nairobi: Implications for Evangelism to Hindus," 2001, 1.

³ Professor Stephen Akaranga Ifedha, "The Contemporary Challenge of Hindu-Christian Relations in Kenya," *Journal of Philosophy*, 2016, 26.

⁴ Ifedha, 27.

⁵ Dr Charles Kinanga Moywaywa, "Effects of the Post-Independent Political Environment on Hindu-Christian Relations in Kenya" 5, no. 8 (2017): 242.

⁶ Kibuthu, "A Study of the Asian Community in Nairobi," 78.

⁷ Yvan Droz and Yonatan Nissim Gez, "Christian Forms of Religion in Kenya," 2021, 297.

⁸ Kibuthu, 3.

⁹ Kibuthu, 69.



while it is easy to find members of other races in churches, there are no Asian churches or Asian Christian Fellowships that exist in Kitale.

The church's mandate for all ages is to make disciples of all nations, races, and ethnicities. The church in Kitale has a role in reaching all communities, including Asians. The paper, therefore, sought to understand Christian perceptions of Asians and the effects of such perceptions on Asian evangelism. The study suggests that the church and the wider Christian community enhance Christian outreach to Asian communities in Kitale and similar contexts.

Methodology

The Research Resign

The study employed a qualitative research method, which "aims to develop an in-depth exploration of a fundamental phenomenon rather than to generalize to a population."¹⁰ The approach helped in the in-depth exploration of the topic. It also highlights subjective and individual emic perspectives critical to understanding the research problem.¹¹ The study topic under consideration entailed an examination of the Christian perceptions of Asians and the effects of such perceptions on Asian evangelism. Therefore, a phenomenological design was adopted. The design appropriately explored the phenomena through varied individual perceptions and experiences.

The Target Population, Sampling Technique and Size

The study population is the total number of units from which data can be collected.¹² The target population included pastors from 180 evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic churches in Kitale's municipality. A total of 18 pastors from various churches were sampled and interviewed. The church leaders included were from long-serving evangelical churches such as PEFA Church, African Gospel Church, Full Gospel Church, Friends Church, and the Anglican Church, as well as modern Pentecostal and Charismatic churches within the municipality such as Active Believers, Evangelistic Revival Church, Welcome Pentecostal Church, Oasis of Love Tabernacle Church, Jesus Fountain of Life Ministries, Restoration Global Ministries, Love Explosion Ministries, and Sanctuary Ministry Church.

¹⁰ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017), 193.

¹¹ John W. Cresswell, "Qualitative, Quantitative. and Mixed Methods Approaches," *Research Design*, 10, no. 08941939.2012 (2003): 181.

¹² Kader Parahoo, *Nursing Research: Principles, Process and Issues* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 218.



The method of sampling was non-probabilistic purposive sampling. The study used a targeted sample strategy to locate the study participants. The respondents were chosen based on their experience, leadership roles, and willingness to participate in the study. This diverse selection gave a comprehensive understanding of different perspectives on Asian evangelism within the local religious community. The research employed participant observation and interviews as the main data collection approaches and semi-structured questionnaires as the primary data collection instruments. On qualitative interviews, Cresswell notes, "In an interview, the researcher conducts face-to-face conversations with participants; these interviews include open-ended questions meant to elicit ideas and opinions from the participants."¹³ The combination of participant observation and interviews allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic from multiple perspectives. This process, also known as triangulation, helps to mitigate potential biases and strengthen the overall credibility of the study findings.

Literature Review

Introduction

Asians refer to people from the continent of Asia, while Indians refer to people from the Indian subcontinent of Asia. Indians are one of the most populous communities in the world; it is approximated that every sixth human being is an Indian.¹⁴ The majority of Kenyan Asians are from the Indian subcontinent. The Punjab, Sindh, and Gujarat regions of North West India are home to most Kenyan Indians.¹⁵ Other than Kenya, other countries where Indians have settled include Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Ghana, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.¹⁶ While there are mixed religions and ethnicities among the Asian people group, it is not often easy to make these distinctions; hence, the term "Indian" is usually used locally to generalize the group.

Asians espouse one of the world's most complex socio-cultural and religious phenomena. It has an interplay of five major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam,

¹³ Cresswell, "Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches," 188.

¹⁴ John Anush John, "Strategies for Evangelism Among First- and Second-Generation Hindu Diaspora in America," 2010, 1.

¹⁵ Kibuthu,.

¹⁶ Dangal, "Understanding the Worldview of Hinduism for Evangelism Purposes," 1.



and Sikhism – twenty-two major languages, educational and socio-economic disparity, and the differences in the belief of Indians in their numerous gods.¹⁷ Hinduism is India's most dominant religion, accounting for about 85% of its population. The British coined the term "the beliefs of the people of India" in 1830 to refer to the culture and practices of the non-Islamic people of the Indian subcontinent.¹⁸

Asians in East Africa

Citizens of Asian descent have a long history on East African soil. The long history is associated with the proximity between Asia and East Africa. Pre-colonial trade networks across the Indian Ocean had connected the littoral realms and the merchant communities of Gujarat in Western India to East Africa since the 17th century.¹⁹ Pathickal observes that as much as there were Indian communities in East Africa at the time, Indians generally dreaded travels out of their homeland.

He notes that religious and social factors, including arranged marriages, food habits, clothing, climate, and topographical divisions, made it difficult for them to travel out of their region.²⁰ Asians who moved to Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania between the mid-19th century and the First World War moved as individual adventurers rather than representatives of socio-religious groups. They organized into solid social communities.²¹ According to Cohen and Cohen, after the construction of the railway, the majority of the Indians went back to their country; only about 7,000 of them remained and settled in East Africa.²² After the completion of the Uganda Railway in December 1901, opportunities for self-advancement were created in the East African region, leading to more Asians of Hindu affiliation coming to Kenya.²³ The East African communities of Asian descent are famed for their entrepreneurial spirit, and their firms contribute considerably to East Africa's economy.

In 2017, they were chartered and legally recognized as Kenya's 44th tribe by the Kenyan government. Moywaywa records, "Kenya's government acceded to a proposal by the

¹⁷ John Anush, "Strategies for Evangelism Among First- and Second-Generation Hindu Diaspora in America," 2010, 4.

¹⁸ Anush, 17.

¹⁹ Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*, Indians in Kenya (Harvard University Press, 2015), 990, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.4159/9780674425903/html>.

²⁰ Paul Pathickal, *Christ and the Hindu Diaspora* (WestBow Press, 2012), 2.

²¹ Robin Cohen and Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick and Currently Dean of Humanities Robin Cohen, *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 75.

²² Cohen and Cohen, 76.

²³ Ifedha, "The Contemporary Challenge of Hindu-Christian Relations in Kenya," 27.



Asian community in Kenya to accord them formal recognition as an ethnic community. Their official recognition means that Kenyan Asians, who have always been categorized as 'others' in previous national censuses, can now be classified as a separate tribe, 44th ethnic community."²⁴

Asian Evangelism

Historically, about two thousand years ago, the gospel is believed to have been taken to India a few years after the death and resurrection of Christ. It is supposed that the nation of India came in contact with the gospel in the 1st century. Traditions found in the West, West Asia, and India indicate that St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus, took the Gospel to India in the very first century, perhaps even less than twenty-five years after the death of Jesus.²⁵

Dangal states that from AD 1700, many protestant missionaries started making mission trips to India.²⁶ After that, Western countries sent thousands of missionaries to countries where Indians were the majority, including India, Bangladesh, Mauritius, and Nepal.²⁷ Ifedha speculates that if the claim is valid, some Indians who worked on the Kenya-Uganda railway might have been Christians.²⁸ While no data supports Ifedha's assertion, we may not rule out that a few of the Asians who were involved in the construction of the railway might have been Christians.

In the American context, Asian evangelism has mainly been neglected by the American church since most churches do not have specific outreach programs for Indians.²⁹ The status is not a disposition of the Americans; even churches that are purely Indians in America do not have a clear strategy for reaching their fellow Indians. Commenting on the Indian Church in America, Anush laments, "The Indian Church in America is not without culpability... Many Indian churches do not have an evangelistic vision. They are inward-looking, trying to create a community they had left behind in India."³⁰

²⁴ Moywaywa, "Effects of the Post-Independent Political Environment on Hindu-Christian Relations in Kenya," 242.

²⁵ Leonard Fernando and G. Gispert-Sauch, *Christianity in India: Two Thousand Years of Faith* (Penguin Books India, 2004), 59.

²⁶ Dangal, 3.

²⁷ Dangal, 3.

²⁸ Ifedha, 28.

²⁹ Anush, 70.

³⁰ Anush, 71.



Evangelism among Indians began in Nairobi in 1957. Over time, few churches or organizations have a focus on Asian evangelism. Only five churches have deliberately reached Asians with the gospel: the Bible Fellowship Church, New City Fellowship, Parklands Baptist Church, Solid Rock Church, and Nairobi Pentecostal Church (Christ is the Answer Ministries).³¹ This figure, however, is a tiny fraction of Nairobi's current number of churches. The few converts from the Asian community have been welcomed to churches engaging in Asian evangelism. It has been observed that churches that actively recruit new members tend to expand, but passive congregations that wait for new members to seek them tend to contract.³² A glaring absence of church members of Asian descent in many church communities in Kenya, therefore, can be directly attributed to the failure of the church to reach Asian communities with the gospel.

Christian-Asians Perceptions

In ethnographic research, perceptions contribute to the construction of reality and lie at the worldview level of cognition. Therefore, perceptions hold a central place and lie at the very core of evangelism. Bharati states, "Without a proper understanding of the worldview of the people one serves, the Gospel cannot be effective."³³ Bharati further observes that Christians have failed in their evangelistic mandate toward Indians because of prejudices they hold regarding social, religious, and cultural lives.³⁴

History of Christian-Asian Perceptions

Before the Portuguese missionaries came to India, a cordial relationship existed between the Indians (Hindus) and the Indian Christians. Indians (Hindus) and Indian Christians gelled in such a manner that it was difficult to distinguish between a Christian and a Hindu. The amiable relationship was primarily ascribed to the remarkable homogeneity of St. Thomas Christianity to the Hindu culture and the lack of missionary endeavor. According to Coward, the church was rightly referred to as "Hindu in culture, Christian in faith, and Syrian in worship."³⁵ Commenting on the relationship, Bauman notes,

³¹Kibuthu, "A Study of the Asian Community in Nairobi," 1.

³² Anush, 174.

³³ Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl: An Analysis of Christian Failings in Communicating Christ to Hindus, with Suggestions Toward Improvements* (ISPCK, 1997), 13.

³⁴ Bharati, 13.

³⁵ Harold Coward, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 16.



India's Christians enjoyed relatively cordial relations with adherents of other religions in India from their establishment in the early centuries of the first millennium until European colonization began in the late fifteenth century. These relations were aided by the high social status of the earliest St. Thomas (or "Syrian") Christians and by their religious rituals and practices similar to and somewhat integrated with those of their neighbours.³⁶

The coming of the Portuguese missionaries marked the turning point in this relationship. The Portuguese found the relationship dangerous and untenable. The "syncretic" relationship between the Syrian Christians and Hinduism was unsettling to the Portuguese. According to them, Syrian Christianity was unorthodox and thus required reformation. Bharati, commenting on the prevailing perceptions of evangelical missionaries, says, "For a typical evangelical Christian, everything in a non-Christian society, including its various cultural aspects, is from the devil."³⁷ While Bharati's view may be overstated, it leaves a challenge to modern-day scholars to investigate whether today's evangelicals hold similar perceptions. Bharati further notes, "A Hindu was considered a follower of the Hindu religion wherein he worships the devil in the form of several gods."³⁸ The Portuguese thus endeavored to sanitize Syrian Christianity from its pollution. Unfortunately, this meant they were to rid Christianity of any "Indianness" and clothe it with a complete European garment.

According to Ahlstrand, the Protestant mission first set foot in India in 1706, and since then, Protestant attitudes to Hinduism have been varied but are in three main categories that often overlap. The first, he calls an evangelical attitude that views Hinduism as a false religion whose adherents must turn to Christ to be saved from the wrath of God. The second is a liberal non-conversionist attitude that marveled at Hinduism and did not find any need for them to change; the third is the Protestant activists' attitude that was interested not just in conversions but viewed Hinduism as unfair and discriminative.³⁹ They, hence, sided with the untouchables in the Hindu caste order. It is not an overstatement to say that generally, the 19th-century missionaries carried paternalistic attitudes toward Hinduism similar to the Portuguese.

³⁶ Chad M. Bauman, "Pentecostals and Interreligious Conflict in India: Proselytization, Marginalization, and Anti-Christian Violence," *PentecoStudies* 16, no. 1 (2017): 12.

³⁷ Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl*, 15.

³⁸ Bharati, 15.

³⁹ Kajsa Ahlstrand, "Protestant Views on Hinduism," in *Handbook of Hinduism in Europe* (2 Vols) (Brill, 2020), 78.



Unlike the Portuguese, however, perceptions of 19th-century missionaries were varied. There was a clash in perception between Christians and Indians: While Christians considered their religion superior, Indians, on the other side, viewed Christians as accomplices of the lower caste, and thus Christianity was viewed as a more inferior caste religion by higher caste Indians.

In Kenya, things were no different. What is unique, however, is that British missionaries concentrated on evangelizing indigenous Africans to the exclusion of Indians. On this, Ifedha observes, "Christian evangelization during the pre-colonial and colonial periods largely targeted the indigenous African communities to the exclusion of Indian nationals. This scenario could have emerged from the early missionaries' wish to work with the indigenous African communities. It could also be so because African communities were an easier target for evangelistic work due to their receptiveness."⁴⁰

Contemporary Perceptions

In America, most Indian and American churches do not have accurate perceptions of Indians and Hinduism. They hold varied inaccurate views that have ended up disadvantaging potential evangelistic efforts, "There is ignorance of Hinduism. Most people in America, including both Indians and non-Indians, have an inadequate view of Hinduism. Many times, their views are skewed to one of two extremes: either people think that Hinduism is one of the ways to heaven, or they categorize it as a demonic, pagan religion with no good in it."⁴¹ The postmodern attitude toward other religions is the basis upon which Hinduism is considered another way to heaven. This non-conversionist attitude, unfortunately, is the peril of the postmodern Christian. John observes that is a natural cause of the lack of evangelistic zeal towards non-Christians.⁴²

In Kenya, the current church also holds diverse perspectives regarding Hinduism. Some pastors in Nairobi, for instance, believe that Hinduism is another way of getting to heaven, and thus, there is no need to have them change to another religion.⁴³ Two factors inform this attitude: first, the postmodern influence, and second, the ignorance of Hindu culture and religion.

⁴⁰ Ifedha, "The Contemporary Challenge of Hindu-Christian Relations in Kenya," 28.

⁴¹ Anush, 74.

⁴² Anush, 75.

⁴³ Kibuthu, "A Study of the Asian Community in Nairobi," 53.



The Effect of Christian Perceptions on Asian Evangelism

Significant perceptions have strongly impacted evangelism; here, we group them into three: The first perceptions relate to the changing Christian theology. A liberal Christian whom the postmodern worldview has heavily influenced believes that many ways lead to heaven other than Jesus Christ. This view implies that Hindus, just like Christians, are all headed to heaven, only that they are using a different route. The perceived theological similarities between Hindus and Christians have even worsened this. Roberts holds that theological similarities between Christians and Indians exist. He observes that acknowledging the divine presence by both traditions and similar theological narratives makes Hinduism and Christians' means to the same end. He suggests that the place of Christ, the avatar of Vishnu, the trinity, and the concept of many gods affect how the postmodern Christian thinks of the Hindu religion.⁴⁴ While commenting on this accommodative perception, Anush laments, "There is an increasing trend for some Christian leaders to consider that salvation is possible other than exclusively through Jesus Christ."⁴⁵ The apparent implication of such a view is the diminishing efforts to reach people of other faiths, including Indians.

The second perception points to ignorance of the Indian culture. The Indian culture is complex, and many communities have not sought to understand it. This ignorance has led to avoiding or applying inappropriate evangelism approaches. To reach Indians with the gospel, one must draw close to know their culture better. Drawing close may include and is not limited to establishing channels to dialogue with them. The primary purpose of dialogue is to create understanding. Regarding gospel communication, ensuring an accurate understanding of the gospel is crucial to the success of evangelism. On this, Bharati observes, "In the communication of the gospel of Christ, it must be spoken in the language of the people, whether it is mythical, metaphysical or secular."⁴⁶

The third perception relates to the historical relationship between Christian missionaries and colonialists. According to Moywaywa, the historical perceptions that Hindu and Christian missionaries had toward one another have affected how Indians and Christians relate today. Indians (Hindus) perceived Christian missionaries as accomplices of colonialists.

⁴⁴ Michelle Voss Roberts, "A Theology of Hindu–Christian Relations," in *Routledge Handbook of Hindu–Christian Relations*, ed. Chad M. Bauman and Michelle Voss Roberts, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021.: Routledge, 2020), 8, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003139843-35>.

⁴⁵ Anush, 75.

⁴⁶ Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl*, 17.



Similar suspicious perceptions, according to Moywaywa, exist between Indians and Christians. Commenting on this, he notes, "The scene of Hindu-Christian relations can be traced back to the events before and after independence."⁴⁷ Moywaywa asserts that the following factors account for the often tense Hindu-Christian relationships. First is the unresolved historical injustices, and second, the Africanization of all operations and systems after independence. Commenting on the seriousness of the issues, Moywaywa further observes, "Indians have on numerous occasions been subjected to acts of violence and confiscation of property in the hands of African individuals as well as state apparatus. African Christians have also suffered discrimination and oppression at the hands of some exploitative Hindu employers."⁴⁸ Such aggressions have affected how the two communities perceive each other, and thus, an effective evangelism strategy must consider the implications of these perceptions.

Hope for Asian Evangelization

Even in the backdrop of such a dark history, there exist bridges for gospel communication between Asians and Christians. These bridges are ascribed mainly to the effects of globalization. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter increasingly provide significant space for people to interact more freely without regard to each other's tribal, racial, political, or religious background.⁴⁹ Other than that, there have been increasing avenues where Asians interact with Christians; for instance, some Christians have enrolled in Asian schools. At the same time, Asians have also enrolled in Christian-sponsored schools. These opportunities provide avenues that can lead to faith conversations.

Research Findings

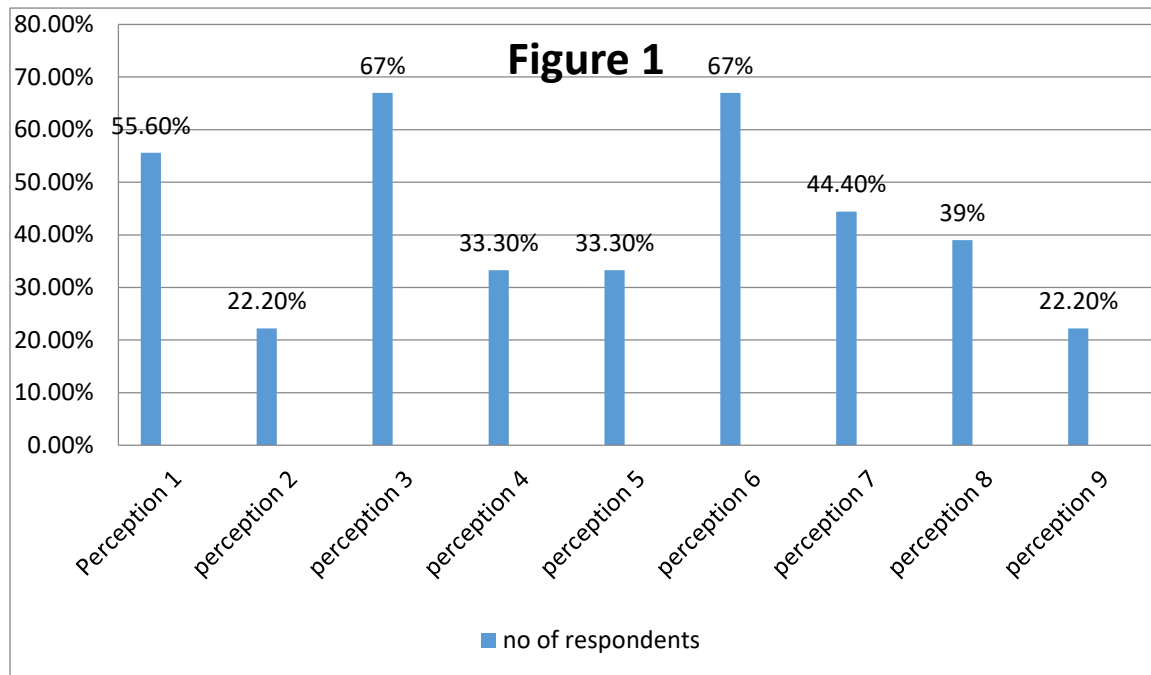
Evangelism to Kenyan Asians remains a fertile ground that has escaped church outreach and scholarly investigations. Much as there is a long history of interactions between Christians and Asians, Asians in Kenya remain largely unreached. Therefore, this study goes a long way to stir up the church to action in the obedience of the great commission. The study examined how Christians in Kitale perceive Asians and how such perceptions have affected

⁴⁷ Moywaywa, "Effects of the Post-Independent Political Environment on Hindu-Christian Relations in Kenya," 236.

⁴⁸ Moywaywa, 235.

⁴⁹ Moywaywa, 235.





Christian witness among Asian communities in Kitale. Eighteen pastors from different churches were asked to explain how Christians perceived Asians and how their perceptions impacted their Evangelism toward Asians. The responses showed that churches in Kitale hold the following nine (9) crucial perceptions toward Asians, significantly impacting Christian outreach to Asians in Kitale.

Figure 1 Christian-Asian Perceptions

Key

Perception, 1 = Asians are open to the gospel

Perception, 2 = Asians respect servants of God

Perception 3 = Asians are wealthy and do not need the gospel

Perception, 4 = Asians are classy and unreachable

Perception 5 = Asians are intolerant and unapproachable

Perception 6 = Asians are unredeemable, pagans, and idol worshippers

Perception, 7 = Asians have an opaque, complex social-cultural structure

Perception, 8 = Asian religion, is anti-Christian

Perception 9 = Asians, like Christians, are going to heaven



Summary of the Perceptions

The research revealed that churches in Kitale hold varied perceptions that have affected its Asian outreach initiatives; of the total identified perceptions, 22.2% were positive, while 77.8% were negative. Christians perceive Asians positively as open to the gospel and highly regard servants of God. On the other side, they perceive Asians as wealthy people who do not need the gospel. Christians also view Asians as people of a high-end socio-economic position unreachable with the gospel. They also view Asians as intolerant and unapproachable.

Further, Christians view Asians as pagans, idol worshippers who are unredeemable, as well as people who have an opaque complex and impenetrable socio-cultural structure. They perceive Asian religions and culture as anti-Christian and utterly averse to Christianity. Lastly, Asians are believed by some Christians to be people who are going to heaven just like them, but through a different route.

Christian Perceptions and Their Effect on Asian Evangelism

Because of their inter-relationship, the nine perceptions are grouped into four as follows:

Perceptions Based on Cordial Asian-Christian Relationships

Christians perceive Asians as open to Christian witness; of the respondents interviewed, 67% indicated that Asians are open to the gospel, while 22% observed that Asians generally respect servants of God. If those perceptions are accurate, then Christians can take advantage of the openness of Asians to reach them with the gospel. Historically, cordial relationships have existed between Christians and Asians, such as the perceived thriving relationship between the early St. Thomas Christians and Indians. According to Bauman, "a cordial relationship existed between the Indians and the Indian Christians. They were so integrated that there was difficulty in distinguishing between a Christian and a Hindu."⁵⁰ The perceived openness to the gospel, however, just like it was with the early Syrian Christians, has not been seized by Christians to witness to Asians. They largely remain unreached.

Perceptions Influenced by Postmodern Theologies

Other perceptions revealed by the research relate to unfortunate postmodern theologies. According to the findings, 39% of the pastors interviewed held that Asians, just like Christians, are going to heaven, while 67% contented that Asians are wealthy, comfortable,

⁵⁰ Bauman, "Pentecostals and Interreligious Conflict in India," 12.



and do not need the gospel. Both perspectives are unfortunate and are a product of postmodern theologies.

The first perception is what is famously known as the "prosperity" gospel or the "wealth and health" gospel. According to this ideology, Christ came to set people free from suffering and lack. Material prosperity, therefore, is a sign of God's blessings, often irrespective of how the same is acquired. Compared to average locals, Asians control a significant percentage of the city's economy. Most supermarkets, bookshops, and hardware businesses are owned by Asians, according to Christians who hold this view. Asians are materially prosperous and thus interpret it as part of God's blessing on them.

The second perception, held by 22% of the respondents, views all religions as routes to the same destination, heaven. In a similar research conducted in Nairobi by Kibuthu, some pastors believe that Hinduism is a means to heaven, just like Jesus in the Christian faith.⁵¹ The effect of this perception on evangelism is significant. On this, Anush laments, "This non-conversionist attitude, unfortunately, is the peril of the postmodern Christian. It is a natural cause of the lack of evangelistic zeal towards non-Christians."⁵²

Perceptions Based on Ignorance of Asian Culture and Religion

The more significant percentage of perceptions from this study points to the fact that many Christians do not have a clear understanding of Asian cultures and religions. Bharati agrees that many Christian-Asian prejudices can be traced back to an unclear understanding of Asians' socio-cultural and religious structure⁵³.

Findings show that Christians perceive Asians as classy and unreachable. They also view Asians as having an opaque, complex, and impenetrable socio-cultural structure. These two perceptions are related and point to the inadequate knowledge of Asian culture. Having interacted with literature on Hinduism, Asians generally have a closely knit social structure and often meet in high-end social facilities. They do not typically interact with the common populace and even have certain secluded social facilities within their temple area. Christians interpret this as classy and hence unreachable. They also view them as a walled-up community with no window of penetration. While those perceptions may contain some truth

⁵¹ Kibuthu, "A Study of the Asian Community in Nairobi," 53.

⁵² Anush, 75.

⁵³ Bharati, 13.



and may point to a sense of racial superiority, the impact thereof is dire. With this prevailing view that it is impossible to reach Asians, Christians in Kitale have not even attempted because the community is perceived to be unreachable.

Other two perceptions that point to the misunderstanding of the Asian religion include the view that Asians are lost pagans and idol worshippers who are beyond redemption. While Christians in Kitale may rightly view Asians as lost pagans and idol worshippers, the perception that they are beyond redemption is a non-biblical view of lost persons, including Asians. Bharati notes that this perception is historical. Reflecting on the same, he notes, "For a typical evangelical Christian, everything in a non-Christian society, including its various cultural aspects, is from the devil." Bharati further notes, "A Hindu is considered as a follower of Hindu religion wherein he worships the devil in the form of several gods." While the sensitivity of the lost communities around Christians is expected to stir passion for evangelism, this perception has achieved the opposite. Christians consider Asians as too lost to be saved. They consider them legit candidates of hell; thus, there are no attempts to reach them. In order to reach Asians, a complete worldview overhaul is needed. Awareness of the Asian socio-cultural structure is an indispensable process for Asian Evangelism.

Other than that, Christians also view Asian religions as entirely averse to Christianity. According to this perception, Asian conversion to Christianity is equivalent to pronouncing a death sentence to oneself. This view is informed by a historical event where the son of a wealthy Asian in Kitale was allegedly killed by his kin in the 1990s after converting to Christianity. About 90% of respondents knew about this event, which strongly influenced how they perceived Asian evangelism. They have thus avoided Asian Evangelism to spare Asian converts from the danger of death. While Hindus, just like other religions like Islam and Christianity, may not celebrate the conversion of their adherents to other religions, this historical event has strongly and negatively influenced Christian outreach among Asians. According to data, the said Asian Christian was involved in a road accident around Webuye and died. Christians have not accepted this incident as a possible coincidence. They firmly believe that his Hindu family was behind his death, which may not be the case.

Perceptions Influenced by Pre and Post-colonial Hind-Christian Relations

The relationships between Christians and Asians have been generally cordial and peaceful. However, findings link the current perceptions and relationships between Christians and



Asians to what was before and after independence. According to this research, Christians perceive Asians as evil, intolerant, and unapproachable. The unfortunate view relates to the employee-employer relations that exist between Asians and Christians. In Kitale and Kenya and perhaps in similar contexts, most of the employees in Asian businesses are Christians. Historical and contemporary Hindu-Christian employer-employee relations influence the sour feelings toward each other. On this, differences in econometrics between Asians and indigenous populations play a crucial role. The intensity of these views varies depending on the experiences of different groups and individuals. Some Christians described Asians with rage as "intolerant slave masters." Moywaywa, reflecting on the Hindu-Christian relations, notes, "The political atmosphere in post-independent Kenya has primarily affected inter-faith relationships and, consequently, the success of Evangelism to Indians in the country."⁵⁴ The tense relationship and the master-servant attitudes between Asians and Christians have negatively impacted Asian evangelism. It therefore follows that for Asians to be effectively reached, missionaries cannot afford to ignore the reality of these relationships.

Even with the perceived challenges, there is hope to evangelize Asians. The opportunities that have opened due to globalization occasioned by free interactions through social media are phenomenal avenues for faith conversations. The church has a critical role in working individually and collectively to seize opportunities presented to reach Asian communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. For this to be realized, the paper proposes the strengthening of the church's discipleship programs, Asian awareness training, the inclusion of Asian religions in theological training, partnerships with like-minded missionaries, and practical obedience to the great commission.

Conclusion

This paper investigated how Christians perceive Asians and the effects of such perceptions on Asian evangelism in Kitale, Kenya. Findings show that Christians hold significant perceptions about Asians that have negatively impacted Asian evangelism. This paper has categorized perceptions into four: Perceptions based on cordial Asian-Christian relationships, Perceptions influenced by postmodern theologies, Perceptions based on ignorance of Asian culture and religion, and Perceptions influenced by Pre and post-colonial Hind-Christian

⁵⁴ Moywaywa, 236.



relations. The paper proposes strengthening the church's discipleship, Asian awareness training, integration of Asian Evangelism in theological curriculums, partnership with like-minded teams, and practical obedience to the great commission to reach Asians effectively.

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