

“EMBRACING CULTURE WITHOUT COMPROMISING FAITH:  
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND RITUALS IN ANDHRA PRADESH”  
Nissy Muller Chowtapalli, Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

*Introduction*

India is often described as a land of diversity, a place where languages, traditions, and customs coexist in a rich, ever-changing mosaic. Nowhere is this diversity more evident than in its rituals and festivals, which structure daily life with rhythm, colour, and social meaning. Andhra Pradesh, shaped by Dravidian heritage and Telugu linguistic pride, exemplifies this cultural richness. Life-cycle rituals—from birth and puberty to marriage and death—function as markers of continuity and belonging. They are not merely personal milestones but communal acts that reaffirm family honor, social ties, and cultural identity. For Christians in Andhra Pradesh, these practices present a theological and practical dilemma. Rejecting them outright may be seen as rejecting culture itself, risking alienation from family and community. Yet uncritical participation may blur Christian distinctiveness and compromise theological integrity. The central challenge lies in discerning how believers can honor their cultural heritage while remaining faithful to Christ.

This paper emphasizes that Christians are called not to abandon culture but to engage it critically and faithfully. Some practices may be affirmed and adapted, others rejected or transformed, all in light of biblical teaching. By examining life-cycle rituals in Andhra Pradesh, this study situates local Christian experiences within broader conversations on contextual theology, showing that faith and culture need not be adversaries. Through careful discernment, Christians can maintain cultural belonging while witnessing to the transformative power of the gospel. While life-cycle rituals in Andhra Pradesh share common patterns, they also differ across regions and communities. Accordingly, this study limits its focus to the practices observed among Christians in Andhra Pradesh who continue to participate in such traditions.

*Historical Background: Early Missions and Cultural Engagement*

From the very beginning, Christianity in India faced the challenge of balancing cultural identification with keeping its core beliefs intact. In the sixteenth century, Jesuits, followed by Robert de Nobili in the seventeenth century, tried to make the faith more Indian among Tamils through careful adaptation. Protestant missionaries continued this work, with Ziegenbalg of the Tranquebar Mission studying Tamil language and culture in the eighteenth century in order to share the Gospel effectively. The nineteenth century marked a major change with the rise of the “modern missionary movement,” led by efforts like the Serampore Mission. In Andhra Pradesh, Protestant missions established strong roots: the London Missionary Society started work in Visakhapatnam (1805) and Cuddapah (1822), the American Baptists arrived in 1837, and the Church Missionary Society began in Machilipatnam in 1841, followed by the SPG in Rayalaseema. Catholic missions, had already been present earlier.<sup>1</sup> These missions left a lasting mark on Telugu society through education, medical work, and evangelism, while also raising the question of how Christianity could become truly “Indian.” By the mid-nineteenth century, Henry

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<sup>1</sup> K. L. Richardson, “The Church and Native Culture: A Telugu Lutheran Perspective,” *Indian Journal of Theology* 35, no. 2 (1993): 80–82.

Venn of the Church Missionary Society had already outlined the “three-self” principle—self-support, self-government, and self-propagation—as the standard for an authentically indigenous church. The issue of how far missionaries could adapt culture without compromising essential beliefs thus became a central challenge for Christianity in India as it engaged with Dravidian culture.<sup>2</sup>

### *Christian Adaptation of Ritual in South India*

The South Indian Christian experience shows that cultural practices can be adapted in ways that preserve Christian identity without compromising essential faith. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, Catholic festivals often look like Hindu processions with chariots, floral decorations, and music, but each element has a clear Christian meaning. Crosses replace temple finials, pink and blue floral cloth is used instead of Hindu patterns, and lotus flowers, closely linked to Hindu gods, are avoided. These careful choices express Christian theology through Tamil cultural symbols. Scholars observe that such adaptations reflect the Catholic Church’s effort to reclaim both cultural and linguistic heritage in India, connecting local religious sensibilities with Christian expressions of victory and devotion. Far from simple copying, this is a form of contextual theology—sometimes called “civil theology”—where public rituals show Christ’s lordship in a diverse religious setting.<sup>3</sup>

This history demonstrates that balancing cultural engagement and faith integrity has been central to Christianity in Andhra Pradesh, preparing modern believers to navigate rituals, “muhurthams,”<sup>4</sup> and other local customs faithfully.

### *Inculturation and the Church’s Engagement with Culture*

The relationship between Christianity and local cultures is not only historical but central to the church’s mission. From the very beginning, the church has lived out the faith in different cultural settings—from Palestinian and Aramaic to Diaspora and Hellenistic worlds—showing that the Gospel can be shared in ways that make sense to each society. Early Christian adaptation, especially through Paul’s guidance at the Jerusalem Council, provides a model of inculturation, where faith is communicated without losing its essential truths. This principle continues today: the church, as a community of believers, naturally interacts with the cultures where it exists. Inculturation, as scholars explain, brings Christian faith into the life of local cultures, allowing both to grow—culture gains new energy, and the church presents its message in ways that people can understand and relate to. This approach shows that the indigenization of

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<sup>2</sup> K. L. Richardson, “The Church and Native Culture: A Telugu Lutheran Perspective,” *Indian Journal of Theology* 35, no. 2 (1993): 80–82.

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “Chariots of the God/s: Riding the Line between Hindu and Christian,” *History of Religions* 39, no. 2 (November 1999): 109,111,115-116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3176389>.

<sup>4</sup> Muhurtham means an auspicious time in Hindu culture, chosen for important events like weddings or starting a business to ensure positive outcomes and success by aligning actions with favorable cosmic and planetary conditions. It is an astrologically determined period, approximately 48 minutes long, during which the planets are favorably aligned, and it is believed to bring peace and prevent troubles during the event.

Christianity in India, whether in Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, fits a larger theological pattern: the Gospel thrives not by rejecting culture, but by engaging with it thoughtfully and faithfully.<sup>5</sup>

### *Culture as Religion, Religion as Culture*

In much of India, religion and culture are deeply intertwined, making it difficult to separate “cultural” from “religious” practices. Festivals such as Sankranti<sup>6</sup>, weddings, and funerals carry both social and spiritual significance, and daily life is often shaped by ritual observances. In Andhra Pradesh, this integration is particularly evident in family and communal life. Marriage ceremonies, for instance, unite not only two individuals but also their families, preserving social order and family honor. Practices such as observing muhurtham or tying the tali<sup>7</sup> are seen as essential for both spiritual and familial well-being. Similarly, rituals surrounding house openings are performed to avoid misfortune, reflecting a worldview where cosmic and social forces are interconnected. From a biblical perspective, culture itself is part of God’s good creation. In the beginning, God created all humans in His image, embedding His goodness in every people and culture (Gen. 1:27; Acts 17:26–27). Every culture contains elements that reflect God’s design—hospitality, community care, humility, and celebration—as well as aspects that need redemption, such as casteism, greed, or superstition.<sup>8</sup>

Indian Christians, therefore, face two common errors in engaging culture. Some reject it entirely, isolating themselves to avoid any perceived corruption—similar to the Pharisee in Luke 18, who separated himself from culture but lacked true humility. Others conform too readily, embracing cultural practices without discernment and failing to challenge sinful aspects. Both approaches risk undermining Christian witness and obedience to God. The biblical call is to engage culture redemptively. Christians are invited to celebrate what is good in cultural practices while challenging what contradicts God’s truth. In Andhra Pradesh, this means participating in life-cycle rituals, festivals, and family customs in ways that honor God, protect doctrinal integrity, and witness to Christ’s redeeming work affirming cultural belonging without compromising faith.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Antonymsamy Sagayaraj, *Christianity in India: A Focus on Inculturation*, Research Papers of the Anthropological Institute, Vol. 1 (2013).115,116.

<sup>6</sup> Sankranti, or Makara Sankranti is a Hindu harvest festival celebrated around January 14th or 15th, marking the Sun's entry into the Capricorn (Makar) zodiac sign, signifying the end of winter and the start of longer days. It is a solar-based festival dedicated to the Sun god Surya and is observed with gratitude for the harvest, the beginning of the auspicious Utrayan (Sun's northward journey), and the celebration of prosperity and new beginnings.

<sup>7</sup> A "tali-wedding" is a traditional Hindu marriage ceremony where the groom ties a sacred necklace [yellow thread or gold chain], called a tali or mangalsutra, around the bride's neck. This is the most significant ritual, symbolizing the couple's union and the wife's marital status. The ceremony is often accompanied by music and is equivalent to the exchange of rings in Western weddings.

<sup>8</sup> Jimit Mehta, “How the Gospel Guides Us in Engaging Indian Culture,” *The Gospel Coalition | India*, October 12, 2022, <https://in.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-the-gospel-guides-us-in-engaging-indian-culture/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jimit Mehta, “How the Gospel Guides Us in Engaging Indian Culture,” *The Gospel Coalition | India*, October 12, 2022, <https://in.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-the-gospel-guides-us-in-engaging-indian-culture/>.

*Honor, Shame, and Christian Identity in Andhra Pradesh*

In Andhra Pradesh, family honor is a central cultural value, and individuals are often judged in terms of how their actions reflect on the broader family. Participation—or refusal to participate—in cultural rituals can be interpreted as a reflection of one’s respect for family and community, creating a tension for Christians between cultural belonging and faith integrity. The biblical parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) offers a compelling framework to understand this dynamic. The younger son’s disgrace not only brings personal shame but threatens the family’s public reputation, while the father’s active restoration of the son mirrors Indian values of reconciliation and the protection of relational and familial honor. In this way, the narrative demonstrates that honor in Christian thought is not earned but given through grace. Similarly, Paul’s teachings in Philippians 2 and 1 Corinthians highlight that redemptive honor is rooted in humility, obedience, and Christlike character rather than social status or public approval.<sup>10</sup> For Christians in honor-shame cultures like Andhra Pradesh, these principles provide a way to navigate community expectations: shame can serve as a corrective mechanism, while honor can be extended to the undeserving, fostering restoration, relational healing, and a gospel-shaped identity that upholds humility, repentance, and God’s transformative grace.<sup>11</sup>

*Biblical and Theological Framework for Cultural Engagement*

Engaging culture faithfully requires wisdom to see which practices can be affirmed, which can be reshaped, and which must be rejected. Scripture provides models for this balance. Jesus’s first miracle at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11) shows that cultural celebrations can serve God’s purposes, while Revelation 7:9 highlights that cultural diversity finds its fullest meaning in worshipping God. Paul’s ministry demonstrates practical adaptation: he adjusted to different cultural settings without compromising the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) likewise allowed flexibility in culturally specific practices while still upholding moral essentials. Most importantly, the incarnation itself affirms that culture can be a medium through which God reveals truth. At the same time, the Bible warns against practices that lead people away from God. Idolatry, superstition, and harmful traditions must be rejected (Exodus 20:3–4; 1 Corinthians 8–10). Romans 12:2 calls Christians to be transformed by renewing their minds, and John 17:14–18 emphasizes the tension of being in the world but not of the world.<sup>12</sup>

In Andhra Pradesh, these principles guide Christians as they reinterpret local practices. For example, baby ceremonies can become dedications centered on God, marriage rituals can retain cultural symbols while highlighting the covenant before God, and puberty rites can affirm maturity and dignity without invoking unbiblical elements. This approach allows believers to honor their culture, remain faithful to Scripture, and present a Christ-centered witness.

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Flanders & Werner Mischke, *Honor shame and the gospel* (California: William Carey publishing, 2020)74, 75.

<sup>11</sup> Werner Mischke, “Presenting the Gospel in Honor-Shame Cultures,” *Culture Learner*, October 16, 2015, <https://wernermischke.org/2015/10/16/presenting-the-gospel-in-honor-shame-cultures/>.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Riley Ashford, *Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement for Christians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 21-24.

This pattern reflects the wider biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. God created culture as part of the goodness of human life, but sin distorts it through idolatry, injustice, and broken relationships. In Christ, culture is not discarded but redeemed—pointing toward a future where people from every nation bring their unique glory into God’s kingdom (Rev. 21:24–26). By affirming what is good, transforming what can be redirected, and rejecting what contradicts the gospel, Christians in Andhra Pradesh participate in God’s redemptive work, bearing faithful witness in the midst of their cultural setting.<sup>13</sup>

### *Engaging Hindu Categories for Christian Expression*

Within the broader Indian theological landscape, Christian leaders have sought to communicate the gospel through categories already familiar in Hindu thought. For example, A. J. Appasamy emphasized *bhakti* (devotion) as a way to express love for Christ, while V. Chakkarai explored *moksha* (liberation) as a lens for understanding salvation. Other thinkers drew upon concepts such as *avatar* (divine descent) and *antaryamin* (the indwelling presence) to explain the incarnation and work of Christ in culturally resonant terms. Such efforts reveal that Christianity in India has never been a rejection of cultural language but a reorientation of it toward Christ. This provides a valuable model for Andhra Christians today: instead of discarding or uncritically adopting local rituals—such as those surrounding birth, puberty, or marriage—believers can reinterpret them through a biblical lens that honors both faith and culture.<sup>14</sup>

### *Life-Cycle Rituals in Andhra Pradesh*

#### *Birth and Infancy*

Birth in Andhra Pradesh is surrounded by a rich set of practices that blend spiritual protection, health wisdom, and social belonging. One of the first customs is the application of a small black dot (*drushti chuka*) on the infant’s forehead or cheek to “ward off the evil eye.” This reflects a worldview in which physical and spiritual domains are interconnected. Some describe this in terms of unseen forces—positive and negative energies—that can affect the vulnerable newborn, neutralized symbolically through such markings. Beyond superstition, it also functions socially, signalling the baby’s fragility and inviting others to treat the child with care.<sup>15</sup>

Another significant event is the cradle ceremony, performed on or around the twenty-first day after birth. On this occasion, the infant is placed in a specially prepared cradle, and both mother and child undergo ritual baths. These baths are made with turmeric, recognized as a natural antiseptic, and a decoction of 25 different medicinal leaves boiled over a wood fire. Such practices support postnatal recovery and align with biological realities, such as the healing of the

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce Riley Ashford, *Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement for Christians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 14-17.

<sup>14</sup> Sebastian C. H. Kim, ed., *Christian Theology in Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 48-51.

<sup>15</sup> [straight\\_to\\_heart](https://theancientindia.blogspot.com/2012/03/what-is-dristhi-evileye-drishti.html), “Dristhi – the Evil Eye,” *Blogspot.com*, March 22, 2012, <https://theancientindia.blogspot.com/2012/03/what-is-dristhi-evileye-drishti.html>.

umbilical stump, while also carrying symbolic meanings of purification and blessing.<sup>16</sup> The cradle ceremony is celebrated with relatives and neighbors, reinforcing the sense that raising a child is a communal responsibility.

From a Christian perspective, these practices invite both affirmation and critique. Customs based on fear of spirits or the “evil eye” conflict with biblical confidence in God’s protection (Psalm 121:7–8). Yet many elements such as the use of natural remedies, the communal joy of the cradle ceremony resonate with Scripture’s affirmation of life and blessing. Accordingly, many Christian families adapt these traditions: replacing the cradle ceremony with baby dedication in church (1 Samuel 1:27–28), framing it as a covenant with God, while retaining cultural expressions like turmeric or rice, reinterpreted as symbols of God’s provision rather than ritual appeasement.

### *Puberty and Adulthood*

Puberty in Andhra Pradesh marks a pivotal transition into adulthood and social responsibility, with gender-specific rituals shaping how this stage is celebrated and understood.

For girls, the onset of menstruation is met with a culturally prescribed period of seclusion lasting anywhere from seven to twenty-one days. During this time, she sits on a mat—often lined with leaves—in a corner of the household, signifying both rest and ritual separation. Relatives visit to bless her, applying turmeric paste and offering fruits and sweets. She is given a nutrient-rich diet including ghee, coconut oil, and sweets, believed to support her physical transition by balancing hormones, strengthening her body, and guarding against infection through turmeric’s antiseptic properties. At the conclusion of this period, the family hosts a small celebration where relatives present clothes, jewelry, and gifts. A maternal uncle’s role is particularly significant, as he traditionally offers gold ornaments and garments, reflecting both the girl’s transition and the family’s honor. Historically, this event publicly signaled the girl’s readiness for marriage, though today it is more commonly observed as a cultural milestone without the same marital implications.<sup>17</sup>

For boys, the rite of passage is marked by the *lungi* ceremony, usually around age twelve. This simple but symbolically important act of tying the traditional garment publicly announces his entry into adult responsibilities within the family and community. Though less elaborate than the female puberty ritual, it plays an equally significant role in affirming maturity and social integration.

From a biblical perspective, menstruation was viewed in ancient Israel as ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:19–30), creating boundaries around women’s participation in religious and social

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<sup>16</sup> Zoë Matthews, Jayashree Ramakrishna, Shanti Mahendra, Asha Kilaru, and Saraswathy Ganapathy, “Birth Rights and Rituals in Rural South India: Care Seeking in the Intrapartum Period,” *Journal of Biosocial Science* 37, no. 4 (July 2005): 385–401, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021932004006911>.

<sup>17</sup> “View of Descriptive Study on Traditional Food Habits and Rituals of Puberty Time of Girls Followed in Kulathur, Pudukkottai District,” *Biosci.in* 2025: 133–37, <https://jtim.biosci.in/ojs/index.php/jtim/article/view/35/55>.

life. Yet in the New Testament, Jesus redefined this framework. His healing of the woman with chronic bleeding (Mark 5:25–34) not only restored her physically but also affirmed her dignity and inclusion, showing that such conditions should not lead to exclusion or shame. For Christians in Andhra Pradesh, puberty rituals can thus be reinterpreted as affirmations of God’s design of the body (Psalm 139:14) and as moments to celebrate maturity, without perpetuating gender inequality, shame, or expectations of early marriage.<sup>18</sup>

### *Marriage Customs and Social Cohesion*

Marriage in Andhra Pradesh is not merely a personal choice but a deeply social institution. Among Christians, as in wider Telugu society, marriage is predominantly arranged and shaped by caste, family lineage, and economic status. The union is conceived not simply as a covenant between two individuals but as the joining of two families, reinforcing networks of honor and preserving cultural continuity.

**Pelli Chupulu and Family Security:** The first stage, known as *PELLI CHUPULU* (matchmaking meetings), reflects the importance of family security and reputation. These gatherings involve careful evaluations of the potential alliance: parents and elders investigate social status, financial stability, and moral reputation. As one elder from Guntur explained, “We do not give our daughter to a boy; we give her into a family. We need to know whether that family will keep her with dignity.”<sup>19</sup> This process of scrutiny offers assurance to the girl’s family while also safeguarding communal honor, since rejection at this stage may carry stigma.

**Dowry as Family Pride and Financial Burden:** Despite biblical teaching that frames marriage as a covenant of mutual love, dowry (*KATNAM*) continues to be a widespread expectation among Christians in Andhra Pradesh. For many families, dowry negotiations are not only economic transactions but symbols of family pride. Gold, property, and money are discussed openly, and symbolic offerings such as *OLI* (a token gift to the bride’s mother) or *KULA KATNAM* (money to the elders) still appear in some regions. Yet what begins as symbolic often becomes financially crushing. Families frequently invest beyond their means in gold jewelry, new homes, or lavish feasts.<sup>20</sup> One pastor observed, “Parents save for years, not for their child’s education, but for the wedding day—because honor is measured in the weight of gold.”<sup>21</sup> Biblically, such practices contradict Christian teaching that marriage is grounded in covenantal love (Ephesians 5:21–33), not in material exchange.

**Engagement and Betrothal:** Once families agree, engagements and *PRADHANAM* (Betrothal) formalize the alliance. Rings, bangles, sarees, fruits, and sweets are exchanged in ceremonies hosted by the bride’s family, marking public recognition of the match. These rituals underscore

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<sup>18</sup> katrinadhamel, “Women, Periods, and the Bible,” *Katrina D Hamel*, August 26, 2019, <https://www.katrinadhamel.com/post/women-periods-and-the-bible/>.

<sup>19</sup> Elder of Deevana Church, interview by Nissy Muller, Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh, September 12, 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Prem Chowdhry, *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste, and Patriarchy in Northern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 88–90.

<sup>21</sup> Pastor Koresh, interview by Nissy Muller, Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh, September 22, 2025.

that marriage is not a private contract but a social declaration, binding not just two individuals but extended kin networks.<sup>22</sup>

**Haldi/Nalugu (Pre-Wedding Turmeric Rites):** In the days before the wedding, both bride and groom undergo *haldi* or *nalugu* ceremonies, lasting three or sometimes seven days. Relatives apply turmeric paste mixed with oil and ghee to the skin, accompanied by blessings and songs. While popularly explained as protection from the “evil eye,” the practice also carries scientific benefits: turmeric acts as an antiseptic and anti-inflammatory, while oil massages improve circulation and relieve stress.<sup>23</sup> The sweets and ghee-rich foods given to the bride are believed to strengthen her body for marriage and childbirth.<sup>24</sup> From a Christian perspective, these practices can be reinterpreted as communal acts of blessing and care rather than superstition a visible expression of family support surrounding the couple before marriage.

**The Wedding Ceremony:** The wedding ceremony itself blends cultural customs with Christian faith. Traditional elements include the bride’s *griha pravesh* (house-entry ritual), where she overturns a vessel of rice at the threshold, symbolizing prosperity entering the groom’s home. Relatives may tie turmeric rice at the bride’s waist as a fertility blessing, and jewelry carries symbolic meaning: bangles for protection, rings linked to the heart, and *metalu* (toe rings) believed to aid childbirth. At the center is the tying of the *tali* (mangalsutra). In Hindu practice, the *tali* signifies marital status and protection.<sup>25</sup> In Christian weddings with Indian cultural influence, the groom traditionally ties the tali in three knots, which symbolically represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, embedding Trinitarian theology into a cultural symbol. Some families may substitute the tali with a wedding ring or exchange Bibles as a way to emphasize covenant and Christian custom over cultural practice, though most continue the tali as a meaningful cultural marker retained alongside Christian vows.<sup>26</sup>

**Public Cost, Pride, and Social Expectation:** Marriage ceremonies also carry a heavy financial dimension. In Andhra Pradesh, weddings are public spectacles of honor, with families judged by the scale of feasting, the size of the venue, and the extravagance of clothes and decorations. This pressure to display wealth frequently results in debt, creating pastoral challenges. Church leaders regularly warn against excess, but families continue to equate a grand wedding with social dignity.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Shirley F. Brown, “Christian Marriage Practices in South India: Continuity and Change,” *Missiology* 17, no. 3 (1989): 15.

<sup>23</sup> Sahdeo Prasad and Bharat B. Aggarwal, “Turmeric, the Golden Spice,” *Nih.gov*, CRC Press/Taylor & Francis, 2011, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK92752/>.

<sup>24</sup> Rukmini Bhaya Nair, “Food, Fertility, and Female Ritual: Nutrition and Reproduction in India,” *Man* 26, no. 2 (1991): 93.

<sup>25</sup> “All about Hindu Wedding Ceremonies – InstaAstro,” *InstaAstro.com*, 2025, <https://instaastro.com/wedding/>.

<sup>26</sup> TheTalesOfTradition, “Indian Christian Wedding Rituals,” *The Tales of Tradition*, January 7, 2025, <https://thetalesoftradition.com/christian-wedding-ritual/>.

<sup>27</sup> Kuhuo Bajaj, “The NOT-SO-GREAT Indian Wedding: The Burden of Wedding Extravagance on Indian Households and Its Opportunity C,” *Ashoka Econ Society*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.ashokaconsoc.com/post/the-not-so-great-indian-wedding-the-burden-of-wedding-extravagance-on-indian-households-and-its-opp>.

**Christian Theological Response:** Theologically, Christian teaching defines marriage as a covenant instituted by God (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6), not a financial transaction of dowry or a stage for public honor. In practice, however, dowry has become so deeply ingrained in the culture of Andhra Pradesh that even many Christian families, including pastors, continue the practice. Those who reject dowry are rare and often face social pressure. Some pastors preach against it, urging couples to ground marriage in faith and character rather than caste or wealth, but the challenge remains pastoral: how to affirm the communal joy and cultural beauty of weddings without allowing exploitative traditions to overshadow the biblical vision of equality, mutual submission, and covenant love in Christ. Cultural symbols such as turmeric, rice, or the *tali* may be retained when reinterpreted through the gospel, but practices that commodify women must be prophetically challenged in light of the kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup>

### *Pregnancy and Childbirth*

The *seemantham* ceremony, a South Indian baby shower held in the seventh month, honors the expectant mother and child. Relatives bring gifts such as sweets, fruits, bangles, and a sari for the woman and her mother-in-law. The bangles are believed to cheer the unborn child with their sound and provide comfort to the mother. Afterward, the woman often stays with her parents until childbirth for added care.<sup>29</sup> For Christians, the practice is valued as communal support but reinterpreted through faith. Instead of ritual appeasement, families gather for prayer, blessing the mother and child, and recalling Psalm 127:3: “Children are a heritage from the Lord.” In this way, cultural celebration is blended with trust in God’s providence.

### *Death and Mourning*

Death rituals in Andhra Pradesh are highly communal. The body is bathed, dressed in favorite clothes, and covered with white cloth and garlands. Cotton is placed in the ears and nose, symbolizing closure. The funeral procession often includes music, and after burial, the family bathes before re-entering the home. On the ninth day, prayers are held, and a tomb is constructed, followed by a communal meal. These rituals reflect respect for the dead and the value of community solidarity.<sup>30</sup>

Christians, however, frame death in the light of resurrection hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14). While mourning customs and community meals may continue, practices implying ancestral appeasement are set aside. Instead, funerals become opportunities to proclaim the gospel and affirm eternal life in Christ (John 11:25–26).

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<sup>28</sup> Antonysamy Sagayaraj, “Christianity in India: A Focus on Inculturation,” *Research Papers of the Anthropological Institute* 1 (2013): 45–48

<sup>29</sup> R. Indira, “Rituals of Motherhood: Women, Culture, and Care in South India,” *Indian Anthropologist* 43, no. 2 (2013): 68–70.

<sup>30</sup> Kathleen Garces-Foley, ed., *Death and Religion in a Changing World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 124.

### *Everyday Customs*

Everyday rituals shape social life in Andhra Pradesh. Eating curd and sugar before exams is believed to bring success—scientifically, it provides glucose for brain function.<sup>31</sup> Tying black threads around the wrist or neck is thought to ward off evil spirits and negative energy. Avoiding travel during solar or lunar eclipses reflects astrological fears about bad luck.<sup>32</sup> People also observe fasting on specific days for health and spiritual discipline. Some households practice Panchanga Shraavanam, which means listening to the Hindu almanac (Panchang) that gives daily astrological details—like the lunar day (Tithi), weekday (Vara), star (Nakshatra), yoga, and karana. People listen to these predictions for guidance, success, and well-being, especially during important occasions.<sup>33</sup> From a biblical standpoint, practices rooted in fear or superstition conflict with faith (2 Timothy 1:7). However, customs with health and mental benefits can be affirmed, while Christians are called to rely ultimately on prayer (Philippians 4:6–7) for protection and success.

### *Toward an Authentic Christian Identity*

Living with integrity as a Christian in Andhra Pradesh involves a careful balance: neither rejecting culture outright nor uncritically adopting practices that contradict biblical teaching. Authentic Christian identity requires discernment, humility, and creativity. By affirming practices that are good, rejecting those that are contrary to the gospel, and transforming rituals that can be reinterpreted in light of Scripture, believers can embody a faith that is both culturally rooted and Christ-centered. Such an approach strengthens Christian witness. Instead of being perceived as outsiders who reject local traditions, Christians who engage culture faithfully demonstrate that the gospel can flourish within the social and cultural fabric of Andhra Pradesh. This reconciliation of faith and culture allows believers to remain true to their heritage while maintaining loyalty to Christ.<sup>34</sup>

### *Challenges and Opportunities: Addressing Syncretism and Social Issues*

Engaging with culture brings both opportunities and risks. If Christians follow caste systems, superstitions, or strict gender rules without thinking, it can weaken their witness and go against gospel values. Many traditions are done without knowing their meaning, making them seem like superstitions. Christians in Andhra say that teaching and guidance from pastors are important to help believers know which customs fit with the gospel and which do not. Caste is

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<sup>31</sup> TOI Lifestyle Desk, “What Is the Idea behind Eating Curd and Sugar before Stepping Out?” *The Times of India*, July 26, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/food-news/what-is-the-idea-behind-eating-curd-and-sugar-before-stepping-out/articleshow/122856335.cms>.

<sup>32</sup> TOI Lifestyle Desk, “Is Travelling Allowed during the Lunar Eclipse 2025? Indian Traditional Beliefs and More,” *The Times of India*, September 7, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/travel/things-to-do/is-travelling-allowed-during-the-lunar-eclipse-2025-indian-traditional-beliefs-and-more/articleshow/123744463.cms>.

<sup>33</sup> “Panchanga Sravanam: A Great Significance Cultural & Traditional Festival,” *Telugu Traditions*, July 3, 2023, <https://telugutradsitions.com/panchanga-sravanam/>.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart Ginn Jr., “Christian Traditions and Their Impact across Cultures,” *Stewart Ginn Jr.*, May 27, 2025, <https://stewartginnjr.com/christian-traditions-and-their-impact-across-cultures/>.

still a major problem. The church needs to work to end caste divisions, build fellowship where all are equal, and give leadership roles fairly. This shows the gospel's true message of unity. At the same time, good parts of Dravidian culture—such as hospitality, generosity, and care—connect well with biblical teaching (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2). These values open natural ways to share the gospel while also respecting local traditions.

### *Conclusión*

Christians in Andhra Pradesh face the challenge of embracing their cultural heritage while remaining faithful to the gospel. Life-cycle rituals, festivals, and everyday practices reflect communal values, family honor, and social continuity, yet some customs carry elements of superstition, caste bias, or gender inequality that conflict with Scripture. The goal is not to reject culture outright, but to engage it thoughtfully: affirm what aligns with God's Word, transform what can be redeemed, and reject what contradicts faith. Biblical and theological models provide guidance for this engagement. Jesus's participation in cultural life, Paul's contextual ministry, and the vision of Revelation 7:9 show that culture can be celebrated and transformed in Christ without compromising truth. Pastoral leadership, teaching, and discernment help believers navigate the tension between cultural belonging and Christian identity, ensuring that faith is lived authentically in every social context.

By embracing practices that reflect care, hospitality, and ethical living, while challenging elements rooted in fear, oppression, or exclusion, Andhra Christians cultivate an identity that is both culturally rooted and Christ-centered. Life in Christ transforms cultural expressions from mere tradition into opportunities for witness, blessing, and communal support. In this way, believers demonstrate that it is possible to fully belong to both God and their community, living a faith that honors their heritage without compromising their loyalty to Christ.

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