

**A Study of the Understanding of the “Christian Family” among the Minority Language
Community, Banswara Wagdi of Rajasthan**

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Abstract

This paper analyses the Biblical understanding of the Christian family of the Banswara Wagdi Christians of Rajasthan. It was aimed to know the Wagdi people’s understanding of family and the contributing factors that influence that understanding.

Forty Wagdi Christians participated in this research and answered twenty-four questions related to the study. All these forty participants comprised first and second-generation Christians who are members of several churches in the Banswara region of Rajasthan.

The study concludes that Wagdi Christians of this region have good Biblical teachings on family life. However, they are found lacking in practically living out what they believed. Though they have godly role models, pastors and missionaries to look up to, they face a constant pull from their community and their traditional and cultural patterns. So, they need a systematic study of the foundational principles of family and the practical approach to Christian day-to-day living.

Keywords

Christian family, mission, influence of culture, biblical foundation, first generation Christians

Background and Purpose of the Study

Historically, the Wagdi community have been oppressed and looked down upon by the rest of the more dominant communities of Rajasthan. When missionaries came and preached the good news of the Gospel, the Wagdi people responded and accepted Christ gladly. But this vibrant Wagdi Church needed systematic teaching from the Scripture. The topics on practical Christian living are not effectively handled during regular Sunday worship services and other teaching sessions.

This research will bring out the challenges and needs of the Banswara Wagdi community of Rajasthan and recommend ways to address these needs systematically. This research is aimed at determining how and where Wagdi Christian families get their teaching from. It also seeks to identify the influence of cultural teachings on these Christian families to determine how similar or different it is from the Biblical foundations of family life.

Key Literature Reviewed

Rajasthan, the Land of Colours

The fact that India is a land of diversities cannot be realised so evidently anywhere else than Rajasthan. Women in their colourful attires with their faces covered, and men sporting their majestic colourful turbans can be spotted everywhere as if they are dressed up for an occasion. Their colourful clothes come as a stark contrast to the land, which is mostly desert. Once upon a time, the people of the land used to be divided by their occupation, but now, there is a change in this scenario (“People of Rajasthan”).

Tribes of Rajasthan

The Bhils, Minas and Sansi are major tribes of Rajasthan. “Bhil” is a broader term that covers a number of sub-tribe groups. (Samuvel, Nelson., et al.) Those in the Banswara, Udaipur and Dungarpur regions are called “Wagdi Bhil” or “Wagdi.” Alexander T. Daniel, in his book “The Impact of Christian Mission on the Socio-cultural life of the Bhil tribe in Rajasthan”, states:

In the early period of the British government, the main problems of the Bhil were agrarian, exploitation from the outsiders and the inferior treatment meted out to them by the high-class Hindus. This always prompted conflict and resentment towards the outsiders coming into the restricted areas, like moneylenders, traders and local officials. So, the British government kept the Bhils under several rules and regulations like the restriction of the entry of non-tribals into their lands, which in turn resulted in the alienation of tribal communities from the non-tribal Indian societies. (T Daniel)

Christian Mission among the Bhils

The story of the origin and growth of the Church among the Bhils of Rajasthan is of great importance, as it helps to understand the role of mission and its social and cultural impact on their life. Four important mission agencies came to Rajasthan between the late eighteenth century and mid-twentieth century: the Scottish Presbyterians, the Christian Mission Society (CMS), the Canadian Presbyterians, and the Roman Catholic mission. Christian Mission Society worked particularly among the Bhils of Kherwara and Udaipur between 1880 and 1954 (T Daniel).

The Christian View of the Family by the Banswara Wagdi Christians of Rajasthan

The culture of any community comprises two-level. The first is surface-level, which shows itself as behaviour. The second is a much deeper worldview level. While the behaviour is bound to change due to other factors and external influences, the worldview doesn't change

quickly. Especially young Christians, when they come to the Lord, they constantly wrestle with their beliefs that shaped their worldview now as they come to view everything in the light of God's Word. Their values, traditions and beliefs are all challenged as they come to know the truth from God's Word. But if they do not make some intentional choice, they will not see a real, and life-changing transformation.

Methodology

Forty Christians of varied age brackets from the Udaipur and Banswara districts of Rajasthan were identified for this survey. The participants belonged to CNI, Filadelfia and independent churches in this region. All the forty individuals belonged to the Wagdi language community and were born and lived in Rajasthan. The survey was restricted to couples living in their locality. Those who had moved out of their region were not considered as they would have had more opportunities to learn from others. This survey has a good mix of educated and illiterate couples as the research's focus is mainly to identify the extent of teaching from the church domain.

This study is limited to the Wagdi speakers of Udaipur and Banswara, Rajasthan, not covering those living in Gujarat, a neighbouring state. Families who were just married and those married for more than a decade were chosen. Those closely associated with the pastor were not selected as it was felt that their responses could be biased. This study could be generalised in the following ways: The research findings could be applied to minority language communities that have 1) a reasonable Christian presence. Only then, as a community, they will intentionally practise the Biblical principle of marriage. and 2) at least the New Testament in their mother tongue.

Forty individuals from Banswara Wagdi Christians who live in three Rajasthan districts participated in the survey. There was openness and eagerness to join in the research though there was some initial hesitation. Google forms would have been an ideal and quick option to collect data. But with the help of a volunteer, a questionnaire was created and translated into the local language. The volunteer also administered the data collection and the responses were provided back in English. Then the collected data was input again in Google form for ease of data analysis.

Findings

The findings of this research were concerning the Biblical understanding of the Wagdi Christians of the Banswara region of Rajasthan with particular focus on (1) the Biblical basis for marriage, (2) Communication between the members of the family, (3) the roles of husband and wife, (4) principles of parenting, (5) handling interpersonal conflicts and (6) human sexuality

The Wagdi Christians have teachings on Christian living, with a particular focus on families from their pulpits. However, there is a massive rift between their beliefs and what they practice. Most of these Wagdi Christians are first-generation believers. Since they do not have a Christian upbringing, they look up to pastors and other believer families as their role models. Though the research findings show that there is teaching in the Church on family life, believers face challenges in the practical application of the learning.

There is some understanding about God’s design on marriage but not in practical application. The Wagdi Christians, in general, have a good understanding of the purpose of marriage. They believe that God created the family to fill the earth with His worshippers, and that can be achieved only through parents intentionally teaching their children from His Word. Wagdi Christians firmly believe that marriage is the union between one man and one woman.

The Wagdi believe certain topics are taboo for discussion between a married couple.

Wagdi Christians believe that healthy marriages thrive on open communication between husband and wife and children. They agree that regular communication between the family members helps strengthen the relationships. But they also feel certain topics should not be spoken even between a husband and a wife. This could be the influence of the culture that brings in a divide between the world of men and the world of women.

Very few have a clear understanding of the roles in a household. Wagdi Christians believe that the husband is the head of the family and has absolute authority. Women are expected to take the posture of obedient subordinates. Though they want to give freedom to the women to work outside the home, they believe that the kitchen is her domain.

When it comes to relationships with children, they firmly believe that they should be given a safe environment and be disciplined by their parents, which is the proper understanding from a biblical perspective. But when it comes to spiritual teaching, they want to give it out to the Church and pastors rather than taking this responsibility themselves.

Wagdi Christians believe that marriage is a contract that can be broken. All those who participated in the survey agreed that mutual love, respect for each other and forgiving the one who wrongs them are foundational to a healthy marriage. But many Wagdi Christians believe that marriage is a contract that could be broken easily when one of the spouses is unloving.

The Wagdi believe they should enjoy physical intimacy and sexual pleasure within the framework of marriage. Wagdi Christians have systematic teaching from the Church, and elders are seen as role models. So, they have the proper understanding that it is sinful to pursue sexual satisfaction outside the marriage. But 80% of the participants in the research hold the

view that sex is meant only for procreation. Only 20% believe that it is also for physical intimacy and pleasure.

The following findings are derived from the second research question which seeks to find out the major influences on the Wagdi Christians and their understanding of Christian family life.

The Wagdi Christians get regular teaching from the pulpit. The research showed clear teaching on family life at their churches. They said that their pastors regularly preach on the subject. However, only when instruction is combined with practical application in day-to-day life situations can people see the relevance of the Scriptures in their life choices.

They have good Christian role models. It is encouraging that all those who participated in the survey expressed that they have Christian families that they look up to who display what a Christian home should look like. As we are instructed to “Remember your leaders, who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).

Family seminars also equip them. A large number of the participants said they had prepared themselves for their family life by attending conferences and seminars. These are primarily sessions that are part of their church conferences and camps. However, it is worthwhile noting that having a systematic study on specific family-related topics will bring about more significant results.

There is a strong influence from outside the Church. Most Wagdi Christians active in their church life consider their pastors and elders as good, godly role models. At the same time, there is a powerful influence of neighbours from other faith backgrounds and extended family members. There seems to be a constant pull between these two.

Recommendation

This exploratory study on Wagdi Christians showed their understanding of Biblical views and their influences on that understanding. The research findings show the need for resources on Christian families to be available in the people's mother tongue. Only then can it reach their heart. Five foundational topics for a Christian home, namely, 1) Purpose of Marriage 2) Role of Husband 3) Role of wife 4) Parenting 5) Being a Lighthouse, have been identified, and curriculum is being developed to teach Wagdi Christians.

These study materials should also be available in culturally relevant forms. Such studies can happen in an organised environment at churches and homes. Adapting other methods such as dramatisation and songs will have a wider reach across all age groups.

The fact that most of the pastors and Christian workers in this region are cross-cultural workers also could be the reason for this disconnect. So, training and raising local leadership in this region should be one of the priorities of these cross-cultural workers. These pastors from the community can understand the culture and the day-to-day challenges the community members face.

Christian workers and pastors in this region should initiate small groups where there will be active mentoring relationships. If such relationships are nurtured, believers will develop a solid Christian bond with a senior couple by which they can “Carry each other’s burdens...” (Galatians 6:2). Small groups can easily get into mentoring relationships.

Recommendations and Scope for Further Study

Wagdi Christians know the value and transformation that Scripture brings to their life, but their traditions and culture of their ancestors also has great influence on them. The Church needs to move on to culturally relevant systematic teaching to strengthen the young Christian families

and, if the teaching is supported by Godly couples who are willing to invest in their lives by walking along with them through mentoring.

There is scope for further study to see how the Wagdi Christians from urban churches differ from those from villages, part of small congregations. It will be an interesting study to find out how couples from different age brackets make their choices in their homes. This will give us an idea of whether any other external influences impact their choices.

Conclusion

The Christians in urban regions have plenty of opportunities to learn and equip themselves in several areas of Christian living, family life being one such. Tribals who are first-generation Christians need culturally relevant but Biblically focused and intentional teaching to thrive in their Christian living. This study was carried out in a short duration with the limitation of the Covid-19 pandemic situation. However, the findings opened a way to understand the needs of first-generation Christians among this people group. This research reflects the need in any minority language community, and we could replicate this ministry anywhere else in India.

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