

https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.23.2023.251			
Received:	09 Aug. 2022	Accepted:	27 Feb. 2023
Revised:	17 Dec. 2022	Published:	15 June 2023
Volume & Pages:	23 (June): 11-18		

Revert Daie: Lived Experiences of Indian Preachers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Preachers are people who deliver Islamic message or speech to the communities around them. This is because the agenda of preaching has been inherent in a Muslim and preaching is also one of the duties of the previous prophets. In Malaysia, the participation of non-Malay preachers such as Indian and Chinese preachers in delivering preaching is constantly growing from time to time. Furthermore, the involvement of Indian Muslims in the arena of preaching still receives less attention in academic studies, although it is undeniable that they also play a role in developing da'wah in Malaysia. It can be seen, most academic studies focus more on aspects of converts such as the welfare of converts, the management of converts to the Indian community and others. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the true story of four Indian preachers in the context of their experiences before embracing Islam and their involvement in preaching. The methodology of this study is qualitative and involves the collection of data in the field. The results of the study found that their strength as Indian Muslim preachers was influenced by three elements, (i) their life and experience before embracing Islam, (ii) their exposure in the diversity of knowledge and, (iii) the external support that makes them have their own approach and principles in delivering da'wah.

Keywords: Da'wa, Indian preacher, lived experience, Malaysia, Revert.

The existence of various communities in Malaysia that consist of different races, languages and religions shows the uniqueness of the country. This is also seen in the context of the da'wah movement in Malaysia which not only involves Malay preachers who are born Muslims but revert preachers from other races also illustrate the diversity of da'wah methods and approaches based in Malaysia. The emergence of preachers from other races such as India is unique and complementary to the existing preaching in Malaysia. Their appearance gives new meaning to the world of da'wah in Malaysia with the experience they had before embracing Islam and their

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involvement in spreading da'wah. According to a statistical report quoted from the study of Wan Kamal Mujani (2012), the total population of Indian Muslims in Malaysia in 2011 was 78,702. The population of Indian Muslims living in the Selangor area recorded the highest position, namely 24,472 (Wan Kamal Mujani 2012) compared to the other states. This explains that the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia is growing in number and the migration of the Indian Muslim community may be due to the da'wah factor. However, previous studies discussing the scope of Indian preachers have not been fully taken into account. For that reason, this article aims to explore the journey of three Indian preachers in the context of their experiences before embracing Islam and involvement in da'wah.

Basic Characteristics of a Revert Daei

The characteristic of the preacher is one of the important aspects that need to be examined in order to identify convert preachers who follow current developments (mainstream). First, struggling with challenges is a preacher's nature and requires a strong soul to face it. This is because in the history of Islam, matters involving opposition and rejection of the da'wah delivered by the prophets to their people so clearly prove the real challenge in spreading da'wah today. In other words, preachers should emulate the prophets like the Prophet SAW who faced obstacles, hardships, and difficulties throughout his da'wah, but he still showed mercy and compassion to the prospect of da'wah (Aminudin & Akila 2012). Wisdom in facing challenges completes the characteristics of a preacher who is strong-hearted and open-minded. This is because it shows the actions of wise preachers when they are faced with challenges and tests during their preaching. Enjang (2017) in his study called for preachers who are accustomed to opposition and challenges in their da'wah efforts, should face this matter with good and wise planning and avoid acting passively or giving up on the da'wah path. Next, preachers need to prioritize themselves and their families, especially revert preachers who are surrounded by their families and relatives who have not yet known Islam and have not received guidance. This can be seen from the story of Asma bint Abi Bakr r.a who asked the Prophet SAW how to deal with her mother who had not embraced Islam. The Prophet SAW advised her to do good to her mother even though she had not embraced Islam.

It is clear that the goal of da'wah is a very important internal characteristic of the preacher to ensure the continuation of the da'wah effort without feeling tired and disappointed by any challenges faced. In fact, Beekun (2012) about one of the characteristics of wise leaders is to remain focused on their highest goals, and that was what the Prophet SAW has, which is "*the higher purpose of Muhammad was to spread the Message of Islam and to guide them toward the good...*" (Beekun 2012). And the last, having knowledge about Islam, but must be equipped with skills such as communication and psychology. This is because the prospect of da'wah has various forms of thought, especially the prospect who has not yet

known Islam. So, the preacher needs to communicate in a different way when facing the prospect of preaching. Among them, there are six categories of communication in preaching that are emphasized in the Qur'an, namely *qaulan layyina*, *qaulan baligha*, *qaulan maysura*, *qaulan karima*, *qaulan sadida* and *qaulan ma'rufa* (Fuad 2015). All these things are based on knowledge which is an important characteristic that a preacher needs to have.

Methodology

The research methodology is qualitative in the form of interpretivist. This coincides with this writing which examines and understands the world and the basis of the social world according to the level of subjective experience and formed by individuals. More specifically, the paradigm framework used in this study is social constructivism, which is the focus of phenomenological studies. This is in line with what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained '*humans are best suited for this task, especially because interviewing, observing and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research*'. The study sample is a purposive sample involving four respondents among Indian preachers who used to follow different religions from each other before learning more

about Islam and active in the field of da'wah through da'wah organizations, respectively. The sample of this study was selected to examine the experiences and stories of their involvement in da'wah activities which are slightly different from Malay preachers because '*context or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue*' (Creswell & Poth 2018). The collected data is divided into two, namely the premier data is a semi-structured interview conducted with four respondents. This interview was transcribed and analyzed thematically through Atlas TI software version 8 which produced two main themes, namely the journey of life before Islam and idealism in da'wah activities in addition to brief profiles of the respondents were also discussed. The secondary data of this study involves observational data, visual-audio respondents and physical artifacts provided by respondents and also uploaded on Facebook and the official website of the respondent's preaching movement.

Background of the Indian Muslim Preachers

The profile of the respondent is important data in identifying in depth the background of the respondent before they embraced Islam. As explained, the respondents for this study are Indian Muslims, but they have different educational achievements and also different ages. To explain the respondent's profile in more detail, it can be seen in the following figure;

Study Participants	Year of birth	Race	Old religion	The year of conversion to Islam	Level of education	Started preaching
Study Participant 1	1968	India	Roman Christian	1979	Diploma Oversea	1995
Study Participant 2	1947	India	Catholic Roman Catholic	1978	Bachelor Oversea	1999
Study Participant 3	1984	India	Hindu	2000	Bachelor	2013
Study Participant 4	1966	India	Hindu+ Jainisme	1996	SPM	2000

Figure I: Profile of the Respondent

Referring to the diagram above, it is the result of data collection, their age is on average between the ages of 30s and 70s. They have different educational backgrounds such as their last formal education is secondary school and some have their final education is a higher education institution. In addition, their old religion before Islam is also generally divided into Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. Meanwhile, they embraced Islam officially on average around the 70s, 90s and 20s. Next, they started preaching actively around the 90s and 20s, respectively.

Exposure Before Embracing Islam

Family

Based on the background of the respondents, all of them were adherents of other religions before Islam, in terms of their lives as non-Muslims at that time were different from each other. Some are categorized as 'ordinary practitioners' of their religion, and some are categorized as 'strong practitioners' of their religion.

Those who are in the category of 'ordinary practitioners' of previous religions are more free-thinking in terms of accepting the environment. SP3 life before Islam used to live with the Muslim community. Since he was a teenager, he was in the Muslim Malay community and their relationship was close. This is based on the words of SP3, "when I was 13 years old. At the beginning of 13, I knew this uncle. This uncle's name is Hanif. He is also a Muslim. He treated me like his adopted son. I always went to his house. At that time, I had not reverted to Islam yet, I always went to his house, he taught the children how to read the Quran. So, when I was around,

he would teach me to read the Quran. We were close. When he wants to pray, he will take me. This thing goes on, like that" (Interview with SP3)

Next, the aspect of ambiguity in the minds of the respondents was also examined, especially in relation to the truth of religion. The respondent doubted the truth of his religion. This happened to SP4 who considered himself an agnostic and was looking for God, as he said "at the age of 9 or 10 he stopped worshiping idols. What is certain is that idols are not God, only what is not certain is that God exists or not. Did God create man? Or man who created God" (Interview with SP4).

However, there is a slight difference with some other respondents who are categorized by the researchers as 'strong practitioners' in the context of their commitment to religion. This can be seen from their commitment to the old religion before embracing Islam. For example, SP1 practiced Roman Catholic Christianity before embracing Islam, but because of the religious spirit among them, namely Roman Catholic Christians and Protestants, he got involved a lot with his Christian friends from other sects. This is clear from his words, "Before Islam I was a Christian, which became a turning point when I went to Sunday School. I practiced the Roman Catholic sect and when a Protestant friend calls me to a Protestant church, there was Sunday school, there was a little spirit, a spirit of sharing, there was a little spirit of religious sharing" (Interview with SP1). The same thing happened to SP2 even though he lived in a different religious community, namely in the Malay Muslim community. However, their religious commitment remains high. This also applies to SP3 as in his statement, "I was a teenager who was active in the church". In fact, he has high ambitions to serve and enter heaven as the best person in the religion. This is very clear from what was expressed, "After finishing SPM, without thinking twice, I registered at the Monastery of Saint Augustine near Ipoh Perak. I registered and because I was a diligent person when I was in school, I always helped the priests in the area of Kepala Batas, Butterworth, Bukit Tengah, Bukit Mertajam, Nibong Tebal and all the districts that I was with, I received many letters of support from the priests which I helped, so I was able to enter the Monastery of Saint Augustine before the announcement of the SPM results (Interview with SP2).

Profession

Apart from that, life before Islam also influenced the respondents' attitude and approach in delivering da'wah after they reverted to Islam. This can be seen from the experience of respondents who lived before embracing Islam. For SP2, despite his role as a priest in his previous religion which was more like reading sermons, conducting church ceremonies, and forgiving people's sins, but he felt that being a priest alone was not enough and he also involved himself in the field of medicine. As he said, "in the Catholic Christian church, the priest's job is to read the sermon, perform ceremonies in the church and also forgive people's sins. That is not enough, must learn to be an expert in any field. So, I want to work at the Mission Hospital and take the field of Medical Laboratory Technology" (Interview with SP2). At the same time, his medical knowledge is more advanced and modern because he studied abroad as he said, "I also studied "Medical Laboratory Technology" in Cologne, Caritas Institute Cologne, Germany" (Interview with SP2). This experience opened up an opportunity for him to approach people in a good way to Christianity as he hopes to do good when he returns to his homeland, as expressed "I would like to undergo medical training so that when I go back to my own country, I can combine my missionary work and social work" (Interview with SP2).

Experience in terms of profession for SP4 is quite different compared to SP2 where the SP2 profession is more modern and requires knowledge in medicine itself. For SP4, he also has his own profession in marketing. In fact, this profession was adapted to the field of preaching when they embraced Islam. As expressed by SP4, "when I preach, I also apply the field of marketing. As for me, I did not change my profession. I am still in the same profession, in the field of marketing, I just changed the product. If I used to sell other things, now I market Islam itself" (Interview with SP4).

Experience

Apart from that, their life before Islam is linked to their profession and also their background as 'strong practitioners' and 'ordinary practitioners' of the previous religion which is more about the family aspect. Environmental and social exposure is also a big factor that contributes to their involvement in preaching. One of them is life as a non-Muslim which provides a large and meaningful space for them because they understand better and appear more confident when dealing with their own group. This is in line with what was explained by the majority of respondents who made the basis of their lives before Islam beneficial for them once they became Muslim. As stated by SP3, "most Hindus do not even know their scriptures. So, they only think that the Baghavadgita is their book, whereas there are other books that are more important than the Baghavadgita that they have never known, never seen and never read, including me when I was a Hindu before" (Interview with SP3).

There are respondents who emphasize the ability to recognize the thinking patterns of religious groups. This can be examined based on SP4's statement which says, "I know how non-Muslims think and I know how Muslims think and if I want to deliver da'wah to non-Muslims I know the appropriate approach" (Interview with SP4). In fact, a strong enough education in the living environment as a Christian, SP2 is so confident that *"my experience in the Christian background living in Europe for more than ten years, that makes me understand more of the way of thinking of the Christian, born Christian who had not heard anything about Islam, dia punya fikiran, is like that. Only they are right. All the others go to hell"* (Interview with SP2).

Interaction and Foreign Language

In addition, the advantage of experiencing life as a non-Muslim can also help some respondents in knowing and understanding foreign languages other than Malay and English. For example, as a person in a high position in the Christian religion, SP2 mastered not only one foreign language, but more than two foreign languages that he learned and mastered throughout his experience as a non-Muslim. He said, "when I entered the monastery, I was told to learn Latin because Latin is a compulsory language... if you want to become a priest you must be fluent in Latin". Likewise, the German language, "I also study German because my superiors were planning to send me to Germany, so I also study German" and "I went to study Portuguese language". This gives the impression that in Christianity the emphasis is placed on the mastery of foreign languages in order to achieve a different status with other Christian laymen. Whereas, for SP1, there is a slight difference, he learns foreign languages and personally only in matters related to divinity, as he expressed "I personally learn some languages related to divinity" (Interview with SP1). Unlike SP3 and SP4 from the Indian race, they master different languages. SP3 who mastered the Tamil language, while SP4 could master the basics of Gujarati and Hindi. Even though the study respondents can master and communicate in different languages, they often use Malaysian and English in delivering da'wah, locally or globally.

The Starting Point of Knowing Islam

Life before embracing Islam also provides a starting point for each respondent to study which draws their attention to Islam before embracing Islam. Almost all respondents are interested in Islam when the things that exist in Islam are also mentioned in the scriptures of their religion. For example, the story about Prophet Muhammad SAW is also mentioned in the Christian Bible. This can be seen from SP1's expression, "finally, I have 100 percent confidence that the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned in the Christian Bible". In fact, he embraced Islam because of this, "I embraced Islam because I saw the Prophet Muhammad in the Bible. For example, I found the oneness of God in the Bible, I found Jesus said he is not God and not the son of God in the Bible" (Interview with SP1).

Likewise, SP2 who is also interested in Islam when he finds verses in the Quran often mention Jesus or Prophet Isa as and statements in verses in the Quran and verses in the Bible

mention the same figure. As he expressed, "I was attracted to the teachings through certain verses that talk about Isa 'alaihissalam. Because, when you read the Gospel, the Gospel says Jesus is the son of God. So, this is the teaching of the Christian church. Although the trinity is not mentioned in the Bible, but it is in the church that Jesus is one of three gods". In other words, the teachings in the scriptures of Christianity are not in line with the practice of the church about Jesus. At the same time, through his research on the Quran, he found that there was no term trinity or three in one as practiced by their church. He expressed it as follows, "after reciting al-Quran, surah al-Nisaa' where God himself said, 'There are not three in one god'. That is one of the many verses of the Quran that attracted me to think again" (Interview with SP2). SP4 who lives as an agnostic, the concept of the One God and science in Islam that made him interested in Islam after he found the answer in the Quran. As he expressed, "the first turning point that made me believe in Islam was the concept of divinity, especially surah Al Ikhlas, surah number 112, verses 1 to 4 and also the verses of Science found in the Al-Quran, especially about the Embryology event, in surah Mu'minin, surah number 23, verse 14" (Interview with SP4).

However, it is slightly different from SP3 who reverted to Islam due to his close association with Malay Muslims, but the peak of his confidence in the truth of Islam was when he attended a comparative religion lecture from the respondent, namely SP4 who embraced Islam and was one of the earliest comparative religious preachers who actively spread da'wah in Malaysia at that time. As SP3 expressed, "I once went to attend Bro Shah's lecture. When I attend, I feel 'Wow this is really very good, make us think.' So, we feel that our faith is strengthened because we feel that all matters are answered when we have made a decision to embrace Islam" (Interview with SP3).

Based on the narrative discussion explained above, the experience of each study participant in enjoying their old life before Islam until they found guidance is different from each other. Basically, it can be seen that the background of the four study participants, generally consists of two, namely the group that is rigid in religion and the group that follows the old religion as the teachings of their descendants. This is also supported by a study (Abdul Ghafar et. al 2011) which categorizes non-Muslims into three; (i) the group that does not want any teachings even though they have heard various teachings, but it does not attract their attention, (ii) the group that studies religion but does not believe, (iii) the group that strongly adheres to the teachings of their religion. Based on the researcher's observations, all study participants are closer in the second and third categories.

From a different point of view, preachers who are faced with the prospect of da'wah from non-Muslims can provide an initial hypothesis about the majority of their da'wah prospects consisting of two main groups of religious nature in their respective religions, whether those who are rigid in aspects of religiosity or those who follow only (blind follower) as a hereditary teaching. So, here the preacher needs to be prepared to face any situation and prospect background. This is explained by Herman (2020) who mentions the term cultural preaching, which is to understand the tendency of *mad'u* and see the background of *mad'u* as one way of preaching. This point is also supported by Ngadri Yusro (2017), mentioning the importance for preachers to be open and accepting of everyone around them regardless of their status or background. In fact, Enjang (2017) analogizes the preacher not only as an educator, but also as a doctor who treats the souls of his patients who are dealing with social diseases and so on.

In the meantime, this matter is also very related to the characteristics of the preacher who is responsible to himself and his immediate family, which is the need to maintain a good relationship with the da'wah prospect like a close relative with a preacher. As explained by Malik (2018) in his writing *Fiqh al-Da'wa: The Emerging Standardization of Islamic Proselytism*. He emphasized the need for a preacher to treat prospects like friends, visit them and help them so that they feel brotherhood in Islam. This is so important in facing non-Muslim prospects who feel that there is a big gap between them and Muslims. In fact, some of them have an inaccurate perception of Islam causing them to be far from Islam. This illustrates the importance of preachers maintaining a good relationship with their prospects in order to create harmony and thus their message about Islam can be received well and widely.

The details of the different profiles of the study participants are significant in explaining the diversity of their age groups who have their own experiences in delivering da'wah. In addition, exposure before embracing Islam such as environmental factors related to family, profession, own experience and the advantage of understanding languages other than Malay and English also allows the study participants to have a different point of view from existing Malay preachers. Among them, in terms of their thinking patterns and willingness to deliver da'wah to prospects in non-Muslim circles. This clearly illustrates the importance of knowing the background of the study participants through their lives before Islam because of the environmental factors that also shape them as preachers and their approach in preaching. This is in line with the study by Shui JingJun et. al (2014) who quotes from Michael Erben about the importance of studying a person's biography, namely "Studying biography can provide greater insight than hitherto into the nature and meaning of individual lives or groups of lives. Given that individual lives are part of a cultural network, information gained through biographical research will relate to an understanding of the wider society".

In fact, the uniqueness found in each study participant in the context of their different backgrounds indirectly explains that they are "agents of change" as mentioned by Rastogi (2019), relating his study, which is one of the qualities in organizational leadership. Likewise in the context of preachers, in the researcher's opinion, abnormality as an agent of change in the study participants is one of the qualities that complements the existing preachers in Malaysia. This is also supported by Borham et. al (2017) in his writing about the factors of attraction in the preaching method, namely (i) the personality of the preacher, (ii) *targhib* and *tarhib*, (iii) *qudwah* and *quwwah*, (iv) the difference factor, (v) the similarity factor, (vi) repeated factors, and (vii) welfare. The difference factor in the context of this study is seen in the participants of this study as Indian Muslim preachers who live in the community, the majority of Malay Muslims who certainly have their differences as Indian Muslim preachers. Next, the similarity factor is also an attractive factor in the participants of this study that can attract the attention of the da'wah prospect from non-Muslims. This similarity factor is seen in the study participants from the Indian race who have experience and feel their old life before Islam and Hinduism or Christianity or Jainism. In fact, they have similarities in terms of culture, language, and traditional practices. As explained by Osman Abdullah @ Chuah Hock Leng (2008) & Ab. Aziz (1994), that is, similarity factors such as language, race and cultural sharing facilitate the message about Islam to be conveyed to da'wah prospects in a non-Muslim context.

This clearly illustrates the presence of Indian Muslim preachers coloring the da'wah landscape in Malaysia and complementing the existing da'wah in Malaysia. Their background and initial exposure to Islam explains the inclusive nature of Islam and their belief in the truth of Islam and further, they convey the message of Islam to their immediate community. Thus, it is necessary to study and discuss in more depth about Muslim preachers of multiple races in Malaysia in order to complete the existing corpus of preaching knowledge in Malaysia. Not only studying from the preacher's point of view, but their preaching approach and leadership that can complete the existing group of Malay preachers in Malaysia.

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Interview

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