

# **An Analysis of Church Growth Among the Bhojpuri of Northern India**

**October 2000**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Purpose**

This report summarizes an October 2000 survey and analysis of church growth among the Bhojpuri people of northern India.

### **Methodology**

An IMB research team consisting of Scott Holste (Director of Global Research), Jim Slack (Evangelism and Church Growth Consultant), and J. O. Terry (Regional Media Consultant) conducted numerous individual and small group interviews of organizational leaders, pastors, evangelists/church planters, and lay people attending the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Bhojpuri Leadership Conference in Barhaj, Uttar Pradesh, India. The team also tabulated and analyzed registration information collected on each of the conference participants.

### **Background**

The Bhojpuri are a predominantly Hindu people living in the north Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. There are also substantial populations of Bhojpuri people in the neighboring countries of Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Swedish Baptists were among the earliest to plant churches in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. By the early 1990s there were less than 32 Swedish Baptist churches in the area and a few Anglican and Methodist churches in the larger cities. In 1989, the IMB assigned David and Jan Watson as Strategy Coordinators for the Bhojpuri people.

### **Findings**

1. Since the early 1990s significant numbers of rapidly growing and reproducing new churches have formed among the Bhojpuri people in the northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. There is evidence that this Church Planting Movement has begun to spread to the Bhojpuri people in Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh.
2. The churches represented in the survey average just over nine years in age. As this average age is inflated by the existence of a few, considerably older congregations, other statistical measures of central tendency are more revealing. The median church age, or that age of which half of the churches are higher and half were lower, is five years. The most common church age reported in the survey was one year.
3. Bhojpuri churches average nearly 85 members per church. Younger churches as well as older churches report similarly large numbers of members. This rapid growth in the size of the church suggests a highly responsive population.
4. Churches averaged nearly 19 baptisms *each* in 1999, ranging from a low of 0 to a high of 70. Churches planted an average of two new churches each in 1999,

ranging from a low of zero to a high of nine. The typical length of time to start a new church was less than eight months. Churches were nurturing an average of more than four outreach groups *each* in 1999, ranging from a low of zero to a high of 25. There is every indication that this rapid growth continues in 2000.

5. There is compelling evidence that a *minimum* of 1600 churches existed among the Bhojpuri at the end of 1998. Beginning with this base and projecting growth based on various assumptions regarding the extent to which the key indicators noted above can be generalized to the entire Movement as a whole, the research team estimates:
  - a. 3,277 – 5,461 total churches at the end of 1999
  - b. 2,077 – 3,461 new churches established during 1999
  - c. 224,722 – 374,536 church members at the end of 1999
  - d. 49,636 – 87,727 baptisms during 1999
  - e. 10,608 – 17,680 total outreach groups at the end of 1999
6. With an emphasis on the authority of Scripture, the baptism of believers, and congregational polity, the rapidly expanding core of the Movement appears very baptistic in theology and praxis. However, churches and organizations that once cooperated in non-denominational efforts at the outset of the work are beginning to consolidate churches, believers, and leaders – differentiating along denominational lines.
7. Similarly, a number of churches and organizations from other parts of India have recently entered the area and have molded existing churches, believers, and leaders into their own image. In many instances, they are providing subsidy to pastors.
8. Consequently, it is no longer possible to consider the whole of the Movement as baptistic. The research team very conservatively estimates the following subset of the totals noted in finding number five as baptistic:
  - a. 2,913 total churches at the end of 1999
  - b. 1,500 new churches established during 1999
  - c. 203,864 members
  - d. 45,575 baptisms
  - e. 9,367 total outreach groups at the end of 1999
9. The profile of this year's conference participants reflect these changes in the movement. Whereas previous conferences were attended almost exclusively by organizational leaders, pastors, and evangelists/church planters, this conference was attended by fewer leaders but significantly more lay people. Of the 525 registered participants, 32.2% were some type of leader. The remainder were lay people.
10. The youthful nature of the Movement is evident in the registration data tabulated by the research team. 35.6% of registered participants indicated they had been Christians for only one year. 16% of participants indicated they had been Christians for only two years. 38.7% of participants indicated they had been Christians for three or more years.
11. Church planting follows the "person of peace" model. A church planter enters a village and identifies the person of peace. The church planter invests himself in that individual – witnessing to him and to his extended network of family,

neighbors, and friends. Converts are gathered together to form one or more house churches. Frequently, the church planter intentionally mentors the person of peace into serving the pastor of the new church. Each new church is taught the importance of planting new churches and is encouraged to identify one or more church members to lead these efforts. These individuals are most commonly known as “evangelists” (or, less frequently, as “church planters”).

12. Believers are emerging among virtually every caste from Brahmans to middle merchant castes to low caste. With only a few exceptions, these diverse castes worship together. This is a very significant and surprising finding, the causes and implications of which should be addressed in future studies.
13. Believers worship in either the national language of Hindi or Bhojpuri, with a decided preference for the latter. The Consortium has produced and distributed a Bhojpuri songbook. Those speaking other local languages tend to congregate in churches using those languages.
14. Believers are predominantly converts from Hinduism. There are reports of a few Bhojpuri believers from Muslim backgrounds, but no indication of widespread responsiveness to the gospel.
15. Believers frequently reference healing or some sort of deliverance from evil within their families as a significant precursor of their decisions to follow Christ.
16. Glossalalia does not appear to be a significant element in the Movement.
17. It is clear that Watson and his Indian colleague VJ\* have played and continue to play significant roles in the stimulation and nurturing of the Bhojpuri Church Planting Movement. They have effectively implemented a comprehensive strategy of prayer, Scripture translation, distribution, radio broadcasts, personal evangelism discipleship, church planting, and leadership development.
18. Watson and his organization *The Consortium*,\* do not provide subsidy for pastors. They do, however, underwrite much of the expense of the annual leadership conferences and their eight training centers in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Participants in the annual conference are asked to pay half of their transportation costs and a small registration fee. While Watson and his organization subsidized the ministry of a number of itinerant evangelists/church planters in the early years of work among the Bhojpuri, they provide support to only a few today. Each new church is responding to the challenge to identify an evangelist/church planter from among its own membership that will lead that church’s own church planting efforts.
19. The IMB’s itinerant leadership training team (LEAD) has had some work in the area through the 1990s. That ministry has provided training for small numbers of leaders within the Swedish Baptist churches.

\* *The names of some workers and the organization have been changed to protect the work.*