

Is India the Fastest-Growth Gospel Territory?

For some time, probably since the year 2000, I have been saying in public that there are five hot spots for the **gospel** in the world today: China, India, Indonesia, Brazil and Nigeria. Interestingly enough, the background of China is atheist, of India Hindu, of Indonesia Muslim, of Brazil Catholic, and of Nigeria animist.

I will refrain from giving details on each of the above, but I usually start with China, the largest nation in the world, reporting the greatest national harvest of souls ever recorded in history, beginning in 1976. Although figures differ, I personally am comfortable agreeing with those who claim that 10 percent of the population is Christian, which would mean that there are around 140 million Christians in that country.

I then customarily go on to say that India, the world's second largest nation, may be seeing church growth similar to that of China, but the facts are more elusive. China is a relatively simple nation with most researchers and scholars in touch with each other and sending out informative reports. This is not the case for India. *Operation World* says: "India's ancient, complex and often inscrutable past; its racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity; and the caste system all make detailed population analysis exceedingly difficult." For example, all official public documents from the national government in India have to be released in 22 official languages, and that is out of a total of 456 different languages spoken in the country. With all this in mind, I usually skip over India quite rapidly in describing the hot spots for the gospel, relegating it to a possible second place next to China.

My new friend S.R. Manohar has now caused me to change my

mind. He told me that in his meetings with other recognized Christian leaders in Bangalore the consensus has now emerged that India is at least 25 percent Christian with some estimating even a higher percentage. Most of this growth has surfaced within the last 10 to 15 years and it covers both North India (which has been strongly resistant to the gospel) and South India (where the majority of traditional Christians have been located). If this is correct, it would mean that India would have a total of approximately 300 million believers, about twice as many as China. India could well be the number one hot spot for the gospel.

I am aware that some readers of this report would find reasons to doubt the accuracy of Manohar's figures. The India government, for example, paints quite a different picture. *Operation World* comments, "For many reasons, the most recent census (2001) significantly under enumerated Christians at percent. [This would be 28 million Christians – ed.] Christian researchers in India indicate much higher results."

Having said this, the *Operation World* figure for Christians in India is 71 million, admittedly quite distant from 300 million. However, I cross-examined my Indian friends as much as I knew how, but they would not budge a bit from their numbers. Since I claim no personal expertise in Indian affairs, I cannot give a definitive conclusion. But my friends know that I am the eternal optimist and when I have a choice I tend to see the glass half full, not half empty.

In my conversations in Alaska, I was told that it is becoming more and more common for whole villages or other people groups to all decide to follow Jesus Christ together at one time. This would fulfill the dream of my mentor, Donald McGavran, who, as a career missionary to India, advocated what he called "people movements to Christ."

One of my informants told about how he had been invited by a friend to speak to a group of pastors in an area he had not

previously visited. While he was waiting for his friend to arrive at the place of meeting, he noticed that there were a number of young people milling around. The thought passed through his mind that perhaps his friend had really asked him to speak to a youth meeting rather than a pastors' conference. He approached a 21-year old and asked, "Where are you from?" The boy named the village. "Is there a church there?" my informant asked. "Oh, yes." "How many members does it have?" "Around 1,000." "No, I didn't ask for the population of the village, I asked about church membership." With a smile the young man answered, "We have 1,000 in the church and it is also the population of the village!" My informant was stunned. "Who is the pastor?" he asked. You guessed it—the 21-year old said, "I am the pastor; there is no one else!"

That brought to mind Leana May Cinquanta of North India, whom I had the privilege of joining Ché Ahn in commissioning as a Harvest International Ministry apostle two or three years ago. When we did that she had planted no fewer than 3,000 churches that were part of her apostolic network. This month, Ché announced to those of us on his HIM Board that Leana had now planted a total of 5,000 churches! She represents this new breed of Christian leaders who are catalyzing the explosion of the gospel in India.

With such exponential growth, the question naturally arises as to the quality of the body of Christ. I have seen no research on this matter, but I will go back to the Indian leaders I spoke to in Alaska. They told me that the new churches in India openly flow in the power of the Holy Spirit with signs and wonders. In fact, I was told of one city which had some 30 to 40 Christian churches, the majority being traditional denominational churches. However, all the churches of the city without exception had now begun moving in the power of the Holy Spirit whether their denominational tradition allowed them to do so or not! They strongly implied that they see what happened there as a trend for the whole nation!

Even though I wrote a book called *Humility*, I cannot resist telling this last story. As a church-growth analyst, I kept probing the group to see what might have sparked the new pattern of church growth in India over the past 10-15 years. When they simply answered, "Prayer!" I intuitively regarded it as a superficial, religious response and tried to probe a bit deeper. I was wondering if there had been an earthquake or an increase in prosperity or the emergence of some flamboyant charismatic leader or mushrooming technology or an abrupt political change or a major scandal in Hinduism or a social upheaval, or something else along those lines. But, no. The key to them was still clearly intercessory prayer.

After I finished my quasi-sociological questioning, someone then casually mentioned that they thought a key contributing factor to the openness to Christianity was the "Praying through the 10/40 Window" initiative. My heart took a joyous leap! Many readers would know that Doris and I had the privilege of leading the massive AD 2000 United Prayer Track during the decade of the 1990s, and our major thrust was "Praying through the 10/40 Window." Doris still says that those were our greatest years of ministry, and if we had even a small piece of the action we now see in India, I would guess that she is probably right!