

The Bhojpuri Movement Transforming Social Dynamics

Excerpted from Victor John's forthcoming book *Bhojpuri Breakthroughs*
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The 1990s saw years of brutal warfare between high caste and low caste people in the state of Bihar. Both groups had guerilla-type armies and over 1,000 people were killed in the violence. Our group brought the good news into this context of enmity, revenge and wholesale human slaughter. Through prayer warfare and proclamation of the good news the caste warfare amazingly subsided.

In 1997, the same year as the bloodbath at Lakshmanpur Bathe,¹ we began work in Bihar, and the Church Planting Movement (CPM) started moving into that area. In less than two years, the good news reached many of the fighters themselves, who were broken and weary of the conflict and bloodshed.

In 1999, two area commanders of these warring groups accepted Christ and became completely transformed. Instead of leading raids and killing sprees, they began leading the way to plant churches. This transformation has continued to the present, as 19 former area commanders of militia groups have now accepted Christ and become church planters. So the Church Planting Movement impacted the caste war and helped bring peace instead of strife. But Bihar's caste wars only highlighted a much more widespread problem.... [The caste system] is a very dehumanizing system: incredibly degrading to human beings.

¹ See, for example "THE PATTERN OF ABUSE: RURAL VIOLENCE IN BIHAR AND THE STATE'S RESPONSE," and "Class (And Caste) War Brewing In Bihar, India's Poorest, Most Dangerous State." To mention just two especially noteworthy atrocities: in 1992, the MCC (low-caste fighters) brutally killed 35 members of the Brahmin caste at Bara village in Bihar. The MCC's armed group brought the 35 men of Bara to the bank of a nearby canal, tied their hands and slit their throats. Revenge came in 1997 when a militia of upper caste landlords, called Ranvir Sena, slaughtered 58 Dalits in Lakshmanpur Bathe village in a well-planned and co-ordinated attack. About 100 armed Ranvir Sena activists entered Lakshmanpur Bathe at around 11 pm. They broke into huts and shot people in their sleep. The village was virtually decimated in the attack; the youngest victim was less than a year old.

In the neighboring state of Haryana, for example, the caste system is still very strong in cities, towns, and villages. It dominates all of life; caste strongly influences each person's identity. People still get burned alive and tortured in caste-related incidents. Animals can drink from certain ponds, but Dalits and Shudras are not allowed to use that water. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, "Dalits and indigenous people (known as Scheduled Tribes or *adivasis*) continue to face discrimination, exclusion, and acts of communal violence. Laws and policies adopted by the Indian government provide a strong basis for protection, but are sometimes not faithfully implemented by local authorities."²

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In light of such social dynamics, why would we want to perpetuate the caste system? We want to see God's kingdom advance, without focusing on caste. We see in Scripture that God's kingdom is equally open to all kinds of people. Yet when the culture has such an organized dehumanizing system, Christianity comes as a threat because it talks about equality under God and tries to give rights to people who have no rights. It creates disruption, because it suddenly brings someone who has always been under others' feet to a position of equality.

² <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/englishwr2k8/docs/2008/01/31/india17605.htm>. Accessed 12/14/2016.

Cultural tensions related to caste

In India's social context as a whole, caste still plays an important role. It underlies social tensions and feeds Hindu fundamentalism. The mindset of many people is now changing, and high caste people often don't demand special treatment. But when something happens that makes them feel threatened, caste consciousness immediately arises. As I talk with all kinds of people, I get the feeling that the caste system still remains in their mindset. This worldview persists no matter what position they hold, what education they have received, or what place they have in society.

Because of democracy, the high caste have lost much of their power as rulers. The vast majority of the population is from low castes: scheduled castes³ and scheduled tribes. Democratic voting increases power for that majority. Also many Dalits and lower caste people have risen up and gained high positions in government and society. So high caste people feel their social power diminishing.

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Hindu nationalism has arisen in reaction to this changing social dynamic. Fundamentalists propagate Hindu nationalism, so that the Brahmin minority can hold onto power. This reaction includes attacking the most vulnerable, which is where religious persecution comes in. The real issue is not conversion but social reformation, which releases lower caste people from oppression. When low-caste people know their rights, they no longer suffer quietly at the hands of the high caste. So Hindu fundamentalist groups attack because they know Christians are social reformers. We educate people, and once people are educated they no longer function as slaves to the high caste. The social equation is changing, which terrifies those at the top. Most of the Hindu fundamentalist groups are run by high-caste people afraid of losing their power, and that fear inspires persecution. In some cases they have relatives in

³ "The Scheduled Castes...and Scheduled Tribes...are various officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged indigenous people in India. The terms are recognized in the Constitution of India....In modern literature, the Scheduled Castes are sometimes referred to as...Dalits." Wikipedia, accessed 3/13/2017



the police, so they complain to the police and ask them to do something to stop the Christians. But the real issues behind such persecution are social control and power.

The Bhojpuri movement faces the challenge of caste

The Bhojpuri movement has made a great difference in this caste-driven context. The population of the Bhojpuri area consists of 20 percent high caste people and 80 percent low caste or outcast Dalits and *adivasi*. The good news has tended to more quickly enter the low caste 80 percent of the population, so the church reflects that social reality. This means we have had to address real issues related to caste. The emerging Christian fellowships face poverty, illiteracy, and leadership challenges because low-caste people haven't been trained for leadership. They've been trained for generations to follow orders, not to take initiative. So we needed to develop a special kind of discipleship and leadership training to empower each person. That's one vital difference between this Church Planting Movement and a *mass* movement. In this movement each person is being disciplined and mentored.

Another challenge in our contexts is that traditional churches are still very caste-focused. People from traditional churches in Southern India come from caste-based churches. They have a very distinct division between the churches, with high-caste churches and low-caste churches that never interact with each other. They have no connection or fellowship with one another as part of their normal pattern of social interaction.

In the Bhojpuri movement, however, we don't talk about Brahmins and Dalits and all. We talk about lost people. The reality is that unless they hear the good news and receive it, they will remain lost whether they are Brahmin or Dalit.

Focus on language rather than caste: touches all castes

Sometimes people say, "Why don't you focus on high-caste people?" But our approach among the Bhojpuri is different. If the high caste in our area are only two percent or 10 percent of the population, that same percentage is also reflected in the churches. By contrast with the work in the south of India, our percentages reflect the national population. God is at work in all the castes.

In addition, caste-focused work would be impractical in many cases. In some villages, there might be only one

family from a particular caste. You can't start a worshipping community with only one family, so you need a multi-caste fellowship. We focus on reaching persons based upon their language, geography, and economic status, rather than caste, because that helps the good news to take root throughout the region, and spread.

Caste divides groups but language unites people, so we have intentionally chosen not to focus on caste. We have instead focused on language, starting with Bhojpuri then spreading to many other language groups.

Top government officials mostly come from the high caste. Nowadays, though, because of the government's reservation system (a form of quota-based affirmative action for lower castes), some lower caste people are moving up in status, but they're often not very efficient. Some people think, "If he's from a low caste, he probably won't be able to do things properly." They continue to believe that caste reflects how people are designed rather than how they've been educated or trained.

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When people move to the city, caste becomes less of an issue than class. Some of the first people who came to faith through our work in Delhi were construction workers, yet they were Brahmins (the top caste). People only look to their own caste when it comes to something like marriage. Otherwise people don't take much notice of it. In the cities, they may live next door to people of different castes without a problem.

Among the Bhojpuri, God is now moving among every caste, even with lower caste people reaching upper caste people. Believers from different castes may not socialize a lot with each other, but they have worship meetings together and pray together. We have one low caste woman who leads a worshipping community on the low caste side of the village, then goes to the high caste side of the village and leads another worshipping community there. Although she comes from a low caste and is female (which makes her an unusual leader in any village), God is using her effectively in both the high caste and low caste contexts. MF