

# A Still Thriving Middle-aged Movement:

## An Interview with Victor John by Dave Coles

**Dave:** *How long has the Bhojpuri movement been going on?*

**Victor:** The movement started in 1998. I had begun focusing on work among the Bhojpuri since 1992 and in 1994 we began the ministry in earnest. We held the first Bhojpuri consultation, began a systematic survey for all the Bhojpuri districts and made a decision to focus on obedience-based discipleship. We didn't start with a blueprint for how the ministry would unfold; everything has been evolving through the years. The real breakthrough with significant numbers happened when we released the first edition of the Bhojpuri New Testament in 1998. After that the movement began growing exponentially. It wasn't a huge movement at that time. Things were happening in various places, but we had no idea of the big picture of what the Lord was doing.

In 2000 an audit was done by the International Mission Board (IMB), and they pointed out that exponential growth was taking place. The tipping point had been in 1998, when things just shot up. We only had 800 pastors at that time, and all of their ministries had grown within the previous two or three years. The IMB's audit showed the rapid growth curve and it hasn't stopped since then. Additional audits have been done by other groups in subsequent years, showing the endurance and growth of the movement. I just met yesterday with 35 or 40 leaders who shared amazing stories. We were counting the generations of believers and churches and it's over 100 generations! Every generation of believers starts a new church. We don't count the number of believers (how many people got saved). We count the number of churches started.

**Dave:** *With all those generations of churches and leaders, how have you managed to maintain the DNA of multiplication?*

**Victor:** The DNA has been set, and in our culture, a lot depends on watching and imitating. What you see is what you do. You watch what a leader does, then it's easy to do the same thing. It's much easier than following written notes or bullet points in a lecture. They see someone do it, then they think, "Oh, I can do that." We try to make it so *simple* that even the least educated person will say, "I can do that; it's not that difficult." After all, obedience is caught rather than taught. We don't present something complicated that requires a lot of education, facilities or money. The idea from the very beginning has been a self-sustaining and self-propagating ministry. It's the responsibility of the Bhojpuri people to take the gospel to their own and to other people, and that's what they're doing.

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**Dave:** *The Bhojpuri movement is one of the longest-lasting movements still continuing with CPM dynamics. This would seem to show it's not just a fad.*

**Victor:** Yes. The movement is still moving. In years past some people invested a lot of time and effort in things that turned out to be just a fad. Some have been reluctant to invest in catalyzing a CPM, afraid it would also turn out to be a fad. But God is so good! Multiplication continues, and we see there's nothing inevitable about a movement ending or turning into traditional churches.

BY **DAVE COLES**

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**Dave:** *Back in the 1990s not many people were using the term “CPM.” When this ministry among the Bhojpuri began in the mid-90s, what were you envisioning? What words were you using to describe what you hoped God would do?*

**Victor:** At that time, “church growth” was very popular. It was heavily commercialized and there were loads of seminars on church growth. The megachurch model from South Korea was also popular, and megachurches in the US were a big thing. But I didn’t think that trying to build a big church would reach the Bhojpuri. I was thinking in terms of something like the book of Acts – small and rapidly reproducible house churches. Instead of having a 500-member church, I thought it would be better, even if the churches only had 10 people, to have 50 churches. It’s easier to reproduce and the cost is much lower. To run a church with 500 members is a huge project – with staffing, building, maintenance, management and administration. All of those things cost money.

Small house churches with no paid staff can easily reproduce. They are also less threatening to outsiders and less likely to invite negative reaction and persecution. I saw back in the 90s that we needed a model of church that could easily go underground if needed. And that’s exactly what’s happening now, in the present scenario of hostility.

This current persecution is not a strange surprise for us. We’re not sitting around saying, “Oh, no! What are we going to do, now that we’re experiencing severe persecution?” We are continuing to do everything like usual, just being a little more careful. A lot of organizations have had to shut down, let their staff go or change what they were doing. But we’re growing, and the newer movement to our east, influenced by the Bhojpuri, is also growing. We are preparing for much greater harvest to come.

**Dave:** *Speaking of persecution, what are some other challenges you’ve faced over the years?*

**Victor:** One challenge was organizations with more traditional models wanting to grab a piece of the action. The Bhojpuri movement had a very difficult year in 2011. A lot of organizations came, then distracted

and hired people. That created a lot of confusion and I got very discouraged. I thought, “Maybe this whole thing will die or disintegrate.” But the ministry continued and that challenge strengthened local leaders who remained as decision makers. They took more ownership of ministry within their area instead of working as evangelists under someone else. Whatever they knew they used. That’s when I started the saying, “If you know one thing, obey one thing; if you know two things, obey two things.”

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Another challenge was the low level of education among many of those being reached. Some people might wonder: “How can a person start a church and mature a church if they have very little knowledge?” But knowledge was not the key; it was obedience to Christ and willingness to really practice what little they knew. This was not people lining up to be hired for jobs; this was ordinary people obeying the Lord and seeing him bless their exercise of faith in everyday life. They know how to incarnate themselves and present Christ among a very hostile community.

A more recent challenge has arisen from the extent of the movement. The nation’s majority feel caught by surprise by what has been quietly multiplying in their midst. The Hindu militants thought that Christianity was only what they had seen for 200 years – a foreign import from the West, with visible structures and foreign patterns. Suddenly they’ve discovered that people are turning to Christ in ways that don’t turn them into Westerners. An article published last year quoted government minister Giriraj Singh blaming Christians for converting people “silently.” He said, “It is Christians who are doing maximum [sic] number of religious conversions in the country, that too silently.” I never thought I would live to hear that complaint.

**Dave:** *Sometimes people travel through an area where a movement has been reported and they don't see evidence of it, so they conclude there's not really a movement happening there. How would you respond to that?*

**Victor:** (laughs) You can walk in a jungle and never see any animals. That doesn't mean there are no animals in the jungle. Some people have a certain image in their minds of what a Church Planting Movement will look like. They think they'll see people crying in the streets, or shouting at the top of their voice that they're saved. They expect to see crosses on top of the houses, and no more temples or mosques or idols. They have this fantasy that when a movement happens the area will look very Christian. Maybe that happens in some places, but not in a context like ours. We don't have people streaming to church buildings on Sunday morning. Bhojpuri believers live, dress and eat like other Bhojpuri people. They gather to worship in relatively inconspicuous ways. We have God doing something wonderful *in the midst* of all the turmoil and idols. His kingdom is silently penetrating – like yeast – into areas where Christ has never before been worshiped.

One man visited our area, looked around and told me, "I don't see any movement going on."

I said, "Good!"

He asked, "Why do you say that?"

I answered, "Because the movement is safe from people like you who come to teach the believers 'how to be a Christian,' and end up destroying the movement." Sometimes I'm very blunt. But the fact is that too many Christians would like to "convert" the movement's believers so they become "better Christians" according to their own definition. Their idea is usually more head knowledge or more Western influence and less reproducible obedience.

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**Dave:** *In your book, you tell about the Bhojpuri movement cascading into other ethno-linguistic groups to begin gospel breakthroughs. At this point, how many other groups would you say have been impacted directly by the Bhojpuri movement?*

**Victor:** About eight different language groups across Northern India have been impacted and those language groups have different sub-groups within them. The work in at least one of those has already reached the point where it can be classified as its own Church Planting Movement. I just attended a conference of theirs and was very encouraged to see the Lord blessing that work. It has now become a fast-growing movement, not dependent on finances or a single leader.

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The nature of the gospel is to multiply and spread. We praise God for the ways it continues to do that among the Bhojpuri and is now spreading among other groups as well. 

