

David Garrison

The Role of Prayer in a North India Movement

It was a bright sunny day in July 2001. As I waited to enter a cavernous gymnasium on the grounds of a Bible college tucked away in the suburbs of a large north Indian city, filled with Indian evangelists, my eyes fell on the hundreds of pairs of shoes they had scattered all around the entrance. Not a respectable pair in the bunch. There were sandals, flip flops mostly, a few tattered loafers with patches sown right over the leather. They seemed a fitting complement to the hundreds of rag-tag, mostly Dalit, evangelists who had trekked across the state to receive four days of training and prayer. Even now I can hear the joyful roar of their prayers in a half dozen languages filling the building. Their words were as indecipherable, as their Spirit was inviting.

Over the next couple of days, I walked with these brothers, worshipped with them, ate with them, and listened to the vision that guided them. Five years later, I am still moved by the clarity and simplicity of their vision, strategy and training. It beautifully integrated the role of prayer into every aspect of their ministry, from their beginning research through their evangelistic outreach and finally into the church planting that ensued.

The plan was developed and led by a couple of Indian Christian doctors and a retired army captain. It was all very logically conceived yet seemed to me preposterously ambitious. They aimed to start a church-planting movement in the least evangelized, most intractable population center of north India's Hindu belt. Their vision: to plant 1,000,000 churches over the next ten years.

State of the Vision

One year into the plan, I sit in the back of a large tent and listen in amazement to the noisy worship of the gathered assembly of more than 600 Indian Strategy Coordinators who have been training over the past year. Most of them have only been Christians for a year or less, and already they have catalyzed the planting of 4-6,000 new house churches and a further 15,000 houses of prayer in villages across the heart of the Hindu belt

By any estimation, the endeavor has been remarkable. Today we'll hear more reports from the practitioners, but already I've seen much of the inner workings and want to relate them to any who have ears to hear.

The Plan

India's states are divided into blocks of 100 towns . Each town is assigned a team of two Strategy Coordinators (known here as Block Coordinators or Strategic Coordinators), 90 percent of whom come from the Dalit caste or come from Chamar and Yadhav background (leather workers and herdsman). Most of these Strategy Coordinators are the first fruit of the movement itself. Their training has been adapted from the curriculum published in Strategic Coordinators by Bruce Carlton and S.D. Ponraj, reducing the training to a 6th grade level while shortening it from 5 months to 5 weeks.

The strategy is all built on a foundation of prayer and, as you will see, permeated with prayer throughout. The Block Coordinators are given responsibility for a block of 100 towns. They begin their research with ten of the 100 villages. They identify five key things to discover and pray for in each village: 1) the Headman (the elected or appointed head of the village), 2) the People Group composition (what is the people group, linguistic, religious and caste composition of the village), 3) the Spiritual Strongholds (the Strategy Coordinator will identify every temple and religious site by name for daily prayer), 4) the Social Barriers (what are the social problems: alcoholism, gambling, prostitution, etc. that plague the village), 5) the Economics (how do the citizens make their livelihood?). After discovering the nature of each of these five aspects to their ten adopted villages, the Block Coordinators pray for each of these five areas every day.

The Beginning Point

After initial training, the Block Coordinators move into one of the ten towns in the block from which they can engage it and the other nine. (10% of the entire block). Their first step is to locate the village headman and introduce themselves as "Men of God who are followers of Jesus." With this announcement, they ask permission to live in the village and pray

God's blessings upon the village. If they are not granted this permission, they move to the next town.

Three times a day the Block Coordinators spend 40 minutes to an hour in prayer for the ten towns they have adopted. They pray for each of the ten towns every day in each of the five areas. Between these three prayer sessions they do prayer walking through the towns (one in the morning and one in the afternoon). In this way they are able to prayer walk through ten towns each week. In addition to this prayer routine, they spend every Friday in prayer and fasting.

The movement is further undergirded by external prayer coordinated by a women's prayer band, as every Strategy Coordinator is adopted and prayed for by three women in the prayer band. Finally, a national prayer effort rallies churches across India to pray for the movement.

As the prayer walking Block Coordinators move through the town they follow the pattern stimulated by the five categories of their research. They circle strongholds and confront social barriers. Whenever an individual asks about them, they respond: "We are men of God who have come to your town (with the headman's permission) to pray God's blessings on your village. May we pray for you?"

B.L.E.S.S.

If they receive a positive response they shift to a five-fold scheme of prayer associated with the word BLESS. B - Body (they pray for any physical ailments that the person reveals). L - Labor (they pray for the kind of work the person does and their workplace). E - Emotional (they pray for the emotional health and well-being of the person and his family). S - Social (they pray for the social relations of the person including their extended family). S - Spiritual (they pray for the spiritual condition of the person). They extend every prayer in Jesus name with an implicit witness.

Quite often the person leaves with no immediate response to the prayer, but later returns with an affirmation of answered prayer and the power of Jesus' name. He or she may ask for additional prayer or request prayer for a family member or neighbor. This prompts the Block Coordinators to request permission to lead a weekly prayer meeting in the person's home.

H.O.P.E.

These weekly prayer meetings have been called "Houses of Prayer" or H.O.P.E. (Houses Of Prayer Everywhere). At the end of the first year the movement was reporting as many as 15,000 Houses of Prayer. What happens in these Houses of Prayer? In addition to prayer for the family, the family hears the Word of God, and learns how to offer up to God

a sacrifice of praise and worship. In this context of prayer, the gospel is shared as an invitation to a living relationship with God. When these prayer connections lead to conversions the new believers are channeled into a five-day discipleship training program, where they learn how their House of Prayer can become a new church.

Over the past few years the north India Block Coordinator strategy has had its share of difficulties and course corrections. At one point, the leaders of the movement discovered that some of their evangelists were falsifying reports and were probably not truly born again. When this was discovered, though, I witnessed the same prayerful spirit that had factored so heavily into the movement demonstrate its power once again in the humility and self-correction of the leadership.

Along the way, countless godly men and women have emerged as true disciples of Christ willing to adopt a block of villages for the purpose of transforming these distant corners of the Great Commission into houses of prayer everywhere. Five years later, my memories of the Block Coordinators of B.L.E.S.S. and H.O.P.E. remain for me a great testimony to the power and sufficiency of prayer as God's greatest resource for us to draw into relationship with Him the teeming millions who don't have a prayer unless we offer one on their behalf.

As I added my own shoes to the scattered piles of tattered rubber and leather and prepared to enter the prayer-filled gymnasium, I felt my spirit soar as I recalled: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that preach the good news."