

# to the Editor LETTERS

*From the Editor: Our journal recently published a missiological critique of the book Bhojpuri Breakthrough (WIGtake Resources, 2019), authored by Victor John and Dave Coles. While the reviewer, H. L. Richard, generally affirms that God is inspiring and directing new movements to Christ in our day, we allowed his review to focus particularly on the weaknesses of this remarkable movement. While the reviewer's experience in India is deep, and very resourceful, an author's disappointment in this letter indicates our lack of foresight as to the consequences of this critique. We regret that a journal is such an inferior genre for any protracted dialogue it may provoke. This conversation will require another more appropriate missiological forum. Yet, despite this apparent setback, our readership can find great missiological value in this letter. The exchange between the author and the reviewer highlights four crucial issues that may determine the effectiveness of any further witness among India's unreached populations.*

## Disappointed in H. L. Richard's Review of Bhojpuri Breakthrough

To the Editor,

I appreciate the contribution of critical voices concerning movements, as these have in the past, and can in the future, help clarify and deepen the missiology of movements and point to places where more qualitative research would be helpful. However, I was disappointed in reading H. L. Richard's review of *Bhojpuri Breakthrough*, as it said very little about the Church Planting Movement itself or its dynamics. The reviewer mainly picked a few items to criticize, rather than engaging the book's contents as a case study of a large and fruitful Church Planting Movement among a number of unreached groups.

Looking only at the review, potential readers would never see that Community Learning Centers have provided creative and effective access in a wide variety of unreached locations. They would not know how a primarily rural movement managed to spread effectively in urban areas as well. Nor would they see that a holistic approach to ministry has transformed families, villages, and slums, and how leadership is nurtured to sustain a movement into dozens of generations of churches planting churches. Potential readers would miss how the movement has empowered women, low-caste people, and illiterate people for ministry. They would remain ignorant about how disciples in

the movement have responded to persecution, and how the Bhojpuri movement has inspired the launching of movements among other groups, both in India and beyond.

Other than caste, the review never addressed any key issues in the movement itself or the significant kingdom advances taking place at that frontier of missions. The consistent negative tone of the review seemed rooted in antagonism toward the whole idea of movements, as reflected in the phrase "current fads over movements" in the review's penultimate sentence. And the criticism that "very little missiological analysis is present in the volume" reflects that the book author's purpose differed from the preferred genre of the reviewer—hardly a problem for which the author should be faulted.

The opening sentence of the review conveys antagonism toward the book, hinting (without evidence) at some dishonesty on the author's part: "a parachurch group that claims to be the originator and main support of the Church Planting Movement." I'm mystified why anyone would choose such accusatory phrasing, since for more than twenty years anyone well-informed about this movement has acknowledged the key role played by the "parachurch group." The reviewer also falsely claims that the contributors to the book are "all local parachurch employees." Rather than argue every detail of the review's attack, I prefer to focus on four key issues raised in the review.

### Money Issues

First, the issue of money: the review complains of "multiple passing references to money throughout the book." This shouldn't surprise anyone familiar with the challenges of church planting in India, since financial problems and misuse of funds have damaged and destroyed countless ministries in that context. *Bhojpuri Breakthrough* attempts to convey honestly the nuances of what they have discovered to be wise and helpful uses of money, contrasted with unwise and unhelpful uses. The references cited in the review fit a pattern of discerning use, which the reviewer might do well to study more closely in the context of movements. An explication of nuanced differentiation in use of funds can be found, for example, in the article "Use of Funding in Catalyzing Movements," which appeared in the Jan/Feb 2022 issue of *Mission Frontiers*.

Ironically, after griping that "There are multiple passing references to money throughout the book," the very next sentence complains about "a church meeting of three to four hundred people in a community learning center; whether that building is owned or rented and who is paying the bills is not mentioned." It appears that, for this reviewer, the book is deficient when money is mentioned and simultaneously deficient when money is *not* mentioned. The reviewer also treats readers to speculative accusations, with no evidence: "One doesn't have

to read very far between the lines to know that such financial policies and practices produce tension, resentment and division.” One might wish the reviewer could stick to what was written rather than expounding on his claim to “know” relational dynamics within the movement based on his capacity for reading between the lines.

The following sentence asserts, “Such topics are not helpful in promotional literature,” thus again scorning the book by painting it as something it never intended to be. The authors intended it as an extended case study of an ongoing great work of God. The goal is not promoting any organizations or leaders, but rather seeking to accurately describe a great move of God. But while some of the reviewer’s scorn might be caused by his classification of the Bhojpuri movement as part of the “current fads over movements,” his larger grievance appears to be the mention of a web link for those who want to know “How can I contact you if I want to support the work or come and get involved directly?” This was included in the FAQ as a real question that many people have asked about the Bhojpuri movement. The reviewer focuses only on the word “support,” as if funding were the only possible type of support. Support can mean funding, but can also mean prayer and expertise, and (as mentioned) direct involvement. This narrow focus fits the book’s answer into the reviewer’s paradigm of American funding as *prima facie* problematic. We can agree that “Promotion in America often harms the cause of the gospel,” but “often” does not equal “always.” We believe widespread evidence also shows that funds handled wisely can help *advance* the cause of the gospel. The reviewer seems to be offering judgment based on his general narrative of a destructive pattern, rather than evidence found in the book or in the Bhojpuri movement itself.

### *The Bhojpuri Bible*

The second issue to address is that of the Bhojpuri Bible. Responding to his own not-quite-accurate portrayal, “it is suggested that the movement really began when the Bhojpuri New Testament was released,” the reviewer argues:

But, in fact, Bhojpuri is traditionally a spoken rather than a written language. Even now, Bhojpuri churches use Hindi Bibles for preaching rather than the Bhojpuri version. Serious research is needed into the effectiveness and impact of the Bhojpuri Bible.

This reflects a shortage of understanding of the role of oral Scripture among oral learners. Among oral learners with very limited income, heart language Scriptures are most useful in *oral* form. We can agree that serious research into the effectiveness and impact of the Bhojpuri Bible could play a useful missiological function. Thankfully, one researcher has already identified this as a topic for exploration. But the goal of the research would not be to answer an outsider’s implied accusa-

tion that the leader of the movement has misunderstood or misrepresented the dynamics of growth in the movement. The goal of useful research would be to better understand the role of heart-language Scripture (both oral and written) in a large multi-generational Church Planting Movement.

### *Caste*

Third, the review highlights:

Perhaps the most astonishing claim in the book . . . : “If the high caste in our area are only 2 percent or 10 percent of the population, that same percentage is also reflected in the churches. . . . God is at work in all the castes.”

Attributing to the statement a level of specificity not intended (“Has any church anywhere in the world ever achieved what is claimed here, a perfect cross section of every strata of society?”), the reviewer concludes this must be false. As proof of likely impossibility, the reviewer cites a study from 1933. It is astonishing to see the reviewer claim a 90-year-old study without any current evidence as critical refutation.

It seems that rather than reflecting a desire to better understand what’s happening in frontier missions, the reviewer chose to critique the book’s descriptions of a movement, based partly on a paradigm from a previous century. On an encouraging note, though, the review stated (about the claim of the caste percentage reflected in the churches), “If this could be documented and demonstrated it would be revolutionary to all church growth and church planting movement thinking.” As with the disputed claim about the Bhojpuri Bible, a researcher has already identified this as a topic for more extensive research: research to be conducted on the ground, rather than through unsubstantiated accusations.

### *A Larger Concern*

A fourth and final note of concern seems appropriate to raise. Twenty-first century missiologists have recognized the vital importance of listening to non-Western voices: those born in majority non-Christian contexts who now serve on the cutting-edge of frontier missions. For more than two decades, many of us have heard rumors of significant movements happening among the unreached. However, those directly involved in these movements often felt reluctant to share much with outsiders about what was actually happening, especially in any public forum. Some of this reluctance is due to very real security concerns. Another reason is that describing what’s happening in a movement opens the door to attack from a wide range of directions. One of those is caustic criticism by Western “experts” who see (or at least suspect) that something about the movement doesn’t meet their standards of theological or academic rigor. I would have hoped that *IJFM* would welcome a non-Western leader’s open presentation of a sub-

stantial movement case study, rather than joining those who attack movements based on prior missiological biases. Writing a review with lack of evidence, numerous misrepresentations, and personal biases, ironically does not meet any standard of academic rigor.

As already mentioned, I look forward to the fruit of further research on topics such as the dynamics of caste within movements in India, and the use of heart-language Scriptures such as Bhojpuri. I see great potential in groups such as the *Motus Dei* Network for helpful research related to movements. I hope we can encourage interaction on such topics in ways that build up and encourage God's work at the frontiers of mission.

Sincerely,

Dave Coles

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*Dave Coles has served in Southeast Asia for twenty-four years and today encourages and resources church-planting movements among unreached groups. He is co-author of Bhojpuri Breakthrough and is widely published (under a pseudonym) on topics related to contextualization, ministry to Muslims, and the nature of the church. He serves with Beyond (beyond.org) and has served as Lead Facilitator for the Bridging the Divide network since 2011.*

## A Reply to Dave Coles

To the Editor,

I am disappointed that Dave Coles did not respond to the correctives I offered to his text. But he is disappointed that I did not hit the main points of his text, and probably will be disappointed with this response to his response.

One of the local informants behind my review wrote this in response to Dave's letter:

I think the writer of the letter assumes you live in USA and judge from there. He needs to understand you have spent substantial time in India, and you are in touch with people who are close to the situation in Bhojpuri area. There are several other missions working in that area, and they (not you) don't accept the claims of the book. The question remains for the readers, who is more authentic of the two groups!!

I share this because I think it is largely valid, but also to comment *against* the "two groups" of the conclusion. My review was not from an anti-movement or cynical perspective, and trying to define "camps" and argue from "in" and "out" groups will not serve the kingdom of God. Better research, which includes better listening and better acceptance of critical evaluation, is the way forward for all of us.

Sincerely,

H. L. Richard

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*H. L. Richard is an independent researcher focused on the Hindu-Christian encounter. He is widely published on the history of contextual ministry among high-caste populations of India.*