

The Bengalis: An Unreached People-Group Since William Carey's Early Start in 1793

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INTRODUCTION

In 1793, William Carey, the father of modern missions, landed in Calcutta and brought the Gospel to the Bengalis. But even after more than 200 years of access to the Gospel, the **Bengalis** remain not only the largest unreached people group in India but the largest unreached people group on earth. Today, the majority of the Bengalis are in Bangladesh. Just over the border in India, there are 90 million Bengalis, mostly in West Bengal and in the Northeast. The Bengali diaspora numbers over one million, exceeding the populations of more than 70 nations.

With 4,635 people groups and over 800 languages and dialects, India is a focal point for Christians who wish to see every nation, tribe and tongue reached for Christ. India also has one-half of all people groups worldwide that are considered unreached and have a population of over 100,000! India's largest unreached language group has only just over one-half of one percent who are Believers - the Bengalis.

SUMMARY OF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On October 16, 1905, the Colonial British Administration mandated a Muslim-Hindu partition of the Bengal Province in British India, thus creating East and West Bengal. Muslim Bengalis moved to what is now Bangladesh (East Bengal) and Hindu Bengalis remained in West Bengal. Until that time, religious tolerance was practiced among the Bengali people and they cohabited peacefully. Although there has been increasing persecution of Christians as well as Hindus in Bangladesh, West Bengal, India still practices a certain amount of religious tolerance primarily due to the policies of the Communist Party that has been in political power in the state for the last 27 years.

CURRENT FACTS

Worldwide, Bengalis are the largest unreached language group, numbering approximately 230 million. According to the 2001 census, the population of West Bengal is 90 million, of which approximately 80%, or 71 million, are Bengali. Of the West Bengal population, 73% are Hindu, about 66 million. Islam, the second largest religious group in West Bengal, is estimated at 20%, or 20 million adherents. Although Christianity has grown remarkably in the state, especially in the northern hills of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts, there are still only 0.6% Christians, and of that small percentage, the number of Bengali Christians is almost non-existent.



- Total Bengali World Population, 230 Million.
- Less than 1% Christian.
- 220 million Bengalis live an area one-half the size of California.
- **Geographic and Religious Distribution of Bengalis:**
 - INDIA
 - West Bengal- 71 Million (23% Muslim).
 - Assam, 7 Million (70% Muslim).
 - Other Indian states, 7+ Million.
 - BANGLADESH
 - 141 Million, almost entirely Muslim. As this is one of the poorest nations on earth.
 - Worldwide Diaspora
 - Bengalis are immigrating to India and beyond (USA, UK and Europe).
 - More than one million Bengalis live outside of India with over 150,000 Bengalis in the USA, primarily in New York and New Jersey.
- **Other Facts on the Bengalis**
 - Of the five Nobel Peace Prize winners from India, four are Bengali.
 - A large percentage of the doctors in India are Bengali.
 - Many top sports stars, singers, actors and actresses in India are Bengali.

BARRIERS TO THE GOSPEL

The Bengali people are extremely proud of their heritage and community. They believe in education, have a strong work ethic and love to debate for the sake of debate. Spiritually-minded, Bengalis tend to practice their religion in a more orthodox fashion. Caste is not a primary concern for them except in marriage. Bengalis are brothers and sisters first and religion or caste afterward. For the Bengali, caste is only an indication of the work they do. Although they have a strong awareness of caste, it isn't a barrier for them socially. Bengalis of differing castes are willing to mix together quite freely.

Unfortunately, the communal pride of the Bengali is a stumbling block to the Gospel. Because most Christian work has concentrated on the tribal people and Nepalis, Bengalis feel Christianity is beneath them. Another obstacle is the lack of knowledge that most followers of Christ have of Islam or Hinduism. The Bengali people want to discuss and compare, and with little knowledge of their religion, many Believers are quickly made to feel inadequate.

PROPOSED MISSIONARY STRATEGY

This is easily overcome by encouraging new Bengali Believers to reach those of their own community first. A middle class Bengali Believer is the best equipped to reach another middle class Bengali. The cell group or house church is a great blessing in this case. Because Bengalis in the same community mix freely, they will go to another's home for informal times of Bible study, discussion and worship, particularly in an urban environment. Bengalis believe in prayer and will respond positively to Believers praying for them either in a group or in their own homes.

Key elements for reaching the world's largest unreached people group include extraordinary prayer, discipleship and encouraging Bengali Believers to reach their own people. As existing Believers are encouraged to pray for those who do not yet know Christ, the Body becomes actively involved in seeing their own people reached. As people come to know the Lord, they are taught to obey the commands of the Lord Jesus as He commanded to be done in the Great Commission. Each Believer is encouraged to disciple a new Believer who in turn discipled another.

CONCLUSION

Presently, many good opportunities exist for making a lasting impact among the unreached Bengali people. Please pray and consider what steps you might make to extend the love of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them today. Today is day of salvation for the Bengali people!

Published in "Featured Article" July 2007 www.globalmissiology.org