

Tentmaking in India

In India the term tentmaking is not commonly used and is generally misunderstood, yet a growing number of churches are reaching out to the unreached peoples through Christian professionals in mission ministry. These professionals are the laity of the church. In India, many churches have been established through their efforts.

by E. David Chaldran

Theological institutions teach about tentmaking as a “Pauline mission.” In India it has not been a common topic in any study or discussion among Christian professionals or in churches. Many understand “tent” making as putting up temporary shelters for functions and business establishments; these are known as “tent houses.”

Three years ago in a Mission Conference, we had put up a display stall with information about tentmaking and about the situation and prayer concerns in North India. No one visited this stall until we had time to introduce this as a new ministry. Then many visited us and we found that they initially understood us to be a group who put up tents (temporary shelters) for new churches. Now many of them are our prayer partners.

Unreached Peoples

Though tentmaking in India is not well known, a growing number of churches are reaching out to the unreached peoples through Christian professionals in cross-cultural ministry. India has 4,635 people groups, and it is common to have many different people groups within a small geographical area sharing a common language. These professionals are the lay leaders and the laity of the church. In India, many churches have been established through their efforts. Western missionaries, started schools, colleges, and hospitals, as part of their strategy in reaching out to the local people. Many of them could be called tentmakers but for the fact that they were dependent on their sending churches for their financial support. William Carey and his friends

Joshua Marshman and William Ward did a tremendous amount of work around Calcutta and in West Bengal. They started the Serampore College. Dr. Ida Scudder started the Christian Medical College at Vellore, Tamilnadu. Miss Christina Rainy brought a woman doctor with her and started the present Christina Rainy Hospital at Madras, Tamilnadu. CMS Missionaries started a college in Kottayam, Kerala. The examples are numerous, and frequently the only reward is that many Indians have appreciated the sacrifice and contribution of the Christians to the society.

Since 1960 mission agencies in India started targeting the responsive people groups among the tribal peoples, and in the last decade some of them have moved their focus to the urban people groups. In the states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, we have seen many pioneering Indian evangelists, who felt God’s leading to a particular area. To reach the local people some have used the strategy of starting schools. It has given them an identity among the people and they have been accepted as part of the local society.

Those who started such schools have diversified into other programmes like adult literacy, and community development, while their church planting activities are also continuing to grow. They have tentmakers (teachers committed for missions) working for them in these programmes and are looking for more potential tentmakers to fill other posts. Josephs in Alwar, Rajasthan, M.A. Thomas in Kota, Rajasthan, Shourie and his wife Rebecca in Nagod, Madhya Pradesh and others have

schools of their own. Immanuel Ministries have many schools and other social development programmes, including adult literacy programmes in many parts of Rajasthan.

Ministries, adopting this kind of strategy, can also be found in other parts of India. Dr. R. A. C. Paul went to a tribe in Orissa, which lived high in the mountains, to preach and provide medical care to the people. After ministering for a few years, he passed away from an illness he contracted there. His ministry was continued by his wife, Iris, who was also a doctor. Now she has a team with her involved in medical development and literacy programmes based in Malkangiri, Orissa. Today there is a church in that place run by the Indian Missionary Society.

A Western Religion

Christianity in India is considered a Western religion, and people are opposed to its propagation. Though there is ‘freedom of religion’ in the country, conversions to Christianity are still opposed. In some places where Christian work has started, Hindu fanatics have opposed them by threatening them, burning down churches and disrupting their activities. Converts have faced many problems from their society and many have been excommunicated from their own homes and society.

In the state of Orissa, 27 churches were burned down in the recent past, and cement is being reused for construction of Christian churches. In Rajasthan, a mission agency had started medical work and in about a year the opposition began to threaten their lives. Soon after that, they had to close

down their medical work and moved out of that location. All of these oppositions have been there because of the fear of conversions.

Tentmaking is definitely a positive mission strategy for India. One of the important aspects for a tentmaker to be effective in India is to be accepted by the people where he lives. This is of great importance in the Hinduistic environment. Due to the caste system in India, people have the nature of accepting others as “our people” or keeping them out as “outsiders.” Christianity has been considered a foreigner’s religion. Hindus consider all foreigners with Christian passports as “Christians.” They do not know how to differentiate between “nominal Christians” and “committed Christians.” So far they have seen and understood Christianity only by the witness and life of nominal Christians, (much like the ugly American), since the presence of truly committed Christians is very negligible.

Nominal vs. Real Christianity

The total Christian presence in India is only 2.3% of the total population, which includes all kinds of Christians including Catholics. Unfortunately, the majority of Indians have only been associated with nominal Christians and have formed a very negative image of Christian faith and life. So the average Indian does not respect the Christian religion and considers all Christians as outsiders.

The only way around this obstacle is by showing through our lives that we are different from the general image that they have formed about Christians. We need to be open to them, respect them and their culture, and show through our lives in our families and profession that we are different. The lifestyle we live, (standard of living), should be closer to their lifestyle or else they will never identify with us. Showing people our true love and concern, motivated by the love of Christ,

has no substitution in India. During the last two decades, two programmes relating to tentmaking were started. Rev. Ken Gnanakken introduced a vocational training programme together with theological training in the ACTS Institute. Professor Vijayam, conducted a training programme in his institution TENT to equip Christian workers and evangelists with simple basic skills. Both of these programmes were aimed at helping Christian workers and pastors to earn some money by means of using a skill. Both of these programmes have continued to fulfill their goals all through these years. A development agency called Farms India, provides training in agricultural training like cattle, poultry and goat rearing, pickle making, etc. They also provide small start-up loans to help the students get started. This programme is aimed for the benefit of the converts.

Tentmakers Centre

In 1992, Tentmaker Centre had its beginning with the purpose of assisting Indian Christian professionals to move into areas of North India where there was no Christian witness. Our role is to motivate and mobilize Christian professionals, identify job openings, guide them, and put them in touch with some local Christian friends or a church in that area if one exists.

In addition, we guide and train such potential tentmakers, as well as working tentmakers, in various practical aspects of cross-cultural living. This is done through weekend seminars and workshops. Tentmaker Centre has published a handbook for tentmakers entitled “Breaking New Ground.” We publish a quarterly newsletter *Tentlink*, which carries news about various Christian ministries among some of the North Indian states. We list job openings and suitable training programmes for tentmakers, and publish articles on tentmaking, etc. *Tentlink* provides potential tentmakers with information on

job openings and others use it as a prayer bulletin about ministries in North India. We also sponsor sessions and programmes conducted by mission organisations and churches.

Today, we have tentmakers working as teachers, social workers, administrators of programmes, engineers, doctors, bank officers, in government offices, as well as in Christian institutions. There is little or no limitation where tentmakers can apply their trades and skills. In banking institutions and government establishments people are transferable to any part of the country. We have seen examples of tentmakers in many professions involved with student ministries, leading Bible study groups, helping in church activities, and being a support to the existing church in those areas.

Tentmaking Progress in India

In what follows we have highlighted some key aspects of tentmaking in India as seen from their life. All of them have a salaried job and are involved in ministry in their free time. They are not financially supported by any church or group. Neither have they been considered by any church as their tentmaking missionaries.

God's calling is important. Mr. KJ, was posted in one of the very remote areas of Rajasthan, a state in North West India. He had decided to move to North India and was looking for opportunities there. He had to wait for a long time. Meanwhile, he made a trip to North India, with a few friends, (organised by UESI), and the Lord confirmed His calling while on this trip. When he went to the place of the job site, he was shocked to see the environment where he was to live and work.

The place was a desert, very thinly populated, and yet his work was to be among the people. He had to travel about 40 kilometers to contact 2 villages. In (South India, this is very unusual.) The temperature goes up to 50 degrees

Celsius in the Summer and near freezing in the Winter. He said that if it had not been for the clarity of God's will in his life he would have left the place immediately.

However, now he has a regular Bible study going on with many non-Christians attending. He is learning the language and he is able to communicate with the people. He feels that he needs to be more thorough with the language, so that he can understand the problems of the people better and also not miss any opportunities to share about Christ with the local people.

Language is important. Mr. VR was from a Hindu background but had come to know the Lord and had committed himself for missions during his student days. He tried constantly to get a job in North India, but could not get one because he did not know Hindi. Without giving up hope, he kept on attempting to find employment. Finally, one company called him for an interview. They brought up the problem of learning the local language, but he assured them that within three months he would learn the language. They were convinced and gave him the job. True to his word, he was able to speak Hindi within a short time and became involved in Christian ministry with a local church among the Hindi speaking people.

Facilitating Tentmakers. Mr. SV, an engineer by profession, belongs to a state in South India. He was working with one of the leading companies in India. He was very involved in ministry, primarily to young people. He was very gifted and formed a music team and used it as a tool in evangelism. He drew a decent salary, and had good friends and family near him. Then he received the call to go to North India as a tentmaker.

He started applying to some companies but did not succeed in getting a job for a long time. After nearly a year

and a half, he came to know of an opening in a Christian Technical Institute in North India. He applied for the post of principal. The salary scale was very low even after the institute increased it for his sake. But what they had offered was just a little over half of what he was getting in his previous position in South India. With his second daughter only two months old, moving to a place that was nearly 3,000 kilometers away, was a major decision. But the Lord confirmed His will, and he was led to take up this new position.

After only two years in his new job, his contribution to the ministry in that region has been profound. He helps in leading Bible study groups and helps other ministries throughout the state. His witness in the institution is very good. The institute has grown during these years. He was instrumental in bringing another tentmaker to a sister institution, a school in the same area. He is encouraging more tentmakers to go to North India. God has blessed his commitment and has used him in the advance of His Kingdom in North India.

Accept God's plan. Mr. PC is from a Catholic background, and came to know Christ during his school days. He had also been helping in Bible study groups while in college. He got a job in New Delhi, with a reputable company. He feels that he did not have a specific calling to go to North India, but fully believes in God's plan and will in his life. He is now sure that it is God's will for him to be in North India. He gives his spare time for ministry among students and has also been helping Tentmaker Centre. His struggles include being lonely since he had experienced good Christian fellowship back home in South India. He also senses pressure due to the predominant secular values and materialistic people's attitudes. He also struggles with the change of food and high cost of living.

Conclusion

Tentmaking in India is just beginning to blossom. Churches have not yet received the vision of what tentmakers can do. Christian professional organizations also need to take the initiative in this area. Suitable training programmes have to be developed. The vision of Tentmaker Centre is that potential tentmakers from areas concentrated with Christians would flood into areas with little or no Christian witnesses and thus show through their lives and work the claims and love of Jesus Christ and so disciple the unreached peoples of North India.

E. David Chandran is one of the founding members of Tentmaker Centre and is now its coordinator. An engineer by profession, while in South India he felt the Lord's call to be a tentmaker and moved to North India in 1990. He is ably supported by his wife Beulah, who is presently the OnTrack Coordinator with Interserve. She has coordinated the Tentmaker Centre activities for over 2 years. Both of them have been associated closely with UESI (IFES affiliate in India), ministering to university students. They are both Interserve Partners based in New Delhi.

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