

# India 2016 Trip Report

Prepared by Ed Harrell and Russ Roberts

January 1-24, 2016

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We begin this year's report with a special word of thanks to those who have supported our annual visits to preach and teach in India since 1995 and to those who have given support to Indian preachers we have recommended. The results have surpassed anything we could have imagined more than twenty years ago.

Our team of eight workers had another fruitful and encouraging trip in January. Each year, we see specific indicators of spiritual growth. Although evident in past visits, this year we were even more encouraged by the increasing number of young men (ages 18-30) taking active roles in the worship services and as skilled interpreters. Both the young men and women at the worship services have their bibles open, are very attentive and take notes throughout our lessons. We have witnessed the growth of an impressive new generation in many of the churches. These young people are well educated and remarkably learned in the Scriptures.



Roy Ebinezar translating for Nathan in Madurai



Ed preaching in a Gospel Meeting in Coimbatore with Thomas David translating

We have been working with many of the Indian preachers and congregations for over 20 years, beginning with Ed and Deedee Harrell's two year residence in Hyderabad in 1993-1995. Our relationship with many of the preachers and their families has become very strong. So it is encouraging to witness the constant spiritual growth in these individual Christians and local congregations that we've worked with for two decades.

During our January trip we taught more than 450 preachers in Bible classes and in Gospel Meetings and preached in more than 30 churches. We were able to visit personally with almost all of the preachers whom we have recommended for support. Specific summaries are appended to this general report for those who are supporting men based on our recommendations.

In the past seven years (particularly after the Harrell/Waldron debate in Bangalore in 2009) we have made many new contacts with able men, some of them skilled in the use of English. Still, most of the preachers we are working with speak a variety of Indian languages (including Telugu, Tamil, Kanada, Hindi, and Paiti) and thus our classes and meetings are conducted in seven large cities and nearby villages.

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The focus of this trip, as it has been for the last several years, is four-fold:

1. To encourage and instruct Indian Christians in classes and weekend meetings.
2. To assess the potential of the evangelists seeking support through personal interviews.
3. To teach and encourage preachers with the aim of grounding them in sound doctrine and teaching how to build solid, self-sufficient congregations.
4. To try to improve the ability of those supported by Americans to report on their work and to stay in touch with those in the United States who are interested in their work. Language remains a serious problem for many of the non-English speaking preachers.



Robert teaching a class in Chennai

## The Team

Except for one member, our team this year which traveled to India in January was composed of veterans who have been on these visits before. They know the Indian brethren and enjoy working with them. This was Ryan Boyer's first trip but he quickly became well-adjusted to the Indian brethren and the way in which we work in India. From left to right: **Russ Roberts** (Sembach, Germany), **Ryan Boyer** (Ellisville, MO), **Nathan Johnson** (Birmingham, AL), **Ed Harrell** (Jacksonville, FL), **Tom Kinzel** (Kingsport, TN), **Jason Cicero** (Annandale, VA), and **Robert Harrell** (Blackshear, GA), Not pictured **Alan Cornett** (Lexington, KY).



## Schedule of Work

The team went to seven cities this year. Week long classes were conducted in both Hyderabad and Coimbatore, while one or two day classes were conducted in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and other cities where gospel meetings were held on the weekends. Each Sunday, we preached in congregations in the surrounding areas. As in the past few years, the preachers from the Northeast suggested that we not hold classes in their area this year because political unrest in the region continues and the Indian government strongly warns foreigners not to go into to these states. As a result, 14 men journeyed to Delhi from Northeast India and Myanmar (Burma) where they joined the church



Johnson and Pushparaj make opening remarks before the Mumbai lessons

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there for the weekend class and meeting. They journeyed for three days and nights by train (or more) to reach Delhi.

## Bible Classes

<u>City</u>	<u>Team Members</u>
<b>Hyderabad</b> 220 attendees	Ed, Tom, Rob, Alan
<b>Delhi</b> 75 attendees	Ed, Tom, Ryan, Nathan, Jason, Rob, Russ
<b>Chennai</b> 55 attendees	Tom, Ryan, Rob, Alan
<b>Mumbai</b> 75 attendees	Tom, Ryan, Rob, Russ
<b>Coimbatore</b> 50 attendees	Ed, Nathan, Jason, Russ

## Gospel Meetings and Preaching

<u>City</u>	<u>Team Members</u>
<b>Hyderabad</b>	Ed, Tom, Ryan, Rob, Alan
<b>Chennai</b>	Tom, Ryan, Rob, Alan
<b>Madurai</b>	Jason, Nathan
<b>Coimbatore</b>	Ed, Jason, Nathan and Russ
<b>Bangalore</b>	Tom, Rob, Ryan
<b>Delhi</b>	Ed, Jason, Nathan
<b>Mumbai</b>	Tom, Ryan, Rob, Russ

## Growth of the Lord's Work in India

We have seen remarkable growth in the Lord's work in India since Ed and his wife Deedee lived in Hyderabad twenty-three years ago. In the last five years, our opportunities have grown to staggering proportions. Among the approximately 500 preachers who attended classes and gospel meetings, many came to study with us for the first time, including some seasoned and very capable preachers. The Indian churches are becoming more firmly established, grounded in the truth, and they are embracing the idea of trying to become self-sufficient.



We have been particularly pleased in the improvement of the work in Mumbai (one of the ten largest cities in the world) which has many American visitors. Through a contact of brother Thomas David (capable preacher from Coimbatore), we are now working with an impressive young congregation in the south central part of the city. The church is made up of about 30 members, mostly under the age of 40. Several of them are



Alan preaching on Sunday at Ballangar with Surender translating



Classes in Mumbai were attended by Christians from several congregations



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well-educated and English speaking. The church was able to find a rented facility in the heart of the Dharavi slum, exactly where they want to be. The congregation is currently supporting two other preachers in other parts of Mumbai. We anticipate more local churches will grow from the example of the Dharavi congregation over the next few years.

## “Window of Opportunity” for the Gospel Message

According to latest estimates, around 80% of Indians still live in villages. Literacy rate in the country is 74%. But the growth of the major cities in recent years has had a major impact on the spread of the gospel. The children of many rural village laborers are becoming more educated and moving to the larger cities in search of work and better jobs. Many of these young people have been educated in English medium schools and have been reared in small churches with dedicated preachers. The encouraging evidence that we have witnessed is that these faithful young Christians are bringing the gospel, taught by their parents, to the larger cities. They have added significantly to the growth of the urban congregations and to their financial stability. These young people are also a testimony to the effectiveness of the village preachers who often preach in two or three churches every Sunday.



Tom and Alan conducting an interview in Chennai



The use of multiple song leaders is common in Indian congregations

## Model Congregations and Individual Preachers in India

One of the major objectives of our evangelistic effort is to establish churches that will eventually develop into spiritually mature congregations, independent of foreign support. In India, planting the seed of “self-sufficiency” has been a long process. It has taken time for the local Indian brethren to understand this responsibility and to foresee that they can function as an effective congregation without relying on American brethren. One of the primary focuses during our visits is to teach preachers and congregations the importance of becoming more self-sufficient.



Ryan teaches classes in Chennai

Self-sufficiency is still years away for the smaller congregations in the mid-size Indian cities (50,000 to 500,000), but there are some congregations in the larger cities (over 1 million) within India that are demonstrating their ability to do their work without financial support from abroad.

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Classes at Ballanagar



Classes at Mouli Ali

Over the past few years, our report focused upon two churches in Hyderabad (**Moula Ali** and **Ballanagar**) as model congregations for the potential of what a scriptural local work should be. Both congregations began when the Harrells were in Hyderabad in 1994, meeting in homes with around 25 people. Within the past two years, both congregations have appointed qualified elders and deacons; have spent thousands of dollars from their own treasuries to improve their meeting facilities. The membership of Moula Ali is nearing 200 and Ballanagar more than 100. Both congregations contribute to the support of five or six preachers working in surrounding villages.

Several other congregations in India have taken deliberate steps toward self-sufficiency. Each has a nucleus within the congregation of spiritually sound

men and women, including well-educated younger families. Some of the congregations with a short-term potential for self-sufficiency include Madurai, Delhi, Erode, Bangalore, Raipur, Nellore, Chennai, and several churches in the Coimbatore area.

In some Indian congregations in the smaller villages (where about 80% of Indians still live), the desire to be “self-sustaining” is hindered the size of their communities and by the financial status of the members. Their situation is much like that of many small churches in America that are unable to support a preacher. Most of the village Christians are poor laborers. Increasingly, support for these village preachers is being supplied by the thriving urban congregations or by American supporters.

It is most encouraging when the preachers supported by stateside congregations understand the need to become self-supported. Last year two of the Indian preachers who have been financially supported for several years, indicated they no longer require financial help. Brother **K. Sunder Rao** (Navipet) and **Benjamin Bena** (Burma) asked that their support be stopped because they were able to work without it. These men serve an encouraging example to many of the preachers in India that the support from the American brethren should be seen as a temporary income and that being self-supporting is attainable.



Jason teaching at the Coimbatore classes



Tom teaching an evening lesson in Sadasivapet (near Hyderabad)

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## Reliable Indian Co-Workers

Through years of experience we have developed strong partners among the Indian evangelists. We have complete confidence in the honesty and soundness of these co-workers. They have weathered the storm from the ever present institutional influences and are constantly teaching and demonstrating how to build effective local works. Below are brief sketches of a few of the growing list of talented and devout men upon whom we depend:



V.J. Benson



Robert with Y. Surender



Dr. T.C. Guite



Panneer Das and Roy

**V.J. Benson** and **Y. Surender** (Hyderabad) preach in the strong congregations at Moula Ali and Ballanagar. Both are skilled translators and preach and teach widely throughout India. Brother Benson is the most widely-known and respected faithful preacher in India. He is the most important facilitator for our work in India. His brother-in-law, Yerra Surender, has earned the respect of many of those working in the Hyderabad area.



Thang Guite and family

**Thang Guite** (Northeast and Delhi) and **Roy Ebinezar** (Madurai- South India) are both very bright and impressive young preachers who should be effective workers for many years. Both are skilled translators. They are in their early 30's and have boldly and resolutely taken stands for the truth. As a result, they and have been targets of harsh attacks. Brother Thang has been supported in his work in the Northeast and in Delhi by **Dr. T. C. Guite**, one of the most respected Christians in Northeast India, and a number of very talented and respected preachers including **S. Soikholian** and **Langkochin**. Brother Roy's father, **Panneer Das**, has preached and taught for over 30 years in South India and is highly respected among all Indian Christians. As a result from Ed's 2009 debate, **Panneer Das** left his job and joined his son in building a Tamil-speaking congregation in Madurai. Many others have followed his example.

**Gopal Dass** (Coimbatore) taught in an institutional School of Preaching for 16 years. A fearless defender of truth, Gopal has taught scores of his former students who hold him in high esteem. He has been an important point of contact for us in the southern part of India. Gopal is an able Tamil translator and has introduced scores of new preachers to our classes. **Thomas David** of Coimbatore, an extremely skilled Tamil translator, has taught classes throughout the region and has opened several doors to sustainable congregations in the Mumbai area.



Thomas David and Gopal Dass in Coimbatore



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## Classes, Preaching and Interviewing- the Heart of Our Work

This year, we scheduled our week-long classes in three separate locations; Hyderabad (central India) for Telugu speaking preachers, and in Chennai and Coimbatore (southern India) for Tamil speakers. The topics this year were practical lessons on the work of the local evangelist and congregational growth, which included *Preachers and Preaching, Building Local Churches, Leadership Principles from Ezra and Nehemiah, How to Study the Bible, and Lessons from the Sermon on the Mount.* The lessons were well received. This arrangement of the classes is possible because we are now working in most of these cities with competent men who can arrange for the gospel meetings and daily classes.

On Sundays and during several weekend meetings, the eight of us preached in approximately 30 churches. Cumulatively, the team probably preached to more than 5,000 people. As usual, the meetings often resulted in baptisms (usually performed by Indian preachers). Indian brethren arranged several special events that brought together Christians from a surrounding area for meetings in tents or in a rented facility.

## Church Buildings

Having a public place to worship in India is highly desirable because of the lingering influence of the abolished caste system. Many Indians are still reluctant to enter the home of someone of a lower caste and having a public meeting place overcomes those prejudices and also brings stability to a congregation.



Construction at Raju Colony



Construction at Madurai

Another reason why congregations desire their own buildings is due to the recent change in the political climate in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing group heavily connected to the Hindu nationalists, is currently in power. We have witnessed the influence of the BJP over the past couple of years as more and more Indian brethren are being vacated from public rented halls for their Sunday worship. Though the enforcement of laws varies from state to state, many churches in the larger Indian cities can no longer use schools, community halls or libraries as their place of worship. Their membership is often too large for a single house so many are searching for place of their own.

Ed and other Americans have helped raise funds from individuals in America to aid in building twenty buildings in India and Burma. In every case, the Indian Christians have shown ability and a willingness to



Russ preaching for a small Hindi speaking church in Mumbai



Classes in Chennai



Classes in Coimbatore

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contribute to these building projects. In the villages, American contributions of \$2,000/\$3,000 have enabled congregations to complete structures that they have erected with their own labor and funding. Like the United States, in India land in the large urban areas is expensive. Most of the city churches continue to meet in rented facilities. Many are saving to try to buy property, and we do receive occasional large donations to help them. We would be happy to supply further information about current needs upon request.

We would like to once again express our thanks to those who have had fellowship with us in this work. We interviewed approximately 100 preachers during the trip and we put particular stress on their need to have better communication with those who financially support them.

It was another encouraging trip to India.



Alan with the church at Raju Colony

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If you have further questions about the work in India, contact us or any one of the men listed below who worked in India in January.



Interviewing in Coimbatore

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Ballanagar interviews

## Nathan Johnson

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## Ryan Boyer

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Classes in Delhi



Ed, Jason and Roy in discussion between classes



Nathan in Coimbatore



A promising young Christian man in South India



Ryan teaching in Delhi



Rob interviewing in Delhi



Tom at the Mumbai classes