Urbanisation, Change and Christian Mission in the Indian Context: A Study of the Changes in the Educated Middle-Class Hindus

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Abstract

India is urbanising rapidly and bringing with it rapid social changes. India, as is well known, is a predominantly Hindu country and a caste-based society. This article traces to what extent urbanisation and other related factors have changed the concept of caste for the educated middle-class Hindu and the avenues those changes have opened up for Christian witness.

Key Words: caste, change, Christian witness, middle-class educated Hindu, urbanisation

Today more than 55% of the world population lives in urban areas. India with 32% urban population may seem to lag behind, but in terms of absolute numbers India's urban dwellers are a mind-boggling 400 million. A UN report of 2018 has predicted that this number would double by 2050. (United Nations 2018). India has 46 cities with populations of over one million, with three having more than 10 million.

Sociologists generally agree that urbanisation brings change. Eshelman and Cashion are of the opinion that "The size, complexity and density of urban communities have given rise to new forms of social organisations, new behaviours and new attitudes." Weber, they say, labelled these changes as a transition from a traditional to a rational society (Eshelman and Cashion 1983, 512-513).

This article examines what changes urbanisation may have brought to the educated middle-class Hindu. They constitute more than 100 million (more than 25%) of the urban population of India. This is a group that is not only urban, but which has been schooled in western education .We would want to see how urbanisation coupled with western education have changed the behaviour and attitudes of the educated middle-class urban Hindu.

Caste in the Urban Context

The three pillars of Indian Hindu society are caste, religion, and family. Though all three are equally important, due to space constraints this study will be looking only at caste in the urban context. The Indian caste system, a hierarchical division of Hindu society based on ritual purity or pollution and social status, forms a basis of the social stratification among Hindus. The article's larger interest is to see the changes in the caste system through the ages and especially the caste dynamics in the urban context.

According to Ghurye's analysis, the caste system has at least six basic characteristics which form the core of this very important institution of Hinduism (Ghurye 1992, 37-48):

1) Segmental division of society
2) Hierarchy
3) Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse
4) Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections
5) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation
6) Restrictions on marriage outside caste

Hindu society was divided into different segments. One was born into a caste group. The *Panchayat* (local governing body), which was free to make its own rules for the community, regulated every aspect of life of its members. Obviously, a 'community feeling' that transcends caste distinctions would be missing. Even the moral standards of one caste would be different from that of another. As Ghurye comments, "Castes were small and complete social worlds in themselves marked off definitely from one another, though subsisting within the larger society" (Ghurye 1992, 38).

What separates these caste groups from each other is a subject of intense debate. Some scholars believe that there is a definite hierarchy that separates them; others believe that it is the distinctiveness of each caste that makes it unique. C. Bougle wrote at the start of the nineteenth century, "The spirit of caste united these three tendencies, repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization, and all three must be borne in mind if one wishes to give a complete definition of the caste system" (Bougle 1992, 65). Bougle's definition of caste is complete for it encompasses all aspects of the caste system. Each person was born into a particular caste and each caste was part of a hierarchy. The occupation of a person depended on his position in the hierarchy. And most importantly, this hierarchy also governed the social interaction between people.

The perpetuation of hierarchy has its own far reaching implications. There is a restriction on feeding and social intercourse between the castes. A person of a high caste would never accept water, much less any cooked food, from a person of a lower caste. Of course, the higher castes have found their justification in their scriptures, which seem to have strengthened their resolve to perpetuate the hierarchical distinctions.

Every caste was attached with certain civil and religious privileges and/or restrictions. That the low castes and the untouchables were not allowed to draw water from the village well or enter the village temple are only samples of the kind of ill-treatments that they received at the hand of the high caste. Another very important restriction was on the choice of occupation for each caste. Each caste was assigned with a particular occupation, and it was hereditary. The menial tasks were to be handled by the *untouchables or Harijans* (the outcaste), while the *Sudras* (low caste) took up those involving manual labour. Last but not the least was the restriction of marriage to one's caste. It was not only the caste which was important but also the sub-caste when it came to marriage. Though endogamy was quite strict, hypergamy was permitted in certain cases.

So it is obvious that Hindu society at large was divided into various caste groups and sub-castes, held together through strict endogamy and restricted social life. Yet, in spite of distinct cultural traditions of each caste, the castes were able to function together as one society. According to Ghurye, the social economic interdependence of each caste held the society together, creating a harmony in civil life. Of course, this harmony was not the harmony of parts that are equally valued, but of units which were rigorously subordinated to one another (Ghurye 1992, 48). Many Indian leaders may have exalted the caste system as a means of maintaining order in the society. Yet, it is strongly believed that caste in India has been perpetuated by the upper caste in order to exploit and oppress the lower caste.

Caste and Change

Two centuries ago, Louis Writh postulated that the city would have a profound effect on traditional social values, which would cause irreversible changes in the way people thought and lived. His thesis was found to be largely true in European and Western countries, and it was thought that the same would be the case in India as well. Frank Conlon says that the

dominant anticipatory theme of scholarship on urbanisation and society in India seems to have been based upon a Writhian assumption that traditional social institutions—the typical forms of family and caste—would experience profound erosion both as a result of urban experience and as a by-product of the expansion of urban influences into the countryside (Conlon 1977, 127).

Sociologists generally agree that caste has undergone change for the urban educated middle-class Hindu. But there is a difference of opinion as to what has caused the change. This study will not get into that wider debate but will focus on the changes that have occurred with respect to caste in urban India with reference to the educated middle-class Hindu.

Impact of British Interventions on Caste

India has always had cities, but as Pauline Kolenda rightly points out, the cultural patterns of the indigenous city were not distinctly different from those of the village (Kolenda 1978, 141). Though religions like Islam did have an effect on Hinduism but did not change its fundamental character. It was certain interventions of the British that brought about fundamental change.

The legal system in India when the British came was based on the principle of hierarchy. The legality of a matter was decided on the caste of the victim and the perpetrator, which meant that the legal system was non-egalitarian in nature. The British introduced various legal innovations which struck down Hindu law and which were based on principles of universalism, rationalism and individualism (Singh 1972, 96). These new laws abolished many of the practices which were against human dignity. Singh rightly says that all these changes posed a serious challenge to the two cardinal attributes of the Indian tradition—hierarchy and holism (Singh 1972, 86). Everyone became equal in the sight of the law, and the special privileges that the high caste enjoyed were thus taken away.

The British also brought in other legislative changes, such as abolishing untouchability. Along with industrialization, this legal end of untouchability brought with it many changes in the pattern and process of urbanisation. Heterogeneous colonies sprang up near factories. Restaurants and public transport, cinema halls, and other public places were open to all without discretion of caste. New workplaces like factories, hospitals, and schools were places where the caste criteria were not taken into account. Such mixing of peoples was a great blow to the caste system as was practiced traditionally.

Change in Caste Ideology

The urban educated middle class had to accept by default all the changes brought about through British legal interventions. However, whether these changes enabled them to overcome the caste system along with its prejudices was another matter. Their education under the British system made them somewhat unique, as it was different from the one practiced before. Based on a modern scientific worldview, the education system of the British taught equality and rational thinking, and it went against the thought pattern espoused by the principles of hierarchy and holism. Did the British education system thereby create a conflict of ideologies and pose a threat to the old system of education? Did the age-old traditions get transformed by their interaction with the educated elite? In addition, the city brought people of different cultures, religions, and regions together. This mixing of peoples should have caused either the diffusion of ideas giving rise to a syncretic culture or it should have done away with the irrational giving rise to a new rational system.

One area which demonstrably did change in the urban context for the educated middle class was their traditional obligation to adhere to the lifestyle of the caste into which they were born and to pursue the occupation allotted to it. Hemlata Acharya did a study to analyze the changing role of religious specialists in the pilgrim city of Nasik and found that they are increasingly taking up new and varied jobs (Acharya 1974, 391-402). But it is important to note that the high caste have stuck to white collar jobs, leaving the menial work to the lower caste. This sampling indicates that the educated middle class are selective in choosing the changes that they want to adapt to.

Andre Beteille, in his lecture at the University of California in 1992, contented that the educated middle class seemed to be in a state of confusion with respect to the orientation of caste in the society. They knew that caste existed but did not know how to respond to it as educated people living in the modern world (Beteille 1997, 152-155). The conflict within them has led to a compromise in that they tend to be rational in their public life and yet otherwise in their private life. Prominent men like Bakimchandra Chatterjee and M. K. Gandhi did not shy away from justifying the morality of caste. Their stance was surprising because though caste was based on the law of *Manusmriti* (an ancient Hindu religious legal text on which Hindu law is based), the Constitution of India completely negated the *Manusmriti*. It looks as if the majority of middle-class Indians took their cue from these great personalities. Though Gandhi may have justified caste as a means of keeping order in the society, the educated urban middle class seems to have taken it to justify a graded hierarchy.

Caste System in Contemporary Urban Society

Is the caste system practiced by the urban educated Hindu today? Srinivas, writing in the 1960s, remarked that the vast majority of Hindus (including the educated) do not consider caste as evil and do not want it to disappear - for they cannot envisage a Hindu society without caste (Srinivas 1962, 70). He further made a scathing remark about the middle class, noting that this class pays lip service to egalitarian ideals, but its attitudes are fundamentally hierarchical (Srinivas 1962, 88-96). This was confirmed by V.S.Naipaul who in 1964 wrote *Area of Darkness* in which he narrated the experiences he had with respect to caste in various different settings in India. This was not well taken by the intellectuals of India and Beteille says that it was because they saw some part of themselves there. (Beteille 1997, 172) Some recent incidents seem to justify what Srinivas wrote. Rohith Vemmula, a dalit (a so-called "backward" caste) student, committed suicide on 17 January 2016, alleging discrimination. There have been several other incidents reported from college campuses. Yashica Dutt's memoir 'Coming Out as a Dalit' is another case in point. She comes out in the open as to how as a child, she was made to hide her dalit identity and how she learnt to keep it hidden for fear of discrimination. Dutt's testimony was that Rohith Vemmula's courage to showcase his identity as a dalit gave her the courage to come clean. Undoubtedly Dutt speaking out publicly gave her a great release from the burden she was carrying for years.

Caste associations which form in cities for the betterment of their own caste members show the solidarity of castes in cities. Srinivas analyses that, because of the work of the associations, the horizontal solidarity of a caste is gained at the expense of vertical solidarity of that region. Hence the last hundred years has seen a great increase in caste solidarity and a concomitant decrease of a sense of interdependence that had developed between different castes living in the same region (Srinivas 1962, 74-75). Lloyd Rudolf asserts that this caste solidarity actually hinders the members from fully utilizing their potential because of limited boundaries defined by the association. Rudolf also suggests that modernity has entered into Indian character and society but that it has done so through assimilation and not replacement.

Changes will occur only when other integrative institutions, e.g., educational and religious institutions, are allowed to have their effects and also when there is a federation or consolidation of caste associations into larger groupings (Rudolf 1972, 168).

There is also a growing pressure on the urban middle class to revive and preserve Indian culture and tradition. Paradoxically enough, the reason for this contemporary pressure lies in another innovation of the British, namely nationalism and the political culture of democracy. These innovations had worked wonders in the Western world. As the feudal structure was replaced by democracy during the Reformation and Enlightenment, communal values were replaced by values of freedom, equality, and humanism. However, India did not see the same results. Singh gives three valid reasons for why British nationalism and democracy bore different fruit in India. First, these values had been derived from an alien tradition and had grown on the soil of India under colonial patronage, which was psychologically irksome. Second, India's economic and social structures were not comparable with those of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century West. Third, these historical innovations, which had evolved gradually in the West, were injected into the Indian body-politic in a compressed form and created new and far greater cultural stresses than they did in the West (Singh 1972, 114).

The growth of nationalism in India became oriented towards the Indian tradition. India's national leaders were for modernity but not at the expense of traditional cultural identity. There is always a tension in India between the traditional and modern.

Recent Field Research Findings (Kolhar 2018:145-164)

Field research was conducted as part of this study. A questionnaire was prepared in English and Gujarati (the local language) and distributed to about 150 people. Out of these, as many as 125 responded and 111 were found valid and chosen for study and analysis. The sample was randomly selected through snow balling (also known as chain-referral methodology), and the people who responded were from various walks of life, including teachers, professors, bankers, and managers. All of them were from the city of Ahmedabad, were educated, and belonged to the Hindu middle class.

The research yielded several revealing findings. The study's research shows that over the last three to four decades residential areas have become class-based rather than caste-based. As such, these areas have become more cosmopolitan in nature, meaning that people from different linguistic and religious backgrounds live in close proximity to each other. People of diverse cultures accept and interact with each other. Exchange of food and social interaction on different occasions shows an increased level of acceptance of each other. People usually do not take notice of caste in their routine interactions, in business dealings, or in their offices or neighbourhoods. Interestingly, the research also found that urban migrants, now a substantial number, are more accommodating than more long-term residents.

The research also explored factors which determine the social status of a person. Most of the respondents ranked education, economic status, and the kind of job that one holds as the most important criteria. In order to determine the importance of caste the next survey question was on how the respondents would like to be identified. Most said that they wanted to be identified by their surname and their profession. The surname indicates the caste of the person, indicating that somewhere in the back of their minds the respondents still are caste conscious. At the same time, the fact that they want to be identified by their profession means that they wanted to belong to a particular class.

Sociologists observe that class consciousness does not necessarily replace caste consciousness. The two may just co-exist and thus one can be a caste- as well as class-conscious person. Such a person may live with a divided mind, whereby both caste and class are important in both thought and action. Thus, in a professional set up, one may be very secular in outlook, but when it comes to family matters like marriage, one would turn caste conscious. This divided mind is why, for intimate family functions, caste still matters. This situation is probably also the reason why this group still practices rituals associated with caste, even though whether they understand them or not is a matter of debate. Such co-existing class and caste values can also explain why the majority of educated middle-class urbanites surveyed attended caste association meetings at least occasionally, if not regularly. The main purpose seems to be all about keeping one's identity alive. A higher caste identity gives a sense of superiority over others, a position that those who have it do not want to let go. Marriage is a very crucial issue, and it is generally still based on caste. Interestingly, the survey indicated that 52% of the respondents preferred a marriage partner of their own choice, irrespective of caste. This group was equally divided among the younger and older generation, but included more of women and migrants. These are the people who want to come out of their caste and investigate and experience the world differently, but societal pressures keep them from doing so. The power of social pressure probably can explain why the Indian diaspora in the West is a lot more accommodative than those in India in such matters.

Overall, this study's research findings indicate that, though urbanisation and other related factors do not seem to have affected the educated middle-class Hindu in a comprehensive or consistent way, there is certainly some change in the way they perceive and relate to people of other caste, religion, and customs. We who are Christians should take this opportunity, though limited as it may seem, to witness to this very strategic group.

Towards a Framework of Christian Witness

This study has examined how urbanisation and related factors have affected the educated middle-class Hindu with respect to caste. Though caste consciousness is surprisingly still strong in this group, the changes that have come about do give us some openings for Christian witness and we need to prayerfully use them.

1) If class and caste go hand in hand for this group, and they are ready to interact socially with people of their own class irrespective of their caste or religion, then Christians belonging to this class need to be encouraged to build bridges with their colleagues and neighbours. Such bridge-building will encourage them to open themselves up in the time of need. There are people in this group who look for prayers, counselling, and moral support in their needs, and Christian believers can fill this gap.

2) If caste is such an important factor for the Hindus, then in our Christian witness, we need to be careful that we do not get entangled with caste issues, at least at the initial stage. Similarly, if an educated Hindu wants to visit a church, we again must be careful that we take that person to a church where people of the same class would be able to interact more easily. Perhaps after some maturing and further experience, the person could be part of a more inclusive group.

3) Local churches in India need to explore apologetic approaches for presenting the Christian gospel to the urban educated middle-class Hindus. Of course, there is

always the question of whether an apologetic approach would help, looking at the fact that the faith of an educated urban middle-class Hindu is not based on logic.

4) Though urban middle-class Hindus seem to want to keep to its traditional values, they are also very highly consumerist and highly existential. Biblical discourses need to be made on relevant life issues which affect their daily existential life.

5) Urban middle-class Hindus are very keen to explore the medium of arts. Thus, painting, music, dance, theatre, literature, and other art forms need to be explored to present he Christian message.

6) The power of caste is based on honour and shame. "Missiologists have recently explored how best to communicate the gospel in honour-shame cultures (George 2020)." It is important that we develop the gospel message with this emphasis rather than use the western concept of sin and innocence or justification, which is difficult for Hindus to grasp.

7) Hindus have a pluralistic idea of religion. Christians feel uncomfortable in making friendships with this group, anticipating that they would have to compromise their faith at some point. We need to explore the concept of pluralism and teach our Christian lay people how they need to stand in the face of it rather than detach oneself and thus not be able to take advantage of opportunities for witness when they arise.

Urbanisation has opened up avenues for us Christians, limited as they may seem, for ministry to educated urban middle-class Hindus. We should grapple with the issues that face us as we present the gospel to this group.

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