

# Kingdom Movements among Internal Migrants to Indian Cities

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## Abstract

India is predominantly a rural country, and missions in India have been predominantly concentrated in rural areas. But the urban population, though only 32 percent, is about 400 million in terms of absolute numbers—more than half of whom are poor. The author has observed in his church planting initiatives among the poor in the city of Ahmedabad that Kingdom Movements are taking place specially among the *poor migrants from interstate and interdistrict locations*. In search of missional reasons for why such Kingdom Movements are occurring, this article is based on a case study in the city of Ahmedabad.

**Key Words:** interstate and interdistrict internal migration, poor low caste migrants, urbanization

## Introduction

Christians in India number about 27.8 million, constituting 2.3 percent of India's population (as of the 2011 Census; Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India n.d.). Most of them are found in either the southern parts of India (Chennai, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala) or in the northeast states (Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and to some extent in Manipur). A small percentage of Christians are scattered throughout rest of the country.

This case study is of a Kingdom Movement among the internal migrants in the city of Ahmedabad, in the State of Gujarat in western India. Ahmedabad is a city with a population of about seven million with a total Christian population of about 50,000. Christianity has been in Ahmedabad for about 200 years. The approximately 200 Protestant churches, including Mainline and Pentecostal churches, have third- or fourth-generation Christians and for the most part are not involved in evangelism in the city. A few of the Pentecostal and independent small churches are involved in church planting, resulting in a few thousand new believers mainly from a poor economic background.

This case study examines one such independent, interdenominational fellowship which started a church planting initiative in the eastern part of the city among the slum dwellers in 2013. A 2014 study reported more than 834 slums and 958 chawls (large tenement houses) in Ahmedabad, which together house approximately 41 percent of the city's population (Mahadevia, Desai, and Vyas 2014, 23). The church-planting initiative in three such slums being examined here was thus, in terms of resources at least, a very small initiative.

Within a year of the church-planting initiative's start, it became obvious that there was a definite Kingdom Movement, not of the locals but of the internal (domestic) migrants of the city. Furthermore, these are not migrants from the same district that the city is also part of, but they are from other districts of the same state (interdistrict) and from other states of the country (interstate). This case study attempts to understand and analyse who these migrants are, whether there are definite missional reasons for this movement, and whether there are larger lessons for the Church in India.

## Urbanisation and Migration

Before examining the reasons for this Kingdom Movement, it would be pertinent to understand the extent and types of those people migrating to cities, along with some of their characteristics that will give a wider perspective to this movement.

The urban population in India has been rapidly increasing. According to the 2011 census, it is 32% of the total population. Though this percentage is lower than the global level of 54%, there are two factors that should be noted. First, in terms of absolute numbers the urban population of India is a mind-boggling 400 million—which is more than the populations of most countries of the world. Moreover, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs reported in 2014 that India's urban population is increasing at an annual rate of 1%, which is higher than the global growth rate of 0.9% (Bhagat 2020, 429).

This increase in the urban population is due to three reasons: biological growth, reclassification of city boundaries, and internal migration. This article will be concentrating on the causes, patterns, and effects of internal migration.

In actuality, internal migration has been increasing for the past half century, since 1971, but there was a dramatic rise from 2001 to 2011. In absolute numbers, internal migration increased from 160 million in 1971 to 454 million in 2011. Of this total internal migration, urban migration was 31 million in 1971, and that number increased to 104 million in 2011. As for the annual growth rate of India's urban migration, it was about 4.5% in 1971-1981, then it actually decreased to -1.4% during 1991-2001. However, in the post-2001 period India's urban migration has increased by 11%. This increase is due to agricultural labour coming to the city. With the growing mechanization of agriculture, for the first time in Indian economic history the absolute number of workers in agriculture (unskilled labour, including women) declined by five million per annum between 2001-2011, with a corresponding annual increase of urban migrants by three million (Parida and Raman 2021, 449-452).

Upon considering the social groups that have been migrating, a new picture comes to the fore. As per the 2007-2008 NSS (National Survey Sample), the rate of migration was 46% for the higher caste, 21% for the SC's (Schedule Caste), only 9% for the ST's (Schedule Tribes), and 26% for the OBC's (Other Backward Classes) (Vartak and Tumbe 2020, 255). The SC's, ST's, and OBC's are the socially and economically deprived groups in the country. It would seem that these groups would be less inclined to migrate, knowing that they do not have the necessary skills to land a job in the city. Even so, various researchers confirm that the SC's, ST's, and OBC's have the highest propensity to migrate seasonally (Vartak and Tumbe 2020, 257). Further studies show that the annual rate of temporary migration is seven times higher than permanent migration (Kesri and Bhagat 2013). An earlier, 2012 study also points out that seasonal and temporary migration is a livelihood strategy among rural households (Bhagat 2020, 438).

Though the SC's and ST's find it difficult to get assimilated in the urban industrial sector, many of them still prefer to migrate, some permanently and most of them at least seasonally, for various reasons. Vartak and Tumbe feel that in their destination migrants have a chance to act according to their wishes, away from the control of the dominant caste. They quote Deshingkar and Akter as terming migration of the poor an "exit choice" (although not everyone agrees). Vartak also claims that the poor's urban migration is not premeditated: they migrate mainly for survival and their resistance to higher-class control is only a by-product. The People's Archive of India (PARI), initiated by P. Sainath, found that many of the Dalits who migrated to cities took up similar jobs in cities they had been doing traditionally in villages, based on their caste. While for the lower caste a lack of options is mainly because of

discrimination, for others (including the *shudras* (working class)—carpenters, barbers, and *dhobis* (washermen), for example) it is a lack of knowledge of a particular skill, lack of demand for that skill in the destination, and the presence of caste-based networks that limit information and other options (Vartak and Tumble 2020, 260-261).

Migration patterns throughout India in 2007-2008 showed that, among all migrants, 53.3% were intradistrict, 32% were interdistrict (from the same state but a different district), and 14.7% were interstate. In absolute terms for all of India, net rural-to-urban migrants have increased from 11 million in 1981-1991, to 14 million during 1991-2001, and to 19 million during 2001-2011. It should also be noted that some states are out-migration areas while others attract migrants. Bhagat has concluded that areas with high levels of urbanisation and per-capita income have a high level of migrants. Moreover, it is the class I cities (those with a population of a hundred thousand or above) which have attracted the maximum number of migrants. India has 7,935 cities and towns according to the 2011 Census, but 70 per cent live in the 468 class I cities. Furthermore, 53 of these class I cities are million-plus cities which comprise 43% of India's urban population (Bhagat 2020, 434-442).

In 2007-2008 the NSS reported that 41.2% of the migrants to cities had moved within the same district, 33.6% were from other districts of the state, and 25.2% were from other states (National Survey Sample Office (NSSO) 2010). These figures indicate that a substantial number of migrants, in particular interdistrict and interstate migrants have been far from their extended families and communities of their village from which they emigrated. This particular state of affairs has a major bearing on this study.

### **Ahmedabad**

As noted earlier, this study is based in the city of Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of the state of Gujarat with a population of about seven million ([censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/A4.html](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/A4.html)). Though the city's population has varied dramatically since it was founded, reaching an abysmal low at times due to the policies of its rulers or due to floods or famines, it has seen a steady growth in the last two centuries. Apart from being an important industrial centre, Ahmedabad is also an equally important educational centre with premier institutions like Physical Research Laboratories, Indian Institute of Management, National Institute of Design, and Gujarat Vidyapeeth, as well as two universities. One must also know that it is here that Gandhi started his Satyagraha movement and also established two of his ashrams.

Ahmedabad was founded in 1411 by Sultan Ahmed Shah. He encouraged merchants, weavers, and skilled craftsmen to come to Ahmedabad and thus made it a flourishing commercial and industrial city (Gillion 1968, 14). Salim Lakha writes of the city's pre-colonial times, "Even though it was a capital city, Ahmedabad was distinguished for its commerce and industry rather than administrative structure and religious function (Lakha 1988, 13). Though the availability of raw material enabled the city's industrial growth, another main cause was the excellent business structure of the city and the shrewd business acumen of the business community (Gillion 1968, 4-5). Population statistics of Ahmedabad for the seventeenth century are lacking, but general estimates indicate that the city was comparable to London or Paris with about one million inhabitants, including suburbs (Lakha 1988, 18).

Ahmedabad came under British rule in 1817, and the various British policies ensured that the city grew exponentially. Gillion quotes the *Ahmedabad Gazetteer* which reported that the population rose from 80,000 in 1817 to 116,172 in 1872 (Gillion 1968, 53). The city saw another population explosion in the next century, mainly because of the setting up of textile mills beginning in 1861. By 1946 there were 74 textile mills in the city employing 76,357

people (Yagnik and Sheth 2011, 162). The landscape of the city changed as people migrated to the city for jobs. The *Census of India, 1921* reported that the population rose from 116,873 in 1872 to 272,007 in 1921 (Gillion 1968, 104). During the 1947 partition there was an exodus of Muslims from Ahmedabad to Karachi, but that loss was compensated by refugees (Sindhis, Hindus, and Dalits) from Pakistan (Yagnik and Sheth 2011, 243). Though the textile mills closed down for almost a decade (1967-1985) and the economy hit rock bottom (Yagnik and Sheth 2011, 270-275), the city recovered dramatically in the succeeding years. Yagnik and Sheth report that a study done in 1997-1998 indicates that the informal sector grew faster than the formal sector: out of the 1.5 million workers in Ahmedabad city, 1.15 million worked in the informal sector (Yagnik and Sheth 2011, 303).

It is clear that Ahmedabad has always been a hotbed for migrants due to the various job opportunities available. The Indian government's various 1991 and 2001 census reports also confirm this trend of jobs pulling migrants to Ahmedabad. According to the 2001 census report of the government of Gujarat, of Ahmedabad's total population of 44.48lakh (4,448,000), 21.48lakh (2,148,000), or 48.3%, were migrants. The distribution of migrants according to the place of birth showed that 33.9% were born in the Ahmedabad district, 43.7% were born in other districts of the state, while 21.5% were born in other states. A similar trend was observed when the distribution of migrants according to their most recent previous residence was taken (Director of Census Operation, Gujarat 2001).

### **Migrants in Ahmedabad's Kingdom Movement**

From this brief survey on urban migration in India, it can be concluded that internal migration contributes substantially to urbanisation. The Kingdom Movement under consideration here is mainly among interstate and interdistrict migrants, who usually form about 50% of the total migrant poor. They are mainly from the SC's (Schedule Caste or lower caste), ST's (Schedule Tribes), and OBC's (Other Backward Classes) and are mostly from a poor economic status. Though they eke out a living doing odd jobs, they make just enough to sustain them on a daily basis.

It is these poor migrants that are responding to the gospel in Ahmedabad and several other cities of India. In order to understand why, I interviewed about a dozen people, recorded their interviews, and analysed the responses. Given below is a summary of those findings.

#### *Interview Findings*

First and foremost, the people who have come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ have been from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh or from the border districts of Gujarat. Both these states, along with a few others like Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, are not highly urbanised, their GDP is very low, and they are not able to sustain their own state's people—so these are the states which are usually the sending states. On the other hand, Gujarat is a highly industrialised and urbanised state and along with states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Delhi is a receiving state. The districts of Gujarat from which migrants have been coming to Ahmedabad have also been less developed, hence those districts' residents migrated to Ahmedabad, a hotbed for migrants.

Quite a few of the migrants had never heard the gospel in their village and they know nothing about the Christian faith. The first time they heard the gospel was in the city, exemplifying just how important urban missions is for India. Most of the cities have representation of many of the villages where the gospel has never reached.

At least one migrant testified about hearing about Jesus back in the village from neighbours who had just returned from the city. It so happened that this couple who shared the gospel with the people of their village had experienced the Lord in Ahmedabad. They themselves were seasonal labourers and regularly visited their village at least once a year, where they began sharing about Jesus. This is not an isolated case, for we found that more often than not the people who come to know the Lord in the city became potential evangelists as they take the gospel back to their village. They also became potential contacts for those who want to come to the city. This was the case with quite a few of those interviewed. The person who shared the gospel with them also brought them and settled them in the city, helping them as well to find work.

The Apostle Paul used this same evangelistic strategy in his time. Bosch, agreeing with various other authors writes, “Paul concentrates on the districts or provincial capitals, each of which stands for a whole region: Philippi of Macedonia (Phil.4:15), Thessalonica for Macedonia and Achaia (1Thess.1:7f), Corinth for Achaia (1Cor.16:15, 2Cor.1:1), and Ephesus for Asia (Rom.16:5, 1Cor.16:19, 2Cor.1:8).” He further notes, “Paul thinks regionally and not ethnically: he chooses cities that have representative character. In each of these centres, the gospel will be carried to the surrounding countryside and towns” (Bosch 2006, 162).

To return to the interview results, here is a description of one particular group who heard the gospel for the first time in the city and came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

It is noteworthy that none of the interviewees came to the Lord because they felt they were sinners in need of a saviour. In India, among the Hindus, the concept of sin is not very strong, as they do not have a concept of a holy God, and sin is never seen to be committed against their god. The concept of wrong-doing is more culture-oriented or even self-determined rather than a revelation from their god. Thus, there is never a seriousness to "sin" and, moreover, there are ways to nullify one's wrong by one's karma or good deeds. They also believe in the transmigration of the soul, which means that they would come back to this world in some form based on their deeds. So Hindus do not see this life as the one chance to earn their salvation. They think that there will be many more chances. Hence the chances of people coming to know the Lord as their Saviour who can wash away their sin is very remote, a reality borne out by my interviews with these migrants in Ahmedabad.

At the same time, all of the interviewees went through some type of crisis in their lives in the form of physical sicknesses or even oppression of evil spirits. They tried cures through medicines and even visiting some spiritual medium or *baba* (a Hindu *Sadhu*, a religious Hindu ascetic practicing exorcism of evil spirits), spending a lot of money on both these things but without any relief.

In nearly all the cases, it was a Christian neighbour who had told them that Jesus could heal them of their problems. It should be noted the Christians who witnessed to their non-Christian neighbours were also staying in the slums and were mostly semi-literate people. Their knowledge of the Bible would itself be limited, but they had the conviction that Jesus could heal these people. It should also be noted here that it was mostly women witnessing to other women.

These non-Christian women were ready to try Jesus probably because they saw nothing wrong in trying another god according to the pluralistic worldview in which they believed. As they started believing they slowly got the healing they were seeking. It was in their healing that they experienced Jesus to be powerful. It was only later, as they began to attend church, that they recognised Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

### *Social Challenges*

In India, extended families and communities are very important. They are the support system in times of need, and they are the ones who sanction the behaviour of their families or members. The people in the cities who had migrated from other states or other districts of the same state were far from their own extended families and also from their communities. That distance is what has proven to be a crucial point in their being ready to try Jesus to meet their needs. When they experienced the goodness of the Lord, they readily accepted him as their Lord and Saviour, for they did not have to fear any major backlash from either their families or from their communities. Moreover, because they did not have the support of their families and their communities, they were ready to try out a new faith. This experience was not found among the locals or even the intradistrict migrants for obvious reasons.

The caste system plays an important role in people's religious affiliation. The caste system is the basis of the social stratification among Hindus. It is a hierarchical structure, and one's social world is built in the space the particular caste assigns. The Dalits or low caste people are considered as outcasts or those who are outside the caste system. In the villages in India, where the caste system is still practiced, the Dalits are discriminated against and exploited in every way. The city thus becomes a means of freedom and, as James Scott points out, migrants' covert form of resistance (James Scott 1985, 33). In accepting the gospel, urban migrants can find a new locus for their identity.

A very important reality for interviewees was that in many cases, even after getting baptised, many of the migrants got married or were married by their parents in the previous caste/religion to which they belonged, according to the rituals of that caste. They were not able to find any partners in the Christian community in their small village or surrounding villages. They were not able to find a suitable match in the cities either, since the older generation Christians already settled in the city do not associate with these new converts who are from the lower strata of the society.

Many evangelical churches would term such behaviour (getting married into your old caste/religion) as backsliding. But in the cases I came across, such marriages proved to be a boon, for they brought the whole new family to the Lord in due time. These family conversions may not always happen, but the church needs to think of how they can accommodate such converts in their church structure.

Another very important aspect which should not be missed out in sustaining the faith of these new converts is the kind of church with which they get connected. The established churches are not in a position to take care of and nurture these new converts, and there is every chance of their becoming disillusioned.

### *New Church Plant*

Among this study's interviewees, most of the converted migrants became members of the new church plant that we established. This church had begun just a year or two before the Kingdom Movement of migrants started taking place. The pastor in these first two years had created a strong core team of about eight to ten people, having trained them well doctrinally and helping them to become keen to work for the Lord. So when these first-generation migrants started attending the church, this core team formed an excellent support team for the pastor. The church got involved not only in spiritual work but also mercy or compassion ministry, which was strong with the limited resources they had. Moreover, the pastor changed the language of worship from the local Gujarati to Hindi, the mother tongue of these converts. These two

realities—being able to worship in their own mother tongue and having support for their needs—gave a feeling of belonging to these new converts and strengthened their faith.

Two examples demonstrate the faith of these converts. One of the families lost their two-year-old daughter to cancer, and another family lost their mother to cancer. I very specially asked them while interviewing them whether these incidents had any effect on their faith. Quite surprisingly, they replied that they knew that their dear ones were with the Lord and they couldn't ask for anything more.

Although all of the converted migrants had disassociated themselves from their old faith, most of them did not do away with many of the associated cultural or religious symbols. For example, Hindu women apply *sindoor* (vermillion) just above their foreheads or *tilak* (a red coloured spot) on their forehead as a symbol of their marriage; the women I interviewed and many other converts continued to apply these even after conversion. In their previous religion these symbols carried religious significance, but now they had become just cultural symbols. The church did not force them to do away with these symbols.

In a few cases, only one member of the family came to the Lord. In such cases, it became difficult for that person to dissociate themselves from their previous religion completely. In two of the cases, it was the lady of the family who came to the Lord. When she had to get her children married and did so with men belonging to her old caste and religion, she had to take part in the customs and rituals of her old faith. In such cases Christian converts may not have a choice, and the church needs to be patient with such people rather than judging them.

## Conclusion

The Kingdom Movement among the interdistrict and interstate migrants in Ahmedabad took place for several reasons. It was in their vulnerability in the city that the migrants experienced the Lord; they were ready to try out this new faith because they were safe from the backlash of their extended families and communities; they were able to find a new locus for their identity in this new faith. The church played an important role in the initiation and sustenance of this Kingdom Movement. Also, the association of the new converts with their old religion and caste continued due to various social pressures. The church was patient with such converts and stood with them thus encouraging them in their time of need.

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