

# Other Backward Castes (OBCs): The World's Largest Megabloc of UPGs

by Yashwant Koli

*This telescoped challenge in the evangelization of India was presented at the ISFM meetings in Atlanta, GA, September 2014, by R. W. Lewis on behalf of Yashwant Koli.*

India is the elephant in the global room; every sixth person on the planet today is an Indian. The elephant in the Indian room is Hinduism—80% self-identify as such on the Census [2011]. The Other Backward Classes (OBCs) are the elephant in the Hindu room. It is time to talk about this elephant in the room.

To come to grips with Hindu OBCs, we first need to appreciate India's religious demographic and then Hinduism's caste demographics. In the last Indian Census (2011) of India's 1.21 billion population, 80 per cent self-identified as "Hindu."<sup>1</sup> The three upper ("forward") castes and the outcaste Dalits together account for only one-third of all Hindus. The remaining Hindus belong to the fourth Shudra or Backward Castes (BC). Two-thirds of Hindus add up to about half India's population. The Indian Constitution which guaranteed affirmative action programmes and reserved political seats for the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes, also acknowledged the needs of the much larger "other backward classes" (OBCs) which term covers mainly those of the Shudra or middle caste.<sup>2</sup>

The last time a Census of India counted people by their *jati* or sub-caste was 1931, under the British. It is too hot a political potato in independent India to repeat such a census.<sup>3</sup> Therefore all affirmative action programmes at the national level to this day work with extrapolations of the 1931 Census data. Based on that, the Mandal Commission (1980) reported OBCs as estimated to be 52% of the Indian population. No official estimate of the OBC population has set it lower than one-third. So, it is safe to say that between one-third and half of the Indian population are Hindu OBCs. The vast majority of India's growing Muslim population are also OBCs.

---

*Yashwant Koli is a writer and researcher born in India who has been involved with Dalit issues since the early 1970's, with OBCs during the last decade, and who has been invited to address these concerns in their large gatherings all over India.*

Shudras and therefore OBCs are made up largely of those traditional occupational groups that work with their hands, including farmers (the largest single group), herdsman, artisans all the way from goldsmiths to potters. They are on the "right" side of the Hindu pollution line defined by the 3 Ds—dirt, disease, death. On the wrong side are the Dalits or Scheduled Castes (SC).

It gets far more complex when we realize that OBCs are an artificial constitutional construct.<sup>4</sup> In fact, people self-identify by their *jati* or traditional occupation sub-caste they are born into—regardless of their current occupation. Each *jati* is endogamous (you can only marry within the *jati*) but made up of many lineage clans called *gotras* that are exogamous, i.e. you have to marry outside the *gotra*.<sup>5</sup> Very few *jatis* are even called by the same name across the state and language boundaries. Each *jati* is therefore an ethnolinguistic endogamous people group.<sup>6</sup>

A 2002 compilation of both the central and state lists ("schedules") of OBCs show totals of 2,176 and 2,551. These numbers can rightly be interpreted to say that the bloc of Hindu OBCs is made up of between 2,176 and 2,551 people groups. Furthermore, the majority of these people groups and particularly those with the larger populations would be concentrated in North India—the Hindi-speaking "cow" belt.

Switching over to the demographics of Christians who make up 2.3% of the Indian population, we note that around 70% are from Dalit (SC) and about 25% from tribal (ST) backgrounds. Though there are a few known Christians from upper caste backgrounds, until this past decade there were even fewer known Christians from OBC backgrounds, except for some from South India.

That makes the OBCs one of the largest single blocs of unreached people groups in the world. Yet the church and mission in India (and internationally) is ignorant of or have ignored the OBC's. Work among them, particularly in North India, has only begun in the last decade (See inset on p. 21). No wonder there are very few followers of Christ from among the OBCs. **IJFM**

## Challenges to Reaching OBCs

*Regardless of approach—contextualised or otherwise—any attempt to present the gospel to OBCs has been historically fraught with challenges, with some listed here:*

*Spiritual “strong man.”* There is massive resistance from spiritual realms, and therefore such work should not be undertaken without sufficient intercessory prayer.

*Casteism:* Casteism is such a pervasive discriminatory system that even the lowered castes discriminate among themselves, and there is always the risk that Christians from a Dalit background will be rejected outright, or vice-versa (Christian Dalits rejecting OBC brothers and sisters because of fear and/or resentment).

*Strong authority structures:* Most OBC jatis have extremely strong, almost dictatorial clan (gotra) authority structures, making outreach to the whole gotra more appropriate.

*Patriotism and apparent “foreignness” of Christianity:* OBCs tend to be extremely patriotic, even jingoistic, and the Hindutva (fundamentalist) propaganda that Christianity is a “foreign” religion seems to make them leery of even listening to anything that seems foreign.

*Social life around Brahmanised “Hindu” festivals:* Most OBCs live in very tight-knit rural communities with Brahmanised Hindu festivals, and Christians need to decide how to respond when they are drawn in.

*Marriage:* Since endogamy is so tightly a part of the OBC social fabric, those disciples of marriageable age (females particularly) will come under tremendous pressure to marry unbelievers of their own jati.

*Syncretism:* Contextualisation and “bridges” in communication always carry risks, and can often create confusion.

*Church resistance:* Finally, when the huge OBC harvests are brought in, will the existing churches allow this different crop into their churches? Rejection will force the growth of jati-specific denominations, in reverse, an OBC corporate apostasy.

### Endnotes and Commentary

<sup>1</sup> *Koli comments:* One useful way to exegete Hindu cultures is to sort out religious elements of the “great tradition” from the more popular religion of the “little tradition.” The great Sanskrit tradition, sometimes called Brahmanism, developed under the leadership of the Brahmans, and preserves a refined and abstract set of philosophical concepts that exhibit very little regional variation. At this level, there is emphasis on unity in diversity and a pervasive attitude of relativism. However, the overwhelming majority of OBCs live more according to their own parochial “little traditions.” Each family will

in addition to the local village deity have their own *kul devta* or clan god. OBCs tend to be traditionally worshippers of the Hindu god Shiva called Mahadev (or Almighty God). OBCs are particularly given to going on pilgrimages to regional temples and shrines. Also, *bhakti* (devotional) movements that began in different regions from the sixth to seventh centuries AD most often arose from within the OBCs and impacted them more than other castes. These movements tended to be highly emotional, even ecstatic, with a personal focus on a single deity. The bhakti poet-saints came from various backgrounds including Shudra. These movements were at least non-caste (if not anti-caste), making caste, rituals and priests irrelevant. Devotees often left their normal social caste roles to concentrate on worship.

<sup>2</sup> *M. Pickett states:* Scholars will tend to challenge any idealistic “corporate ladder” of caste. Any classic restatement of the standard, idealist theory of caste, and particularly the position of Shudras, is far more complicated, and actually more the product of changes in power structures over the last 200 years.

<sup>3</sup> *Koli comments:* Hindu nationalist fundamentalists (Hindutva) like the RSS and VHP parties clearly have a strategy to co-opt and keep OBCs within their fold. One such vehicle dominated and led by OBCs is the Bajrang Dal strategy (inspired by the monkey god Hanuman’s monkey brigade that helped the god Ram in his rescue of his wife, Sita). Like the regional Hindutva, the Bajrang Dal recruits and uses the muscle power of lumpen elements (i.e., the dispossessed and uprooted) to do Hindutva’s dirty work, including attacking Christians. The BJP party, now the majority party in power, has also successfully recruited OBCs into leadership ranks, the most prominent example being the former chief minister of Gujarat, Naranda Modi, now prime minister of India.

<sup>4</sup> *Koli comments:* Two major social processes simultaneously at work in Hindu societies are (1) Sankritisation—the perceived advancement up the caste ladder through the adoption of Brahmanical beliefs and practices by the lowered castes—and (2) Rajputisation, through which lowered castes, especially OBCs, emulate in externals—like name (most often Singh), dress, and occupation (most often the armed forces)—the identity of the princely-warrior Kshatriyas. [Editor’s note: M. Pickett suggested that nearly everyone aspires to Kshatriya status and will ideally seek to emulate the raja in the way he plays the patron.] As a result, many OBCs pursuing upward mobility in the Brahmanical world, are reluctant to identify themselves as Shudra or “backward.” Since the 80s, a third process is evident: as a result of the Mandal Commission giving OBCs “reservations” (affirmative action quotas) in the government, and more recently in higher education, many Rajputised OBC jatis (like the Yadavs and Jats) have a vested interest in identifying themselves as OBCs.

<sup>5</sup> *M. Pickett states:* “I think we can say that almost by definition a jati is endogamous but the reality is that not all jatis have sharp boundaries. The reality is more complicated. Hypergamous castes are more of a spectrum (akin to sub-species of bird or mammal in some parts of the world), where caste members in area A intermarry with those in area B, those in B with those in both A and C and those in C only with those in B. Their marriage rules are more complicated than have been assumed.”

<sup>6</sup> *M. Pickett states:* “There is a clear ambiguity here. If a single jati is not confined to a single language area, then how can that jati be an ‘ethno-linguistic’ group? Which is the criterion for determining a jati, endogamy or language? The author is saying both and seems to be contradicting himself, is he not?”