

THE FINAL FRONTIER

INDIA'S OTHER BACKWARD CASTES

By **YASHWANT KOLI**

Yashwant Koli is an India strategy demographic analyst. Over the last several decades, he has studied, written about, and engaged both Dalits and OBCs, particularly in north India.

The remaining task of world evangelization cannot be completed without one country in the world and, within it, a large bloc of frontier people groups (FPGs) being reached. That one country is the world's most populous, India, and that bloc is made up of its Other Backwards Castes (OBC). This has become increasingly clear in the last five to 10 years. A deep dive into the latest FPG numbers provides granular specificity into the make-up of the largest OBC FPGs. This article shares some of those data points and their implications for completing the remaining task.

If the 10/40 window is akin to a satellite map, the FPG lens affords us more of a 30,000-foot view. Broadly speaking, when viewed through the filter of the largest (each of 1 million or more) FPGs, 293 groups represent 80 percent of the total FPG population and 20% of the global population (approximately 1.61 billion).

When you look at a world map (see graphic on page 11) depicting the size of each continent/region in proportion to its FPG population, what jumps out? South Asia, with its FPG population of 1.44 billion people, is home to around 70% of the world's largest FPGs, with 51% in India alone. India is clearly the bullseye for anyone seeking to reach FPGs.

INDIA'S OTHER BACKWARD CASTES

Zooming into the world's most populous nation, India has 154 of the world's 293 largest FPGs. Of those, 109 (or 71%) belong to OBCs, whose largest FPGs are:

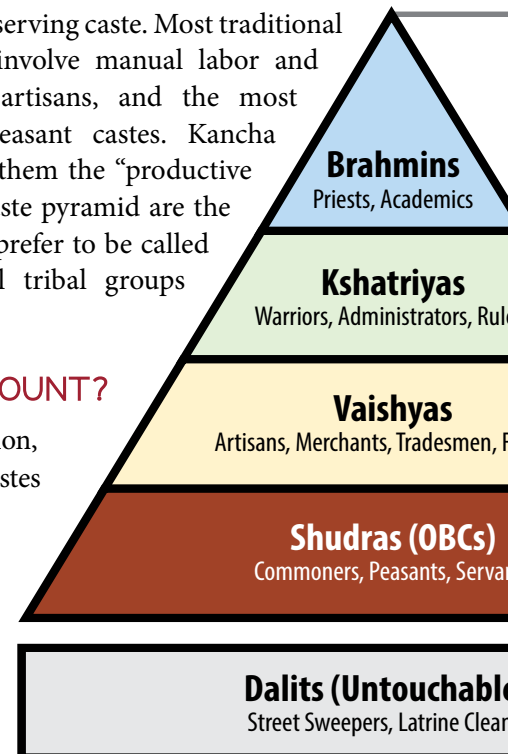
- Hindu (76%)
- Muslim (18%)
- Sikh (3%)
- Ethnic religion (Lingayat) (1%)

So, who are the OBCs? To answer that question, we need to reckon with the fact that the caste system is pervasive throughout India, even among religions like Islam, Sikhism and, yes, even Indian Christianity to some extent. According to the Pew Research Center, "India's caste system is an ancient social hierarchy based on occupation and economic status, with roots in historical Hindu writings. People in India are born into a particular caste and tend to keep many aspects of their social life within its boundaries, including whom they marry and whom they choose to count as their close friends."

Within the original *varna* system, there are three so-called upper caste groups: priestly Brahmins, warrior Kshatriyas, and mercantile Vaishyas. Below these minority "twice-born" castes are Shudra, the largest and lowest serving caste. Most traditional Shudra occupations involve manual labor and include goldsmiths, artisans, and the most numerous pastoral-peasant castes. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd calls them the "productive castes." Outside the caste pyramid are the "Untouchables," who prefer to be called Dalit, and aboriginal tribal groups called Adivasis.

DO THE OBCS COUNT?

In the Indian constitution, Dalits or Scheduled Castes (SC) and Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes (ST) are designated as Backward Classes. (Under the British, the word "classes"



was used for castes.) It is in relation to them that the Indian constitution refers to the former Hindu Shudra caste groups as “other backward classes” (OBC). These social constructs are mainly for the purposes of government affirmative action policies in education and employment. The OBCs are defined as “socially and educated backward.” Over 80% of Indian Muslims are classified as OBCs.

So, why do OBCs want to be counted in the national census? The 1931 Indian census was the last time all India’s castes were counted. However, since Indian independence in 1947, the decennial census counts only the Dalits (SCs) and Tribals (STs). That’s because their numbers are needed for affirmative action and other policy planning purposes. Though the OBCs now qualify for affirmative action benefits, there has been resistance to them being counted, primarily from the upper-caste-dominated federal ruling parties.

Meanwhile, at the national level, much of the planning for affirmative action programs has been based on extrapolations from the 1931 census data. Based on that, the Hindu OBCs would be 52% of India’s population; today, that would equate to around 730 million. OBCs make up around two-thirds of India’s Hindu population.

Think of it: Today, every sixth person on the planet is an Indian, and every 12th person is an OBC.

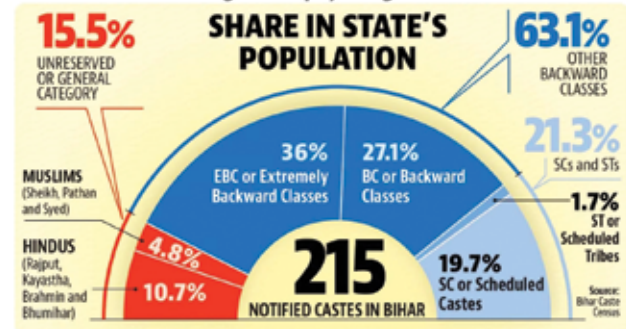
BLESSING THE OBC FAMILIES

In 2023, India’s second-most-populous state, Bihar (131 million) conducted a thorough socioeconomic survey of its citizens by caste. The headline news was that the state’s OBCs, including Muslim OBCs, together account for 63% of its population. This confirms that Bihar is the state with the second-highest percentage of OBCs.

On the heels of the release of the survey data, the state legislature unanimously passed a bill to increase the caste-based affirmative action “reservations” from 50% to 65%. This will apply to state government, higher education, and jobs.

What preliminary results show

This is the first time since independence that all castes have been enumerated across a region in a physical government headcount



However, even with that, Bihar’s Backward Castes will remain poor and underserved for a long time.

This is a task for the church to mobilize workers for the harvest in Bihar and beyond to engage and bless all these OBCs in a holistic way. The challenge in Bihar, as in most of India, is that most Christians, including Christian workers, are from Dalit or tribal backgrounds. They do not naturally cross the caste barriers to engage and reach out to OBCs.

Bihar, the birthplace of Buddhism, has the reputation of being the “graveyard of missionaries.” However, in recent years, seeds sown by Indian workers are beginning to bear fruit among the outcaste Dalits and recently among the OBCs of Bihar.

By looking at the largest bloc of OBCs, we discern the magnitude of the challenge in engaging, reaching, and blessing these groups. The Hindi-speaking Yadavs, traditionally castes involved with all aspects of dairy farming, are estimated to number around 40 million. They are largely concentrated in India’s two largest states, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Joshua Project calculates that the Hindi-speaking Yadavs require around 817 workers (based on a minimum of one worker per 50,000 people). However, as noted earlier, most workers are from Dalit or tribal backgrounds and are not a natural fit for engaging Yadavs.

JOIN WHERE GOD IS ALREADY AT WORK

Still, we have hope. As in Acts, the Holy Spirit is on the move. The point is made in recent accounts. Both involve younger Yadav men from Uttar Pradesh, both

Twice Born Groups

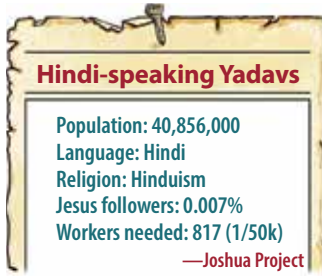
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Hindi-speaking Yadavs

Population: 40,856,000
 Language: Hindi
 Religion: Hinduism
 Jesus followers: 0.007%
 Workers needed: 817 (1/50k)
 —Joshua Project

healed in the name of Jesus. As both shared their testimony and the good news, many other Yadavs, along with their families, began to follow Jesus, gathering to worship and pray together. The numbers continue to grow, in one case to 25,000. Both Yadav men had to build rough extensions to their homes to accommodate these Jesus worshippers. In one instance, persecution has followed; yet, these new believers, with no outside church support, continue to worship.

Meanwhile, urban missiologist Dr. Anon (pseudonym) surveyed recent Christward movements in north India. He shows that the Holy Spirit has moved directly and through the church to draw people to Christ. Most of these movements are led by OBCs and initially attract

largely OBCs through their family, clan, and caste networks. Furthermore, they follow Jesus without renouncing their sociocultural identities. Anon concludes, “the emergence of Christward movements is a strategic way for India’s frontier people groups to know Christ.”¹

The situation today manifests Jesus’ dictum, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Matt 9:37) in the disproportion between workers and the harvest among India’s FPGs. Will we follow in Jesus’ footsteps, joining his Father where he is at work (John 5:17, 19–20), and follow the Spirit’s lead? If so, the Church clearly needs to focus on India’s majority OBCs, drawing them into the circle of the blessed families of the earth. India’s FPGs and the OBCs are the final frontier to be crossed before the remaining task is complete. **✱**

¹ See Anon’s article “Understanding Christward Movements in India” in this issue.



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