

Serving THE influencers

In the last few years India has witnessed the most remarkable economic changes, which are beginning to redefine the very image of India. Gandhiji once said that anybody wanting to understand India must go to its 600,000 villages. However, if Gandhiji were alive today, he may instead say that we need to visit the hundreds of towns across India which are fast becoming nerve centres of urban transformation in this once predominantly rural country.

With a focus on “winning the winnable while they can be won”, cross-cultural Indian Gospel workers, building on the foundations of western missionaries, are serving the needy in villages in the remotest parts of our country. And there have been success stories, including mass movements of tribal and Dalit (so-called untouchable) people groups deciding to follow Christ.

Unfortunately, the side-effect of the above ethos has been the neglect of strategic social people groups like the middle class. The church and missions, in general, are not ready to reach urban upper and middle classes. Most Christian workers are trained either to go to the tribal/Dalit groups

or become pastors of existing Christian congregations. But Indian missions and churches cannot remain mute spectators of the changes wrought by urbanisation: they need to come to the forefront and be involved in the holistic transformation of India through serving the influencers.

The influencers

The vast Indian middle class, with over 300 million people, now exceeds the total population of the USA. Educated, thinkers, and vocal decision makers, they are modern culture shapers and fashion leaders, and the target of multinational businesses. The Indian economy is controlled by their purchasing power, and their opinions influence government decisions in economics and politics.

Although financially secure, the urban middle class struggles with a multitude of social issues, both modern and traditional: the census of India, for example, reported that traditional problems like female infanticide and dowry deaths (where wives are killed because they didn't bring enough assets into the marriage) are more prevalent among the middle class.

Less than one percent of the urban middle class follow Jesus Christ – yet these are the influencers who need to be touched by His transforming love.

Following the example of Jesus

Jesus met two people on His way to Jericho. One was Bartimaeus, the blind roadside beggar, and the other was Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Jesus stopped for both of them, and met their individual needs. As much as Bartimaeus needed to be restored from his physical blindness, Zacchaeus needed to be restored from his spiritual blindness.

Jesus not only proclaimed the Kingdom of God to the poor, marginalised, and oppressed, but also to the rich, the middle class and the influencers of the day. God shows no favouritism, and neither should we.

Consider Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, who first came secretly in the night to talk to Jesus, and later became a follower. And then there was Matthew, the tax collector who invited Jesus home for a meal, and who was later chosen as an apostle. Jesus regularly visited Lazarus and his sisters, who had the means to entertain Him and several of His followers. Women from rich and royal households followed Jesus and supported his public ministry from their personal funds. Joseph of Arimathea offered his own tomb for Jesus to be buried in.

In the Scriptures, the rich young man was one of the very few who declined the call of Jesus. After he walked away, Jesus explained that it



Less than one percent of the urban middle class follow Jesus Christ.

Yet these are the influencers who need to be touched by His transforming love.

is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, and compared the 'hardness' to a camel passing through the eye of a needle. "When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible'" (Matthew 19:16-26).

When Jesus proclaimed, "Today salvation has come into this house," Zacchaeus went out and shared half of his wealth with the poor, and paid back four times the amount he had taken dishonestly. When the rich

hear the Gospel and respond as Zacchaeus did, it is an impossible event made possible by God.

If we want to see whole communities and nations transformed we need to be involved in serving the unmet spiritual needs of the often-overlooked middle class, who are the influencers of today. Sadly, very little pioneering work has been done among these influencers, and although they are often said to be unresponsive to the Gospel, the truth is, very little effort has been made to communicate the gospel contextually, or to provide an environment of appropriate integration among the established Christ-followers.

Zacchaeus was a typical middle class urbanite, exploiting people and making money, but when an encounter with Jesus transformed him, the transformation impacted his entire town (Luke 18:35-19:9). If we allow ourselves to be used by God to help transform the Indian middle class, they then, in turn, have the capability to transform our entire nation.

A wide range of salaried positions in corporate, medical and educational institutions are available right now, and India also welcomes foreign entrepreneurs with funds for investment in transformational business. Are you willing to commit to reaching the middle class? ☺

John Amalraj is the National Director for Interserve India.