A MISSIOLOGICAL PORTRAIT OF BOMBAY, INDIA

A Paper
Presented to
Dr. Charles Lawless
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for 88500

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December 16, 2010
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Bombay, India is a trendsetting city that takes a back seat to no other. Prolific manufacturing, fashion, trade, technology, and Bollywood films make for a city that is “razzle-dazzle, Indian style. Bombay is urbane and jazzy and as hip as India gets.” Bombay, lying on India’s west-central coast, is known as the gateway of India. The city’s sea entrance is marked by an ornate gatehouse built in 1911 for the visit of English King George V. The channel into Bombay Harbor was the primary entrance point of passenger steamship prior to the advent of commercial air travel. Today, Bombay’s superb harbor makes for India’s busiest shipping port and the city’s airport is India’s most active hub for international arrivals and departures. Bombay is the financial capital of India and one of the largest manufacturing centers in the entire Eastern world. Currently, the city is home to more than twenty million residents and is the fifth largest city in the world.

This paper will provide a portrait of Bombay, giving special attention to the history, major religions, needs, state of the church, and current missions strategies. The goal is to raise awareness of the strategic nature of Bombay and introduce the reader to demographical and missiological implications for ministering in this world-class city.

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1This paper will use the name Bombay rather than Mumbai since most of the literature referenced uses Bombay.


3Dom Moraes, Bombay (Amsterdam: Time Life International, 1979), 5.

4Fodor’s India, 261.

History of the City of Bombay

Present day Bombay actually began as a small grouping of islands off the west coast of India. The origins of the name of the city are disputed. One idea is the current name, Mumbai, is a derivative of Mumbadevi, a goddess worshipped by the earliest inhabitants of the area. A more probable explanation is that Mumbai is a mispronunciation of the city’s name under British rule, Bombay. Bombay, in turn, is a mispronunciation of the Portuguese, bom bahia, or good bay. The city was not well developed by any indigenous peoples and is somewhat unique among Asian cities in that it was first developed as a city of European origin. Settlement commenced, initially by the Portuguese, and then by the English. In 1661 the entire city was given as a wedding dowry by the Portuguese king so that his daughter, Princess Catherine de Braganza, could marry the English King Charles II. England did well in acquiring the city as Bombay’s natural harbors were a safe place to build and send out ships and also to protect industry from Indian Ocean pirates. Bombay began as a city known for a growing textile industry and quickly became one of the world’s greatest exporting cities, sending vast quantities of cotton and opium to world markets. By 1860 Bombay was the third largest cotton-exporting city in the world. From the beginning, Bombay was endowed with the latest technological advances for manufacturing and shipping.

The city experienced colonial rule in the 19th century, which further brought Modernity and Enlightenment capitalism, science, and industry to the Eastern world. The European influence allowed the city to be built by wealthy and powerful individuals and those associated with the cotton trade gained a large portion of local power. Similarly, the lower class

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7Fodor’s Inida, 261.

8Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, History, Culture and the Indian City (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12.

9Ibid., 13.
traders had access to city officials and government, something that was unheard of in the rest of caste divided India.\textsuperscript{10} People began pouring into Bombay from across India to take advantage of the growth of the burgeoning textile industry.

The large immigration also made Bombay unique in that the Indian caste system was not able to exert as much control as in other more homogeneous cities. In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, two-thirds of Bombay’s population was Hindu but people came from such a wide variety of places that no single linguistic group was able to dominate nor any particular caste.\textsuperscript{11} For a number of years, there was great freedom of movement for native Indians. As time went on, however, class distinction began to congregate around the industrial areas of the city. The textile mills were in the northern part of Bombay and working-class neighborhoods formed around the mills. Ninety percent of workers lived within a fifteen-minute walk of their places of employment. As neighborhoods formed around cultural and linguistic affinities, the caste system could be enforced again.

Still, Bombay was always a city of immigration. Even in 1921, 84\% of the city’s residents had been born outside Bombay.\textsuperscript{12} Bombay experienced steady but not unfathomable growth for the first two-hundred years. In 1780 the population was about one-hundred thousand and began growing at a rate of around one-hundred thousand every ten years until World War Two began. After the war the population began skyrocketing.\textsuperscript{13} India had been a British colony for over one-hundred years but the war brought many changes to the game of country management. Across the Southern Hemisphere, nation after nation gained sovereign control as the world powers shifted, reorganized, and pulled out of the colonization game. India gained

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 32.
independence in 1947, with Rajendra Prasad becoming the first president of the new Indian Republic.\textsuperscript{14} The transfer of power from Britain to a sovereign Indian nation was not without violence, however. Pakistan had been split off from India at the same time. Five million Sikhs and Hindus moved east into India from Pakistan and a similar number of Muslims fled India and moved west into Pakistan. The crossing of the religious groups resulted in attacks from both sides and around five-hundred thousand people died in the population exchange and settlement of both countries.\textsuperscript{15}

The Indian people were now in control of their own affairs but British and Western influence had proven so strong that little changed in many large cities. Largely a result of the city’s unique origin built on Enlightenment and Industrial Age foundations, Bombay has become synonymous with India’s technological advancements. Under former President Nehru, technical colleges and scientific research institutes were built and well funded. The use of atomic energy was first developed within India in Bombay, launching India into the atomic age – both in nuclear power production and with the Bomb.\textsuperscript{16} Bombay was where people went to be successful and the city had the offer of promising education and careers. Millions streamed in, hoping to get a piece of the Indian dream.

All was not well in a dramatically heterogeneous Bombay, however. Throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century the infusion of culture, religions, and class background began to cause turmoil. Riots often broke out as Hindus rose up against Muslims. Power hungry textile industry owners began taking advantage of the poor and made unjust use of class distinctions. A massive strike closed the textile industry for a time in 1982. Workers retreated into their homogeneous neighborhoods for support and protection. The gap between the rich and powerful and the poor


\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 159.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 169.
classes widened to the greatest distance yet seen.\textsuperscript{17}

Today Bombay is a city of paradox, like many of the world’s largest cities. One can make a fortune in Bombay in the computer age, living in a luxurious condo in the heart of the city. In order to get to work, however, one must pass tens of thousands of street beggars who commute in from one of the hundreds of slum cities that congregate around the outskirts of Bombay proper. The city of unparalleled affluence is juxtaposed against unparalleled poverty. Urbane, jazzy, and hip Bombay holds true to its reputation but the upscale image cannot so easily hide all of the city’s dirty secrets. The next section will explore one cause for these tumultuous conditions, the diverse religions of Bombay

**Major Religions Found in Bombay**

The convergence of diverse religions in India has long been the cause for perennial violence even though India’s constitution provides full religious freedom of not only worship but also of witness for all religions.\textsuperscript{18} The historic battle has been between Hindus and Muslims as each side waxes and wanes in political and military influence. Interestingly, the strongest persecution today is directed not between Muslims and Hindus, but from high caste Hindus against low caste Hindus.\textsuperscript{19} In addition to low caste Hindus, Christians are heavily persecuted at times due to their outreach to the Dalit, or untouchables class. Some Christians are attempting to break down the caste system and find unity in the gospel. Hindu extremists are afraid the entire society will be upset if the caste system is broken and Dalits are not allowed their place in the lowest rungs of society.\textsuperscript{20} Bombay has populations of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Zoroastrains, Sikhs, and many others. A breakdown of the largest and most relevant religions of

\textsuperscript{17}Chandavarkar, *History, Culture and the Indian City*, 26.


\textsuperscript{19}Chandavarkar, *History*, 104.

\textsuperscript{20}Mandryk, *Operation World*, 407.
Bombay is listed below.

**Bombay’s Hindu Population**

Hinduism dominates India in general, composing over 74% of the total religious affiliation found in the country. Bombay closely follows the national average as around 70% of residents, or fourteen million people, claim Hinduism as their religion. Though Hinduism dominates Bombay on paper, it is difficult to consider Bombay a Hindu city. There are numerous sects of Hinduism present and many different languages are spoken among the Hindus so that any degree of religious unity is unattainable.\(^{21}\) In much of India, common language does more to unite Indians than does religious affiliation.

**Bombay’s Islamic Population**

Two million Muslims live in Bombay comprising about 10% of the total population.\(^{22}\) It seems as though the Islamic population is decreasing as thirty years ago Muslims made up at least 15% of the population.\(^{23}\) The reason is likely that those who continue to immigrate to the city are Hindu rather than Muslim so the proportion of Muslims is not as high as it used to be. As with other groups, the Muslim community is very heterogeneous. One finds a blend of Shi’a and Sunni Muslims from many linguistic backgrounds. Many Muslims come to Bombay from Northern India to apply their cultural weaving skills in the textile industry.\(^{24}\) The Muslims of India are ascribed low caste status, often being included in the Backward Castes.\(^{25}\)

Muslims are not without their presence however as the famous Haji Ali Shrine is built

\(^{21}\)Moraes, *Bombay*, 72.

\(^{22}\)Mandryk, *Operation World*, 433.

\(^{23}\)Moraes, *Bombay*, 72.


\(^{25}\)Ibid., 268.
on a rocky outcropping on the Arabian Sea in the western part of the city. This shrine was built to honor a Muslim saint who drowned here five-hundred years ago while on pilgrimage to Mecca. His remains washed ashore and are now held within the mosque and destitute families and beggars frequent the area in hopes of garnering divine favor for their pleas. In addition, Muslims are beginning to gain a place in the Bollywood film industry. Historically, films were based on Hindu epic stories but recently those in the Indian Diaspora population, especially Muslims, are being featured. One theory attempting to explain the inclusion of Muslims centers not on Indian Hindus embracing them but rather, they are included to make the films more marketable on the world film scene.

**Bombay’s Christian Population**

As India as a whole is extremely diverse, so it is within those who profess Christianity to be their religion. Bombay boasts the second highest Christian population of India’s megacities but the Christian percentage has been declining in recent years. There are about eight-hundred thousand Christians in Bombay, four percent of the total population. This population is spread out over many different Catholic and Protestant sects, many splintered along lines common to Western churches around the world. Traditionally, the Dalits have the highest percentage of Christians in large Indian cities but because of their low social status they are unable to exert much influence on the population at large. The next section will focus more intently on the Dalit population as Bombay’s needs are examined.

**Needs in Bombay**

India is one of the neediest countries in the world and Bombay is no exception. The

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26 Fodor’s, 263.


cotton mills and industry have drawn migrant workers looking to help their impoverished families in the home villages. Like many large industrious cities however, work can become scarce and shantytowns spring up when migrants can no longer afford apartments or houses. Workers become beggars when the jobs run out. India in particular has a large number of beggars because Hinduism permits begging. Asking for and giving alms are seen as meritorious acts.\(^{29}\) It is alleged that many children in the city are controlled by a kind of mafia and are forced to beg, steal, and provide sexual services to provide a good life for their rulers.\(^{30}\) The scenes from *Slumdog Millionaire* are not far from reality in Bombay. Poor living conditions and overcrowding contribute to many problems, both social and medical. Water supply for the city is in bad shape. Water usage is typically restricted to between two and eight hours a day. Air pollution is a major problem as noxious fumes are emitted from textile mills and chemical plants.\(^{31}\) The needs of Bombay are great but nowhere can they be more clearly seen than in the slums that ring the center of the great city.

There are well over 150 shanty colonies in the ‘suburbs’ of Bombay. Over 60% of the city’s population lives in these slums. Bombay hosts the world’s largest slum, Dharavi, with over one million people packed into a density of 16,500 people per square mile.\(^{32}\) Dharavi is composed of two and three story ‘apartments’ built of concrete blocks, tin, and cardboard. The average apartment size is no more than one-hundred square feet and houses a dozen people from two or three families.\(^{33}\) Most of the slum communities lack proper sewage and water delivery and are infested with disease and rodents. These slums are host to more trouble than just housing

\(^{29}\)Moraes, *Bombay*, 112.

\(^{30}\)Ibid., 113.


\(^{32}\)Mandryk, *Operation World*, 432.

and rodent issues. The sex industry proliferates in the crowded communities as well.

Kamatipura is the red-light district of Bombay where brothels abound. In Bombay there are around one thousand men for every 650 women. The reason for the discrepancy is so many men come to town for work, leaving their families behind in the home village. Marriage is a lengthy process in Indian culture so many men are happy to frequent the brothels rather than, or in addition to, pursuing marriage.\(^{34}\) The brothels are legal and are inspected by policewomen, though the houses of ill repute remain the epitome of filth and squalor. Sexually transmitted diseases are rampant as women typically have six to eight sexual encounters a day. Women are usually surgically impaired from having children in an effort to keep the population down and keep the women in business. Children that are born into the community are usually raised right in the brothel, often being taken care of by older, retired prostitutes.\(^{35}\)

In addition to the sex industry, abuse is prevalent in the slum communities. Forty-three percent of women surveyed reported they had been victims of physical abuse by their husbands at some point in the marriage.\(^{36}\) All manner of contributors to the high level of abuse were discovered. Affairs, drinking, gambling, poor relations with in-laws and the dowry, and membership of certain gentlemen’s clubs were recorded as being present in abuser’s lives.\(^{37}\) Slums are not policed very well and access to medical care is often nonexistent. Illness, lack of work, and dissatisfaction with life have many consequences in people’s lives. As stress and unhappiness build, marital abuse seems to become more common.

One greatly overlooked need in Bombay is the growing homosexual community that has been proliferating since the 1970s. One author has done an extensive study on the

\(^{34}\)Moraes, *Bombay*, 116.

\(^{35}\)Ibid., 118.


\(^{37}\)Ibid., 65-66.
community examining both outside influences on the community as well as the community’s influence on Bombay. The author attributes the presence of the vibrant homosexual community to globalization. Many upscale Indians go to college in the United States and England. The author, himself a homosexual, attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. There are homosexual communities present at many East Coast and Ivy League schools that affirm Indians who have homosexual tendencies. Upon return to Bombay, many gay Indians seek to establish a gay community similar to what can be found on college campuses in the United States. It is difficult to determine an exact number of gay men and women in Bombay but one club alone boasts over five thousand members.

These needs described above are not likely to go away without major intervention. The slums are too large and too numerous for governmental action to achieve any measure of societal change. Those in the successful working class are afforded luxuries the poor can only dream of but their hope is contingent on financial success. Students study abroad at prestigious schools and some find security in a close knit homosexual community. These communities are ultimately lacking in real relationship. The one sure hope for all people in Bombay is the gospel of Christ. Many churches are being planted in Bombay, particularly in the slums, but there are still scores who have never heard the gospel or seen a Christian community. The next section of this paper will survey the state of the church in the city, for it is the church that can bring hope, healing, and reconciliation to the urban population.

The State of the Church in Bombay

In a city as large as Bombay one can find many churches. Christianity has been in India for several thousand years. As in most places with a Christian presence, there are many good things the church is doing to reach the lost and train them to be multipliers of their faith.


There are also many problems that accompany an old and diverse Christian presence. This section will focus on both the good and problematic components of the church in Bombay.

Much good can be found in Bombay concerning the state of the church. Bible believing churches and groups are growing beyond documented statistics.\textsuperscript{40} Many mission agencies continue to work in Bombay, including the International Mission Board.\textsuperscript{41} The IMB has teams of missionaries in several sections of the city, from the middle class areas to the slums. Indians are coming to faith and the IMB seeks to train them to carry the gospel to their own neighborhoods. Several times a year the agency hosts a church multiplication conference to train nationals.\textsuperscript{42} These training conferences equip local leaders in areas such as hermeneutics, Chronological Bible Storying, discipleship, and leadership development. The population and amount of lostness are immense and multiplication training centers are one successful method to multiply indigenous leadership. In addition to the IMB’s grassroots method of training leadership, several larger seminaries and Bible schools exist. The effectiveness of these institutions is debatable, as many graduates of the seminaries do not find their way into pastoral or missionary service.\textsuperscript{43}

The state of the church in Bombay reveals several areas in need of improvement. First, many established congregations no longer have any first generation believers from a non-Christian background. The majority of conversions come through children and family members of believers.\textsuperscript{44} Many churches have stagnated and become inward focused and are no longer seeking to plant new churches in areas with no Christian presence. The lack of conversion

\textsuperscript{40}Mandryk, \textit{Operation World}, 412.

\textsuperscript{41}Listed as IMB hereafter.


\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 411.
growth reveals a need for revival and a renewed sense of concern for the lost.

Next, the longtime Western influence on Bombay is seen in the expression of the established church. Little in the way of contextualized forms of worship can be found. Worship, preaching, discipleship, and Christian education look much like what one would find in traditional churches in the United States and England. These non-contextualized churches are not as successful in reaching culturally proud Indians as they might be. Several of the larger seminaries, though evangelical, have moved toward a more liberal arts style curriculum and are less focused on training pastors.

Finally, much more effective discipleship is needed for new believers. The charismatic movement is strong in India and evangelists often use large rallies to preach the gospel to people. These rallies are accompanied by supposed healings and miracles and sometimes see many converts. Once the rally disperses, the believers are not able to connect to a Bible believing church or begin any kind of a discipleship process. There is a greater need for churches to work together during rallies so that interested new believers can assimilate into a local church.

An examination of the state of the church in Bombay reveals the need for a contextualized strategy to reach and train Indians. Such a strategy is complex in a city the size of Bombay. One must take into account the hundreds of neighborhoods, religions, and people groups gathered together in a city covering many square miles. The next section of this paper will examine the cultural tendencies of Indians so that a contextualized strategy might be developed to reach target groups. The section will conclude with current strategies employed by IMB personnel in Bombay.

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46 Ibid.
Current Missions Strategies Employed in Bombay

Indians, like all peoples of the world, have their own particular culture. Cultural specialist Richard Lewis places India halfway between a multi-active culture and a reactive culture. In addition, most residents of Bombay are Hindus. Hinduism is very tolerant and affects every aspect of an Indian’s everyday behavior, both socially and professionally. Hinduism appears good-humored on the surface but there is an underlying solemnity that addresses births, marriages, deaths, and business ventures. There are many rituals inherent in Hinduism that must be performed to garner the favor of various gods. The Hindu worldview is hierarchical with gods on top, humans in the middle, and animals on the bottom. These cultural insights must be factored in to a strategy to reach Indians with the gospel in a contextualized manner.

A strategy to reach the middle and upper class Indians must address their longings for financial security. Bombay is known as the economic center of India and many residents are adept businessmen and communicators. Small communities centered around fellowship are vital. Indians like to talk as they are close enough to a multi-active culture to exhibit a tenaciousness for conversation. Upper class Indians respect Westerners and will listen to what they have to say. Evangelistic business fellowships could be successful. Churches should form in high-rises and apartment complexes as Indians are very busy and Christian fellowships are more likely to reach others if the church meets in a location that is accessible and convenient for

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47 Richard D. Lewis, *The Cultural Imperative: Global Trends in the 21st Century* (Boston: Intercultural Press, Inc., 2007), 83. People in multi-active cultures tend to do many things at once, are not linear in focus, and value relationships over tasks. Hispanics and Italians are at the extreme end of the multi-active scale. People in reactive cultures tend to be very reserved, rely heavily on tradition and cultural precedent, and have a long-term focus on life and business. China and Vietnam are at the extreme end of the reactive cultural scale.

48 This strategy section will focus on Hindus since they compose nearly ¾ of the population.

49 Ibid., 44-45.

other businessmen.

A strategy to reach the low class and slum dwellers will be very different from that used to reach businessmen. The poor of Bombay often cannot read so an oral approach must be used. Needs can be met through installing water purification devices, cleaning homes, and providing medical care. Evangelists can story through the Scriptures alongside the social ministries. The slum populations are so immense that locals must be trained to reproduce the story sets in their neighborhoods. Oral communicators learn best when they can pattern themselves after those who reach them with the gospel.\(^{51}\) Because of the needs of the people, it is vital that missionaries use methods consistent with what oral peoples can understand, remember, and reproduce.

All strategies must take into account the predominant Hindu worldview. Hindus are used to a hierarchical nature so authoritative church leadership comes naturally. One must understand the complexity of Hinduism. It is possible for an Indian to renounce the gods and turn to the One True God in Christ but the plurality of the culture means that thorough discipleship is a must, even with the new Christian identity. Speaking of this identity, Hiebert remarks that “we cannot expect new believers to put their identity in Christ at the deepest level of their hierarchy of identities the moment they become Christians. This simply will not happen. Learning that being human and Christian are our deepest identities must be an intentional part of discipling.”\(^{52}\) Once the cultural traits listed above are understood, a strategy can be enacted to reach the target group.

The IMB has several teams in place in Bombay. As is often the case, there are far too few missionaries available to reach the vast population. Strategy coordinators are tasked with the difficulty of reaching the largest number of lost people possible with the small number of


personnel. The IMB has broken Bombay into twelve zones in order to create a degree of order and manageability for the city. Each zone contains one or more missionary units, which can be comprised of a single individual or a family. The work in each zone is far too immense for the IMB missionaries to address so they attempt to reach and train national believers to multiply the work.

The missionaries also rely heavily on short-term mission teams from the United States to come and train nationals. Groups come from churches or seminaries and are assigned tasks that fit the skill sets the volunteers bring. For example, a team from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary spent ten days sharing the gospel through Chronological Bible Storying and discipleship training. Evangelism was contextualized to the Indian Muslim or Hindu worldview and shared in a culturally appropriate location – often the flat rooftops of the residential housing. Missionaries are using very basic discipleship training to equip new believers to make disciples of their own. The gospel need is far beyond what the few IMB missionaries are able to accomplish. They pray daily for more workers, both missionary personnel and indigenous leaders.

Conclusion

Bombay, India is a world-class city, complete with all the trappings one would expect to find: large population, financial and industrial hub for the region, and many needs among the people. Bombay is as diverse a city as one might find anywhere in the world. Immigrants come from a myriad of linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Reaching Bombay with the life-giving gospel is a difficult task and one that requires a well thought out strategy. This paper has sought to provide a perspective missionary with the historical and religious background needed to begin to formulate an effective mission strategy. This paper is only the beginning, however, as an in-depth ethnographic survey of the target people is needed. God’s blessing and hard work

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53 Brad B. (full name withheld for security purposes), e-mail message to author, December 7, 2010.

54 Brad B., “Mumbai Multiplication.”
can bring a taste of heaven as Bombay is truly a place where many tribes, tongues, and nations come seeking life. May the gospel provide what the nations seek and more.
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