

# RELIGION, CASTE AND URBANISM IN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Religion and urbanism is a new line of research for India. So far we have only two systematic books on this subject. The question of ancient urbanism and its relation to religion is another less researched subject in India; however we have many studies on Religion Caste and urbanism separately. Religious prescriptions of purity and pollution – along with the caste identities, caste hierarchies, and identity politics – had been controlling the social relations in the rural India. A similar pattern with slight difference can be seen in Indian urban spaces too, where the idea of purity and pollution has got associated with some new notions of religion and religiosity. Sociological thinkers in modern India assumed that the increasing urbanisation and industrialisation would lead to a decline of religion and caste system in urban space. However, recent studies show that after the liberalisation of Indian economy, religion has gained more significance than ever before, and caste has reinvented itself in many ways. Among the urban middle class, a new ritualistic notion of religion has become more prominent. This has a profound effect on neo-urbanism in India as the revived interest in Hindu rituals and symbols is now interacting with another very complex and classical issue of ‘caste identities’ in urban space. In this background this paper aims to explore the dynamic relationship between religion, caste, and urbanism in the light of the ancient Indian religious prescriptions regarding life in the cities.

Key words: **Urbanism, Religion, Caste, Identity, Urban space, Urban Sociology**

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## Introduction

The relation between urbanism and religion is yet to be properly explored in India. So far, we have only two systematic books on this subject from Yamini Narayanan (2015), (2016) respectively. Study of religion and urbanism opens a new door for us to understand the identity politics in urban space. There is very little textual and empirical research on this issue in India, and the literature about ancient Indian urbanism is another less studied subject. This study demands that many of the peculiar characteristics of caste and religion and their relation with social relations and caste hierarchies in the urban space need to be seen through the ancient Indian religious prescriptions about urban life. Such an approach may not only help us to trace the evolution of urban life in the past but also to predict the future urbanism. The reason for it is that there is an increasing interest in mythology, rituals, and religious symbolism in Indian urban middle class (Nanda 2011) and such an inclination defines and influences the perception of caste based identities in Indian cities. Hence, the sociology of urban population needs to be seen through these religious prescriptions regarding purity, pollution and caste, and their implications for the creation of social and cultural capital in urban space. This not only calls for more research in Indian urbanism, it asks to explore much deeper aspects of people's perception of religion, religiosity, purity, pollution, and caste in urban space. Further, it also asks for a careful study of Dalit's and Backward caste's experience of discrimination and segregation based on caste. Some recent observations and studies in Indian cities provide the empirical data as well, for example, the typical 'spatial arrangements' of caste groups in urban space (Kamble 2002) reveals that Dalits and other lower caste communities live at the peripheries of the cities. This is similar to the arrangements made by the ancient lawgivers such as Manu and Yagyawalkya in India. Interestingly, in the villages, there are many ways of judging one's caste and lineage, which is difficult for urban areas.

Sociological thinkers in modern India assumed that the increasing urbanisation and industrialisation would lead to a decline of religion in urban space. This was also assumed that the social structures and social behaviours associated with caste would be loosened. However, as studies show (Nanda 2011) that after liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG) in 1991 in India, religion has gained more significance than ever before. Especially among the urban middle class, a new ritualistic notion of religion has become more influential. This had a profound effect on the new urbanism in India as the revived interest in Hindu ritualism is now interacting with another very complex issue of caste in urban space. Many recent studies have proved that the caste system in urban spaces has redefined itself. As noted by Anand Teltumbade '... caste has showed an amazing resilience It has survived feudalism, capitalist industrialization, a republican Constitution, and today, despite all denial, is well alive under neoliberal globalization' (Teltumbde 2010). Communities with different religious and cultural practices are becoming keener in retaining their socio-

cultural practices in urban space. This development needs to be studied as part of larger process of urbanism in India. Given these facts and observations this paper finds that there is a gap in the understanding of religion and its relation to urbanism, further it can be argued that the relation between religion and urbanism can be seen through the dynamics of caste relations in an urban space in India. Thus, this paper aims to explore the dynamic relationship between religion, caste, and urbanism in the light of the ancient Indian religious prescriptions regarding life in the cities.

### **Caste, Religion and Urbanism: Recent observations**

Indian cities, with the variety of religious beliefs, caste identities, and hierarchical structure are becoming multi-ethnic places of tension. In many cities, it has been noticed that the communities try to retain their distinct socio-cultural identities through their social, religious institution and cultural practices. This way they try to retain and re-establish their distinct socio-cultural identities, which eventually leads to in-group interaction and intense conflict as well (Chaudhuri 2009). The question arises here is, why do these communities develop such a practice in the Indian cities? Following Giddens's (1991) explanation, we see that the new conditions in modern cities create a sense of crisis among the people; this makes them search for new relations and a new type of social networks. The religious groups and gatherings easily fulfil their search. Some other studies show that this kind of intense religious involvement provides a sense of brotherhood, security and a meaning in the life of the city dwellers (Babb 1987). Fischer (1975) also shares similar insights that urbanism promotes social bonding for a variety of sub-cultures (including ethnic and religious groups).

The known urban theories argue that after migrating to the cities, people and communities adapt to the city-life and their older social organisational forms are weakened or modified (Park 1967). However, for Indian cities, it is difficult to understand what kind of changes caste relations go through in urban space and how they define the sense of social and cultural capital. The work of Giddens (1991), and Babb (1987) show that such kind of changed religious involvement defines a new dynamics among the different groups and communities. This observation has many implications for Indian cities as in recent times we have seen a great change in the urban religiosity and inclinations towards rituals and popular spiritualistic traditions and cults. These inclinations though do not prescribe for a direct decision or clear message for caste and religious identities, but in many different ways, the idea of caste and hierarchy does come in practice. The ancient Indian prescriptions for segregation between different castes and Varna are still practised in every Indian city and village. Studies on residential segregation in Indian cities also suggest that such segregation is highly influenced by identities based on caste, it also reveals that in every city such segregations surpass the level of segregation based on the socio-economic status (Vithayathil and Singh 2012).

Such a segregation and spatial distribution of castes are seen as an acute form of discrimination. Some scholars (Ashton 2001; Kapoor 2004; Brown & Sitapati 2008) have compared the Dalit experience in urban space in India with the African American in the US on the grounds of some similarities between the caste based discrimination and racial discrimination. These scholars have developed their tools and methods of enquiry in American urban space, which is still to develop for the Dalit experience of discrimination and segregation in Indian urban space. Such tools and methods seem more important and practical for Dalits and Tribes in urban space, as many Indian policy makers and planner wrongly believe that caste and religion do not play in urban spaces in India. However, other qualitative research in similar spaces suggest that caste becomes a crucial question when it comes to the other important aspects related to the creation of social and cultural capital in urban space, for example, the choice of education, school, work, workplace, and residence (Munshi & Rosenzweig 2006; Thorat & Newman 2010). The above-mentioned studies and opinions show that there is a complex relationship between religion, urbanism and identities, which needs an understanding in the historical urbanism in India and its relation to the leading religious ideology which is Brahminism.

### **Ancient Indian urbanism and religion**

Ancient Indian scriptures provide some important mentions and indicate that they had a lot to say about the future of cities and villages. Brahminism and Brahminical scriptures take a firm stand against cities and urban life, the basic idea of purity and pollution is extended in such a way where it negates the possibility of living in close proximities in a city. The fear associated with ritual pollution manifests in their prescription for open defecation, as the legendary religious historian P.V. Kane (1941: 649) notes<sup>1</sup>, Hindu dharmashastra prescribes for defecation in the open, far from the human settlements in the south or south east, while covering the head and not talking to anyone even if he is urinating. Bronkhorst (2007) in his research on ancient India mentions that Brahminism did not like the urban life.

‘when it came in contact with cities, Vedic civilization did not like them. There are explicit statements to that effect, already in the early Dharma Shatras. The Baudhayana Dharma Sātra, for example, states: “A man who keeps himself well under control will attain final bliss even if he lives in a city with his body covered with the city dust and his eyes and face coated with it”—now that is something impossible. And the Apastamba Dharma Shatra enjoins: “He should also avoid visiting cities.” The impurity of city life finds expression in the Gautama Dharma Shatra where it points out that “according to some, Vedic recitation is always suspended in a town.” The same disapproving attitude also finds expression in some later texts that call themselves Upanishads. A pericope that occurs a few times in the Sanyasa Upanishads

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<sup>1</sup> “One should not urinate while standing or walking ( Manu. IV. 47 ) nor should one speak while doing so. 1529 One should answer calls of nature away from a human habitation towards the south or southwest. Manu V. 126 and Yaj. L 17 prescribe that, after answering calls of nature, one should perform cleansing the parts with water held in a pot and lumps of earth to such an extent that no smell or filth will stick.”

states: "He shall avoid [...] capital cities as he would the Kumbhipaka hell".  
(Bronkhorst 2007: 251)

The threats of pollution if seen as a threat of infection and disease can be understood and then this exaggeration in Brahminical scriptures makes some sense. But it does not seem to be the fear of diseases and infections only, rather it appears that the very idea of Dharma and varna based duties is in the root of these prescriptions, as noted by Ray (1977) 'Briefly, the Dharmasāstras and the Dharmasūtras are decidedly and unequivocally in favour of a rural life, going to the extent of even indicating that it was in the villages alone that one could lead a pure, clean, honest and peaceful life and pursue one's dharma, that is, one's social life and obligations, without distraction.' (Ray 1977: 865).

The threat of diseases and infection was not unique to India or to the Brahmins. As McNeill (1977) points out, there were at least eleven cases of pestilential disaster in Europe in the republican times, the earliest dated 387 BCE. With a similar threat of diseases Europe has never developed the Brahminical idea of purity and pollution or the idea of Varna and caste. Many scholars have proved that the Brahminical dislike for urban life had profound consequences. According to Giovanni Verardi (1996), from the third century onwards, the crisis of the trade and economy became increasingly profound. In this period only, the decline of the Indian cities began, which caused the de-urbanisation of the country in Gupta times. The Brahminic social and economic model, based on land and agriculture (not on trade) regained the power and authority in this period.<sup>2</sup> In its nature, from the very beginning the Brahminic ideology was against anything that questioned the social equilibrium attained in the rural areas. Because of this inclination it remained a key factor in determining the decline of the urban life, trade and economy of the subcontinent. This is also visible in Brahminsim's long and historical struggle against the Buddhists and Jains in India.

### **Caste discrimination and Urban Poor**

India, with the neoliberal reforms and fast growing economy in the global market, is learning to adapt the urban lifestyle and many of the western and modern values are being translated into the local environment and needs. At the same time, Indian society exhibits its peculiar nature of accommodating and reproducing caste and caste based discrimination in urban spaces. Some recent observations and studies in Indian cities provide the empirical data as well, for example, the typical 'spatial arrangements' of caste groups in urban space (Kamble 2002) reveals that Dalits and other lower caste communities live at the

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<sup>2</sup> I am fully aware of the strong theoretical propositions that Brahmins did not have any direct connection with land and production process ever. Many indigenous theories strongly opined an entire disengagement of Brahmins with land and all forms of productive resources.. It is true that Brahmins themselves did not have strong connections to land or agriculture. Brahminic Economic model does not necessarily mean that Brahmins are the owners or cultivators of the land but it means that they are able to control the land owners, cultivators and the kings. They discouraged trade and emphasised on agriculture.

peripheries of the cities. This is similar to the arrangements made by the ancient lawgivers such as Manu and Yagyawalkya in India. Interestingly, in the villages, there are many ways of judging one's caste and lineage, which is difficult for urban areas. However, the studies show that in spite of these difficulties caste Hindus have invented their own ways of knowing other's castes in order to place them in the 'right category of treatment.' Generally, it is assumed that the urbanisation has facilitated the elimination of such traditional caste and Varna based identities and created a class identity in cities. Nevertheless, if observed carefully the caste system has invented many ways of surviving and denying this merging of traditional identities. Parallel to all the scientific and technological advancement and neoliberal reforms, there has been indeed certain civilisational and socio-cultural development in India too. However, regrettably, the most destructive tendencies in Indian society have also learned to adapt to the changes in order to reproduce themselves in modern India. This has not only resulted in the denial of equal access and opportunities for Dalits and marginalised communities in urban space in India, but it has made the urban Dalits vulnerable to upper caste attacks (Teltumbde 2010). The urban question for Dalits and marginalised is much complex and challenging as it demands a good understanding of the religion and culture of India, which is often ignored by the policy makers, urban planners and even by the scholars coming from leftist or atheist inclinations. That is why they did not tend to enquire deep into the dynamics and implications of the sociology of religion in Indian urban spaces.

Among the Indian urban poor, the social groups most vulnerable to poverty have been identified to be Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households with both these groups having above average levels of poverty indicators in the rural and the urban population (Sundaram & Tendulkar 2003). These social groups have historically suffered from exclusion in multiple spheres, which has led to their severe deprivation. Moreover, centuries of the caste-based social organisation has left a legacy of inequalities in all spheres and led to the process of exclusion, discrimination and deprivation of these groups from the full participation in the society within which they live (Throat & Newman 2007). There exists continued persistence of caste disparities in education, income and social networks among different dimensions of well-being (Desai & Dubey 2012). In its long history, Indian civilisation repeatedly confronted with the problems of bringing social order out of the tremendous diversity. Here India's celebrated solution was to compartmentalise social differences (Gould 1969; Mukherjee 1965) On the other hand, the above refers to what M.N. Srinivas (1952) and others have so often noted, that Hinduism and the caste form of social organisation mutually reinforce each other. Not only in history but also in our times, even after the neoliberal reforms in 1991 in India, the same social compartmentalisation is still playing in many ways. There is some empirical evidence that suggests the presence of systematic caste discrimination in the labour market. For instance Banarjee and Knight (1985: 277-307) observe that

in India 'an effect of caste prejudice in the labour market, more generally, is to promote the economic interests of some groups and to harm those of others. The caste system is thus functional to the generation and maintenance of economic inequalities. Job discrimination produces caste differences in the price of labour and therefore in incomes. It can be expected that these economic interests contribute to the preservation of the caste system.'

### **Caste Religion and Urbanism: Discussion and analysis**

Apart from the ancient religious prescriptions, if we see caste as a living concept in Indian society; we can see caste has been able to reinvent itself repeatedly in recent times.

For Ambedkar, urbanisation and the problems associated with it were central to the problems faced by the Dalits and the deprived. Few scholars have adopted Ambedkar's point of view on this issue. The great importance Ambedkar accorded to this issue can be seen in his scholarly treatise *The Untouchables* (1948), Ambedkar lists the emergence of urban centres and their security needs as one of the reasons for the origin of untouchability. Not only to untouchability, in his analysis Ambedkar has attributed the same reason for the emergence of Dalits (Broken Men) as well. According to him, even after pastoral societies learnt to farm and settled, some tribes chose to continue with their nomadic existence. Subsequently, these nomadic groups began attacking and looting agricultural settlements. The settlers now needed security and they decided to employ 'Broken Men' – defeated nomads – for this purpose. The Broken Men were provided living space immediately outside the settlements and were used as private armies to battle the intruder. Nevertheless, they were not fully assimilated into urban society and its processes, as they belonged to another, tribal community.

Ambedkar has sought to validate his premise using the examples of Ireland and Wales, among others. Needless to say, there were huge differences between those societies and India. In other societies, the private militias were assimilated by their masters – the urban community – into itself. However, in Indian society, they continued to be ostracised (Michael 2007). Thus, for Ambedkar, the origin of untouchability is not only associated with racial and cultural differences but also with the insecurity of a closed economic class. This premise can be extended to assert that later these defeated tribal groups were pressed into carrying out demeaning works and then this became a tradition, which is shown in the writings of Stephen Fuchs (1981). This analysis about the origin of broken man and the origin of untouchability is important for us to explain the issue of castes in urban India. The first point, however, explains the global phenomenon of separation and re-absorption of the broken man in the mainstream societies. Nevertheless, the second point is specific to India and it spreads light on some typical characteristics of Indian society, culture, religion and its relation to urbanism. As Ambedkar has mentioned, the nomadic tribes who were allowed to live in the village peripheries were reabsorbed by the

mainstream societies in Europe and this allowed a social and genetic mixing of these two groups, resulting in a less stratified and less divided society. However, in India, this was not allowed, thus the peripheral and the village people remained divided resulting into a highly divided and polarised society. In his other writings about Untouchability and the supremacy of caste Hindus and especially Brahmins, Ambedkar shows that this division and polarisation was created purposefully in order to secure the sanctity and purity of the Brahmin blood by controlling exogamy. This control of exogamy by creating of endogamous groups resulted into a caste, which is continued, in Indian society. Now if we look at the caste interactions in modern India, we can see that the most of the marriages follow the same ages old rules and most of the castes follow the same restrictions as prescribed by the medieval and ancient Hindu lawgivers.

If we extend this analysis to the modern Indian urban society, it shows that in many ways the same tendency is guiding the behaviour of the urban population in India. It is not only the spatial arrangements of caste groups in urban space but also the social interaction is guided mainly by this ages old characteristic of India society. This is visible in the crimes against Dalits in urban India. The infamous Khairlanji incident has been largely discussed and its analysis from the sociological point of view reveals many facts, that shows how caste is still a reality in urban social systems. Discussing the Kharilanji incident, Teltumbde (2010: 29) comments on the criminal attack on the urban Dalits by noting down 'there may be a combination of factors and aberrations that lead to such behaviour, but the foremost is the conviction that what one is doing is right. The perpetrators of the crime believe that they are justified. Religious ideology, culture, and tradition could be the sources of such conviction. But, however self-righteously a person develops the belief that it is right to inflict harm on others, it is a pre-requisite that he or she should also be in a position to overpower the other.'

## **Conclusion**

Urbanism in India is a new subject of enquiry, which needs to be seen through the insights and observations from Indian cities and their intrinsic characters. Most of the approaches developed by European and American scholars do not apply in Indian cities for obvious reasons. Indian caste system and caste based hierarchy complicate the whole question of urban sociology and urbanism and any model or framework developed in the west cannot possibly explain the reproduction of social and caste relations in Indian urban space. Unless we look into the traditional and religious prescriptions about caste, purity, and pollution, it is difficult to understand why the urban population in India behaves the way they do.

Neoliberal reforms and urbanisation clubbed with increasing migration for employment and educational opportunities are helping the rural rich and poor to seek better opportunities in urban space, but at the same time the crisis

of identity and the urge to maintain their social hierarchy is also being translated and reinvented in the cities. This paper shows how the ancient scriptures and Dharmashastra had shaped the reasons for such a phenomenon in the ancient history of India. Obviously, since many of the prescriptions and beliefs are still relevant for Hindu society, their implications on the social relation can be seen easily through these prescriptions and not by the western models and approaches. This paper wants to suggest that the urbanism and social relations in the Indian urban space must be seen through these religious prescriptions for purity, pollution and caste based hierarchies.

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