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Towards an Understanding of the New Middle Classes in India: Missiological Perspective and Implications

Abstract:

One of the distinguishing features of contemporary India is the emergence and the rise of the new middle class/es (hereafter NMC). The confident and ambitious NMC has sprouted up across the country, now numbering about 300-400 million people and the number is increasing rapidly. The purpose of the article is to demonstrate that the emerging NMC is relatively an unexplored and unengaged people group in urban missions in India and beyond. It is a contemporary movement that is fluid and still in the process of emerging. In further exploration of the NMC, this article provides few key implications for an effective engagement with the NMC both in India and abroad. Recognizing that a sizable majority of the NMC are transnational, the NMC represents the Indian diaspora globally.

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Introduction

For the first time in human history, around half of the world is middle class, with the majority being in Western countries (Bhatt et. al. 2010:127-152). One of the most distinguishing features of contemporary India is the emergence and rise of the new middle class/es[1] (henceforth NMC). Today, the NMC is the fastest growing segment of the Indian population (Saxena 2010). Madhukar Sabnavis asserts that the "big Indian middle class" is anywhere between 300 to 400 million and growing (2010:4). By all reasonable estimates, the Indian middle class is bigger than the entire population of many nations (Bhavan 2009:1). The middle class, especially the new middle class which is categorized on the basis of income, social status, education, occupation, and consumerism has significantly emerged as a powerful, influential, and dominant class in urban India who largely determine India's economy, polity, culture, education and social relationships.

In such a changing scenario, the NMC remains one of the most unengaged sections of Indian missions. K. Rajendran accurately remarked that "the educated middle class seem reached and yet not reached" (2005:8-17). David Bennett, in his nationwide research in India, concluded that many Indian churches and other related institutions had not significantly engaged with the emerging urban middle classes. He suggests that the India Missions Association (IMA) and a few others are making some attempts to engage with them (2011:51).

Similarly, John Amalraj, Mohan Patnail and Anand Mahadevan (2011:293) along with Herbert Hoefer (2001:12-15) contend that the Christian ministry in India has not significantly impacted its urban society, except for the needy and poverty-stricken. Although some mission practitioners and scholars have shown a perpetual concern and have written about this urban movement, missions among the NMC have been mostly neglected, except to the Christian middle class. Even though there have been sporadic attempts made by a few ministries, there is very restricted consistent work among the secular NMC. The present article is an attempt to understand the NMCs and their present sociological as well as religious reality and their missiological implications.

The Emergence of the NMC: History in Perspective

Karl Marx and Max Weber, widely accepted classical sociological thinkers, have written extensively on class in an analysis of human history

and sociology. In the 19th and the early parts of the 20th century, during the time of British rule, the Indian middle classes in India began to emerge and thrive in the field of education, consequently creating new job opportunities which moved them upward towards economic mobility. Sanjeeb Mukherjee, rightly asserts that Colonialism and Capitalist developments gave rise to dominant all-India classes (Mukherjee 1989:100). British rule made inroads to form a capitalist economy while establishing a new administrative system and promoting English education, which resulted in a tiny educated class in urban areas (Shah 1990:162).

In the contemporary literature, the NMC emerges with the background of the discourses on economic liberalization.[2] Mainstream economists and policy-makers have deliberated on this and have contended that the augmentation of this new economy was interrelated to the expansion of the urban middle class, referring to this as the "new" middle class (Sinha 2014:40). Liberalization, according to S.P. Aiyar is the philosophy of modernization in India (1973:9) which brought economic, social, and political changes. Liberalization, undoubtedly, has not only significantly improved the Indian economy, educational opportunities (both locally and globally), and the rise of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) but it has also paved the way for upward mobility for hundreds of thousands of Indians especially, the NMC.

The NMC: Concept and Various Definitions

There is no unanimity in understanding the NMCs since it is a contemporary, fluid and still emerging movement. The contours of the NMC are increasingly perceived as a "class-in-practice," which is marked by its economic mobility, politics and the regular practices through which it reconstructs its affluent position. Some argue that the NMC is "a tangible and significant phenomenon, but one whose boundaries are constantly being defined and tested" (Fernandes and Heller 2006:495). The size and definition of the middle class are the subject of incongruity and depend on several aspects such as income, status, identity and power, consumption, occupation, and lifestyle. Hence, there is no single standard definition of India's middle class. Moreover, there are different NMC categories which are different from the NMCs in other parts of the world, especially North America and Europe. Gaining an accurate understanding of the Indian NMC is further complicated particularly by the caste structure and its dominance in the class system.

In the contemporary scenario, the term 'middle class' is defined and expressed in various terms. Bibek Debroy in *Indian Express* states,

> The "middle class" is an over-used expression and difficult to pin down, since it is defined not just in terms of income, but also as values, cultural affinities, lifestyles, educational attainments and service sector employment. Using income, one way of defining a middle class is in terms of how much of income is left over for discretionary expenditure, after paying for food and shelter. If more than one-third is left, that qualifies one for inclusion in the "middle class". (2009:1-2)

Carol Upadhya suggests that the "new" middle class is a product of the 1990s neo-liberal policies and their outcome (Upadhya, 2011:190). For a few others, the middle class/es are those who have emerged because of social mobility and status attainment.[3]

NMC and Castes in Contemporary Urban India

The contemporary Indian society is undergoing significant changes. One crucial change is a slow but steady erosion of the caste system (Finny 1993:14-15). For instance, a person's status is assessed on the basis of his education, occupation, and income, whereas caste is considered only during marriage (Kuppuswamy, 1975:359). Raj Gandhi (1989:41) further asserts, "If one wants to discern the direction of change in the social stratification of urban India, the most logical step is to think in terms of change from caste to class." Although it is an accepted change, it has not profoundly penetrated India's social system and dynamics among other Indian populations.

Further, the NMCs are a heterogeneous group. Due to the strong influence of caste it is primarily dominated by the traditional upper castes (Kuppuswamy 1975:348). M.N. Panini (1997:60) foresees, economic liberalization, which in the long run, will generate job opportunities to an extent that workers will cease from using their caste as a license to get jobs. It seems that the caste-based occupations are perhaps eroding in India due to urbanization, globalization, and modernization, subsequently resulting in multiple job opportunities outside of traditional occupations, both locally and globally, particularly in private, ITC and related sectors. Conversely, caste continues to 'cluster' in occupations with higher influential levels such as in government services like managerial and professional occupations,

and in the 'industrial milieu' between the organized and the unorganized sector (Panini 1997:32-33).

The NMC Categories and Characteristics

According to B.B. Misra (1978:7), the middle class has an occupational interest but it is bound together by a typical style of living and behaviorial patterns, and stands for democratic values, which they express in their social and political lives. Moreover, the NMCs are classified into various groups or categories by various sociologists. Bhagavan Prasad (1968:9-11) divides the NMC's into four groups based on occupation: 1. Salaried persons, including administrative employees, postal and other institutional and government officials; 2. Independent occupations such as medical practitioners, lawyers, armed forces officers, teachers, artists, actors, journalists, and other consultants; 3. The non-salaried such as those involved in entrepreneurial or business activities like a private business, and directors in business firms; 4. Retired persons and widows from wealthy families. Income, social status, consumerism, and lifestyle are a few other key criteria used to categorize the NMCs in India.

Furthermore, although the Hindu percentage is on the higher side compared to other social groups, the NMC comprises people from all spheres of the social structure. According to Sudeshna Maitra (2007:3), Muslims and Christians form a more substantial segment of the lower class (18% and 11% respectively) than the middle and upper classes (15% and 4% of the middle class and 10% and 4% of the upper class). Recent economic developments are significant for Christians, as a sizeable portion made substantial socio-economic progress during the last two to three decades, primarily due to education and public and service sector employment.

The NMCs are recognized on the basis of their earnings, mostly from the higher and middle castes. In the era of contemporary globalization, dual-earning couples have increased among the NMC. In addition, an increasing percentage of women and youth representation in the private and IT-related sectors has been observed, and they are increasingly global in nature and lifestyle. The following are few key characteristics of the NMCs:

1. Increasingly Consumerist Lifestyle and Identity

In a contemporary study of the middle classes, consumerism is the single most consistent theme (Fernandes 2006) that has repeatedly shown

the link between middle class formation and the emergence of consumer cultures (Heiman et al. 2012:23-24). The NMCs are perhaps the most significant consumers of "high-end" goods such as cars, air conditioners, designer clothes, computers, mobile telephones, gadgets and much more. In short, consumption has become their *status quo*.

2. Technologically Savvy: "Knowledge Class"

The NMCs are also called the "knowledge class" because of their specialized, advanced education, technological expertise, and much greater knowledge in different fields. Their dependence on technological gadgets like mobile phones, the internet, laptops, iPods, tablets, etc. is exceptional and proves how this class is conversant, and has been exposed to new and modern technology.

The Indian IT industry has become the new great hope of the Indian middle class (EPW Editorial 2001:5).   According to Gurcharan Das (2002a:245-253), IT entrepreneurs and professionals are considered the new middle-class heroes. Das, even proposes that India can leapfrog the industrial age while embracing information technology that can drive India's economic growth and transform the country (2002b: xvii.).

3. Aspirational and Career-Oriented

The NMCs perspective about overall life is increasingly money centered. The argument of Robert Wuthnow about American *middle class* categorically applies to a certain extent to the NMCs in India. He states:

> The distinguishing feature of the middle class is its obsession with work and money…middle class is fundamentally defined by its pursuit of careers, the preparation of its children to participate in the labour market, and the close connection between its material well-being and its values. (Wuthnow 1993:192)

The NMCs, their upbringing and enculturation have tuned them to the single-minded pursuit of material success and career growth for the acquisition of a comfortable lifestyle, more wealth, and prestige.

The NMC Culture and Society: More Globalized than Localized

The NMC, mainly, the IT and related sector professionals, are increasingly seen to aspire to international job opportunities and immigration to developed countries.   As a result, they have developed

a global worldview while embracing technological advancement and advanced language skills and expertise. The NMCs maintain a professional lifestyle, they are fast-paced, demand a modern, western standard of living and have a keen global perspective. Incidentally, the NMCs are emerging as a transnational and a global phenomenon.

Furthermore, Chowdhury and Halarnkar (1998:58) observe that globalization is ushering in unprecedented transformation by altering old prejudices thus demonstrating the confidence to adopt new and innovative lifestyles, cultural standards, and global mindsets. However, such changes are the exceptions rather than the rule and have not actually loosened the hold of caste, particularly over marriage relationships, specific religious traditions, and institutions where caste bonds are yet being valued and practiced.

Purnima Mankekar (1999:9) notes that, "If the middle classes seemed eager to adopt modern lifestyles through the acquisition of consumer goods, they also became the self-appointed protectors of tradition." Although the NMCs are certainly becoming more globalized and modern in their entire outlook, they do continue to value and practice specific traditional and ancient cultural practices despite their conservative nature in correspondence with kinship relationships, family values, religious beliefs, and so on. This situation has undoubtedly positioned them to be "glocal", allowing them to be both "local" and "global" at the same time.

The NMCs Worldviews

The NMCs worldviews are different from other classes and are changing rapidly due to various factors. L.W. Bryce (1961:84) asserts that urbanization brings cultural change in the ways of thinking, lifestyle, and the point of view of populations. The NMC has changed over the years, though there are tensions and some continuity with old traditions, beliefs, and lifestyle. The NMCs who are predominantly English educated, often in private and even international schools and colleges, are profoundly impacted by the western, scientific, secular, "enlightenment" ideologies and worldviews. Consequently, this has had a far-reaching influence on the NMCs political consciousness, religious beliefs, gender relationships, and other socio-cultural perspectives.

Moreover, segments of the NMC who are secular, are primarily concerned with the matters of this world as they strive to bypass religion. It is a process which brings gradual changes in the thinking and practices of

people that is seen especially among the NMCs who are more exposed to secular ideals and practices (Aghamkar 2011:6-7). In this respect, the NMC has undoubtedly become more secular, although not all segments of it and not in equal measure. The NMCs who are influenced by western education and modernity are also exposed to liberal, secular, and rational concepts and morals. However, they still keep themselves rooted in the traditional and religious social structures (Misra 2010:152).

According to Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin (2008:1) the terms "pragmatism" or "pragmatic" usually denotes:

> …a commitment to success in practical affairs, to "getting things done." Pragmatists are driven not by principle, but by the desire to achieve their ends. Hence pragmatists have little interest in abstraction, idealization, nitpicking argument, or theory of any sort; they have no time for these because they are fixed on practical tasks. A pragmatist is hence a bargainer, a negotiator, a doer, rather than a seeker of truth, a wonderer, or a thinker.

Likewise, "what works for me, is right," is a way of life for most of the NMC and they tend to judge everything from that perspective. What appeals to the intellect is generally accepted, as most of them are inclined to evaluate everything by its relevance and applicability according to their felt needs and aspirations.

The NMCs Spirituality and Religious Diversity

In contemporary India, religion continues to have an influential role in personal, family, and business affairs, and continues to influence and shape their overall development in cognizance of self-identity, god, and society (Tirimanna 2011:5). Today, a large number of religious, cultural, philosophical, and spiritual institutions and various ideologies are practiced by the NMC along with their traditional Hindu faith and temple worship. The worship places such as: Sri Satya Sai Baba Ashram, the ISKCON temple, OSHO ashram, *Yoga* centers, *Sri Sri* Ravi Shankar's *Art of Living* and many other such centers have become famous destinations not only among the NMC but also for people from all over the world.

It is generally perceived that in the cities people are not religious, however, the NMC, though not very religious in strict terms, do adhere to their religious faith and spirituality. Raj Gandhi (Gandhi 1989:56) focuses on the popularity of religion in cities. He contends, "it is futile to argue that religion is disappearing from Indian cities." Hinduism has ancient roots that

are presently undergoing a transformation in which Neo-Hinduism, Neo-Vedanta and New Guru movements, along with several other New Religious Movements, both local and global, are playing a vital role. Their religious nature and practices are complex, fluid and exceptionally intermingled at times. Consequently, the NMC is evolving with "hybridization", while maintaining a tightrope balance in their religiosity.

The NMC and the Anubhava *Phenomenon*

In the contemporary scene, almost all religions seem to be promoting the experiential religious aspects of their various faiths. In the case of Hinduism, while presenting a profound belief in the *anubhava*-experiential spirituality found among Hindus, Herbert Hoefer (2001:12-15) notes,

> Traditional Hindu religiosity emphasizes three sources of authority in discovering the religious truth: *Srti* or ancient writings; *Yukti* or rational thought; and the most important *Anubhava* or experience. The purpose of using *srti* and *yukti* is only to get to one's own *anubhav*-and only then, Hindus believe, do they know the writings and teachings are true. Of course, this emphasis on *anubhava* is central to Pentecostal theology and practice as well. An Indian seeker will commonly want confirmation through visions, miracles, answered prayers and healings. Most other denominations are uncomfortable with all this subjectivity. They prefer to remain at *srti*-in this case the Bible-and *yukti*-the dogma, but the Indian drive is for *anubhava*.

The NMC, being pragmatic seekers of religious vitality long for some divine *anubhava* in their life, career, business, and family. To experience the reality and divine power of god, the NMCs perform various rituals, *poojas*, and *bhakti*, as well as following various *gurus*, going for pilgrimages, holy baths and pursuing different religious rites.

Thus, we may construe that Hindu faith is being redefined, but has not lost its influence among the NMC. The popularity of neo-Hinduism[4] and the guru movement among the NMC is noteworthy as an indicator that the Hindu faith endures and flourishes although the methods of worship and teaching have undergone numerous changes over the years.

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Proposed Missiological Implications

The missiological implications proposed here are not an explicit framework, but rather ways of engaging with the NMC more effectively.

Present the Uniqueness of Christ in the Pluralistic Context of the NMC

Indian Hindus have a pluralistic and secular worldview. For most Indians, Jesus Christ is one among other gods, a divine guru, and unique teacher. This pluralistic perception demands active engagement and clear dialog. Such a context, poses a huge challenge in presenting the uniqueness of Christ and the Gospel. Needless to say, there are suspicious attitudes towards Christians by Hindus during the period of "effective engagement." Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that there is good rapport between Christians and Hindus in most urban contexts. There seems to be mutual respect towards each other's faith and religious practices. However, insensitivity and conceited behavior can incite hatred and negative attitudes towards the other group.

Samuel Escobar implies that globalization is a "*fait accompli*"[5] and exhorts the church to strive to understand pluralism and globalization and respond to it positively in order to demonstrate God's goodwill towards humanity. He further appeals to churches to recognize this situation and change accordingly, to be relevant to the sociocultural and religious context, while making use of its positive features and neutralizing negative ones (Escobar 2003:53). In such scenarios, it is vital to redefine the Christian approach and move forward with the uniqueness of Christ by exemplifying a biblical Christian identity through servanthood, purity, and sacrificial living.

Recognize the Stress and other Psychological Problems of the NMC

For most of the NMC, peace of mind, good health, and the family's comfort are fundamental concerns. However, urban life has been infested with daily hassles, stress, and other psychological problems. One of the reasons is the 24/7 work culture. The NMC is not excluded from urban life and its predicaments. The high level of competition, rapid social changes, loneliness, tedious work demands, the disintegration of the family, attitudinal and habitual changes among the youth, and relationship problems have significantly affected the NMC, resulting in anger, disputes, frustration, isolation, and hopelessness. In such scenarios, they seek for a new channel of interaction which would offer peace, hope, and love.

Appropriate and godly engagement, counseling, healthy dialogue, and interaction, providing necessary practical help, speaking about God's promises from the Bible and other such initiatives to meet their felt needs would be very effective.

Challenge Christian Professionals to be a Witness in the Public Square

It must be pointed out that the Christian NMC and their professionals have excellent skills, education, and communication capabilities, and have access to secular NMC groups. Thus, they are the natural and best anchors to present the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the unconditional love of God. Depending upon the response by the NMC professionals, these opportunities can be channeled for the launching of new ministries catering specifically to this segment of the society. Christian professionals must be challenged and strategically equipped to engage with the secular NMC through their walk of integrity and excellence in work ethics. The Church at large needs to address how Christian life can be lived in the public square with lessons drawn from biblical narratives, history, and characters who lived and served God in similar political, social, and power structures.

Focus on Young Professionals

Indian cities are increasingly young. Hence focusing on young professionals is strategic since their representation in the NMC population is growing. Presently, urban India provides ample opportunities for education, investment, and professional growth. This has resulted in the rapid influx of young professionals in the urban metropolises from all over the country. This influx further provides opportunities for the Indian Church to appropriately engage with the thriving and exploding NMC. Innovative approaches and tools, and efforts to engage with young NMC professionals as well as NMC migrants will have a positive result for the extension of God's kingdom.

Encourage House Churches and Utilize Family Networks among the NMC

House fellowships are another effective way to communicate the Gospel with the NMC. With relevant and contextualized approaches, such fellowships can be very effective since they are non-threatening, friendly, and relationship-based. These suggested implications are effective methods however not significantly developed in the context of the NMC.

House churches also provide anonymity to individuals. Thus an individual can conceal their whereabouts from their acquaintances if they feel threatened. Further, there are some who seem to be uncomfortable with the structured and organized form of Christianity. Such NMC aspirants who respect independence and openness can be absorbed in house churches where they can enjoy the freedom of seeking new levels of spirituality and become spiritually mature until they eventually become part of the organized Church and its fellowships. There is a need to identify and reach out to receptive segments of the NMC. Mainly among the educated young professionals and their families who have just migrated to the city and are willing to explore new ideologies.

Emphasize Friendship and Incarnational Witness

The gospel is communicated more effectively among friends and colleagues. This approach could be useful in engaging with the NMC as friendships in cities mutually reinforce fields of social action that define the middle class in India. Witnessing to friends can involve discussing personal, family, marriage, career, relationships, and other issues that matter the most to them. These friendships are fundamentally anti-hierarchical; mutual and life sharing, while offering valuable time and friendship in a time of need and urgency.

Recognize that the NMC are Intellectual and Highly Educated

The NMC are much more globalized than localized. Today's majority of the NMC are becoming more global than local. The church and its mission need to recognize that the NMC are highly educated and modern in the way they approach life. They are more intellectual and philosophical. Aghamkar rightly asserts that culturally relevant evangelism, undergirded by apologetic discourses, as well as relevant literature that presents the uniqueness of Christ and attempts to clarify misconceptions about Christianity are generally well received (Aghamkar 2011:7). Intellectual dialogue and healthy discussion regarding each other's ideologies can create an opportunity to present the gospel. However, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict the person.

Focus More on "Here and Now" than Eternal Rewards

The NMC are pragmatic and prefer experience (*anubhava*), over faith and hope. For most of them, materialistic and practical needs, and the

mundane realities of life matter most. They seem to be more attracted to experiential events such as miracles, prosperity, healing, and deliverance from the evil powers. Thus, the focus should be more on the "here and now" without neglecting the hope of "eternal life." It is necessary to avoid overemphasizing Christian dogma, rituals, traditional beliefs and practices and rather focus on experiential theology.

Initiate a Missional Approach for Migrant NMC

The NMCs, most of them, are an increasingly migratory category of urban population. Migrants who are uprooted and isolated from their homes and cultures are suddenly exposed to a new culture, people, and environment. In such disorientation and emptiness, they seek moral and even religious support. In such a time of need, the Church could strategically follow them by helping in several ways: for example, help to find an affordable place to rent or buy, to navigate the city and update on cultural norms or to make them comfortable and secure while sharing resources and practical help during a crisis time.

Developing a missional approach for a migrant section of the NMC has great potential for engaging and becoming involved in their lives, as most of them seem to be more open while in transition and in the settling process. How can the Church understand such dynamics, migrants' ongoing pressing issues, insecurity, emotional trauma, fear, and so on? A "transnational anthropology" would help, to study the life of these NMC transnationals (or those who cross between states), where globalization has repositioned them. Here, select Christian NMC's who are, or have been, similarly on the move both nationally and internationally could be equipped to engage while providing them necessary specialized training, equipping, and motivation.

Conclusion

The NMC has emerged as a growing, but unengaged mission field. This calls for an urgent and serious paradigm shift in the approach from the Indian church and its missions. There are other possible missiological implications which could be drawn. Nevertheless, the implications noted in this article are those necessary for active engagement with the NMC. God loves the city and desires them to be reconciled, transformed, and utilized as a channel for his great mission for humankind. The NMC Christian professionals are perhaps a vital bridge to crossover to the secular

NMC. When the NMC has been effectively and adequately presented with the gospel, it will pave the way for engaging with the upper class and its castes more effectively.

In embracing the city and urban missions, there is also a need for restructuring the theological, ecclesiological, and practical aspects of the Indian Church and its missions in order to effectively engage with the NMC and their ongoing struggles, issues, and challenges. The new epoch of mission is urban and the focus on the NMC is one of the key strategies for the 21st-century missions in India and beyond.

End Notes

[1] The "new middle class" and its plural form, "new middle classes," are used interchangeably and the reader should not make a distinction in meaning between the two terms. When the term *"middle class"* is italicized; it refers to the Western ideal type of the concept "middle class." One need not assume that India's middle class is like the Western *middle class* and can be analyzed by using simple sociological or economic constructs. In much of the existing literature, the "new" middle class refers to the English-speaking, securely propertied elite, and professionals. However, the actual *middle* middle class and lower middle class bear little cultural resemblance to the elite. For further see. Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reforms* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 196.

[2] The Indian government initiated the economic liberalization program in the mid-1980s. However, its development with specific resources and reforms were realized more from 1991 onwards (Soumodip Sinha 2014:2).

[3] For further see, Donald J. Treiman, *Occupational Prestige in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Academic Press, 1977 and Melvin M. Tumin, *Social Stratification: The Forms and Functions of Inequality*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall. 1967.

[4] According to Frank Morales, Neo-Hinduism was an "artificial religious construct used as a paradigmatic juxtaposition to the legitimate traditional Hinduism that had been the religion and culture of the people for thousands of years. Neo-Hinduism was used as an effective weapon to replace authentic Hinduism with a British invented version designed to make a subjugated people easier to manage and control." For further see, http://hinduism.about.com/od/history/a/neohinduism.htm(accessed 2 November 2017).

[5] French, literally meaning "accomplished fact". A thing that has already happened or been decided before those affected hear about it, leaving them with no option but to accept it. See, www.oxforddictionary.com

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