INDIAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY:
RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL INTERACTION TO MINORITY FRAMING

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Abstract

Indian Christianity has been an interactive community, living out its faith and traditions in an ambience of spontaneity. It implied moments and dynamics of acceptance, rejections, hesitations, and criticism from the outside others, even while Indian Christianity itself involved in dynamics of exclusions and inclusions towards others. All these religious-cultural dynamics took place in a vein of spontaneity, interactivity, and creativity. However, in the recent past, it has been made to become self-conscious of its identity as the majority's 'other' through a process of 'minority framing'. From being an ancient religious community, which went about its life and activities in an ambience of freedom, the Indian Christian community is now made to become a 'communally conscious minority', concerned about its vulnerable communal identity. This essay narrates the contours of the changes.

Keywords: Indian Christianity, identity, minority.

Résumé

Le christianisme indien a été une communauté interactive, vivant sa foi et ses traditions dans une ambiance de spontanéité. Cela impliquait des moments et des dynamiques d'acceptation, de rejets, d'hésitations et de critiques de l'extérieur, alors même que le christianisme indien était lui-même impliqué dans des dynamiques d'exclusions et d'inclusions envers les autres. Toutes ces dynamiques religio-culturelles se sont déroulées dans une veine de spontanéité, d'interactivité et de créativité. Cependant, dans un passé récent, il a été amené à devenir conscient de son identité en tant qu'« autre » de la majorité à travers un processus de « cadrage de la minorité ». D'être une ancienne communauté religieuse, qui menait sa vie et ses activités dans une ambiance de liberté, la communauté chrétienne indienne est maintenant faite pour devenir une 'minorité communautairement consciente', soucieuse de son identité communautaire vulnérable. Cet essai narre les contours des changements.

Mots-clés : christianisme indien, identité, minorité.

Rezumat

Creștinismul indian a fost o comunitate interactivă, care își trăiește credința și tradițiile într-o atmosferă de spontaneitate. A implicat momente și dinamici de acceptare, respingeri, ezitari și critici din exteriorul celorlalți, chiar dacă creștinismul indian însuși implicat în dinamica excluderilor și incluziunilor față de ceilalți. Toate aceste dinamici religio-culturale au avut loc într-o venă de spontaneitate, interactivitate și creativitate. Cu toate acestea, în trecutul recent, a fost făcut să devină conștient de identitatea sa ca

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"celălalt" al majorității printr-un proces de "încadrare a minorității". De la a fi o comunitate religioasă străveche, care și-a desfășurat viața și activitățile într-o atmosferă de libertate, comunitatea creștină indiană este acum făcută să devină o "minoritate conștientă comunitar", preocupată de identitatea sa comunală vulnerabilă. Acest eseu povestește contururile schimbărilor.

Cuvinte cheie: creștinism indian, identitate, minoritate.

1. Situating the Debate

Not one but several factors of the contemporary global world bring up the concern and debate on minority identity to the fore. Migration that was growing faster during the last quarter of the twentieth century is indeed a crucial factor to the emergence of the now-prominent identity discourse. During the 90ies of the twentieth century, faced with the advent of different migrant communities in their liberal political polities, the Canadian and North-American Governments were discussing 'multiculturalism' as their standard liberal political practice so as to do justice to different identities. If we go back a little further in time to the post-war era, we find yet another important factor in the formation of independent nation-states in southern and eastern hemispheres, freeing themselves from the erstwhile colonial powers. Different cultural identities had to contend with the nation-states which were constructing unified national identities for their states. We find that the minority identity came to the fore in this context. As Will Kymlicka observes, the post-colonial and post-cold war era brought to the fore questions of relationship between States and minorities, between minorities, and within minorities themselves (Kymlicka, 2005, p. 3). He identifies two broad categories of minorities: one, 'national minorities' who had pre-existed the colonial States and continue to exist inter-generationally in post-colonial States too with certain common denominators of language, religion, culture, etc.; and the other, 'ethnic minorities', most often immigrants, who have formed into minorities in their countries of settlements. What is a relevant point to draw out from Kymlicka's large oeuvre on the liberal theory of multiculturalism and minority rights is the emergence to the fore of the question of minorities – their identities, rights, cultures, etc., within the framework of the contemporary post-colonial democratic States. Immediately after the attainment of independence from colonial powers, the newly emerging democratic States drew together the different cultural communities into the common project of nation-building. Now, after about half a century or more, these States have to deal with problems arising from identity politics, majority-minority conflicts, and so on.

Against this background, the discipline of *minority studies* has emerged as an important field of research today (Robinson, 2012), and minority identity discourse has obtained significance in these studies. It is heartening to see that several higher educational institutions, especially in the western hemisphere, have established centres for minority studies. Unfortunately, the Indian academia

is yet to reckon with it and contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon with researches and debates.

2. Contemporary Indian Context

Indian context, however, is debating the issue vigorously at the practical realms of politics. India, as an independent nation-state, is emerging today to play a prominent role in the global world, based apparently on its expansive consumerist base (in terms of the huge population), and it constructs, overtly and covertly, its specific identity in the international arena. Major political players feel that India has to emerge not only as a unified powerful political and economic entity, but also as a cultural and religious universe, having its specific identity cut out for negotiations at various global fora.

In this context, India is witnessing to the danger of 'majoritarianism' in political, cultural and religious fields; and it goes with a hegemonising dynamic of the dominant in the Indian hierarchical society. Those who construct majoritarianism adduce several reasons for their project:

a) India has been under foreign or alien rule for centuries together, and it is but legitimate that the majority of Indian population aspire for their own nationhood;

b) India has a spiritual and religious core which has withstood the vicissitudes of history (as proposed by Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan and the neo-Hindu philosophers) and this should become the core of Indian polity, if not the global polity for the benefit of humanity.

With these and other reasons, the political players are endeavoring to construct a majoritarian religious-cultural identity for a sub-continent that has 1.35 billion people, speaking 22 official languages, 122 major languages and 1599 minor dialects, and following such distinctly diverse religious traditions as Saivism, Vaishnavism, Sakthaism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zorastrianism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, along with hundreds of Guru-specific and folk religious traditions. An attempt is being made, as aptly pointed out to by Manjari Katju, as professor of political science, to refashion the secular democracy into that of a 'Hindu'[2] democracy, with its own specific philosophy of nation, citizenship, ethical ideals and so on (Katju, 2017).

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[2] A name that has come handy for this project is what is being addressed today as 'Hinduism'. Etymologically a word that stood for the geographical region beyond the river Sindhu, as addressed by the Persians, the word 'Hindu', with a very gradually evolving usage through the centuries, has come to stand for a religious universe today, and there is a strenuous political effort being made to construct this unified religious identity to go in support of Hindutva, an ideology of political Hinduism. As perceptively pointed out to by Romila Thappar, a noted Indian historian, there is an effort at work to construct a 'syndicated Hinduism', after the model of the Semitic religions. For more on this debate, *cf.* Thappar (2003); Lal (2009); Oddie (2006); Jaffrelot (2013).

3. Indian Christianity: Origins and Developments

Indian Christianity is feeling its feet through the challenges posed by the situation today. As per the 2011 Indian census, Christians in India constitute 2.34 % of the Indian population, which in absolute numbers would be about 31.66 million, which supersedes the total population of some European countries. Christians are the second largest minority in India, after the Muslims. Their number has not shown any increase during the last two decennial censuses.[3] While their presence in southern and North-Eastern States are significant, the northern region of India has only a thin presence.

Indian Christianity, though it stands out as a single religious tradition in relation to others, is internally diversified in terms of denominations, rites, and cultures. It consists of the Catholic Church, which is constituted by the three Rites (Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara), Protestant Churches, Oriental Orthodox Churches, and Pentecostal Churches (mainline and independent). Historically speaking, one could speak of several 'springs' (Fernando & Gispert-Sauch, 2004) of Christianity which emerged across the centuries. From the very early centuries of the Christian Era, India had the presence of those who are called today as St. Thomas Christians. As per a vibrant tradition, this spring of Christians came to exist with the mission of St. Thomas,[4] an apostle of Jesus, and was further augmented by the arrival of a contingent of Syrian Christians during the fourth century. Since they used the Syriac language in their liturgy, and were united with the ancient churches in Syria, they were known also as the Eastern Syrian Christians. These Christians, mostly traders, seem to have gotten integrated with the native 'higher caste' communities of the southern western

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[3] The reasons for the stagnation of Christian population are many. Though India has a liberal secular Constitution which underscores the freedom of religion, there are laws which indirectly dissuade the people from converting to Christianity. The Hindu Marriage Law, for example, denies the right to inheritance to someone who has converted to a religion other than Hinduism; moreover, a few States have positively brought about anti-conversion laws which act as deterrent against conversion. In addition, the Christians, generally being educated, prefer to have smaller families, a factor that inhibits the growth of the number of Christians. There are some unofficial accounts which claim that the numbers of Christians in actuality are much more than the number given by the census data. Because, several Christians do not divulge their religious identity to the census enumerators, fearing the denial of benefits of certain affirmative action implemented for the socially backward sections of the Indian society.

[4] The exact period from which this community came into existence is a point of dispute existing for a long time among historians. The popular 'belief' here in India is that the community came into existence with the evangelization of Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus, who arrived here in the year 52 AD. Historians have held differing and contradicting views as regards this 'belief'. However, a conclusion to which majority of Church historians from India veer around is that, due to multiple cumulative indications, the arrival of Thomas the apostle to India cannot be denied, and it is high probability. For a recent work that discusses comprehensively about the issues involved, *cf.* Nedungatt (2008).

Malabar region and continued to live on as the only Christian community in India for about sixteen centuries.

The next spring arose at the instance of the *padroado mission* of the sixteenth century. This mission was eventful in different ways: first of all, there were 'mass conversions' to Christianity due to the missionary activities of the Jesuits in the Coromandel coast; secondly, these missionary activities, supported by the Portuguese power, spread to areas other than those wherein Christianity remained confined until then; and, thirdly, the Roman Catholic Christianity spread by these missionaries came into a conflict-ridden relationship with the existing Eastern Syrian Christianity, and the integration or otherwise of the latter with the former has become an enduring part of history until this day. As of now, there are two Syrian Christian communities (Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara) existing within the Roman Catholic fold, while a relatively lesser number of Syrian Christians formed under different Churches like Orthodox, Jacobites, Mar Thoma, etc. exist by themselves. The Roman Catholics of the *Padrado Mission* continued to spread from the coastal regions to the hinterland of the southern Tamil region, encompassing different strata of the Tamil society under its fold through the fervent missionary efforts of the Jesuits down the centuries. There were also other Catholic missionary agencies who entered the field during later centuries, and have together contributed to the formation of a Catholic Christian community in South India (Hambye, 1997).

The third spring of Christianity emerged from the early part of the eighteenth century with the efforts taken by the Protestant missionary agencies. Lutheran missionaries landed here first to be followed up by Baptists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others. Their missionary agencies, consisting of some European powers and independently formed missionary societies, created Protestant Christian communities in South and North Indian territories. Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, the Protestant missionary to India, landed and worked at Tarangambadi, a Danish settlement along the south eastern coast. Ziegenbalg translated the New Testament of the Bible into Tamil so as to enable the native converts read, understand and preach the Gospel. He ventured also into an understanding of native religious traditions, and brought to light the deep religious visions present among the native people. His publications (Jeyaraj, 2006) initiated a deep exploration and dialogue between Christianity and native religious traditions. Subsequently during the end of the eighteenth century, the setting up of a mission at Srirampur, near Kolkata, by the trio – William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, took up the translation of the Bible into several Asian languages and strengthened the presence of Christianity in India. During the nineteenth century, the works of missionaries sponsored by the London Missionary society took Anglican Churches to the southern tip of India. And several other missionary agencies followed up with their endeavours. It must be noted that their missionary endeavours, coinciding with the rule of the British in India, contributed very significantly to the making of the modern India.

The next spring of Christianity is what the twentieth century has witnessed to: spread of the Pentecostal Churches. These Churches, emergent in the North-American soil from the early part of the twentieth century, began to cross over and exist as mainline and independent Pentecostal Churches in the Indian soil. Mainline Pentecostal Churches are federated with international networks of leadership, while the independent Churches exist independently, though a broader network of solidarity is present among them too. It needs be noted that a considerable section of people attending Pentecostal Churches are drawn from the economically poor and the socially marginal communities of India.

Sociologically speaking, Indian Christians hail from different 'caste' groups, whose relationship with one another is not so harmonious and egalitarian as one would expect. There are instances of discrimination, denial of civic rights, jostling for power, and even of violent manifestations of 'caste pride' between different groups. The caste composition of Indian Christianity has been explored much (Massey & John, 2013) and it is a general consensus that about 65 per cent of the Indian Christian population hails from the subaltern communities of Dalits and Tribals; the rest belong to the most backward, backward, other backward and forward 'castes'. In spite of constant rhetoric and well-meaning efforts being made, the religious leadership does not yet represent the composition of the people, and there are discriminatory practices still existing within the Churches as regards occupation of ritual spaces. While such is the reality within Indian Christianity, the treatment meted out to Christians by the external others is no less characterised by an isolating tendency.

In terms of gender justice, there is a long way to go before the Indian Christian community experiences freedom and justice to every gender. Patriarchal domination is the ruling ethos within the Churches, in spite of the fact that Indian Christians fare better in sex-ratio (1023 women per 1000 men according to 2011 census) and conscious efforts are being made to address the question of gender justice.

Educationally, thanks to the missionary efforts made during the nineteenth century for mass education, Indian Christians have become the community with high literacy (Indian Christians have about 80 per cent literacy according to 2011 census) and with the ability for individual capabilities in terms of life-skills and occupations.

Politically speaking it would not be an exaggeration to say that Indian Christians make a rather quiescent community, and their political assertiveness and visible participation are yet to emerge on to the horizon. They do not have politically active individuals proportionate to the levels of education they have obtained during the recent centuries. This could be due to several factors: one could be that in the traditional Indian context wherein economic power had been the salient factor behind the rise of politically assertive individuals, Indian Christians, in general, are on a disadvantage; another reason could be that a strand of world-negating theology and spirituality which have been propounded

within Christianity for a long time has possibly inhibited the Christian individuals from emerging into the wider public; yet another reason could be that Indian Christians had been, at least during the colonial era, got used to becoming dependent upon the 'protective' colonial powers that they have lost for a while the prowess for their independent political assertiveness. There could be many more such reasons. However, it should be noted that Indian Christians are indeed beginning to be politically assertive today against the obtaining reality of anti-Christian violence and majoritarian democracy. It is in place to note that several ecclesial leaders are out in the public domain voicing their concerns upon their security and freedom. Oswald Gracias, the president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, met with the Home Minister in 2018 to express the concern of the Indian Christian community as regards their security. Other leaders like the archbishop of Delhi, Anil Couto and archbishop of Goa, Filipe Nerri Ferrao are voicing their concerns regarding the secular constitution and secular politics. Emergence of this voice has to do not only with the incidents of violence against Christians being reported today, but also with the corrosion of religious freedom guaranteed in the Indian Constitution. Indian Christians have now come to realise that they have to defend the spirit of freedom enshrined in the Constitution.

4. Contours of Indian Christians' Religious-Cultural Interactions

Indian Christianity, though embodying a religious tradition distinct from native ones, was less concerned about projecting its different identity, while interacting creatively with other traditions in an ambience of religio-cultural freedom. In its early days, Indian Christianity of the Syrian Christian tradition seems to have merged relatively more thickly with the native religio-cultural traditions. Being a mercantile group, having been accommodated into the 'high' castes by marital ties, the Syrian Christian tradition interacted and entered more deeply into the religio-cultural terrain of the people living in the south west coastal region. These Christians seem to have taken in several cultural elements like aesthetics, architecture, art-forms, and, folklores; they had taken in also the lineaments of the caste-system; however, they seemed to have continued to be non-vegetarians, as distinct from the vegetarian 'high castes' who lived in joint families. Moreover, they nurtured the Christian faith through a worship or liturgy, which was conducted in Syriac language and which centred round a sacramental theology of human regeneration through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Practice of this religion went with several features of socio-cultural accommodations, and the Christian community was apparently 'respected' by others, and enjoyed freedom to be on their own, in their own way. The religio-cultural face of this early Christian tradition, therefore, was a unique formation.

During the early modern era, an event-filled missionary era, beginning with the Portuguese missionary endeavours of the sixteenth century (as mentioned above), Indian Christianity inaugurated, so to say, a new phase of

interaction. Headquarted in Goa, the *padroado* mission agency, supported by the Portuguese colonial power, undertook its mission along the western as well as the eastern coast and witnessed to a good number of native people becoming Christians. Along the western coast, it met with the existing Syrian Christians whom it befriended for a while before breaking off, even violently, on account of an attempt at co-opting them into the Roman Catholic fold headed by the Pope (Mundadan, 2001). The zeal of Francis Xavier, a prominent Jesuit missionary of the time, took Christianity to the people living along the Coromandel Coast and the southern tip of the erstwhile Travancore kingdom. Liturgically, architecturally, theologically, and cosmologically, it was a version of Portuguese Catholic Christianity that began to exist in the Indian soil. The then missionary paradigm, informed by an overarching religious zeal to save the souls of the entire humanity, went also with an exclusive ecclesial-centric soteriology of 'No salvation outside the Church', and it introduced a discourse of radical difference, hurtingly though to different religious others. There were reactions from the native people, who appreciated less the religion of the meat-eating and wine-drinking food habit of the Portuguese. But for an initial bout of conversion to Christianity, the natives kept aloof from the missionising religion, tagging the latter with an ambiguous but apparently derogatory term '*Paranghi* religion' (*paranghi margam*), which attributed a very lowly identity to Christianity. The term *paranghi* stood for the Portuguese, who, according to the perception of the high caste natives, "did not wash or bathe frequently, who ate beef, drank liquor, and communicated freely with persons of the most despised castes" (Thekkedath, 2001, 212).

The label, and the resistance to Christianity, became a major concern for an upcoming missionary of the *padrado* mission. Robert de Nobili, a Jesuit of Italian origin, who came to serve in a parish in Madurai, was intrigued by the labelling of Christianity as *Paranghi Margam*, and endeavoured to present a respectable picture of Christianity as a religion followed by dignified people in Europe. He adopted a method of adaptation of Christianity to the socio-cultural behaviours of the Brahmins, and made a distinction between Christianity as a religion as different from the socio-cultural system. While proclaiming the Christian religion in terms of doctrines and beliefs, in dialogue with Agamas, Upanishads, and other Indian theistic traditions (which he studied rather deeply in Sanskrit and Tamil), he presented himself in the attire of and with the markers of a Brahmin Sannyasi (Brahmin ascetic, generally considered to be learned), taking to strict vegetarian food, prepared by a Brahmin cook. All these efforts were to make himself and his religion acceptable to the 'learned and religious' sections of the Tamil region. A very small section of people showed interest in De Nobili's endeavours, and the method of adaptation did not bear much fruits. The imposed identity as *Parangi Margam* was not to be erased so easily. It remained in the consciousness of the local people for a very long time to come.

The Jesuits then embarked upon a new path to reach Christianity to the people. They adapted themselves to the religious world of the people beyond the

Brahmins, at further layers of the Indian caste system. They identified that those who were catering to the religious needs of these people were known as *Pandarams* (religious leaders of the castes, next in ladder after the Brahmins)and therefore, they presented themselves as *Pandarasamis*. Starting with Balthasar da Costa, the first *Pandarasami* to be initiated in the year 1640, Jesuits missionaries adopted the attire and markers of *Pandarams* to preach Christianity. Their efforts seemed to have brought in more people into Christianity, but not without further conflicts and resistance. Those at the next layers of the caste system (beyond the Brahmins) were not ready to accept those who were further down the lane or those beyond the pale of the system of caste to worship together with them, lest they too 'defiled themselves'. The ensuing struggle seemed to have made the Jesuits introduce yet another category of *Pandarasamis* who served the further sections of people in the layers of caste. Handling the caste factor in relation to the identity of Christianity was a continuing struggle for the Jesuit missionaries. They had to face it even during the period of the new Madurai Mission.[5]

It should be noted here that the Jesuits' missionary efforts branched off to other domains as well. We find, and a vast majority of Tamil people recognise until today, that the Tamil literary contributions (Meenaskshisundaram, 1974) made by the scholar Jesuits from the seventeenth century onwards have a lasting impact and abiding value. Though the corpus of Tamil literature that they produced went beyond the framework of the typical Christian mission of the day, some of their writings have introduced the Christian faith-tradition to the Tamil literary field in an effective way. The corpus of Tamil Christian Literature is being studied and drawn inspiration from until this day, not only for literary interest but also for inter-religious and even political inspiration. Thus, the literary strand of Tamil Christianity has had an enduring impact upon the consciousness of the Tamil people. It may well be stated that the stiff against Christianity on account of its being a *parangi margam* was 'compensated' by the reception of the literary output of the European Christian scholars.

While the Portuguese missionary efforts continued, the Protestant missionary era began in the early part of the eighteenth century, as mentioned above, with the Lutheran mission founded by the first Protestant missionary Bartholomew Ziegenbalg in a south Indian Danish colony along the eastern coast at Tarangambadi. Later during the end of the same century, again as noted above, the founding of yet another mission by the Baptist missionaries at Srirampur near Kolkata introduced the Protestant Christianity to north India as well. And the subsequent eventful missionary work during the nineteenth century by missionaries sponsored by the then emergent European missionary societies like London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, etc., contributed much to the introduction of the

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[5] The old Madurai Mission came to a halt due to the suppression by the Pope of the Jesuits Congregation in the year 1773. When it was revoked again after forty years, the new Madurai Mission by the Jesuits came into existence.

Christianity among the subaltern people of Indian society, and made an enduring presence in political and civil spheres of India in terms of its 'civilizing mission' (Ingleby, 2000). The Protestant mission, unlike the earlier Catholic missionary efforts, focussed upon the reading and understanding of the Bible, as a prerequisite of which they embarked upon the project of educating the people in modern education, providing them with health care, sensitizing them upon their civil liberties, etc., which as a whole came to be addressed later as the 'civilizing mission'. The Protestant missionary presence was active among the subaltern sections of India, and it gave subaltern identity to Indian Christians. It empowered them to assert their rights, and even undertake struggles to do away with certain unmeaning social evils of the time.

The British colonial power was more interested in trade which could go on well without 'disturbing the political stability' of the country. And so, they adopted a policy of religious neutrality, though an evangelical section in the British Parliament sought to legitimise the colonial presence in India in terms of the 'civilizing mission'. The Protestant missionaries heartily involved in the civilizing mission, presuming it necessary for the Indian mind to grasp the message of the Gospel. The salvation offered through the Gospel was presented to be far superior to the liberation offered in any Indian religion. Their work, however, combined with the modern education, engaged several spiritually inclined Indian intellectuals of the time, and it inspired the emergence of the socio-religious movements like Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj. The Christianity of the time inspired also a corpus of writings which attempted to integrate the Indian philosophical-religious vision into Christian theology. The result was what came to be known later as the Indian Christian theology, and it was, unlike the earlier effort to adapt to the native socio-cultural systems, an effort at the plane of theologising with Indian categories. Such an integrative initiative could be pursued in an ambience of relative freedom.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, in the context of the struggle for Indian independence combined with a discourse on Indian nationalism, Indian Christianity increasingly became conscious of its Indian identity. Indian Christian missionary societies, Ashrams model of inculturation and dialogue, participation in nation-building with socio-economic contributions, etc., became the new initiatives. Indian Christians were shaping up an identity of a religious community, self-confident and open-minded, interacting with and contributing to the wider society through their service-oriented institutions and initiatives. Minority rights enshrined in the Indian constitution recognised the need of the religious and linguistic minorities to nurture their distinct cultural identities, and provided for freedom to run educational and welfare institutions (Article 30 of the Indian Constitution). Indian Christian leaders seemed to have argued for these rights in lieu of the communal award that had been granted earlier by the British power (Fernando & Gispert-Sauch).

Indian Christians began also to address some of the age-old internal issues, like that of the prevalence of caste-based exclusions within Indian Christianity.

With the growing realisation that the majority of Indian Christians were drawn from the Dalit and Tribal communities, Christianity in India, existing in its different denominational Churches, was addressing the questions of social justice within the boundaries of the Churches.

The idea of being a 'minority religious community' did not gain salience in the Indian Christian mind until the onset of the discourse on Indian nationalism. Since the religio-cultural terrain had remained open and expansive, relatively less bounded, - and not the least around a single organising political idea of nation, the sense of being a majority or a minority did not emerge into the consciousness of the people until the time of nationalism. Indian nationalism was the project of the time, serving a meaningful cause of Indian independence from foreign colonialism, and eventually, through sacrifices and trauma, gave birth to the political entity of an independent nation called India. Needless to say that the political nationhood of the post-colonial era, as Kymlica pointed out, brought in the discourse of minorities and their rights too.

5. Contemporary Challenges

Today, Indian Christianity is facing up to the politics of majoritarianism and its cultural nationalism. The issues and concerns that they are facing today are changing them over from being a 'religious community' to a 'communally conscious minority', with increasing concerns over security, freedom of religion, cultural rights, rights to partake of the civil society, etc. Indian Christians are treated in terms of multiple not-well-meaning identities: colonial, western, proselytising, 'low caste', culturally alien, politically divisive, and so on:

1. Colonial – Western: In spite of the fact that Christianity in India has existed from very ancient times, and has been part of the Asian religious landscape; despite the fact that those who practise Christianity in India are people of the Indian types (Dravidians, Dalits, Tribals, etc); and in spite of the fact that the cultural dimension of Indian Christianity has to do more with native indigenous cultures than the western ones, Christianity in India is still being identified with the colonial powers and western cultures.

2. Proselytising Agent: Indian States have gone about legislating upon 'anti-conversion' laws, under the pretext of banning conversion by 'force, coercion and fraudulent means'. Some of them have had such legislations right from the very early days of independent India. The reasoning behind these legislations was that conversion is unduly disturbing the fabric of Indian society, and playing a divisive role in the wider society. Though this reasoning has been prevalent for a long time, it has become very vocal today. In an ambience of majoritarianism and cultural nationalism, conversion is countered with violent outbursts today. Since 1990 when religious nationalism emerged boldly, the number of violent acts against the Christians has increased. Christian personnel – pastors,

nuns, priests, etc., are humiliated publicly, tortured, and even killed by rightist fanatics.

3. 'Low-caste' Social Identity: The subaltern face of Indian Christianity is what seems to emerge in the public. There is a certain 'untouchability' that goes with the Christian identity, when looked at from within the ideology of purity and pollution that goes with the caste-system of India. While this being the case, the social strife and discrimination between the small minority of 'higher caste' Christians and the majority of 'low caste' Christians are continuously being reported even until this day. Indian Christianity, sociologically speaking, is indeed an internally strife-ridden community until this day.

4. Culturally Alien: For a very long time in the Indian films, Christian characters are depicted as villains, womanisers, and drunkards. We used to be indignant about this. Why do Christians get such roles? It has a colonial legacy, coming from Portuguese times onwards. But, do simple ordinary Christian folks today deserve to be depicted like this? Apart from such visible instances, Christians continue to suffer the identity of cultural aliens on other cultural dimensions as well. One of the recent issues being debated in the public centre round an old age home run by a Christian missionary. The home was closed down for a period due to allegations that it was selling the dead bodies of old people, using unwholesome methods of disposing of the bodies, etc. A fact-finding team which went into the issue reported that there was a cultural incompatibility between the Christian concern for the dead and the cultures of the surrounding people. Taking care of the old at the time of their death is not congenial to the Indian ethos, despite the fact that they appreciated the works of Mother Teresa and her missionaries.

The experience of Indian Christianity is not so typical of being a minority 'other' in the global world today. Even in its vicinity, minorities of different religions in South Asian countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, etc., are facing up to similar struggles. We are in need of a healthy enlightened political system that can address the concerns of religious minorities effectively. There is a lot of thinking going into the treatment of minorities in liberal democratic politics of the world today. There is unanimity in defending and safeguarding the rights of the minorities for any liberal democratic system to mature and bear fruits. It is indeed a challenge that there is a retreat of the liberal political doctrine as the guiding principle of political practice. In a volume titled, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, Edward Luce demonstrates with examples as to how our political practice is moving away from principles of liberalism. In its place, we have political practices which draw their legitimacies from ethnic, cultural and civilisational identities and traditions. It is an era of the dialectics of the very idea of democracy, about which political philosophers starting with Plato had much doubt. People speak today of 're-traditionalisation' of polities. In

this context, majoritarianism, overt and covert, tends to become the dominant political practice.

What would it be like being a minority in majoritarian polities? Would minorities shrink and stagnate in terms of their culture, public engagements, religious practices, etc? Or, would they turn to reactionary measures? Or, would they find creative avenues of interactive existence? – are important questions today. A phenomenological study and a narrative account of the experience of being a minority would unearth the pathos of living a life framed by a minority identity. A person of minority identity lives in a vulnerable position of being incessantly called into question, and that person is always required to 'prove his / her patriotism' in front of a self-righteous majority. Will Kymlicka made a fine distinction between patriotism, the feeling of allegiance to a state, from nationalism, the sense of membership in a group. Kymlica's distinction dwells upon the distinction between an allegiance to the State, in terms of fostering citizenship, from nationalist sentiments which envelop the people in terms of their identities. Recognition of such a distinction would indicate the quality of democracy that might exist in a given political unit. Unfortunately, in the Indian case, the national identity is wilfully being conflated with the majoritarian Hindu identity by a politically vocal section upon the ideology of Hindutva, and that conflation is further conflated with patriotism to reap political mileage. A minority has to prove oneself against these multiple yardsticks, and failing in one would be seen as failing in another.

Conclusions

Going by the hint given by Emmanuel Levinas, it needs be recognised that an oppressive unity, forged regardless of the participation of different others, will not take a community towards 'transcendence in sociality'. Minorities need to face up to the situation in an open-minded manner. They need to engage the public and the political polity in a manner of fine and substantive negotiation, premised upon the ideals of justice, dignity, freedom and civil rights. It is in place to note that some well known Indian Christian thinkers point to meaningful ways of Christian existence or life in the emerging scenario. For example, Felix Wilfred, a very perceptive Indian Christian scholar, who integrates insights of social sciences with theological education, endeavours to creatively imagine a dynamic identity for Indian Christians (Wilfred, 2014). Such an identity is multi-dimensional, interactive, and pro-active, especially with an ethical sensitivity, oriented towards the empowerment of the subaltern people of India.

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