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Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview

Rowena Robinson



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Foreword

Development has for long been viewed as an attractive and inevitable way forward by most countries of the Third World. As it was initially theorised, development and modernisation were multifaceted processes that were to help the “underdeveloped” economies to take-off and eventually become like “developed” nations of the West. Processes like industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation were to inevitably go together if economic growth had to happen and the “traditional” societies to get out of their communitarian consciousness, which presumably helped in sustaining the vicious circles of poverty and deprivation. Tradition and traditional belief systems, emanating from past history or religious ideologies, were invariably “irrational” and thus needed to be changed or privatised. Developed democratic regimes were founded on the idea of a rational individual citizen and a secular public sphere.

Such evolutionist theories of social change have slowly lost their appeal. It is now widely recognised that religion and cultural traditions do not simply disappear from public life. They are also not merely sources of conservation and stability. At times they could also become forces of disruption and change. The symbolic resources of religion, for example, are available not only to those in power, but also to the weak, who sometimes deploy them in their struggles for a secure and dignified life, which in turn could subvert the traditional or establish structures of authority. Communitarian identities could be a source of security and sustenance for individuals. This change in attitude of the social sciences towards religion could also be seen in shifting trends in empirical research on the subject. Over the last two or three decades we have seen a steady shift towards treating religion as a “normal” sociological fact, without any teleological presupposition about its pasts or futures. This shift has also been reinforced by the emerging social and political trends in countries like India where issues relating to citizenship are raised by identity movements of historically deprived categories, such as the Dalits and the tribals, or the religious minorities, such as the Muslims, for a more inclusive and just development.

There has also been perceptible shift in state policy. With grass-rooting of democracy and a gradual shift in the social profile of political elite in countries like India, the old secular-communal dichotomous way of

thinking seems to be increasingly becoming meaningless. Social policies dealing with issues of marginalities and exclusions have begun to be framed using “social group” variables at the core. At global level also, much of the recent research and policy dialogue has centred on questions of citizenship and entitlements in relation to cultural and group identities. With growing movements of people, nation-states are everywhere becoming ethnically and culturally diverse and plural where religious and communitarian identities are difficult to dispense with. While questions of development and citizenship in relation to culture and religious belief or communities have become important issue in the public and political spheres, social science research on the subject is still at a nascent stage. It was in this broader perspective that the research programme on ‘Religions and Development’ was conceived. The research programme is funded by DFID and coordinated from the University of Birmingham. As partners in the consortium, we, at the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, have been working on various aspects regarding the subject in India. The working paper series disseminates some of these works.

This Working paper “Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview” constructs a historical and contemporary profile of Indian Christians, bringing out the differences across regions, castes and economic strata. The paper emphasises sharp differences among Christians, who in reality are comprised of a number of different regional and local communities but are recognised by the state as monolithic minority community. The paper attempts to demonstrate the construction of Christians as a minority having complex and uneven implications for the community. Instead of viewing Christians in isolation, it is far significant to view these in terms of their altering relationships with the state and with other communities. This perspective allows for the analysis of multiple issues such as abortion, reservation and conversion concerning Christians in the contemporary scenario.

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Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview

Rowena Robinson*

1. Introduction

The Constitution defines India as a 'secular' republican state, where equality is promoted among all citizens regardless of their beliefs, faith or patterns of worship. On the other hand, the Constitution also provides for recognition of and defines particular social groups – Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. Also, as stated in Articles 29 and 30, it recognises minority communities and groups. Christians are one such minority. The notion of minority community is important at one level; while at another it tends to obscure the fact that India has diverse Christian communities. Each has its own life-style, customs and mores, its own history and social trajectory. It appears, however, that both levels are significant for the analysis here. The state is deeply implicated in defining social categories and its recognition of citizens on the basis of such categories is important for what these citizens can access from the state or what rights they can claim. Moreover, identity politics is part of the life of contemporary India and ethnic violence has affected Christians in many parts of the country, most recently in Orissa.

This paper will try and bring out the nature of the social and economic development of the Christian community and its internal differences. First, some basic demographic information is presented. This is followed by a brief history of conversion and different Christian communities to help us to understand the differences among Christians. We will then look in more detail at patterns of internal differentiation with respect, in particular, to

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caste distinctions and social relationships. Church organisation and the role of the churches in the provision of social services is next outlined, followed by a discussion of Dalit Christian identity and experience. These and the final section reveal something of the relationships between the Christian community and the state, particularly in relation to selected issues including proselytisation, abortion, reservation for Scheduled Castes, personal laws and targeted violence. The discussion will bring out the changing nature of the community's self-identity and its identity with respect to the state and other communities. The politics of Hindutva¹ will be seen to have considerable implications for the identity of Christians today.

2. The Distribution of Christians in India

According to the 2001 census, there were 24.1 million Christians in India, constituting 2.3 per cent of the population. Their uneven geographical demography is brought out by the available statistical data: 25.15 per cent of Christians belong to Kerala, 15.71 per cent to Tamil Nadu, 4.19 per cent to Karnataka and 4.9 per cent to Andhra Pradesh. These four states account for 54.34 per cent of the total Christian population. In the northeast, the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur together include 29.09 per cent of Christians. In Goa, Christians constitute 26.68 per cent of the population (Table 1). Elsewhere, Christians are much more scattered. Just 0.56 per cent of Gujarat's population is Christian, 0.13 per cent of Haryana's and 0.13 per cent in Himachal Pradesh. However, in terms of actual numbers, the Christian population is quite significant. For instance, while they only constitute 0.64 per cent of West Bengal's population, there are over five hundred thousand Christians in the state. About 90 per cent of the Christian population, thus, is found in three regional enclaves: south India, the north-east and the tribal belt in central India consisting of Chotanagpur and contiguous areas. The northern Hindi belt, which is home to 40 per cent of India's population, has only 10 per cent of India's Christians (Tharamangalam 1996).

**Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of Christians in India
(Census of India 2001)**

Code	State/Union Territory	Total Population	Christian Population	Proportion of Christian Population	Sex Ratio	Sex Ratio (0-6)	Proportion of Child Population in the Age Group 0-6yrs	Literacy Rate	Female Literacy Rate	Work Participation Rate
	India	1,028,610,328	24,080,016	2.3	1009	964	13.5	80.3	76.2	39.7
01	Jammu & Kashmir	10,143,700	20,299	0.2	594	834	11.6	74.6	60.9	50.6
02	Himachal Pradesh	6,077,900	7,687	0.1	822	898	12.6	82.6	79.5	47.6
03	Punjab	24,358,999	292,800	1.2	393	870	16.1	54.6	47.0	35.7
04	Chandigarh	900,635	7,627	0.8	932	939	12.1	88.5	85.1	41.7
05	Uttaranchal	8,489,349	27,116	0.3	960	989	11.7	87.9	85.3	37.0
06	Haryana	21,144,564	27,185	0.1	918	921	12.4	85.3	818	39.0
07	Delhi	13,650,507	130,319	0.9	1076	965	11.4	94.0	91.7	44.9
08	Rajasthan	56,607,188	72,660	0.1	986	956	14.6	83.0	77.7	42.9
09	Uttar Pradesh	166,197,921	212,578	0.1	961	936	14.6	72.8	67.4	33.9
10	Bihar	82,998,509	53,137	0.1	974	918	14.8	71.1	65.4	39.2
11	Sikkim	540,851	36,115	6.7	960	929	14.6	72.4	65.2	47.4
12	Arunachal Pradesh	1,097,968	205,548	18.7	1003	960	20.5	47.0	37.8	43.5
13	Nagaland	1,990,036	1,790,349	90.0	941	968	14.6	66.2	61.6	42.2
14	Manipur®	2,166,788	737,578	34.0	977	959	14.0	65.9	58.5	44.2
15	Mizoram	888,573	772,809	87.0	986	969	16.1	93.1	91.4	51.7
16	Tripura	3,199,203	102,489	3.2	941	975	15.7	67.9	57.3	38.7
17	Meghalaya	2,318,822	1,628,986	70.3	1004	973	21.1	65.3	63.3	41.9
18	Assam	26,655,528	986,589	3.7	962	964	17.6	56.4	48.0	41.7
19	West Bengal	80,176,197	515,150	0.6	1002	973	13.4	69.7	62.3	38.9
20	Jharkhand	26,945,829	1,093,382	4.1	1018	975	16.2	67.9	59.8	45.6
21	Orissa	36,804,660	897,861	2.4	1026	981	17.8	54.9	44.1	44.6
22	Chhattisgarh	20,833,803	401,035	1.9	1021	972	15.3	75.3	68.2	46.1
23	Madhya Pradesh	60,348,023	170,381	0.3	996	976	13.3	85.8	81.4	40.5
24	Gujarat	50,671,017	284,092	0.6	988	927	12.8	77.7	71.2	45.9
25	Daman & Diu	158,204	3,362	2.1	944	918	9.8	88.2	82.7	43.2
26	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	220,490	6,058	2.7	902	1009	19.3	64.6	50.8	47.4
27	Maharashtra	96,878,627	1,058,313	1.1	953	958	10.3	91.0	87.4	38.9
28	Andhra Pradesh	76,210,007	1,181,917	1.6	1037	977	12.3	75.3	69.8	42.8
29	Karnataka	52,850,562	1,009,164	1.9	1030	961	11.1	87.4	84.0	39.5
30	Goa	1,347,668	359,568	26.7	1107	945	9.6	83.8	78.8	32.4
31	Lakshadweep	60,650	509	1	206	333	3	97.0	96.0	82.0
32	Kerala	31,841,374	6,057,427	19.0	1031	960	11.2	94.8	83.5	33.9
33	Tamil Nadu	62,405,679	3,785,060	6.1	1031	968	11.2	85.8	81.6	39.0
34	Ponridicherry	974,345	67,688	6.9	1101	962	11.0	87.3	82.9	34.9
35	Andaman & Nicobar Island	356,152	77,178	21.7	904	990	12.7	77.0	71.6	40.3

Source: Government of India, 2001.

The census collates Christians into a single category, but they belong to different persuasions. Catholics form the largest group, nearly half of the total Christian population. Another 40 per cent are Protestants, while about 4 per cent are Orthodox Christians and 6 per cent belong to indigenous sects (D'Souza, 1993). While the popular image of Christians as descendants of low-caste, low-status converts is not wholly true, it is the case that over half of all Christians are from the Untouchable castes. Between 15 and 20 per cent are tribal in origin, while upper caste Christians, largely from Kerala and the Konkan coast constitute a quarter of the total (Tharamangalam 1996). The latter are over-represented in the priesthood and exercise an influence and authority far in excess of their numbers. There are great differences between them and, for instance, the Santal converts of eastern India.

2.1 A Brief History of Conversion

Intertwined with demographical distinctions are those of denominational and temporal significance. The south and west were home to Christian traditions early on: the Syrian Christians of Kerala trace their origin to 1 A.D. and historians agree that there was a Christian community in Kerala at this time. Though these Christians maintained links with Chaldea or Persia, the community remained relatively isolated from Western Christianity at least until the sixteenth century - Keralam Christianity was linked to west Asia, not Western Europe. Next came Catholic influence, with Catholicism in Goa being four hundred years old. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century, however, that the north witnessed a significant growth in Christian missionary activities, although a few efforts predated that period and there were small groups of converts here and there. The mid-eighteenth century conversions to Catholicism in Bettiah, where the local ruler patronised the mission, is an interesting case (Sahay, 1986). In the northeast, where Protestantism dominates, Christianity is largely the product of nineteenth and twentieth century conversions. Thus while Christianity is often associated with British rule and the process of westernisation, it is clear from the discussion above that its appearance in India preceded the British by several hundred years. Indeed, one might say that Christianity in India is as old as the faith itself.

Clearly Christianity has come to India from different parts of the world, at different historical moments and out of different impulses. It is crucial to

differentiate between the British and pre-British periods and within both of these there are further distinctions – these are outlined above and will be discussed in slightly more detail below. As noted, the earliest known Christian community is that of the Syrian Christians. The Syrian or Thomas Christians regard themselves as the descendants of high caste (Nambudiri Brahman) converts of St Thomas. While the St. Thomas tradition is part of Syrian Christian lore, it elides with another Thomas tradition, that of the merchant Thomas of Cana, who is said to have come to the Malabar coast in A.D.345 with a number of Christians from Jerusalem, Baghdad and Nineveh. There appears to have been mercantile and spiritual integration between the indigenous and immigrant peoples, though they remained separate endogamous groups.

The Syrian Christians have a long history of prestige and privilege, enjoyed under different local rulers. The Syrians have been linked with maritime trade and commerce for centuries. They also have a history of warrior service and clientage under the region's chiefs. It is through their warrior and mercantile skills and tradition of rendering service as pepper brokers and revenue officers in the Malabar, for which they received honour and social privileges from the regional rulers, that the patrilineal, prosperous Syrians established themselves as a high status group within the indigenous hierarchy (Bayly 1989). They negotiated their position through alliances with the local rulers and maintained their status by adhering strictly to the purity-pollution codes of regional Hindu society.

India's next major encounter with Christianity came in the sixteenth century. At that time, the Portuguese came to India bearing Catholicism. Trade, conquest and Christianisation went hand in hand for them: the sword accompanied the cross in the search for spices. Goa, of which the Portuguese first gained control in 1510, formed the Asian centre of their overseas activities. The Portuguese viewed their empire as a commercial and maritime enterprise cast in a military and ecclesiastical mould (Boxer 1969). Religion and trade were indistinguishable. The king was aligned with the Papacy in what was termed the *Padroado* form of jurisdiction (Ram 1991). A series of Papal Bulls passed between 1452 and 1456 gave Portugal the authority to conquer, subdue and convert all pagan territories.

To control the Asian trade routes, the Portuguese needed certain key posts. Goa was one of the main ones, where political and military rule was established, but there were smaller trading bases along the southern coastal belt. To establish themselves in these areas, the Portuguese required the support of the local people. Since they defined themselves in religious terms, their mode of incorporating local populations into their political body involved converting them to the Catholic religion. Mass conversions were linked to the need to create social allies. Thus conversions took place between 1527 and 1549 among castes with fishing and boat-handling skills, such as the *Mukkuvars* and the *Paravas* along the southern coast, where trade and proselytisation were carried on under the shelter of the forts. For both these groups, Christianity became a means of strengthening their *jati* or community identity. The *Paravas* also had a grip on the profitable pearl fishing industry. Unlike the *Mukkuvars*, therefore, who even today have a precarious material existence, the *Paravas* developed considerably in terms of their economic strength and occupational diversification (Ram 1991).

In Goa the interlocking of religion and politics, of the state and the church, was uniquely manifest. The state actively espoused mission, successive viceroys reporting to the king on the progress of conversion efforts. The missionaries were able to access state forces to destroy temples, quell resistance to conversion and punish the defiant. Hemmed in by such compulsions, few options were available to the people. Fleeing from the territory or resisting with violence were among the more drastic responses chosen by some. The majority perhaps accepted conversion out of different motives. For the upper castes, conversion meant alignment with the rulers and hence the protection of their economic and social privileges. For the low-ranking, there may have been an expectation of social mobility, for instance, through movement into non-traditional, pollution-neutral occupations opened up by the new administration. In many cases, though, it is likely that things worked differently: existing patron-client relations were employed to bring about conversion. Village leaders were converted and they in turn influenced the other caste groups bound to them by ties of socio-economic dependence. Mass conversions perpetuated caste and, whatever the expectations of lower social groups, the church did not attempt to radically alter existing hierarchies. Indeed, conversion protected the privileges of the upper caste landed groups. In these instances, caste

came to be largely dissociated from notions of purity and pollution, but remained an idiom of social differentiation, marking status distinctions and the deference patterns with which they were associated.

Proselytisation did not remain altogether confined to the coast in the centuries after the Portuguese came to India. Incursions into the interior were made by Jesuits and other missionary orders. Conversions were made in inner Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and in Bombay, Daman and Diu. In addition, there were three successive waves of Catholic converts from north Goa, who fled to Mangalore and areas nearby, due to the Inquisition, famine and political upheavals. Individual conversions were fewer in this period. By far the most intriguing effort to bring about individual conversions was made – again in Tamil Nadu – by a Jesuit, who separated himself from the strivings of the *Padroado*. Based in Madurai, the Italian Robert Nobili explicitly attempted to enter into dialogue with Brahmanical Hinduism. As noted above, the *Padroado* had, in contrast, linked itself with south India's low-ranking maritime communities. Nobili adopted the attire, diet and lifestyle of a Brahman *sannyasi* (renunciate). He studied Tamil and Sanskrit sacred scriptures and entered into discussions with Madurai's priests (Bayly 1989; Neill 1984). Nobili's converts were high caste men. They wore the sacred thread and received the sacraments from select priests who, like their leader, maintained a Brahmanical lifestyle and called themselves *sannyasis* (Bayly 1989). From the viewpoint of the converts, receiving baptism was akin to being initiated by a *guru*. They did not associate with lower-caste Christians and, for them, Catholicism denoted membership of a particular kind of sect, which forbade their taking part in idolatrous rites but allowed them to live with their families and retain their caste ideas and symbols.

The British period did not see the kind of relatively unambiguous bond between religion and power that characterised the *Estado da India*, the areas under Portugal's imperial control. The linkages between missionary activity and British colonialism were complex and intricate. The English East India Company, though it employed chaplains for its own servants, merchants and soldiers, was at first hostile to missionary activity. This hostility stemmed from the fact that, as a commercial enterprise, the Company could only hope to succeed by accommodation to indigenous social and cultural traditions, including religion. It feared that brash

evangelical efforts might give rise to violent reactions, creating political instability and threatening vital commercial interests. A change came about in the early nineteenth century after pressure was put on the British government by missionaries and returned civil servants such as Charles Grant, who argued that the propagation of Christianity, far from endangering British interests in India, would produce obedient citizens and strengthen the foundations of the empire. The motifs of civilization and moral improvement that were woven into the missionary enterprise thus potentially facilitated the forging of linkages with the project of colonialism.

The Company had itself not followed its espoused practice of complete neutrality in religious affairs. Accommodation to indigenous religion meant that large sums of money were donated for the maintenance of temples and priests and Company officials attended the more important sacred celebrations, with a view to manifesting their respect for native traditions. It was partly this participation by Company servants in Hindu rituals that provoked the missionaries to complain to the government. Following a shift of policy, the Charter Act of 1813 directed that missionary efforts be permitted, if not actively supported. A cautious attitude towards the missionaries resulted. In the decades that followed, their work began to be viewed with increasing favour, though at no point was a missionary-cum-imperialist drift completely dominant (Kooiman 1989). In the case of conversions in the tribal areas of central, east and northeast India, however, there is clear evidence of official patronage of the missionaries.

Conversion in the northeast had begun to advance while the British were in the process of shedding the role of traders to assume that of rulers. Annexation brought the British into contact with the tribal people of the hilly regions, who they considered unpredictable, primitive and difficult to deal with. It was hoped that missionaries, through evangelisation and education, would be able to civilize and domesticate the unmanageable tribes in a terrain hard to administer and govern directly. Among the missionaries who worked in the northeast, the Presbyterians and Baptists were prominent, though Methodists, Catholics and Anglicans were also present. The government took an interest in the educational activities of the missionaries and funds were donated for this purpose, particularly in

the latter half of the nineteenth-century. Churches were also built with vice-regal support and support from the administration and local converts.

Apart from the mass conversions of Untouchables in certain parts of the country, the bulk of the converts made during the British period were located in more outlying regions, at the margins of the agrarian plains, for example, in particular north-eastern tribal pockets. It is suggested that the conversion of tribal groups such as the Nagas may be explained, in part at least, as a function of social transformation. Isolated as they were both geographically and in terms of religion from traditions with a wider literary base, such as Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism, these groups retained elaborate but highly parochial belief systems. The opening up of the hills under the British brought about various material and economic changes, integrated the hitherto insulated Nagas with the rest of the subcontinent and led also to an erosion of traditional village institutions and forms of authority. These rapid shifts and the broadening horizons of their social world required something other than the existing localised belief systems, which had, in any case, been greatly dislocated by the changes taking place. Thus, entire groups caught in a fluctuating social, cultural and political environment became amenable to conversion (Eaton 1984).

Mass conversions, from the middle of the nineteenth-century onwards, took place largely among low caste groups. In the north, *Chamars* (leather workers), *Chuhras* and *Lal Begis* (sweeper communities) in the Punjab and the United Provinces were drawn into such movements. Conversion in each of these cases was a result of a group decision and generally followed kinship lines (Webster 1976). In the south, the mid-nineteenth century saw a mass conversion movement among the *Nadars*, a caste located on the borders of the boundary of pollution. In Telugu country, groups of *Malas* and *Madigas* converted *en masse* (Forrester 1980). Mass movements indicated a growing discontent among the depressed classes, which may be related to the extensive disruptive effects of colonial rule in rural India. A dual effect resulted. The traditional relations of production and distribution were undermined, rendering the lowest castes more vulnerable. At the same time, there were new opportunities for such groups to enhance their social position or acquire new patrons or religious attachments. A product of this disquiet and change, thus, was the attempt by lowly groups to disengage themselves from caste structures. Christianisation was one

among a number of potential means available for this purpose. Conversion to Islam, Sikhism or the reformed Hinduism of the Arya Samaj were other modes adopted by some (Forrester 1980).

Christian missionaries did not have at their disposal the means to enforce conversion. Particular benefits could, however, be had from association with them, which may have served as an incentive to convert. For low caste people, these included intercession with the government, protection against money-lenders or exploitation by high castes and, perhaps, educational and employment opportunities. Mass conversions may then be viewed, in part, as movements for improvement in social and material conditions, but they were also movements for dignity and self-respect. It does not matter that higher castes did not change their attitude to the converts or that, in the end, their situation did not significantly improve: the expectation of change was itself a powerful catalyst (Forrester 1980; Oddie 1969, 1977).

2.2 A Contemporary Demographic and Developmental Profile

This section, based mainly on the Census of India 2001, brings out some aspects of Indian Christians' demographic and developmental profile. In this section, the basic available statistics are presented but reasons for the trends and differences identified are not analysed further. The population statistics for religious communities since 1961 reveals that the proportion of Christians in the population of India as a whole has remained relatively unchanged: 2.4 per cent (1961), 2.6 per cent (1971), 2.5 per cent (1981), 2.3 per cent (1991) and 2.3 per cent (2001). However, the decadal growth rate of the Christian community has varied, declining dramatically from 36 per cent between 1961 and 1971 to 19.2 per cent between 1971 and 1981 (the largest decline of any religious community) and down again to 17 per cent between 1981 and 1991. The most recent decade for which figures are available, however, saw an increase to 22.1 per cent. At present, it is difficult to assess whether this was due to natural increase or other factors. A slightly higher proportion of the urban than the rural population are Christian: 2.9 per cent compared to 2.1 per cent.

Christians are the only religious community to show a positive adult sex ratio (1009) (Table 1). However, in the 0-6 age group there is a deficit of girls and the sex ratio goes down to 964. This compares favourably with

950 for Muslims, 925 for Hindus and 786 for Sikhs, but may indicate that, like other religious communities, Christians are engaging in sex-selective abortions. There are also interesting regional differences. The northern states, such as Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, have the lowest 0-6 sex ratios at only 834, 898 and 870 respectively (Table 1). The southern, eastern and north-eastern states do significantly better. The adult sex ratio is positive in a number of states, including Delhi, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. This compares favourably with the sex ratio for Muslims and Hindus in most of these states. In Kerala, Muslims and Hindus do better at 1082 and 1058 respectively. Muslims also have a positive sex ratio in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu and Lakshadweep.

In terms of the proportion of their population who are aged 0-6, Christians in 2001 show lower proportion (13.5 per cent) than the national average (15.9 per cent). This indicates a decline in fertility rates. Literacy rates among Christians are among the highest in the country. Female literacy is at 76.2 per cent and male at 80.3 per cent. In more than 20 states and union territories, more than 75 per cent of their Christian populations are literate. Lakshadweep, Kerala, Delhi, Mizoram and Maharashtra have a Christian literacy rate of over 90 per cent. It is only in Arunachal Pradesh that Christian literacy is below 50 per cent. Christian literacy is also lower than the national average (64.8 per cent) in Orissa (54.9), Punjab (54.6), Assam (56.4) and marginally in Dadra and Nagar Haveli (64.6). The gap between male and female literacy among Jains and Christians is less than 10 percentage points. In contrast, Hindus show a gap between male and female literacy of 23 percentage points, followed by the Buddhists (21.4 percentage points) and Muslims (17.5 percentage points).

The work participation rate amongst Christians is 39.7 per cent (Table 1). Of those working, 20.9 per cent are engaged in cultivation, a smaller proportion than amongst Hindus (33.1 per cent) or Sikhs (32.4 per cent). In contrast, a lower proportion of economically active Christians are agricultural labourers: 15.8 per cent compared to 26.5 per cent of all workers. In addition, only 2.7 per cent of Christians are engaged in household industry, compared to 8.1 per cent of Muslims and a national average of 4.2 per cent. A large majority of Jains (81.7 per cent), followed

by 52.8 per cent of Christians, are engaged in other work, i.e. in the non-agricultural tertiary sector, which includes services, manufacturing, trade and commerce and allied activities. The available figures on patterns of employment in urban and rural areas show that a high proportion of Christians in urban areas are in regular waged or salaried employment (56.1 per cent), but that there are still 12.3 per cent in casual labour. A relatively smaller proportion of Christians than of members of other religious communities is engaged in self-employed activities (NSSO, 1987-88). Thus, a higher proportion overall obtain their income from salaried employment (23.5 per cent) (National Sample Survey Organisation, 1987-88). This employment pattern is reflected in the lower incidence of poverty amongst urban than rural Christians (11 per cent compared to 20 per cent) and amongst Christians than all other groups except Sikhs (national average 24 per cent) (John and Mutatkar, 2005, p. 1340-1, using the 1999-2000 National Sample Survey).

When it comes to rural India, a higher proportion of Hindus are farmers than any other religious community, while a higher proportion of Muslims and 'Others' are engaged in non-agricultural occupations than Hindus or Christians, although over 28 per cent of Christians are agricultural labourers (NSSO, 1978-88). Thus 46.3 per cent of Christian households overall obtain their incomes from agriculture (NSSO, 1978-88). This is reflected in patterns of ownership of land and milch and draught animals. Christians are among the smallest holders of land as well as of draught and milch animals. All other communities appear to do better than Christians in terms of agricultural landholdings. The source-wise percentage distribution of household income shows that 46.3 per cent of Christian households get their income from agriculture, while 23.5 per cent of them are in salaried employment. The second figure is the highest among different groups and communities (NSSO, 1978-88). Thus, although a smaller proportion of rural Christians are poor than of other groups (20 per cent, compared to 27 per cent), John and Mutatkar (2005) note that there is greater inequality amongst Christians in terms of consumption expenditure. Their analysis also reveals significant inter-state variations in the incidence of poverty for all religious groups, including Christians.

The Human Development Report (Shariff, 2002) charts the percentage of households owning or having access to a variety of different types of assets and amenities, including cycles, television and radio sets, fans, scooters, kitchens, electricity, piped water and toilets. At an All India level, as noted above, the literacy level of Christians surpasses that of any other group and they have relatively higher average household and per capita incomes. Christians seem to be reasonably well-off with respect to access to amenities or assets as well. Significantly, over 50 per cent have access to toilets, as compared to only 13.2 per cent of Hindus or 8.3 per cent of Scheduled Castes. Although only 27.8 per cent have access to piped water, that figure compares well with other groups.

2.3 Patterns of Social Differentiation

The presence of 'caste-like' differences is perceived everywhere among Christians, though the mode of their articulation differs considerably. As discussed above, some groups, such as the Syrians, found their place as a relatively high caste within the overall regional social order. They were located at par with the Hindu *Nair* and may even, at one point of time, have intermarried with them. They were considered 'clean' or *suvarna* and had the right of entry into Hindu sacred precincts and places of worship. On the other hand, the Goan Catholics have a system of stratification that is on par with the Hindus around them, although the two orders exist *separately* and are not integrated with each other ideologically or in terms of systems of exchange and interaction. Madras Protestants (Caplan 1980) also have some ideas of caste identity but are not incorporated into the system of Hindu castes. The Catholics of rural Tamil Nadu, however, as described by Diehl (1965) and Mosse (1986, 1996), live and work alongside Hindu kin and caste fellows. Christians and Hindus, therefore, share caste identities and are assimilated into a single system of hierarchy and ritual exchange: there are Hindu and Catholic *Vellalars*, *Utaiyars*, *Pallars* and *Paraiyars*.

Caste is explicit everywhere: in the organisation of church services, in the division of labour within churches, and in marriages and sometimes commensal patterns. While spatial segregation within churches is no longer formally sanctioned anywhere, it often continued in muted and less explicit ways. For example, in the 1970s it was observed that south Arcot Malaiman Udaiyan Christian males and children occupied the middle rows of seats in

churches, while Udaiyan women sat in the rows on the right and the Dalit Christians in the rows on the left (Wiebe 1977). In some south Goan villages, the benches closest to the altar were often tacitly reserved for high-caste celebrants on the occasion of church feasts. Low-caste Kerala Christians usually occupied the back benches in churches where they worshipped together with the Syrians. In fact, though there was no formal ban on Pulayas attending services in Syrian Christian churches in the 1960s, few of them did so (Alexander 1972). There is evidence that similar restrictions exist nowadays, although such constraints are publicly condemned by the church authorities (see, for instance, Massey 1990).

It is true that low-caste converts at times suffered in terms of the receipt of pastoral care and they are still less visibly represented in positions of authority and power in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This may be less due to active discrimination than to the configuration of circumstances that has led to the deprived and less educated being left out of the race for position and prestige. However, the unspoken preference for admitting only high caste people into the priesthood that prevailed for a long time cannot be denied. This was, no doubt, partly based on an apprehension that high caste Christians might be alienated and that a low-caste priest might face opposition from his high-caste parishioners. Moreover, caste conflicts are sometimes quite intense at higher levels in the church administrative hierarchy. For example, the politics of caste is rampant in south India in the Diocesan Councils, bodies which make decisions affecting the clergy and adherents in each diocese.

Outside the church, caste continues to rear its head in social relations. Most Christian communities tend to be caste endogamous. Catholic Reddys in Andhra Pradesh or Christian Nadars in Tamil Nadu might prefer to marry among Hindus of their own caste than to form an alliance with a low-caste Christian. In Goa, *Bamons*, *Chardos* and *Sudras* do not usually intermarry. Syrian Christians in Kerala will not even contemplate connubial relations with *Pulaya* Christian converts. Where marriage outside caste boundaries has begun to take place, it is usually confined to groups which are closer together in the hierarchy. Thus, Goan *Bamons* and *Chardos* may now occasionally intermarry, but rarely *Bamons* and *Sudras*. This is, of course, true for regions where group conversions took place.

Where individual conversions were recorded, the possibility of maintaining caste endogamy is less. Where a few individuals or families converted, marriage across the boundaries of caste becomes almost inevitable. For example, high-caste conversion in the Madras Presidency never reached the kind of level necessary to maintain generation after generation of caste-specific marriages. Endogamy had, more or less, to be abandoned in the face of demographic actuality. Missionary orphanages, whose charges had vague if any caste affiliation, often provided educated girls considered suitable for matrimony with high-caste converts. In contemporary times, marriages are arranged between suitable Protestant families and caste credentials are not always mentioned. Nevertheless, marriage cycles tend to form quickly and the respectability, wealth and life-style of families are crucial considerations, marking status almost as efficiently as caste background (see Caplan 1980, 221).

Economic and class considerations are also seen to play crucial roles in the making of marriage. Even where caste endogamy is taken for granted, marriage is more likely to take place between families of similar educational and economic background. In cases where caste boundaries are bridged, one often finds that it is the compatibility of class backgrounds that contributes to making a non-endogamous marriage acceptable to the families concerned. Such marriages are usually self-initiated rather than arranged by others (the popularly labelled 'love' marriage), but the consent of families is rarely wholly ignored. Thus, if wealthy, educated and professionally well-established, an *Izhava* or *Pulaya* Christian may find it possible to marry a Syrian Christian without raising a furor. Though not frequent, marriages may acceptably occur across the *Bamon-Chardo-Sudra* caste divide in Goa, when educational and professional criteria are acceptable.

The question of inter-dining is equally if not more complex, for the rules quoted by people may not strictly match the actual relationships between castes on the ground. Class intersects with caste to a considerable extent in deciding the extent of commensal relations. This is more so in recent times, but was not unknown even in the past. Up until the 1960s, the *Pulaya* Christians of Kerala would not be given food inside the house of a Syrian Christian. Food would be served outside the house on a leaf or broken dish. After eating the food, the *Pulaya* would have to wash the dish before

returning it. *Izhava* Christians belonged to the toddy-tapping community and were therefore also considered to be below the line of pollution. However, because of their high economic position and movement into different professions, they did not face the same discrimination as the *Pulayas*. Inter-dining and even inter-marriage with the Syrian Christians had been possible as early as the first decades of the twentieth-century (Alexander 1972, Tharamangalam 1996). Today, educated, well-to-do *Pulaya* Christians will sit at table with a Syrian Christian, while Syrians attend the weddings of the former and do not hesitate to accept food from them.

3. Ecclesiastical Organisation and Social Services

It is somewhat difficult to obtain statistical data on the Christian clergy, not least because of the presence of several different denominations. The Catholic Church appears to be divided into 157 ecclesiastical units in the country.² These consist of 29 Archdioceses and 128 dioceses. Out of these, 27 are of the Latin Rite, 25 of the Syro-Malabar Rite and 5 of the Syro-Malankara Rite. Statistics for 2003 show that there were 14,000 diocesan priests, over 12,000 religious priests, nearly 90,000 religious sisters and 4,300 religious brothers. The total number of religious orders or congregations was 300, of which 70 were for men and 230 for women. Apart from ecclesiastical work, the Catholic Church is responsible for running a whole range of educational institutions and social welfare activities (see also John, 2007). It runs 3,785 kindergartens and nursery schools, 7,319 primary schools, 3,765 secondary schools and 240 colleges (apart from 28 colleges devoted to medical and nursing training and 5 to engineering). The total number of students catered for up to the secondary level is 5.6 million. The colleges together have 511,500 students. In addition, the Church runs over 1,500 technical training schools, over 1,700 hostels and boarding houses and 704 hospitals, as well as orphanages, crèches, homes for the destitute, physically challenged and aged, dispensaries and rehabilitation centres.

The Indian subcontinent has seen the remarkable union of Anglican and non-Apostolic Protestant denominations into four major churches: The Church of North India, the Church of South India, the Church of Pakistan and the Church of Bangladesh. The Church of South India (CSI) emerged as a result of the union of Anglican, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian

and Reformed churches in the south of the country.³ It took off in September 1947, after considerable negotiation between the churches, beginning as early as 1919. It has 3.8 million members and 14,000 congregations and is organised into 16 dioceses⁴, each under the spiritual leadership of a bishop. The church as a whole is governed by its synod, which elects a moderator or presiding Bishop every two years. The CSI explicitly recognises that Episcopal, Presbyterian, and congregational elements are all essential for the life of the church. It has its own service book and communion service, both of which draw from several denominational sources. The union, especially in its reconciliation of the Anglican doctrine of apostolic succession with the views of other denominations, is considered a landmark in ecumenism. It runs 2,000 schools, 130 colleges and 104 hospitals. In the 1960s the church became conscious of its social responsibility and started organising rural development projects. There are now 50 such projects all over India, in addition to 50 training centres for young people, and 500 residential hostels for a total of 35,000 children.

The Church of North India (CNI) was inaugurated in November 1970 after many years of preparation. Negotiations commenced as early as 1929 and in 1951 a committee was constituted to draw up a plan for unification.⁵ In 1965, the plan took its final form, leading to the constitution of the church in 1970. The CNI includes the Anglican Church, the United Church of Northern India (Congregationalist and Presbyterian), the Methodist church (British and Australian Conferences), the Council of Baptist Churches in Northern India, the Church of the Brethren in India and the Disciples of Christ. There are about 1.25 million adherents spread over 26 dioceses. Unity was achieved in the practice and understanding of the Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the three-fold ministry of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons, and in the organisational structures of Pastorates, Dioceses and the Synod. Provision was made to accommodate diverse liturgical practices as long as these do not disrupt the unity and fellowship of the Church. As in the CSI, the CNI is run by a synod, which elects a moderator, who is a Bishop.

The Church runs educational institutions and social service centres. Its social services wing, known as the Synodical Board of Social Services (CNI-SBSS), focuses on development issues and works for the poor and marginalised, for justice and human rights. The issues it looks at include livelihood and food security, tribal identity and indigenous rights, land

rights, gender and the position of Dalits. CNI runs 65 hospitals spread over 8 regional divisions, which are managed by CNI-SBHS (Synodical Board of Health Services). It also runs 9 nursing schools, 250 educational institutions and three technical training centres.

The wide range of health, education and social work activities engaged in by the different Christian denominations has sometimes led to the theological description of the Indian church as a 'servant church',⁶ following the example of Christ on his knees washing the feet of the disciples. Indeed, the singular contribution of Christians in the social sector is widely recognised in the country.

4. Contemporary Dalit Struggles

I focus in this section on the constitution of the Christian Dalit identity, because this is the most visible religio-political movement within the Christian community today. Underprivileged Christian groups have begun to challenge their position in new and radical ways, one of which is through the construction of the category of 'Dalit' Christians. The term, meaning 'broken' or 'ground down', has been drawn from the Maharashtrian experience for use by and for Christians from Untouchable castes. Bodies such as the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement and the National Co-ordination Committee for Scheduled Caste Christians have emerged to promote Dalit struggles against casteism within and outside the church and to demand the extension of the benefits of positive discrimination, in the form of reservations aimed at the Scheduled Castes, to Dalit Christians. Dalit Christian movements are backed by a number of church intellectuals and aim to construct a Dalit theology. It is recognised that the upper castes are over-represented at all levels of theological education. The broad endeavour is to reform Indian theology, which had its support and roots among the upper castes, so that it reflects the experiences and concerns of the lowliest. Accordingly, it is believed that Dalit theology must be a product of Dalits themselves.

The Dalit movement has two complex aspects. One is the outer political aspect, which brings the Dalits into direct contestation with the state. Various bodies have emerged to co-ordinate the struggle, in which Dalit Christians from all over the country attempt to come together on the basis of shared experiences of inequality and, with varying degrees of success,

to forge linkages with Dalits from other religious communities, drawing again on the common social and material experience of subjugation. In the process, the motif of religious difference is suppressed. Dalits from other communities, however, are sometimes wary of such an association because they believe that it might lessen the share of privileges and benefits available to them and even if this does not happen, their chances of getting reserved seats in employment might lessen, given that Christian Dalits have had better access to education.

Today the church as a whole has decided to back the political struggles of the Dalits for reservations. This does not, however, mean that the structures of inequality within the churches themselves have been addressed. Within the different churches, Dalits wage another struggle. This one brings them into opposition with the upper caste and upper class, largely urban-based elites and into an attempted association with other oppressed groups, notably tribal Christians. The internal struggle of the Dalits is aimed at fighting caste/class inequalities within the different churches and at constructing a Dalit theology. While it is believed that Dalit theology should be produced by Dalits themselves, some members of the church elites – theologians and priests – are also involved in this process of redefinition. The Christian Dalit Liberation Movement, formed in the 1980s, became the forum for the promotion and co-ordination of Dalit struggles against caste discrimination within and outside the churches on an All-India basis. This movement has in particular taken shape within the Catholic Church. The most significant demand that has been taken up by the Dalit Christians and, in turn, endorsed by the mainstream churches is that Dalit Christians should be accorded the same reservation and welfare benefits that are granted to Scheduled Castes professing the Hindu, Sikh, and Neo-Buddhist religions under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 (amended in 1956 and 1990). The Dalit Christians should, it is argued, be given Scheduled Caste status and privileges so that they can enjoy the same political rights and socio-economic benefits as all other Scheduled Castes.

At present, Scheduled Caste Christians are not recognised as such under the law and they are not, therefore, eligible for the benefits of positive discrimination sanctioned by the Constitution. Dalit Christians are fighting for just such recognition and for the extension to them of the benefits accorded to Scheduled Castes. It is argued that most Dalit Christians are poor, educationally backward, politically powerless and social outcasts.

The demand is that the Indian Government restores to them their legitimate rights and ceases to discriminate against them on the grounds of religion. The Constitutional order of 1950, known as the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 listed Scheduled Castes and Tribes using the list employed by the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1936. The third paragraph of the 1950 Order specifies that no person professing a religion other than Hinduism may be deemed a member of a Scheduled Caste. This was amended in 1956 to include Sikh Dalits and again in 1990 in favour of Buddhist Dalits. Christians argue that the exclusion of Dalit Christians from these benefits amounts to religion-based discrimination and contravenes Constitutional principles prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

While the churches have overtly supported this struggle of the Dalits, the latter continue to assert that the leadership is ambivalent about their problems. The Dalit Christian Liberation Movement has specific concerns with respect to marginalisation in admissions and appointments to Christian institutions, marginalisation in religious orders, and unequal sharing of power and authority in the churches. It argues that the churches cannot leave it up to the government to solve the problems. Whether or not the government acts in favour of Dalit Christians, it is asserted, the churches must do what they can through a policy of reservation in their own institutions. Dalits have received international support for their struggles. In the 1990s, the World Council of Churches (WCC) – made up of 334 member churches and associate bodies throughout the world – announced a Dalit Solidarity Programme as part of its Ecumenical Action on Racism. The programme intends to focus the attention of WCC member churches on the situation and struggles for justice of Dalits in India.

The Dalit Christian Liberation Movement is not the only representative group of Dalits in India. There are said to be over 5,000 such groups, not all of them solely Christian, across the country. The movement to create a Dalit theology has led to the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary establishing its own Integrative Dalit Liberation Movement. The history of Dalit struggles and the elements of a Dalit theology are now part of courses taught at several different seminaries. While competition between different groups is inevitable, an important challenge to the Dalit Christian struggle recently has come from associations aligned with Hindu right-wing organisations. Among these is one calling itself the Poor Christian Liberation

Movement, which may well be an organisation floated by the Hindu Right. Its President speaks out in RSS publications, such as the *Organizer*.⁷ The organisation opposes Dalit Christians receiving recognition as Scheduled Castes and chastises the churches for allegedly misleading poor people by converting them with the promise of social and economic uplift. It asserts that the churches should give equality to Dalits in their own organisations, instead of looking to the government for benefits. The organisation is also opposed to the recourse by Dalits to international associations such as the WCC. It argues that it is necessary to build a 'Swadeshi' or national church and to cease looking towards the Vatican or the WCC for assistance and support.

4.1 Targeted Violence and Debates over Proselytisation

One of the most significant challenges facing the Indian Christian community as a whole in recent times has been the increasing violence its members have faced from Hindu right-wing organisations and their associates. While there was during the colonial period a stereotype of Christians as 'toadies' of the British, the post-Independence period has, in general, seen them being regarded as a largely peaceful, non-communal and law-abiding community. There have certainly been issues on which Christians have stood apart. In particular, they have defended their 'right to proselytise and convert' against enormous opposition from Hindu fundamentalists, moderates and Gandhians alike. With the rise of Hindutva since the early 1980s, Muslims and subsequently Christians have increasingly become targets of active campaigns of hatred. Conversion, in particular, has become the focus of enormous controversy and the recent period has seen many states, including Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Chattisgarh and Rajasthan, bringing in stringent legislation against conversion.

The murder of Graham Staines and his children in 1999 is only the most dramatic of the increasing number of incidents of violence witnessed against Christians in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Khandamal in Orissa, Dangs in Gujarat, and other states, including Kerala. In many of these incidents, members of Hindu right-wing organisations have been involved. 'Conversion' has been identified as the target in this furor. Such organisations argue that Christian missionaries have been converting people by both force and inducement, justifying their anger and violence. In fact, after the killing of Staines, the then BJP Prime Minister, Atal Behari

Vajpayee, came out in defence of a 'national debate' on conversions. While most mainline churches do not engage in active conversion, there are cases of the new Pentecostal churches trying to evangelise.⁸ This has to be placed against the spread of so-called 'Hinduisation' movements started by Hindu organisations, particularly in tribal areas.

The issue of conversion may well be a mask for other concerns. Christian missionaries engage in health and education activities among lower castes and tribals. This raises their awareness and may lead to a refusal to submit to age-old patterns of social and caste discrimination. On the other hand, Christian theologians and believers are beginning to realise that their insistence on conversion does not go down well in the pluralistic Indian context. There is ample space here for the continuance of dialogue with other faiths and for the embracing of a notion of 'conversion' that does not necessarily involve change of *community*, but could proceed as a continuing attempt to ensure understanding and acceptance of each others' ways and positions across religious boundaries (Kim 2003). What emerges clearly is that Christians in India live in an environment in which religion is increasingly politicised, and this impinges in myriad ways on the practice and understanding of their faith.

4.2 Church, State and Politics

While the church has for the most part either kept out of politics or stood on the side of the *status quo*, there have been struggles associated with the church that have been anti-state. In Goa, the Konkan Railway protests saw the Catholic Church firmly on the side of those opposing the railway during the early 1990s. The church also participated in the struggles to ensure that Goa was not merged with Maharashtra, after its independence in 1960. Insurgency movements in the north-east have been closely associated with Christianity and Christian clergy supported fishermen's struggles on the south-west coast.

Since India's independence, the peoples of the north-east have expressed their dissatisfaction with the governance of their region by the centre, the lack of development and corruption. This discontent has led to many insurgency movements seeking statehood, the adjustment of State borders or, in some cases, separation from India. These nationalist or sub-nationalist movements clearly fed conversion in the second half of the twentieth-century. Scholars have pointed out that conversion among the

previously unconverted Nagas in Nagaland or adjacent areas in Burma and Arunachal Pradesh were closely linked with Naga nationalism (Downs 1994). Becoming Christian was a political statement in the hills, reinforced by the targeting of churches and Christian leaders by the Indian security forces sent to suppress the insurgents.

Under the influence of the South American liberation theology movement, some clergy in India, especially Jesuits, came to reassess their role in bringing about socio-economic change. The ferment created out of the movement was in part responsible for the Jesuits' new 'option for the poor', in which worldly matters were given as much import as spiritual ones. In a world of injustice and oppression, Jesuits have been asked to stand up for social justice and become agents for social transformation. Jesuit organisations have turned to tribal social transformation, social research and even initiatives for communal peace, human rights and justice for ethnic minorities and those oppressed by caste disabilities.

Jesuits, who are prominent particularly in the field of education, have made their central goals the playing of a constructive role in shaping public policies in favour of secularism, the alleviation of poverty, the empowerment of women, uplift of the marginalised, preservation of the environment and the spread of literacy. In accordance with these priorities, Jesuits have chosen to withdraw from the direct governance of some of the elite schools that they had started, such as the Champion School in Mumbai, and to move more actively into engagement with the marginalised. Some of these moves have brought them into confrontation with the Papacy and have certainly led to conflicts with the central and some state governments at different points in time. They have also led to conflicts with Hindu right-wing forces from time to time.

As already noted, the struggles of Christian Dalits for reservation have also led to contestation over categories defined by the state and legal system. The courts have shown a tendency towards conservatism in cases regarding the extension of reservation to Christians (and Muslims). In a 1952 judgement, the Punjab High Court, for example, held the religious clause in the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 to be protected by the powers of exception granted in Article 15 (4) of the Constitution, even if it may be considered to be discriminatory under Article 15 (1).⁹ Again, in 1986, the Supreme Court faced the issue in the case of Soosai versus the

Union of India. However, the same outcome emerged and the burden of proof was placed on the petitioner regarding the persistence of disabilities of caste after conversion (Conrad 1995, 322). There is still a case pending before the Supreme Court on which judgement is awaited. These disabilities and discrepancies, however, have their effects on Christians. In coastal Andhra, for instance, the Malas are overwhelmingly Christian by faith but are legally recorded as Hindu so as to be able to obtain the benefits of positive discrimination.

With respect to Scheduled Tribes, the question of reservation was decided by the courts. The Constitution itself did not lay down any criteria for specifying Scheduled Tribes, though it does indicate that there is no religious bar on a member belonging to such a group. In 1968, the Supreme Court upheld a Patna High Court verdict (in *Munzi vs Ôrâon Patna 201 V.51, C. 54*) that “Ôrâons embracing Christianity do not cease to be Ôrâons and are therefore entitled to the rights and privileges of Scheduled Tribes”. The High Court had also observed that, although Christian tribals omit certain practices of the tribal religion, they retain practices such as exogamy, harvest rites, birth and marriage observances and the like. These Christian and non-Christian tribals intermarry and Christians are called Christian *Ôrâons* (Kujur 2004).

Christian groups, particularly Catholics, came into opposition with the government over the issue of abortion. When the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Bill was to be passed in the early 1970s, Catholic groups rallied in opposition to it. Mother Teresa was closely associated with the resistance to the Bill and Catholic schools joined in the protest by symbolic closures. Though the government of the day passed the Bill (and India was perhaps the first country in the world to thus legalise abortion), the opposition to both abortion and contraception by the Catholic authorities has remained. Throughout her life, Mother Teresa was vehemently opposed to abortion and contraception, stemming from the rigid Catholic ‘pro-life’ position. Her views troubled many, including members of her own denomination and feminists. On the other hand, the ‘pro-life’ position received a fillip when adverse consequences of the Act began to be perceived: a rapid decline in the sex ratio and an increase in female foeticide.

Women’s groups worked very hard to bring about changes in the archaic Indian Divorce Act, 1869, which contained very adverse features for

women. The struggle to amend the Act was long and there was opposition particularly from the Catholic Church. The Joint Women's Programme (JWP), Delhi, worked assiduously from around 1983 to obtain the consent of different churches to the new Bill framed along the lines of the Special Marriage Act. The Catholic Church was particularly averse to the proposed provision for mutual consent divorce. The proposed Bill was sent to the government but lay gathering dust. In 2000, it was the National Democratic Alliance government that took it up again, but there were apprehensions from the Christian community, since the atmosphere at the time was communally vitiated. The challenge was to bring all the stakeholders to the table and the Joint Women's Programme did that in 2000. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) was persuaded to go along with the proposed amendments and the new Bill was finally passed on August 30, 2001. In it, cruelty, adultery and desertion have been made independent grounds for divorce, mutual consent divorce has been included, the condition limiting maintenance to an upper limit of one-fifth of the husband's income has been removed and provision has been made to entertain petitions at both the place of marriage and the place of last residence.

5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to construct a historical and contemporary profile of Indian Christians, bringing out the differences across regions, castes and economic strata. The 2001 Census provided for the first time in independent India data on social and economic indicators for different religious communities. This and official data from other sources have enabled us to construct a socio-economic profile of Indian Christians and to compare them with other communities. What the paper also emphasises, however, is that there are sharp differences among Christians, who in reality are comprised of a number of different regional and local communities. Despite this, from the point of view of the state, Christians as a whole are considered a minority community. As the paper has attempted to demonstrate, the construction of Christians as a minority has complex and uneven implications for the community. Thus, rather than viewing Christians in isolation, the paper has throughout attempted to view them in terms of their altering relationships with the state and with other communities. This perspective has enabled us to analyse a variety of issues concerning Christians today, including abortion, reservation and conversion.

End Notes

1. Right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology which, briefly, believes that India is a land belonging to Hindus and that other groups such as Christians, Muslims and Parsees have come from outside and live in the country at best at the pleasure of the majority. Organizations such as the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishan (VHP) espouse such a view. At the political level, the Bharatiya Janata Party supports Hindu nationalist sentiments.
2. The data in the following paragraphs were accessed from <http://www.cbcsite.com/church%20in%20india.htm> on 28.3.2006.
3. The following data are largely from
<http://www.csichurch.com/> and <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/tour/province.cfm?ID=N2>
accessed on 28.3.2006.
4. In addition, there is, for historical reasons, one diocese in northern Sri Lanka
5. The following data are largely from
<http://www.cnisynod.org/> and
<http://www.indianchristianity.org/cni.html>, both accessed on 28.3.2006.
- 6 From <http://www.stpetersnottingham.org/misc/cni.html>.
Description by Hazel White Church Mission Society Area Coordinator from Derbyshire visiting CNI churches in India in 1999.
7. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu right-wing organisation, known for its virulence towards minorities such as Muslims and Christians.
8. This has to be placed against recent incidents that may be partly a result of a reaction to the increasing virulence of movements of Hinduization. In September 2006, the well-known Loreto convent in Lucknow organised a session with a rickshaw-puller from Kolkata,

who describes himself as 'Christ'. The session had many students of the school fainting and in distress, but the principal denied any attempt at evangelization. The Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha went on a rampage in the school, damaging its property.

9. Article 15 (1): The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

Article 15 (4): Nothing in this article...shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (see Conrad, 1995).

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