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The Christians of India

Religious Identities, Communal Feeling,
and the Dialectics of (Dis)Engagement

Christianity in India has had a long and complex history—in its own way, one of the longest and richest histories among the countries of South, Southeast, and East Asia. While it is beyond the scope and purposes of the present volume to describe that history in detail—a job, at any rate, ably performed by a number of other scholars—a brief account of the sociopolitical contours of Christianity in India would be useful to help explain and contextualize the patterns of Christianity in the Indian diaspora. Indian Christianity's uneven development in different parts of the nation and amongst different people-groups, predicts some of the heterogeneity that is seen amongst varieties of Christianity in the Indian diaspora, and the dialectics of identity related to this. More particularly, differentiated attitudes to India—and to being in the diaspora versus being in India—on the part of different segments of the diasporic population, can be more easily understood as part of the complex ambivalence that Christians have toward the homeland.

Religious Identities and the Cultural Politics of Religion in India: A Brief Background

India's constitution forbids discrimination against anyone on the basis of "religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth," protects freedom of access to places or employment to all religions and castes, abolishes the doctrine of "untouchabil-

ity" (the apartheid associated with older practices of the Hindu caste system), and provides for "equality of opportunity" for those of all religions (Government of India 2007: 7). Freedom of religion is guaranteed under article 25 (1):

> Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.

Religious groups are also guaranteed the right to maintain their own educational institutions (Government of India 2007: 13, 14). It is also unconstitutional to bar anyone from an electoral roll on the basis of religion or caste. These clauses do not preclude various affirmative actions which might favor "any backward class of citizens," "scheduled castes," and "scheduled tribes"— provisions through which the Government reserves some appointments, educational places, and other such benefits to groups which were traditionally discriminated against within the Hindu caste hierarchy (Government of India 2007: 8).

These basic constitutional guarantees do not, of course, prevent political practices from exploiting deep religious feeling, nor the religious politics of everyday life from impacting society in profound and often disturbingly violent ways. Indian politics is heavily influenced by religious considerations, and indeed the 1947 partition itself was governed primarily by religious considerations, with the state of Pakistan created to provide a homeland for Muslim Indians; partition also saw a subsequent "politics of the religious fanatic" that saw more than a million dead and millions displaced from their homes (Fernandes 2007: xv). Separatist politics on religious lines have also characterized India's subsequent domestic politics, centered on states like Jammu and Kashmir (predominantly Muslim), Punjab (predominantly Sikh), Nagaland (predominantly Christian), and elsewhere. A number of Indian political parties are organized on more-or-less explicit religious principles, with probably the best-known example of a large national party being the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). There are also numerous smaller state parties like the Indian Union Muslim League, the Shiromani Akali Dal (Sikh), the Shiv Sena (Hindu), and many other parties which campaign locally on religious platforms.

A number of major incidents in India's social and political arena in the past three decades or so indicate the extent to which religious identities and communalism are often implicated in irruptions of factional politics

and violence. The main religious-political tension has been between Hindu and Muslim groups, primarily catalyzed by the social and political agitation of religious parties, including in some areas separatist tensions as well. The Bharatiya Janata Party, India's Hindu Nationalist party, is overt in its appeal to the "cultural and civilisational greatness" of India's tradition—a tradition explicitly linked with "Hindu thought" (BJP "Manifesto"). In much of its public discourse, the BJP version of Hinduism stresses its "ennobling" truths, the emphasis on the "essential unity of mankind," the doctrine of "spiritual co-existence" and "unity in diversity," and similarly values (BJP "Manifesto").

In practice, however, the BJP has been linked to a number of episodes of civil unrest pitting Hindu mobs against Muslims. On December 6, 1992, the BJP organized a rally at the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. The mosque, one of the most significant holy sites for the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, was on a disputed site which Hindus believe to have once held a temple commemorating the birth of Rama. The December 1992 rally, at which there were reportedly around 150,000 supporters, featured speeches by leaders of the BJP and its parent Hindu organizations, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (Fernandes 2007: 8); it was meant to symbolically commemorate the start of temple building, but with an undertaking not to damage the mosque. Several people broke through the police cordon and climbed onto the dome of the mosque, after which things rapidly got out of hand as the mob stormed the mosque, scattering the police and beating up journalists and anyone else in their way, before totally demolishing the mosque (Tully 2002). Present at the rally was Lal Krishna Advani, a BJP stalwart who later became party president and leader of the opposition in India's lower house (Lok Sabha).

Another BJP leader, Narendra Modi (then Chief Minister of Gujarat, and who became Prime Minister of India in May 2014), was also implicated in the February 2002 communal violence in the state of Gujarat—what has come to be known as the "Godhra incident." The violence broke out after a group of Muslims were alleged to have set a train carrying Hindu pilgrims on fire, killing fifty-nine of the pilgrims; retaliatory attacks by Hindus on Muslim shops and houses left hundreds of Hindus and Muslims dead. Modi was variously accused of not enforcing civil order, and even of helping to instigate the violence.

Political analysts have seen this appeal—explicit or implicit—to "Hindutva" ("Hindu-ness," and the championing of a Hindu identity and the politics thereof) as a characteristic and necessary strategy for the BJP, its unifying ideology in the absence of a clear and distinctive platform or a charismatic

leader (Overdorf 2008: 41). While this view may not sufficiently acknowledge the economic and infrastructural improvements that Modi was credited with in his long tenure as Gujarat Chief Minister, it does highlight the role that Hindutva has played in his leadership of the BJP. This overt alignment with Hindutva has continued after Modi's ascension to the office of prime minister, with accusations that he has implicitly or explicitly condoned the work of the RSS in "re-converting" Muslims and Christians to Hinduism (Srivastava 2014; Das 2014).

Islam has also been the rallying point for separatist politics, most notably in the Muslim stronghold-state of Jammu and Kashmir. From 1989, a violent campaign has been conducted to drive minority Hindus out of Jammu and Kashmir; the insurgency has seen tens of thousands of casualties from bombings, assassinations, and even "collateral damage" from military efforts (Fernandes 2007: 27–29, 46). The politics of Islam in post-partition India have continued to be complicated by the frequently tense relations between India and Pakistan, not only in the matter of border relations and the fate of contested states like Jammu and Kashmir, but also because of India's continued suspicions of Pakistan's role in terrorist activities in India, particularly after 9/11. Episodes like the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, which the Indian government saw as supported by Pakistan, have sustained the association, in the eyes of the Indian government and many of its people, between Islam and political destabilization in India. If Hindu organizations such as the RSS and VHP have had a history of involvement in communal causes often leading to violence, so likewise have Muslim organizations such as the Indian Union Muslim League, Muslim Majlis, Jamat-e-Islami, and others (Krishna 2005: 176). Hindu-Muslim communal violence continues to erupt occasionally, particularly since Hindu fundamentalist actions have increased under the BJP government since 2014. Many of the Muslim acts of violence have been justified by that community as mere defensive actions or retaliations against Hindu provocations, in the face of the state often turning a blind eye to the Muslim situation (Alam 1993: 157).

Although it is the tension between the two largest religious communities, the Hindus and Muslims, which dominates the religious politics of India, other religious groups are also involved in religious conflicts, sometimes of a strikingly violent nature. Sikh separatism in the state of Punjab goes at least as far back as the 1920s along the work of the Akali Dal party to give Sikhism a larger voice and presence in the government of the state. This eventually became a demand for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan. In the 1970s, violence escalated the volatile situation as Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his group

of conservative Sikhs resorted to the murder of their political and doctrinal opponents (Judge 2011: 41). Bhindranwale and his extremists sought refuge in the Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib) in Amritsar, prompting the Indian government to mount the military strike named "Operation Blue Star." The strike not only destroyed the Sikh group led by Bhindranwale, but also killed pilgrim bystanders and caused considerable damage to the Sikh holy site. It also led to the retaliatory assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, by two of her Sikh bodyguards. Although the militant manifestations of Sikhism generally died down after the 1990s, the grievances about the Indian government's treatment of the Sikhs, and the Sikh "crisis of identity" that spurs a constant assertion of that religious identity in the face of the threat of Hindu assimilation, persist (Fernandes 2007: 193, 218).

Although Christianity has a much less militant role and history in Indian politics, it has received significant attention because of its association with separatist movements in the state of Nagaland in Northeast India. Nagas, like many of the tribal peoples in the small states in Northeast India, are predominantly Christian (and largely Baptist), and the phrase "Nagaland for Christ" became a rallying cry in the Naga armed struggle for autonomy (Fernandes 2007: 164). Although part of the insurgency was as much a matter of political opportunism as of genuine religious conviction, nevertheless the distinct Christian identity of the Nagas was part of their self-perception, and came to be inextricably linked with Naga militancy as well (Fernandes 2007: 164, 166).

Religion features significantly not just in the more extreme cases of political activism and separatist movements, but also in the tensions in terms of cultural politics and communal relations that underlie Indian society. These tensions arise from governance issues having to do with the relations between India's overwhelming Hindu population and those of other faiths, and also to do with the contestations over India's identity as a Hindu nation. Hindus comprise just over 80 percent of the total population; the next largest religious group, the Muslims, constitute only 13.4 percent of India's populations; and the other main religions—Christians (2.34%), Sikhs (1.86%), Buddhists and Jains (each less than 1%)—are collectively much smaller than even the Muslims (Census of India "Religious Compositions"). Hinduism, at least in the form that it took in the "Vedic period"—with an early version of the caste system, the practice of religious rituals, and the existence of hymns and commentaries—dates from before 1000 BCE (Clothey 2006: 21–27), thus exerting a diachronic cultural weight of thousands of years of continuous practice in the Indian subcontinent. It is further reinforced by cultural capital in the form of a rich tradition of literature and performing arts based on religious texts

such as the *Mahabharata*, ornately decorated temples many of which are big tourist draws and even UNESCO world heritage sites, the "philosophical" value of Hindu thought, the popularity of practices such as vegetarianism and meditation both in India and abroad, and so on.

Hinduism's demographic weight and accumulated cultural capital, together with the 1947 Partition which effectively defined the modern state of India on religious lines in contradistinction from Muslim Pakistan, have lent themselves to conceptions of India as a de facto Hindu nation. The use of the term "Hindu" to mean "the collectivity of people of India" regardless of their religion, was the usage current in the nineteenth century (Pandey 1993: 245). It was only in the context of "new challenges" of religious communalism and "increasing strife between Hindus and Muslims" in the 1920s that a more nationalist notion of "Hindu" came into being, popularized through the 1923 publication of V. D. Savarkar's *Hindutva* (Pandey 1993: 247). While Savarkar's term still extended over "all the people who reside in the land," it established a criterion of historical, cultural, and ultimately religious qualification to that belonging: a condition of "love" and "worship" of the ancestral land, such that one could be non-Hindu by religion (e.g., a Sikh or a Jain), but have Hindu-tva (Hindu-ness) by affection and loyalty for the land and people (including, implicitly, a tolerance for the multicultural and multireligious makeup of the land; Pandey 1993: 248–50). This of course still left room for the dominance and centrality of the Hindu religion as the core of the Hindu Bharat, and it was this religious core that was mobilized in the 1940s and 1950s to "appear to include—yet subordinate—minorities" within the unquestioned dominance and mastery of the Hindu majority (Copland 2007: 263–65).

The tendency for caste-thinking to reach out beyond the limits of the community of Hindu adherents is ingrained into the national consciousness of India, and inscribed into the Constitution. Article 25 (2)(b), which reserves the state's right to provide social welfare for or open public religious institutions to "all classes and sections of Hindus," carries an explanation that the reference to "Hindus" includes "persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion" (Government of India 2007: 13). Pandey (1993: 245) shows that the term "Hindu" was indeed used by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist writers in a larger and more inclusive way than referring only to religious adherents—an inclusive and "expansionist" move which has been opportunistically resurrected by "Hindu propagandists in more recent times."

The evolution of Hindu nationalism in the form of the BJP, RSS, and other such organizations has now worked to centralize Hindutva as normative, as an "authentic" Indianness, at the expense of all non-Hindu minorities.

Schools and school texts today are very much part of this ideological playing field: in the schools run by the RSS and BJP, tenets pointedly glorifying Hinduism and bashing Islam and other religions are repeatedly taught to students, and textbook material promoting an "extremely *virulent communal* view of Indian history" is used in classes (Mukherjee et al. 2008: 21; Hasan 2007: 237–38). There is also an underlying strand of Hindutva in media discourses, for example in the playing up of "Hindu" outrage at Pakistani provocations and Muslim terror attacks such as the one on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001 (Manchanda 2007: 356–59). Pandharipande (2001: 237–42) shows that Hindu-ness plays a central role in the linguistic constructions of "authenticity" even amongst diasporic Indians, for example, the Americans of Indian descent that form the subject of her study.

As Angana Chatterji (2009: 41) puts it, Hindutva can be seen as "the hyper-practise of Hindu cultural dominance." The resonances and reverberations of this "hyper-practise"—despite its roots in a "narrow centralized" and "Brahmanical" code, as Chatterji (2009: 41) points out—frequently wash through a wider Indian society, not necessarily by explicit public consensus, but rather by the political mileage and cultural momentum it contains. In 2007 then-Culture Minister Ambika Soni was criticized by a colleague in the Indian Cabinet when her ministry denied the existence of a Hindu god, Lord Ram, in order to justify a project to dredge a sea lane in the shoals between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka (Agence France-Presse 2007). According to the Hindu epic *The Ramayana*, the shallows in question (also known as "Ram Setu") were the work of Lord Ram; Soni's ministry in a report submitted to the Indian Supreme Court essentially took a rationalist perspective that denied this religious account. Reaction to the report unfolded on several fronts: the RSS and its affiliated organizations mobilized a mass demonstration on December 30, 2007, in Delhi, featuring Hinduism "awareness" talks by spiritual leaders, and the decoration of the cityscape with saffron (Hindu) flags and buntings (Hindu Janajagruti Samiti 2007). In the state of Punjab (the state represented by Soni, who belongs to the Congress party), effigies of Congress party leader, Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, were burned, accompanied by outcries that as a "Christian" (an imputation that followed from her being non-Indian and European in origin) she is ignorant of and unsympathetic to the "Hindu religion" (Agence France-Presse 2007). Tamil Nadu state also saw an outcry against its Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi who had supported the dredging project (Hindu Janajagruti Samiti 2008). As a result of these outcries, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh put the project on hold, and Soni offered her resignation (Agence France-Presse 2007; Banerjee 2008).

In 2010, religious and nationalist sentiments erupted in the highly popular spheres of Indian cricket and Bollywood. In January 2010, Pakistani players and fans protested against the fact that no Pakistani players had been picked up by the Indian Premier League teams (Agence France-Presse/Associated Press 2010). When Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan (whose parents were born in what is now Pakistan) expressed sympathy and conciliatory sentiments, he was attacked by the Hindu nationalist group Shiv Sena (a habitual critic of Pakistan for what it perceives as Pakistan's backing of Muslim terrorism), which tore down posters of the actor's upcoming film *My Name is Khan* and threatened violence against movie houses showing the film (Agence France-Presse 2010b).

As a final example (among many others), food culture too is heavily influenced by Hindu values, with vegetarianism—a custom amongst many Hindus, Jains, and others—colonizing not only the food scene, but also housing and real estate (Associated Press 2006). The states of Gujarat and Rajasthan are known to be dominated by (largely Hindu) vegetarians, but in recent years immigrants from these states have also brought a new wave of vegetarian influence to the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai, where restaurants and supermarkets have felt the pressure to go only vegetarian, and even housing societies and cooperatives have rejected applicants who are non-vegetarian (Associated Press 2006).

Such examples of Hindu-ness as a "hyper-practise of . . . cultural dominance" (Chatterji 2009: 41)—from politics to educational practices to popular culture and certainly to many aspects of communal life—can easily be multiplied. While there are of course many instances of tolerance, social harmony, and liberal open-mindedness in India, particularly within the business and professional spheres of large-city Indian life, this does not deny the prevalence of Hindutva as a dominant cultural practice and attitude, and its periodic flare-up into political incidents and communal violence. It certainly extends overseas as well, in the cultural influence of organizations like the RSS, the VHP, and the BJP, and the project of creating a "diaspora Hindutva movement" linked to the "majority rights of Hindus" in India (Kinnvall 2006: 151–54). The cultural pervasiveness and dominance of Hindutva might well signal a "crisis of secularism" in India, as Rajan and Needham (2007: 2) contend. Certainly it is a feature of the Indian socius, markedly different from the models of multiculturalism and secularized individualism familiar in many North American and Western European countries, which must be borne in mind in seeking to understand the religious-cultural landscape of India.

One particular aspect of Hindu practice—the observance of caste—also continues to impact Indian society and even (to varying extents) its diasporic communities. Article 15 of the Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination against individuals on the basis of caste, but this largely governs fairly basic public and political freedoms such as enfranchisement, access to public spaces, and so on. "Untouchability" as a systematic apartheid of the Dalits (meaning "oppressed"—the name now used in preference to the old pejorative term "untouchables") is also prohibited by the Constitution. Article 46 further provides for affirmative action in respect of the "economic and educational interests" of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (those most clearly prejudiced in the Hindu caste system vis-à-vis the upper or forward castes), and avows more generally to "protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation" (Government of India 2007: 23).

In practice, however, and in most of the multifarious details of everyday life, caste continues to be of considerable importance despite these constitutional intents. Caste features very prominently in matrimonial arrangements. While an increasing number of matrimonial advertisements are declaring "caste no bar,"[1] it is still the norm for the desired caste of the prospective bride or groom to be declared up front. Phrases used in these matrimonial advertisements—such as "middle class Brahmin bride wanted," "pretty suitable Brahmin bride wanted," "any Brahmin sect acceptable," "Nair parents . . . invite proposals for daughter . . . from well employed professionals, respectable Nair family," "Nair, Thiruvathira . . . seeks professionally qualified (Abroad/India) Nair/Allied Caste Groom"—show the forthright specificity which still governs such matrimonial arrangements, particularly among the forward castes.[2]

Belonging to a scheduled caste no longer means the certainty of a deprived and oppressed life as it did in earlier times, as educational and economic opportunities can now create a greater degree of social mobility for some individuals than in the past. However, it is still the case that caste is a highly significant determiner of socioeconomic status for the majority of Indians; as De Wit's study of the Chitra Nagar slums of Madras showed, the majority (almost 90 percent) of the dwellers of that insalubrious slum were Dalits (1996: 163). In rural India, with even more limited access to educational resources and socially transformative opportunities, caste is in many ways an even stronger social determiner than in the cities; discrimination, ostracism, mob violence, rape, and other crimes are often perpetuated against Dalits in rural villages, in contravention of the Constitution and largely with impunity from law enforcement (Murthy 1999; Dalit Christians "Disabilities").

Conversion to other religions has provided an option for lower-caste individuals to escape the prohibitions that come with their caste, and there has even been documentation of mass conversion (to Christianity) by members of a scheduled caste (Forrester 1980: 14–15). However, this often means that caste-like discrimination merely attaches to converts to Christianity, their conversion often taken as indication (whether true or not) that they were from a backward caste. Certainly it is true that a significant number of Dalits have converted to Christianity: according to a 1999 estimate by Soosai Raj Faustina, a member of the Dalit Solidarity Peoples (DSP) National Working Committee, about 50 percent of Indian Christians came from Dalit backgrounds (cited in Murthy 1999: 4). The Dalit Christian website, which seeks to further the cause of Dalits in India, estimates that there are 19 million Dalit Christians, who thus form about 70 percent of India's Christians (Dalit Christians "Demands"). Since the estimate is that there are about 200 million Dalits in India, the percentage of Dalits who are Christian is still relatively low, at about 10 percent (although it is much higher than the overall rate of Christianity in India, which is about 2.3 percent). However, the predominance of Indian Christians who are Dalits has meant that the social opprobrium attached to Hindu Dalits often simply gets transferred onto Christians. Not only does life not get better for the families of many Dalit converts to Christianity even after several generations, but even within churches those caste distinctions often persist, and converts from Dalit backgrounds are discriminated against by forward-caste Christians (Dalit Christians "History"; "Disabilities").

Given the predominance of Hinduism and the prevalent influence of Hindu ways of seeing social relations, caste affects not only Hindus, but also other religious identities in India as well. Christianity in India has long been troubled by caste issues, and the persistence of caste-based discriminations within the church (and at times the discrimination against Christians as a whole, perceived as Dalit refugees) is not likely to change in the near future (Forrester 1980: 15, 71–77; Dalit Christians "Disabilities"). Low-caste Hindu converts, not only to Christianity, but also to Buddhism, Islam, or indeed any other religion, are all too readily seen by the more militant strain of Hinduism as a "problematic" and "inconvenient" appendix of the Hindu nation, thus perpetuating Hinduism's continuing relevance and hold on them, by insisting on seeing them as a Hindu problem (Rai 1993: 225, 230–35). Although the Sikh religion was intended as a reform of some of the perceived ills of Islam and Hinduism (including the latter's caste prejudices), caste continues to operate in Sikh social life, with the elite Jat caste at the top of the hier-

archy (Angelo 1997: 138). The persistence of caste in the Sikh diaspora, and the predominance of powerful castes like the Jats, has been documented in Sikh communities in Canada, the UK, and elsewhere (Kotin 2006: 179–80; Judge 2011: 33).

It is in this context of India as "Hindu nation" (and its contestations) that the place of Christianity and that of Indian Christians must be understood—as the negotiation of a minority religious-social identity in the face of the overwhelming sociocultural and political dominance of Hinduism and the notion of India as a nation of Hindutva. In some ways this negotiation of Indian Christian identity is similar to the factors shaping the negotiation of other religious-cultural identities like that of Indian Muslims, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians (and to a much lesser extent, minority religions seen as akin to Hinduism, such as Buddhism and Jainism). Thus, for the members of all such minority groups, periods of social integration and harmony will alternate with incidents of discrimination, alienation, and even communal violence, depending on factors such as geographical location, local governance, socio-economic conditions, the absence or presence of catalyzing events, and so on. Christianity arguably also has some unique features among these minority groups, however, which work to foster a particular mindset and culture toward Indian Christians on the part of the Hindu population in general, and consequently toward India on the part of Indian Christians. Christianity's uniqueness can be attributable to factors grouped under the following rubrics: abjection, evangelicalism, and regionalism (or vernacularism).

Christianity and Abjection:
Social, Spatial, and Gendered Strategies

Abjection can be understood as the way in which Christianity in India acquires a particular nuance of foreign-ness and alien-ness in the Indian context, as well as its association with abject (backward caste, non-Indo-Aryan, female, powerless minority) peoples. Psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection provides useful insights as well as a general rubric to understand the particular position of Christians in India. Kristeva was interested in the ways in which "phobic objects" are subjected to a process of "exclusion or taboo," in some "rite of defilement and pollution . . . the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up" (Kristeva 1982: 17, 41). Abjection is perpetuated through basic social processes such as "spatialization" (various ways of drawing and defining an "inside" versus an "outside") and "verbal-

ization" (Kristeva 1982: 41, 61). Although the feminist theorist Kristeva was particularly concerned with the position of the woman (as passivized object, menstrual figure, and otherwise excluded figure), her theory of abjection offers a general social psychology to explain the treatment of marginalized and passivized individuals in general, including the ways in which female gendering often gets attached to such individuals. For Kristeva, social rituals such as are found in organized religions are the *locus classicus* of abjecting processes: Christianity, for example, was a system to "domesticate the feminine" by the participation in a "purification rite" (the ritual of confession of sin) that would lead to salvation (Taylor 1987: 177). Central to Kristeva's thought, and shaping her theory of religions, was the understanding that the feminine (traced to the subject's "semiotic" and bodily attachment to the mother, but also the "symbolic" separation from the mother through social structures) was always viewed as defiled, threatening contamination by its contact.

Abjection also explains the ways in which Christians in India can be perceived as simultaneously passive and threatening, docile and insidious: for Kristeva the very process of "passivization" in abjection, the need for cultural mechanisms of controlling and containing "that other sex, the feminine," is a recognition that the feminine is paradoxically helpless and yet insidious and threatening, or rather placed in a passive and helpless position precisely because it constitutes a tacit and underlying anxiety (1982: 39–40; 70). Drawing on the work of anthropologists like M. B. Emenau and Louis Dumont, Kristeva theorizes that in Hinduism, the practice of caste endogamy is "the passing on of group membership [in] an *equal share to the father and to the mother*"; however, this is structurally managed by the "strong caste hierarchy [which] compensates for the man/woman balance introduced by Indian endogamy" (Kristeva 1982: 79–80). In other words, Hinduism's acceptance of male-female equality within caste endogamy is compensated for by the caste system's general processes of "immobility," and the "repulsion" of the "impure" backward castes; the equal status of women in caste marriages comes only through the displacement of "impurity" elsewhere, onto backward castes (Kristeva 1982: 81–83).

For Kristeva, Christianity's version of this abjection of the feminine was to separate the sinful "flesh" from the purifying "spirit," as epitomized in the epistles of Saint Paul. However, she also observes that the duality of the flesh in Christian thinking—simultaneously outside and other to the self, but also an undeniable part of the self and thus also "inside"—means that the Christian religion is "paradoxical," the very act of confessing sin itself a reinforcement of sinfulness (Taylor 1987: 175–76). As Kristeva puts it,

> . . . the practice of confession, on the whole, does nothing else
> but weigh down discourse with sin. By having to bear that weight,
> which alone confers the intensity full of communication, avowal
> absolves from sin and, by the same stroke, founds the power of
> discourse. (Kristeva 1982: 130)

Kristeva's analysis of Christianity sees "sin" as "constitutive of man, coming to him from the depth of his heart" (Kristeva 1982: 121). The only means of escaping this ambivalence, this preoccupation with sin contained within a flight from sin, is either to achieve the "unrivalled existence of Christ" himself, or else to abandon the Christian confessional ethos altogether in favor of "discourse," of writing (or "w-rite-ing," as she phrases it), of pyschoanalysis (Kristeva 1982: 120, 130; Taylor 1987: 178).

Adapting Kristeva's framework, we might say that it is *evangelical* Christianity in particular which has the most marked ritual of purification: not just the public confession of sin, but the abjection of that sin onto the Other—the target of evangelism—who, in being asked to acknowledge and repent of sin, momentarily takes the burden of sin away from the evangelist. In the psychospiritual schema described by Kristeva, evangelical Christianity is the most masculine of expressions, seen in the boldness of public action, the taking authority over the life and salvation of the Other, and the projection of sin (for Kristeva, a feminine defilement) onto that Other. The masculine, authoritative evangelical Christianity that Kristeva sees in the letters of Paul, is also manifested in the European tradition in which context she was writing. Christianity is, on the face of it, not a religion which easily lends itself to a feminized construction. While the worship of Mary and female saints in Catholicism is the obvious exception, in general Christianity—with its masculine Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, its doctrine of wifely submission to the husband, its location of the catalyst of original sin in the first woman Eve, and its culture of Hebrew patriarchs and rabbis, Catholic priests, and Victorian "muscular Christian" missionaries and headmasters—is a religion which, if anything, leans distinctly toward masculinity and often faces charges of male chauvinism in its institutional culture (Carmody 1982: 88–89; Kreeft 1988: 124).

However, this is a social positioning of Christianity that is not possible in India, so that a particularly feminine and "defiled" version (in Kristeva's terms) comes to take its place. This can be explained through the sociopolitical factors constraining Christianity in India. Christianity in India is twice-marked: as the foreign other tainted by its association with that which

is outside the Hindu Bharat (but also threatening for the same reason), and as being the other which does not fit into the Hindu caste hierarchy except in the assigned position equivalent with the impure and powerless (Dalit). As an extremely minority religion popularly associated with foreign origins, its adherents assigned the role of a passive and acquiescent community by the powerful Hindu majority, Indian Christians, largely unable to profess and confess their religion in public, have to internalize and embody the "defilement" that, for Kristeva, can only in the normal course of things be dealt with by extroversion.

In many ways, Christianity continues to be seen as a "foreign" religion in India, a late arrival identified with colonial history and with Western culture. This is notwithstanding the fact that Christianity in India has had a longer continuous history than in any other country in South, Southeast, or East Asia, and that Indian Christians have over the years (and at the cost of not a few conflicts with foreign religious authorities over matters of liturgy and leadership) forged their own distinct identity and have to a certain extent "Indianized" Christian practices (Robinson 2003: 32; Copley 1997: 6). As Robinson (2003: 18–19) points out, the Hindu Code Legislation of 1955–56 defined "Hindu" in such a way as to include "any person who is Buddhist, Jain or Sikh by religion," but also pointedly to exclude those who belong to "religions originating outside India," i.e., Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. Thus Christianity—like Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism—is patently estranged from the Hindu Bharat in ways that the other minority religions of Buddhism, Jainism, or Sikhism are not.

Added to this view of Christianity as a foreign religion is the very limited and contained spread of the religion in India, as compared to the largest of the "foreign" religions, Islam. Part of the reason for the limited hold that Christianity took in India was the fact that even the earliest Christian missions encountered structural problems that limited its spread in the land and ensured that only a localized and limited presence was created. Frykenberg (2003b: 34–37) describes the development of one of the earliest known Christian regions in India, the southwest coast of Kerala, in such terms: as one of the Christian communities established by the Apostle Thomas (according to the tradition of the Indian "Thomas" Christians), it grew partly as the result of the support and patronage of the church "patriarchs of Antioch, Babylon or Edessa, and Armenia." Subsequent arrivals of "Christian refugees, settlers, and traders" were encouraged by "endowments, gifts and privileges," and documents of the time suggest that these settlers were valued because of "their

ability to generate general prosperity where they settled" (Frykenberg 2003b: 36). Institutional problems (to do with the use of Syriac, the language of the priestly elite but largely unknown to the masses, as the liturgical language, and also with doctrinal conflicts concerning celibacy and baptism) led to the isolation and weakening of the Eastern Church, and consequently to the widening gap between it and the church in India.

Later Catholic missions in India, while having a very different provenance, modus operandi, and institutional character, had a corresponding pattern of establishment and growth followed by containment. When the Portuguese arrived in India from 1498 onward, they established select enclaves in places like Goa, Daman, Diu, and Bombay (Frykenberg 2003b: 40). Indian Christians were at first a likely ally for the Portuguese in their wars against the Muslims and in their attempts to undermine the latter's control of the spice trade (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999: 191). However, limited Portuguese resources to manage and defend their geographically stretched empire, together with increasing power-conflicts (centered on differences in theology and liturgy) with the Indian Thomas Christians, led to a weakening of the Portuguese project to expand the domain of Catholicism in India. Roman Catholicism became embroiled in a long-running conflict (which was to stretch over centuries) with the Thomas Christians in an attempt to bring the latter under the authority and liturgical forms of the Catholic church (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999: 199–201; Frykenberg 2003b: 40–42). The Portuguese presence in India waned toward the end of the seventeenth century; other Catholic presences elsewhere in India continued the Catholic influence, this often taking scholarly and intellectual forms, rather than an expansive religious influence accompanying a military-commercial empire (Frykenberg 2003b: 43).

Protestant missions in India began in the early eighteenth century with German evangelicals (Pietists missionaries) sent by the King of Denmark; in 1706 the two missionaries, Bartholomaus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau, arrived at Tranquebar (Tarangambadi), because this seaport had been granted in lease to Danish merchants (Frykenberg 2003b: 48). Ziegenbalg and Plutschau, together with later missionaries like Christian Frederick Schwartz, extended the reach of Christianity from Tranquebar to other parts of Tamil-speaking India and even further across South India. However, these missionaries faced increasing opposition from the British East India Company and often from Hindu reactionaries; support for the mission was not sustained, in the wake of declining missionary interests in most of Europe (Hudson 1995: 96; Hrangkhuma 1996: 389; Frykenberg 2003b: 50–52).

It was only with the arrival of British and later American missionaries from the late eighteenth century onward that sustained Protestant missions to India were established. In 1793, Baptist missionary William Carey arrived in Bengal, taking up residence in Serampore, although the East India Company was still opposed to missionary activities and would remain so until after the revision of its charter in 1813. Bengal was the logical starting point for these early British missionaries because of its proximity to the colonial capital of Calcutta. Missionary activities were limited, not only by the continued wariness of the colonial administration even after 1813, but also by severely limited resources. Copley (1997: 66–87) describes the Baptist mission in Bengal for example as a "deeply troubled" one, undergoing a falling out with its home authorities, lacking sufficient missionaries to cover such a large territory and often hostile terrain and population, and encountering a "solid indifference" to the Gospel on the part of the local peoples.

The regions which have seen the most dramatic growth of Christianity—the northeast states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, which are the only three states in India which today have majority Christian populations—were in many ways exceptions to the rule. Unlike intentional mission hubs like Goa, Tranquebar, the Kerala coast and the Bengal area which were logical choices because of connection or proximity to commercial-military settlements, land grants, administrative headquarters and other factors, the northeast missions were established almost by accident, in the course of missionaries looking for a land route to China (Longchar 1998: 248–49). Missions in the northeast were carried out by American Baptists, who essentially took over from the over-extended and often discouraged missionaries of the Serempore Mission (Marak 1998: 160). Others, such as the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission and Catholic missionaries, later came to work in the northeast as well, although the main impact in this region was from the Baptists (Snaitang 1998: 237). This mission was exceptional for the response of the tribal people to the Gospel. While in some cases (as with the Khasis) conversion was very much a "gradual process," in others (as with the Nagas) conversion was widespread and rapid, especially compared to areas such as Bengal (Snaitang 1998: 241–42; Longchar 1998: 258).

The distribution of Christianity in India today still reflects the character of its historical origins, with a pronounced exclusion from most of the Hindu heartland in the North, the concentration (which is also a containment) of Christianity in particular regional pockets, and the segregative effect of Christianity perceived as the religion only of particular people groups. This is in part due to the "reluctant, but gradual, awareness of the frailty of the

Figure 1.1. Map showing the uneven distribution of Christianity in India.

missionary endeavour" among missionaries toward the end of the nineteenth century (Copley 1997: 26), which froze Christianity in India in largely the cultural-geographical contours it possessed at that time. However, it is also due to the fact that Christianity never gained any significant presence in the influential north of India, and consequently has continued to be viewed as a suspicious outsider to the Hindu core of Indian society.

Not only are the Christian communities small and contained within the larger socius and geography of India as a whole, they are also closely

associated with the social abjects of Hindu society: the backward castes, non-Indo-Aryan tribal peoples, rural poor. Historically, caste distinctions and discriminations were long a part of Indian Christianity, and are all too real and powerful even today. Robinson (2003: 70–72) points out that early missionaries "came to terms with the existence of caste under certain conditions," even as they elsewhere "played important roles in fighting against some of the most severe caste disabilities." However, this is not merely an indictment of the missionaries, but a recognition of the entrenched weight of caste conventions in India; as Robinson (2003: 72) points out, converts themselves often "resisted any missionary efforts to establish egalitarian relations," especially in earlier centuries. Frykenberg (2003a: 12) illustrates the complex cultural influence of caste even on individuals who had converted to Christianity, by pointing to the views of two nineteenth-century Tamil Vellalar Christians, "devout believers" yet for whom

> . . . there could never be such a thing as a "Christian" in the abstract or in general. Christians, either as individuals or as members of a community, could only be known and understood in concrete, local, and specific terms. . . . For these Tamil Christian thinkers, the same kind of perspective could also be applied to all stories about human origins and all stories about the social significance of birth, caste, pollution, social ranking, and status. (Frykenberg 2003a: 12)

The result is that Indian Christians today (apart from a small number of Christians from forward castes) are clustered largely within a few scheduled caste groups: 21 of the 600 scheduled caste groups have developed enduring mass movements to Christianity, according to one estimate, compared to only 5 of the 2,000 forward castes (cited in Agarwal 2010). "Mass movements" took place among the scheduled caste groups of the Nadar, Paraya, Sambava, Madiga, Mala, Mukkuvas, and Parvas in South India, and among other groups such as the Chura and Chamar in Punjab and Pakistan; the Chamar, Bhangi, Balahi, Gara, Mehra, and Namashudra in North and Central India; and the Dherd and Mahar in West India (Agarwal 2010). These mass conversions to Christianity among scheduled castes were well known both to missionaries and to non-Christians, and had the effect of associating Christianity with untouchableness in the eyes of many. An LMS mission report of 1844 from the Tamil field observed that

> Not only does the heathen of high caste look down with utter
> contempt on all those who embrace the gospel, and treat them
> as outcastes, but even the lowest grades of Hindus consider the
> followers of the Savior beneath them in rank, and unworthy of
> their society. (cited in Balasundaraum 2000: 109)

This association certainly had a strong deterrent effect upon forward caste
individuals who contemplated conversion. Agarwal recounts how the news
of his own conversion was greeted by his grandmother in Punjab with the
incredulous comment "Have you gone mad, it is the churas who become
Christians?" (Agarwal 2010). Dalits clearly dominate the ranks of Indian
Christians, with estimates of between 50 and 70 percent of Indian Christians
being former Dalits (Murthy 1999: 4; Dalit Christians "Demands").

Although many Christians from Dalit backgrounds converted to Chris-
tianity in the hope of gaining a "social recognition" denied to them as Dalits,
the reality that governs Indian society as a whole is that conversion in most
cases does not do much to change the convert's marginalized social status.
Robin Thomson, a British missionary to India in the 1960s, writes of passing
"a collection of rather miserable thatched huts" outside a village in Andhra
Pradesh in the company of an Indian evangelist, who explains that there are
Christians living there whom he will not be able to visit:

> If I go there, I may not be welcome in the homes of the village
> [non-Christian] farmers. You see, these people come from what
> is called the Scheduled Castes. They used to be Untouchables.
> *Sister Mary will go and visit them.* The Christians understand why
> I don't go there. (Thomson 2002: 28, emphasis added)

In an alignment of gender with caste, Thomson goes on to describe the divi-
sion of labor in which Sister Mary visits the untouchable Christians separated
from the rest of the village by a stream, while the men (Thomson and the
male Indian evangelist) cross the stream and are hospitably received as hon-
ored guests in the houses of the farmers. The abjection evident in the entire
setup—the ostracizing of the Dalits as "unclean," the role of the stream in the
spatial separation of forward castes and untouchables, the gendered division
wherein the nun ministers to the untouchables while the male evangelist visits
the forward caste households—is all too familiar within the context of caste in
India. The forward caste farmers, who have been receptive to the evangelist's

overtures but have "not yet formed any 'church'" and continue to stay "within their cultural setting," are clearly content to perpetuate the abjection of the scheduled caste Christians which began when the latter were still Dalits, which continues after their conversion, and which will almost certainly continue if and after the forward caste farmers themselves have openly converted (Thomson 2002: 35). Agarwal (2010) cites a study which documents similar strict caste distinctions in Indian churches, which include separate chapels for Dalits and non-Dalits, separate seating where there is only one chapel (with Dalits sitting on the floor and forbidden to sit on available benches or chairs), separate cemeteries, separate lines for communion, and so on.

Untouchable Christian status is extended to tribal (non-Indo-Aryan) Christians by the equivalence of the official terminology, where "scheduled tribes" take on a similar role and place as "scheduled castes" within India's constitution but also its social hierarchy. The tribal status (of "Mongoloid" ethnic origin, in contrast to the Indo-Aryan majority) of the peoples of North-
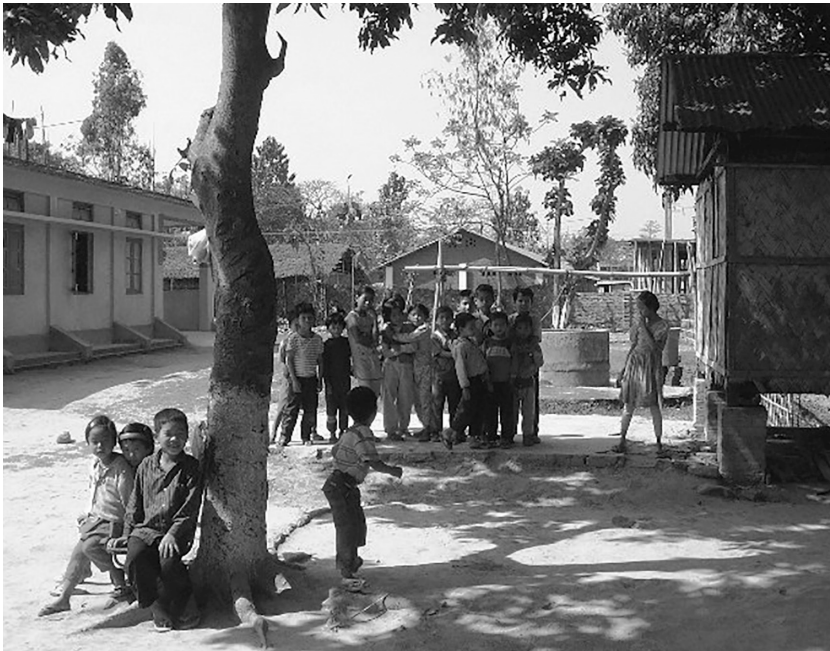

Figure 1.2. A Christian children's home near Dimapur in Nagaland, showing ethnic Naga (tribal) children who constitute a visible ethnic minority compared to the Indo-Aryan majority in India.