

**POWER AND IDENTITY:  
A SOCIOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF  
CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation titled "POWER AND IDENTITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA" submitted by YOONSIK LEE in the partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY of this University, is an original work to the best of our knowledge and has not submitted for any other degree of this University or any other institution.

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I hope, however, this work would be a good opportunity to extend the understanding of Indian Christian fellows who are struggling in many areas for their life. I would recall the Bible verse as a final remark: "*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong*" (1 Corinthians 1:27).



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## Introduction

This is an attempt to look at the Indian Christianity in relation to caste issue and identity formulation from a socio-historical perspective. The first impression about Christianity by ordinary Indians as well as aliens might be that it was brought by colonial powers into the nation during the colonial period (Oommen 2000:40; Srinivasan 2004:105; Robinson 2003:31). And so Christianity is perceived to be the enemy of the nation and to be unable to coexist with other cultures or religions in India. Another important impression might be that Christianity in India, by and large, is of lower castes or Untouchables, which is quite approvable. The above-mentioned subjects have important values from the viewpoint of identity making of Indian Christians in a multi-cultural society like India. These are the matters which will be discussed on in this paper.

When you look at the historical development of Indian Christianity, however, you can easily realize that Christianity was accepted into Indian society in a friendly relationship. However, the conflicts and challenges in connection with caste have emerged repeatedly within the Indian Christians themselves and in the wider Indian society throughout the progressing phases of Indian Christianity. In relation to Indian Christianity, caste, as a social and cultural form in the wider social settings, has been accepted, by and large, among Indian Christians from the initial stage of Indian Christianity. As a matter of fact, a group of Indian Christians was accepted as a caste in the caste system in India (Forrester 1980: 102).

Caste system basically shows the hierarchy in terms of 'power' and 'status,' whether it refers to spiritual or political perspectives. Given the ethos of Christianity, i.e., equality of all human beings, the fact, however, that the caste system has existed

within Indian Christians and is existing even these days casts a curiosity and wonder. Louis Dumont(2004), too, argues that caste can only properly be understood in the light of an ideology of purity and pollution as the basis of an emphatic distinction between power and status. This ideology, which is inherently Hindu tradition, according to Dumont, cannot be expounded without constant reference to Hindu beliefs. Dumont would, therefore, have problems in interpreting non-Hindu groups which are operating as castes within the caste system while rejecting the Hindu beliefs, as we will see in the study about Syrian Christians.

In the understanding of caste and the operation of the same, there has always been discords and disputes among the Western missionaries and Indian Christians (Forrester 1980: 119). Caste was understood, for most of Western missionaries, as a vicious institution which breaks down the dignity of human beings and promotes the whole system of idolatry. However, it is noticed that there were two different attitudes against the issues of caste among the Indian Christians according to their castes, i.e., among the upper castes and the lower castes. This might be the main source of the conflicts and disputes among the Indian Christians even in the contemporary period of time.

Mass movement or mass conversion movement, in this sense, has been a critical issue in Indian Church politics. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as is well known, it is witnessed an unexpected and dramatic development in Indian Christianity, i.e., group conversions from especially the Untouchables (Forrester 1980:69; Robinson 2003:60). It is generally known that caste is far more entrenched among the lower caste converts than among the upper caste converts who became Christians usually by individual conviction. That is why, it is reasoned, mass conversion was possible among the lower caste converts. As for the lower castes, in most of cases, the act of conversion was the

opportunity for social mobility. However, the upper-caste converts had different kind of experiences after their conversion. This is the reason, I assume, why they had different attitudes against caste according to their hierarchy in caste system.

There are two dimensions of caste mobilization in the contemporary Indian churches. The first is inter-caste rivalry that permeates all church activities at all levels in terms of struggle for power and control over church resources. The second is about the struggle of Dalit Christians, who felt frustrations for equality and dignity in the churches and are leading various forms of protest against the upper-caste converts in the churches. Caplan(1987), in this regard, reports on what came to be regarded as a scandalous case involving the selection of a Vellala bishop to the Madras diocese of the Church of South India(CSI) by bypassing the more popular and experienced Harijan incumbent assistant bishop. This election was influenced by some very important church people who held that because the Madras diocese was the most important in the CSI it would not do to have a Harijan bishop. The above incident highlights the increasing disaffection of the Dalit Christians who find themselves treated as second class members of the church and excluded from positions of power in the church. In the case of Tamil Nadu, in fact, Dalits form 63 per cent of all Catholics but represent only 3.09 per cent of church leadership. They are also excluded from the higher positions of schools and colleges. By and large it is assumed that the failure of the churches in improving the educational levels of Dalit Christians is directly correlated with the dominance of these churches by upper caste Christians. It is widely understood today that in the mixed caste churches and regions that Dalit-upper caste and other inter-caste conflicts are most acute.

What is an interesting phenomenon in Indian Christianity, in relation to identity formulation, is that a conversion movement has been operating as a kind of group

identity crisis, in which the group usually passes through a negative rejection of their lower position in Hindu society to a positive affirmation of a new social and religious identity. One of the most interesting incidents which happened in Indian Christianity is that St Thomas arrived in Indian territory much earlier than twenty centuries. It helps Indian Christians, psychologically, to attach them to a long tradition which in turn invests them with dignity and pride to a great extent and, sociologically, to define Indian Christianity, with such a cognition, as a pre-colonial phenomenon which is of tremendous existential consequence.

There are two different ways of understanding 'identity' (Jodhka 2001: 26-27): The first position defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self," hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. In their own constructions of self-images also, most identity movements would perhaps articulate their politics in such a 'primordialist perspective'; The second call 'open-ended view of culture' that approaches community identities as a process of 'conscious mobilization of cultural difference.' From the viewpoint of the latter, then, cultural identity is to be historical, it undergoes constant transformation. Identity is not to be treated as naturally given rather it is to be understood as a matter of mobilization and construction. Many studies show that identities shift, change, evolve and are not permanent in any way. Kurien's study (2002), too, shows that identity is to be highly contextual and an individual can choose appropriate aspects of identity to be displayed in a particular context. However, she too commented that the main element of the formation of identity is deeply related to religion. Therefore, she said that "if this identity is defined largely by religion, then the structural modifications usually bring about a reconceptualization of the meaning and significance of that identity, concretely manifested through modifications in rituals and behavioral practices



believed to be religiously sanctioned”(ibid.:29).

In the process of identity formulation of Indian Christians, it is witnessed that two different powers always have been struggled; i.e., the Western missionaries and the Indian Christians in the past, and the leadership of upper castes and the majority of lower castes in the present. The Indian Christians, from the period of the Portuguese, have been existing in the two different worlds; i.e., the foreign and the Indian, in other words, the ecclesiastical and the cultural. Till 16<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, Indian Church was under the leadership and control of Persian Church, and after that time on under the leadership some of European countries. These different groups, while drawing on regional traditions and patterns, clearly attempted to constitute the identity of Indian Christianity according to their own ways.

Indian Christians, however, have persistently attempted to bring forth their own identity standing on the foundation of their own culture and context. It was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that Indian Christians started laying claim to their own opinion criticizing Western missionaries, particularly for their lack of the understanding of Indian culture and of the sympathy for the indigenous expressions of Christian faith (Oommen 2000:48; Firth 2005:248-50). After that time on, their struggle to set up their own identity has been expressed in various ways; e.g., ashram movement, *sannyasis* movement and Christian nationalist movement. What is the most remarkable attempt by Indian Christians, I assume, was the establishments of Christian institutions and organizations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century according to their own way of understanding of Christianity. In these attempts, they tried to overcome the divisions and sectarianism made by the Western missionaries. The fruits of these attempts were the the formation of Church of South India in 1947 and of the Church of North India in 1970.

Today, the identity of Indian Christians is being reconstituted in the complex social and

political environment. Especially Christian Dalit identity becomes the core of all discourses on Indian Christianity. The sharpest conflict in the matter of identity issue among Indian Christians broke out in relation to the group of dalits in recent days. By and large, the upper-caste converts were regarded as representatives of Indian Christianity and they enjoyed the position of leadership and respect within Indian churches for a long period of time. Upto now, in fact, their leadership, theological as well as ecclesiastical, was celebrated and glorified in every realms of Indian Christianity. As a result, the majority of Indian Christianity, i.e., Dalits and Scheduled Tribals, was relegated to the margins of Indian Christianity even though they were the majority of Indian Christianity. However, a new turning point in the Christianity of India took place, which led to a shift of focus away from the Christian elite and dominant groups to the vast majority of Christian people who were involved in the formation of Christianity in India. Dalits, therefore, who were the main heroes of the mass conversion movements that played a major role in the Indian Church are being perceived as the new heroes. Dalits now found a significant voice within the mainstream of Christianity in India in the writings and activities in relation to Indian Church. In this process the new identity for the Indian Christianity from the 'below' is being formulated in recent days.

#### **Scope and Objectives of the Study:**

This study deals with Indian churches only in the main lands on the national level. Therefore, it does not include the North-East area in the examination of the literatures.

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- To understand the historical and cultural backgrounds of Indian Christianity.
- To explain the power relations within the Indian churches.
- To analyze the process of identity formation of Indian Christians on national level.

**Hypothesis:**

On the basis of the above-mentioned objectives, this study is based on the following hypothesis.

- The development of Christianity in India is based largely on the inputs of European Christianity.
- The caste regulations are strongly practiced among Indian Christians.
- The identity of Indian Christians is formulated largely by the influence of Western Christianity.

**Methodology:**

The methodology of research especially for data collection is based on secondary sources. This includes the existing literature like books and articles which are closely relevant to this study.

In the next chapter, I will discuss about Indian Christianity in terms of caste issue, through which I will show how caste was accepted and disputed with Western missionaries and Indian Christians. And in the following chapter, the identity formulation within Indian Church will be discussed. Here I will show how Indian Christians attempted to construct their own identity throughout the process of development of Indian Christianity.

## Indian Christianity: A Historical Overview

It is attempted in this section to describe the historical development of Indian Christianity from the foundation of church in Indian soil throughout contemporary period of time. The historical development of Indian Christianity, according to the main group within the Indian churches, might be divided into four phases in terms of main power as follows: 1)the period of St. Thomas Christians or Syrian Christianity(1<sup>st</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century); 2)the period of Catholic missions(16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century); 3)the period of Protestant missions(18<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century); and finally 4)the period of Indian churches(20<sup>th</sup> century-present).

In relation to the history of Indian Christianity, *History of Christianity in India*, edited by the Church History Association of India, introduces a detailed account on Indian church history. Firth's book, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (2005), explains the main issues in Indian church history from a historical perspective. Oommen's book, *The Christian Clergy in India (vol. 1)* (2000), too, has a short, yet well-explained, section on the history of Indian Church. Susan's book, *The Christians of Kerala* (2001), has a good anthropological study on Kerala Christians.

### (1) ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS OR SYRIAN CHRISTINITY(1<sup>st</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> CENTURY)

There are two different opinions among scholars about the origin of Christianity in India. According to the first view, the foundations of Christianity in India were laid by St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, in the first century. The other view would ascribe the arrival of Christianity in India to the enterprise of merchants and missionaries of the East-Syrian or Persian Church in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century at the earliest. However, the former view, so-called the Syrian Christian tradition, Western tradition

or general tradition in other names, has been “the constant tradition of the Syrian Christians of Malabar, and it has been widely believed in the West”(Firth 2005:2).

According to the Syrian Christian tradition, handed from generation to generation by word of mouth among them, St. Thomas reached India some time in the middle of the first century, supposedly 52 AD. He landed at Cranganore, on the Periyar estuary north of Cochin, and preached to the Jewish colony settled there. He had made converts both among the Jewish and their neighbors. While traveling in the coastal area southwards he planted churches in seven places.<sup>1</sup> He converted high caste Hindu families, e.g., *Sankarapuri*, *Pakalomattam*, *Kalli* and *Kaliankal*, and ordained priests for them. After this he also moved to the east coast making conversions and crossed over to China and, finally, returned to India organizing the Christians of Malabar under spiritual leadership from among the leading families within the churches. He also established a few public places of worship. Then he moved to the Coromandel and suffered martyrdom near the *Little Mount*. His body was brought to the town of Mylapore and was buried in a holy shrine he had built. In relation to this tradition, the people of Kerala too undoubtedly possessed a rich oral tradition, which was reflected fully or partially in their folk songs and even in written records.

There are many evidences, however, which support this general tradition, especially a few references of the Fathers beginning only in the third century, which clearly show that the 3<sup>rd</sup> century writers thought of Indian churches as “the scene of St. Thomas’s labors”(Firth 2005:8). Moreover, the apocryphal story, i.e., *Acts of Thomas*, explains about the activities of St. Thomas in India, even though there are many fantastic incidents in it.

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<sup>1</sup> The seven places are: Maliankara, Palayur, Parur, Gokamangalam, Niranam, Chayal and Quilon. In four of them, Syrian churches are still existing.

About two hundred years earlier Marco Polo, who was in South India in 1288 and 1292, was shown a tomb that was supposed to be that of St. Thomas, it became a place of pilgrimage for both Christians and Mohammedans from that time on. South Indian Christians, therefore, claim that the apostolate of St. Thomas is supported by two monuments: the community of St. Thomas Christians with their living tradition, and the tomb of Mylapore which is definitely identified as the burial place of Thomas at least from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Before 16<sup>th</sup> century, Indian churches were under the leadership of East Syrian Church in its ecclesiastical orientation. It is known that some kind of relations between the Christians of India and Church of Persia existed from very early centuries. The geographical position of the location of Babylonian civilization gave its commercial importance especially because the north-south and east-west land routes of trade passed through these regions. "These trade routes," however, "greatly facilitated the activities of the missionaries of the East-Syrian Church"(Mundadan 1989:81)".

The original community constituted by the Apostle Thomas seemed to suffer a decline in a course of time. But, it was reinvigorated by the arrival of groups of Christians who came from Babylon(Persia), immigrant groups of East-Syrian merchants. The arrival of these groups was "a tuning-point in the history of the community as it brought to them both material and spiritual prosperity"(Mundadan 1989:95). They settled down in Kerala and enjoyed a good relationship with St. Thomas Christians and other Hindu neighbors. There are at least two considerable immigrations of influential people from these countries, who contributed to revive and strengthen the Indian Church to a considerable extent.

The first one happened in the year of 345 consisting of between three and four

hundred families-men, women and children including some clergy under the leadership of Thomas, who is known as Thomas of Cana or Thomas the Canaanite. The city built by the Syrian settlers was supposed to be the Christian colony of Cranganore, which was called Mahadevarapatnam. However, there turned up a social distinction between those who intermarried with Indians and those who did not. The former were called Northists(Vadakumbagar), who were considered the major portion of the Syrian community; the latter were called Southists(Thekkumbagar), who were comparatively a small group but, as they claim, were considered to be the direct lineal descendants of Thomas of Cana and his Syrian colony. They do not intermarry each other even today.

The second immigration is dated in the year of 823, when a number of Syrian Christians arrived in Quilon in Travancore with two bishops-Mar Sapor and Mar Parut(Piruz)-and a merchant called Sabrisho. They settled down there after obtaining the grants of land and other privileges from the local ruler. Apart from these two occasions Indian tradition has practically nothing to say about this period of time.

The Indian Church, as we have seen above, contained a considerable element of foreign settlers and was considered over a period of time a part of a general church organization whose headquarter is located in Persia. It is becoming obvious when it is considered that the bishop for Indian Church was appointed from Persia, who exercised a superior supervision over Indian Christians who were residing in Kerala. However, from the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Church of East suffered severe persecution under the Persian dominion. Even though they won the right to exist in the 5<sup>th</sup> century it was allowed only as a tolerated minority with many restrictions in their activities. The situation became worse even after the rise of Islam in the seventh century when Mesopotamian and Persia passed under the rule of the Mohammedan Arabs. The

Church of Persia, i.e., the East-Syrian Church, however, was looked upon by the Western Church, i.e., Roman Catholic Church, as “having drifted into ‘schism’ and ‘heresy’ from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century”(Mundadan 1989:87). As a result, the Church of the East was reduced to a small community in Mesopotamia with some outlying sections in a few places such as Malabar. During this period of time, it also seemed that Indian churches were left to itself without bishops from Persia.

According to the traditions of the Syrian Christians of Malabar, their community enjoyed a certain independence of the Hindu rajahs in their areas between the ninth century and the sixteenth. They are said to have “a king or ruler of their own called Belliarth(Villiarvattam) at Udayamperur(Diamper), who ruled over the Christian community dispersed among the neighboring Hindu States”(Firth 2005:36). Even though no record is found about their life and church activities, when the community was noticed after the arrival of the Portuguese, the Indian Christians appear “as a fairly prosperous trading and landowning community, reckoned by the Hindus as equivalent to one of their higher castes, and affected in some matters by the customs of their non-Christian neighbors, as for the observance of untouchability”(Firth 2005:36). From the late thirteenth century onwards emissaries of the Western Church and lay European travelers began to appear in the land of India. Especially the mission activities of Friars were quite prevalent during this period. These were the members of mendicant orders founded in the thirteenth century by St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, who vowed to poverty, celibacy and obedience and inured to hardship and ready to endure all things for the sake of Christ and his Church. However, some of them noticed that the church was filled with idols and contaminated with Nestorian heretics and regarded it their duty to convert Indian Christians as well as non-Christians to the Roman Catholic form of Christianity.



Even though the main activity of Syrian Christians was doubtless in Malbar, it seems that there were during this time smaller groups of Nestorians in other parts of India too.

In the year of 1490, however, a deputation of two Indian Christians came to Mar Simeon, Patriarch of the East, and asked him to send bishops to India. In which there had been no bishops for a long time. The Patriarch, as a result, sent two priests as bishops, i.e., Mar Thomas and Mar John. Later on three more priests were sent as bishops by the request of Mar Thomas. The arrival of these five bishops brought about a revival among the Christians of Malabar, who were consisted of about thirty thousand families living in prosperity and security. After their arrival, there was "general rejoicing; new churches were built, old ones were repaired, new clergy were ordained, and a church life of greater regularity and vigor was fostered"(Firth 2005:45). Over all, Indian Christians during this period of time seemed to enjoy a good standing in society even though it was after all minor community and was dependent on foreign Patriarch and bishops. That is to say, Indian Churches yet had not developed an ecclesiastical organization nor an ecclesiastical language of its own before the proper arrival of Portuguese.

## (2) THE PERIOD OF CATHOLIC MISSIONS(16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> CENTURY)

This period of time commenced with the arrival of Portuguese in the land of India. India and Indian Christian community had sporadic contacts with the West through an occasional traveler, pilgrim or missionary who passed through this country from time to time. But none of them brought any lasting influence of the West on India. It was the arrival of the Portuguese at the close of the 15<sup>th</sup> century that brought India and Indian Christians into an enduring contact with western Christendom. In general, it is

agreed that the present Latin Christians of India owe their existence as a separate group to the Latin missionaries who came to India from the time of the Portuguese arrival.

Robinson suggests the sociological and anthropological understanding in Christian conversion during this period in her books, e.g., *Christians of India* (2003), *Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Goa* (1998), *Sociology of Religion in India* (2004).

The second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century is known as the time of the great voyages of discovery undertaken by the maritime nations of Western Europe, which led to the establishment of colonial empires in America, Africa and Asia. One of the motives behind these voyages was the desire to find out a new route to India for the purpose of trade especially with spice. In this background Vasco da Gama reached India and landed near Calicut in 1498. When he went back to Portugal in the following year, the newly-found route by Vasco da Gama became known to the West. Fresh and larger fleets made voyages to India every year and Portuguese stations were established along the western coast. In this situation, Goa became the center of administration and the capital of all Portuguese settlements in Asia.

The second motive in these voyages was to promote the spread of Christianity among those who came under the rule of Portuguese kings. While claiming and exercising rights of dominion and trade, the Portuguese settlers were seriously prepared to propagate Christianity. The Portuguese fleets that came to India, therefore, contained, besides sailors and soldiers and merchants, priests and friars, not only as chaplains for themselves but also for mission work for Indian people. Therefore, it is acknowledged that “every male Portuguese who went out to the East did so in the service of the Crown or that of the Church. In other words, religious mission was

never separated from mercantilism, conversion from commerce” (Robinson 1998: 44). Therefore, the relationship of the missionaries with the conquering power logically functioned under the orders of the King of Portugal and missionary activity was linked very closely with the establishment of military and political rule in the regions conquered by the Portuguese (Robinson 2004: 178).

In 1512, one of these Friars, Luis do Salvador, preached at Vijayanagar and was martyred there. In 1534 Goa was made the seat of a Portuguese bishop, who became the head of a regular ecclesiastical organization in India and beyond. There were four orders, however, which functioned in Goa during this period of time (Robinson 1998: 45): The Franciscan arrived in 1517 and their work was limited to Bardez; the Jesuits arrived in 1542 and were responsible for the conversion of Tiswadi and Salcete; the Dominicans came in 1548; and finally the Augustinians arrived a few years later.

However, it was the policy of Albuquerque, the Portuguese governor, during this period of time to encourage mixed marriages between Portuguese men and Indian women. Large numbers of Indian women being were baptized through this kind of inter-racial marriage, and thus a large Indo-Portuguese population grew up in the Portuguese stations. But the work of Christianizing was carried on as much under the auspices of the government as of the Church. The special financial subsidy, for example, the governor offered to the converts acted as a great incentive to conversion. Robinson (2004: 186) introduces the early tactics of conversion, i.e., taking care of orphans and setting aside jobs and offices for those who converted. The applications for baptism, however, increased considerably but baptism was administered with very little or no preparation.

Some converts, in some cases, were made by compulsion. It happened in the later stage of converting tactics. Robinson (2004: 186-94) introduces three ways of this

strategy. First, They destroyed idols and places of worship for Hindus and Muslims, which made Hindus see Catholicism as “the only way of preventing their world from falling completely to pieces” (ibid.: 190). Second, they prohibited of religious practices. Hindus, by and large, formed a unity concerned with the celebration of the fertility of the earth and of human fertility. In case they were not able to access to old symbolic practices, it was naturally considered a breakdown of this unity. “Only in such a situation,” she argues, “is it possible for particular symbols such as the areca palm to be severed from their contexts of meaning in such a way that they appear to have a strictly pragmatic value” (ibid.: 190-1). Third, they manipulated, in a variety of ways, the socio-economic and kin relationships, by means of which society was organized. For example, they changed the laws of inheritance, in which converted woman was able to inherit family property with other brothers.

However, the prospect of coming under the protection of the powerful foreigners was a stronger inducement to many of them than receiving the teachings of the Gospel, and it was frankly offered as such. Paravas, a caste of pearl-fishers on the south-east coast of India, for example, made a mass conversion to take the advantages of Portuguese protection. Between 1535 and 1537, in fact, all the people belonged to the caste were baptized, about 20,000 people. It might be the first case of mass conversion. Robinson (2004: 184) explains about the socio-political background for this, saying that “given that the Portuguese identified themselves primarily in religious terms, their method of incorporating the local population into their political body and ensuring its support necessarily involved conversion to Catholicism. Mass conversion became a fundamental part of the charter of conquest, given the need to create a body of social allies.”

On their arrival in India the Portuguese, of course, encountered the Syrian

Christians. The relations between the two were initially very friendly. On Vasco da Gama's second arrival in India in 1502 a deputation of Syrian Christians came to him and asked for the protection of the Portuguese. This occasion was called the hand-over of "the silver-tipped Rod of Justice"(Firth 2005:54). Da Gama of course promised them protection what they demanded.

It was at this stage that King John III of Portugal, always solicitous for the progress of the Faith in his rapidly expanding dominions, appealed to the Pope and the Society of Jesus for priests who could go to India. The first man who was chosen this time was St. Francis Xavier(1506-1552), who bears a famous name in the history of Indian Christianity. By the time he landed in Goa on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1542, he was already a famous saint. This time a school was founded for non-European boys of various races, which was hoped to develop into a seminary to train Indian clergy; this became known as the College of St. Paul. But the prevailing spirit among the Portuguese was worldliness and loose living, and the large numbers of Indo-Portuguese resulting from the inter-racial marriage were ill-disciplined. He devoted himself to visiting the sick in hospitals and those in prison and to gathering children and others together for elementary Christian teachings. Later on, he visited the Parava converts who lived on the south-east coast opposite to Ceylon. On one of these journeys he baptized large numbers of another fisher caste in Travancore, called Mukkavars. One of his assistants too baptized another community in the island of Manaar. The number of the members of the Society of Jesus was too steadily increasing-three in 1545, nine in 1546, ten in 1548-and, as time went on, replacing the Franciscans. Several of the new arrivals were assigned to the College of St. Paul in Goa and the management was now handed over entirely to the Jesuits. Xavier himself went to Japan in April 1549 and returned to India early in 1552, having received on the way an order from Ignatius

Loyola appointing him Provincial of the Society of Jesus in India and the East.

The relations between the Portuguese and Syrian Christians, however, started changing in a negative way. Even though they were ready to accept each other as brethren, it became more and more apparent as mutual understanding increased that there were differences between them; and the Portuguese ecclesiastics, who were Western Catholics and believed, as all other Western Christians then did, that the Roman Church was the only true form of the Church and its doctrines and practices were the standard for all Christians in the world. All others, though claiming the Christian name, were considered as heretics for them. The Syrian Christians on the other hand were an Eastern Church, acknowledging as their head not the Pope but the Patriarch of the East. Portuguese churchmen began to be more conscious of the differences, and tried to make the Syrian Christians follow Western Catholic ways. It was believed in those days that(Mundadan 1989:217):

To many of them the social, ecclesiastical and ritual customs and practices, which differed from the Latin and western ones, were real 'abuses' and 'errors.' Archbishop Ros was convinced at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that many Portuguese, including some religious, had not understood anything that was not in strict conformity with the Latin Rite, and had therefore believed the differences to be heretical and superstitious.

Thus in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Portuguese began an attempt to introduce the teachings of Western Catholicism among the Syrian Christians and to encourage them to accept their teachings. Attempt went on introducing a policy of bringing the entire Malabar Church into conformity with Western ways and under the government of Portuguese bishops. In the year 1541 Fr. Vincent de Lagos, a Portuguese Franciscan, opened a school for Syrian boys at Cranganore. A few years later, John de Albuquerque, a Franciscan, turned it into a seminary for the training of young Syrian Christians for the priesthood. Yet it was quite clear that Fr. Vincent's

aim was to westernize his students according to Roman Catholic ways. He taught them Latin and instructed them in the doctrine and ritual of the Roman Church, not of their own Church. This policy achieved only a limited success and there came in the end a bishop of the Syrian Church who refused to ordain the men from the seminary, because they knew no Syriac and were too much westernized. In this regard it is said that(Mundadan 1989:341):

The college was a success in the sense that it produced many well-trained and good Latin priest from the community of St. Thomas Christians. But it failed miserably in its ultimate purpose, namely, of influencing the community of St. Thomas Christians through these latinized priests and of converting them to the acceptance of Latin customs, jurisdiction and rite.

After the death of Mar Abuna Jacob, the last survivor of the four Nestorian bishops who arrived in 1504 and was so active in reviving the Malabar Church, in 1549 there followed a period of six or seven years, during which no successor came from Mesopotamia; the Syrian Christians were left without a bishop of their own, and the only bishop in the country was the Portuguese one in Goa.

In those years the Franciscans in Cranganore made the most of their opportunity, and the work of westernizing went on apace, until it was slowed down by the unexpected arrival of a Nestorian bishop, Mar Joseph. But he was not acknowledged officially by the Portuguese government and was deported to Europe after being arrested twice. Meanwhile during Mar Joseph's first absence from India the Syrian Christians in Malabar had sent to Mesopotamia for another bishop. The bishop who was sent was a genuine Nestorian not in communion with Rome, whose name Mar Abraham. Yet his activities in Goa were greatly disturbed by the Portuguese.

The percentage of Kerala people converted to Christianity in the first half of the

16<sup>th</sup> century does not appear to be significant. Even in Cochin and Cannanore, Christians formed a small minority. Unlike Goa, even in Kerala the Portuguese did not possess a sovereign territory. The prospective converts were all subjects of the Hindu rulers, and the Portuguese had to depend on the goodwill of the local rulers for effective evangelization for them. Yet the Hindu rulers naturally did not look with favor on the conversion of their Hindu subjects.

In fact, many groups seemed to accept conversion to align themselves with the Portuguese. However, there are two different views about the causes of these conversions; from the perspective of missionaries, it is argued that these conversions were conceived as genuine in that they arose out of true commitment to the faith; it is also argued, from the Hindu perspective, that the conversions were based on force, with the local population helpless in the face of missionaries. Robinson(1998:452-55) illustrates the various motives of conversion to Christianity during this period: at first, there was a pragmatic motive so that they might not lose their property; secondly, secondly, they expected, for the lower castes, to gain more religious privileges in the church activities just like higher castes in the temple activities; thirdly, it was conceived, particularly for the higher castes, as a new access to the new administrative jobs and offices generated by the Portuguese regime; fourthly, the life-style of the Europeans were considered as a privileged one which allows to gain access to some of their superior power.

Meanwhile a very different kind of mission had been started in Tamil Nadu by Fr. Robert de Nobili, a young Italian Jesuit of aristocratic parentage, who arrived in India in 1605. The place chosen for him was Madura, presently Madurai, the capital of the Nayak kings who at this period of time were ruling the south-east corner of India. Through a deep relationship with a Hindu schoolmaster, de Nobili got an insight into



Hindu life and ideas and had his eyes fully opened to the great gulf that existed between the caste Hindus and the Christians. He soon became convinced that a change of method and approach was needed.

Those days Christianity was understood as the religion of the Portuguese and their followers and Indian Christians tended to be lower castes who had taken refuge under the Portuguese. It also suggested meat-eating, wine-drinking, loose-living and arrogant people, whose manners were far removed from Indian propriety that social intercourse with them was unthinkable. De Nobili therefore determined to indianize himself. As a member of the Italian nobility he claimed to be the equivalent of a Kshatriya. It seemed, however, that the state of life best corresponding to his position as a priest and a religious teacher would be that of a sannyasi-guru. Adopting this mode of life, he taught a group of young people. They argued for twenty days, four or five hours a day, and finally the schoolmaster accepted de Nobili as his guru and was baptized.

In November 1607, after receiving permission from the Pope, he exchanged his black cassock for kavi robes and his leather shoes for wooden sandals, and became a sannyasi in earnest. Furthermore, he made the acquaintance of a Telugu Brahmin pandit, named Sivadarma, with whom he began to learn Sanskrit. By August 1608 he was able to speak Sanskrit and then persuaded the pandit to teach him some of the Vedic texts, and what is more, even write them down for him. The pandit too was baptized in 1609. In that year the number of converts rose to 63. They were of several castes, some Nayaks, some cultivators, and some Brahmins. They were baptized, of course, according to the ordinary Latin rite, but were not required to break caste or change their dress, food or mode of life except in the matter of idolatry. They were not expected to join themselves to the Parava congregation either.

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Thus the converts were able to remain in their families. De Nobili believed and taught explicitly that, when a man became a Christian, he did not need to leave his caste or lifestyle, for he was convinced that caste was a social custom parallel to distinctions of class and rank in Europe, and an inevitable feature of the Indian way of life.

In the course of time the controversy in relation to de Nobili's ministry was narrowed down to four points: i.e., whether high caste converts might wear the cord, the hair-tuft and the sandal paste and continue their customary bathing. In this process some measure of social distinction based on caste would have been generally admitted. The decision was made by the Pope Gregory XV in 1624 that Brahmins and other higher caste converts might use the external marks of their noble tank (cord, hair-tuft and sandal paste), but must give up the Hindu ceremonies and *mantras* connected with them. The cord was supposed to be received from a Christian priest with a Christian prayer. After fourteen years of trial de Nobili won his case and was free to carry on his work without restriction.

Apart from Brahmin *sannyasis*, however, it was decided among the Jesuits to appoint special missionaries for work among the lower castes. They were called *pandaraswamis*, and their position corresponded to that of the non-Brahmin religious mendicants known in the Tamil country as *pandarams*. They lived as *sannyasis*, and on that account they were respected by the upper castes and had the chance to have a social contact with them to some extent, but their main responsibility was for the lower castes and Adi Dravidas. For the rest of the seventeenth century and the greater part of the eighteenth, Jesuits' missions were carried on in the inland of South India by the methods initiated by de Nobili. Even though de Nobili and Vico had dreamed of a college where Brahmin Christians might be trained for the priesthood, their plan

was never fulfilled. There was never an Indian clergy, and the lack of them had serious consequences in the eighteenth century.

After the early days of de Nobili, Brahmin converts were very few; most of the Christians came from the Sudra castes and the depressed classes. In places where they gather with different castes, they all worshipped in one church or chapel, but the building was so arranged as to keep caste and outcaste apart in a separate setting. Fr. Houpert estimates the total number of Christians in the Madura Mission in 1700 as about 80,000. There was no breach with caste; and so socially the people remained assimilated very much to their Hindu neighbors.

Those days, however, great numbers were baptized, in most cases, perhaps without much preparation. Yet it often happened that the Christians were left without having a visitation by a priest for years. In some districts where disorder was prevalent or the rulers were hostile, Christianity took on almost the appearance of a secret society. After the suppression of 1759 against the Jesuits in Portugal, the Jesuits in India too were arrested and deported and were imprisoned. Those who were in the inland remained and continued their work till death, but their ministry lost its power since no new workers could come to replace them and the funds for their ministry were cut off. However, it is quite interesting to look at the method of 'accommodation,' de Nobili's approach to Indian society in relation to caste issues and identity debates among them.

### (3) THE PERIOD OF PROTESTANT MISSIONS(18<sup>th</sup>-EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY)

In the early eighteenth century, the Protestant missionaries first appeared in India, especially in Tamil Nadu. Their ministry began in the stations of the new European

trading companies, which settled along the east coast.<sup>2</sup> Even though the sole aim of the European settlers was trade and profit, they brought out chaplains to minister to their own people. In England the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) was founded in 1698 to provide Anglican ministers to British people abroad, and to evangelize the non-Christian peoples of their colonies.

However, the man who first conceived the idea of sending Protestant missionaries to India was King Frederick IV of Denmark, a Lutheran. His court chaplain, to whom he assigned the task of finding suitable men, applied to his friends in Germany. Two young men, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Pluetschau, who were grown up in a revival movement called Pietism, volunteered to go to India. The movement of Pietism had begun in the Lutheran Church of Germany in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, stressing personal devotion as against the prevailing emphasis on correct doctrine. They were then sent out to India as 'royal missionaries' at the personal expense of the king, who arrived at Tranquebar on July 9, 1706.

As early as August 1707 a small church was built outside the fort. The first Tamil converts, nine in number, were baptized in the following month. In 1709 three more missionaries, Gruendler, Jordan and Boevingh, arrived in Tranquebar. In the same year the Danish king made a permanent arrangement for the finances of the mission to be set apart out of the postal revenues, which resulted in the establishment of a mission board in Copenhagen in 1714.<sup>3</sup> This might be the first incident that a mission organization took shape in the European church history.

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<sup>2</sup> The Dutch settled at Pulicat (1609), Sadras (1647) and Negapatam (1660); the British at Masulipatam (1622), Madras (1639), Cuddalore (1683) and Calcutta (1689); the French at Pondicherry (1674); the Danes at two places, i.e., Tranquebar (Tarangambadi), in what is now the Tanjore District of Madras State (1620), and Serampore (1676) in Bengal near Calcutta.

<sup>3</sup> It was a three-cornered arrangement: The Board in Denmark administered; most of the candidates (not all) came from the university of Halle in Germany; and additional help in money and materials was provided by the Anglican S.P.C.K. in England (Firth 2005:134-5).

However the first Protestant mission team faced a few barriers in India field shortly. When they launched a project for building a new church and a training school for teachers and catechists, the secretary of the mission board in Copenhagen urged that the missionaries should devote themselves wholly to spiritual work and that the Indian Church itself should be responsible for supplying its own material needs. In the process of this controversy, Ziegenbalg died at the early age of thirty-six. Another difficulty was that Schultze, who assumed the leadership among the newcomers, caused a disturbance in the Tamil congregation by a rash attack on caste in the church. The earlier missionaries had acknowledged among the converts a distinction between those who came from Sudra castes and scheduled castes. Schultze tried to stop the distinction somehow, but the only result was opposition and discontent. This situation, however, was settled down by Walther and Pressier, who arrived in 1725 and restored the old practice.

The influence of the Tranquebar Mission spread out into the adjacent kingdom of Tanjore and Protestant mission work, through this mission, was started in other European stations in South India, such as Madras, Cuddalore, Negapatam and Trichinopoly. However, the pattern set for Protestant mission those days was too subordinate to European missionaries, which was a typical form found in every field in India: orphanages and charity schools, preaching and catechizing(Firth 2005:143-4). Indian catechists travelled from village to village and from house to house, while meeting the missionaries regularly to receive their instruction and make their reports. The missionary was in fact regarded as the head of a community, on the same principle as native headmen were recognized, and was permitted to fine, flog, and otherwise punish offenders belonging to his community.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, it was clear that the next period in

the Indian history was to be the British colonialism. At the turn of the nineteenth century British rule was firmly established in the three presidencies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay. This period of time is called “the period of modern missionary movement,” which was commenced in England and other countries in the West.<sup>4</sup> In November 1793, William Carey, so-called the father of modern mission, who was sent by the Baptist Missionary Society, arrived at Calcutta. Early in 1800 Serampore Mission was started under the leadership of Carey, through which Carey developed an astonishing range of social as well as Christian activities. The first object of their ministries was to get the Bengali New Testament printed. Some of the translations were made by the missionaries with the help of pandits. Carey himself was responsible for the translation and printing out in Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit and Marathi.

Carey and his coworkers, Marshman and Ward, also planned to make Serampore a base for mission in India and beyond, sending out new missionaries arriving from the West, their own sons, Indians and Anglo-Indian members of their community for the purpose of evangelism. From his second year in Calcutta, Carey started preaching the gospel in one of the poorest areas of the city, Lall Bazaar. However, they tried to be self-supporting and independent from the beginning, which provoked a controversy between them and the mission board. They were separated finally from the board in the year of 1827. They also planned and carried into execution the project, which became their permanent memorial work, setting up Serampore College in 1818. They planned a college for “the instruction of Asiatic, Christian and other youth in

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<sup>4</sup> In England, this was one of the results of the revival among the churches, which was the counterpart of the Pietist movement in Germany, which had already produced the first Protestant missionaries. In this period of time a number of mission organizations were founded under a fresh impulse of missionary zeal: such as the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, the London Missionary Society in 1795. In US the first society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, was founded in 1810.

Eastern literature and European science”(Firth 2005:153). It was an arts and science college with a theological department in today’s term. Their aim was “to produce a class of enlightened men conversant with both the classical literature of India and the best western learning of the day, and in particular to raise up educated men to serve and lead the Indian Church as ministers and teachers and in other walks of life”(Firth 2005:153).

In the same year in which the college was founded, the indefatigable three entered the field of journalism, when Marshman and his son started a weekly newspaper in Bengali, called *Samachar Darpan*, which was believed to be the first newspaper ever printed in any oriental language, and an English monthly, *The friend of India*. Both of them were to play a valuable part in educating public opinion on social questions, e.g., children sacrifice and sati. Strong-minded officials, among them some of Carey’s former pupils, prohibited the practice in their districts on their own responsibility. By and by, as it is well known, the voices of Ram Mohan Roy and a few enlightened Hindus also raised their voices against Sati.

While Serampore Mission was actively ministering in Calcutta, another Protestant mission began in Travancore State(now Kanyakumari district), where rapid church growth happened and a large Christian community was produced. The pioneer was W. T. Ringeltaube, a German Lutheran who was following the Moravian type of Pietism. In fact, he had already spent a few months in 1797-98 in Calcutta under the S.P.C.K., but had become discouraged and returned to Europe. In 1804 he came back to India a second time under the London Missionary Society, traveling with two other L.M.S. missionaries in a Danish ship that brought them to Tranquebar. In 1806 Ringeltaube proceeded to Palamcottach, which became his headquarters for the next three years. From there he traveled about among the Christian communities of

Tinnevely and also visited Mayiladi. Vedamanikam became his chief catechist, and until then the Christians were of Vedamanikam's caste. But from 1810 members of caste called Nadars began to ask him for baptism. Hesitating initially, Ringeltaube baptized four hundred of the Nadars. And this caste formed the bulk of the Christian community in South Travancore. After the arrival of his successor, Charles Mead, in 1817 a great mass movement of Nadars into Christianity began, which continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These people presently form the Kanyakumari diocese of the Church of South India.

Meanwhile the renewal of the East India Company's charter happened in 1813. Since 1793, in fact, the company's policy had been opposed to the entry of new missionaries. The charter of 1813, however, contained the provision that "sufficient facilities should be afforded by law, by persons desirous of going to, and remaining in India, for the purpose of accomplishing those benevolent designs, i.e., the introduction among the inhabitants of India of useful knowledge and religious and moral improvement"(Firth 2005:158). Another important feature of the charter, however, was to set up an ecclesiastical establishment, consisting of a bishop of Calcutta and an archbishop for each of the three presidency towns, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, to be maintained from Indian revenues. The primary purpose of this was to provide for the spiritual oversight of the chaplains and the English churches, civil and military. In fact, it was not intended as a contribution to missionary policy, and so the relations between the bishops of the ecclesiastical establishment and the missionary societies were not yet clear.

After the veto of the Company was removed in 1813, the way was open for Protestant missions. As a matter of fact, the great expansion of Protestant missions in India was possible since this period of time. Those societies which had begun their



ministry already were now able to extend their activities, and those which had not yet launched their work in India were now able to enter the field. Lay believers in the church, too, supported the auxiliary Bible Societies and Tract and Book Societies which were formed in the principal cities. The missionaries usually resided at the cantonment stations, where English services, pastoral work among civilians, soldiers and camp followers, orphanages, schools, itinerant preaching and the distribution of tracts and portions of the scriptures formed the staple of their work. As a community came into being, services in one or more Indian languages would be added. Some of the converts would be chosen to work as catechists, and, later on, one of them would be ordained. In the early nineteenth century, in the case of South India, however, it happened that the rise of missionary zeal in England and the relaxation of restrictions in India came at a time when the old missions in South India were in difficulties. The result, however, was to bring the England missions more directly under the control of Anglican Church.

In this period of time, it is not to be omitted the impacts of English language in Indian society in general, and Indian churches in particular. Modern Indian history begins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the consolidation of British rule and the impact of western ideas on the social, political and religious life of the country through the medium of the English language. A desire for English education, in fact, was kindled by the missionaries themselves. This was the state of affairs in Calcutta in 1830, when Alexander Duff, a young missionary sent by the Church of Scotland, came to India and started an educational mission in Bengal. He quickly perceived the effect already made by English education and the rising desire for it and so determined to put this into Christian education. Thus he opened a school, with a mind to make the same in due course of time a college, where all the subjects of a liberal education should be

taught in English from the standpoint of Christian faith. Through this he planned to demolish old and reformed Hinduism through modern knowledge and at the same time to build up a structure of Christian truth by giving positive Christian teaching. Encouraged by William Carey and Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of Brahma Samaj, his school was of a great success. He also made contact with students of Hindu College by giving a course of lectures about Christianity. The result was also a great success. Between August 1832 and April 1833 four students who were from higher castes accepted the Christian faith and were baptized. It had a significant meaning showing that "Christianity was not merely the refuge of the ignorant and backward and despised, but was to be reckoned with as a serious alternative to the secularism which had hitherto been the only fruit of an English education"(Firth 2005:184).

However, public excitements were stirred up by the cases of conversion in schools and colleges. The converts too faced great hostility from their families and sometimes cast out from their family members. Moreover, until 1832 in Bengal and 1845 in other districts a convert to Christianity lost his right of inheritance, and in some Indian states this kind of disadvantage continued still longer. Until 1866 a married man, whose wife ceased to live with him because of his conversion, was not allowed to marry again. In 1857, a sudden reaction against the increasing British power occurred in North India, i.e., Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Even though it was not specifically an anti-Christian movement, inasmuch as it was anti-British, missionaries as well as Indian Christians suffered. Sometimes there was an element of religious persecution. About twenty mission workers (with wives and children included) are known to be killed in the Mutiny. Much more Indian Christians were hunted and driven from their homes and forced to take refuge in the jungle, until the political condition calmed down.

The Mutiny immediately brought about the end of the East India Company and initiated the direct rule under the government of the Queen Victoria from 1858. In spite of the efforts of evangelicals in British, the queen clearly disclaimed any intention to impose Christian beliefs on her subjects. Nevertheless the removal of the Company's former attitudes of opposition and the orderly administration of the new regime together made a favorable environment for Christian missions. The activities of missions, therefore, increased greatly in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; it was indeed the century of foreign missions.

Throughout the middle years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a continuous movement towards Christianity among the educated classes. As a matter of fact, there were many Hindus who, though they never became Christians, abandoned idolatry and formed the habit of reading the Bible at home and even of praying in the manner they had learnt at their Christian schools. Whether by open conversion or secret discipleship, it seemed as if Christianity were making headway among a section of people. It was an age of ferment under the influence of western culture. The first effect of this ferment was dissatisfaction with Hinduism in the stagnant and unreformed state. To many religious men who felt the influence most keenly in those days, the Christianity of the West was the most challenging alternative. Christian leaders hoped that the spread of western and Christian influences would soon bring about a general movement, and even non-Christians would be willing to accept the new way of life sooner or later. But it did not happen in such a way. Hinduism, with its immense power of absorption, began to reform itself and adapt itself to the modern world, and the potent force of nationalism began to appear in this trend. What happened in this period of time was that "there began to be an abundant choice of alternatives for the educated man who became dissatisfied with orthodox Hinduism.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century passed over into 20<sup>th</sup>, reinterpretations of Hinduism and, above all, political nationalism gathered strength and turned men's minds away from Christianity"(Firth 2005:191).

However, the education for girls during this time was comparatively in a weaker position. Even then a few schools for girls initiated by missionaries' wives, such as Mrs. Marshman of Serampore and Mrs. Wilson of Bombay, aided by committees of well-wishers, such as the Calcutta School Society(1819) in India and the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East formed in London in 1834. Many of them who enrolled the school came from lower castes, who attended the school so irregularly and left at such an early age that their schooling had little effect for their future. In Calcutta the first school for higher caste girls was a secular one founded in 1849 by Drinkwater Bethune, president of the Government's Council of Education. Duff opened a Christian day school for girls in 1857, and the American Presbyterian Mission too started a girls' boarding school at Dehra Dun in 1859. As for the girls' education by Indian ladies, Rama Bai(1858-1922) was outstanding in her commitment for girls' education, which founded later on the Ramabai Mukti Mission. During her life-time and since then, as a matter of fact, there has been an impressive change in the position of women in India. But it might be able to claim that Christians have been in the forefront of the movement for the emancipation of women since the influence of Christian schools and colleges has been outstanding in this regard. In the Christian community itself the service of women workers, missionaries, teachers, doctors, nurses and Bible women, and of the women's organizations in the churches has been one of the most effective agencies both in building up the Christian life in the Church and in bearing its witness to the non-Christian society.

One of the outstanding features in this period of time is that many people

accepted Christianity through mass conversion. There are several literature which are explaining about the mass movement. Firth's book, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (2005), and Forrester's book, *Caste and Christianity* (1980), has a good section on it. Webster's books, *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India* (1976), *Local Dalit Christian History* (2002), and *The Dalit Christians: A History* (2007) well explains about the mass movement as well as the experiences of Indian Dalit Christians from a socio-historical perspective. Robinson, however, attempts to present the sociology of conversion through her books, *Christians of India* (2003), *Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Goa* (1998), and *Sociology of Religion in India* (2004).

However, the conversion of educated Brahmins and other higher castes throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century was of very great value and importance. It provided the Indian Church cultured and intelligent leaders who were regarded intellectually the equals of the most enlightened non-Christians, and it increased greatly the respect of the latter for Indian Christianity. The chief numerical growth of Indian Church, however, was not by the conversion of individuals, but by mass movements or group conversions among much more lower sections of the society: i.e., some of the Sudra castes, the scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes.

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Christian missions began to pay attention to the many aboriginal peoples of India, especially in North India. In fact, from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century mass movement happened already in south India, i.e., Travancore and Tinnevely. In 1846, however, a Lutheran mission from Germany, called after its founder Gossener's Evangelical Lutheran Mission, began work in the Chota Nagpur region of Bihar. In 1850 and 1851 a few members of the Oraon and Munda tribes were baptized at Ranchi, and from then onwards an increasing number

of the same and other tribes, collectively known as Kols, accepted Christianity. By 1857 there turned up a community of between 800 and 900 people scattered among many villages. Especially after the Mutiny of 1857, there was a rapid increase in the number of converts. By 1863 the baptized community had risen to 3,401. Besides the plan of catechists visiting the villages and meeting together with the missionaries for instruction, an efficient system of honorary village elders was organized. In 1869, however, acute controversy among the senior missionaries of the Gossener's mission led to a split of one third of the whole community, who joined the Anglican Church. They became the nucleus of a new mission in the area, which also grew rapidly and became the Anglican diocese of Chota Nagpur in 1890. In 1887 another large secession took place as the result of agrarian unrest, and this time they joined the Roman Catholics. In the following decade a sectarian movement, led by a renegade Christian and combining elements of Christianity, paganism and Mohammedanism, was a further embarrassment. Nevertheless the Lutheran Mission survived these troubles and emerged in 1905 with a community of 67,000 (Firth 2005:198). In 1901 the mission was able to extend their ministry to Assam, where Kols had gone to work on the tea estates.

Among another aboriginal people, the Santals on the border of Bengal and Bihar, the work of several missions had resulted in another large body of Christians which also spread over into Assam.<sup>5</sup> Other communities have been formed among the Gonds and the Bhils of Central India and the Konds and Pans of Orissa. Assam had been a particularly fruitful field those days. Since 1841 the Missions of the American and British Baptists and the Welsh Presbyterians had built up very large communities

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the C.M.S. began their work from 1860, the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches from 1867, which was started by two independent Scandinavians, the Free Church of Scotland from 1870.

of the Garo, Naga, Khasi, Jaintia, Lushai and other tribes (ibid.: 199).

This movement became most rapid in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the census between 1911-1921 the census commissioner noted one area of 7,000 square miles where the Christian population had increased from 2,000 to 27,000, and added the remark, "At the present time it is quite the fashion to be a Christian, and even the chiefs are joining the movement"(Firth 2005:199).

In South India too the mass movement went on during this period of time. In Tinnevely, for example, village ministry among Tamil-speaking tribes went on successfully. By the time the Protestant missions in the district celebrated their centenary in 1880, there were 89 Indian clergy. The baptized community then numbered over 59,000, and the number of villages occupied was reportedly 1,506 (Firth 2005:199). Tinnevely became a diocese finally in its own right in 1896.

A major incident in the history of South Indian mass movements happened after the grievous famine of 1876-1878, after which thousands of people of the scheduled castes became Christians because of aid they received from the missions. In Andhra Pradesh, the American Baptist Mission in Nellore District started their ministry in 1836. From 1866 a movement among the Madigas caste followed the conversion of a young literate yogi called Periah. During the famine J.E. Clough, the missionary at Ongole, played an active part in relief work by taking a contract from the government of Madras for a stretch of the Buckingham Canal, which was then being dug between Madras and Bezwada, and so was able to provide his people with employment. As a result of this combination of philanthropy and propaganda, multitudes of Madigas asked for Baptism. In July 1878, 3,536 people were baptized in three days (ibid.:200). Baptisms continued in the years immediately after the famine. Four years later the mission reckoned its community in the Ongole area at over 20,000 (ibid.:201).

Other missions in Andhra Pradesh, too, substantially increased their numbers after the famine. The care of famine orphans was a regular feature of missions in many parts of India. In all cases work had been going on previously and mass movements of schedule castes had already begun. The result of the relief work done during the famine was to give them a fresh, and sometimes a spectacular impact. Even though most missions in South India were concerned in some way or other with famine relief during the crisis of 1876-1878, relief work itself did not create mass movements. Some of the mass movements owe their origin to the spiritual quest of certain zealous individuals.

During this period of time similar mass movements happened in many other parts in India. In Uttar Pradesh, Mazhabi Sikh community of Moradabad District and a sweeper caste called Mehtars of Bedaun District became Christians by the ministry of American Methodists. In Punjab, too, many of Chunhra caste became converts to Christianity in a large number. Similar movement happened among Chamars in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. In all this work Christian missions have played, and still play, a leading part with the help of medical mission, industrial and agricultural projects, etc..

A variety of motives had been laid among the mass movements happened during this time. The predominant one, perhaps, is a desire for social betterment and a conviction that the Christian missions are interested in their welfare. Secondly, there must have been genuine instances of individual faith, and where emotional revivalism is practiced, religious excitement from this source also must have played its part. Thirdly, there are also instances of the mere hope for getting some material gain. As a matter of fact, medical and many kinds of technical missions had played a great role in the development of mass movement. However, the major characteristic of a mass



movement during this time is noticed as follows(Firth 2005:202):

People come to the faith in tribal or caste groups, whether large or small, and that the movement spreads to other groups of the same caste or tribe. When this happens, it is inevitable that many persons are included whose knowledge of Christian teaching and interior experience of Christian faith are of the slightest. They come with the rest of their group as the result of a communal, not a personal, decision. They consent to what is being done; it is not a question of compulsion; but the element of conscious religious conviction in their action may be very small.

It is necessary to look into the social meaning of conversion in the context of our study here. Even individual conversion, in general, involves more than a change of belief; it involves a transfer from one society to another, from a Hindu caste to the Christian Church in Indian situation. The baptism of the early higher castes' conversion provoked such a violent reactions since it was regarded a serious matter to leave one's own caste. That is why the individual higher-caste convert tended to become a denationalized person, cut off from his own people and obliged to associate with Europeans and with a small Indian Christian community. One of the characteristics of mass movements, however, is that they can become Christians without violent social dislocation, i.e., without losing his/her social nexus.

#### (4) THE PERIOD OF INDIAN CHURCHES(LATE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY-PRESENT)

This period can be characterized mostly by the enhanced national self-consciousness among the Indian Christians. The modern missionary movement commenced by William Carey at the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century brought Christianity in India in the form of a number of foreign missions from Europe and America. The Protestant missions, in most cases, were independent organizations and, therefore, hold different views in

theology and church policy. Moreover, each one of them was bound more or less rigidly to a denominational body in the West. This made them propagate its own type of teaching and its own system of organization and discipline. As the work grew, as an inevitable result, a great number of separate Christian communities came into existence, e.g., some Anglican, some Methodist, some Presbyterian and so on. Even among Christians of one denomination, there were separate communities belonging to missions from different countries.

Even though missionaries in 19<sup>th</sup> century tended to take such a state of affairs for granted, they could not ignore the fact that all Christians together in India were only a tiny minority in a vast non-Christian population. While they staunchly maintained their denominational positions, yet they used to consult together on common problems. It seemed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was more brotherly feeling and co-operation between the dominations in India than there was in the contemporary West. In this situation there formed an environment in which entire Indian churches can cooperate among themselves.

In 1855, representatives of six missions and three European churches in Bengal met in Calcutta and began to have conferences of missionaries working in particular provinces, and later a series of decennial conference for the entire Indian Church was commenced at Allahabad in 1872. A further step in the process of consultation was taken when the World Missionary Conference was held at Edinburg in 1910, out of which the International Missionary Council was formed, a permanent advisory and consultative body for Protestant missions. Later on, Dr. John R. Mott, one of the chief promoters of this movement, visited India with an intention of setting up a national missionary council for the missions working in India. He held meeting with Christian leaders in the several provinces, and finally at a general conference at Calcutta in

1912, it was decided to form a permanent council known as the National Missionary Council of India. This was formed in 1914 but, in 1923, its name was changed to National Christian Council, which signified that the Indian Church had an equal part in it with the foreign missions.

The objects of the National Christian Council are(Firth 2005:235): “to stimulate thinking and investigation on missionary questions; to enlist in the solution of these questions the best knowledge and experience to be found in India and other countries, and to make the result available to all Churches and Missions in India; to help to co-ordinate the activities of the Regional Christian Councils; and through common consultation to help to form Christian public opinion and bring it to bear on the moral and social problems of the day.” However, it was an outcome of the ecumenical movement among the Protestant Church of the West, which became the new fact and great movement of that time. Moreover, another kind of cooperation happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which became more common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among union institutions, i.e., colleges or other institutions carried on by two or more missions in partnership. For example, thirteen of the twenty-one colleges and seminaries connected with Serampore College in 1960 became union institutions.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a new attempt was endeavored more than cooperation between missions and church organizations. Indian Church agreed to bring separate bodies together into an organic union. The first definite achievement was made in South India. It was a local union of Presbyterians in South India on 1901, which brought together the communities of one American mission and two Scottish Presbyterian missions, located in and around Madras. In 1904 this body joined with another several Presbyterian missions in North India, eight in all, to form the Presbyterian Church of India. Another local union of same denominational family was

the loose federation of the Congregationalists of the London Mission and the American Madura Mission in Tamil Nadu, which was formed in 1905. The first fruitful attempt of an inter-denominational union was the South India United Church, which was formulated in 1908. This was a union of all the Congregationalists and Presbyterians in South India and the Jaffna district of Ceylon.

In North India, too, a parallel movement turned up. In 1924 the United Church of Northern India was formulated, again a union of Presbyterians and Congregationalists. In this body eleven missions were included, and its area stretched from Bengal and Assam to Gujarat and the Punjab.

In the case of Lutherans, they organized autonomous Lutheran Church. One of them was the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church, which was formed after the conflict of 1914-1918 of the communities of the Leipzig Mission and the Church of Sweden Mission. In 1926, finally, the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India was founded.

The most emphatic and far-reaching project of church union in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the formation of the Church of South India in 1947.<sup>6</sup> It was because that this attempt was not a question of the drawing together same kind of denominations, but an attempt to heal one of the major divisions that arose in the Western Church during the Reformation period in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and had been imported into India by Western missions. Many Indian church leaders declared their belief that the union was the will of God and the teaching of Scripture since Indian Church was greatly hindered in its evangelism by the division. They further added that those divisions were not of Indian origin and they did not want them to be

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<sup>6</sup> The parties which united together were: South India United Church, a combined body of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, the Anglican dioceses in South India, and the Methodist communion of South India.

perpetuated. They too asserted that each of the three systems represented among them, i.e., the Episcopal, the Presbyterian and the congregational, contained scriptural and valuable elements that ought to be preserved in a united Church with the explicit recognition of the historic episcopate and the spiritual equality of all members. They proposed following as the basic terms of the union(Firth 2005:240-1):

- (1) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing all things necessary for salvation;
- (2) The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed;
- (3) The two sacraments ordained by Christ himself, i.e., baptism and the Lord's Supper;
- (4) The historic episcopate, locally adapted.

They proclaimed, however, that the acceptance of episcopacy did not involve any particular theory of its origin or any doctrinal interpretation of it. Another series of an attempt for church union in North India commenced in 1929. As a result of the same, the Church of North India was inaugurated in 1970.

Indian Church, by and large, has been dependent on the Western Church throughout its history, and has had little opportunity to play a conspicuous role in the world church history. However, in this matter of church union in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has played a leading role and made a notable contribution to the Christian world. This church union was an outcome of the development of self-consciousness of Indian Church, closely connected with the nationalist movement. In fact, the most prominent feature of Indian history in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the nationalist movement. This is the reaction from the previous century against "the spread of English education and western civilization"(Firth 2005:248).

On the religious side the reaction took the form of a reassertion and defense of

Hinduism in modified versions, such as Arya Samaj or Ramakrishna Mission. On the political side it appeared as an impatience of the British rule and an aspiration towards independence. However, it seemed that not many Christians took a direct and active participation in the political struggle for *swaraj*. So far as the majority of the community was concerned, the rising national self-consciousness was rather slow to affect them. It might be because most Indian Christians were content to live under the firmly settled order of the British Raj and the paternal rule of missionaries. Yet the Christian community sympathized more and more with the aim of the Congress in the later stages of the struggle for independence. But the attitude of hostility to Christian community as a whole, which could be found ordinary Congressman, made them chary of participating more actively with them.

However, the members of the Christian community, whose education and social standing gave them a more independent outlook and enabled them to mix with non-Christians of similar status, could not but feel the stirrings of national pride. The indianization of worship, too, was a subject that had been much discussed. In many cases, especially in the regional language-speaking churches, they did not need pews and instinctively leave their sandals outside the church before entering. It is also found in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a greater inclination among converts to seek Indian ways for expressing Christian devotion. In this trend, Krishnarao Sangle of Ahmednagar composed Marathi lyrics in Indian meter and set to Indian *ragas*, and a collection of them called *Gayanamrit* was published in 1867. About the same time he and Vishnupant Karmakar began to turn to Christian use the Indian oratorio form known variously as *kirtan*, *harikatha*, *kalakshepam* etc., in which the story-teller, accompanied by a band of musicians, delivers his matter in a musical recitative interspersed with songs and choruses. The most outstanding literary work of the new

spirit was seen in Narayan Vaman Tilak(1862-1919), whose Marathi poetry was inspired not only by intense personal devotion to Jesus Christ but also by intense affection of his country.

It is also found that attempts were made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by certain individuals to live as independent *sannyasis*. N.V. Tilak, for example, resigned from his position in the American Marathi Mission and spent the last 20 months of his life in this way of life. His action, in fact, was a striking try to use on of the traditional Indian modes of life for Christian purposes. Similarly B.C. Sircar, a Bengali who worked in the Y.M.C.A. practiced *yoga* in his later years and set up a Christian shrine at Puri.

The Christian *sadhu* who caught the public notice and became famous both in India and abroad was Sundar Singh. When he was only 16years of age, he donned the saffron robe and became a *sannyasi*, wandering about the Punjab, Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. In this manner he spent the next six years, being associated for some period of time with an American missionary S.E. Stokes, who had also embraced a wandering life in imitation of the mediaeval friars. The two of them formed a 'Brotherhood of Service' later on.

In this trend there turned up a movement to make use of the ancient Indian institution of the *ashram*. As a matter of fact, the idea of a life of *sannyasi* is familiar to the Indian mind and has a considerable popular appeal. On the other hand Christianity too has its tradition of the religious life lived in communities and orders. The institution of *ashram*, therefore, seemed to be which Christians could use to express their religious ideal in a way that other Indians would readily appreciate on. The Syrian Christians too had a number of *ashrams*, which were of purely Indian foundation and some of them had their stations outside Kerala.

Another indication of the enhanced national self-consciousness may be found in the formation of several Indian missionary societies during this period. These societies, in fact, were formed by Indian Christians themselves to preach the gospel and carry on Christian work in India. The first of these was the Indian Missionary Society of Tinnevely, which was founded in 1903. In 1905 a more ambitious enterprise was launched, that is, the National Missionary Society which was founded at Serampore at a meeting of young Indian Christians from different parts of India and different denomination. This was of an inter-denominational society, supported financially by Indian Christians and manned by the same, though it would not refuse offers of overseas help. Anyhow it was committed as far as possible to follow indigenous methods. Its objects were to evangelize the unevangelized areas in India and adjacent countries and to stimulate missionary zeal in the churches. In this period there was a paradigm shift in the understanding of the Church, in other words, a shift of emphasis from 'mission' to 'church'. It is implied, from this perspective, that the evangelization of India was no longer seen as the primarily the task of missionary societies, whether foreign or Indian, but as a function of the ordinary church in its regions.

To indianize and strengthen this trend became the predominant task of the Indian Church in this period as the result of the development of self-consciousness among Indian Christians. Especially after 1919, the rising national consciousness and the intensification of the political struggle for independence formed the background to the paradigm shift. The 19<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, was called an age of foreign missions, and so foreign missionary dominated the scene with an almost patriarchal authority. There was little consciousness of an Indian Church as such. Except in certain areas there had been little attempt to build up self-governing institutions. Here and there a



distinguished individual had been brought into a position of leadership and authority in Indian Church, but they, in many cases, were ranked as assistant missionaries.

In the years after the 1914-1918 war, however, missionary societies came more and more to realize that their business was not strengthen and perpetuate their own organization, but to foster the Indian Church and prepare it to take full responsibility for its own ministry. Accordingly they began more seriously to devise representative institutions, to take Indian members into their administrative bodies and to hand over some of their responsibilities to them. Therefore, slowly or rapidly a process of transferring responsibility to the Indian Church and of making the work church-centric went on. The pace, of course, was greatly accelerated after the country became independent.

Since the First World War, Indian Church has been applying the three principles, i.e., self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. However, Indian Church is still dependent on foreign financial support to a great extent. It might be a greatest weakness among Indian church and a stumbling stone in the development of Indian Church at the present period of time.

## Political Sociology of the Indian Christianity

In relation to the understanding of caste, Dumont's work, *Homo Hierachicus* (2004) shows the fundamental characteristics of caste in terms of the opposition of purity and impurity. Quigley's book, *The Interpretation of Caste* (1993), however, shows the political characteristics of caste from the Horcart's interpretation of caste. Dipanka's edited book, *Social Stratification* (1993), shows many valuable writings on caste. We have, in fact, in the field of Indian sociology, many works of G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas, Y. Singh, and so on.

*A Dictionary of Sociology*, edited by Marshall (2006), shows well about the definition of the term 'power'. Dumont's *Homo Hierachicus* (2004) is useful to understand the characteristic of power intrinsic in caste system to some extent. Foucault's postmodern ideas on power are well expressed in his books, for example, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1973), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: Introduction* (1978).

Power is one of the fundamental concepts in social stratification. Power is defined, according to Weber, "the probability of persons or groups carrying out their will even when opposed by others" (Marshall 2006:519). Power is viewed therefore as a social relationship and can be understood in the context of social relationship. This definition suggest logically that A has power over B to the extent that he/she overcomes the resistance of B if it is offered, implying that the interest of B are being sacrificed to those of B.

Foucault(1977, 1978) introduces a postmodern concept of power. According to him, power is exercised in a multitude of micro-centers, like schools, hospitals,

factories, communities, etc.. In his book, *Discipline and Punish*(1977), he argues that the disciplinary techniques introduced for criminals became the model for other modern sites of control(schools, hospitals, factories, etc.), so that prison discipline pervades all of modern society. Foucault(1977:138) sums up 'the mechanics of power' which is the modern approach to discipline, i.e., methods for the meticulous control of the operations of the body: it aims at producing 'docile bodies' not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes. For this purpose, three means are operated, *hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination* (ibid.:170-194). Hierarchical observation is based on the obvious fact that we can control what people do merely by observing them. Normalizing judgment refers to the fact that individuals are judged not by the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of their acts but by where their actions place them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else. Normalizing judgment is a peculiarly pervasive means of control. There is no escaping it because, for virtually any level of achievement, the scale shows that there is an even higher level possible. Further, norms define certain modes of behavior as abnormal, which puts them beyond the pale of what is socially acceptable. Finally, the examination combines hierarchical observation with normative judgment. The examination is a prime locus of modern power/knowledge, since it combines into a unified whole the deployment of force and the establishment of truth. It both elicits the truth about those who undergo the examination and, through the norms it sets, controls their behavior.

From this understanding, it becomes easier to look at the power which is intrinsic in the caste system. In fact, the characteristic of hierarchy in caste system, whether it refers to ritual hierarchy or not, is described by many sociologists, e.g., Bougle, Dumont, G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas, etc. (see Gupta 1993). In *Essays on Caste*

*System*, Bougle argues that “the hierarchical characteristics of the system are pervasive and ritual rules regulate interaction at all levels by interdictions of various kinds” (Sharma 2005: 13). Dumont, who understands the caste system as the hierarchical opposition between the pure and the impure, too argues that “the caste system is a hierarchy, not just in the sense of a system of superordination and subordination achieved by the exercise of power but also in the sense... of a system ordered by encompassing set of values” (Sharma 2005:21). Bandopadhyay and Eschen(1993:357) therefore, from their study, argued that “power tends to be very closely associated with class and caste... The causes of the close association between power, class, and caste are diverse and complex, and they run in both directions; that is high class and caste position not only bring power, but power brings wealth and, even, in the long run, high caste position.” Caste system regulates about, for example, what to wear, what to eat, where to reside, with whom to get married, what kind of job to take, etc.. If somebody tries to cross over these social norms, there will be restriction and penalty, which is a kind of power characteristic.

In the understanding of Indian Church too caste itself is the most prevalent and far-reaching element in the play of power within themselves. As it is widely known “caste exists among non-Hindus in India and...it is prevalent even in those non-Hindu religions which consciously repudiate caste and proclaim theologies and ideologies that oppose caste”(Tharamangalam 1996:263). As a matter of fact, condemnation of caste as unchristian has been major assertion in Indian church history and re-emerged as an important issue in contemporary theological and official church discourse. There is an also increasing pressure today from rising Dalit Christian movements supported by new radical theologies, e.g., the theology of liberation and Dalit theology, and by important sections of theologians and intellectuals within the churches. Therefore, it is

clear that caste cannot be completely separated from the broader socio-political setting in which Indian Christians are located.

In this section I would like to look into the existence of caste and the debates in relation to the same within Indian Church through its historical development.

### (1) CASTE AND THE KERALA CHRISTIANS

Kerala is known as the area where the caste system survived longest in its most rigorous form as well as the home of the oldest Christian community in India, i.e., the Syrian Christians of Malabar. Syrian Christians are also called simply Syrians, or the Christians of St Thomas or Thomas Christians.

From the initial stage of St Thomas Church caste has played an important role in the development of church ministry and the internal administration among themselves. As a matter of fact, Malabar tradition on the apostolate of St Thomas pointed out that the majority of the converts who were converted by the labor of apostle Thomas were usually Brahmins and other higher castes. Even contemporary scholars mostly agree that the Christians still retain some customs very similar to those of the Brahmins.

Since St Thomas Christians were supposedly from higher castes, especially Brahmin background, Christians occupied a comparatively higher social status in Hindu-ruling society. It is supposedly known that they were mostly engaged in three principal occupations: i.e., agriculture, trade and military service (Mundadan 1989:155). In their day-to-day life, therefore, the St Thomas Christians were different very little from other noble castes. Moreover they were allowed to continue their practice of untouchability since this was necessary to carry on their daily social intercourse with the upper caste.

Let us look at those caste-related issues among the early Indian churches. It is generally insisted that the St Thomas Christians, because of their general Indian mentality and especially their caste feelings, were averse to proselytizing. The caste feelings, no doubt, stood in the way of receiving into the community of the lower castes. As for the higher castes concerned they must have had no objection to interact with Christians since those Christians were believed to be from higher castes. By getting married with higher castes, especially the *nayars*, the Christian community received many non-Christians into them and had them baptized.

However, there turned up a division among the members of St Thomas Church according to their caste. During this period of time they were divided with Northist(or Northerners) and Southist(Southerners). It is said that the Northist community was always eager to increase the numerical strength of the Church and so had received many outsiders and baptized them. And Southists who are believed to be directly descended from Syrian merchants who settled in Kerala consider themselves pure-blooded and superior to the Northists—who make up the vast majority of the Syrians—and strictly enforce endogamy rejecting converts from outside. The tradition said that this division was caused by the two wives of an influential church member, who came from different caste background respectively.

Later on another division took place. Those who broke away and then re-established their communion with the Patriarch of Antioch are known as the Jacobites. Those who continued to remain in communion with Rome, then a tiny minority but now the majority of Syrians, were allowed by Rome to retain their own Syrian rite and came to be known as Romo-Syrians or Syrian Catholics.

However, conversion of the lower castes in an extensive manner seems to have been taken up by the St Thomas Christians only after the arrival of the Portuguese.

The rules of pollution, by and large, were more precisely formulated and rigidly enforced in Kerala than elsewhere in India. The Syrians were allowed to continue their practice of untouchability since this was necessary to carry on their daily social intercourse with the upper caste. But the Portuguese Synod condemned the 'superstitious' beliefs associated with the practice, and ordered them not to wash and purify themselves if they accidentally touched lower castes. Most of the untouchable castes were in fact pre-medial slaves until the middle of the nineteenth century, and were subject to countless degrading regulations to avoid polluting higher castes by their physical contact, or approaching near(so-called 'distance pollution') or even by sight. Those days, inter-caste relations were regulated with punctilious exactness in every detail. "A Nair", for example, wrote a wife of a C. M. S. missionary in 1860, "may approach but not touch a Nambudiri Brahmin; A Chogan(Ezhava) must remain thirty-six steps off, and a Pariar some distance further still. A Syrian Christian may touch a Nair but the latter may not eat with each other. Poolians and Pariars, who are the lowest of all, may approach but not touch, much less may they eat with each other." It seems to be clear that within the caste system of the society the large Syrian Christian community was accorded a position of considerable esteem, as it were either equal to, or immediately below the Nairs.

However, J. W. Pickett suggested that the Syrian Christians operated very much as a caste(Forrester 1979:98). In fact, they were regarded as part of the Hindu caste system in many anthropological studies. It is perceived in the sociological studies that "Syrian Christians groupings form part of the total segmentary caste structure and are ranked to each other and to the Hindu castes"(Visvanathan 1993:2). As Fuller(1976: 59) has pointed out, "recruitment by hereditary membership is more important for caste identity since endogamy is widely practiced among religious and

denominational groups all over the world.” In fact, the Syrian Christians, the Latin Catholics and the Neo-Christians(Puthukristianikal) of Kerala can be considered as three castes or clusters of castes. Even the beef-eating and liquor-drinking Portuguese who constantly associated with the Untouchables were assigned a ‘caste’ status, i.e., *parangis*; their lower caste converts became *kulam pukkus* which meant those who had entered a new caste, the caste of the parangis.

As for the Syrian Christians of pre-Portuguese Kerala there was nothing problematic about caste. They were occupying a higher position in caste system as well as in economic status, and thus observed the general caste practices including untouchability. Yet they were not interested in calling other people of lower caste background into the churches. But European missionary approach to conversion, especially group and mass conversions, altered the scene irrevocably. The Syrians refused to admit into their churches the new Pulaya and Mukkuva converts, who were forced to sit near the porch. In Tamil Nadu the Portuguese had to build separate churches for the Kareyars and the Pulayas whom the Mukkuvars refused to admit into their churches.

When St Thomas came to Kerala and baptized them, this conversion was implied the loss of caste status. Thus they were segmented off from their original caste group. Yet they could manage to keep with them certain privileges including their attendant castes. Servants who converted from lower castes, for instance, kept strict endogamy along with commensal restrictions. Even though they were allowed, therefore, to worship in Syrian Christian churches, they did not have equal status. In the modalities of choice-making with regard to food, occupation, marriage, birth and death and their accompanying rituals too they are presented as a caste group.

When the West rediscovered the Malabar Church in the sixteenth century it was



already perceived to be encapsulated within Hindu society. The Syrian Christians as a whole had most of the qualities of a caste-endogamy, shared social status, the caste hierarchy, etc. Even today marriages are supposed to happen almost invariably within the community to a great extent, but not infrequently cross sectarian boundaries. This situation might be compared with that of the Nadars in Tamil Nadu, where marriages between Hindu and Christian Nadars are by no means uncommon. Many families in Kerala, in fact, would prefer to contract marriages within the same caste yet of the other religion, rather than with a person of a same religion yet of a different caste-background.

In contrast with Christian converts elsewhere in India, the Syrian Christians were accorded a higher status within the caste system. In most parts of Kerala they ranked after the Brahmans, roughly equal to the Nairs, although some Syrian Christians claimed that their Brahman origin made them indubitably superior to the Nairs. For example, rich landowning Syrian Christians with political power could claim that higher status than Nairs where they were dominant in number. Most of Syrian Christians were traditionally traders and landowners, and thus the Hindu kings, pleased with the hard-working and prosperous Syrian Christians, gave them certain privileges and honors which distinguished them as a higher caste.

In brief, the caste system seems to have made it possible for Christianity to survive in Kerala, but on condition that it observed especially the norms of the caste system. The Syrian Christians survived and indeed flourished because they accepted the social system within which they found because they accepted the social system within which they put their social status accordingly and observed its norms. It also seems that there was no conflict or debates those days in relation to caste issue within the Indian Church as a whole.

## (2) CASTE AND MASS MOVEMENT

The Protestant consensus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was summed up in a minute of the Madras Missionary Conferences of 1850, in which caste was declared to be “one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the gospel in India”(Forester 1980:71), which was supposed to be opposed to Christian principles and so not to be tolerated in the churches. Many missionaries were well aware that the conflicts within the churches on the caste issue in the 1830s and 1840s had not only discouraged numerical growth but had led to notorious schisms and the reversion to Hinduism of large numbers from many of the South Indian churches. Ironically in the light of later developments, they saw the maintenance of social links between converts and their Hindu caste-fellows as simply a standing invitation to apostasy rather than an evangelistic opportunity. However, the conviction of the missionaries about the evils of caste made them positively opposed to the idea of group conversion, and served to reinforce the individualism characteristic of nineteenth century evangelicals.

The first occasion of mass movement, however, was witnessed among Paravas who lived on the south-east coast opposite to Ceylon in 16<sup>th</sup> century (see Forrester 1980:394-96). In Tamil Nadu, the first recorded visit of the Portuguese to Mylapore was in 1517. In 1536 and 1537 there took place the great mass conversion of the fishermen on the Paravar Coast, east of Cape Comorin. The Paravars scattered in 22 villages maintaining their living by fishing and pearl-diving from very early times. The Muslim Arabs, who established a monopoly as lease-holders over the sea-born trade of both the west and east coast of India, had a powerful control of the pearl-fishery. The Paravars were exploited both by the Hindu rulers and the Muslim traders and oppressed in various ways. By the time the Portuguese arrived, the Paravars had been reduced to the status of slaves and day-labors under the Muslim lease-holders,

which made them petition the Portuguese for help and protection. To receive the favor of the Portuguese they decided to embrace Christianity. All the men, numbering about 50,000; were immediately baptized, and after that women, old men, and children. By the end of 1537 the entire Parava community had accepted Christianity. This might be the first recorded mass conversion to Christianity among Indians. However, there was no regular instruction or systematic pastoral care after that. When Francis Xavier arrived on the fishery coast in 1542, he baptized several thousand children and started some rudimentary instruction of converts in Tamil.

Even in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a great mass movement of Nadars in South Travancore into Christianity was outstanding, which continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see *ibid.*:84-86). The Nadars were able virtually to take over the church and use it in part as an expression of their caste identity. The serious mass movement, however, took place from late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The major two pockets of this movement are South India, especially Tamil Nadu, and tribal belt of Chotanagpur, 28 districts belonging to 4 states, viz., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missions, initially particularly Protestant missions, witnessed an unexpected and dramatic development in their ministry through group conversions from especially untouchable castes. Since the decision to adopt the new faith was usually taken by the caste elders, people converted in caste groups rather than as individuals. Since then the missionaries were forced to reassess their attitudes and approaches to the issue of caste, which quickly transformed the whole mission scene. Before 1860 the efforts of missions had been directed almost

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<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed from the fact that Christian population is densely located in these locations (Oommen 2000:53). According to the source, the percent of all Christians in India in Tamil Nadu and the tribal belt of Chotanagpur is 17.31% and 10.58% respectively.

totally towards the conversion of individuals regardless of caste, or concentrated of those from the highest castes. And it was generally assumed by most of protestants that converts must break caste by separating themselves from Hindu social context and enter a new Christian community, usually exclusive and alienated society from other religious communities. The new phenomenon of mass movement, however, did change these already-accepted perspectives to a large extent.

It might be necessary at this stage to look into some cases of mass movement at different parts of Indian. There were mass conversion movements in many parts of India particularly in the Madras Presidency. Between 1881 and 1901, for example, the number of Protestant Christians who live districts of the Telugu country alone rose from 78,000 to 225,000 and virtually all the converts were untouchables, such as Malas and Madigas. Mass conversion is meant by “people became Christians not singly but collectively as castes and it involved little disruption of the social structure of the groups or of their relationships with their neighbours”(Tharamangalam 1996:268). Caplan(1989: 22, 25) has shown that “caste is far more entrenched among these Christians than among the numerically fewer and generally upper caste individual converts... The individual converts often married outside their caste and many of them consciously repudiated caste.” That is why, I assume, that mass conversion could be possible among the lower caste converts. The individual converts, it is assumed that, often married outside their caste and many of them consciously repudiated caste.

During the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Catholic missions too increased and consolidated themselves (see Firth 2005:223-24). There were some conversions among the higher castes, for example, three Brahmins at Trichinopoly in 1804. But the majority came from Sudras, scheduled castes and aboriginal tribes.

Chota Nagpur, where the Lutherans of Gossner's Misioon made many converts among the Mundas and Oraons, also became a very fruitful field for the Roman Catholics. The Belgian Jesuits, too, who came to Chota Nagar from Bengal in 1877, were able to take advantage of the unrest among the Kols which led to a large secession from the Lutheran churches from 1887. This mass movement is especially associated with the name of Fr. Constant Lievens, who showed himself a zealous and effective champion of these people in their quarrels and lawsuits with landlords and moneylenders during the period of 1885-1892. Besides baptizing large numbers of them Fr. Lievens founded for their economic improvement a Mutual Help Society and a Co-operative Credit Society too. In 1927, when the diocese of Ranchi was established in that area, the community numbered 190,000. It is now well over 300,000. In South Kanara too several thousands of the depressed classes became Christians through the ministry of Fr. Faustin Corti, S.J., who turned to them in 1910 after five years of fruitless work among Brahmins and Jains, and was living in Indian style and walking from village to village barefoot. In many other parts in South India too there were mass movements, which became prevalent phenomenon those days.

Mass conversion also took place in Punjab (see Forrester 1980: 87). In Punjab, the protestant community increased from 3,823 in 1881 to 483,081 in 1947. This spectacular growth was almost entirely the result of the mass movement which swept through certain districts such as Sialkot and Narowal. In the case of Chuhra caste, they impressed the missionaries from the beginning as a community which was in a rebellious mood against the Hindu social order. Their passion for liberty, in fact, was in part a hunger for land. The new canal colonies had brought to agriculture in the Punjab great prosperity in which Chuhra laborers had a share through enhanced wages. A number of Chuhras moved to the colonies and managed to set up as successful

tenant farmers, or remained as laborers, but in much more favorable conditions. Missionaries therefore persuaded the government to allocate land, on which Christian settlements were set up. Almost all the colonists in these settlements were Christian, and their existence gave the missions an ability to do something to meet the land-hunger of converts as well as providing an escape from situations of virtual serfdom. The Chuhra movement was a kind of communal declaration of independence on such a large scale, particularly between 1880 and 1920, that missionaries were not able to give as much oversight and retain as much control as they wished.

An instructive instance of a mass movement which collapsed is that of Krishnagar, in Bengal (see Forrester 1980:88-89). When the Church Missionary Society established its first school here in 1832 they found that the district was a stronghold of an anti-Brahman and vaguely egalitarian sect, the Karta Bhajas, which drew most of its adherents from the lowest rank of society. The adherents of this sect very quickly began to show interest in Christianity, and a number of people were baptized. There were about 3,000 candidates who were ready to take baptism before 1839 was over, and during the next few years the church continued to grow at a prodigious rate. But early observers quickly concluded that the motives of the converts had been mixed in an unhealthy manner. It is said that they found with Christians pity as well as money and rice, which they did not obtain from the zamindars. The converts became excessively dependent in every way on the missionaries, and the mission was notable both for its loyalty to the government and for the factional disputes it nurtured.

Then what was the social milieu which led to mass movement among the depressed castes from the middle of the nineteenth century? One of the possible reasons is that many mass movements were initially a kind of response to the behavior

of the missions in times of famine and drought, which happened in the same period of time. Apart from this external element, Christianity-based humanity, e.g., dignity, self-respect, concern of patrons who will treat one as an equal, and the ability to choose one's own destiny, were possibly powerful incentives to conversion to Christianity.

In fact, the major attraction to the conversion to Christianity by the Portuguese in Kerala was the appeal of charity. Conversion to Christianity through internal conviction and religious urge was not so common even those days. Even though many converts were not made always by compulsion, the prospect of coming under the protection of the powerful foreigners was a stronger inducement to most of the lower castes than receiving the preaching of the Gospel. And in many cases it was frankly offered as such. Paravas, for example, made a mass conversion to take the advantages of Portuguese protection.

The most obvious impact which the Dalit mass movements had upon the churches was a dramatic increase in the number of Christians (Webster 2007: 60): This implies logically "a transformation of the Christian community from a tiny predominantly urban, educated community of mixed social origins to a predominantly poor, rural, illiterate Dalit community" (ibid.: 61). The mass movement also brought Dalit concerns into the Indian churches and so drew the foreign missions into an enlarged perception of their work. Therefore, missionaries did stand up for the rights of persecuted Dalit converts, even in court whenever it is necessary. The church also had come out emphatically on the side of the oppressed Dalit on a matter of simple social justice. However, the most significant long term impact of the movement on Indian churches was "to put a permanent Dalit stamp upon them" (ibid.: 63). From the Dalit Christians side, conversion was "ways of reform and renewal" (ibid.: 71) and they were now struggling with a formation of new identity.

Mass conversions may be viewed, in part, as movements for the betterment in social and material conditions, but they were also movements for dignity and self-respect. In the case of the low castes, according to Robinson(2003:61), “these included intercession with the government, protection against moneylenders or exploitation by the high castes and perhaps, educational and employment opportunities. Many tribal groups also viewed the missionaries as mediators with the courts and colonial administration.” Therefore, groups who do not have social or religious advantage may have perceived that they had much benefits by adopting Christianity.

In many cases, however, those converts who converted during this period of time experienced social mobility in their social status and the process of westernization. As Robinson(2003:65) said, “conversion certainly involved more than only a change in religious beliefs and ideas... that it was sometimes part of larger social process of transformation.” In this account, Robinson(ibid.: 32-33) introduces an anthropological perspective on conversion. Earlier intellectualist or theological explanations saw conversion primarily as a transformation in the religious beliefs of individuals. Psychologist perspective looks at conversion in terms of a change in the individual’s psychological disposition. Sociological or anthropological approach, however, tries to identify some of those external empirical factors which have led to the changes in the life of individuals and groups and which help to explain why some people have opted out of one religious community and joined another.

It might be necessary then to juxtapose the concept of Sanskritization and that of Christianization. Sanskritization was a cul-de-sac because of concerted and efficacious rebuffs from the higher castes. While Sanskritization is a complex process involving changes in “customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a



high, and frequently twice-born caste”(Srinivas 1992:6), Christianization involves not only personal uplifting movement but also structural change in a different direction. Sanskritization, as Srinivas points out, “results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to any structural change”(ibid.:7). In the case of converts to Christianity, as Robinson (1998:20) points out, caste “enters the distribution of rights and privileges in the organization of feasts within the church. Hindu cultural codes are shared in other spheres too.” When a group of certain caste wants to claim a higher caste, therefore, they try to take up a certain role in Christian feasts, which is conceived a role of higher caste.

As a matter of fact, the consequence that conversion did not lead in the short term to any significant material improvement, or in the longer term to any significant change in the attitudes of the higher castes towards the converts did not appear to become a brake on a conversion movement. However, if large-scale group conversions for the depressed castes took place typically in situations where the village community had been weakened, the conversions themselves consequently introduced new and severe tensions into the village. Such behavioral changes were often met with straight repression from the higher castes who quite correctly understood that their traditional position would be threatened, and the solidarity of the village as a sacral community destroyed. Repeated attempts, therefore, were made by the higher castes to enforce the strictest rules about social behavior, e.g., dress, occupation, manners, etc., generally on converts and the untouchables as a whole, which in many cases resulted in violence. Mass movement converts continued to live in their former villages, with all the tensions and opportunities. Because of the scale of conversions, too, village congregations should have considerable autonomy within themselves since there were not enough missionaries, pastors, and trained catechists

who can visit them. Thus some forms of missionary paternalism were challenged, but the missionaries struggled hard to retain control because they feared the mass movements might easily be transformed into barely Christian forms of millenarianism, or gradually fade away, if conversion were not able to bear visible fruits in terms of secular advancement.

Missionaries hoped that visible fruits among converts who remained in continuing contact with the village community would attract not only others of the same caste, but would also bring in converts, or even spark off mass movements, among other castes. Caste boundaries have proved to be considerable obstacles to the spread of conversion. Church leaders, however, had very great hopes that a strong pattern of group conversion would spread upwards from the untouchables to the higher castes, but these expectations were not on the whole realized. It was quickly found to be clear in most areas that christianization was only one of several alternative possibilities for a caste seeking to escape from a status and conditions deemed to be intolerable within the Hindu social structure.

Dr. Thayil explained about the reason why the Thiyas embraced Islam for them those days, which could be a part of explanation in the case of Christianity. He was, in fact, convinced that “the Thiyas could no longer remain within the fold of Hinduism consistent with their self-respect and he had decided to embrace Islam for the sake of securing the social, political and religious freedom of his community”(Forrester 1980:86). However, there was developing a counter attack against the conversion of Hindus. In November 1936 the Government of Travancore responded to the conversion movement saying that the temple were opened to all classes of Hindus. The Maharaja proclaimed that(Forrester 1890: 86):

Profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of our religion, believing that it is

based on divine guidance and all-comprehending toleration, knowing that in its practice it has throughout the centuries adapted itself to the needs of changing times, solicitous that none of our Hindu subjects should by reason of birth, caste or community be denied the consolation and solace of the Hindu Faith, we have decided and hereby declare, ordain and command that...there should be henceforth no restriction placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering and worshipping at temples controlled by us and our government

The effect of this declaration was almost instantaneous. Threats of mass conversion were no longer heard, for the Ezhavas, and other lower castes, saw that they had a future within the Hindu community and that pressure from them could be effective in eliciting a response. A road to advancement without conversion was now clearly open for them.

Mass movements have been severely criticized from both the non-Christians and Christians. The former criticized that the movement is to weaken Hindu solidarity, and that the missions concentrated on the backward and ignorant castes using unworthy means to induce them to make Christians because they were less capable of resistance than the other castes. As a matter of fact, the motives of large numbers of ignorant and degraded people were questionable and their understanding of the Gospel might be very little. On the other hand, at the level of their social life major decisions were social rather than individual. In general, with a few exceptions, individuals followed their group decision. In Kerala these conversion movements produced a new Christian caste (or caste cluster), the *Puthukristianikal* (new Christians or neo-Christians) of Dalits as distinct from the Syrian Christians and the Latin Catholics.

In sum, caste has played a crucial role in the understanding of Indian Church from inside and outside. Yet the criticism against the caste has emerged from the Western perspective, which made the issue more complicated. Even though Indian

Christians too criticized the caste system, they were not either free from the caste system itself nor able to administer free of caste issue as we can see in the example of mass movement. The development of mass movement also became a turning point for the Western missionaries in the understanding of caste.

### (3) CASTE AND CHURCH POLITICS

The majority of Indian Christians, in most cases, are originated from lower caste background. According to Oommen(2000:111), 80 per cent, in the mass movement areas, were from ex-Untouchables and tribes, and at least 40 per cent of Indian Christians are from Scheduled Castes, which implies that those of upper caste origin are not more than 10 per cent. In this fact it is implied that the segment of caste in Indian churches is playing as a crucial factor in understanding Indian churches as a whole and particularly church politics.

In Indian Church there is a tendency to have some overlap between caste and sect both by and large because of the caste origins of the sects and the tendency for sects in India to be absorbed into the caste system over a long period of time. As Robinson(2003:73) points out, "in some communities then, the church became the center for the manifestation and maintenance of status differences centered around caste. Church celebration and processions began to express and articulate relations of rank and status, hierarchy and honor in particular local contexts. On a par with Hindu temple celebrations, most Christian feasts find the distribution of rights and honors on a caste basis." The very nature of mass conversion movements ensured that often a whole caste joined a particular church or sects as a caste or a cluster of castes. Thus the Salvation Army in Kerala, for example, is in many places an entirely Pulaya-Paraya sect. Similarly there are 'one caste churches' in Tamil Nadu such as the

Tirunelveli dioceses of the Anglican Church which had 68 percent Nadars in 1938.

There are similar overlaps in the tribal areas too.

As for the Syrian Christians of pre-Portuguese Kerala there was nothing problematic about caste. They were occupying a higher position in caste system as well as in economic status, and thus observed the general caste practices including untouchability. Yet they were not interested in calling other people of lower caste background into the churches. But European missionary approach to conversion, especially group and mass conversions, altered the scene irrevocably. The Syrians refused to admit into their churches the new Pulaya and Mukkuva converts, who were forced to sit near the porch. In Tamil Nadu the Portuguese had to build separate churches for the Kareyars and the Pulayas whom the Mukkuvars refused to admit into their churches.

In the nineteenth century discipline was so tightened in most of the Protestant denominations that it was “virtually impossible for converts to be baptized without explicit and public ‘breaking of caste’”(Forrester 1980:118). However, opposition to the missionaries’ caste policy tended to come from Christians of Sudra origin rather than from untouchables or higher caste converts. Converts from lowest castes, in fact, tended to see the provision of conversion as in part an escape from the caste system into a new and more flexible social order, while higher caste converts were well aware of the fact that in case they abandoned Hinduism they were inevitably supposed to sacrifice their innate social status. In the old South Indian missions there were few converts from the highest castes, but substantial numbers of Sudra-origin Christians were intent on maintaining social links with their Hindu caste fellows and asserting their social superiority to Christians of lower caste origin. “Only if,” Forrester(1980:118) points out, “they continue to treat lower-caste Christians as

polluting could they maintain their standing in the broader community which the missionaries regarded as Hindu.” They were the most vocal section of the Christian community and the same produced the most of the native clergy, whose attitude toward caste practices tended to be markedly more tolerant than that of most missionaries, and who often quietly failed to implement the most vigorous assault on caste enjoined on them from above.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a segment of Indian Christian opinion which was strongly critical of the missionaries, particularly for their lack of understanding and sympathy for Indian culture and indigenous expressions of Christian faith and their general hostility towards the great surge of national feeling. Most of this new group of critics were first or second generation converts from high castes who were not clergymen nor employees of the missions. They had an attitude of independence and a strong standing which enabled them to be very outspoken from time to time, and yet some of their statements have a remarkable balance and authority.

Caste conflicts seem to be quite intense at higher levels in the church administrative hierarchy (Robinson 2003:78). A large proportion of the Christians, in the case of South India, were Sudras whose families had been Christian for several generations and who had Lutheran or Roman Catholic backgrounds, and hence experience of a milder discipline on the issue of caste. In the South the anti-Brahmin feeling which was widely diffused among the ‘Sudra castes’ served to reinforce the idea that caste was not in its essence a matter of religion. Those who rejected Brahmanical Hinduism abandoned religious caste and were left in an unexceptionable civil caste system which was in fact the indigenous social order of the country which had been perverted by the Brahmins. This view, in fact, was found not only among Sudra Christians but was widespread among Hindu Sudras as well in the early 19<sup>th</sup>

century. Both Christian and Hindu Sudras were attempting to 'debrahmanize' the caste system, secure in the hope that they would then be able to rise and enhance their position.

Converts of lower caste origin had found advancement in their social status after conversion, but hung on to caste observances as a kind of insurance against falling still lower. Higher caste converts knew that they could only fall in social esteem and despised those who were unwilling to make a similar sacrifice. It was understood generally that the break with caste at the time of conversion was final and irreversible. Christian elites assumed that the possibility of national renaissance depends upon the abolition of caste, and the only sure and effective antidote to caste is Christianity.

After Independence, too, caste has been played an increasingly important role in church politics. With the transfer of power from the foreign mission to the Indian leaders, caste is back again with a bang. There are two dimensions of caste mobilization in the churches. The first is inter-caste rivalry that permeates all church activities at all levels in terms of struggle for power and control over church resources. The second concerns the struggle of Dalit Christians whose frustrations for equality and dignity in the churches is leading to new forms of protest.

In Kerala the rivalry between Syrian Catholics and Latin Catholics have been building two parallel churches with two sets of bishops, clergy and other institutions. In Tamil Nadu it has been reported that caste differences have posed a more formidable obstacle to church union than theological or liturgical differences. The Lutheran Vellalas of Tamil Nadu apparently kept away from the church union movement of the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century for fear of domination by the more aggressive Nadars. Casteism may be even stronger at the highest levels of the church, who were mostly from higher castes. Caplan reports on what came to be regarded as a

scandalous case involving the selection of a Vellala bishop to the Madras diocese of the CSI by bypassing the more popular and experienced Harijan incumbent assistant bishop. This election was influenced by some very important church people who held that because the Madras diocese was the most important in the CSI it would not do to have a Harijan bishop. Apparently the bitterness generated by this election was a major factor in the subsequent bifurcation of the Madras diocese and the creation of a new diocese in the North Arcot area whose predominantly Harijan population was thus allowed to escape caste Christian control.

The above incident highlights the increasing disaffection of the Dalit Christians who find themselves treated as second class members of the church and excluded from positions of power in the church. In the case of Tamil Nadu, Dalits form 63 per cent of all Catholics but represent only 3.09 per cent of priests. They are also excluded from positions of power such as principals of schools and colleges and procurators. The Dalit priests are only put in charge of parishes that have exclusively Harijan members, in most cases. In the Mar Thoma church and the Jacobite church too there are no priests ordained from the backward classes. By and large it is assumed that the failure of the churches in improving the educational levels of Dalit Christians is directly correlated with the dominance of these churches by upper caste Christians. It is precisely in the mixed caste churches and regions that Dalit-upper caste and other inter-caste conflicts are most acute today.

Webster (2007: 179-87), too, shows the political aspect of caste within the Christian communities. As for the roles of Dalits in the churches, they have been assigned inferior roles in worship, funerals, celebrations, etc. to a large extent. In the distribution of power in the churches, Dalit inclusion in the church leadership was comparatively very low. Therefore, he said that "caste has certainly played its role in



their struggles for power within the churches, at least in the south. Where caste can provides the basis for informal political alliances from the congregational level on up, the basic division has been between Dalits and non-Dalits... The politics of caste affects not only elections to positions of leadership and power, but also appointments and promotions in Christian institutions” (ibid.: 184).

The Dalit Christians’ disillusionment, however, might be manifested in twofolds: the advantages that conversion once under missionary patronage have largely disappeared; and they are denied the advantages of Scheduled Caste status by the government of India because of their profession of Christianity. The reaction of the Dalits has been of three kinds in this respect. At first, many have left the Christian fold and reconverted to Hinduism thus also qualifying for the privileges accorded to Scheduled Castes. A second form of Dalit protest has given rise to exclusively Dalit churches either through secession from mainstream churches or through the founding of altogether new Dalit churches with new Dalit ideologies. The emergence of new churches founded by Dalits with Dalit ideologies is an interesting phenomenon not yet documented by social scientists. Thirdly, the most important form of Dalit Christian protest is seen in the emerging Dalit Christian movement within the churches, now inspired by liberation theology and an emerging Dalit theology. Dalit theology, in fact, perceives Christianity itself as a movement of Dalits and the Christian message as essentially a movement for the liberation of Dalits.

#### (4) WESTERN DISPUTE ON CASTE AND INDIAN RESPONSE

The caste system has been criticized by the Western missionaries throughout Indian church history. The understanding and adaptation of caste, in fact, has been challenged from the arrival of Western people, starting from the Portuguese. By and

large Western missionaries criticized evilness of Indian culture in general the caste system in particular.

Roman Catholic mission in India from the beginning appear to have regarded the caste system as the given and religiously neutral structure of Indian society within which the conversion of individuals and also the conversion of whole caste-groups might proceed. The earlier missionaries in Tamil Nadu, in fact, had acknowledged among the converts a distinction between those who came from Sudra castes and scheduled castes. For example, the Sudra men sat on one side of the nave and the others on the other during worship service. At holy communion too all the Sudras communicated first and the others afterwards. A similar distinction was observed in school to a large extent.

Anglicans bishop Heber in Tamil Nadu once ordered that the distinction of caste had to be abandoned, decidedly, immediately and finally, but it only provoked a flare among Indian Christians and missionaries. Most of the Indian catechists refused to carry out the bishop's policy, even if they were dismissed because of that. The new Jesuit missionaries, too, did not follow the methods of de Nobili later on. The problem constantly existed among missionaries of all denominations throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

However, the mission established by Robert de Nobili in Madurai in 1606 was an attempt to solve certain problems that had emerged in the course of the ministry of missionaries those days. Christianity, those days, became identified as the *parangi* religion, limited to foreigners and polluting castes, and the conversion for the higher castes was considered as equal to becoming a *parangi* and adopting a whole series of foreign and impure ways. De Nobili, therefore, set himself up as a Christian sannyasi, separating himself from most contact with lower caste Christians and conforming to

higher caste patterns of behavior in food, dress, etc.. “I am not a parangi”, he wrote, “I was not born in the land of the Parangi, nor was I ever connected with their race... The holy and spiritual law which holds this doctrine of mine does not make anyone lose his caste or pass into another, not does it induce anyone to do anything detrimental to the honor of his family”(Forrester 1980:15). De Nobili’s initial converts were Brahmans, Nayakkars of the royal caste, and others of higher social status. He also allowed them to maintain most of their customs, e.g., retaining their *tufts (kumudi)*, their sacred cord, their customary bathing, food rules, and all the regulations governing social intercourse. In particular they were not required to break caste by associating with Paravar Christian congregation or with foreign Christians. “By becoming a Christian”, he wrote, “one does not renounce his caste, nobility or usages. The idea that Christianity interfered with them has been impressed upon the people by the devil, and is the great obstacle to Christianity”(Forrester 1980:15). This made it possible, therefore, for them to remain as Christians within Hindu society interwoven with castes. De Nobili felt that the limitation of Christianity in the past to the lower caste had been a standing denial of the universality of the faith since he believed that the true god is not the God of one race but the God of all. However, de Nobili’s approach was severely challenged within the Catholic Church and led to the famous controversy about the so-called ‘Malabar Rites.’

In spite of papal decrees of 1734 and 1744 which denounced untouchability as alien to Christianity, and widespread criticism against the Jesuits who were identified with the policy of accommodation, it became generally accepted among Catholics that “caste was a civil institution which could be used for evangelistic purposes and maintained with only minor modifications within the Church”(Forrester 1980:16). The Curia, however, insisted on the point that whatever concessions might be made in

practice, the missionaries should make every effort to propagate everywhere the idea of the equality of all men before God. Hence a Catholic scholar writing in 1937 could notice “a gradual reduction in caste consciousness and caste observance within his church, but admitted that it still remained”(ibid.:16).

Indian Christians, however, believed in a different way in relation to the issue of caste. The Syrian Christians believed that lack of caste among Christians is an obstacle to the Malabarians' acceptance of Christianity. God created, they believed, several kinds or castes of men separately, which are to be distinguished by their calling and professions: one is not permitted to intermarry with another caste; two different castes may not eat together, nor use the same ceremonies in worship; the moment that they lose their caste, they can no longer converse, eat or drink with any of their caste, nor indeed with those of any other caste.

There turned up, therefore, two different perspectives about understanding caste. On the one hand they treated caste as simply irrelevant to their efforts, seeking to convert individuals whose keeping or breaking of caste would have no bearing on their religious profession. This point of view was unquestioned at the beginning and dominant for most of the time. On the other hand, it was possibly believed that India might be evangelized through the conversion of caste groups, which was possibly the position of Xavier and de Nobili. By and large, the old Lutheran missionaries, with few exceptions, had tolerated caste divisions among their people.

Protestant missionaries from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century were aggressively and consistently attacking caste and carried on a relentless onslaught on it as being inconsistent with Christianity. For them it was an inescapable problem of evangelistic strategy. This position was adopted later by more understanding and less ethnocentric missionaries, and in post-colonial India by the Indian church leaders. The statement

issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India in 1982 is representative of all church discourse(Tharamangalam 1996:284): “We state categorically that caste, with its consequent effects on discrimination and caste mentality, has no place in Christianity...It violates the God-given dignity and equality of the human person.”

William Carey, and most of his colleagues, were typical of the missionaries that came from the class of skilled mechanics with an almost innate desire to better standards and a deep distrust of rigid hereditary hierarchies. On the one hand, the missionary movement, the forerunner of which was William Carey, was in part an expression of a far wider development, i.e., the social emancipation of the under-privileged class in the Britain. On the other hand, it represented an export of this movement of emancipation. According to their theology, they put a premium on individual conversion and social structures which demanded spiritual and intellectual conformity.

William Carey and his colleagues, at first, appear to have been willing to tolerate a degree of caste distinction both in their schools and among their converts. However, both the Hindu assertion that caste status would be lost after conversion and the realization that it was caste rather than faith which restrained some people from seeking baptism led the missionaries to develop a criticism against caste. They also developed a dual strategy for its overthrow: a running battle with the caste system as a whole in the belief that this was a central element in the total engagement with idolatry; and the complete exclusion of caste-based observances from the indigenous church. They saw caste as “a prison, far stronger than any which the civil tyrannies of the world have erected; a prison which immures many innocent beings”(Forrester 1980:25-6). “Caste”, wrote Carey, “has cut off all motives to inquiry and exertion, and made stupid contentment the habit of their lives”(Forrester 1980:26). Caste therefore

was understood in terms not only of conversion, but also of enlightenment and progress as well. The missionaries believed that the caste system being in itself a vicious institution formed an integral part of the whole system of idolatry and served to maintain that system in the face of every challenge and disturbance. They concluded that it was the most cursed invention of the devil that ever existed and the masterpiece of hell.

But they were by no means demanding that their converts should be assimilated to western ways and manners, nor was their approach to Indian culture in general by any means negative and aggressive. Potts, one of the early Bengal missionaries, contended that it was not his wish to have their profession of faith in Christianity alienate them from their own society. He said that: "No, we wish you to remain Hindus, but to become Christian Hindus, and to leave off the worship of idols and all sin, and to become holy men"(Forrester 1980:27). Carey's flexibly accommodating philosophy of mission within the indigenous civilization projected them Christian missionaries rather than agents of western cultural imperialism. Yet before long the rejection of caste pioneered by Carey and his companions became generally associated with an emphatically hostile attitude towards Indian culture as a whole.

Let us look at the educational institutions established by Western missionaries, which played an important role in attacking the caste system as a whole. From the beginning protestant missions in India had been involved in education as an instrument of evangelism. As Srinivas points out, "while educated Indians dislike deeply the evangelizing aspect of missionary work, they readily acknowledge the good work done by the missionaries in providing education...to all sections of the population, and especially to Untouchables and women"(1992:79). Education was one of the new factors affecting dominance, which emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century under the rule

of British. Western education was significant in contributing to the prestige and power of particular caste groups. Even though other missions those days were involved in education and used the schools as agencies of evangelism, the Scotland missionaries were the first to use education as an invaluable weapon in the struggle against caste and to affirm that a liberal and Christian education could not recognize or tolerate caste observances within its walls. They saw education as both primary technique of mission and a weapon which could only maintain its integrity if turned relentlessly against caste. "The principle of equality," as Srinivas points out, "found expression... in the opening of the new schools and colleges...to all irrespective of religion, race, and caste"(1992:49).

Alexander Duff, who came to Calcutta in 1829 as a member of Scottish Missionary Society, provided a new angle to the question of combating caste. The motto of the Scottish missionary enterprise was from the word of the Bible: "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea"(Isaiah 11:9). Duff had an elitist notion of education, in the sense that resources were to be concentrated initially on giving a thorough education in English to the minority capable of benefiting, in the expectation that these benefits would filter down throughout the society. The filtration theory involved commitment to a breaking down of caste and its replacement with a class system giving more place to competition and permitting a degree of social mobility. According to Duff, the old elite must, through education, be replaced with a new dynamic, and improving elite if India were to be reformed and the Indian 'renaissance' and 'reformation' were to become possible.

The artificial institution of caste, according to Duff, cannot long survive the period when the youth of India shall be led by the daily habit of their lives to disregard it. The new elite was to be open as the old had never been, and openness

was the precondition for the progress of the human mind and the development of a new and more inclusive sense of community. It also revealed a widespread and intense desire for English education among the higher castes, people whom he judged to be in the urban environment more open to change and new ideas than those to whom missionaries had hitherto devoted their main attention. Caste, Duff believed, was not a civil but a sacred institution, and its overthrow would be simultaneous with the destruction of idolatry. According to him, idolatry and superstition are like the stones and bricks of a huge fabric, and caste is the cement which pervades and closely binds the whole. Duff was one of the most able and convincing apologists for the missionary attack on caste. However, it is arguable that the educational tradition that he set up did more than anything else to spark off the widespread questioning of caste so characteristic of modern India.

By the 1850s virtually all the protestant missions were in agreement in holding that caste was a great evil that must be ruthlessly uprooted from the Church. In 1847 the American Madurai Mission insisted that all employees should demonstrate their rejection of caste by taking part in 'love-feasts,' eating with missionaries and Christians from various castes since the food was usually prepared by a cook of lower caste. A resolution of the Madras Missionary Conference in 1848 had laid it down that only those who broke caste by eating food prepared by a pariah should be entitled to baptism. Caste, those missionaries believed, is "one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the Gospel in India"(Forrester 1980:42). According to them, caste was much more than a merely civil distinction. Whatever it may have been in its origin, they believed, it is now adopted as an essential part of the Hindu religion.

The Revolt of 1857, however, transformed the whole atmosphere within which the caste question was discussed by underlining the centrality of the problem and the



extreme urgency of finding the correct solution. Many missionaries saw in the Revolt the inevitable outburst of conflict between Christianity and caste, which no official professions of neutrality could indefinitely postpone. Many missionaries, therefore, believed that now was the time to enforce on society as a whole the principles which had been applied at such pain and expense in the churches in the first half of the century.

Most missionaries were concerned that converts from the lowest ranks of society should be enabled to escape from the disabilities and status which caste society had imposed upon them, and were willing to move the courts and petition government to this end. The incompatibility between caste and the continuance of the Raj was shown most convincingly, most missionaries believed, in the ranks of the native army. Beyond all controversy, they believed, it was the war-cry of caste that first effectually roused the native soldiers to the required pitch of desperation. The course for which they pleaded as the only logical consequence of 1857 was a firm re-imposition of the British yoke, now explicitly recognized to be Christian, and antagonistic to caste.

In sum, the perspective of Western missionaries on caste was negative and aggressive by and large, even though there have been attempts to understand it as part of Indian culture and social system and, thus, to adapt it in a moderate form in their church ministries.

## The Identity Question and the Indian Christians

The classical understanding of identity is well explained in Kurien's book, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India* (2002). Prof. Jodhka's edited book, *Community and Identities: Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India*, too, introduces many identity issues in detail especially among non-Hindu communities.

In relation to identity issues of Indian Christianity, some deeper and thoughtful works were done by various scholars. Robinson connotes this matter in her books, e.g., *Christians of India* (2003), *Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Goa* (1998), *Sociology of Religion in India* (2004). Webster's books, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (2007), too, mentions about identity issues especially among the Dalit Christians.

Identity in this study refers to especially 'ethnic identity.' Ethnicity defines (Marshall 2006:201) from the dictionary meaning "those individuals who consider themselves, or are considered by others, to share common characteristics, such as religion, occupation, language or politics, which differentiate them from the other collectivities in a society within which they develop distinct cultural behavior." Kurien (2002:22), in her study among different religious immigration groups, uses the term ethnicity as "the identity, culture, and practices of a group of people who feel a sense of connection based on a notion of common heritage." According to her, ethnicity "is not just created and maintained by group members, but it is also constructed by external social, economic and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions. Group development may arise as a consequence of the attribution by others of a common identity to individuals sharing

certain characteristics”(ibid.:22). In this case, caste is, of course, one of the most important characteristics which decide the ethnic identity of a particular group of people.

It has been noticed in Indian church history that “a conversion movement is like a kind of group identity crisis, in which the group passes through a negative rejection of their lowly place in Hindu society to a positive affirmation of a new social and religious identity”(Forrester 1980:77). In this regard the conversion to Christianity in Hindu-centered Indian society, whether it is an individual or group conversion, could be dealt with identity to a very large extent. As Robinson(2003:65) points out, conversion involves not only the change of religious beliefs and ideas but also “*larger social process of transformation*”(italics are mine).

In this section I would like to look at the identity formation of Indian Christians and its crisis and the dynamic re-formulation of their own identity in a new Indian society. First of all, the early stage of Indian Christianity, i.e., 1<sup>st</sup> to early 16<sup>th</sup> century, will be looked at in the first section. This is important because this period of time provides the seedbed for identity formation for Indian Christians.

#### (1) THE IDENTITY FORMATION OF INDIAN CHRISTIANS

In the minds of ordinary Indians, Christianity seems to be a product of Western conquest or British colonization(Robinson 2003:31). As a matter of fact, Christianization was carried out along with trade and conquest from the period of the Portuguese(ibid.:42). This view leads naturally to a negative perception about Christianity as a whole regarding Christianity as an alien and anti-national entity. However, as we have seen above, Christianity has been planted in Indian soil 20

centuries ago, i.e., long before Western Christianity was imported, and has been maintaining an amicable relationship with other people who belonged to different religious backgrounds. Moreover, most of them were of comparatively higher castes. In this sense St Thomas Christians gives Indian Christianity an important perspective in its identity formulation. As Oommen(2000:40) commented, therefore, it has “great psychological and sociological significance: Psychologically, such a perception is important in that it helps to attach the involved population to a long tradition which in turn invests them with dignity and pride. Sociologically, such a cognition defines Indian Christianity as a pre-colonial phenomenon which is of tremendous existential consequence.”

However, the identity of Indian Christians from the beginning has been formulated after the two different cultural backgrounds. Syrian Christians, for example, developed rituals and a lifestyle distinct to them and yet drew profusely from the local cultural reservoir of Kerala. Yet in matters of Christian doctrine and beliefs they were heavily dependent on the East-Syrian Church. Their cognitive world was located in the geographical, political and social world of Malabar(or Kerala) and the ecclesiastical world of the East-Syrian Church. It is presented therefore that “they lived in two different worlds simultaneously—the socio-cultural world of India and the ecclesiastical world of Persia”(Oommen 2000:41). Even after the arrival of the Portuguese and the Western Protestant missionaries, Indian Christians were located under the strong influence of the West to an extreme extent. In this sense the identity of Indian Christians has been formulated in a complication of Indian and foreign influences.

It has, however, never been challenged from outside by that time and it seems that they had no conflict in this regard. For the early Indian Christians, they had the

clear consciousness of the fact that they were the descendents of the St Thomas. The prelates of the East-Syrian Church governed the Indian Christians in terms of all church-related matters, and the latter too were so much attached to the Persian Church that they would not have even dreamed of an existence apart from it. From tradition and history too it seems that the Indian church from very early times depended on the East-Syrian Church not only for its prelates but also for its manner of worship both in the liturgy proper and the other official functions of the Church.

In this regard, M.G.S. Narayan observes (Mundadan 1989: 153) that “the massive organism of Hindu society offered hospitality to other creeds from time to time leading to a situation where peaceful coexistence of different communities became necessary and possible.” The multi-colored Kerala society, in fact, has been woven through many centuries with different religions, i.e., Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, coexisting without losing their identity or even their contrast in character. Each religion, it must be noticed, brought to it not only a creed but also its own specific way of life. In the case of Christians, they received Hindu names, and practiced rituals of worship like the use of native *nilavilakku*, and accepted social customs like the wearing of *tali* by the bride. To a great extent, it can be said, there was a balanced position in the identity formation of early Indian Christians in the relations with other religious especially Hindu peoples. Robinson also noticed that “Christians and Hindus... share caste identities and are assimilated into a single system of hierarchy and ritual exchange” (2003:70).

When the Portuguese first came to India and encountered the Syrian Christians, the relationship between the two was quite friendly. Each side respected each other and was ready to accept the other as brethren. But before long, as mutual understanding increased, it became more and more apparent that there were

differences between them. And the Portuguese ecclesiastics, since they were Western Catholics, i.e., Roman Catholics, believed that the Roman Church was the only true form of the Church and its doctrines and practices were to be the standard for all Christians in the world. All other forms of Christianity, according to them, were heretics. The Syrian Christians in Kerala, however, attached to the Persian Church, i.e., Eastern Church, acknowledging as their head not the Pope of Roman Catholics but the Patriarch of the Persian Church. Portuguese, as members of the Roman Catholic Church, began to be more conscious of the differences and tried to persuade the Kerala Christians to follow Western Catholic ways.

In sum, three points might be acknowledged in relation to this section that could be helpful to understand the identity formulation of Indian Christians: 1) Christianity has been existing for more than 20 centuries in Indian soil even before colonization by the British, which could help formulate a proper identity for Indian Christians; and 2) Indian Christians, in its initial stage, were of higher caste backgrounds and had enjoyed a peaceful relationship with other religious background peoples; and 3) they underwent, however, cognitive conflict during the process of identity formulation mainly due to their double position.

## (2) IDENTITY CRISIS OF INDIAN CHRISTIANS

Till the early 16<sup>th</sup> century Indian Christians never experienced the conflict of identity within themselves in Hindu-cultured society. In the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Portuguese began to introduce the teachings of Western Catholicism among the Syrian Christians and encouraged them to accept those teachings. They continued to attempt to bring the entire Malabar Church into conformity with Western ways and under the government of Portuguese bishops. There is one example. In the

year 1541 Fr. Vincent de Lagos, a Portuguese Franciscan, opened a school for Syrian boys at Cranganore. A few years later, John de Albuquerque, a Franciscan, turned it into a seminary for the training of young Syrian Christians for the priesthood. The aim of the school, according to Fr. Vincent, was to latinize the students. He taught them, for example, Latin and the doctrine and ritual of the Roman Church. No liturgy other than the Latin one was taught and practiced in the activities of the school. It was designed, in fact, to “mould the young minds of the students in the Latin spirit and shut out any Oriental influence”(Mundadan 1989:337).

This policy, however, achieved only a limited success because of the opposition by the bishop of the Syrian Church, who refused to ordain those who graduated from the seminary because they did not know Syriac and were too much westernized. After the death of Mar Abuna Jacob, the last survivor of the four Nestorian bishops who arrived in 1504 and also was so active in reviving the Malabar Church, in the year of 1549, Indian Church did not receive a successor from Persia for six or seven years. The Syrian Christians of India were not taken care of without a bishop of their own, and the only bishop in the country was the Portuguese one in Goa. Since St Thomas Christians were heavily relying on the Persian Church for their prelates, they had been periodically deprived of prelates and consequently of a sufficient number of priests to look after their spiritual needs. In this situation the attempts of the Portuguese to make Indian Christians westernized were not able to be successful. It is noticed that “repeated attempts to make them accept the Latin rite met with stout resistance and therefore, failed. The St. Thomas Christians continued to retain their Oriental identity, though there were some changes due to Latin influence”(Mundadan 1989:348).

The attitude of the priests and the missionaries of the Portuguese, however, intended always to make the Indian Christians conform to the Portuguese ways and

manners. The St. Thomas Christians, on the other hand, were of a different view. They could not accept the idea that only the Latin form of Christianity was the true Christianity. They could never entertain the idea of giving up their customs and practices, both social and ecclesiastical, which had been sacred to them for many centuries. At the same time they were not fully unreceptive to certain good influences coming from the western Christians.

The St Thomas Christians, however, came to be influenced more and more as the political power of the Portuguese in India had been increasing. They told the Portuguese that they welcomed greatly the arrival of the Portuguese in India and that their lord sent allegiance to the king of Portugal whom they accepted as their king and to whom they were presenting their 'rod of justice.' They also asked the Portuguese protection for them. They demanded da Gama, for instance, to take them into his protection and to defend them in the name of the king of Portugal, whose dependents they pledged themselves to remain from that day onwards. Da Gama too promised them protection in the name of the king, saying that he himself would protect them and all the other captains who would come to India after him would do so. As for the ecclesiastical guidelines for their Christian life, they fully appreciated, at least in the initial stage, the plan of the Portuguese to give them more instruction in relation to doctrine and practical disciplines.

The motives of conversion at this time were mostly motivated in most cases by material benefits. The special financial subsidy, for example, the governor offered to the converts acted as a great incentive to conversion. The applications for baptism increased considerably, but there was no proper preparation for baptism. Although the clerics were generally enthusiastic about evangelization and conversion, many of the officials were often cool in this regard. In spite of all these limitations and difficulties



a good beginning was made by the clergy, and many secular Portuguese officials extended a helping hand to them. It could be, therefore, said that the socio-cultural milieu which the new Christians lived in was too protective and westernized, somewhat isolated from their own kith and kin, might have affected the formation of their identity as a member of their own country.

Till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century after the arrival of the Portuguese the identity making of Indian Christians was influenced greatly by the Western missionaries. The pattern set for Protestant mission those days, for example, was too subordinate to European missionaries, which was a typical form found everywhere, i.e., orphanages and charity schools on the one hand and preaching and catechizing on the other. Many of Indian ministers, well tested and approved, of course, were decidedly subordinate to Western missionaries. The missionary was, in fact, regarded as “the head of a community, on the same principle as native headmen were recognized, and was permitted to fine, flog, and otherwise punish offenders belonging to his community”(Firth 2005:143-4).

De Nobili, however, is recorded as the first missionary who tried to indianize himself according to the so-called ‘adaptation’ theory as we have seen above. As a member of the Italian nobility he claimed to be the equivalent of a Kshatriya. It seemed however that the state of life best corresponding to his position as a priest and a religious teacher would be that of a sannyasi-guru. He was criticized, however, from Christian side, that he went too far and that he allowed, as a result, the caste system in the church. It might be recognizable in any case that he was the only one those days who made an thorough-going attempt to indianize Christianity, which challenged Indian Christians to shape their own identity according to their own cultural background and spiritual heritage.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there turned up a new spirit among Indian churches,

through which Indian Christians tried to change their attitudes to Western missionaries, which was too submissive, and further find their own identity. There was a segment of Indian Christian opinion which was strongly critical of the missionaries, particularly for their lack of understanding and sympathy for Indian culture and indigenous expressions of Christian faith and their general hostility towards the great surge of national feeling. Forrester points out that(1980:119):

Some of this criticism was directed specifically against the missionary line on caste, which was interpreted as an aggressive attack on Indian social structure which totally lacked an understanding of the merits of the caste system and really had nothing except the probably even more desirable western class system to put in its place. More cogent, in many ways, was the suggestion that the missionaries had failed quite remarkably to see the bearing of the Christian social ethic they propounded on their own social relations to Indians, and on the imported divisions of the church.

Most of this new group of critics were first or second generation converts from the higher castes who were not engaged by the Western missions directly. This made it possible probably for them to have an independent attitude against the Western missionaries and to be very outspoken from time to time against the same with a balance and authority. Starting from the debates on caste issue, their attempts to form their own identity had been unfolded through a series of struggle, about which I will present below.

**Tanjore Debate in 1824:** The earliest arguments used by Indian Christians opposed to the missionaries' hard line on caste came from the mid-1820. When Bishop Heber became aware that caste disputes were causing bitter disruptions in many churches of South India, he consulted a widely respected Indian pastor, Rev. Christian David. Many dissident Christians in Tanjore and other places, appealed to

the bishop complaining that the missionaries were interfering with their customs and practices needlessly and arrogantly. Heber asked David that whether the dissidents object to intercourse with the Pariars on any superstitious ground of caste, or simply because they belong to the economically meaner rank of society. Heber found that it was hard to see any really substantial difference between the European notions of class, which were perfectly acceptable to him, and the practices which the missionaries were trying to suppress as heathenish. David's response was as follows(Forrester 1980:120-1):

Caste is the only notion of rank understood and accepted by most Indians, but is in itself in no way superstitious. Caste ranking is different in kind from ranking in terms of wealth or occupation: a wealthy Pariah who has given up the degrading occupations traditional to his caste, remains a Pariah and those of higher caste, Christian or Hindu, will not associate with him...It thus happens that low-caste catechists are listened to with deference and attention by caste Christians, although they are not socially acceptable beyond very narrow limits. Because of their customary occupations and habits the Pariahs, even Christian Pariahs, are feared as a source of contamination by even the Christian native of India...As a consequence, the feelings in question with the practices resulting from them were visibly losing ground.

In fact, younger missionaries those days had sponsored an aggressive attack on caste which went hand in hand with disparagement of the older missionaries and their achievements. David's recommendation was that "the bishop should reprimand the junior missionaries for their impetuosity and disregard for the customs and feelings of their congregations, while at the same time addressing a pastoral letter to the converts explaining to them from the Bible, the utter opposition of all proud notions of caste to the gospel, and intimating the earnest wish of their European instructors to remove this, with as little offence as possible to any of their national feelings or prejudices,

without touching any just and proper distinction of rank, education, or degree in society”(Forrester 1980:121). From this debate it was clearly noticed that caste, according to Heber, was in essence a civil distinction closely parallel to European notions of rank, and observance of caste did not affect adversely the life of the church, and further the individually-kept social ethics of converts were not the legitimate concern of the missionaries.

As a matter of fact, the impetuosity of young missionaries was the origin of the so-called Tanjore debate in 1834. A substantial part of the Tanjore church had resisted the missionaries’ attack on caste. It was partly because the large proportion of the Christians were Sudras whose families had been Christians for several generations in the Lutheran or Roman Catholic backgrounds, and thus experienced of a milder discipline on the caste issue. They emphasized that the caste distinctions are civil rather than religious and are closely analogous to European notions of rank, degree and class. Since the young missionaries failed to recognize any distinction between civil and religious aspects of social order, they found themselves committed to an ill-considered and virtually all-inclusive attack on all things Indian. Thus they rejected not only caste distinctions but the *kudumi*(topknot), the use of garlands at marriages, the use of Indian musical instruments in church, and so forth, which were cultural heritage for Indians as a whole.

**Madras Debate in 1834:** After ten years, however, another debate on caste took place in Madras among a group of young converts attached to the Free Church of Scotland’s school in Madras. This time the Indian Christians wholeheartedly and most intelligently supported a strong line against caste. Their arguments demonstrated both a remarkable understanding of western culture and a profound understanding of Hinduism and the true nature of caste.

John Anderson, the founder of the institution, posed five questions on caste to six of his converts. These were as follows (Ferrester 1980:125):

- (1) Is caste inseparably connected with Hinduism, or is it not?
- (2) Can Caste with truth be called a civil distinction, chiefly designed to preserve a family from deterioration by intermarriage with other families?
- (3) Do our native Free Church brethren regard caste as part and parcel of idolatry, and of all heathen abominations?
- (4) Is the idea of pollution in the Hindu mind separable from the system of caste, or not?
- (5) Can caste be compared for a moment with the European distinctions in society?

Half of the six converts were recognized as candidates for the ministry and were undergoing the equivalent of the full 'Scottish Arts and Divinity' curriculum of the time. All of them were soundly educated and, at baptism, renounced caste. Ramanoojooloo, one of the six, however, took a long time in a state of indecision before seeking baptism, and after baptism returned to the Hindu fold for a long time, and finally settled down in the church. Perhaps he wondered why Christians, in casting off caste, should build another barrier between themselves and the Hindus, which was, for him, so similar to a caste division.

Those days two different attitudes against caste system were found among Indian Christians. Converts of low-caste origin used to hang on to caste observances as a kind of insurance against falling still lower even after advancement. As for the high-caste converts, however, the break with caste at the time of conversion was final and irreversible. Even though it cannot be denied that caste has in it some elements of a civil nature, but it is chiefly a religious institution, for as the soul is connected with the body, so caste is connected with Hinduism.

According to Anderson and his converts, caste militates against ordinary acts of

humanity and is a standing denial of love and humility, which are the main ethos of Christianity. Further, they argue, caste makes distinctions among creatures what God made equal and attaches moral impurity where God does not. It is a great barrier, according to them, to the propagation of the gospel for the Christian who retains caste and hopes to use it as an instrument for the spread of Christianity. By doing so, further, destroys his own credibility, dishonors Christianity, and confirms the heathens in their idolatries, they argued. Anderson's converts believed that secular education in itself is not enough to destroy the domination of caste and that a radical change of heart, conversion, is required for the purpose.

As we have seen above, the opposite perspective against the caste is found among the Indian Christians, which shows the advancement as well as conflict in the process of identity making of Indian Christians.

**Calcutta Movement:** Krishna Mohan Banerjea, a student of Duff, who later became known as the profounder of a theology in which Vedic religion found its fulfillment in Christianity, published a prize essay on Hindu Caste 1851. Banerjea's essay is notable for the range of its citations from Sanskrit sacred writings and for its inside knowledge of caste. He demonstrates from a wide range of sources that caste has always been a religious no less than a civil institution, and he argues that both in origin and development the system has served the selfish interests of the Brahmans. The essence of his argument was distinctively his own, and much more secular than was common among the missionaries of his time. Caste is, according to him, the main cause for the decadence and humiliation of India. The institution of caste, he pointed out, by forcing professions on men without regard to their qualifications and tastes, has a tendency to fill the country with bad priests, bad warriors, bad mechanics, etc.. In this logic it might be possible people cannot be expected to improve a science of an

art in which they feel no interest, nor are they likely to take an interest in those things, to which they are wedded by birth, not inclination.

Those days Banerjea and Lal Behari Day, both students of Duff, were recognized as the fathers of "Indian-Christian nationalism." Banerjea, an already deeply patriotic thinker, was against caste because it is the principal cause of India's humiliation and so does put an end to unity and strength in the nation. He argued that (Ferrester 1980:129): "a people, divided and sub-divided like the Hindus can never make head against any power that deserves the name...The possibility of national renaissance depends upon the abolition of caste, and the only sure and effective antidote to caste is Christianity: if India be destined in the counsels of providence to look up once more among the nations of the earth, it will only be by unlearning the institution of caste, and by adopting the religion of her present rulers with all its temporal and spiritual blessings."

**Madras Movement:** An apparently similar movement in Madras shared with the Calcutta movement which presented resentment at missionary paternalism, and with the demand for more autonomy in theology and church organization as well as rejection of sectarian differences imported from the West. The main source of this movement was the National Church founded in 1885 by Dr. S. Pulney Andy, a medical man trained and converted in England. The National Church, however, was also notably cool towards the missionary attack on caste, which became a refuge for Christians who believed that caste was compatible with the Gospel.

Nehemiah Goreh, a Konkani Brahmin convert, who had both considerable understanding of Hinduism and orthodox understanding of Christianity, showed another extreme line accepting the missionary idea on caste without question.

Christianity with caste, according to his conception, would be no Christianity at all. He was increasingly drawn into the reawakened nationalist movement and felt that he was called to identify himself socially to the full with Hindu society. He argued that the foreign clothes of the Catholic faith had chiefly prevented his countrymen from perceiving its universal nature. He argued that(Ferrester 1980:131):

Catholicism had donned the European garb in India, according to him. Our Hindu brethren cannot see the subtlety and sanctity of our divine religion because of its hard coating of Europeanism...When the Catholic Church in India will be dressed in Hindi garments then will our countrymen perceive that she elevates men to the Universal Kingdom of Truth by stooping down to adapt herself to his racial peculiarities.

Somehow he came to the point that in all save religion he was a Hindu, and so he decided to undergo a purifying ceremony, i.e, *prayaschitta*, to signify his full re-entry into Hindu society after having mixed his European fellowmen. He mentioned that(Ferrester 1980:131): “in customs and manners, in observing caste and social distinction, in eating and drinking, in our life and living, we are genuine Hindus; but in our faith we are neither Hindus nor European, nor American, nor Chinese, but all inclusive. Our faith fills the whole world and is not confined to any country or race; our faith is universal and consequently includes all truths.”

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was becoming obvious, in the more nationalistic climate of opinion, that the Christian attack on caste was not about to cause the collapse of Hindu society and that Christian communalism was withdrawing more Christians from a general concern for the good of society and involvement with the national movement, thus creating a real danger that the church would become an alien minority encapsulated within Hindu society and incapable of relating in any meaningful way with that society.



### (3) NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF INDIAN CHRISTIANS

The identity construction of Indian Christians on a national level, by and large, was set off from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cultural and religious renaissances which had been a feature of the nineteenth century in a number of places changed emphatically into political struggle in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the religious side the reaction took the form of a reassertion and defense of Hinduism in modified versions, such as Arya Samaj or Ramakrishna Mission. On the political side it appeared as an impatience of the British rule and an aspiration towards independence. However, it seemed that not many Christians took a direct and active participation in the political struggle for *swaraj*. So far as the majority of the community was concerned, the rising national self-consciousness was rather slow to affect them. It might be because most Indian Christians were content to live under the firmly settled order of the British Raj and the paternal rule of missionaries. Yet the Christian community sympathized more and more with the aim of the Congress in the later stages of the struggle for independence. But the attitude of hostility to Christian community as a whole, which could be found ordinary Congressman, made them chary of participating more actively with them.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, became a period of growing nationalism, in which both the intensity and the diffusion of national consciousness were vastly and swiftly increased. At the turn of the century had witnessed largely a cultural nationalism confined to a small intellectual elite and usually qualified by professions who were loyal to the British Raj. Yet by the late twenties there emerged an explicit demand for *swaraj* backed by massive popular support. This new spirit could not but affect the churches, even though it was rather belated and started peripherally, for most missions had strong paternalist structures which made it difficult for Christians to identify themselves with the national movement without

drawing down the wrath of the leadership of their missions. It was also because that “most missions saw their destinies as closely bound up with the continuance of the Raj, and it was only a minority of Indian Christians who saw the national movement in positive terms and identified themselves with it”(Ferrester 1980:173). This minority, however, included a number of remarkable figures, and the questions they proposed about the role of the church in relation to India’s national aspirations and about the foreign control of most branches of the Indian Church had a cumulative and liberating effect.

After a long struggle of Indian Christians to shake missionary dominance in the churches, it became more and more obvious in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that there was less intellectual dependence on the missionaries and more independence from them in the reflection of the theological and social views in the context of Indian context. For the most part Indian Christians worked out either independently of the missionaries or in an equal and co-operative dialogue with those missionaries who were identified with the new national mood of India. It is also true that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century more Indians were able to encounter contemporary European theology directly for themselves without missionary filtering, and as a consequence a number of Indians began to contribute to international and ecumenical theological debates of the contemporary times. At this period of time, in fact, Indian churches emphasized on national and cultural factors and had much in common with the theology that had more tolerant attitude towards caste and cultural norms of India. Indian theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century further had been obliged to tackle problems presented by the large numbers of mass movement conversions from the depressed classes. This continued at a very significant level in many parts of India well into the 1930s, which happened as a response on the part of the most underprivileged and degraded sections of society to

the uncompromising opposition to caste and affirmation of the equality and dignity of man, which had characterized most of the Protestant denominations since the mid-nineteenth century. The attitude of the depressed classes this time provided a totally convincing justification of the uncompromising opposition to caste system and the radical distinction between Christianity and all things Hindu. Those who inaugurated the ashram movement continued intellectual work among the educated classes, and those who were involved in the national movement had to develop a theological critique of the exclusive emphasis on mass movements.

Conversion, of course, had a political dimension and there were significant Christian thinkers who cast a critical eye at the mass movement strategy because they feared that it would cause Indian Church to become a community in conscious opposition to the Hindu community and to be concerned exclusively for its own growth and welfare rather than for the wider good of the nation. The problem continued after Independence as Christians struggled to understand their role as a small minority in a secular or religiously neutral state. The irrelevance of western denominational distinctions became increasingly obvious and the struggle against casteism within the church continued with varying success. Indian Christian thinkers increasingly questioned about the caste system and the rejection of untouchability as the century drew on, culminating in the constitutional abolition of untouchability and the protective legislation for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in independent India. The fact that it had become unfashionable to defend caste, and that the influence of caste was now commonly regarded as a malignant growth, presented a most important change. The protective discrimination for Scheduled Castes and Tribes reversed at a blow the possible economic and educational advantages of conversion to Christianity, and indeed provided now compelling disincentives to conversions from the

underprivileged groups. On the other hand this liberated the church from large-scale conversions intended only for economic motives. Yet the fact that conversions continued on an appreciable scale suggested that Christianity still had attractive power independent of any material considerations.

However, most of all Christian thinkers in India after 1920 had to relate their thought to Mahatma Gandhi and his movement. Most Christians were enthusiastic supporters of Gandhi's attack on untouchability, but many saw differences between Gandhi's notions on *varnashramadharma* and any Christian ideas on the proper ordering of society. Many Christian thinkers, however, shared Ambedkar's feeling that the effect of a general acceptance of Gandhian techniques among the Untouchables might weaken their collective position.

**Christian Nationalists:** Now let us have a look about Indian Christians' involvement in Indian independence movement. Surendra Kumar Datta (1878-1942), K.T. Paul (1876-1931) and S. K. Rudra (1861-1925)<sup>8</sup> may well be counted as the fathers of Indian Christian nationalism. They were pioneers in moving the Indian Church, or at least a significant section of it, into a position more sympathetic to nationalism and in remaining effective Christian leaders of all-India stature who were also deeply committed nationalists. None of these saw the solution of the social problems of India as the simple displacement of the caste system by western social order, or by a Christian one if such a thing ever exists. They could discern some positive virtues in traditional Indian society as well as much injustice and inhumanity in it. What they sought was a kind of synthesis based on a Christian discrimination of

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<sup>8</sup> Paul was an officer of the YMCA for most of his active life while Rudra and Datta were both college principals—Rudra the first Indian principal of the St. Stephen's College in Delhi, Datta principal of Forman Christian College, Lahore, a member of the Legislative Assembly, and a participant at the Second Round Table Conference.

what was best in the social traditions of East and West. Even though they acknowledged the usefulness of the caste system in the past, they argued that caste had become tyrannical. Thus ethical charges of great substance, according to them, had to be laid against the caste system because it fragmented rather than united the broader community and made nationalism, in a true sense, impossible. Caste, according to them, presents the greatest of all obstacles to evangelism, for Hinduism itself is excessively tolerant to heterodoxy of belief. While it is possible, they argue, that caste may be modified to make it less objectionable or even in such a way that the enormous power of the system may be exercised in the interests of morality, at present the church must be utterly opposed to caste both within itself and in society at large. If caste distinctions are tolerated in the church, they insisted, it would be fatal to the influence and power of Indian Christianity. According to them, the Christian contribution to the new India of a broader and more flexible idea of fellowship and a more liberated notion of individuality depends utterly upon the maintenance of an uncompromising stand on caste.

**The Rethinking Christian Group:** In the aftermath of the First World War a number of South Indian Christians began to work together in a loose group around the Christo Samaj, the Bangalore Continuation Conference and a Journal, the Christian Patriot. They were all nationalists, although their precise political affiliations varied, and most of them were graduates of the Madras Christian college. They attempted to reconsider in the light of their knowledge of Indian thought, society and culture, the doctrine, structure and mission of Christianity in India. For this purpose, they did published a series of books, pamphlets and articles, jointly and sometimes independently by a particular member of the group. The best known of these publications is *Rethinking Christianity in India* (1938).

Most of the members of the group were suspicious and critical of the present

form of the church in India as overtly western and basically uncongenial to the Indian spirit, and so they suggested reforms in liturgy, church architecture and so on. P. Chenchiah, one of the members, made a thoroughgoing critique of the church as a hindrance to the gospel, and encumbrance to the Christian mission, which startled most of his contemporaries with its clear suggestion that it was possible and indeed desirable to have a churchless Christianity. According to him, there should be open areas in society where the individual owns no master and suffers no external restraint and the free space should be the domain of religion. Hinduism, according to him, organizes strongly on the social side in order that man may be free religiously and the sadhu, for example, stands beyond the obligations of caste which is the ruling norm of the society. The existence of a formally organized church, he argued, was not a necessary implication of Christian faith, nor necessary for its continuation and propagation. He did not think of replacing the church with nothing but a loose alliance of Christian ashrams. The choice for Chenchiah was between Christianity as a movement with the spiritual power to transform Hindu society and Christianity as a community in a country long blighted by communalism and doomed inevitably to become a caste which was incapable of presenting either a religious or a social challenge. He argued that (Ferrester 1980:183):

The Christian community has the unique opportunity of rising above caste and community in this caste-ridden and communal India. I hope it will not surrender this high calling and be caught up in the passing show. In India to become a community is to purchase an assured future at the sacrifice of a great adventure. It would please every other community in India should we settle down like themselves into a community.

V. Chakkarai and Eddy Asirvatham were the two Christians leaders those days whom one would expect to develop a theory of the Church's relation to Indian society

and the Christian's role in social and political life. Chakkarai, in fact, was deeply involved in politics and Asirvatham was a professional political scientist. A casteless and classless society, according to Chakkarai, is the ideal of the social revolutionary, as of the Christian. While he believed that it is more important to be a Christian than a churchman, he clearly saw the church as an organized body having a major role in the overcoming of caste, class, and national differences and inequalities. He argued that Church is constituted not by mere cults but by communion with the living Lord for social action; therefore Church should be supra-national and the members of Church should consider themselves and act as such, refusing allegiance to earthly states when they do things contrary to the abolition of inequality and the establishment of an egalitarian order. Asirvatham argued that only Christianity is capable of freeing man in any real sense from thralldom to caste and communalism, giving a truly national and international outlook. Even though he is clear that the Christian must reject the casteism, he also remembers that it had its virtues in a sense.

In the 1930s when the mass conversions to Christianity reached a peak, Gandhi's resolute affirmation that conversion was a totally misguided response to the problems facing the Harijans, and that Christian efforts to nourish mass conversions were perverse and politically motivated, provoked a polarization of opinion among Indian Christians. On the one hand, there were those who accepted Gandhi's point of view without any significant qualification and threw themselves with great enthusiasm into the Gandhian movement. On the other hand there were people who were thoroughly committed to mass-movement evangelism. Most of them were critical of the Gandhian strategy for the uplift of the depressed classes, and were deeply involved with the National Missionary Society. They were ardent nationalists, sympathetic to indigenization, but theologically rather conservative.

In March 1937, an Indian Christian Manifesto on Christian Duty to the Depressed and Backward Classes was published in response to Gandhian criticisms of the mass movements. The Manifesto announced that although in the past Indian unrest had contained note of religious quest, at the present time due to the spread of nationalism, religious values seemed to have receded into the background. While antagonistic to mass conversions because of their effects on churches, the manifesto nevertheless affirmed that individuals of family or village groups will continue to seek the fellowship of the churches. They also pointed out that the mass movements had resulted in a distortion of the gospel, because the gospel is to be for not only the poor and down-trodden masses in India but for all sections of the country.

**Indian Way of Church Activities:** During this period of time many church activities have been transformed according to Indian style based on cultural background of India. One of them was 'ashram movement.' In the ashram heritage of Indian culture some of Indian Christian leadership adapted a way of evangelization in a mode of ashram, which is a traditional form of Indian culture. As a matter of fact, the life-style of *sannyasi* is familiar to the Indian mind and has a considerable popular appeal among them. On the other hand Christianity too has its tradition of the religious life lived in communities and orders. The institution of *ashram*, therefore, seemed to be which Christians could use to express their religious ideal in a way that other Indians would readily appreciate. The Syrian Christians too had a number of *ashrams*, which were of purely Indian foundation and some of them had their stations outside Kerala.

The Indianization of worship, too, was one of the important areas on which Indian church had focused. Therefore, many local churches gave up pews and accepted instinctively the custom to leave their sandals outside the church before



entering. The music for worship too was transformed according to Indian style. The members of the Christian community, whose education and social standing gave them a more independent outlook and enabled them to mix with non-Christians of similar status, could not but feel the stirrings of national pride. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a greater inclination among converts to seek Indian ways of expressing their Christian devotion developed, finding the prevailing western way in the Indian churches unsatisfying. In this trend, Krishnarao Sangle of Ahmednagar composed Marathi lyrics in Indian meter, and a collection of which called *Gayanamrit* was published in 1867. It is also witnessed at the same time the use of Indian oratorio form known as *kirtan*, *harikatha*, *kalakshepam* etc., in which the story-teller, accompanied by a band of musicians, delivers his matter in a musical recitative interspersed with songs and choruses. The most outstanding literary work of the new spirit was seen in Narayan Vaman Tilak (1862-1919), whose Marathi poetry was inspired not only by intense personal devotion to Jesus Christ but also by intense affection of his country.

It is also witnessed that attempts were made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by certain individuals to live as independent *sannyasis*; for example, N.V. Tilak, who resigned from his position in the American Marathi Mission and spent the last 20 months of his life in this way of life; and B.C. Sircar, a Bengali who worked in the Y.M.C.A. practiced *yoga* in his later years and set up a Christian shrine at Puri. The Christian *sadhu* who caught the public notice and became famous both in India and abroad was Sadhu Sundar Singh. He is remembered, in fact, as the first modern Christian *sadhu*, who started donning the saffron robe from the age of 16 and wandering about Punjab, Kashmir and later on Tibet and many other foreign countries. He strongly propagated the indianization of Christianity according to the context of Indian and her spiritual heritage. In this regard he mentioned the need to distinguish the 'living

water' and the 'cup', which was taken from his personal experience. According to him, to present the living water(the gospel) for Indians Indian cup is to be used not the western cup. In this regard he commented that(Thompson 1997:56):

So the Hindu is more prepared to receive the 'water of life' when it is offered to him in a vessel he can accept. The sadhu is a familiar figure and gains a readier hearing everywhere than the foreigner, or even the Indian who adopts the western manner of life and general approach. The water is the same, but the vessel in which it is offered is different. If the vessel is acceptable it is more likely that the water will be received.

**Indian Way of Church Organization:** Another indication of the enhanced national self-consciousness may be found in the formation of several Indian missionary societies during this period of time. These societies, in fact, were formed by Indian Christians themselves to preach the gospel and carry on Christian work in India. The first of these was the Indian Missionary Society of Tinnevely, which was founded in 1903. In 1905 a more ambitious enterprise was launched, which witnessed the National Missionary Society was founded at Serampore by young Indian Christians who came from different parts of India and different denominations.

This period of 20<sup>th</sup> century can be characterized with the signs of an enhanced national self-consciousness among the Indian Christians to a great extent. To indianize and strengthen this became the predominant task of the Indian Church in this period as the result of the development of self-consciousness among Indian Christians. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was called an age of foreign missions, and so Indian churches were dominated by foreign missionaries who had patriarchal authority. In the years after the 1914-1918 war, however, it was witnessed paradigm shift in the matter of leadership and the form of church organization. Therefore a process of transferring responsibility to the Indian Church and of making the work church-centric went on, which was

greatly accelerated after Independence.

It seemed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was more brotherly feeling and co-operation between the dominations in India than there was in the contemporary West. In this situation there formed an environment in which entire Indian churches can cooperate among themselves. In 1914, it was decided to form a permanent council known as the National Missionary Council of India. Its name was changed to National Christian Council in 1923, which signified that the Indian Church had an equal part in it with the foreign missions. Another kind of cooperation happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which became more common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among union institutions, i.e., colleges or other institutions carried on by two or more missions in partnership.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a new attempt was endeavored more than cooperation between missions and church organizations. Indian Church agreed to bring separate bodies together into an organic union. The first definite achievement was made in South India. It was a local union of Presbyterians in South India on 1901, which brought together the communities of one American mission and two Scottish Presbyterian missions, located in and around Madras. In 1904 this body alongwith another several Presbyterian missions in North India formed the Presbyterian Church of India. Another local union of same denominational family was the loose federation of the Congregationalists of the London Mission and the American Madura Mission in Tamil Nadu, which was formed in 1905. The first fruitful attempt of an inter-denominational union was the South India United Church, which was formulated in 1908. In North India, too, the United Church of Northern India was formulated in 1924, a union of Presbyterians and Congregationalists. In the case of Lutherans, they organized autonomous Lutheran Church, the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, which was set up in 1926.

The most emphatic and far-reaching project of church union in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the formation of the Church of South India in 1947. It was a kind of attempt within Indian Church to heal one of the major divisions that arose in the Western Church during the Reformation period in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and was imported into India by Western missions. Another series of an attempt for church union in North India commenced in 1929. As a result of the same, the Church of North India was inaugurated in 1970. Indian Church, by and large, has been dependent on the Western Church throughout its history, and has had little opportunity to play a conspicuous role in the activities of Indian churches throughout Indian church history. However, in the matter of the establishment of united church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has played a leading role within the nation and made a notable contribution to the Christian world on a global level. This was, of course, an outcome of the development of self-consciousness among Indian churches, closely connected with the nationalist movement.

**Indian Identity from the 'Below':** In this period there was a paradigm shift in the understanding of the Church. In other words, there was a shift of emphasis from 'mission' to 'church', which was implied that the evangelization of India was no longer seen as the primarily the task of missionary societies, whether foreign or Indian, but as a function of the ordinary church in its regions. Many writers, therefore, have made a conscious and systematic attempt to move away from mission-centered history towards a history of the Christian community itself. This type of understanding of church was a part of a post-colonial search by the church in India to find its own identity. Two features of this type of historiography stand out: Firstly, the elite Christians who belonged predominantly to the high caste groups were placed on a pedestal. Their leadership, theological as well as ecclesiastical, was celebrated and

glorified; Secondly, the mass conversion of the Dalits and Tribals to Christianity was relegated to the margins of this history and historical writing on this subject did not move beyond the “mass movement” discourse commenced by the missionaries. However, a related development had taken place, which led to a shift of focus away from the Christian elite and dominant groups to the vast majority of Christian people who were involved in the historical formation of Christianity in India. Therefore, Dalits who were the main heroes of the mass conversion movements that played a major role in the Indian Church became the heroes, although they were not its exclusive focus. The result was that “Dalits found a significant voice within the mainstream of Christianity in India in an unprecedented way, criticizing the previous trend in which the Christian elites were uplifted and glorified.

In many regions Dalit Christians struggled in varied ways to distinguish themselves as belonging to a community distinct from their castes through education, lifestyle changes, the acquisition of land, as well as imbibing Christian values and piety. In most cases, “Christianity, education, and mobility appear to have played a definitive role in the formation of this emerged identity”(Oommen 2002:8). Many of regional and national level studies of first generation Dalit converts have witnessed that “the dominant motivation which drew them to Christianity was their search for human dignity and self-esteem”(ibid.:10). Most Dalit Christians show tenacity and determination in holding on to their Christian identity, even when their Scheduled Cast privileges are denied to them because they are Christians.

Almost all the case studies, however, observe that the strong desire and the struggle to establish a Christian identity for Dalits still continues. Sometimes their identity is contested and at other times dual identity creates psychological tensions within and for the community. While it appears that many Dalit Christian

communities have established their distinct identity as against other communities present around them, the stigma of untouchability has not completely disappeared.

The analysis of Dayanandan(2002) reveals in a powerful way how missionary educational policies were so discriminatory against Dalit Christians in denying them for over a century an educational opportunity through which they might move upward beyond a lower middle class or middle class level. According to him, missionaries were both helpers (by sponsoring literacy and education) and hindrances (by putting a low ceiling on their rise) to Dalit Christian mobility. As a consequence, the discriminatory type of casteist divide that is so apparent within Indian churches in recent years is a “historical consequence of missionary and upper caste Indian Christian prejudices”(Oommen 2002:14).

In this regard Dalits Christians argued, for example, that loyalty to the caste rejecting principles of the missions suddenly disappeared when it was time for a marriage: Upper caste Christians sought and married into families of upper caste Christians also of other missions; When the upper caste Christians moved away from small towns, they ensured that their houses were sold only to Christians of upper caste origins. The upper caste converts, they argued, completely dominated the ecclesiastical and administrative positions in the Church and its institutions without including any Dalit converts. Another study shows, on the consideration of the power of English education, that there was more power if one were an upper caste Christian with English education.

In sum, it is obvious that Indian churches have been struggling in many areas to restore the lost identity of Indian Christians by discovering the historical and cultural values of India. The identity of Indian Christians on a national level, however, has been established and developed through the expansion of self-consciousness among

the Indian Christians with especially the political struggle for Independence to a great extent. One of the important issues that should not be neglected is that the attempts of Dalits to find out their own identity within themselves have been made from the 'below', which is to be separated from the identity formation from the 'above' made by Indian Christian elites.

## Conclusion

It has been attempted in the earlier sections to describe the historical development of Indian Christianity and look into two major issues in Indian Church in relation to caste and identity. As it is mentioned earlier the analysis of these two matters has been undertaken from the socio-historical perspective within the Indian churches. As I have analysed above it might be possible to draw a few points of conclusion as below.

**In relation to caste issues** within Indian Church it might be possible to present the below-commented points as conclusion. At first, in Indian Church caste, by and large, has been accepted as a social and cultural form from the initial stage of Indian Christianity in a larger Hindu society, in which caste system is the major foundation. During the period of 1-16<sup>th</sup> century, especially Syrian Christians were believed to be descended from the high caste families including Brahmin families. They were, in fact, following the customs and rules of caste system within themselves. The Syrians were, for example, allowed to continue their practice of untouchability since this was necessary to carry on their daily social intercourse with the upper caste. From the perspective of the contemporary Hindus, too, Indian Christians were perceived as equivalent to one of their higher castes, and affected in some matters by the customs of their non-Christian neighbors. As J. W. Pickett suggested, Christians were regarded as a caste and their lifestyle was operated in the boundary of caste system. Even today most of the qualities of a caste-endogamy, shared social status, the caste hierarchy, etc, are being kept in many Indian churches, even though many critical comments were made by some of the Indian Christian leaders.

Louis Dumont argues that caste can only properly be understood in the light of an ideology of purity and pollution as the basis of an emphatic distinction between power



and status. This ideology, which is inherently Hindu tradition, according to Dumont, cannot be expounded without constant reference to Hindu beliefs. Dumont would, therefore, have problems in interpreting non-Hindu groups which are operating as castes within the caste system while rejecting the Hindu beliefs. It would seem, as we seen in the case of Syrian Christians, that a non-Hindu group can be a caste while rejecting the ideology of caste.

Secondly, the caste system, by and large, has been criticized by the Western missionaries in general the Protestant missionaries in particular to a great extent. Even though de Nobili tried to adapt the caste system in his church activities with the approach of 'accomodation', the main stream among the Western mssionaries has notbeen changed from the critical camp. Protestant missionaries aggressively and consistently attacked caste and carried on a relentless onslaught it as being inconsistent with Christianity. This position was adopted later by more understanding and less ethnocentric missionaries, and in post-colonial India by the Indian church leaders of these churches. As summed up in a minute of the Madras Missionary Conferences of 1850, the Protestant consensus declared that caste was one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the gospel in India and that was not to be tolerated in the churches. This is becoming clear considering the fact the the conviction of the missionaries about the evils of caste made them positively oppose to the idea of group conversion, and served to reinforce the individualism in conversion. In the nineteenth century, in fact, most of the Protestant denominations believed that it was virtually impossible for converts to be baptized without explicit and public 'breaking of caste.'

Caste, however, was understood in terms not only of conversion, but also of enlightenment and progress as well. Caste, William Carey argued, has cut off all

motives to inquiry and exertion, and made stupid contentment the habit of their lives. The missionaries, in fact, believed that the caste system being in itself a vicious institution formed an integral part of the whole system of idolatry and served to maintain that system in the face of every challenge and disturbance.

Thirdly and finally, caste has been a most crucial element of Indian church politics, which lays the foundation of social distinction among the Indian Christians themselves. In fact, it was found to be clear in most areas that christianization including baptism was only one of several alternative possibilities for lower castes from a status and conditions deemed to be intolerable within the Hindu social structure. In this sense, mass conversion movement has been a critical issue in Indian church politics. Especially in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missions witnessed an unexpected and dramatic development in their activities through group conversions from especially untouchable castes. It is generally known that caste is far more entrenched among the lower caste converts than among the upper caste converts, who became Christians usually by individual conviction. That is why, it is reasoned, that mass conversion could be possible among the lower caste converts. The reason why converts to Christianity do not give up their caste to a large extent might be, as we have seen the definition of power above, that caste system is one of effective ways to express one's own power within the society. Therefore they don't cast down their caste since most of people intrinsically tend to pursue power within their social boundaries.

However, the conflict between the different castes within the Indian Church has been acute since the church members are controlled not only by Christian manners but by traditional cultural norms which has been deeply rooted in the ethos of Hinduism. Converts of lower caste origin had found advancement in their social status after

conversion, but hung on to caste observances as a kind of insurance against falling still lower. Higher caste converts, on the contrary, knew that they could only fall in social esteem and despised those who were unwilling to make a similar sacrifice. There are two dimensions of caste mobilization in the contemporary Indian churches. The first is inter-caste rivalry that permeates all church activities at all levels in terms of struggle for power and control over church resources. The second concerns the struggle of Dalit Christians whose frustrations for equality and dignity in the churches is leading to new forms of protest.

In places where they gather with different castes, for example, they all worshipped in one church or chapel, but the building was so arranged as to keep caste and outcaste apart in a separate setting. In another case, when they keep the practices of the Holy Communion especially the higher castes decline taking the cup which was served for low-caste Christians. Caplan(1987) reports on what came to be regarded as a scandalous case involving the selection of a Vellala bishop to the Madras diocese of the CSI by bypassing the more popular and experienced Harijan incumbent assistant bishop. This election was influenced by some very important church people who held that because the Madras diocese was the most important in the CSI it would not do to have a Harijan bishop. The above incident highlights the increasing disaffection of the Dalit Christians who find themselves treated as second class members of the church and excluded from positions of power in the church. In the case of Tamil Nadu, in fact, Dalits form 63 per cent of all Catholics but represent only 3.09 per cent of priests, i.e., church leadership. They are also excluded from positions of power such as principals of schools and colleges and procurators. By and large it is assumed that the failure of the churches in improving the educational levels of Dalit Christians is directly correlated with the dominance of these churches by upper caste Christians. It is

precisely in the mixed caste churches and regions that Dalit-upper caste and other inter-caste conflicts are most acute today.

**In relation to identity issues** within Indian churches it might be possible to draw a few points as conclusion as below. At first, the identity of Indian Christians, by and large, has been formulated in terms of their own caste background. The first Indian Christians in the first century, in fact, came from the higher caste groups. As mentioned earlier this historical fact has a great psychological and sociological significance: Psychologically, it helps to attach the involved population to a long tradition which in turn invests them with dignity and pride to a great extent; Sociologically, such a cognition defines Indian Christianity as a pre-colonial phenomenon which is of tremendous existential consequence. As Sharma (2005: 40) commented, caste was manifested as “a set of identities.” Since Indian Church is existing among multi-cultural and -religious environment, this perception is of crucial importance in the identity making of Indian Christians.

Secondly, the identity of Indian Church has been affected by the deep-rooted and far-reaching influence of foreign countries. From those days Christianity was brought in Kerala, St Thomas Christians lived in two different worlds. The Indian Church, as we have seen above, contained a considerable element of foreign settlers and was considered over a period of time a part of a general church organization whose headquarter is located in Persia. The original community constituted by the Apostle Thomas, in fact, was reinvigorated by the arrival of groups of Christians who came from Persia, immigrant groups of East-Syrian merchants, which brought to the St Thomas Christians both material and spiritual prosperity. It is too obvious when it is considered that the bishop for Indian Church was appointed from Persia, who exercised a superior supervision over Indian Christians in Kerala during the same

period of time. One of the most important incidents during this time was the hand-over of “the silver-tipped Rod of Justice”, on which Syrian Christians asked for the protection of the Portuguese to Vasco da Gama who arrived in India in 1502 for the second time. That is why it is said that they lived in two different worlds simultaneously—the socio-cultural world of India and the ecclesiastical world of Persia. Even after 16<sup>th</sup> century Indian Christians were under the strong influence of the West to a great extreme extent.

The fact that the identity of Indian Christians has been formulated under the strong influence of foreign institutions is the most deep-rooted reason of the alienness of Christianity in India. Moreover, during colonial period of time, Western missionaries as well as Indian Christians who coworked with them were perceived as cooperators of the colonial power. That is the reason why the followers of Christianity are considered to be far from Indianness and the cultural domain of India, with whom the social intercourse was understood as unthinkable.

Thirdly and finally, Indian Christians have persistently attempted to bring forth their own identity on the foundation of their own cultural property and heritage. Ironically, during the period of the Portuguese, St Thomas Christians continued to retain their Oriental identity which was descended from the Persia, even though there were some changes due to Latin influence. It was only late 19<sup>th</sup> century that Indian Christians started laying claim to their own opinion criticizing Western missionaries, particularly for their lack of the understanding of Indian culture and of the sympathy for the indigenous expressions of Christian faith. In this conflict the issue of caste was always in the center of the matters. In this regard, it is remarkable to recollect the social incidents happened with the name of ‘Tanjore Debate’ in 1824, ‘Madrass Debate’ in 1834, ‘Calcutta Movement,’ ‘Madras Movement’ and the ‘Rethinking

Christian Group' which were mentioned above. Moreover, in this period of time there was a paradigm shift in the understanding of the Church; In other words, there was shift of emphasis from 'mission' to 'church' in the understanding of church. It is implied that the aim of evangelization was no longer seen as the primarily the task of missionary societies but as the function of the ordinary church in its regions.

After this time, their struggle to set up their own identity has been expressed in various ways. Indian Christians, for example, sought Indian ways of expressing their Christian devotion. Another attempts were 'ashram movement' and '*sannyasis* movement.'

What is the most remarkable attempt by Indian Christians, I assume, was that they established Christian institutions according to their own understanding of Christian theology and their own perspective of way of doing things. In this endeavor it happened to be found that they tried to overcome the divisions and sectarianism made by the Western missionaries. In this current, National Missionary Council of India was formed in 1914, of which the was changed to National Christian Council, which signified that the Indian Church had an equal part in it with the foreign missions. Another kind of cooperation happened among union institutions, i.e., colleges or other institutions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a new attempt was endeavored more than cooperation between missions and church organizations, which led to the formation of Church of South India in 1947 and of the Church of North India in 1970. These incidents were evaluated that Indian Church has played a leading role and made a notable contribution to the Christian world. These incidents, in fact, were an outcome of the development of self-consciousness of Indian Church, closely connected with the nationalist movement.

The sharpest conflict in the matter of identity issue among Indian Christians

broke out in relation to the group of dalits in recent days. The majority of Indian Christians accepted Christianity through the process of, by and large, mass movement since the late of 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is generally known that caste is far more entrenched among the lower-caste converts than among the upper-caste converts, who became Christians usually by individual conviction. Therefore, the conversion of educated Brahmins and other higher castes throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century was considered to be of very great value and importance. They were regarded intellectually the equals of the most enlightened non-Christians, and they received increasingly the respect of the same for Indian Christianity.

As a matter of fact, the main heroes of Indian Christianity have been Christian leaders who came mostly from higher castes. Upto recent days, their leadership, theological as well as ecclesiastical, was celebrated and glorified in every realms of Indian Christianity. As a natural result, the majority of Indian Christianity, i.e., Dalits and Scheduled Tribals, was relegated to the margins of Indian Christianity even though they were the majority of Indian Christianity. However, a new turning point in the Christianity of India took place, which led to a shift of focus away from the Christian elite and dominant groups to the vast majority of Christian people who were involved in the formation of Christianity in India. Dalits, therefore, who were the main heroes of the mass conversion movements that played a major role in the Indian Church are being perceived as the new heroes. Dalits now found a significant voice within the mainstream of Christianity in India in the writings and activities in relation to Indian Church. In this process the new identity for the Indian Christianity from the 'below' is being formulated in recent days.

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