Chapter I

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES OF INDIA: A PROFILE

This study aims at an understanding of social mobility among a religious minority in India, the Syrian Christians of Kerala. It is an attempt to probe into the sources and patterns of their mobility. The study of minorities has long been of interest to scholars the world over. As a result of migration, the flight of refugees from famine, poverty and persecution, colonial settlements and missionary work, many societies frequently contain minority groups whose physical appearance and cultural practices are unlike those of the dominant group. The dominant group in these societies often differentiates between its own members and the minority. Typically, it denies minority group members equal access to the power, prestige and wealth that its own members enjoy.

Sociologically, the term minority is used in a very specific sense. It is not a matter of numbers, but is determined by the presence of certain distinguishing features. Louis Wirth first defined it thus:

We may define a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination.
This definition has since been refined, and a minority group is regarded as such if it has certain distinguishing characteristics.

1. The members of a minority group suffer various disadvantages at the hands of another group, the dominant one.

2. A minority is defined by group characteristics that are socially visible, so, for example, all people sharing a religion, are lumped together into a single category. Individual characteristics of a minority group member are regarded as less significant than the supposed characteristics of the group to which the individual belongs.

3. A minority is a self-conscious group with a strong sense of "oneness". The more the group is persecuted, the more intense its group solidarity is likely to become.

4. By choice or by necessity, the members of a minority group are usually endogamous, that is, they marry within the group.

There is one aspect of the sociological use of the term minority group that may seem incongruous. A minority group can sometimes be a numerical majority. Conversely, one can speak of a dominant minority. Minority group status is not
a matter of numbers, as we said earlier. In practice, it is very rare for a numerical majority to be a minority group in its own society, but examples do exist. In South Africa, the small white population dominates the much larger black one.

The relations between minority groups and the dominant one may follow many different patterns from harmonious coexistence to outright conflict. Simpson and Yinger\(^3\) have provided a typology of all the possible patterns of race and ethnic relations.

1. **Assimilation**: In some cases, a minority group is simply eliminated by cultural or racial assimilation. Cultural assimilation occurs when the minority group abandons its distinctive cultural traits and adopts those of the dominant culture; racial assimilation occurs when the physical differences between the groups disappear as a result of inbreeding. Brazil is an example of a country following a policy of assimilation.

2. **Pluralism**: Some minorities do not want to lose their group identity. The dominant group in the society may be willing to permit and even to encourage cultural variation within the broader confines of national unity. In Switzerland, four ethnic groups, speaking German, French, Italian and Romanche, retain their sense of group identity while
living together amicably in the society as a whole.

3. **Legal protection of minorities**: In some societies, sections of the dominant group may have hostile attitudes towards minority groups, but the minorities enjoy the support of the government. Legal measures may be introduced to protect the interests and rights of the minorities.

4. **Population transfer**: In some situations of intense hostility between groups, minorities are removed from the scene altogether. This happened, for example, when President Amin of Uganda ordered Asian residents to leave the country in which they had lived for generations.

5. **Continued subjugation**: In some cases, the dominant group has every intention of maintaining its privilege over the minority group indefinitely, even to the extent of being willing to use force for the purpose. The outstanding example in recent times has been South Africa.

6. **Extermination**: The extermination of entire populations, or genocide has been attempted and even achieved in several parts of the world. Nazi Germany's extermination of millions of Jews stands out in recent memory.

These patterns are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and a society can adopt more than one at the same time.
The area of minorities and social mobility has always been of interest to scholars. In societies with minority groups who are, by definition, disadvantaged, would mobility be possible? It was argued that minority groups always face discrimination at the hands of the dominant group. *De jure* discrimination or legal discrimination can be eliminated by law. *De facto* discrimination, that is, informal discrimination entrenched in social customs is hard to eliminate. It is always present in any situation in which a dominant group maintains advantages over a minority. Theorists like McClelland⁴ have argued that disadvantaged groups like minorities, who are often the victims of social prejudice, overcome this obstacle by success in specific occupations, particularly business. Hence the case of the Jews all over the world, the Protestants in France and so on. He further says that such groups will provide a disproportionately large number of entrepreneurs, only if they are middle-class and are prevented from entering high prestige occupations.

The Indian Constitution recognizes two kinds of minorities, those in a minority by virtue of language, and those who are religious minorities. Indian society is characterized by religious pluralism. Different religious communities exist side by side; 82.6% of the population is Hindu and this forms the dominant group. Apart from this, there are followers of almost every faith in the world, and these
are accorded the status of minority religious groups - the Muslims, Christians, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists, Jews and the Baha'is. In the context of Indian society, what has been the relationship between the religious minority and social mobility? This has always been a particular area of interest, because in India's religiously plural society, there is such an overwhelming dominance of one religion, Hinduism.

**Table 1.1: India 1981: Percentage distribution of Population by Religion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>82.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 1981, C Series, Government of India.

A traditional society like India presents a fascinating picture. Hinduism was the dominant religion, and yet Hindus were never a homogeneous group. They were divided by language, region and customs. They were at once united and divided by one of the most closed and complex systems of stratification known to man, the caste system. It was a system which rigidly controlled the lives of those born into
it, and within its boundaries, allowed little or no mobility. Yet the existence of this caste system meant that for those groups outside of it, that is, non-Hindus, opportunities for mobility existed, particularly after British colonial rule, because for them, occupation was not dictated by caste membership. For many groups thus, the majority Hindu group was not a barrier to mobility, as long as the caste system itself operated. From the 19th century onward, some of the most mobile groups in India were those that are today referred to as religious minorities – notably the Parsis, the Jains and the Jews.

One of the problems regarding the study of minorities in India is the danger of treating them similarly, because they share the blanket status 'minority'. In the context of the majority group, all other religious collectivities are minorities. But in terms of their origins, antiquity and their relationship vis-a-vis the majority, each group is distinctive and must be seen as such, if minority studies are to be meaningful.

Another problem regarding the study of minorities in India, which has implications for mobility studies, is the tendency to look on religious minorities as homogeneous entities. However, religious minorities in India are neither homogeneous nor a monolith. The complexity of India's
traditional caste society coupled with its history of colonization has left a lasting mark on its contemporary society. As a consequence, not only Hindu society, but that of several minority groups is sharply divided along religious, class, regional and even caste lines. It is necessary to understand these various dimensions in order to fully comprehend the religious minority in question. People identify themselves and play their roles in relation to different groups. Many kinds of social groups and relations become important - religion, language, region, and caste and so on.

Religious minorities in India have necessarily had to exist in some kind of relationship with the Hindus who are overwhelmingly dominant. This relationship, whether it was hostile or cordial, accommodating or assertive and competitive, has shaped and moulded religious minorities in India. As a consequence, even those world religions like Christianity, for instance, which has followers in India, developed a uniquely Indian character, which, in many ways, directed the path of social mobility. Like other areas of study, that of social mobility among religious minorities in India needs to be looked at through Indian eyes, and not necessarily through Western academic perspectives.

Having said that, let us look at religious minorities in the Indian context in terms of work that has been done on
them. Religious minorities vary greatly from one another. Apart from the obvious religious differences which render them distinct groups, they vary greatly in terms of size. They vary in terms of the date of origin in India, and, importantly too, the mode of their incorporation. They have developed differently depending also on the area in India that they have made their home, and the socio-cultural characteristics of that area. Hinduism itself was an umbrella category, sheltering diverse languages, customs, practices and so on. Consequently, religious minorities living in various parts of the country developed differently. According to Oommen,5 'The most telling feature of religious minorities in India is that they are a variegated entity in terms of their demography, dispersal, doctrines and development.' Categorizing them is thus imperative, but, given these variations, is also difficult.

At the broadest level, religious minorities in India may be grouped into three categories, based on the sources of their presence in India.6 They are (a) the protest religions of India, for example, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, (b) migrant religions like Judaism, Zoroastrianism and the Baha'i faith, (c) religions which are seen by the Hindus as the product of conquest and colonization, like Islam and Christianity.
THE PROTEST RELIGIONS OF INDIA: THE JAINS

In the context of the relationship between the dominant Hindu population and religious minorities, it is important that the protest religions are regarded as indigenous to Indian soil. Of these, the Jains are the smallest group, forming only 0.5% of the total population in 1981. Jainism developed as a protest against Brahmanical Hinduism. Jainism and Buddhism were roughly contemporaneous. Mahavira, considered to be the founder of Jainism lived in the 6th century B.C. Jainism was a faith strongly characterized by its emphasis on non-violence, discipline and austerity. It survived on political patronage. With the end of the Mauryan dynasty, Jainism faced strong opposition from Brahmanism and its supporter kings. Bihar, which was the birthplace of Jainism, has virtually no Jains today. Jainism spread to Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. The predominant group among the Jains today are Baniyas, included under the Vaisyas or traders in the Hindu caste system. This preponderance of Baniyas is a relatively recent phenomenon, because in ancient times, Jains were found in all classes.

Jainism, emerged as a protest against Brahmanic supremacy and the caste system. However, it too became enmeshed in this system. The two leading sects, the Digambaras and the Svetambaras, contain many castes and subcastes within
them. While the Digambaras have accommodated a few low caste groups, the Svetambaras are all of clean caste origin. The Jains are also not a proselytizing group, but are socially insulated.

Although the Jains are such a small community, their influence in India today is very strong. They are one of the most affluent of the religious minorities in India, having contributed to the economic prosperity of the country far in excess of what their numbers would indicate. They are the third most urbanized religious group in India, after the Parsis and the Jews. By the early 20th century, the Jains, who had earlier pursued varied occupations, had begun clustering about trade, moneylending and banking, and then industry. As they hold key positions in all these occupations, it is no wonder that a large proportion of mercantile wealth passes through their hands. In modern industry, Jains are second only to the Parsis, with some of India's biggest industrialists being Jains.

The Jains reflect a close association between religious minority and occupation specificity, being so inclined towards business and industry. Much of the work on Jains reflects this, Sangave's to name one.

There are certain points about the Jains which are relevant to our discussion. First, the Jains are perceived
to be indigenous to Indian soil, and consequently, their Indianness is established. Second, they are dispersed all over the country, but do not identify with a particular territory or language. Third, they are predominantly urban, 60% of them living in urban areas. Fourth, they are occupation specific, that is, they are associated with particular urban occupations, namely trade, banking and industry.

THE BUDDHISTS

In some ways, the Buddhist and Jain religions have points of convergence. Both are indigenous religious doctrines. Both had their roots in protest against the dominant Hindu religion. But the life history of Buddhism and its social identity are substantially different. Buddhism also originated in India about the 6th century B.C., but unlike Jainism, it did not survive long in this country. It flourished in India for over a thousand years, under the patronage of Bimbisara (543-491 B.C.) of the Magadha dynasty, the celebrated Buddhist King Asoka (273-238 B.C.) of the Mauryan kingdom, the Kushan king Kanishka (1st century A.D.) and Harsha (606-648 A.D.). Its followers were found all over the country. It survived longest in Bengal and Assam until its very rapid decline from about the 11th century onward. It spread to various parts of Asia. The
20th century saw a revival of Buddhism in India under the charismatic leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Today, the Buddhists form only 0.7% of the population. Of these, the largest group is found in Maharashtra. According to Census figures, the percentage increase in the number of Buddhists between 1951-61 was 1,671. In 1961, the Census records the number of Buddhists in India at 32,56,036, and an overwhelming majority of them, 27,89,501, were in Maharashtra. In 1951, by comparison, there were only 2,487 Buddhists in the state. This phenomenal increase in the size of the Buddhist community was the result of Ambedkar's influence. He took Diksha in Nagpur on October 14, 1956. A large number of Scheduled Caste Mahars, following Ambedkar's lead, embraced Buddhism, in protest against the oppression of the Hindu caste system. Denied mobility within the system, they sought it outside. The Buddhist conversion movement then spread, particularly among another low caste, the Chamars in Uttar Pradesh. The bulk of Indian Buddhists are thus neo-Buddhists, so called to indicate that they are low caste converts to Buddhism.

Conversion to another religion as an avenue of mobility for untouchables is not new in Indian history. Islam and Christianity grew in large part by low caste conversion. But while Islam and Christianity attracted people from various castes, high and low, the neo-Buddhists are only
from erstwhile untouchable castes.

Like other religious communities in India, the Buddhists have multiple identities. They have, first and foremost, an identity as a distinct religious group. However, because of the formation of a large part of the community through low caste conversion, the group also has a caste identity which is very significant.

In the ultimate analysis, conversion was mainly restricted to the Mahars. It is significant that the call for religious conversion did not cross the frontier of caste. Original Buddhist appeals were to all castes. Ambedkar could only rely on caste loyalties. The very structure he wanted to demolish inhibited the scope of his action.13 Because of the close association between Mahars and neo-Buddhists, the caste element has persisted even after conversion. It means that while the neo-Buddhist rejects the idea of untouchability, he does not reject the benefits conferred on him by the government in terms of preferential discrimination. Thus there exists a dual identity among the neo-Buddhists. While religiously and socially they are Buddhists, they cannot escape their untouchable origin, and utilize the privileges they are entitled to.14

In terms of mobility, this has meant that, as for scheduled castes elsewhere, the origins of neo-Buddhists
continue to hamper their mobility. At the same time, they have an avenue to mobility in the reservation system, of the government, through education, employment and political representation.

One of the limitations of mobility analysis in India has been that scholars, both Western and Indian, have concentrated on social mobility insofar as it was operative within the framework of the caste system. We have, for example, Bernard Barber's\textsuperscript{15} classic work on mobility in the caste system. Much of this attention was focussed on efforts at mobility of the untouchables. Much of the work done on Buddhists in India is in the context of untouchability and mobility, since that is the salient identity among the Buddhists today. The emphasis thus in works like those of Trevor Ling,\textsuperscript{16} Owen Lynch,\textsuperscript{17} Michael Mahar,\textsuperscript{18} and Patwardhan,\textsuperscript{19} is on the Mahar identity as untouchables rather than as Buddhists.

There are aspects of the Buddhists which are particularly salient to our discussion. First, like the Jains, the Indianness of the Buddhists is clearly perceived by the majority group. Although they are found in other parts of India, the overwhelming majority are native to Maharashtra, to that extent, they have, unlike the Jains, a territorial anchorage within India. Third, they are pri-
marily converts from the traditionally underprivileged scheduled castes. This has meant that they continue to be rooted, like scheduled castes elsewhere, in traditional areas of occupation like agricultural labour. The only avenue to mobility is through the reservation policy, whereby they are entitled to certain benefits.

THE SIKHS

Sikhism developed as a reaction to Hindu ritualism and the caste system, like Jainism and Buddhism. But unlike these faiths, Sikhism is a relatively young religion, tracing its origins to the 15th century A.D. Guru Nanak, the founder fought against the domination of Brahmin priests. He also fought against Islamic orthodoxy. This religious foundation was transformed into a stronger communal order, the Khalsa, by Guru Gobind Singh in the 17th century. The present militant posture of the Sikhs became crystallized by this time. He ended the reign of gurus by transferring the authority to the corporate community and to the Adi Granth or sacred book. He also asked the Sikhs to distinguish themselves by wearing the five emblems: kesh (unshorn hair and beard); kanga (comb); kachh (breeches); karha (steel bracelet) and kirpan (sword). From then on, the Khalsa came to be known as Keshadharis and orthodox Sikhs, while the Shahajdharis (or shaven ones) came to be seen as deviants. Subsequently, a third group, the Nirankaris, emerged.
As a community, the Sikhs originated in the Punjab, and continued to live there. Despite the cohesive bonds of territory, language and descent, the Sikhs were beset by religious differentiation and caste differences. All the ten gurus of Sikhism were Khatris, members of a trading caste, accorded Kshatriya status in the Hindu caste hierarchy. However, most of their followers were Jats, an agricultural caste ranked as Sudras. The Jats form the bulk of the Sikh community. There were also members of outcaste groups. Although the faith explicitly denies the sanctions of the caste system, studies have shown that there are Sikh castes.

During the 18th and latter part of the 19th centuries, the Jats came to acquire increasing prominence with increasing numbers joining the Khalsa. By 1881, the Jats formed 66% of the Sikhs. The Jats benefited greatly from the British annexation of the Punjab. They were regarded by the British as the foremost agricultural caste, and were generally the recipients of favoured treatment in terms of educational and other benefits. By the 20th century, the Jats had consolidated their position at the top of the Sikh hierarchy. Not only were they regarded as the finest agricultural community by the British, but by the time of partition, they were also the most literate. The Jats also
dominated the community economically.

By the late 19th century, though, the most remarkable increase in converts to Sikhism had been from an untouchable group, the Chuhras,\(^2\)\(^3\) as an attempt to achieve corporate mobility outside of the traditional Hindu framework. But within the Sikh community, they were always socially and economically backward. They were referred to as Mazhabi Sikhs which immediately set them apart in terms of origin.

Once the partition of India became imminent, it was inevitable that the partition of the Punjab would divide the Sikhs, spread out as they were throughout the state. As a community, the Sikhs suffered, with their richest lands and one hundred and fifty shrines left on the Pakistan side of the border.\(^2\)\(^4\) Having been the most prosperous community, the Sikhs, both the Jats and the trading Khatris, found their lives dramatically transformed. Virtually every Sikh left Pakistan (West Punjab) and moved to India. With a ready homeland in East Punjab, the majority settled there, the Jats continuing to pursue their traditional occupation of farming. With the acute pressure of population on land, they began to move to Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, areas which were contiguous to the Punjab. Others made urban centres like Delhi and Bombay their home, and were in trade, the professions and the transport business.\(^2\)\(^5\) In the context of post 1947 India, the Sikhs in West Pakistan thus
became immigrant refugees as a consequence of political upheaval.

The demographic composition of religious communities in pre-partition and post-partition Punjab varied substantially. In 1921, Punjab was a Muslim majority province with Muslims comprising 51% of the population. In 1961, Muslims formed only 2% of the population of the Indian Punjab, while 64% of the population was Hindu and 33% Sikh. In spite of the creation of a separate Sikh homeland within India, the problem persists. As the nationalist agitation moved towards independence, the Sikh were spurred on by the Muslim demand for Pakistan to demand a separate Sikh homeland. The first official demand for a Sikhistan was made in March, 1946. The reorganization of Indian states gave a new anchorage to the Sikh demand. Now they demanded a Punjabi Suba, which was established in 1966. It was in effect a state dominated by the Sikhs where they constitute 53% of the population. Despite this, as we said, the problem persists. At least a section of the Sikhs have, over time, developed a notion of being a political community, with Sikh separatism and the demand for secession being a part of this idea.

Much work has been done on the Sikhs as a community. Ethne Marenco, McCleod and Khushwant Singh have worked
on the evolution of the Sikh community and the social history of the group. Pettigrew focuses her attention exclusively on the Sikh Jats. Although these works do bring out the mobility of the Sikhs, no work on mobility per se has been attempted, nor an attempt made at comparison of the Sikh case with other religious minorities in India.

Like the Jainism and Buddhism, Sikhism is viewed as an indigenous religion. Further, the Sikhs are mainly concentrated in the Punjab, a territory which they consider their homeland. Also, as a group they are both rural and urban. In 1971, the Sikhs living in the Punjab constituted 78% of the total Sikh population, and 81% lived in rural areas. Lastly, the Sikhs are occupationally diffuse, being farmers, but also pursuing other urban occupations.

MIGRANT RELIGIONS OF INDIA: THE JEWS

Both the migrant religions and those associated with conquest and colonization, are perceived as being of alien origin. This is in contrast to the protest religions which, as we saw were regarded as indigenous and therefore Indian.

Of the migrant groups, the Jews constitute the smallest group, in fact they are the smallest religious group in India. They numbered only 18,533 in 1961, and even at the peak of their growth never numbered more than 26,000.
Jews arrived in India as a persecuted religious group, fleeing from Palestine, and persecuted wherever they went. Timberg writes:

The bulk of Jewish experience for the last millenia has been of living in a Christian or Islamic society, and being influenced by that society. In Indian Jewry, we have a Jewry in an entirely different context.35

Their association with India predates the Christian era, when they settled in Cochin, Bombay and Calcutta. These major concentrations point to the three subdivisions among them: the Palestinian Jews of Cochin, the Bene Israel of Bombay and the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta. These groups came in migrant waves and settled down in these places.

They never aspired to political or economic dominance, and consequently, they were never perceived of as a threat by other religious communities. Moreover, they were never a proselytizing group. They adhered strictly to their religion. Nevertheless, they adopted the language, dress and customs of the people among whom they settled. Throughout their stay in India, they were conscious of their homeland in Palestine. With the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, the bulk of Indian Jews readily emigrated.

The Jews were associated primarily with trade. With the arrival in India in the 19th century of David Sassoon, the foundation of the famous business house of the Sassoons
was laid. The Sassoons, along with the Ezra and Elias families later became leaders in Indian life as merchants, financiers and industrialists. The migrations to Israel which continues steadily makes this a tiny group left in India. Perhaps for this reason, very little definitive work has been produced. Timberg's edited work on Jews in India is the only overarching collection on the Jews.

The Jews are thus perceived as followers of an alien faith. Further, they never regarded India as their homeland, being always conscious of a distant promised land. They have always been a markedly urban group, and have been traditionally associated with trade, that is, they are occupation specific.

THE Parsis

Like the Jews, the Parsis arrived in India as a persecuted group. The Parsis or Zoroastrians, are followers of Zarathushtra, the ancient prophet of Iran. When they fled to India to escape from religious persecution in Iran, they landed in Gujarat in the 8th century A.D. and were given refuge there. In exchange for this sanctuary, they were to adopt the language and dress of the country. However, they would retain their religious exclusiveness. According to Kulke, one can call them an Indian minority only with certain reservations, since their real homeland is Persia or
Iran. By the 10th century, the Parsis began to settle in other parts of Gujarat. Beginning with the 16th century, Surat, at the time an important port, began attracting more and more Parsis. Once the British began to develop Bombay as a trading centre, Parsis settled there, and today, more than 70% of the community lives there, making them India's most urbanized religious community. They played a leading role in transforming Bombay into a busy and prosperous port.

The Parsis, starting from the day they arrived in India, could only survive as a minority by being loyal to every ruling authority, from the local rulers to the Portuguese, the British and finally the Indian Union. At no time was the community itself a power factor that would have been able to enforce its own interests against the will of its rulers. The only condition laid down for this loyalty was non-interference in religion. Unlike other religious minorities in India, the social structure of the Indian Parsi community has remained relatively unaffected by influence from its caste Hindu environment. (As a contrast, caste consciousness and caste like structures have been maintained or accepted by Indian Muslims and Christians.) The community continues to retain its exclusiveness even today. The Parsis were able to live within their environment without conflict as both they and the dominant group did not attempt any assimilation or mutual conversion.39
The Parsis engaged primarily in agriculture, trade and handicrafts prior to the 18th century. It was under the protection of the advancing English power that the Parsis began their social and economic rise. They became highly mobile, being Westernized, with high levels of education, and were strongly represented in entrepreneurial and professional occupations. In spite of their very small number, the Parsis succeeded in placing their mark on the economic development of India, becoming one of the most mobile groups in the country.

Works like that of Bulsara and Nanavutty trace the history of the community. Kulke's work on the minority as an agent of social change is an analysis of the mobility of the Parsis as a minority group.

The Parsis like the Jews, are conscious of a homeland other than India. In that sense, they are sojourners in this land. Also, like the Jews, they are a predominantly urban group. They are also occupation specific, being clearly identified with the professions and industry.

THE BAHAI'S

Of the three migrant religions, the Baha'i faith is the most recent. Its contact with India dates back to as recently as 1872, when Jamal Effendi, a personal envoy of the
founder of the faith, Baha-u'llah, arrived in India. They were a small group, numbering not more than a thousand until the 1950's. These were drawn mainly from the urban elites. But in the 1960's, the faith began active proselytization in the rural areas of Madhya Pradesh, and substantial conversions took place. Consequently, there was a phenomenal increase in their numbers to about 400,000. The overwhelming majority of these converts were from ex-untouchable groups, particularly the Chamars or leather workers and Bhalais who were weavers.

The reasons for this tremendous spread of the Baha'i faith have been discussed by Garlington. The prophet Baha'u'llah was presented as a manifestation of the lord, which is a notion familiar to Hindus. He was seen as having come to revitalize all religious traditions, and this fitted in with the notion of tolerance of all religions. Also, the stress on the oneness of mankind made it attractive to converts who were part of an essentially hierarchical system. Lastly, the change in the belief system did not necessarily have to be accompanied by a drastic change in lifestyle, so the break from the past was not sudden, and this appealed to all converts.

A few upper castes, especially Rajputs converted later. Because the majority of the Baha'is are scheduled castes,
they continue to be socially and economically backward. By the 1970's, Hindu militancy forced the Baha'is to discontinue proselytization.

The Baha'i faith is also regarded as an alien one. It is a migrant one in the context of India, like Judaism and Zoroastrianism, but there are differences. First, unlike Zoroastrianism and Judaism, the Baha'i faith was a proselytizing one. Second, the Baha'is as a group, consist overwhelmingly of converts from the Malawa region of Madhya Pradesh. Consequently, they have a homeland notion within India, unlike the Parsis and the Jews, for whom India was only a temporary home. Thirdly, they are urban, but much more, rural in residence. Their origin as untouchables has meant that they continue to be economically and socially backward. They are thus very much confined to their traditionally specified occupations.

RELIGIONS ASSOCIATED WITH CONQUEST AND COLONIZATION: ISLAM

The two other religions of alien origin in India are Islam and Christianity. Both are viewed by the majority of the Indian population as the result of earlier conquest and colonization. They are also very strongly associated with proselytization. Both pre-conquest Islam and pre-colonial Christianity existed in India, but this is hardly taken note of.
The Muslims form the largest religious minority in India, 11.4% of the total population. Of the three dozen Muslim majority nations in the world, India has the second biggest Muslim population. The Muslims did not arrive in India as a persecuted minority and, in fact, they are always primarily associated with a long period of conquest. Also, because Islam was an actively proselytizing faith, it was always regarded by the dominant Hindus with suspicion.

The first Muslims arrived on the west coast of India in the 8th century through the settlement of Arab converts trading with the Malabar coast. The community here and elsewhere grew as a consequence of proselytization as well as natural increase. From the 11th century, when the Turks conquered Punjab until the British established their domination over India, Muslims were regarded as conquerors.

The Muslims are relatively more backward than the Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs and Christians. Like the other communities, the Muslims are also divided vertically and horizontally, in terms of classes. The Muslim community was not homogeneous. Language, caste and economic standing worked together to divide Muslim from Muslim. The Muslim attitude to religion is more conservative than other minority groups, and its clergy has been a dominant one. This made the Muslims far more resistant to change and modernity.
than other religious minorities. Spread out as they are all over India, they are divided as a community in terms of language and culture.

Most of the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent have remained feudal. They never developed the entrepreneurial class that the Parsis or the Jews did. There are a few small business communities like the Khojas, the Bohras and the Memons. Some sections of Muslims, especially in South India were also in commerce, but never went beyond small business. Numerically, these communities do not account for much of the total Muslim population. Because the Muslims were traditionally feudal, the abolition of jagirdari left them without economic roots. The educated classes among the Muslims migrated to Pakistan after 1947. The small upper class was mobile, taking to administrative jobs and the professions.

The bulk of the Muslim population consists of the rural and urban poor. They have been associated with typical occupations, like butchery, oil pressing, crafts and agricultural labour. The religious conservatism of the community meant that it was very slow to take to western education which brought about great mobility for many communities in India. This was partly as a result of suspicion of Christian conversion. The Christians were associated with educational expansion, and, like the Muslims were of a
The history of Hindu-Muslim relations has, more than Hindu relations with any other minority, been a chequered one. As a consequence, the wealth of literature that exists on the Muslim community, deals with Muslim problems as a minority, the tenuous and fragile relationship between Hindus and Muslims, and Muslim separatism. The Muslim decline began with the rise of British power. At a time when minorities like the Parsis, the Jews and the Sikhs were in the ascendant and poised for greater mobility, for the Muslims, it was a period of decline. Instead of using Westernization as a route to mobility, the Muslims closed ranks and attempted religious revivalism. The Muslim ethos had been one of insulation. Muslim revivalism arose virtually out of the need felt by the clergy to combat the threats of Christian missionaries to convert them, of the British legal system to loosen their control over their flock and western education to subvert them.46

Writers on Muslim problems contend that the partition of the country created peculiar problems for both Hindus and Muslims. The partition of the Indian subcontinent on the basis of the two nation theory, led to the biggest known uprooting of humanity (of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims). It also created a psychological distance between the Hindus and
Muslims. The Hindu community on the whole remained intact, while the Muslims were split into three groups, in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. The presence of these two Muslim majority nations as immediate neighbours of India has made the Indian Muslims objects of suspicion in the eyes of non-Muslim Indians in general and Hindus in particular. That India is indeed their homeland, and their loyalty is to it, has to be constantly proved by the Indian Muslims.

Muslims of independent India therefore emerged as a new community and their position is no longer similar to what it was prior to independence.47 The privileges of the community are no longer there: reservation in the services has been abolished, adult franchise and joint electorates have replaced separate electorates; the zamindari system which benefited a number of Muslims has been done away with. There is large scale unemployment among them.48

The Muslims have always been committed to propagating their religion and consequently, the majority of Indian Muslims were local converts. Although they are thus rooted in India in terms of a homeland, they continue to be perceived as alien. As we have seen, for the Muslims, the historical background of their presence in India acts as a serious liability even today. They are both rural and urban. Muslims as a group are not economically prosperous. There has been a certain amount of occupational typification
with the Muslims being associated with traditional rural occupations. Indian Islam is not a monolithic entity. It is a conglomeration of Turkish, Arabic and African Islam, all of which are different. Notwithstanding this alien element, constituting the nobles element in the Muslim population, the overwhelming majority of Muslims are the commoners and converts from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Understandably, the majority of Muslims in India are poor, illiterate and engaged in occupations of low prestige. As Oommen says,

In the final analysis, past political glory, substantial size, present political strength, economic disabilities, socio-cultural isolation, close linkage between the religious and the secular and an abiding commitment to propagate their religion renders Indian Muslims a category apart as compared with other religious minorities in India.

THE CHRISTIANS

The Christians in India are, more than any other minority perhaps, are divided in terms of their origin and antiquity. Viewing the Christians in India as a monolith would be misleading. The identity of Christians in India is a diffuse one, but the dominant image is that they are mainly descended from scheduled castes, tribes and other backward classes, these conversions having taken place after colonial rule was established. In fact, though, Christians belong to three groups in terms of their origins, (a) the Anglo-Indi-
ans, a distinct product of miscegenation and colonialism, (b) those who became Christians through mass conversions mostly from scheduled caste and tribe background, that took place during Portuguese and British colonial rule, (c) pre-colonial Christians who claim to be converts from upper castes, that is, the Syrian Christians.

The first two categories suffered from socio-cultural stigmatization and the majority are economically deprived. For the Anglo-Indians, this stemmed from their being the objects of social prejudice, both from the point of view of the British and the Indians. They were the products of sexual unions between British men and Indian women. Although they sought to emulate the lifestyles of the British, they suffered an identity crisis when they were declared to be natives of India. Disowned thus by the land of their fathers, they were ill at ease with the land of their mothers. Association with the British meant access to basic western education and employment. These were predominantly urban, and associated with the railways, teaching and clerical jobs. This occupational stereotyping became a serious barrier to their mobility.51

The new Christians or converts from scheduled castes, suffered like all low caste converts, from the stigma of their origins. For the tribals, long isolation from the
wider community has meant, that even after conversion, they continue to assert their tribal rather than their Christian identity. Both these groups are predominantly rural, being found in the southern states of India, the north-east and central India. Most of them are economically poor and are usually engaged in low prestige occupations. The one area in which the Christians dominate notwithstanding their small size and economic disabilities, is in the area of service institutions, particularly in education and health.

Unlike the Christian elsewhere who tends to be a marginal, the Syrian Christians' is a visible presence in the socio-economic fabric of Kerala. They are the oldest Christians in India, having been in Kerala since at least the 4th century A.D. Consequently, Kerala is clearly identifiable as their home. They came in pursuit of trade, subsequently intermarried and made local converts from the upper castes. From the earliest times, they enjoyed acceptance and respectability in Kerala's rigid caste society. They are rural and urban in residence, and pursue a variety of occupations, including farming. Their position is unparalleled among Christians elsewhere. It is with this group that we are concerned in this study.

For the whole of Indian society, the 19th century and British rule, was a period of great change. The traditional social structure of Hinduism which had survived for so many
centuries came into contact with forces that were to slowly break it down. For the religious minorities, which had coexisted with this dominant social structure too, the 19th century was to bring dramatic changes. Opportunities for mobility were there for the plucking. For some groups, the source of their mobility lay in their being occupation specific. What made for these differences? Is it to be seen in the differences of origin of these groups? In applying these questions to, and studying mobility among different groups, we may be able to achieve comparability which is critical. For this, categorization is imperative. This study intends to indicate mobility patterns, and comparisons, and the following categorization is geared to that.

The Jains, Parsis and Jews form, in this context, one category. At first glance, this may seem to be an inappropriate grouping, given the background of these groups. The Jains regarded as followers of an indigenous faith on the one hand, and the 'alien' Parsis on the other. But, notwithstanding these differences, what is relevant for the present analysis is that these are all groups which have no strong territorial identification within India. For the Parsis and the Jews, India itself was never their home. This was not true of the Jains, but within India, they too lacked a homeland, since they are dispersed all over.
Secondly, they are all groups which are urban. In fact, the Parsis, Jews and Jains constitute the first, second and third most urbanized groups in India. Thirdly, they are all groups which are occupation specific. In this occupation specificity lay the route to their greater mobility and the singular mark they made on India’s economic history.

The Buddhists and the Baha’i may be grouped together for the purposes of our discussion. As we saw earlier, the Buddhists in India today consist primarily of ex-untouchables, and are concentrated in Maharashtra. The Baha’is too consist essentially of converts from low castes, especially from the Malawa region of Madhya Pradesh. To that extent, both the Baha’is and the Buddhists have a territorial anchorage in India. They are both largely rural groups. For both these groups, the persisting stigma of their origins has meant that occupationally, they are confined to traditional rural occupations particularly agricultural labour. On the whole they are economically badly off.

The Muslims, given their origins and their subsequent history in India, clearly stand out as a separate category. The historical background of their situation in India has made them an extremely complex group. They have been in India for several centuries even prior to Muslim conquest. However, they continue to be regarded as alien. They are
rural and urban and are economically backward.

In comparing the Syrian Christians with other religious minorities in the present context of social mobility, how does one categorize this group? As a tentative step, we may think of grouping together the Syrian Christians and the Sikhs. Sikhism is a religion of recent Indian origin. The Syrian Christians follow a faith which is regarded as alien. But, despite this, both groups have a strong territorial identification within India, the Sikhs with the Punjab, and the Syrian Christians with Kerala. Both are rural and urban in residence. Neither is occupation specific, but are found in a variety of occupations, and both are mobile groups. We venture to suggest that the comparability between these groups may lie in both having a given homeland in India, and, given such a homeland would be rural and urban. Would this in turn account for the diffuseness of occupation of these two groups?

Given this, how has mobility taken place among the Syrian Christians? Our study looks at the sources and patterns of social mobility among this group. It is hoped that this study will add a new dimension to minority studies in India. In attempting to compare the Syrian Christians with other communities, and situating them thus in a wider context, it is believed that a valuable area of minority studies will be enriched. Accordingly, Chapter II looks at
who the Syrian Christians are, situating them in the wider context of Christians in India. Chapter III examines the theoretical perspectives on the study of social mobility, and the methodology adopted for this study. Chapters IV, V and VI analyze three important sources of mobility, and how they have affected the Syrian Christians - occupational change, education and migration. In Chapter VII, conclusions are attempted. But first, to answer the question, who are the Syrian Christians, we turn to the following chapter.
Notes


6. Ibid., p.207.


29. Mc Cleod, *op. cit.*


33. Ibid., p.107.


36. Ibid.


38. Ibid., p.13.

39. Ibid., p.239.


42. Kulke, op. cit.


44. Ibid., p.115.


47. Moin Shakir, Muslims in Free India, New Delhi, 1972, p.1.

