Chapter Three

Origins and Development of Christian Identity in India

Although India contains a plethora of identities based on religion, caste, language and region, religion remains the main axis for the division of Indian society. Hence, the term minority largely reflects this division on religious lines. Religion has also been the reason for the inadequacy, and perhaps the failure, of the State in the task of managing a culturally plural society. Even though India was a conscious contrast to theocratic Pakistan, it continued to be predominantly a Hindu society, with minority religious communities given special rights to ensure the preservation of their cultural and religious diversity within the social and political fabric of the country. Religious minority has solely been defined in the narrow conception of those who are not Hindus, emphasising Hinduism as the dominant core of Indian identity. The tacit, and now popular, implication is that to be wholly Indian, a minority community has to integrate within the mainstream Hindu identity. Consequently, there is prominence given to talks of ‘Indianisation’ of minorities. This means that minorities should observe Indian, that is Hindu, national holidays, identify with the pre-Islamic history and great Hindu heroes and events simultaneously, prove affiliation to the soil of India as opposed to holy lands of Mecca or the Vatican.

The struggle to maintain the distinctiveness of its minority identity is therefore, for religious minority communities, an attempt to assert their ‘Indianness’ despite differences in religion. This chapter is an account of the less researched and acknowledged religious minority community in India, the Christians. It is an attempt to understand the various aspects of the Christian community that result in a complex community identity, the efforts of the community to reaffirm its Indianness despite its perceived westernised moorings and its quest for political survival. It also establishes the ground for the main theme of this thesis, that is, the gender discourses within the Christian community. This chapter has three main sections, the first dealing with the origins of Christianity in India. This religion witnessed different phases of proliferation throughout the country. Each phase of Christianity was responsible for the formation of new denominations in the country. Consequently, although the Christian community in India is a small community, it is the most heterogeneous amongst the minority religious communities. The second section briefly describes the
status of the community in pre-colonial times and the contributions of the community during the British rule. It also examines the role of the Christian community during the freedom struggle.

The third section examines the Christian community in Independent India. It emphasises the demographic spread of the community throughout the country. It highlights the multiple identities and affiliations of Christian citizens of the country, besides the main identity of Christianity. It further examines the various issues that pose as challenges for the community. One of the main challenges is the incorporation of the notion of caste in the otherwise egalitarian community of Christianity. The core of Christianity is the equality of all in the eyes of God, rich or poor, man or woman, pagan or believer; there is no first or last, no superior or inferior. But such is the uniqueness of the caste system in India that no religious community can afford to disregard this essential social feature. The Christian community, regardless of it theological equality, was forced to incorporate the caste system in its perception of missionary activities. The inclusion of the caste system has only brought with it challenges that the Church in India is yet to resolve. An equally challenging issue plaguing the Church in India is the issue of conversions. An area of great debate and controversy since the framing of the Indian Constitution, the right to practice, profess and propagate one's religion has culminated in increased acts of violence against the community over the years. With the lack of a conclusive solution to the debate in the contemporary political scenario, it would continue to remain an ongoing debate for years and may have deep consequence to the Church in India. This section also analyses the general perceptions of the larger Indian society regarding the Christian community of which little is known or researched. The perceptions about the community have largely been negative and this has also contributed to the acts of violence against the Christian community.

I

Christianity in India and its Diverse Origins

The Christian community in India is marked by its diversity. Christians in India belong to three different traditions: (i) the Orthodox churches of West Asian traditions, that is, Syro Malabar, Syro Malankara, the Mar Thoma Church and so on.
(ii) the Roman Catholic Church of Latin rites and (iii) the various reformist churches of Protestant traditions now consolidated into the Church of South India (CSI) and the Church of North India (CNI). Formation of these federations is a post-Independence phenomena with the CSI being formed immediately after Independence and the CNI being formed during the seventies. There also exists a large population of Christians among various tribes, particularly in the northeast region. These tribes are granted protection under the Constitution in respect of their culture, tradition, customs and laws and hence, are not governed by the Christian personal laws.¹

Church historians have not yet made the final pronouncement with regard to the historicity of Christianity in India. Broadly, there are two views on the matter. One view holds that the origins of the Christian community in India can be traced back to the first century when it is believed that St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, came to India in A.D. 56. He converted many Namboodri or high caste Hindus along the Malabar Coast. The first church was established in Quilon by Saint Thomas himself. The Christianity of this period was affiliated to the orthodox traditions of West Asia that is, Syria, Armenia, Antioch and also Constantinople. The second view ascribes the arrival of Christianity in India to early merchants and missionaries of the East Syrian or Persian Church.² The history of Christianity in India from the first century AD up to the sixteenth century is virtually the history of the Syrian Christians of Kerala. Their style of adaptation has been conducive to the general ethos of Indian society. The Syrian Christian concentrated along the southwestern coastland, was loosely structured, developed rituals and a lifestyle distinct to them and at the same time drew profusely from the local culture of region and was thus, assimilated with the local communities with fluidity in the church rules and customs. This early community of Christians did not proselytise, again in tune with the Hindu ethos, the community depended on gradual assimilation rather than attempts to proselytise, which in turn made peaceful coexistence possible. Marriage and divorce was accepted.³

The first large-scale demographic increase of Indian Christians occurred in the sixteenth century under the Portuguese. The Portuguese came to India for trade and after conquering a few Indian territories, they converted the fisher-folks along the

¹ Agnes, (1999), *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women’s Rights in India*, p. 142
² Oomen and Mabry, (2000), *The Christian Clergy in India, Social Structure and Social Roles*, p. 38
³ ibid. p. 41

88
western of the Konkan coast. In 1550, the Pope (the Patriarch of the Church of Rome) had a pact with the Portuguese king to evangelise the newly acquired territories and in return granted the king a say in the appointment of bishops in these territories. Saint Francis Xavier, the popular saint of this period, landed in Goa in 1542 and travelled along the western coast and instituted the Roman Catholic Church in India. The evangelists of this period were engaged not only in proselytising but also in ‘Latinising’ the Thomas Christians of the West Asian traditions. The Portuguese intervention had two consequences for the Indian Christians. Firstly, it created an estrangement between the higher castes and Indian Christians. Perhaps this could be seen as the beginning of the wedge between the cultural mainstream in India and Christians of Indian origin. Secondly, the bulk of the converts were from the lower castes and the products of mixed marriages leading to internal fractionation of the Indian Christian community. The caste system, the rigid social structure and the induction of the lower castes with the converts of upper castes and the aristocracy were a situation that both were not equipped to deal with. Further, interdenominational hostility, particularly between the Catholics and non-Catholics, crystallised during this period.

The third phase of Christianity is Protestantism and the theology of enlightenment brought in by the missionaries of various European and American churches who zealously evangelised the native people in the sub-continent during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The difference between the Portuguese and the Protestant missions was that the latter explicitly focused on institution building, particularly education and health, from the start. This in turn meant that the attempt to proselytise was not the primary focus, at least to start with. Along with this the translation of the Bible was high on the agenda of the Protestant missions. Hence, the Bible was the first book to be translated into tribal languages enabling the formation of a tribal identity. Work relating to reform, language and development of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was pioneered by the Protestant missionaries. These activities in unison gave a development orientation to their work. The areas that were converted to Christianity were South India, particularly Tamil Nadu and Andhra

---

4 op. cit. n. 1, p. 143  
5 op. cit. n. 2, p. 44  
6 ibid.  
7 op. cit. n. 1, p. 143
Pradesh, and the tribal belt of Chotanagpur. The Christian mission in the Northeast was mainly after Independence although it was begun during the British period.\(^8\)

Thus, although the indigenous Christian community was being shaped by the European philosophies of the conservative and highly institutionalised Roman Catholic Church and the liberal and loosely Protestant theology, the indigenous Christian community also incorporated the local customs, traditions and languages in wide regional diversities. Moreover, the converted Christians also retained their pre-conversion caste hierarchies influencing the way the Christian community would develop in the Independent India.\(^9\)

II

The Christian Community in Pre-Independence India

Prior to Independence, the Syrian Christian community in the south, which is the oldest Christian community, occupied a place of honour and privilege. The history of their existence shows that they were welcomed for their trade enterprises and martial capabilities. During the British period they derived direct but mostly indirect benefits because of the British presence. The Syrian community was never accused of being an appendage of British imperialism.\(^10\) The Christians of Goa and other former Portuguese colonies received direct patronage from their colonial masters and became Catholic centres wherever the Portuguese established their trading posts in India. Highly westernised in their manners, dress and food the converts readily took on the Portuguese way of life and Portuguese names. The short Portuguese rule in India provided an example where the Indian Christian community was most closely identified with the rulers and enjoyed special privileges due to foreign rule. It was with the Portuguese rule that an image of the Christian community in India as foreign and apart from their Indian compatriots gained credibility.\(^11\)

During the initial years of the British period, the East India Company was ambivalent towards missionary work in India, which was based on a fear that missionary work would antagonise Hindus and Muslims and thus jeopardise the trade

\(^8\) op. cit. n. 2, p. 46
\(^9\) op. cit. n. 1, p. 143
\(^10\) Thomas, (1974), Christians in Secular India, p. 93
\(^11\) ibid. p. 94
operations of the company. This ambivalence was further evidenced in their attitude towards converts. Thus, early converts were mainly from the lower castes, with some notable exceptions from Bengal. Unwilling to show any kind of favouritism to native Christians, they were excluded from military service and debarred by law from appointment to many governmental posts till 1831. Christian converts suffered loss of property due to conversion, fallout of the traditional laws of Hindus and Muslims penalising apostasy by disinheretance. Although the official policy of the Government of India during British rule was one of religious neutrality, individual government officials of high and low ranks often, showed sympathy and favour to the missionaries in particular and to Indian Christians in general. As a result of the British policy of religious neutrality, Christians in British India were not identified with the British administration, as were those in Portuguese territories. However, to some degree in actual fact, and much more so in popular imagination among non-Christians, Christianity came to be closely identified with the British.

During the freedom struggle the Indian Christian community, as a whole did not take an active part. A large section of the Indian Christian community was closely associated with foreign missionaries and churches. These churches were very dependent financially and spiritually on 'mother churches' overseas and they followed the advice of the missionaries. The English missionaries were by and large identified with the British rulers and in many cases forbade their followers to take part in the political struggle. In any case they did not give encouragement to such participation. Non-British missionaries could enter the country only after pledging that they would not engage in any political activities. Hence, they were not allowed to express any opinions on political matters. There was also the widespread feeling, especially among the uneducated, ordinary members of the community, that the future of the community would be bleak under a government in which the Hindus would be a majority. They looked to the British government as the protector of their religious freedom. They were economically dependent on government jobs for their livelihood. The isolation of the Christian community was also caused by the ostracism of Christian converts by the Hindu community. Since the starting of the

---

12 ibid. pp. 95-96
13 ibid. p. 97
14 ibid. p. 100
15 ibid. p. 101; op. cit. n. 2, p. 48
16 op. cit. n. 10, p. 101
Arya Samaj in 1895, their propaganda caused a hostile feeling to develop against Christians and Christianity. In the villages, their landlords oppressed Christian peasants.\(^{17}\)

On the other hand, educated Christians on the whole supported the national movement. There was also a cleavage between the officiodom of the churches and the members, especially the youth.\(^ {18}\) In spite of the opposition by the missionaries and the churches there were a number of Christians who took an active part in the freedom movement at the national and the local levels. There were some regional and national organisations within the Christian community itself that tried to work for the social and political rights of the Christians in India. The formation of the National Christian Council in 1923 gave the impetus to the Indian Christians' desire for the church in India to be autonomous and the acknowledgement of indigenous leadership. It was an authentic response of the missionary movement to the surge of nationalism in the Church and among Indian Christians.\(^ {19}\) Even though they represented the more conservative and moderate voices of the Christian community and often, mere vested interests at local levels, they performed a useful function in giving public expression to an Indian Christian viewpoint on different political and social issues of the day and in trying to safeguard the political rights of Indian Christians.\(^ {20}\)

III

The Christian Community in Independent India

a) Demographic Distribution

The Christian community in India, by and large, is a product of conversions and mass conversions brought about by foreign missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence, the Church in India is a conglomeration of both western and Indian influences. The early converts were mostly from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities. There are strong cultural impacts on the Indian Christian community or society which neither western theology nor imitation of western

\(^{17}\) ibid.
\(^{18}\) op. cit. n. 10, pp.101-102
\(^{19}\) op. cit. n. 2, p. 50
\(^{20}\) op. cit. n. 10, pp. 105-106
lifestyle has been able to counteract. Christians in India are basically Indian and their cultural behaviour, life-style and mode of thinking differs from state to state and region to region, depending on the native language and customs. The Gujarati Christians differ from the Bengali Christians and the Tamil Christians from the Maharashtrian Christians differ not only in their language, dress and food habits, but also in their ways of worship and celebration of Christian rituals. Thus, Christians share more similarities with members of other religions in the same region rather than with Christians in different parts of the country. The only common reference point would be that they are Christians.

An examination of the distribution of the different religions in India would be relevant in this context. Table 3.1 shows the distribution of population by religion for the year 1991. The Christians are merely 2.3 per cent of the total population in comparison to 82 per cent of Hindus. The decadal growth rate of the Hindus is higher than that of the Christians. The decadal growth rate of the Hindus is 22.78 per cent, whereas that of the Christians is only 16.89 per cent. Among the major religions in India, the Christians have the lowest growth rate (16.89 per cent) much below the national average growth rate of 23.79 per cent. As this is the case it is assured that the numerical share of the Christian population is actually decreasing. The downward shift in growth may be due to two reasons: (1) the adoption of family planning techniques by Christian families (2) the re-conversion of dalit Christians, especially tribals and harijans into Hinduism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Community</th>
<th>Population* 1991</th>
<th>Percentage*</th>
<th>% Decadal Growth Rate 1981-91**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>68,76,46,721</td>
<td>82.00</td>
<td>22.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>10,15,96,057</td>
<td>12.12</td>
<td>32.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>1,96,40,284</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>16.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>1,62,59,744</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>25.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>63,87,500</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>35.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jains</td>
<td>33,52,706</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>37,00,976</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>25.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83,85,83,988</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>23.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 1991

Table 3.1: Population of India by Religion, 1991

* Excludes the figures of Jammu and Kashmir where 1991 census was not held.

** Excludes figures of Assam and Jammu and Kashmir
Religious Community | Population | Percentage
--- | --- | ---
Hindus | 30,35,75,474 | 84.98
Muslims | 3,54,14,284 | 9.91
Christians | 83,92,038 | 2.35
Sikhs | 62,19,134 | 1.74
Buddhists | 1,80,823 | 0.05
Jains | 16,18,466 | 0.45
Others | 18,48,224 | 0.52
Total | 36,10,88,090 | 100.00

*Source: Census of India 1951*

Table 3.2: *Population of India by Religion, 1951*

Excludes the population figures for Jammu and Kashmir

Table 3.2 gives the population of India by religion for the year 1951. Christians were 2.35 per cent of the population at the time of Independence. And in the following decade, the growth rate of the Christians has been 2.44 per cent. The 1971 census figure of the Christian population was 2.60 per cent and the 1981 census shows the Christian population in India as 2.43 per cent. Thus, there has a marked decrease in the Christian community. This trend refutes the claims that the large-scale conversions resorted to by the Christian missionaries is increasing the numbers of Christians in India.

A close examination of the census, figures from 1951 to 1981 shows that the numbers of the Buddhists have increased, a result of large-scale conversions of Hindu dalits in Maharashtra and other parts of the country into Buddhism. There is also a sharp decline in the decadal growth rate of ‘others’. The section ‘others’ include mainly the tribals (adivasis) who do not belong to any ‘structured religion’ like Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. The tribals have their own indigenous religious beliefs and customs. Some of the tribals have joined the structures religions, relinquishing their separate religious identity. The projected figures for 2001 census also reveals that there is a decline in the Christian population and the chances are that this trend would continue in the years to come.
### Table 3.3: Projected Population of India by Religion, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Community</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>82,65,53,000</td>
<td>81.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>12,68,22,000</td>
<td>12.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>2,20,98,000</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>2,03,92,000</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>86,05,000</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jains</td>
<td>34,84,000</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>44,32,000</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>101,23,86,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Projections of Technical Group on Population Projections, 1996 (Govt. of India, Ministry of Affairs, New Delhi, 1996).*

There are four types of Christians in India (a) the Anglo-Indians (b) Christians of Scheduled Caste origin (c) Christians of Scheduled Tribe origin (mostly groups in central India and the North-East India and (d) Christians of upper caste origin. These Christians may belong to either the Catholic or the Protestant traditions of the kinds described above.

The Roman Catholic tradition accounts for a 55 to 60 per cent of the total Christian population and the other Christian traditions between 40 to 45 per cent.

---

21 The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (C.B.C.I.) is the apex body of 14 million Catholics in India, who include those belonging to the Latin rite, Syro Malabar rite and Syro Malankara rite. It comprises of 126 dioceses, headed by Bishops. It is the highest authority of the Catholic Church in India. While the C.B.C.I. member bishops meet in Biennial General Assembly, the Standing Committee of the C.B.C.I. is the executive body, which decides upon matters affecting the Catholic Church.

22 For the Protestant Churches the umbrella organisation has been the National Council of Churches in India (N.C.C.I.) with its headquarters in Nagpur established in 1914 as the National Missionary Council of India. In 1979 the Council transformed itself into the N.C.C.I. It is an inter-confessional autonomous Council and is an ecumenical expression of Churches in India, which embraces, promotes and co-ordinates the various forms of the Church's ministry, and serves also the wider community and society. It is the common platform for thought and action and as such it brings together the churches and other Christian organisations for mutual consultation, assistance and action in all matters related to the life and witness of the Churches and Christians in India.

23 Massey, (1999), *Minorities in a Democracy: The Indian Experience*, p. 73

24 The World Christian Encyclopaedia estimated that Christian denominations in India numbered 286 in the mid-1970s and 330 in the mid-1980s. However only 260 of the 330 are identified by name and of that data was available for only 148. In the non-Catholic category the two biggest denominations are South Indian in origin, namely, the Church of South India and the Orthodox Syrian Church. The third biggest group, a cluster of several denominations, is from Northeast India. The Church of North India, which covers a vast area and is the product of a union of several denominations, ranks only eighth in size. A majority of the denominations (56 per cent) have a membership of 5,000 or less. Thus, the non-
per cent of the total Christians live in the four southern states and Union Territories with Kerala contributing the largest proportion (19.32 per cent), and 14 per cent of the Christians in the North-East India, almost exclusively tribal, and 21 per cent live in North India, in the predominantly tribal belt of Chhotanagpur, which is vivisected and apportioned between four states due to economic and political reasons. In North India covering 74 per cent of the country there are only 5 million Christians, which is not even a quarter of the total population of the region. The minority problems for Christians, therefore, prevail more in the North than in the South where there are well integrated in the social and political spheres. In the North, the local Christians are often regarded as being a foreign group alienated from the land and the people and a continuing threat to the prevailing religious groups around them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Union Territory</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Sikhs</th>
<th>Buddhists</th>
<th>Jains</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>5,92,81,950 (89.14)</td>
<td>59,23,954 (8.83)</td>
<td>12,16,348 (1.83)</td>
<td>21,910 (0.3)</td>
<td>22,153 (0.3)</td>
<td>26,564 (0.4)</td>
<td>15,129 (0.2)</td>
<td>6,65,08,008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arunachal Pradesh</td>
<td>3,20,212 (37.04)</td>
<td>11,922 (1.38)</td>
<td>89,013 (10.29)</td>
<td>1,205 (0.14)</td>
<td>1,11,372 (12.88)</td>
<td>64 (0.1)</td>
<td>3,30,770 (38.26)</td>
<td>8,64,558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1,50,47,293 (67.13)</td>
<td>63,73,204 (28.43)</td>
<td>7,44,367 (3.32)</td>
<td>16,492 (0.7)</td>
<td>64,008 (0.29)</td>
<td>20,645 (0.3)</td>
<td>1,48,313 (0.67)</td>
<td>2,24,14,322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>7,11,93,417 (82.42)</td>
<td>1,27,87,985 (14.81)</td>
<td>8,43,717 (0.98)</td>
<td>78,212 (0.9)</td>
<td>3,518 (N)</td>
<td>23,049 (0.3)</td>
<td>1,44,567 (1.67)</td>
<td>8,63,74,463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goa</td>
<td>7,56,021 (64.68)</td>
<td>61,455 (5.25)</td>
<td>3,49,225 (29.86)</td>
<td>1,087 (0.9)</td>
<td>240 (0.2)</td>
<td>487 (0.4)</td>
<td>678 (0.06)</td>
<td>11,69,793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>3,69,64,228 (89.48)</td>
<td>36,00,920 (8.73)</td>
<td>1,81,753 (4.44)</td>
<td>33,044 (0.8)</td>
<td>11,615 (0.3)</td>
<td>4,91,331 (1.19)</td>
<td>20,691 (0.05)</td>
<td>4,13,09,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>1,46,66,512 (89.21)</td>
<td>7,03,775 (4.64)</td>
<td>15,099 (10.0)</td>
<td>9,56,836 (5.81)</td>
<td>2,058 (0.1)</td>
<td>35,296 (0.21)</td>
<td>3,472 (0.02)</td>
<td>1,64,63,648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>49,58,560 (95.60)</td>
<td>89,134 (1.72)</td>
<td>4,435 (0.09)</td>
<td>32,050 (1.01)</td>
<td>64,081 (1.24)</td>
<td>1,206 (0.02)</td>
<td>1,411 (0.02)</td>
<td>51,70,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>3,84,32,027 (85.45)</td>
<td>52,34,023 (11.64)</td>
<td>8,59,478 (1.91)</td>
<td>10,101 (0.02)</td>
<td>73,012 (0.16)</td>
<td>3,26,114 (0.73)</td>
<td>42,446 (0.09)</td>
<td>4,49,77,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>1,66,68,587 (57.28)</td>
<td>67,88,364 (23.34)</td>
<td>56,21,510 (19.32)</td>
<td>2,224 (0.01)</td>
<td>223 (N)</td>
<td>3,461 (0.01)</td>
<td>13,969 (0.05)</td>
<td>2,90,98,518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>6,14,12,898 (92.80)</td>
<td>32,82,800 (4.96)</td>
<td>4,26,598 (0.65)</td>
<td>1,61,111 (0.24)</td>
<td>2,16,667 (0.33)</td>
<td>4,90,324 (0.74)</td>
<td>1,90,772 (0.28)</td>
<td>66,18,170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Catholic denominations (except for a few) are highly splintered and scattered entities. Given the fact that the non-Catholic population is barely 1.5 per cent of the total Indian population, such fractionation further marginalises an already marginal category (Oomen and Mabry, 2000, The Christian Clergy in India, Volume I. Social Structure and Social Roles, p. 60).

\[24\] op. cit. n. 23, p. 73

\[26\] Fonseca, (1972), ‘Law, Secularism and Indian Minorities’, in Imam, Minorities and the Law, p. 111
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% Hindu</th>
<th>% Muslim</th>
<th>% Sikh</th>
<th>% Jain</th>
<th>% P Sikh</th>
<th>% Other</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>6,40,33,213</td>
<td>(81.12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>10,59,470</td>
<td>(57.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>2,60,306</td>
<td>(14.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>34,788</td>
<td>(5.05)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaland</td>
<td>1,22,473</td>
<td>(10.12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>2,99,71,257</td>
<td>(94.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>69,89,226</td>
<td>(34.26)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>3,92,01,099</td>
<td>(89.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikkim</td>
<td>2,77,881</td>
<td>(68.37)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamilnadu</td>
<td>4,95,32,052</td>
<td>(88.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>23,84,934</td>
<td>(86.50)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>11,37,12,829</td>
<td>(81.74)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>5,08,66,624</td>
<td>(74.72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andaman &amp; Nicobar Islands</td>
<td>1,89,521</td>
<td>(67.53)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
<td>4,86,895</td>
<td>(75.84)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dadra &amp; NagarHaveli</td>
<td>1,32,213</td>
<td>(95.48)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daman &amp; Diu</td>
<td>89,153</td>
<td>(87.76)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>78,82,164</td>
<td>(83.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakshadweep</td>
<td>2,337</td>
<td>(4.52)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pondicherry</td>
<td>6,95,981</td>
<td>(86.16)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68,76,46,721</td>
<td>(10.15)</td>
<td>1,96,40,284</td>
<td>1,62,59,744</td>
<td>63,87,500</td>
<td>33,52,706</td>
<td>37,00976</td>
<td>83,85,988</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures within brackets in percentages

Table 3.4: State-wise Population of the Major Religious Communities in India
Table 3.4 shows that the Christian presence is noticeable only in a few states, that is, Kerala, Goa, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Manipur. In many of the major states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Gujarat, the Christian population is below one per cent of the total population. Even in Gujarat, where Hindu fundamentalists claim that there is large-scale conversion to Christianity, the population is only 0.44 per cent. Similarly, in Orissa the Hindu population is 94.67 per cent whereas the Christian population is only 2.10 per cent. In all major states Christian population is negligible. Wherever the Christian population is substantial (as in the cases of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalya and Manipur) or wherever Christians are traditionally privileged (as in the cases of Kerala and Goa), they occupy important positions in the economic and political contexts. This inevitably imparts a sense of belonging to the administrative / political units which provides a basis for developing a ‘we feeling’ with fellow citizens all over India.27

b) The issue of Caste within Christianity

Though the caste system is peculiar to Hindu society, in actual practice, it also pervades Christians. And although officially the Christian tradition does not recognise the caste system and all are theoretically equal in the eyes of the Church, the conversions over the years by people from the lower castes in an attempt to escape the discriminations of the caste system have led the Church to acknowledge the existence of caste within its folds. This is compounded by the fact that mere conversion has not really eliminated the discrimination that the converts may face in the social and hence political spheres. Christians of dalit background in the Christian community in India suffer three-fold discrimination: one, at the hands of members of the Indian society in general; two, from the government, when it denies them constitutional rights which is given to the dalits in general; and three, from Christians of upper caste/class background. Dalit Christians form 60 per cent of the total Christian population; tribal Christians form 12 per cent; Christians from the other backward classes (OBC) class form 15 per cent28 and non-dalits form 13 per cent.29

27 op. cit. n. 2, p. 52
28 Although the Mandal Commission Report acknowledges the reality of caste among Indian Christians it lists only 12 states and union territories out of 21 (now 28 states) that includes Christians of

98
The Indian Constitution, on the basis of Article 341(1) empowers the President of India, "...by public notification, to specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of groups within castes, races or tribes which shall, for the purpose of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Caste....". Again the Constitution without defining who is of a caste in Article 366(24) refers to the power given to the President of India in Article 341. But once the President has issued such an order saying as to who can be included in the list of Schedule, this list of Scheduled Caste, on the basis of Article 342(2) can be changed only through an Act of Parliament. While exercising his powers conferred on him in Article 341(1) the President of India promulgated on 26th January, 1950 an order known as the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 which contained paragraph 3 of the original draft which stated that "notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2 no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of the Scheduled Caste". Even in the draft proposal this had raised doubts about the fairness of this stipulation and it was agreed upon to delete this paragraph. But it was brought in through the back door.\(^{30}\) This was further extended to the Sikhs by an amendment by the Parliament in 1956 to read "the Hindus or the Sikhs" and the Buddhists in 1990 by the inclusion of "to the Hindus or the Sikhs or the Buddhists". Although the amendment in 1990 changed the criterion about religion by clearly stating that 'the change of religion' does not alter 'the social and economic conditions' yet this logic was not extended to the dalit Christians.\(^{31}\)

Under the 1950 Presidential Order, the Christians dalits do not enjoy equal rights with their counterparts belonging to other religions. These rights include: reservation of seats in the Lok Sabha (Article 330), reservation of seats in the

---


\(^{30}\) op. cit. n. 29, p. 183. It was the first such ordinance passed by the President of India after Independence. It was a re-enacted list of the Government of India Order, 1936. The Ordinance was only meant to list the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and in 1950 every religion had members from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In 1956, under pressure from the Sikhs the President issued an order to include them. This can be seen as inducement by the State for not converting to any other religion or reconverting to Hinduism. Dalits thus do not have the right to freedom of religion. It should be seen as a violation of minority rights. What is of grave concern is that 60 per cent of the minorities do not enjoy their full constitutional rights and are not full citizens (Interview with Rev. James Massey, Director, Centre of Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 10th March 2004).

\(^{31}\) Massey, (1995), Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to the Christians, p. 134
Legislative Assemblies of States (Article 332), claims to government services and posts (Article 335), special officer to look after their interests (Article 338) and promotion of educational and economic interests (Article 46). Through the use of these rights the dalits can partly progress, but all these rights are denied to the Christian dalits and it is done on the basis of the Presidential Order, which as amended in 1990 is known as ‘The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Orders Amendment Act 1990’. The Act only gives the above rights to those dalits who profess “the Hindu or the Sikh or the Buddhist” religion.  

Thus, the Christian dalits continue to lose one of their most important fundamental rights, which prohibit any kind of discrimination on the basis of religion, which has been stated in Article 15. Moreover, the Christian dalits are also denied the right of conscience and the choice of religion as per Article 25 since the category of Scheduled Castes is extended only to the Hindu community. They are denied the right to protect their personal life under Article 21. The Presidential Order of 1950 has deeper implications. The Government has passed a number of other Acts and Rules in order to give protection to the dalits, which include Protection of Civil Rights, 1955, Protection of Civil Rights Rule 1977 and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes which do not include the dalit Christians. The Scheduled Tribes along with the discrimination based on religion face discrimination on their identity as indigenous people.

The Christian community sees this exemption of Christians of dalit origin from the benefits given to other dalits of the Hindu religious tradition as a violation of

---

32 ibid. p. 142

33 The result of this is evidenced in incidents of violence against Christian dalits. On 17th July 1985, in a village named Karamchedu, Prakasam (Andhra Pradesh) Christian dalits were attacked by upper caste Hindus and killed. The media coverage was of some Harijans being killed and not some Christian dalits. The matter was discussed in the Andhra Legislative Assembly, again only on the basis that all killed were Harijans and not Christian dalits. A one-man Commission of Enquiry was constituted which investigated the case not on the basis of those killed being Christian dalits, but only Madigas (a community belonging to a Scheduled Caste, which means by faith Hindu). A similar incident took place on the 6th August 1991 when upper caste and non-dalits raided a dalit colony at Tsundura, Guntur district (Andhra Pradesh) and eight Christian dalits were killed. The media coverage again was that some dalits were killed and not Christian dalits. The victims in both the incidents were Christian dalits who, according to the Presidential Order, 1950 are not considered to be Scheduled Castes and are therefore not entitled to any protection and care, neither under the special Articles provided in the Constitution (Articles 330, 332, 335, 338 and 46), nor under the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 (Massey, Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to the Christians, pp. 142-144).

34 op. cit. n. 23, p. 74
the Constitution. The dalits can be regarded as the marginalised within the marginalised. It is perceived as an attempt to indirectly stop anyone from joining the Christian community.\textsuperscript{35} Although difference of opinion exists regarding the issue of caste within Christianity faith has nothing to do with the economic status of any person. Though Christianity does not believe in casteism the caste system is based on the economic conditions. The exclusion of Christians from the caste benefits enjoyed by other dalits is an indication of the apathetic attitude of the State towards the Christian community.\textsuperscript{36} There are those who feel that the most important point for the Christian community is to avoid the use of the word ‘dalit Christians’. The underlying conception is that Christianity is not differentiated on the basis of caste and that should be adhered to very strictly. An opinion among the Christian community is that it is the responsibility of the whole Christian community to look after their own, including the poor and the so-called lower castes.\textsuperscript{37}

c) The Issue of Conversion within Christianity

Conversion to Christianity in India was largely a group phenomenon, mainly because the social location of, and interaction among, individuals, independent of their present and antecedent caste status, was impossible. Therefore, it was communities, tribes, castes and kin groups rather than individuals, which usually converted.\textsuperscript{38} The issue of conversion has been a topic of debate even prior to Independence. As early as October 1945 the joint committee of the Catholic Union of India and All India Council of Indian Christians issued a resolution, which urged that in the Constitution of India, “the free profession, practice and propagation of religion” should be guaranteed. In negotiations with the Indian National Congress the All India Council of Indian Christians agreed to cooperate with the Congress but at the same time made it clear that they expected a guarantee of “full and unfettered profession, practice and teaching” of the Christian faith. The underlying assurance given by the Christian community was that this had no political or communal motives.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{35} Interview with Sr. Mary Scaria, Member, Justice and Peace Commission, 29\textsuperscript{th} March 2004.
\textsuperscript{36} Interview with Reverend Enos Pradhan, General Secretary, Church of North India, 15\textsuperscript{th} March 2004.
\textsuperscript{37} Interview with V.V. Augustine, Member of the National Commission for Minorities, 13\textsuperscript{th} April 2004.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{op. cit.} n. 2, p. 51
\textsuperscript{39} Sebastian, (2003), \textit{In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversions in India}, p. 39
The draft Constitution included the word 'propagate' as part of the fundamental rights guaranteed in Article 19. The majority of the members of the Constituent Assembly\(^{40}\) wanted the word 'propagate' to be removed from the draft. Christians of both Catholic and Protestant traditions held the view that conversion is a vital part of the Christian faith and that the Constituent Assembly's position in the right to conversion would be a barometer of the attitude of the new government towards the Christian community. However, there were also suggestions from members who were not Christians to keep the word 'propagate'. Their reasons included that the right of conversion would not only be available to the Christian community but also to all communities, including the Hindus. There were ample safeguards against the misuse of such rights and each state has the right to regulate such activity. Since the Christians had shown the willingness to assimilate into the general community, they should be given the right to propagate their own religion. Moreover, the Article does not give unconditional freedom but only expresses limited freedom.\(^{41}\)

Since the Hindus were in a majority in the Constituent Assembly, a reason for their willingness to concede the right to conversion to the Christian community could be seen as a compromise with the Christians giving up their reserved seats in the legislature. But looking at the chronology of events, it is evident that Christians put their faith in the majority community after the latter had made provisions for the minorities in the fundamental rights. This concession to Christian concerns appears to be what caused Christians to cooperate with Hindus in the abolition of reserved seats. It seems that the crucial factor that convinced the majority of the Assembly to vote for the right of conversion was the need to placate the minorities in the face of communal need.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) In 296 members of the Constituent Assembly only 7 were Christians, including J.J.M. Nichols-Roy who was included in the quota for 'Backward Caste' as compared to 163 Hindus and 80 Muslims. Muslims appear to have not spoken in the debated regarding conversions in the Assembly with brief exceptions of comments by Tajamul Hussain and Mohammed Ismail Sahib (Sebastian, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversions in India*, p. 39).

\(^{41}\) op. cit. n. 39, p. 53.

\(^{42}\) ibid. pp. 54-55. Why then did the Christians not insist on the word 'convert' instead of the term 'propagate'? One reason could be that the word 'conversion' was sensitive at that time so Christians tended to avoid it in order to minimise the reaction from the Hindus. But more significantly, it appears to be that the Christians used the word 'propagate' because they saw the right to propagate one's faith as the most fundamental right, and assumed that the right of an individual to convert to another religion was guaranteed by the clause 'freedom of conscience' in the same Article (Sebastian, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversions in India*, p.55).
Thus, at the time of Independence, while the Christians feared that the majority Hindus would use their social and political power to suppress conversion, Hindus resented the fact that Christians were determined to have their way over the right of conversion, which they saw as a symbol of colonial suppression. During the first years of Independence the presence of foreign missionaries involved in social and medical work was generally accepted by the people of India and also by the government in power. However, the increasing numbers of foreign missionaries and the continued conversions of *advasis* and backward classes made many sections of the society anxious. On 16th April 1954, the Madhya Pradesh government announced the launch of an enquiry into missionary activities. Headed by Bhawani Shankar Niyogi, retired Chief Justice, the committee consisted of all Hindus, except for S.K. George, a Syrian Christian whose selection Catholics had strongly objected believing that he did not represent the Christian community in India. The enquiry coincided with the launch of a Hindu nationalist party in Madhya Pradesh, Jana Sangh, and its attempt to promote the ideology of Hindutva resulted in a Christian interpretation of the enquiry as a political strategy to intimidate religious minorities. A careful analysis of the Niyogi report highlights a one-sided picture, its finding coloured the issues as entirely political and ignored the spiritual and religious dimensions of conversion and missionary activities. But the report was significant in that it gave credence to the Hindu objections to Christian conversion by providing factual evidence of problems surrounding the Christian campaign of conversion.43

The debates on conversion post-Independence focused on the legal implications of conversion in the struggle between fundamental rights and religious tolerance; between law and religion. An all-India law, Indian Converts (Regulation and Registration) Bill was presented to the Lok Sabha in December 1954 by Jethalal Joshi to regulate conversion and enable registration and licensing the persons aiding any person to become a convert. The bill was eventually rejected on 2 December 1955. Subsequently, the states of Orissa (*Orissa Freedom of Religion Bill 1967*), Madhya Pradesh (*Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantrya Adhiniyam 1968*) and Arunachal Pradesh (*Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act 1978*) passed bills to make illegal any forced conversion. Another bill, All-India Freedom of Religion Bill was again presented to the Lok Sabha by O.P. Tyagi on 22nd December 1978 based on

43 *op. cit* n. 39, pp. 58-72
the bill passed in Orissa. The new laws meant that converts were not treated as a part of the Indian community but as ‘outsiders’ if they continued to uphold their identity as Christians. Christians felt that Hindus were alienating the Christian community and its members from Indian society through the powerful means of legislation. The Christian resentment was not so much against the letter of the legislation as against the spirit that they perceived to be behind it. The Christian argument increasingly shifted their basis from the fundamental right in the Indian Constitution of all persons to propagate their faith to a human right perspective as seen in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to practise their faith as a minority religious community. In other words, the problem was now seen as Hindus determining to enforce their influence over religious minorities using State power and legal authority. It was the Christians who were under pressure to make adjustments with respect to Hinduism.44

The issue of conversion has, in the past five or six years, brought the Indian Christian community into the forefront of Indian politics and has incurred attacks by the Hindu fundamentalist groups. With the attacks on the Christian community in Dangs,45 Gujarat in 1998, the murder of Graham Staines, an Australian missionary who had been in charge of a leprosy home in Orissa and his two minor sons in 1999, the rape of four nuns in Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh to the more recent alleged rape and murder of a nine year-old girl in Jhabua in a Church compound46 the beginning of 2004, the Christian community has been the latest community singled out for the Hindu fundamentalist hate campaigns.

**d) General Perception of the Christian Community**

Although the identity of Christians in India is a diffuse one the dominant image is that Christians are mainly descendants of converts from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes. Christians in India are predominantly rural

44 ibid. pp. 84-86
45 What is of grave concern is that on 10 January 1999 the Prime Minister visiting the district called for a nation-wide debate on conversion on the grounds that it is in the interest of everybody that a general consensus be formed on the issue (Sebastian, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversions in India*, p. 188).
46 After intensive enquiry into the incident, the police charged Manoj Jadava, an alleged member of the Sangh Parivar, for the rape and murder of the minor girl. Despite the apprehension of the culprit and his admission to the crime, the Hindu fundamentalist groups continued to charge the concerned Christian priests for the incident (Report of the National Federation of Indian Women Fact –Finding Committee).
(75 per cent), economically poor and usually engaged in low-prestige jobs. There is, however, a small section of urban middle-class Christians, which has experienced upward mobility through the educational facilities made available to it by missionaries. Christians in India usually do not assume an overall religious identity; they are highly fragmented, denominationally as well as linguistically. Thus, their identities are crystallised as Catholics or one or other Protestant denominations; or as Anglo-Indians, tribal Christians, neo-Christians, Syrians Christians. They are not a one-language community, do not have a distinct lifestyle (except the Anglo-Indians), and are usually absorbed into the regional-linguistic milieu. 47

Christians in India are not organised into a political party and this could be accounted by two factors: first, their socio-cultural fragmentation based on denomination and language; and second, their conscious rejection of separate electorates initially and the subsequent non-communal approach they seem to have adopted in political affairs. Further, their small size and physical dispersion does not equip them to acquire any political clout 48 except in regional contexts, like in Kerala and in the Northeast. But in the Northeast, the Christian identity although has been mainly asserted in terms of their tribal-hood, the Christian missionary activities have been perceived by the government and the majority community as the root cause of ongoing tribal rebellions. Though factually incorrect 49 it has only generated a negative attitude towards Christians in India. 50

The area where the Christian community dominate, despite their numerical presence and economic disabilities, is in institutions of service, particularly in education and health. 51 The Christian contributions in these areas are widely acknowledged in the Indian society as a whole. But there are two problems associated with it. Firstly, although these institutions were originally meant to serve the poor, they have become elite oriented. With Independence, the Indian State took the responsibility of providing educational and health facilities to the poor. The Christian-

47 op. cit. n. 2, p. 54
48 This general absence of Christians in the decision-making and administrative bodies has rendered the community “voiceless” in matters that affect its minority status (Interview with Sr. Mary Scaria, Member, Justice and Peace Commission, 29th January 2004.)
49 For example, although the Nagas and Mizos are predominantly Christians; the Manipuris are Hindu and the Arunachalis are mainly Buddhists and Vaishnava Hindus the demand for greater political autonomy has gained currency among all of them (Oomen and Mabry, (2000), The Christian Clergy in India, Social Structure and Social Roles, p. 55).
50 op. cit. n. 2, p. 55
51 Interview with Reverend Dr. Henry De Souza, Deputy Secretary General, C.B.C.I., 28th January 2004; Reverend Enos Das Pradhan, 15th March 2004.
run institutions thus mainly catered to the dominant upper caste and class Hindu community and it is only in the rural areas that the benefits of Christian educational institutions have filtered down to the lower castes.\textsuperscript{52} Secondly, a substantial number of these institutions still seem to be dependent on financial support from western Christian institutions. This dependency renders them artificial limbs rather than self-growing organisms.\textsuperscript{53} The main concern for the Indian Christian community in the first four decades of Independence vis-à-vis the Indian State had been only in the field of education, solely in matters relating to salaries and the management of the educational institutions.\textsuperscript{54} It is only in the fifth decade of Independence that the emphasis for the Christian community has shifted to defending the right to religious freedom and religious institutions.\textsuperscript{55}

The Christian community in India has a largely negative image although in reality the case is different. First, Christianity is deemed to be a colonial incorporation. Second, Indian Christians are seen to be converts from the Scheduled

\textsuperscript{52} Interview with Fr. Prakash Louis, Director, Indian Social Institute, 24\textsuperscript{th} May 2003.

\textsuperscript{53} op. cit. n. 2, p. 55

\textsuperscript{54} Since the Christians have been primarily involved in the field of education, it has been a widely disputed right. In the St. Xaviers case (Ahmedabad St. Xaviers College v. State of Gujarat, 1975(1) SCR 173) the verdict was that a law which interfered with a minority’s choice of qualified teachers, or its disciplinary control over teachers and other members of the staff of the institution, was void, as a violation of Article 30(1). Thus, while it was permissible for the State and its educational authorities to prescribe the qualifications of teachers selected by the minorities for their educational institutions, the State would have no right to veto the selection of those teachers. The selection and appointment of teachers for an educational institution was regarded, as one of the essential ingredients of Article 30(1) and this was applicable for aided schools as well (Raju, (2002), Minority Rights: Myth or Reality, p. 31). Significantly, in a later case (T.M.A. Pai Foundation and Ors v. State of Karnataka and Ors (1993 SC 317)), the judiciary has redefined the term ‘minority’ as: “Linguistic and religious minorities are covered by the expression “minority” under Article 30 of the Constitution. Since reorganisation of the States in India has been on linguistic lines, therefore, for the purpose of determining the minority, the unit will be the State and not the whole of India”. Thus, religious and linguistic minorities, who have been put on par in Article 30, have to be considered State-wise. This premise for defining minorities becomes contentious, as a majority in a state can be a minority in relation to the whole nation. The judgement also made further inroads into minority rights under Article 30 by providing for compulsory reservation for non-minorities in aided minority institutions, provision for external appellate tribunals and the permissibility of national interest as a basis for regulations. The judgement equated a fundamental right of religious and linguistic minorities (Article 30) with a fundamental right to all citizens (Article 26, a right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes). The judgement, an eleven judge verdict, with the majority opinion of six judges, hence the binding verdict, attempted to give a restricted meaning to the minority rights whereas the minority opinion of the other five, sought to continue the trend of liberal interpretation in favour of the minority. Till recently the majority judgement used to be the one interpreting the minority rights favourably for the minorities and the minority judgement used to be against the minorities. According to the judgement, there appeared to be an apparent conflict between the rights of the minorities and the non-minorities, hence, the attempt to balance these rights (ibid., pp. 34-42).

\textsuperscript{55}The recent attacks on the Christians have been attempts to destroy churches and schools run by Christian missionaries in remote tribal areas, along with a move to evict the missionaries from the tribal areas on allegations that these churches and schools have been built on tribal land, which should be left to the tribals as per the Constitution.
Castes and Scheduled Tribes by western missionaries. Third, there is a perception that the western capitalist countries fund the Christian Church and the institutions associated with it. Fourth, Indian Christianity is believed to be intellectually dependent on the West for its ideology, doctrine, beliefs, rituals and related matters, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, as it owes allegiance to the Vatican. Fifth, Indian Christians due to this is often thought to hold positions similar to that of the western ‘Christian’ countries. Sixth, Indian Christianity is perceived as vigorously indulging in attempts to proselytise and hence, is expansionist in intent and orientation. Seventh, the Christian community is taken to be very touchy in regard to violations of minority rights but invariably indifferent to the violation of human rights by the State in India. Eighth, Christians are believed to be eager to preserve themselves and their interests at all costs (as evidenced by their behaviour during the Emergency). Ninth, Christians are viewed as having alienated themselves from the cultural and national ethos.

Empirically, Christianity is not a western religion but rather an eastern one that originated in Asia. Christianity came to India much before it went to the West. The earliest converts to Christianity were from the upper castes. Further, there are Christian denominations, which are completely autonomous financially, and there has been conscious rejection of westernised Christianity. Moreover, some of the Indian Christian denominations do not proselytise and are explicitly against it. But it should be remembered that the Christians are partly responsible for the negative image.

An important feature of the Indian Christian community is that since the majority of the Christians are drawn from the three socio-cultural enclaves: South India, the Northeast and the tribal belt of Chhotanagpur, the vast Hindi belt with 40 per cent of India’s population contains only 10 per cent of India’s Christians. This instantly pushes Indian Christianity out of the cultural mainstream. This under-representation of Indian Christians in the Hindi-speaking community renders them at the margins. In fact, the carriers of Indian Christians are the peripheral nationalities of South India and the subaltern nationalities of tribal India. This creates a deep wedge between the dominant nationalities of India (those who inhabit the Indo-Gangatic belt and speakers of Indo-Aryan languages) and Indian Christians (ibid.). Hence, the relationship between Christians and the majority community, the Hindus, has been an ambivalent one. For three decades after Independence, for the Hindus, the Muslims

56 op. cit. n. 2, p. 55
57 ibid. p. 56
were the official ‘other’. The Christian community did not pose any threat as the majority community benefited from the infrastructure provided by the Christians. But over the past ten years the Christian community has borne the brunt of attacks by Hindu fundamentalists, mainly on the issue of conversion. The attempt, according to Church officials, is to instigate the dalits and tribals, the marginalised sections of the society that the Christian missionaries are trying to empower.\(^{58}\) To maintain a unified Hindu identity, it is important to bring the lower castes through the backdoor. Hence, the Hindu communal forces are propagating the threat perception by the Christian community.\(^{59}\)

The Christian community is one of the oldest minorities in the country, with a history dating from the first century AD. Contrary to the popular perception of the Indian mainstream, Christianity is a religion that made its presence felt in the country much earlier than in the most Christian dominated countries at present. Hence, one can call it an ‘eastern’ religion rather than a ‘western’ one. The proliferation of Christianity in the country has been a process spread over many centuries. The Christian community belongs to three different traditions, namely, the Orthodox churches of West Asian traditions, the Roman Catholic Church and the various reformist churches of both South and North India. Although the Christian community is a very small minority in India, there are over 330 denominations adding to the complexities of the community. In pre-Independence India, the various colonial rulers, especially the Portuguese rulers, influenced the Christian community. It is the Portuguese rule that has contributed largely to the general perception that the Christian community is a westernised and foreign community. With the coming of the British, the position of the Christian community was ambivalent. The community as a whole was not an active participant in the freedom struggle. There was no Christian leader of national importance at this stage.

According to the 1991 census, the current population of Christians is only 2.3 percent of the total population. Moreover, the community is not, and may never be, in a position to become anything more than the second largest religious minority in the country. A detailed examination of the census figures reveals that the community is the product of decreasing demographics. The Christian community is located in three major pockets of the country, the southern states, the Chhotanagpur plateau and the northeastern states. The Christian presence in the northern belt is very minimal. This

---

\(^{58}\) Interview with Sr. Mary Scaria, Member, Justice and Peace Commission, 29th January 2004.

\(^{59}\) Interview with Fr. Prakash Louis, Director, Indian Social Institute, 24th May 2003.
dispersed demographic distribution of the Christians has resulted in a community that
can never be a major political force in minority politics of the country, unlike the
Muslim. Unlike the Sikh community, the Christian community is not organised into a
political party. Moreover, this community does not possess the economic clout to
make a vast difference in the economy like the Parsi community.

A religion that was incorporated at various stages within the Indian social fabric,
the Christian community has had to contend with issues that are unique to the nation,
namely the caste system. Scheduled Caste Christians have been denied the special
entitlements, which Scheduled Castes from Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist communities
enjoy. The State admits that a change of religion has not necessarily led to the
betterment of the social status of Scheduled Castes. Moreover, since the State has
conferred these special benefits to other communities, a denial of similar benefits of
Christians is tantamount to discrimination on the basis of religion and a violation of
the Constitution.

In post-Independent India, the Christian community has been projected as a closed
community, complacent in its peaceful presence in the country and having cordial
relations with both the majority community and other minorities. Despite the main
limitations of the community, its main contributions to nation building have been in
the educational and medical sectors. Yet the general perception of the Christian
community in the Indian mindset is largely a negative one. The popular image of the
community is one of a progressive, westernised and liberated community. The
opinion that western capitalist countries fund Christian institutions and missionary
activities in the country has only added to this negative image of the community.
Christians are viewed as alienated from the cultural and national ethos. But the main
challenge to the community is its emphasis on the right to proselytise and to ‘go into
all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation’ (Gospel of Mark
16.15) and baptise all in the name of Jesus Christ. A contentious issue since
Independence, in recent years, with the rise of fundamentalist groups within the
dominant community, Christians are forced to defend and simultaneously, come to
terms with the hostilities arising from this right to proselytise. The Muslims had all
along been the ‘other’ in the public realm. On this issue the Christian community was
also identified as the ‘other’ and have become the target for acts of communal
violence and hatred. A systematic analysis of this aspect of the public image of the
Christian community would be discussed in the following chapter.