Conclusion

A highly pluralistic society, home to a multitude of religions, languages and communities, India is a complex web of relationships at any level. Although the Indian State has allowed a number of pluralities to gain significance at various stages of the country’s history, the main plurality that has formed the basic core of Indian politics has been religion. The turbulent circumstances that led to the birth of Independent India necessitated a particular trajectory, which has generated recurrent situations of crises. The Partition of the country along religious lines and the bloodbath that followed has been the one main event that changed the course of Indian history. The immediate and pressing need was the stability and unity of the country. Simultaneously, it was vital to assure the Muslims who had opted to remain in India of an equal participation in the public domain.

Consequently, the nascent republic chose to consolidate the ideas of the community within the political realm, as opposed to the notion of the individual prevalent in the Western liberal framework. The Constitution makers were unconvinced that the granting of individual rights would be sufficient to promote and preserve the heterogeneity of Indian society. In the West, historical events culminated in the separation of religion from State policies. Though Nehru favoured a similar separation of religion and politics, the popular opinion was that such a separation would be unsuitable for a nation with such deep religious moorings. After much deliberation, the forefathers of the nation opted for the principle of sarva dharma sambhava or equal respect of all religions in the public domain. India was envisaged as a secular Republic, rather than a Hindu nation, which would have been an obvious choice given that Pakistan became an Islamic nation after Partition.

This principle of equal respect for all religions was vastly different from State neutrality as practiced in the West. The principle of sarva dharma sambhava did not mean an outright rejection of religion in the public realm. The Indian Constitution does not strictly inscribe any codified principle defining the relation between religion and the State. The term ‘secular’ was only incorporated into the Constitution with the 42nd Amendment in 1976. Theoretically, all religions were subject to equal entitlement in State policy. Post-Independence, the Indian State, as the sole agency of
reform in the country, could use its regulative powers to bring about reforms in religious institutions and practices.

Hence, in the constitutional scheme, minority rights have been an integral part. Prior to Independence, the consensus on minority rights centred on the right to language, script, culture and religious practices. What remained contentious were the political rights of the minorities. At Independence, political reservations for minorities were dropped as being potentially divisive for a religiously sensitive country like India. Even though the Constitution did not define the term 'minority', it provided minorities with the right to religious freedom (Article 25-28), cultural and linguistic rights (Article 29-30). The Constitution, thus, recognises that different groups have different cultures, which are valuable for the members and hence, provides for provisions to prevent homogenisation of the society. There is a tacit acknowledgment that members of minority groups can face disadvantages in a society with the predominance of any particular religion or community. Consequently, the Indian Constitution provides for the promotion and protection of minority religions and culture in society as essential for the viability and sustainability of the Indian democracy.

In the West, cultural rights were granted after a uniform structure of social and civil laws were established in society. This uniform structure set the parameters for the exercise of cultural rights in society. Hence, in the West, community rights have not conflicted with certain individual rights, for instance, the principle of gender equality. In India, the principle of secularism adhered to saw the development of a different trajectory for community rights and individual rights. Since the emphasis was on the community, community rights have often led to a conflict with individual rights.

Though the historical circumstances for the adoption of the principle of sarva dharma sambhava is no longer valid, debates on the Indian variant of secularism has not been categorically determined within the political discourse. Despite the affirmed neutrality of the country, India was, and is, a predominantly Hindu state, all other religions inevitably, became minorities within the public sphere, some with more bargaining power than others. Every decade, since Independence, has witnessed communal violence on religious issues. Fundamentalist groups within the dominant community have been gaining prominence in the political realm, leading to a constant escalation in the feeling that India is a Hindu nation and subsequently, all other
religious communities are alien to the country. There has been a persistent erosion of respect for the various pluralities based on culture and religion. Simultaneously, there is a fostering of deep mistrust towards minorities communities. This was heightened with the ascendancy of BJP to power at the Centre and at various states. This is not to say that the so-called secular political parties have not been a party in ‘soft’ Hindutva.

Minority communities possess certain attributes, which its members consider to be unique and vital to their existence as a group. The attempt, therefore, is to protect and sometimes, even promote these unique attributes within the larger society. Most demands from minority communities are demands to legitimately incorporate respect for these differences within the mainstream. The leverage that a minority community acquires for itself depends upon its relative standing with other communities in the larger society. Furthermore, communities are never insular, in that, they are constantly affected by the way the other communities in society perceive it. Often minorities convert themselves into political minorities, in order to seek recognition and protection of their distinctive identities. Simultaneously, political parties in a democracy, like India, develop these minorities to their political advantage. Thus, the growth of fundamentalism has simultaneously witnessed the strengthening of community identities for the sake of political survival.

Religion in the political discourse has always centred on two main communities, the majority of the Hindus and the minority of the Muslims. Religious minorities like the Jains, Buddhists and the Sikhs are legally a part of the Hindu community. It is mainly the Christian community that is ignored or pushed to the background in debates of secularism within the public domain. The Christian community comprises of 2.3 per cent of the total population in India. It is the second largest religious minority community after the Muslims. The Christians occupy a unique place within the Indian political sphere. The origins of Christianity in India can be traced back to 52 AD when, according to Church history, St. Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ, became the first Christian missionary. The history of Christianity in India is largely linked to the colonial rule of various European powers in the country. For the 300 years that the British ruled, the Christians and by association the Indian Christians were the political masters. After Independence, the Christian minority was reduced to insignificance with no major stand in the political happenings in the country.
The association with colonial rulers resulted in various strands of Christian theology gaining popularity, leading to the mushrooming of a large variety of Christian denominations, for an alarmingly low 2.3 per cent of representation. The presence of over 300 denominations merely adds to the complexities that already beleaguer the community. The on-going conflict between the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions has always remained a point of contention that assumes significance in the manifestation of a Christian identity.

The import of Christianity to India has inevitably assumed all the attributes of the existing social fabric of the country. Although the caste system was unique to the Hindu society, Christianity, in its missionary zeal, had no option but to accept the system. Theologically, all Christians are regarded as equals in the Church, but membership from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has increased the Christian presence in India. Scheduled Caste Christians or dalit Christians suffer discrimination as they are denied the benefits that accrue to Scheduled Castes of other religions, especially Sikhs and Buddhists. Often, they are also subjected to discrimination from the upper caste Christians in the church. The failure of the Indian State to address this issue has further questioned the supposed neutrality in the public domain.

The Christian identity is highly diffused and fragmented. Predominantly rural, Christians are economically poor and usually engaged in low-prestige jobs. The section of urban middle-class Christians, with upward mobility, largely through the educational facilities provided by the missionaries, is significantly small. The Christians lack an overall religious identity, a single language commonality, a distinct lifestyle and are usually absorbed into the regional-linguistic milieu. The Christians are dispersed throughout the country with few pockets of majority, namely Kerala and the northeastern states and hence, lack a political party, like the Sikhs. Christians are also deficient in numbers, like the Muslims, for a greater representation in the political and public domains. Unlike the Parsis, Christians lack the economic wealth to make an impact on the country. In addition, the Christians lack visibility in the various representative institutions like the judiciary, the police forces, bureaucracy and in the legislature. Furthermore, the community has not made its presence felt either in popular media and the arts of the cultural scene in the country. The representation of the community in popular media often reiterates the stereotype of the community as 'western' in their lifestyle, thought processes and religion. The
paucity of literature on Christians is possibly indicative of their insignificance suggesting that the community does not merit the same degree of interest in the research and authentication of various aspects like their socio-economic conditions and their religious and political compulsions.

According to the Church leadership, the mainstream has a general impression that the community in India is westernised, since Christianity is a religion associated with Western countries. Moreover, Christians owe their allegiance to the Vatican, like the Muslims owe their allegiance to Mecca and Medina, and consequently, are alien to the Indian mindset. What is ignored is the contribution of the Christian community to nation building, especially in the fields of education and health. While the leadership takes immense pride in the quality and extent of their contributions, it feels that the community has not been adequately recognised for their efforts. It also points out that the services rendered by the community are not specific to the community and the benefits of the services have been enjoyed by sections of the dominant community, even to the extent that some of the leaders of the Hindu Right may have been educated in Christian institutions.

In the recent past, the Christian community has come under attack from different parts of the country. The community has been severely criticised for its role in conversions of illiterate tribal sections of the society. This has led to violence against the community by fundamentalist groups. The community, which has had a relatively peaceful and non-controversial existence in the country, has been compelled to counter these threats to its existence. The community maintains that the right to practice and propagate its religion is constitutional and it is guaranteed to all communities. The Christian community takes immense pride in being the first religious minority to reject religion as the basis for membership in the country. The Christian representative in the Constituent Assembly denied the option of separate electorates for the community. Instead, the community was granted the right to practice and propagate religion after many deliberations in the Constituent Assembly.

The implicit understanding in the Indian mindset has been that alien religions, especially Christianity, attempt to proselytise to increase their numbers. The Church leadership points out that the Christian community has the lowest birth rate amongst all communities while the death rate among the Christians is high, hence, the myth of increasing numbers of Christians is a popular misconception. Although the Indian Constitution provides all citizens the right to freely profess, practice and propagate
one’s religion, the Indian State has intervened to ensure that alien religions are prohibited in its missionary activities through legislation, which effect intimidation of Islam and Christianity. This leads to a perception, among the affected communities, that the Indian State operates as a Hindu State. The judiciary has played a significant role in deciding areas of State intervention in religious and cultural matters. It has frequently assumed the authority to interpret religious texts to determine various aspects of religious practices. Questioned by the minority communities, the role played by the judiciary has limited the legitimacy of the State to intervene in religious matters.

Violence against Christians is a well-documented fact, although it is hardly highlighted in the popular media. Apart from the murder of the Australian missionary, Graham Staines and his two minor sons, there has been limited coverage of incidents like burning of 400 Bibles in Rajkot by Bajrang Dal activists, demolition of churches in Dangs, Gujarat, rape of nuns and ‘re-utilisation’ of entire villages in the tribal Gujarat-Rajasthan belt, forcible tonsuring of Christian women in Orissa, attacks on priests in Jhabua for the alleged rape of a minor girl within the church premises, which was later proved to be the work of a member of the Sangh Parivar. What gets highlighted is the fact that Christians resort to conversion of illiterate tribals in order to increase their numbers. The Church leadership maintains that they are being targeted for the work that they undertake among the underprivileged and the marginalised sections of society. In the process of development, the marginalised are made aware of their rights and begin protesting against the landlords and zamindars of the areas, who regard this protest as the handiwork of the missionaries. The landlords, often with political connections, may perpetuate the alleged conversion of tribals to suit their purpose. It is also alleged that Christians utilise their presence in the fields of health and education to aid in the process of conversion.

Although the issue of conversion has been a source of contention between the dominant sections of society and the Christians since Independence, the community has chosen to remain fairly silent on the subject. Though the Church does admit to instances of conversion by missionaries, it is reluctant to examine the issue without its own brand of fundamentalism. The community, both leadership and laity, maintains that real ecumenism would be meaningful only if Christians become genuine role models of the values emphasised by Jesus Christ with a genuine change of heart on the part of the converted influenced by the actions of Christians. This would, at times,
involve instances of persecution of Christians and at the same time, it should also involve genuine forgiveness of those who persecute (this is evident in the statement of Gladys Staines, the widow of Graham Staines, and various church organisations, after the court verdict against Dara Singh, the leader of the mob who instigated the burning of Graham Staines and his two sons). The community comes across as being so deeply involved in its devotion that they are almost passive in their world-view. As a test of the faith in Jesus Christ and the rigid adherence to the tenets of the Christian faith, the community often finds itself defenseless against, or in a state of meek submission, to communal forces. Even as Jesus Christ, and after His death the apostles and early Christians, suffered persecution to bear testimony to their faith, Christians in India too, are expected to have the fortitude and intensity of belief to endure such trials.

The Church leadership admits that the Christian identity in India is highly fragmented on dogmas, doctrine, language and allegiance to different Heads. The main thrust of the Church has been on the ministerial aspect of Church activities rather than on the worldly necessities of political survival. The Church in India needs to overcome these denominational differences and become an active participant in civil society. It should work towards with the secular civil society for its own healthy development within the country.

The perceptions of the laity with regard to the attacks on the community reflect the apprehensions of the community. A high percentage of participants in the fieldwork claimed to be worried about the recent attacks on the community. This sense of worry cuts across the various parameters of age, gender, marital status, educational qualifications, occupation, income, caste and region. Furthermore, a high percentage of the participants felt that the attacks were a result of political activities of the parties, though respondents who felt that other possibilities could be caste politics and the issue of conversion were significant. Almost all the participants felt that this necessitated a greater unity among all Christians across denominational lines. More than half the participants felt that the Indian State was biased towards the majority community. With the change in government after the elections, there seems to be a sense of relief among the members of the community and the leadership. The defeat of the BJP and its allies has, according to the community, only revealed the vitality of the dominant community in resisting attempts to homogenise Indian society. It feels that even the dominant community has rejected the communal mandate of the Hindu
The community leadership is hopeful that the community may not be subjected to further blatant communal violence with the change of government.

Perceptions of threat to the community identity have often resulted in a greater emphasis on unity within the community. Differences from within the community could only lead to the further weakening of the community identity. Demands for community-based rights significantly shift the focus from the individual to the collective. Community-based rights often conflict with individual rights. Communities may deny certain liberties to individual members, which may restrict an individual’s choices in life. Carried to an extreme, communities can even become tyrannical in its quest to project a unified image to the larger society. Their continued existence may, to a large extent, depend on a projection of this unified image.

The Indian principle of secularism has special significance to gender equality within the country. Women are often regarded as the sole symbols of a particular community. In the formation and strengthening of a community identity frequently, gender concerns are subsumed within the larger concerns of the community. This results in a divergence of interests between the community as a whole and members in their individual capacities. An instance of this discord between interests is visible in the struggle for gender equality within community relations. This divergence becomes more marked in minority religious communities, especially when the authority to decide on gender relations within the community form the basis for negotiations with the nation state for greater autonomy.

The role of the State in encouraging pluralism in the public sphere becomes significant for such minority communities. The State, as an all-encompassing institution, at times can favour one community over others, relegating the latter to a subordinate position within the public sphere of the State. This majoritarian bias of the State becomes evident in its exercise of authority. Despite the State’s constitutional mandate to legislate for all religious communities in its role as the sole agency for reform, the exercise of this power has been wider with regard to Hinduism than with other religions. The Indian State, which intervened as a reformer in the case of the majority and protestant religions, pursued a policy of expedient withdrawal from intervening in Islam and Christianity despite its moral and legal responsibility to do so. Consequently, the possibility of obscurantist practices continuing in these communities is far greater.
The impetus of the Indian State in gender issues has largely been confined to the reform of personal laws. Personal laws refer to issues that define gender relations within any religious community in India. They relate to marriage, divorce, maintenance, adoption and inheritance. Personal laws, governing gender relations in religious communities, were a legacy of the British rule. Although the Constitution of India does not regard personal laws to be a fundamental right of a religious community, it has added to the ambiguity of the status of personal laws. Even though these are within the purview of the State’s legal system, the extent of State power to legislate on religious laws has remained undefined and nebulous. Consequently, since Independence, the existence and maintenance of personal laws have justified disparities between the different religious communities in the country.

After Independence, the Indian State in its self-abrogated role as social reformer of Indian society undertook the reform of the Hindu personal laws. Although the process was vehemently resisted by sections of that community, the Indian State steamed ahead in its effort to bring about gender justice and equality within the Hindu personal laws. This attempt at reform of the personal laws of the majority community led to the further consolidation of religious differences. A Hindu was defined as one who was not of the Muslim, Christian, Zorastrian or Jewish religions. It denied a distinct identity to the protestant religions of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism while simultaneously denying a citizen’s right to atheism. The attempt at reform was to ensure commonality between the various traditions of Hindu jurisprudence. It first recognised the existence of discrete belief systems, regional specificities and overlapping religions, and then proceeded to deny these pluralities. In the process, it deprived women of the benefits of many local and regional legal systems. It also perpetuated the myth that the Hindu Code was an egalitarian legal system and a first step towards the legislation of a uniform civil code for all religious communities.

Even though the Indian State used its mandate to initiate reforms within the majority community, it shied away from using the very same mandate to initiate similar reforms in the personal laws of the minority religious communities. Hence, the personal laws of minority communities have remained virtually untouched in post-Independent India. The State firmly maintains that such initiatives should come from within the communities. Since religious ideology and leadership are often in the hands of male members of the community, women of such minority communities are dependent on this leadership for gender justice and equity. Community leadership
claim their religious laws as inviolate and the constant emphasis on the unity of the community, defined in terms of family codes, restrict the articulation of gender interests. Challenges to the status quo within the community are often regarded with suspicion and as an endeavour to threaten the community identity, as evidenced in the Shah Bano case.

The Constitution had attempted a delicate combination of religious freedom at present with a future mandate for active governmental promotion of a transformation of India’s religions. This was evident in the constitutional provision of divesting religions of their character as sources of legal regulation of family life and the evolution of a uniform civil code for all religions. A genuine concern of the women’s movement in the country, the demand of a uniform civil code saw a drastic reversal post-Shah Bano. The growth of the Hindu Right saw an appropriation of this demand by it to promote its understanding of Hindutva. With the projection of the Hindu Code as the source for the uniform civil code, the Hindu Right also promoted the idea that since the Hindus had given up claims to their identity with the codification of the personal laws, minority communities, especially the Muslims, should also be prepared to do so. They accuse the State of resorting to a policy of ‘appeasement’ towards the minorities. The other notion promoted was the idea that Muslim women were subjected to barbaric laws and were in need of the egalitarian Hindu law to liberate them.

It is within these parameters that the question of Christian women’s rights as equal members of the community is brought into public attention. Muslim women have witnessed a tumultuous struggle at reforms from within the community. The amendments to the Parsi personal laws were accepted readily by the Indian State as the initiative for reform was from the liberal male leadership of the community. The Christians have had a prolonged history of reform initiatives begun by women members of the community. Christian personal laws were an outcome of legislations promulgated during the British colonial rule. Reflecting the progress in the legal system in the parent country, it redefined the parameters for reforms within the country. Although the laws were legislated mainly to govern the relations of English Christians, by association, the native Christians were included as well. Subsequently, laws in the parent country were liberalised but in India, Christians continued to be governed by antiquated and static laws, which were over a century old.
The decade long struggle was complicated by the differences in opinion among the various traditions in Christianity. The community could not, for a long time, evolve a consensus on the concerned issues among the numerous denominations. The Indian State continued to refer the recommendations of the women's organisations to the Church leadership, as it did not want to antagonise the conservative and politically powerful Catholic Church. Amendments to the Christian personal laws are a recent outcome, although the community is still in the process of fighting for rights that are available to other communities, like the right to adopt.

Although the reform initiative was pioneered by women's organisations within the purview of the Church, the benefits or knowledge of this struggle has not percolated to the lay members of the community, both men and women. The community members are unaware of personal laws that govern gender relations within the community. An overwhelming percentage of participants in the fieldwork were ignorant of the absence of an adoption law available to the community. Even those who were aware of instances of 'adoptions' among relatives and friends were ignorant of the difference between these 'adoptions' and the legal provision of guardianship of wards, which legally governs the Christians. A high percentage of respondents were unaware of recent amendments to the IDA or the Christian Marriage Bill proposed by the NDA. Though many respondents were aware that for the Roman Catholics, marriage is a sacrament and hence, the Roman Catholic Church was against the notion of divorce, more respondents were unaware of the availability of the provision of divorce for Protestants. For Roman Catholics, divorce is on dual grounds, as per the civil law of the country applicable to Christians and on grounds allowed by the canon law. For Protestant, marriage can be terminated according to the civil laws of the land and did not require any canonical approval. Women are largely unaware that they are entitled to an equal share of the ancestral property. A large percentage of the respondents felt that the Church should initiate greater consciousness among the laity, especially women about their rights as a part of its activities.

Surprisingly, the Church does not consider it essential to create consciousness among the laity. The Church, in general, is rather closed in matters that should ideally be common knowledge among its members. The Roman Catholic Church considers it an anathema to have a discussion on divorce in the fear that it would encourage divorce amongst its members. An incident representative of this could be the caution
impressed upon the researcher by the priest celebrating the service when asked to give the Sunday sermon for International Women’s Day. The researcher had chosen to talk about Christian personal laws. Many women members present in the Church for that particular service approached the researcher afterwards to claim their ignorance about matters pertaining to marriage, divorce and adoption. An active member of the Church group, the researcher herself was unaware of these laws until academics compelled her to investigate this area to a greater degree. This also shows that the Church is keen to project its pro-women position but only within its theological framework.

Hence, there exists a tussle in the community between the desire to be liberal and egalitarian in relation with other communities and the tendency to be fundamentalist in its relations with its own members. The significance of women in Church theology has largely been a result of the Biblical notion of the creation of man and woman. Adam, the first man, was created in the likeness of God. All creatures on earth were put under the care of Adam. Yet, Adam felt alone and God thought of creating a helpmate for Adam. Thus, Eve was created from a rib taken from Adam when he was asleep. This creation of Eve, the first woman, after the creation of man, and especially from his rib, has accorded an inferior status to the woman from genesis itself. The male leadership of the order of creation identifies the patriarchal social order with the natural or divinely created order. Male headship is the divine will of God and hence, any effort to give women autonomy would be against this divine will. An implicit understanding in this notion is the paternal symbols of Godhead. Though there has been liberal feminist theology that speaks of man and woman being created in the likeness of God, the dominant and official view within the Church has been associated with the theory of subordination of women.

The subordination of women is further substantiated by mankind’s fall from God’s grace as a consequence of Eve’s actions. Eve was tempted by the snake to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, in spite of being strictly forbidden by God. Eve, in turn, tempted Adam to do likewise and hence, was the cause of the first sin against God. Eve came to epitomise all women. She is willful, lacking self-control of her passions and appetite, a temptress of the male and therefore, needs to be kept under control, both for her own good and for the good of humanity. She is decidedly the moral inferior of man. Throughout the history of the Church, women have been burnt at the stake as witches in the image of Eve for heresy.
Simultaneously, in Christian theology, women are likened to a kind of heroic ethic of humility and suffering, chastity and self-abnegation in the likeness of Mother Mary, the Virgin Mother of God. The example of her humility and acceptance of God’s will is clearly evidenced in the divination of the birth of Jesus Christ to Mary by Angel Gabriel, the virgin bride of Joseph. In the New Testament, Mother Mary is an example of sacrifice and suffering during the life and the death of her son for the salvation of humanity. Christian women are called upon to be in the likeness of Mother Mary in their demeanour. That Jesus Christ often chose women to be the centre of many parables and events to convey His teachings to the masses of those times, thereby, placing a special emphasis on women, has probably redeemed the moral standing of women amongst few within the Church. Jesus Christ also placed great importance on the agency of women by choosing women to give the message of His Resurrection to the world.

This duality in the moral standing of women in Christian theology is reflected in the role and participation of women in the Church. This study attempted to analyse only two aspects of the participation of women in the Church, namely the movement for equal participation of women in the priestly mission of Christ and women’s representation in Church bodies. The ordination of women as priests has been vehemently opposed since the beginning of Christianity. The reason behind this opposition was probably that Jesus Christ, the founder of the institution of ordained ministry, chose only men to be His apostles who later become the first priests. Although this could have been a reflection of the times, Catholic Church leadership has fervently supported the exclusion of women from ordained ministry. Certain Protestant Churches have, over the years, changed their stand on this issue and have allowed women to be ordained as priests. In 1994, the Church of England decided to

1 The one event through which this becomes clear would be the forgiving of the prostitute. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the dominant sections of society of that period, brought a prostitute before Jesus Christ to be stoned for her sins. Jesus Christ addressed the crowd by stating if anyone in the crowd considered to be without any sin should be the first to throw a stone at the woman. At this the crowd gradually dispersed. Jesus Christ looked up after sometime and asked what had happened to the crowd. When the prostitute said that they had all left, Jesus told the woman that He too does not condemn the woman. Such events are well documented in the New Testament.

2 After the death of Jesus Christ, He was buried in a new tomb hewn in the rock. A stone was rolled to door of the tomb. After the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and Mary went to see the tomb at dawn. They found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. As Mary Magdalene was weeping outside the tomb, Jesus appeared and said to her ‘Woman, why are you weeping? I am He who you are looking for. Go tell my brothers that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and to your God’ (Gospel of John, 21.18). For all Christians, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basis of their faith. By choosing to appear before women for the first time after His death, Jesus placed great significance on their agency as witnesses to the Resurrection.
ordain women as priests. This decision prompted an exodus of hundreds of conservative priests. Recently, the Church of England voted to remove the legalities towards ordaining women as bishops. In terms of church politics, the ordination of women as bishops would allow women into the centre of decision making, because bishops wield significant power over individual parishes and ordained priests. This decision of the Church could lead to a greater migration in protest of women as bishops.

Christianity, on the whole, has had to contend with changing times of sexual misdemeanours involving priests, priests who are openly gay, reduced numbers of priests, dwindling participation of members in Sunday service and controversies regarding some of the fundamental tenets of Christianity, like abortion and contraception. In India, women are largely responsible for the practice of the faith either in the families or in the presence during Sunday services. Women in their capacity as nuns exceed the number of priests and brothers. Some women participants in this study felt that it was only fair to ordain women as priests as they equaled men in their faith. Women, who choose to become nuns, undergo the same rigorous training as men who choose to become priests. And like the priests who lead a life of chastity, obedience and humility, dedicated to the service of Jesus Christ, nuns too are called upon to lead a similar life of dedication to Jesus Christ. However, women participants were also unhappy with the ordination of women as priests, due to the notion of 'uncleanliness' associated with women during menstruation and the threats to the personal safety of a woman priest in carrying out the duties of a priest. Women would have to travel to different places, often isolated and underdeveloped, to celebrate the Mass, putting them at great risk. There were also participants who felt that the community at large would not be able to accept a woman priest.

As far as women's participation and representation within the different theological strands of Christianity is concerned, there are varying positions that cover the entire spectrum. The Roman Catholic Church is known for its conservativeness, especially on many issues that relate to women. The stand of the Roman Catholic Church on the issues of abortion and contraception is well documented. That the Church is male dominated is also a well-documented fact and the Roman Catholic Church very vehemently upholds that women would never be ordained as priests. This is in accordance with what Jesus Christ had instituted, all the apostles chosen by Him were men. Feminist theology within the Roman Catholic tradition cites examples
from early history of the Church where there were women prophetesses who preached Christianity across foreign lands. The church has acknowledged these women prophetesses and their missionary activities. Women are given representation and also voting rights in various church bodies, though not to the extent that would ensure their equality. The church leadership feels that women have been given adequate representation and participation in the church and hence, do have to rely on ordained ministry. Religious women have approximately 230 congregations, which are managed and administered autonomously by women. The leadership admits that women have been the mainstay of the contributions of the Christian community to nation building.

Women representatives feel that the Roman Catholic Church has only resorted to tokenism. The church has not given women their due place in the church organisation. Women's organisations known as the Legion of Mary or Mahila Sangathan are an integral part of the various churches within the Roman Catholic tradition. These organisations are mainly involved in the devotional, social and charitable activities of the church. In rural areas, the practice of segregation of the sexes during attendance at the Sunday service is still prevalent. Women are still expected to cover their heads while in church. Though the covering of the heads was considered a mark of respect to God, it is not expected of men. Moreover, the church has only laid emphasis on Mother Mary as the model on which Roman Catholic women should base themselves. The Roman Catholic Church does not encourage other role models for women. Further, it is the celibate priestly representatives who often take decisions on issues that largely affect gender relations in the community (evident in the struggle for the reform of Christian personal law, laws that are not religious in nature, except divorce). The Church in India, feel women representatives, could have a greater role in the elimination of social evils like dowry in the southern churches, yet they are not willing to do so as it is often the beneficiary of dowry transactions. The election of the religiously conservative Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as the new Pope has further closed avenues for more open discussion on issues of gender within the Roman Catholic Church.

The Church of North India, on the other hand, subscribes to the Protestant traditions of Christianity and hence, could be considered as a progressive church where women can be officially ordained as priests. It has also initiated the process of nominating women priests for the post of deacon, a first for the Church in India.
although it admits that women pastors often have a difficult task due to inadequate acceptance of women pastors by the community. The Church of North India is also progressive, in that, the official policy of the church has provided for one-third mandatory representation of women in all church bodies. The various parishes under the Church of North India strictly adhere to this policy, though only some among the laity are aware of this fact. This Church is very proud of the fact that they have achieved something that is still an on-going debate in the larger political domain. Moreover, the other denominations are ignorant of this official philosophy of the Church of North India. The researcher regrets the inability to incorporate the participation of a woman pastor as a part of the research due to lack of resources - this would have only added to the quality of the research.

The Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church, a southern church, is, as the name would suggest, a conservative church. It also belongs to the Protestant philosophy but in this church, it would be unthinkable for the church to have women ordained as priests. Women in this denomination are not elected as Parish Council members but are co-opted in the various bodies through the agency of their husbands, and do not possess any voting rights. This means that single women and women are not given the space for an active participation within the church. Yet there is an active Marthamariam Vanitha Samajam, which is headed by women. This view of the church is a contrast to the Church of North India.

Surprisingly, according to the laity in all the five churches of the fieldwork, the reason for this absence of women’s participation in the church bodies and in decision-making could be attributed to a lack of time. And what is of significance is that this is an opinion shared by both the men and women participants. According to the participants, other reasons for this absence of women in church bodies involving decision-making is the possible lack of initiative by women to take a greater interest in church activities, and the social status of women that prevent them from a more active participation. There is a strange reluctance to openly admit that the Church philosophy does not allow women a greater presence in the Church.

According to the laity, the Church in India is promoting women’s issues and interests among the Christian community and within the wider society. The only difference would be that men feel that this promotion of women’s interests within the community is a recent phenomenon and women participants believe that this perusal of women’s issues within the church is a slow process. Even the male participants in
the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church felt that the church was pro-women although the women of this church did not agree with this opinion. It is also of great significance that a large percentage of the lay participation expressed the view that Christian women had a better overall status as compared to women of other religions.

Evidently, the denominational differences in Christianity are largely responsible for the degrees of gender equality within different churches. But in general, the mainstream conception of the westernised and liberated Christian, and hence, the westernised and liberated Christian woman, is fallacious. There is a visible lack of legal consciousness among women members of the community. Moreover, there is no active interest or knowledge in the issue of ordination of women as priests and simultaneously, there is under-representation and participation of women in Church. Gender discourses within the Christian community is restricted to certain issues, thereby lacking an overarching concern for gender equity and participation. Advocacy on gender equity within the Church is visibly lacking. Gender solidarity across the denominations has not translated into a strong and vibrant movement to emphasise issues concerning women.