

The Clash of Global and Local Forces: The Case of the Church in India

THE CLASH OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL FORCES: THE CASE OF THE CHURCH IN INDIA

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The story of Christianity in India is a long and tangled one, extending from the time of Christ to the present. In this subcontinent Christianity has encountered great empires, sophisticated scholars, and some of the most profound philosophical and religious systems on earth. In the encounter it has shaped and been shaped by India. In many ways this Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire has been the testing ground for Christianity and the modern mission movement. Here Christianity has been forced to deal with institutionalized ethnic and religious pluralism, with the uniqueness of Christ, and with the unity of the Church. The encounter has shaped the thinking of western leaders, such as E. Stanley Jones, Stephen Neill, Leslie Newbigin and Donald McGavran, and gave rise to Indian theologians and leaders such as Sadhu Sundar Singh, A. J. Appasamy, V. Chakkarai, V.S. Azariah and M. M. Thomas.

We will look briefly at the history of the Christian Church in India, and then at the current scene. Finally we will examine what the experiences of the Indian Church have to say to the global Church.

I. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before examining the history of Christianity in India, we need to make explicit the theoretical framework that will inform the analysis. I will examine four sets of competing forces that have been important in shaping the church in India.

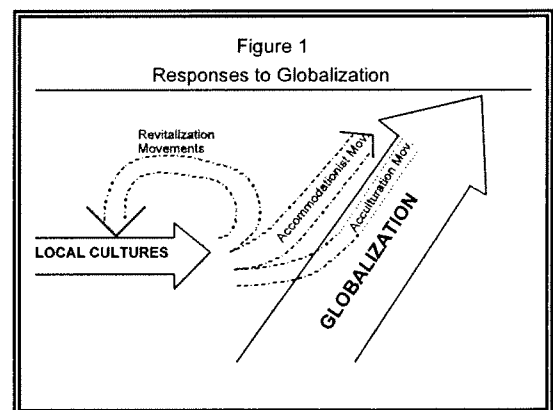
Globalism-Localism

The first of these conflicting forces is the move to globalize the world through the expansion of economic, political and religious systems around the world, and the local reactions

to this globalization (Giddens 2000, Hannerz 1996, Berger 1997). Roland Robertson (1992) introduced the term *glocalization* to refer to the fact that most people live in tension between these two forces. They want to participate in the benefits of globalization, but want to maintain their local communities and cultures which gives them identity and meaning in life.

Since the sixteenth century, most of the global forces have originated in the West, and extended their power and influence around the world through the spread of trade, colonial rule and modernity. It is important here to remember that Christianity, after Acts 15, proclaimed the universality of its message, and has sought to plant build a global church through missions to the world. The Roman Catholic Church has been named “the oldest significant global-oriented organization (Robertson 1992, 81).”

A. F. C. Wallace’s theory of revitalization can help us understand the current conflict between global and local forces around the world. Wallace argues that when local cultures are overrun by powerful global forces, the people respond in several ways (figure 1). The first response is “acculturation movements” in which people change their allegiances to the new ideology. When the British conquered India and introduced Enlightenment thought, some Indians, generally from high Hindu castes, adopted a modern secular scientific worldview, and become scientists, doctors, and lawyers. When missionaries brought the gospel, others, mostly Untouchables and tribals, who had no status in the old Brahmanical order, became Christians in Western mission based churches.



A second response to global forces is “accommodation movements” in which people adopt many of the elements of the new order, but reinterpret these in terms of their old categories and logic. In India this was seen in the rise of the Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj reform movements that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They called for rejection of the caste system, untouchability, idolatry, wife burning, and a radical transformation of Hinduism.

A third response to globalization is “revitalization movements.” These look to the past and seek to restore it. These localizing forces see the globalizing forces as destroying their cultural heritage, and as imperialistic in nature. As we will see, Neo-Hinduism, as we know it, is the result of India’s encounter with Enlightenment and Christian thought, and seeks to restore Hinduism to power and make India a Hindu nation.

We will use global-local theory to examine the encounter of Christianity and Indian cultures.

Ethnicity and Social Pluralism

A second set of forces central to our understanding of the church in India is the tension between the integration of society as a whole, and its fragmentation on the basis of ethnicity or ‘race.’ Ethnic groups are made up of people who share a “consciousness of kind” (to use Gidding’s phrase) in which “kind” is defined in terms of shared “blood.” To maintain this identity, ethnic groups must be endogamous. Ethnicity is not biology itself. It is what people make of biological differences.

Ethnicity in India takes two major forms. One is ‘tribes.’ Tribes are single endogamous ethnic groups that inhabit a relatively separate territory, and share a single culture (language, customs, religion, worldview). In India, tribes are found in the mountainous regions, particularly in the North East Hills Area (NEHA), and in the Vindya hills of central India.

The second type of ethnic community in India is “caste.” Castes are endogamous groups embedded in larger caste systems.¹ Many have traditional occupations and distinct customs. All are ranked along a hierarchy of religious purity and pollution, with the Brahmin castes at the top, and the Untouchables at the bottom (Dumont 1972). The caste system is the heart of traditional Hinduism. It is the fundamental social structure for the agricultural villages of India that cover the plains, and persists, with some adaptations, in modern cities. It solves the problem of social differences by institutionalizing these in a caste system in which each community is permitted to live as it wishes so long as it abides by the rules of the larger system.

We will look at the church’s response to ethnicity in India: to tribalism and casteism.

Religious Pluralism and Relativism

India is a land of great religious diversity. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity coexist within its borders. Traditional Hinduism (*sanatana dharma*) itself is not a single religion. Each caste has its own gods, scriptures, religious rites and priests. There is no fundamental orthodoxy, no shared set of gods, no one set of rituals. Rather, traditional

¹ “Caste” here is used for the term *jati*. There are thousands of *jatis* in India. Most of them are subdivided into subcastes, lineages (*gotras*) and extended families. *Jatis* are loosely grouped into four *varna* (caste groups) based on the Hindu belief that the Brahmins (religious leaders) come from the head of the primal human, Kshatriya (rulers and warriors) from the shoulder, Vaishya (merchants) from the loins, and Shudras (manual laborers) from the feet. The Untouchables are below *varna*, and outside the pale of true Hinduism.

Hinduism as a worldview that affirms and institutionalizes pluralism. It argues that all religions lead to God, and, therefore, no one should seek to convert others to their beliefs. Peaceful coexistence must be based on tolerance and rejection of evangelistic outreach to others. We need to examine how the church has responded to this religious inclusivism in the light of Christ's claim that he alone is the way to salvation.

Dominance and Marginality

A fourth theory that can help us understand the church in India is dominance theory. According to this, powerful dominant communities have a vested interest in maintaining the traditional religious order, and seek to do so through force, if need be. Marginal communities, on the other hand, often assert their own identities by converting to other religions.

Let us turn now to a brief survey of the history of the Church in India in the light of these competing four forces.

II. THE THOMAS CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA

Tradition has it that the Apostle Thomas brought Christianity to India in 52 A.D. There are various stories of how he came to Kerala in South India and established the church now known as the Thomas Church. Archeological and literary evidence shows that by the third century there was a thriving Christian community there (Aprem 1977, 2-14). It maintained loose ties with the Syrian Orthodox Church, and claimed succession from the Syrian Prelate.

Over time, Christianity became native to the land and largely lost touch with the global church. Except for sporadic visits to and from the Syrian church, the church was isolated. With regard to ethnicity, Christians were absorbed into the caste system and became a high caste, just

below the Brahmins and Nayars. Joseph Thekkedath notes (1988, 23), “[T]hey paid little attention to the Christian belief in universal brotherhood and the fundamental equality of men. They were as much caste-ridden as the Hindus among whom they lived.” The price they paid for acceptance in the society was to abandon evangelistic efforts to convert others.² By the sixteenth century there were an estimated 100,000 Thomas Christians living in fifty large settlements in central Kerala (Thekkedath 1988,24).

In recent years, through encounters with Roman Catholic and Protestant missions, accomodational movements, such as the Mar Thoma and Evangelical Thomas churches, have emerged which are linked to global Christianity.

II. THE ERA OF MISSION CHURCHES

The modern era in Indian Christianity began with the arrival of missionaries from the west. In 1498 Vasco de Gama and the Portuguese landed at Calicut, South India, and in the mid-eighteenth century the French, Dutch and English began to establish trading posts and colonial empires throughout the land. Along with western traders and colonial governments came missionaries seeking to spread the gospel.

Roman Catholic Mission Churches

In 1494 Pope Alexander VII divided the world between Spain and Portugal, and instructed them “to send to said lands and islands good men who fear God and are learned, skilled and expert to instruct the inhabitants in the Catholic Faith and good morals.” 1500 A.D. Cabral, the

² This is the Indian response to diversity—it encapsulates and institutionalizes it in social (the caste system) and cultural (religious pluralism) enclaves.

governor of the Portuguese settlement in Kerala brought in eight Franciscan Friars and eight secular priests.

Catholic missions were shaped by three encounters. The first of these was with the local Thomas Christians. The missionary response was to seek to reconnect these estranged believers to the global church based in Rome. At first the missionaries were largely successful, but in 1653 many of the Thomas Christians returned to their traditional Indian roots after a general rebellion because the Roman Catholic priests were trying to change their traditional Syrian rites and structures.

The second encounter took place on the Fishery Coast of Southeast India. There the Paravas, a pearl fishing caste, became Christians en masse (1536-1537). In 1542 Francis Xavier visited the Parava Christians and found they were largely ignorant of Christian beliefs, so he spent four months baptizing new believers, celebrating mass, and teaching the converts to pray the Lord's Prayer and recite the twelve articles of the short creed. He also taught them the ten commandments, and made them destroy all traces of idol-worship in their villages. Xavier organized the mission to follow up the work of renewal which he had begun.

At the end of the end of the 17th century, the Jesuits, using the methods of de Nobili, began work among the Nadars in the South, and another mass movement took place. Today many prominent Christians in India come from this caste-church.

The churches on the Fishery Coast were made up of only Paravas, and those inland were Nadars, so questions of unity in the church did not arise. But these churches became a upwardly mobile caste within the region and did little evangelism. Their birth also raised the question of the authenticity of mass movements, a question that was to plague protestant missionaries in the region two centuries later.

The third encounter occurred in 1606 when Robert de Nobili, a Jesuit priest, moved inland to Madurai, a stronghold of traditional Hinduism and the caste system. In order to evangelize Hindus, he decided that the approach must be made from within Indian society, and not from outside. He determined to Indianize himself. He mastered Tamil and Sanskrit, and identified himself with the high caste Brahmins as a *sanyasi*. His converts were not required to break caste or change dress, food or mode of life, except idolatry, nor were they expected to join the Untouchable congregations planted by his fellow Jesuits who followed later. De Nobili's strategy was a mixed success. In the end he was accused of being truly a Parangi or foreigner. He claimed to be a *sanyasi* sent from Rome. Persecution set in and in 1644 he and his fellow priests were put in prison and their churches confiscated. On the theological level, the Franciscan missionaries accused him of dividing the church and of tolerating idolatrous practices such as the sacred thread, the hair-tuft and sandal paste, all of which were sacred to the Brahmins.

Protestant Mission Churches

Protestant missions began in India in the early eighteenth century. They pursued two general strategies: one to reach Hindus and the other to reach tribals.

Mission to Hindus

Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Heirich Plutschau arrived in India in 1706 at Tranquebar, South East India. They were sent by Frederick IV of Denmark to evangelize the Indians in the Dutch trading ports. Both mastered Tamil and started elementary schools. Their work was based on five principles: 1) education and church should go together, 2) the Scriptures and Christian

literature should be translated and printed in local languages, 3) preaching should be based on a clear knowledge of the people's cultures, 4) definite personal conversions should be stressed, and 5) the establishment of churches with Indian ministers at an early date. The missionaries bought property, and build houses, schools and churches. They set up a printing press, and started philanthropic works. They trained and sent out native evangelists to the villages, and ordained their first Indian minister in 1733.

The Tranquebar mission took the caste system for granted, and made no attempt to condemn it. Converts retained their caste identities after conversion, and separate places were assigned for different caste groups in the church. Considerable effort was given to developing self-supporting and self-governing churches.

In 1793 William Carey, William Ward and Joshua Marshman established the Serampore Mission in North East India. They practiced the British Mission Society policy of self-support of missionaries. After suffering great hardships during their early years, the team established itself in Calcutta. They sought to spread the Gospel by every possible means, opening outstations and hiring Indian evangelists. They translated and printed the Bible, organized Baptist churches (which were in no way under Baptists in England), studied the local cultures deeply, and trained indigenous leaders. In 1818 they looked after 126 elementary schools. By 1834 six translations of the Bible, and twenty-three of the New Testament appeared. Portions of Scripture were published in ten other languages. In 1819 they established Serampore College which later became India's leading seminary.

The Serampore Mission became the model for later Protestant missions in India. Alexander Duff stressed the importance of education as an evangelistic strategy. Clara Swain

and Ida Scudder introduced women's hospitals which opened the door for reaching women behind the veil. Christian schools and hospitals spread across the country.

Following the lead of the Serampore trio, Protestant missionaries condemned the caste system as the essence of Hinduism, and required converts from all castes to attend the same churches.³ The result was a mass inflow of converts from the untouchable castes, and the identification of Christianity with untouchability. Despite the strong insistence by western missionaries that converts renounce their castes and join the church as a new Christian community, most Indian Christians brought caste into the church. Herbert Hoefler notes (1991,157),

The studies demonstrate how the Christian community is understood both by the Christians and by their neighbours as another "*qaum*", or caste-community, within the overall social bracket. The Christians share with other *qaums* the general attitudes towards religion and morality, and they also share the general attitudes toward their *qaum*: membership through birth, group-serving loyalty, and accommodation as one community among many other . . .

This is particularly true of the mass of Untouchables who make up most of the mission churches. In many cases, denominational differences have become the new arena in which caste differences are fought. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the untouchable Malla have largely become Lutherans, and the untouchable Madigas Baptists. Now they justify endogamy and separation on the basis of denominational differences.

The development of truly indigenous churches was a priority from the beginning, but Protestant missions delayed the transfer of power to them, arguing that they were not ready for the responsibilities. The result was foreign control of mission churches, and increasing tensions

³ For an in-depth study of Protestant mission responses to the caste system see Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, 1980.

between mission agencies and the churches. These were finally resolved when most mission agencies withdrew their control and personnel after Indian independence, and “turned over” the work to Indian mission churches.

One consequence of this foreign control was that Christianity was shaped by western forms and widely seen as a foreign religion associated with colonialism and, more recently, the global economy, and Christian converts as aliens to their own land. This was reinforced by the 19th and 20th century mission goal which was to Christianize and Civilize the people.

Response to missions to Hindus was mixed. Today most Christians are in the South (more than 6% of the population in some areas). There are few in the great Gangetic plain. One reason is that missions have worked in the south a hundred years longer than in the north. Another, and probably equally important reason, is that the South has always been cultural marginal to the North, which is the heartland of Hinduism, Hindi and Hindu nationalism. For many in the south Christianity and English gave them an identity which they did not have in the traditional Indian cultural wars.

Mission to Tribals

The second Protestant mission strategy was to evangelize tribal societies found in the mountainous regions of North East India, and the hills of central India. In the North East Hills Area (NEHA), British patrols pacified the mountainous regions after 1800. The British policy was to preserve the traditional cultures as much as possible, but by destroying tribal governance and opening the hills to the outside world, British Raj had devastating effects on these cultures. There was much resistance, but the British put a stop to this by military conquest.

British Welsh Presbyterians and American Baptists began evangelistic tours and establishing schools in the region after 1836. The mission policy was to establish schools using the vernaculars to teach Christians how to read the Bible, and to train native evangelists and leaders for the rapidly growing churches. The government restricted where they could work under a “a discrete licensing policy,” but as new areas were opened up by patrols, the missionaries extended their network of schools into the hills.

Initially there was resistance to the gospel from tribal communities, but by the end of the century, Christianity was spreading rapidly among the tribes. The growth was based on an extensive educational system and a comprehensive indigenous church structure. Most of the Christian growth was the result of native evangelists and missionaries going to unreached villages and neighboring tribes, and occurred as group movements in which whole families and villages became Christian on the basis of corporate decisions.

During the twentieth century, Christianity continued to spread rapidly throughout the region. The methods most commonly used were to establish low level schools in which local leaders were trained, and itinerant evangelism by local evangelists. Relief and medical ministries were added, but there was considerable concern lest people become “rice Christians.” Some tribes became almost entirely Christian while others had few Christians among them. Christian revival movements (1906, 1913, 1919, 1929), often rooted in the singing of songs composed by the people, contributed much to the indigenization of Christianity in the region. By the twenty-first century, the majority of people in several North East Indian states considered themselves Christians (Figure 1).

One benefit of Christianity, socially speaking, was to help the hills tribes preserve their identity in the face of the threat of assimilation into the Hindu societies of the plains at the lowest level of the socio-ritual hierarchy (Downs 1992, 4). In doing so, however, it fostered among some tribals the desire to succeed from India and establish their own independent nations.

Assam (plains, Hindu)	2.4
Mizoram tribals	86
Manipur tribals	76
Nagaland tribals	67

A second benefit of Christianity for tribals was that it educated the young and prepared them to participate in the global world. Tribals became outstanding political and religious leaders

Outreach to the tribals in NEHA raised important missiological questions. One had to do with the validity of people movements in which whole families and villages became Christians en masse. These followed the traditional tribal patterns of making important decisions together. It was clear that many went along with these corporate decisions to maintain the unity of the village, and not for religious reasons. These movements often occurred during times of calamity, such as the great earthquake (1897), the so-called bamboo famines which take place at intervals of twenty-five years or so, and the failure of tribal rebellions (Downs 1992, 141-142). Debates arose whether these conversions genuine, and over how should missions and churches deal with such movements?

A second question had to do with dealing with traditional cultural practices such as birth rites, marriages, festivals, intoxicants, slavery, head-hunting, hygiene, status of women, and dress and hair style (Downs 1992, 146-164). The first missionaries and early converts called for

radical changes in life style which were a major factor in the acculturative role that Christianity played. In some areas, these changes were beneficial. Head hunting and slavery declined, and the role of women greatly improved through biblical instruction and education of women. In other areas, these changes led to an undermining of the people's cultural identity. Today Christians in NEHA are increasingly connected to the world, but also struggling to rediscover their cultural heritage and identity.

Assessment of the Modern Protestant Mission Movement

How can we assess the modern Protestant mission movement in India. There have been positive and negative outcomes.

Contributions

One contribution of Protestant missions to India has been the establishment of the Indian Church (table 2). Through the great sacrifices paid by those who went and those who supported the work, Christianity plays an important role in Indian life, particularly in the South and North East.

RELIGION	1900	1970	2000
HINDU	184,023	433,214	700,513
MUSLIM	31,552	62,877	122,570
CHRISTIAN	3,820	23,353	62,341
Orthodox	200	1,425	3,100
Roman Catholic	1,920	8,433	15,500
Protestant	650	8,137	16,826
Indian Initiated	90	6,944	34,200
Hindu-Christian	200	15,552	31,000

[Barrett, Kurian and Johnson. 2001, 360]

A second outcome has been to bring Untouchables and tribals a sense of dignity and upward mobility. Today the children and grand-children of Untouchables are Christian doctors, lawyers, professors and government officials. Tribal communities have preserved their identities in the face of strong assimilative forces. At first this reinforced separatism among these communities, but eventually Christianity became a vehicle for bringing together different tribes and castes in larger ecumenical movements. An emerging trend is for Christian communities to establish links all over India through the training of their leaders in inter-denominational seminaries and participation in the National Christian Council and Indian Evangelical Fellowship.

Christian missions are also responsible for establishing schools and hospitals throughout India to serve the general public.

Shortcomings

Christian missions in India have also had serious limitations. One is their identification with western colonialism and civilization. No serious student of Christianity in India would argue that Christian missions and the Church did not benefit from the British Raj. While it may be technically correct, in terms of official policy, to say that the British were neutral in religious matters, there were many ways in which highly placed representatives of the British government assisted Christian missions, and the missionaries accepted that support gratefully. It is also clear that the missionaries did not consider themselves agents of the colonial power. Their primary purpose was the proclamation of the gospel. Frederick Downs writes, “[T]he relationship between the missions and the government can best be described as cooperation in certain limited

areas of mutual coincidence of interests. In other areas there was often conflict between the two (1992,31).” What can be said is that Christian missions and the colonial government were there for their own purposes, and found each other useful.

One area in which British administrators and missionaries worked together was in starting schools. British colonial administrators saw these as a means to civilize and pacify the tribals.

Mackenzie, an official, writing in 1884, said,

I strongly urged the advisability of establishing a regular system of education, including religious instruction, under a competent clergyman of the Church of England. I pointed out that the Nagas had no religion; that they were highly intelligent and capable of receiving civilization; that with it they would want a religion, and that we might just as well give them our own, and make them in that way a source of strength, by thus mutually attaching them to us (Mackenzie 1984, 43).

An area of conflict was the use of vernacular languages in these schools, and the displacement and assimilation of tribals into the colonial empire.

From the point of view of the Indians, missionaries were often seen as agents of imperialism, and Indian Christians as traitors to their own cultures. No national church was free from missionary domination. Even the National Council of Churches in India was controlled by missionaries. When the independence movements emerged in the late nineteenth century, missionaries, by and large, supported continued British rule.

Another set of problems arose out of the principle of comity adopted by protestant missions, in which they divided out the land so as not to compete. One unintended consequence, however, was that tribes and castes often became identified with denominations. For example, in South India the Baptists became known as the church of the untouchable Madigas, and the Lutherans of the untouchable Malas. Tribal and caste rivalries now take the form of

denominational rivalries. In NEHA the Khasi and Mizo became Presbyterians, and the Nagas, Kuki and Garos became Baptists.

A third set of problems arose out of the lack of adequately contextualizing the gospel and churches. Christianity came in western dress, and often existed like a potted plant, dependent on outside nurture and support. Many Indians saw it as a foreign religion, and as a religion of Untouchables. The lack of contextualization also meant that Christianity came to mean articulating the right beliefs and performing the right rites. The result was a lack of depth in discipleship, and little conversion of the Indian worldview in the light of the gospel.

After World War II, governance in most mission churches was turned over to Indians. These leaders are now working hard on contextualizing the Gospel in the Indian setting, and are leading the churches in mission outreach. Today, India is the second largest mission sending country in the world. Most Indian missionaries are from the South and serve in the North, which is culturally very different from the South.

III. ERA OF LOCAL MOVEMENTS

Western missions are widely seen as part of the global intrusion on Indian culture and society. Secular state, modern education, modern medicine, churches, all came as a package that could not be sharply differentiated by most Indians. The result was a series of revitalization movements seeking to keep the Indian identity and ward off the evils of foreign ways. These local movements have occurred not only in Hinduism, but in the growing Christian church as well.

Hindu Revitalization Movements

The last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of new forms of Hinduism as Indians responded to confrontation of Christianity and Enlightenment thought. Many Hindu leaders became extremely anxious about the landslide of the lower sections of Hindu society to Christianity, a “foreign religion.” These “revitalization movements” are local reactions to the spread of global forces in India (Hiebert 2000).

Successful revitalization movements, in the long run, tend to move in of two directions. Some become increasingly spiritual in nature, detached from the socio-political arena in which they exist. Others become increasingly politicized as they seek to wrestle power from the dominant power around them.

Spiritualized Hinduism.

One stream of Neo-Hinduism has increasingly stressed the spiritual nature of Hinduism. This includes the Arya Samaj (1875) founded by Dayanand (1824-1883), and the Ramakrishna Mission which emerged out of the work of Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and Vivekananda (1863-1902). Today, Neo-Hinduism as a religious movement is centered around the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the World Council of Hindus that coordinates the activities of Neo-Hindu movements and monitors orthodoxy.

The watchword for these movements is “back to the Vedas.” Indian scholars were inspired by the recognition given to the Vedas and Upanishads by the West. They created religious doctrines and institutions based on the old texts, long forgotten in traditional Hinduism

(*santana dharma*), and organized Neo-Hinduism as a modern, formal “high” religion. They argued that the Vedas were monotheistic., and rejected undesirable customs, such as idolatry and untouchability, as degenerate accretions of the pure Vedic religion. They popularized their teaching by linking these to the great epics, the *Mahabharata* (with its *Bhagavad Gita*) and the *Ramayana*, which are at the heart of popular Hinduism. These movements seek to unify all sections of Hindu society by bringing to light the inherent vitality of Hinduism. They reject Christianity and Islam as foreign religions, and actively seek to win Christians and Muslims to Hinduism through evangelism and re-conversions.

Politicized Hinduism

The second stream in Neo-Hinduism has become increasingly political in nature. In 1909 Pandit Malaviya founded the Hindu Mahasabha, which soon developed into a right-wing Hindu political party. In 1925 Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a member of the Hindu Mahasabha, founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu religious movement, which rejected cultural diversity and advocated the reorganization of the nation built on the principles of Hindu nationalism. In 1931, a young revolutionary at Benares Hindu University, Vinayak Damodar Savakar, was recruited by the RSS. In 1940 he became its leader. In his book, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* Savaka (1969) popularized his concept of Hindutva or Hindudom. He argued that Aryans who came to the Indian sub-continent were a nation because they shared a geographical unity, racial features and a common culture. He set out to create a Hindu national identity in which he hoped to make the RSS and Hindu society identical (Mangalwadi 1997:289).

The central vision of RSS is Hindutva, a Hindu theocratic state. To achieve its goal, it uses a uniform system of socialization to shape all people into one collective identity and Hindu nation. It has announced its intention to use political power to control educational institutions run by Christians and other minorities, so that these become mediums of its own propaganda. While claiming not to be a political party, it has spawned a great number of front organizations. It has trained millions of highly disciplined members spread all over India and abroad, and is the driving force behind the modern Hindu revitalization movement.

How does the Hindutva movement deal with cultural and religious pluralism? It rules out any possibility of Indian Hindus, Muslims and Christians living together in harmony as equals in a secular state. It argues that all Indians must adopt the Hindu culture and language, and hold in reverence Hindu religion. Those who do not “may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen rights” (Golwalkar 1939:62).

The RSS is the parent body and force behind the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), “The Indian People’s Party,” which emerged as a dominant political force after 1989, and has now gained control of the national government. It argues that Gandhianism, Communism and modernism have failed, and that only Hindutva can keep the country together. It projects itself as a deeply moralistic party, rejecting the secularism of the modern nation state, and the lack of social, ethical and personal values in Western-style democratic politics. It holds that Hinduism is moral and tolerant, and that Islam and Christianity are alien and intolerant.

The challenge of the BJP is not so much its present political clout, but its challenge of the notion of the secular state, which it views as a global force imposed on the land, and its

redefinition of the nation in local terms (Table 3). After Independence, in 1947, India declared itself a secular civil state built on the Western notion of a contract between the state and the people as

Table 3	
<u>SECULAR STATE</u>	<u>RELIGIOUS STATE</u>
- contract with individuals -uniform civil law	- contract with religious communities - multiple religious community laws, and dominant Hindu law

individuals. The BJP is now seeking to redefine the basis of the state, arguing that the government has a contract with the different constituent communities, not with individuals. It argues that in the nation culturally diverse people cannot live together as equals. It favors a strong, centralized state based on cultural nationalism in which the safeguards of minority rights are eliminated and the interest of the Hindu majority rule. Increasingly, Indian politics is based not on ideology, but on communal parties based on religion, ethnicity and caste.

Hindutva has particular appeal to the multitudes of Indians caught between their traditional past and the forces of modernity and globalism. It runs against the current of global communication, electronic market and democratic secularism (Friedman 1999). However, it is caught between these two forces—to mobilize Indians with their own sense of local identity, or to participate as a nation in the global world.

Since the BJP led coalition assumed power in 1997, there has been a significant increase in violence against Christians, and Christians have been warned not to abuse the hospitality that Hindus have extend to them. There has been a shift from a more or less peaceful co-existence of different religious and ethnic communities to a policy of hegemony and dominance. and from a polity of rational discourse to the argument of threat and violence.

Indian Christian Local Movements

Local movements reacting to the spread of globalization have also emerged among Indian Christians. We will examine two types of such movements.

Indian Initiated Churches

After 1850 many indigenous attempts have been made to form Hindu-Christian churches affirming faith in Jesus Christ, but rejecting Western missionary control and retaining India culture and nationalism. Among the first were the Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus (1858), Yuomayam (1874), and Fellowship of the Followers of Jesus (1920). Recent movements include the Indian Pentecostal Church of God (1924), The Assemblies (Jehova Shammah) started by Brother Bhakht Singh (1942), and the Nagaland Christian Revival Church. In recent years there has been an explosion of these Indian Initiated Churches (IIC)⁴ which formed more than a hundred denominations in 2000.

Many of the Indian indigenous movements claim to be Christian, but some have sought to plant Hindu-Christian churches which worship Christ, but remain Hindu in identity. The largest of these is the Subba Rao movement begun in Andhra Pradesh (1942 - cf. Baggo 1968). Subba Rao conducts large healing ministries in the name of Jesus, but rejects baptism, and considers himself a Hindu.

Churchless Christians

In recent years, Hebert Hoefler, a Lutheran missionary in South India, has studied the

⁴ In many ways these are parallel to the African Independent Churches (more recently known as the African Initiated Churches) the autochthonous churches of Latin America (Berg) and the Chinese house church churches.

influence of Christianity outside the church. He writes,

Our statistics have shown that there is a solid twenty-five percent of the Hindus and Muslim population in Madras city which has integrated Jesus deeply into their spiritual life. Half of the population have attempted spiritual relationships with Jesus and had satisfying and learning experiences through it. Three-fourths speak very highly of Jesus and could easily relate to Him as their personal Lord if so motivated (1991, 109).

Most of these silent followers of Christ are young educated poor people who have come in contact with dedicated Christians. The majority are women and high caste people. Many have experienced the confirmation of Jesus' place in their lives through physical healing, moral growth and a sense of forgiveness of sins. David Barrett and his associates estimates that there are more than four million 'radio believers,' Hindus who take Bible correspondence courses and pray regularly to Jesus (2001, 361).

Hoefler's findings have provoked a heated debate regarding the spiritual state of these "churchless Christians." Some of these are theological. Are these people indeed Christians? In Hinduism individuals are allowed to worship their own personal god (*ishta devata*), so a wife may believe in Jesus as her savior. But as a member of the family she must carry out the family duties of making evening offerings to the family and caste god (*kula devata*). Second, should they be encouraged to be baptized when baptism means joining a church that itself is identified with specific untouchable castes? Should Muslims be required to join churches whose members practice low caste customs? Should high caste Brahmin vegetarian converts be encouraged to eat meat to show that they are indeed 'one in Christ' with meat eating Christians from the untouchable castes? Other questions relate to Christian ministry. How should the church minister to women in Hindu and Muslim homes who will be cast out or killed if they take a public stand for Christ? Should new homogeneous churches be planted for converts from

different communities in order to win them, and make the unity of the church a long term goal? How can leaders transform caste-based churches into covenant communities in which all castes are welcome and valued when they, themselves, are part of the caste system? These are not easy questions to answer. It is all too easy for us from outside to pass judgment on the Indian churches. We need deal first with the racism, classism and genderism in our own churches.

IV. REFLECTIONS ON THE CHURCH IN INDIA

What can we learn as members in the church from the case of Christianity in India? Let us return to the four competing forces for some insights.

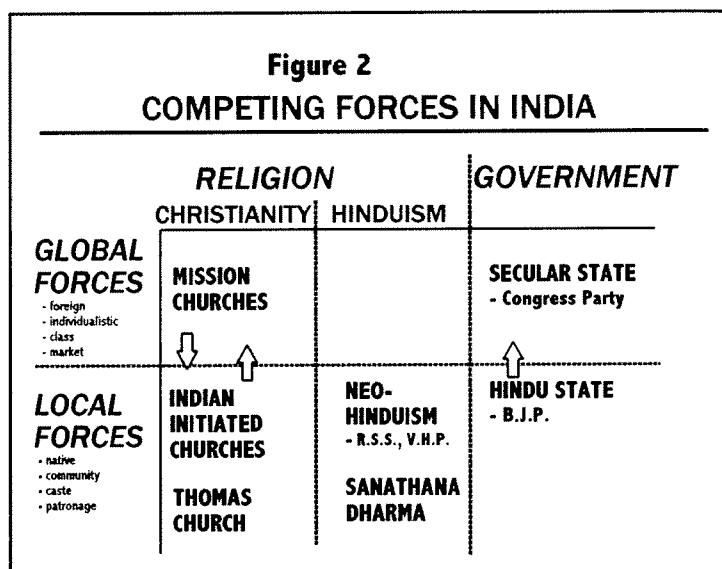
Globalism-localism

The Church in India, like the church in every country, is caught between the forces of globalization and those of localization. In a sense, it is to be an insider in every country, and yet remains an outsider. To the extent it is part of the global Christian community it appears to be foreign to the local people. To the extent it identifies itself with the local community, it is distanced from the global community. This tension manifests itself in a number of ways in the Indian churches.

The Church in the Indian Context

Many of the current tensions the churches faces in India have to do with the countervailing forces of globalization and localization (figure 2). The modern Indian secular state and the mission churches represent the forces of globalization. The Indian Initiated Churches, Thomas Church and Neo-Hindu Nationalism represent localization movements. This

raises two questions for Indian Christians. On the one hand, how can they affirm their Indian identity when that supports the establishment of a Hindu State? On the other hand, how can they support the secular state when that is seen by many as foreign?



Christian leaders have largely supported a secular nation state, even though the political wing of the Neo-Hindu Nationalist movement has said it would welcome Christians and Muslims in a Hindu State if they became truly India (figure 2). The result has been a sharp increase in persecution of Christians by Hindu fundamentalists.

The current escalation of persecutions raises another question. Indian leaders have been debating how Christian should respond to them. If they turn to the secular government for protection, they reinforce in the minds of many that they are a foreign presence in India. Many argue that the church should bear suffering without resorting to the state or violence, and, in so doing, bear witness to love and forgiveness, a theme (*ahimsa*) deeply rooted in Indian culture.

Globalism-localism in the church

The Indian churches themselves are caught between global and local forces. Mission churches have global connections, which give them access to resources and power. These

connections, however, reinforce the widespread belief that Christianity is a foreign religion.

Indian Initiated Churches, on the other hand, are seen as truly Indian, but they lack resources and global ties.

In recent years the two kinds of churches have moved towards the middle. After World War II most mission agencies turned ownership and control over to Indian leaders, who are now seeking to make their churches more Indian in character. The Indian Initiated Churches, on the other hand, have organized joint fellowships, and are setting up boards in the West to raise funds and to gain global visibility. Ecumenical relationships between the two groups is also increasing.

Indian Mission Churches and Foreign Mission Agencies

Since World War II there has been a shift in relationship between Indian Mission Churches and their parent mission agencies. Many of the churches still depend, to some extent on outside funds, and enjoy participation in global activities. Indian nationalists argue that this proves the foreignness of Christianity in India. Mission agencies, for their part, talk of partnership, but often give aid with strings attached. There is much discussion on how Indian churches should relate to churches in other lands.

Globalism-localism and the Gospel

Gospel issue of contextualizing the church and gospel and make it Indian, without selling out the gospel. Most urban mission churches are copies of the home churches of their founding missions. Indian Initiated Churches, on the other hand, are Indian in their worship styles. Their theologies range widely from 'New Testament' churches to those in which Christ is the central god, but one among others.

Global Christianity

The churches in India raise the question of the relationship of local churches to the global church. The Roman Catholic Church sees local churches as expressions of the one global church administered from on top. The indigenous churches see the local church as the true church, and work towards globalization from the bottom up through interchurch associations and networks of joint ministry. Protestant Mission churches in India, though members of global denominations, have cooperated from the beginning through the division of the country under comity agreements, and joint efforts such as Bible societies, schools and hospitals. It is not surprising that the ecumenical movement in western churches was born in India when a number of denominations joined to form the Church of South India and the Church of North India.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity remains a central issue in the Indian churches. This is complicated by the fact that different castes and tribes are now often associated with different denominations to form ethnic-religious communities. Christianity has not brought an end to caste in the churches themselves.

Ethnic identities raises the question of evangelism. Following William Carey, Protestant churches required all converts to attend the same churches. In 1960s Donald McGavran, a life long missionary to India, began to advocate planting homogeneous churches aimed at reaching different caste groups. This would mean Brahmins would start Brahmin churches, Shudras would start Shudra churches, and Untouchables would start Untouchable churches. For the most part, the churches in India have publically rejected this strategy, but some, particularly some

western mission agencies, have adopted this approach. This raises the question of the relationship between unity and diversity within the Church.

The challenge of Religious Pluralism

Given the Hindu stance that all religions lead to God, Indian theologians, such as M. M. Thomas and R. Pannikar, have sought for ways to understand and communicate the Christian claims of the uniqueness of Christ without being colonial and foreign. They have also sought to do Indian theology within the context of global theology.

Dominance Theory

Finally, the fact that the Untouchables and the South Indians have been most responsive to the Gospel raises theological and missiological questions. Should the church have a preferential option for the marginal and oppressed, or should it seek to win the rich and powerful? Should the church speak out against systems of dominance, such as the caste system, and regional politics?

As we noted at the outset, India has been a major testing ground for Christianity and the modern mission movement. It is also the greatest challenge to Christianity in the west through its spread through the New Age Movement and through its message of religious relativism and tolerance.

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