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## Changing Perceptions of Indian Christians in Independent India

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When we speak of Indian Christians or of the Indian Church we are not referring to any homogeneous or monolithic community, as such a community does not exist. There are various Church bodies and denominational groups spread out over the length and breadth of the country and each of these has its own genesis, history and characteristics. Thus, when we refer to the Indian Christian Community it must be understood in a broad 'umbrella' sense and must be nuanced accordingly.

To put this brief survey of Indian Christian perceptions over the fifty-odd years of our independence in proper perspective, we must bear in mind that the history of Christianity in Indian spans almost two millennia. Christianity reached Indian shores centuries before it became the official religion of the Roman Empire under the Emperor Theodosius. According to tradition, it arrived through no less a person than the Apostle Thomas, one of Christ's immediate disciples.<sup>1</sup> Ancient Kerala welcomed Thomas long before it gifted Adi Shankara to India and the rest of the World. Even if the Thomas referred to is the later Thomas of Cana and not the Apostle Thomas, the later Thomas visited India in the Fourth Century of the Christian era.<sup>2</sup>

Before coming to the changing perceptions of Indian Christians in the post-Independence period, it is pertinent to ask what those perceptions were in the first place even before the advent of Independence. It is only against this backdrop that there can be any meaningful discussion of changes, if any, in those perceptions following Independence. Given that an Indian Christian community, however loosely defined and however widely scattered, was in existence long before Independence, what was their self-awareness within the total social context? There cannot but be a differentiated answer to the above question depending on which specific group of Christians one is referring to, with regard to which region and which social class and in respect of which historical period. Thus, we need to draw up a profile of Indian Christianity on the basis of historical, geographical, social, cultural, economic and political parameters before proceeding to answer the question posed above. It may be possible to do so only cursorily here.

### A Hoary Tradition

Historically, Christianity made its appearance in India in the coastal areas of South-Western India much before it spread to other parts of the subconti-

ment. The long-established sea trade routes connecting Southern India with the ancient Middle East made it possible for early Christianity to travel to India from what was then Greater Syria. Hence, the term Syrian Christians used to designate those Christians of Kerala who have adhered to that branch of Christianity over the centuries. For the sake of convenience we shall refer to this branch of Christianity as Syrian Christianity to distinguish it from Latin Christianity which came to India a millennium and a half later with the arrival of the Portuguese.

Syrian Christianity came to India in a wholly peaceful manner along with trade. There was nothing aggressive or hegemonic about it. It was very oriental and acclimatized itself effortlessly on Indian soil. It had no connotations of cultural domination or colonial conquest. Thus, like Zoroastrianism brought into India by the early Parsi refugees who landed near Sanjan many centuries later, it was fully absorbed into the social mainstream and was thoroughly indigenized. Hence, there is no trace of any so-called 'minority complex' among the Syrian Christians of Kerala. Add to this the fact that those who embraced Christianity hailed from the upper castes and were already high up on the social ladder. The case of the Latin Christians hailing from the lower castes is somewhat different.

If we speak of the self-awareness or self-perception of the Syrian Christians we therefore find that their sense of belonging within the overall social matrix and of efficacy in matters social, cultural, economic or political is of a very

high order. This has been the case for generations before the advent of Independence. It continues to be so in the post-independence period as well. If at all there have been any changing perceptions among Keralite Christians, these changes have nothing to do with being Christians but with being Keralites caught up in certain socio-economic problems that affect all sections of society across denominational boundaries. Prolonged commercial and cultural contact with visitors from overseas, be they Jew, Arab or European, has made for a cosmopolitan outlook that Christian and non-Christian Keralites share alike. Keralite Christians, like their non-Christian countrymen, have shown a remarkable alacrity in moving out of their home state to far-flung areas in India and abroad. Also, thanks to their high degree of literacy and attendant socio-political awareness, Keralite Christians have done well for themselves in various walks of life, be it commerce, the professions or politics.

Christianity in Kerala offers an apt illustration of a faith that has spread peaceably by way of a spiritual and cultural osmosis rather than by the twin agencies of flag and sword. Centuries before the rise of Christianity, Buddhism had made its peaceful way from India to West Asia in much the same way that Christianity from West Asia later came to India via the established trade routes. The peaceful cross-fertilization of cultures, economies and faiths has perennially been a source of enrichment of the common human heritage. It is neither desirable nor feasible to stymie this on-going process.

One of the ironies of history is that whereas Syrian Christianity had no adversarial relationship with any of the non-Christian creeds in the midst of which it had taken roots and thrived, it did have a serious confrontation with Western or Latin Christianity which made its appearance in Peninsular India with the arrival of European explorers, traders and missionaries in the Sixteenth Century. Thus, a 'civilizational clash' occurred not only between Christian and non-Christian but between Christian and Christian, specifically between oriental Christianity and its occidental variant. It is important to highlight this aspect of the development of Christianity in India as it has implications for the moulding of the perceptions of various denominations of Indian Christians vis-a-vis themselves and one another. It also has implications for how non-Christians could view their Christian compatriots in the light of the historical evolution of Christianity in India. When one considers the broad sweep of history, the post-Independence developments in Indian Christianity are but a brief footnote to a lengthy saga. While not discounting the latter, which we shall turn to presently, it cannot be forgotten that they can be properly assessed only against the background of the previous two millennia of the existence of Christianity in India.

### **Cleavages within the Church**

Similar to the confrontation between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in Europe, minus the bloodshed, was that between Latin Christianity and Syrian Christianity in peninsular India. Much before the Protestant Reforma-

tion, there had taken place the Great Schism<sup>3</sup> between Rome, the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, and Constantinople, the seat of the Orthodox Church, the former headed by the Pope and the later by the patriarch. Various branches of the Orthodox family were to be found spread over several countries in Europe (particularly Eastern Europe and the Slavic countries) and the Middle East. Syrian Christianity in India had its affiliation with the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and had achieved a fair measure of autonomy in its local functioning. The appearance of Latin Christianity was viewed as an intrusion and a threat. The latter was very Western and therefore very alien. Its rites were conducted in Latin and its affiliation was with the Roman Pope. The rites of the Syrian Christians were conducted in Syriac and Rome did not feature in their scheme of things. The Roman Catholic Church was highly centralized and structured according to a rigid hierarchy, whereas Orthodox Christianity in its various branches was highly decentralized. To add to it, Latin Christianity had political strings attached to it inasmuch as the King of Portugal had, by special agreement with the Vatican under the system of 'Padroado' or Patronage,<sup>4</sup> a say in the appointment of Bishops to the Orient. In fact the Archbishop of Goa was designated Patriarch of the Indies, a title which could not be taken to kindly by the well-established Syrian Christian Church in India with its hoary traditions dating back to Apostolic times. Indeed, since Syrian Christianity had nothing to do with Western colonial expansion whereas Latin Christian missionaries

followed in the wake of the latter, the perceptions of Syrian Christians and of Latin Christians were bound to be divergent if not antagonistic. In areas controlled by the Portuguese, conversion usually meant the adoption of Western names and life-styles and a distancing from the local culture which was viewed as pagan and idolatrous. The introduction of the Inquisition<sup>5</sup> also added to the sense of unease over the methods and modalities of Latin Christianity among peoples, Christian and non-Christian, who were accustomed to a pluralistic situation in which Orthodox, unorthodox and heterodox persuasions all had a place in the sun.

While the cleavage between Latin Christianity and Syrian Christianity does not surprise one in the light of the foregoing discussion, what is even more curious is the cleavage that appeared within Latin Christianity itself in the course of its sojourn in India. I am referring to the rivalry between parish areas set up under the Padroado regime on the one hand and those set up under the 'Propaganda' regime on the other. The latter was largely independent of the patronage of Portugal and was handled directly by the Vatican through its Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Congregation de Propaganda Fide*).<sup>6</sup> With the decline of Portuguese power, the old Padroado dispensation fell into disuse and was eventually supplanted by Propaganda. The anti-clerical regime of the Marquis of Pombal<sup>7</sup> also played a role in the downgrading of Padroado. Instances of Padroado-Propaganda rivalry can be cited from local history. In Mumbai, certain Churches came to be known as

Portuguese Churches thanks to the Padroado connection. In earlier times, and even into the first few years of Independence, Padroado and Propaganda Churches jealously guarded their respective jurisdictional spheres within which they performed their pastoral functions and exercised their priestly ministries. But with increasing social mobility and marriages across jurisdictional boundaries, the erstwhile Padroado-Propaganda demarcation became meaningless and had to be abandoned.

Mumbai, like any typical metropolis, has proved to be a melting pot for various denominations of Christians no less than for those of other communities. The most sizeable groups are those of the so-called East Indians, Goans, Mangaloreans and South Indians. While the East Indians speak Marathi, the Goans and Mangaloreans speak Konkani and the south Indians mainly Malayalam and Tamil. Though the more Westernized sections of Christians speak English, they by no means constitute the majority of the Christian population in the metropolis. Indeed on an all-India basis, Christians whose functional mother-tongue is English would probably constitute a minority not very different in size from that of similarly Westernized sections of other communities. However, this would need to be established statistically. What this goes to show is that Christians, like their non-Christian compatriots, have taken to English and to varying degrees of Westernization for purely functional and utilitarian purposes. Their religious affiliation has nothing to do with this. It is considerations of better educational opportunities and of brighter employment

prospects in India and abroad that motivate them to cultivate English and other technical and professional skills. For some to view this as proof that Christians are estranged from their motherland and have their sights trained on foreign lands where their true loyalties lie is absurd. For every Christian who migrates either temporarily or permanently, there are probably hundreds of non-Christians doing so, and this could be verified statistically.

Speaking of Westernized Christians in metropolitan areas like Mumbai, it could be said that in the wake of Independence the realization dawned on them that in some respects they had tended to keep aloof from local languages and cultural patterns. This was probably because English gave them greater vertical and horizontal socioeconomic mobility and because their felt need to use the vernaculars was minimal. Some of them might also have harboured prejudices and stereotypes about other communities based on their own self-imposed aloofness and resultant ignorance. But the same could be said of other social groups as well, and religion had only a tangential role, if any, to play in these perceptions and misconceptions. In fact, even among Christians, there were mutually allergic attitudes often prevalent among East Indians, Goans, Mangaloreians and South Indians. And if one considers the entire gamut of the various denominations of Christians, there was often no love lost as among Catholics, Protestants, Jacobites, Marthomites and so on. The saving grace of a metropolitan area is that in course of time denominational boundaries become porous even if they

do not disappear altogether. The East Indians might still have their 'Koli' (Fisherfolk), 'Kunbi' (Peasant) and 'Samvedi' (upper-caste) groupings as also the Goans their 'Bamon' (Brahmin), 'Shardo' (Kshatriya) and 'Sudir' (Shudra) rankings. But in a melting-pot situation these distinctions have been largely diluted and no longer evoke the same primordial sentiment they did a couple of generations ago.

### **The Post-Independence Period**

The question might be posed here as to how Christians took to the end of British rule in 1947 and of Portuguese rule in 1961 on the assumption that they were presumably more comfortable under a Christian government, albeit a foreign one, than under a mainly Hindu indigenous one. In reply it may be said that there is no evidence that the British government particularly favoured Indian Christians in the various branches of the imperial administration. And the Portuguese regime in Goa, whatever other heads of criticism one might level against it, was the first to enact a uniform civil code applying to all communities without discrimination - an example that still awaits emulation in India, fifty years after Independence. Indian Christians had for generations before Independence lived in peace and harmony with their non-Christian brethren whether in British-ruled India or Portuguese-ruled Goa. There was therefore no reason for them to be apprehensive about their future in Independent India especially since the Indian National Congress under Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru literally bent over backwards to reassure the minorities that they had noth-

ing to fear and everything to gain from Independence. Jesuit Father Jerome D'Souza, a member of the Constituent Assembly, expressed his full faith in the sense of fairplay of the Leaders of Independent India when he declined to demand any special reservations for Indian Christians in the new constitutional dispensation. Valerian Gracias, Mumbai's first Indian Catholic Archbishop and India's first Cardinal, was well known for the eloquence with which he exhorted his co-religionists to be loyal to their nation no less than to their Christian faith, as there was no contradiction between the two. The Government of Independent India conferred the coveted Padma Vibhushan on him for his role in fostering patriotism, civic duty and national integration.<sup>8</sup>

For several years after Independence, the Indian Government allowed foreign missionaries to come to India and operate freely despite opposition from powerful conservative elements in Hindu society. The right to profess, practise and propagate one's religion has been guaranteed in the Constitution, though the right to convert has been hotly contested. India and the Vatican have maintained full and cordial diplomatic relations uninterruptedly and the latter has shown the sensitivity to rapidly indigenise the Church in India by appointing sons and daughters of the soil to key positions and gradually phasing out the foreign, mainly European and American, personnel. In fact the wheel has come full circle inasmuch as India now sends out its own priests and nuns to work in foreign countries in Africa, Europe and the Americas. The foreigners who now flock to India are not only

tourists but religious seekers and pilgrims who end up in Hindu ashrams and seek guidance from non-Christian preceptors. And it is non-Christian gurus and godmen from India who have large followings in the nominally Christian western countries.

Despite occasional hiccups and pin-pricks, Christians in India have by and large not harboured apprehensions about their role and status in free India. India has welcomed two Popes on its soil, Paul VI and John Paul II, both of whom were received with great deference and warmth.<sup>9</sup> The Catholic Church in Mumbai received full cooperation from the civic authorities when organizing two major Congresses, the Marian Congress and the Eucharistic congress.<sup>10</sup> No restrictions have been placed on the working of Church bodies like the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the Church of North India, the Church of South India and the National Council of Churches in India. Church-run institutions are for the most part able to function without let or hindrance, though in recent days, instances of attacks on Christian institutions, places of worship and personnel have escalated significantly. These incidents are deplorable indeed but do not affect Christians alone and must be seen within the context of an overall decline in law and order affecting all sections of society.

## **The Controversy over Conversions**

The Niyogi Committee Report which dealt with missionary activity in India stirred up a hornets' nest in Church circles due to the negative view it took of the subject.<sup>11</sup> Similarly the proposed

but never enacted O.P. Tyagi Bill, as well as anti-conversion bills passed by the legislatures of Arunachal Pradesh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, raised the hackles of the Indian Christian community as they were seen to run counter to the freedom of religion guaranteed under the Indian Constitution.<sup>12</sup> Oddly enough, these bills were termed 'Freedom of Religion' bills, ostensibly aimed at protecting all religions but in reality intended to curb conversions to Christianity. The sore point with the Church authorities was that State agencies were being empowered to judge the merits of a sovereign personal decision in matters spiritual, while the onus of proof that the decision to convert was a free one, without inducement or fraud, was placed on both the converted and the converter. It was as though every conversion involved potentially guilty parties who had somehow to prove their innocence if they were to escape punishment. This was not acceptable under a liberal democratic Constitution.

Since conversion has become a bone of contention, it needs to be discussed with some rigour. On the face of it, in a free and secular society, anyone is at liberty to change his faith back and forth and as often as he chooses. It is nobody else's business, least of all that of the State. This freedom goes along with that of thought, expression and association. Public order and morality are the only constraining bounds and a plethora of civil and criminal laws are in existence to deal with these. Just as political parties, firms and corporations are free to sell their wares, while voters, clients and consumers are equally free to accept or reject them, religious

groups have the right to advertise their beliefs, and people have the prerogative to adhere to the latter, ignore them, or repudiate them. Many Christians in Europe and America have embraced Hinduism, Islam, Taoism or Buddhism, or have chosen to remain agnostic. Nobody need take umbrage at this. An anti-conversion stance might betray jealousy, or a deep-seated prejudice, or a sense of insecurity, or even, an inferiority complex. This aspect needs to be looked into.

The plain truth of the matter is that in contemporary India the average Christian is least interested in converting others to his faith or in adding to the numbers of his Church group. Like his compatriots of other faith persuasions, he is pre-occupied with securing his livelihood and bettering his prospects. The very fact that after nearly two thousand years Christians number barely 3% of the population speaks for itself. Part of the problem of conversion is related to the traditional Church policy of 'evangelization' which means 'announcing the good news'. The good news was supposed to be the teaching that Jesus mandated his disciples to spread among all peoples. One way of understanding this mandate was that a deliberate effort must be made by Christ's followers to win over as many adherents as possible to the 'way of salvation'. This was the path followed by missionary Christianity during the period of European colonial expansion and conquest of new territories. This activist policy came to be associated with the political ascendancy of foreign powers and the loss of freedom of indigenous powers. It could not but cause resentment among local cultural and religious groups. Another way

of understanding Christ's mandate was that his followers must imitate his virtues by loving and serving their fellow-men even to the point of self-sacrifice. This would be the best way of announcing the good news of Jesus' message. This latter understanding has overtaken the earlier understanding among Christians in Independent India. Christianity in India could not fail to be influenced by the generally tolerant and pluralist Hindu culture and civilization that has prevailed for centuries. Developments in Christian theology over the past half century, and particularly after the Second Vatican Council, have opened up perspectives within the Church, making the latter less sectarian and exclusivist in its outlook and in its approach to other Faiths. The accent is now on Dialogue rather than on a self-righteous Monologue claiming to hold all the truth the world needs to know. The Church would be well-advised to follow the policy of 'nishkama karma' or of non-attachment to the fruits of its labour. It should not seek to expand its spiritual empire but rather bear humble witness, in truth and love, to Jesus' message and leave it to others to be convinced or not.

The accent in evangelization today is on serving the poorer and weaker sections of society regardless of caste or creed. Even this may be viewed with suspicion as a ploy to lure the more vulnerable into the Christian fold. But there is little or no evidence to show that this has been happening or that Church numbers have swelled as a result. Post-Independence Indian Christianity has set great store by 'inculturation', by which is meant a conscious and sustained effort to express Christian belief, worship

and praxis in indigenous cultural forms. This has been largely in response to the general perception that Christianity was a Western transplant and therefore alien to Indian culture. Today Mass is often said in the padmasan posture by priests wearing saffron shawls and using the local language. There is a fair sprinkling of aratis, kirtans and bhajans in Church services and excerpts from the sacred writings of non-Christian religions are often read at prayer meetings. Inter-faith prayer services are frequently held to promote a sense of oneness and universality among adherents of different faiths. Rather than Christianity converting Hinduism, Hinduism has domesticated Christianity in India.

An effort has also been made to develop Indian Christian art forms as seen in the paintings of Angelo da Fonseca, Jyoti Sahi and Sister Genevieve. The Bharat Natyam explorations by Francis Barboza and the Hindi bhajans of Charles Vaz have been generally well received. If one considers dialogue and inculturation in their widest ambit, one must mention the pioneering efforts put in by the likes of Fallon, Antoine, Bede Griffiths, Le Saux, Lederle, DeLeury, Valles, Shilananda and Sister Vandana, just to mention a few by way of illustration. Esteller did scholarly work on the Rig Veda and Bulcke on the Romayana. In more secular disciplines, Fuchs contributed much to Indian anthropology, Heras to Indian Proto-history and Santapau to Indian botany. An Indian Christian theology has been in the making over the past few decades with names like Samuel Ryan, Sebastian Kappen, George Soares-Prabhu and Francis X. D'Sa,



among several others, being associated with the venture. The cumulative effect of all these developments has been that Indian Christianity no longer wears an alien appearance despite its global linkages. Christians have been writing and publishing in a number of Indian languages like Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarathi, Konkani, Malayalam and Tamil. In Maharashtra, the Marathi Khristi Sahitya Sammelan has been organized along the lines of the earlier well-established Marathi Sahitya Sammelan. Indeed, Indian Christians might be expected to be even more alert and active in the print media considering that the first printing press<sup>13</sup> as also some of the early grammars and dictionaries were introduced into India generations ago by Christian missionaries.

## Five Phases in Post Independence Christianity

Looking back over the past half century one can discern roughly five broad phases in Church development in India. For convenience, these phases are being here sequenced decade wise, though they are not to be put in water tight chronological compartments as there is considerable overlap among them, which is only to be expected in complex historical processes. On this cautionary note, one can view the decade of the fifties as broadly indicative of the first phase, the sixties of the second, the seventies of the third the eighties of the fourth and the nineties of the fifth.

The first phase, which followed soon after Independence and was mostly a carry over from the pre-Inde-

pendence period, was concerned with the traditional **evangelization**, involving 'spreading the good news' and witnessing to the faith through educational and humanitarian activities. While the educational and humanitarian activities were appreciated and aroused no controversy, the 'spreading the faith' activities aroused resentment in certain influential quarters in newly independent, Hindu-majority India. Vigorous efforts were made to ban conversions, expel foreign missionaries and re-convert neo-Christians to Hinduism. The experiences of the first phase led the Church in India to do some introspection and to adapt its policies and perspectives to the changed scenario in order to avoid confrontation with the majority community, a confrontation that would be both futile and detrimental to the interests of the Indian Christian community itself. Thus, in the second phase, the emphasis was on indigenisation of the Church, replacing foreign personnel with sons of the soil in a progressive manner.

In the immediate wake of independence, the government of India magnanimously offered Indian citizenship to a number of foreign missionaries who had put in long years in the country of their adoption and many of whom had contributed significantly to Indian society through their scholarship or social service in various fields. Entry visas continued to be issued to foreign missionaries after Independence, but government policy became more stringent in this regard and understandably so. The foreign missionaries themselves realized the socio-political changes underway in Independent India, with the result that many of them chose to re-

turn to their home countries while indigenous clergy were inducted into positions of responsibility and control within the Indian Church. Today, visas are issued to foreign missionaries in the rarest of cases. In effect, as mentioned earlier on in this discussion, it is the Indian Church which now sends its own personnel abroad, to Africa, Europe and the Americas.

The third phase saw the question of inculturation being taken up in earnest by the Indian Church and this aspect has already been dealt with above. In the fourth phase, the accent was on social justice which was also referred to as the preferential option for the poor. The criticism was often voiced, usually from within Church circles, that the Church was surreptitiously becoming an 'Establishment Church', seeking linkages with the powers-that-be and catering to elite groups in society, while neglecting the weaker sections. No doubt, counter-criticism from Hindu orthodox groups was also directed at Church bodies for fishing for converts among the poorest sections of society, especially the scheduled castes and the tribals. While the Church did have a clientele among the weaker sections, there was a growing realization that mere welfarism was not a desirable policy. Something must be done to change the structures of society precisely to bring about a more equitable distribution of opportunities and resources among all sections of people. Or else there would always be the specter of poverty staring us in the face. On the principle that prevention is better than cure, it would make more sense to pre-empt poverty by tackling its root causes

rather than trying to remedy it once it erupts. Here, the influence of Liberation Theology, first elaborated in Latin America by Gutierrez, Boff, Cardenal and others, was discernible as it made out a powerful case for establishing a just society in the here-and-now rather than preaching about a messianic kingdom in the hereafter. The accent was on liberating human beings from their fetters, on conscience-tizing and empowering them, thereby vindicating their status as children of God. But the struggle for social justice is no easy task. It usually leads to a polarization between the haves and the have-nots; and the Church has generally preferred a harmonization rather than a clash of interests among its followers. Thus, in the Indian Church, there have been cases of pro-changers like Fr. Vadakkan, Fr. Tom Kocherry, Pradeep Prabhu, Sr. Alice and others having had to face the displeasure of their superiors and even disciplinary action. Opposition has also come from outside the Church with many instances being reported in recent times of assaults, often fatal, on priests and nuns and lay people involved in social action aimed at changing the status quo.

The struggle for social justice has led the Indian Church to realize that by itself it cannot hope to effect major changes in society given its miniscule size and limited resources. It needs to network with a wide cross-section of the national community and to broaden its perspectives beyond restricted ecclesial horizons. Else it will always remain a marginal phenomenon. It needs to plunge into the mainstream without reservations. And this imperative has ushered in the fifth phase of mainstream

participation in national life by Indian Christians. Though this participation is still on a modest scale, it bids fair to gain salience in times to come. While Christians have always been fairly well represented in the professions, in the media – particularly journalism and advertising and in sport, they have generally fought shy of business and politics. Part of the reason could be that they have been socialized into a value system that looks askance at both business and politics, at least of the run-of-the-mill variety. Both avocations are often associated with an elastic conscience and ‘dirty tricks’. At least where politics is concerned, a further consideration could be that in a democratic system, where sheer numbers count, a microscopic minority does not stand much of a chance at the hustings, except for places in Kerala, Goa, the Christian tirbal belt in Bihar and some states in the Northeast (Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya) where Christians form a significant percentage of the population. While a few prominent Christians have been found in the ranks of the civil services and the police, the community has been very well represented in the armed forces, many occupying the highest echelons.<sup>14</sup> When Christians therefore are questioned on their national loyalty, there is no better proof of the same than the ranks of Christian servicemen standing shoulder to shoulder with their non-Christian compatriots on the front lines of India’s defense.

As for business and politics, there has been a slight shift in perceptions and attitudes among Christians more recently. Some Christians have ventured into the world of business and have done

reasonably well for themselves. These hail mainly from Kerala and Mangalore. The ICEEDA (Indian Christians Economic and Entrepreneurial Development Association) has been established with a view to encouraging members of the community to develop their talents in business, trade and commerce and thus raise their living standards while contributing to the growth of the national product.<sup>15</sup> And with the heightened awareness of business ethics and of environmentally friendly business practices, fair chances are that an increasing number of Christians may take to this avocation and distinguish themselves in it. As for politics, those places where Christians form a significant segment of the population already have representatives of the community among Members of Parliament, Members of the Legislative Assembly or Legislative Council and Ministers of the Government. Elsewhere, there is a growing awareness that indifference to the vital question as to who is to be entrusted with power over the people is not consistent with the Christian commitment to help shape a better world. One cannot keep aloof from politics and then complain that the wrong people have entered it and have hijacked the noble purposes of the State. Christians are being exhorted to exercise their franchise without fail and, if they are so minded, even to enter active politics while keeping in mind the common good and the purity of ends and means. Pre-election meetings have been held to make voters aware of the issues involved and of the need to vote for the right candidates. In the course of election campaigns, Charters of People’s

Demands have been drawn up and presented to candidates contesting the elections either on a party ticket or as independents. Candidates have been invited to address public meetings at which they have been cross-examined about their manifestos and their commitment to secularism, clean government and service of the people. A process of political education and socialization is now underway in the Christian Community albeit on a low key.

### **Problems and challenges**

As in every human association, so also within Church bodies, there have been from time to time contentious issues that have engaged the attention of Church leaders. One such, particularly in Catholic circles, has been the sense of alienation that has crept into some sections of lay people who feel that Church structures have become too rigid and that the traditional forms of worship under clerical auspices have become stereotyped and uninspiring. This phenomenon is to be observed mostly in metropolitan areas where the pace of life is fast and stressful and where media exposure in a cosmopolitan milieu is the greatest. In Mumbai, for example, various groups of lay people have branched off from the official Church and hold their own prayer sessions separately, often in private homes and neighborhoods. They find this more meaningful and supportive than going to Church and listening to sermons. These groups, variously styled as 'charismatic' or 'Pentecostals', emphasize enthusiasm and fellowship in their prayer meetings with abundant singing, clapping and shouts of joy. In response to this move-

ment, the official Church has also permitted Catholic charismatics to function under controlled conditions. This step was taken to forestall large-scale defections from the official Church.

Another area of contention has been that of clergy-laity relations within the Church. The clergy have traditionally viewed themselves as 'shepherds of the flock' after the Gospel metaphor of Jesus the Good Shepherd who tends his sheep with the greatest devotion.<sup>16</sup> This metaphor might have suited a pastoral society which has long ceased to exist in most parts of the world. And late twentieth-century lay people are not too enthusiastic about being treated as obedient sheep by the clergy. They have minds of their own and are increasingly disposed to decide matters for themselves particularly in non-theological affairs. They are asking for a share in decision-making within the Church, specifically where legal, administrative and financial questions are involved. In response to these trends, parish councils with elected members have been set up to aid and advise the clergy in Church administration.<sup>17</sup> However, these are not fully democratic bodies in the generally accepted sense of the term as they are merely advisory and subject to clerical 'veto' in the ultimate instance. But they are a step in the direction of greater democratization in the Church. Speaking of democratization, the hierarchy and the more traditional-minded clergy are not in favor of 'democracy' within the Church. For them, the idea that power flows from the people goes counter to the theological proposition that God has called together his Church and entrusted the Church leaders with the task of

‘guiding the flock’. On such a premise, any political type of democratic functioning with its competition for power and for majority votes would be singularly out of place. However, in our day and age, any notion of a ‘divine right’ to rule would be even more singularly out of place, and a realistic formula needs to be worked out for clergy-laity cooperation and power-sharing, especially in view of the added fact that increasing numbers of lay men and women are now theologically extremely well-informed and will not be preached to by the clergy.

From time to time, other tensions have surfaced, for example over the language to be used in Church services, as happened in Bangalore between Christian Kannadigas and Tamils. At other times the question of rites has proved a bone of contention, particularly between Latin-rite and Oriental-rite Christians. In effect, separate Bishops’ Conferences have had to be constituted for the respective rites, with new dioceses or ‘eparchies’ being set up of rites other than the Latin rite.<sup>18</sup> Among Syrian Christians in Kerala a cleavage has arisen between groups owing allegiance to the India-based ‘Catholicos’ on the one hand and those favoring the Syria-based Patriarch on the other. All these developments go to show that in the Indian Church, the search for particularistic identities goes hand in hand with more universal concerns, and in this respect Indian Christians are no different from their compatriots of other faiths.

In an ecclesial set-up in which the culture of patriarchy is still dominant, certain women’s groups have been ex-

amining the role of women in the Church and have called for reforms in the civil laws of 1869 and 1872 regulating Christian marriage and divorce, as these laws are not only outdated but are particularly hard on Christian couples in general and Christian women in particular, especially in cases of failed marriages. More equitable laws governing matrimony and matrimonial causes are being sought with a view to promoting gender justice; and a draft bill has been drawn up after much deliberation within Church circles.<sup>19</sup> But political vicissitudes at the Centre have prevented the bill from being taken up in earnest by Parliament and enacted into law. Like the proposed bill to reserve a third of the seats in Parliament for women, this bill too will have to await a more propitious time for its passage.

Another grey area in the Indian Church is the issue of the Dalit Christians or Christians of Scheduled Caste origin. These feel discriminated against even within the Christian fold, quite apart from their having lost the benefits of reservation or affirmative action on being converted to Christianity. This shows that caste-mindedness has affected sections of the Indian Church, and affirmative action within the Church itself is now called for. At the same time, the Christian community has been campaigning for the extension of the benefits of Government-mandated reservations to Dalit Christians as has been done in the case of Dalit neo-Buddhists and Dalit Sikhs.<sup>20</sup> A sore point with the Christian community is that Dalit Christians who re-convert to Hinduism are promptly given back the benefits of reservation which they had forfeited by embracing

Christianity. This shows that religion is in effect the sole criterion for granting or denying these benefits, no matter what might be said in the Constitution.

### Conclusion:

From the entire preceding discussion certain broad conclusion emerge. The Indian Christian community, with all its idiosyncrasies, is as much Indian as any other community. It has international linkages no doubt, but so have the Government of India, other communities, political parties, professional bodies and associational groups. This is not surprising in an era of globalization. The Indian Church has no extra-territorial loyalties or political affiliation. Like other bodies, it receives foreign aid which is fully accounted for under the provisions of law. The Christian community in India, like other communities, has to con-

tend with various pulls and pressures from within and without and has to make a constant effort to fight caste-mindedness, gender discrimination and fundamentalist tendencies, all of which affect it in various ways. The Indian Church needs to democratize its structures in keeping with the national democratic ethos. It cannot demand civil liberties in the wider society while perpetuating clerical domination and restrictive practices within its own fold. The national agenda is a formidable one – giving effect to the noble aims and objectives set forth in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution and in the Directive Principles of State Policy. It will be both a challenge and a privilege for the Christian community to establish and maintain the closest bonds of solidarity with all other communities in order that we might keep our collective ‘tryst with destiny’.

### Notes

1. Circa 52 A. D., whereas the Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 A. D.
2. Adi Shankara or Shankaracharya is generally placed in the second half of the eighth century A. D.
3. This schism or spilt occurred in 1054 A. D.
4. The system of Padroado was introduced by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 A. D.
5. The Inquisition was introduced into Goa in 1560 A. D. at the request of Francis Xavier. It was suspended in 1774, revived in 1779 and finally abolished in 1812. It aimed at establishing Christian doctrine and practice as officially approved and often resorted to coercion and even capital punishment to that end.
6. Established on 6 January 1622 and renamed as Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples following Vatican Council II (1962 - 1965).
7. Pombal: b. 1699, d. 1782.
8. Valerian Cardinal Gracias was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 1964.
9. Pope Paul VI visited India in 1964 and Pope John Paul II in 1986.
10. The Marian Congress was held in 1954 and the Eucharistic Congress in 1964.
11. The Niyogi Committee Report appeared in 1956.
12. The proposed Tyagi bill (1978) and the enacted bills of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa (1968) and of Arunachal Pradesh (1978) were perceived as going counter to the spirit, if not the letter, of Art. 25 of the Constitution.

13. The first printing press was set up in Goa in 1556 by the Jesuits.
14. For Christian representation in the armed forces as also in other walks of life, see D' Silva (selected readings)
15. The ICEEDA was set up on 2 September 1985, in Mumbai.
16. See, Book of Ezekiel 34: 1; John 10:11 and I Peter 2: 25.
17. According to the Code of Canon Law for the Latin rite promulgated by the Vatican on 25 January, 1983, every parish must have a council (Canon 536) and a Finance Committee (Canon 537).
18. Separate Conferences have been set up for the Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites. The eparchy of Kalyan, under the Syro-Malabar rite, was established in 1993.
19. The Christian Marriage Bill (1994) awaits introduction and passage in the Indian Parliament.
20. Dalit Sikhs were granted reservation in 1956 and Neo-Buddhists in 1990.