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**A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF CHRISTIANS:
A STUDY ON SOCIO POLITICAL IMPROVEMENT
AND INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT**

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A Historical Perspective of Christians: A Study on Socio Political Improvement and Indian National Movement

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Abstract – India gained Independence from the British colonial power sixty years ago. Her achievement of Independence was a result of about a century's struggle by the people. The struggle for freedom was not an involvement of few people but rather it was a people's movement where every section of people played their roles. The Indian national movement has a long history. As a matter of fact, it began with the Revolt of 1857. The Revolt had been called as Sepoy Mutiny, by the British people, but many Indians considered it as the first war of India's Independence.¹ However, the actual struggle for freedom began with the formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885. The period between the Revolt of 1857 till the formation of the INC in 1885 was marked by a rapid growth of National consciousness for political freedom. With the formation of INC the Nation~ struggle became an organized movement.

This paper will focus on new Christian movements indigenous to India most of which are not well known to outsiders but are active, contextual and vibrant in witness. Indigenous Christianity which had significant growth in the twentieth century has roots in earlier attempts in Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. It includes the National Missionary Society and numerous other Indian initiatives. Asian incarnations of the gospel are found in historic as well as non-traditional Churches of several countries, but especially in India. Some of the independent Churches are perceived as deviant in theology or characterized by folk religious practices. Through their worship, practice and teaching many independent Churches respond to the day to day experience and grass-roots culture of the people. There is a vigorous expression of Christian faith and witness of the Spirit in Asia today.

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INTRODUCTION

Christianity is the most visible religion, practiced and preached around all the continents of the World. The Christians believe in One God, the creator of both heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, His crucifixion and resurrection. Faith, hope, love and charity form the core message of Christianity.

The origin of Christianity can be traced to Palestine, in West Asia and its birth and progress is closely interlinked with the story of human history. Lord Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 B.C. - A.D. 14) and suffered at the hands of Pontius Pilate (Roman prefect of Judea, the fifth Governor of the Province and the second – longest holder of the office from A.D. 26 to 36.) according to the chronological records of the history of Rome.

Circumstantially, Christianity has evolved from Judaism revolving round the haloed personality of Jesus Christ, His life, His belief, His sufferings, and above all His teachings. His first and immediate followers were all Jews and given the historical perspective they rallied round Him and interpreted the significance of what He perceived and preached.

According to the established chronology, a handful of His disciples set off on the mission to spread the message of Jesus on the day of Pentecost¹ 29 AD, which is the day of the birth of the Church. Thus, it is on this significant day that the eventful missionary journey of the disciples carrying the torch of the faith of Christianity to various parts of the world, far and near, was inaugurated.

It was with this mission of carrying the message of Christianity across the different corners of the world that one of the beloved faithful of the 12 disciples of Jesus, St. Thomas came to India which has been the welcome home to many different streams of thought, cultural and religious over the ages. The diverse groups have interacted, co-existed and mutually assimilated the emerging composite culture and traditions in India.

The Christian missionaries came to India, took the mission in right earnest wanting to make the right impact on the society. They reached out to the most neglected sections of the society and in the most inaccessible areas of the country with the message of faith, hope and love to enlighten their spirit. Mixing with the poor, illiterate and marginalized people, the

missionaries would generally talk about the basic issues of life and living, trying to bring about a change in their mind-set by cultivating faith in God and Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

This paper will focus on new Christian movements indigenous to India most of which are not well known to outsiders but are active, contextual and vibrant in witness. Indigenous Christianity which had significant growth in the twentieth century has roots in earlier attempts in Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. It includes the National Missionary Society and numerous other Indian initiatives. Asian incarnations of the gospel are found in historic as well as non-traditional Churches of several countries, but especially in India. Some of the independent Churches are perceived as deviant in theology or characterized by folk religious practices. Through their worship, practice and teaching many independent Churches respond to the day to day experience and grass-roots culture of the people. There is a vigorous expression of Christian faith and witness of the Spirit in Asia today.

An indigenous Church is one rooted in the culture from which it grows. Indigenous Christian movements are those which arise from within the local context. Unfortunately in India not infrequently Christianity is erroneously perceived as a foreign religion, less than Indian. The examples which follow are demonstrations of what Lamin Sannah calls "the translatability of the Gospel" as well as authentic Indian incarnations of Christian faith. "Translatability is the source of the success of Christianity across cultures."

The earliest example of indigenous Christianity in India is found in the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar. Much has been written about the Thomas Christians. More research is needed. Since the Thomas Christians became "Syrianized" the picture is not entirely clear. The connection between the Church in India and Syrian-Persian Christianity began in the third or fourth century. Gradually the former became dependent on the latter so that "everything ecclesiastical in India was practically East-Syrian." While this preserved a strong Christian tradition, it "prevented the Church of India from developing an Indian Christian culture...."² The arrival of the Portuguese appears to have obliterated the earlier Malayalam traditions leaving only the Syriac forms.

Early missionaries in India included scholars who made important contributions to the understanding of Indian cultures. The brilliant but controversial Jesuit scholar, Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), for example, whose radical cultural adaptations were viewed as a threat by the Portuguese ecclesiastical authorities, adapted his life-style to that of the people and appropriated various "harmless" customs and ceremonies. De Nobili's approach was through the traditions of Hinduism. While strictly Hindu religious practices were removed, other traditional practices were Christianized. Controversies aside, it is to his

credit that de Nobili "Tamilized" the gospel. Here and there the Christian message caused ferment and reaction. India has seen several attempted cultural incarnations. One such was that of the flamboyant Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884), a 19th century attempt to Indianize the gospel. Sen was captivated by Jesus Christ whom he sought to follow--as an Indian. His was a spontaneous response to the gospel from within Hindu society expressed in Indian culture and symbol. He never identified with traditional institutional Christianity. For this reason Christian writers regard him a Hindu--or a heretic. His method was borrowed from Hindu tradition. Sen acknowledged Christ as Lord but did not opt for the Christian religion. Hindu symbols sometimes were combined with Christian concepts. Keshub Chunder Sen wanted to see India come to Christ. He chided Christian missionaries for doing other things instead of preaching Christ. They should stop presenting Christ as an Englishman because the picture of a foreign Christianity is repugnant. He criticized nominal European Christians whose pseudo-Christianity hinders the progress of the spirit of Christianity in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a plethora of literature available on the history and development of the Church and how the missions traversed in different continents of the world, but there is only a little information available concerning the existence of Christians in India.

Of late, some researchers have been keen on discussing and delineating the political rather than the socio-economic issues concerning the community. As such, a brief review of the selected and relevant literature will help us in gauging the focus of the present study viz. the concept, the issues and an insight into the relevant factors thereof.

The available literature can be broadly categorized into three types:

1. Historical and descriptive studies with origin, growth and spread of Christianity.
2. Christians in India.
3. Empirical and behavior literature concerning broadly with socio-economic and political parameters.

Most of the research exercises have revolved round the state and national level and are demographic in nature. However, there is no study that is directly pertinent to our field of research though there are some which helpfully point towards the direction in the formulation of issues and preparations of the schedule for our empirical study.

M.P. Christanand Pillai⁸ in a write up *Introduction to the Study of the Christian Religion* presents a comprehensive exposition of the historical

development of Christianity right from the beginning upto-1215 A.D.

James K. Mathew's book¹¹ gives a brief but lucid description of one hundred years of Methodism in India (1862 -1962). He spells out the great contribution made directly and indirectly by the missionaries toward the development of the region as a whole. The author makes a cogent point by making the observation that freedom of India from the British Raj was implicitly facilitated by the Church and the leaders of the national freedom movement were one and all shaped by and schooled in Western and Christian influences. At one point of time, the author observes, every cabinet member in free India had a Christian confidential secretary. The book also assesses the reasons for the failure to convert Dr. Ambedkar to Christianity and why the influence of the missionaries failed to reach out to all sections of the society.

Andrew Gordon's ¹² work describes the thirty-year history of the Indian Mission of the United Presbyterian Church of North India (1855 -1885). The author was nominated by the Presbyterian Church to travel to Punjab and to propagate the faith that he had received from the Lord Jesus. He narrates the difficulties and the trials faced by the Christian Missionaries in their task. He gives detailed information about the names and the achievements by the missionaries, the first converts in 1857 -1864 among the Chuhars, the religious awakening among the Megs and especially the conversions of Muslims and the work carried out by the missionaries among these people. He concludes the book mentioning the various institutions, social and educational run by the Presbyterians in North India.

Waskom Pickett's book²¹ extensively deals with the mass movement that took place among the Chuhars and the Megs and how they became Christians. This study is empirical and therefore helpful to understand the background of the Christian community at large.

REASONS FOR THE RISE OF NATIONALISM

Christianity and Western Education : Christianity and western education are closely related. With the coming of William Carey in 1793 and Dr. Alexander Duff in 1930 to Calcutta~ there was a spread of western education. They opened the first Anglo-Vernacular School for the youths of other faiths.³ Christianity and education challenged the superstitious beliefs and the existing social evils. Thus, they initiated the socio-religious reformation in the country.

English education also helped the Indian elites to get the idea of western Liberalism. Besides, the Indian elites got the inspiration for National struggle through the readings of the histories of the American War of Independence, French Revolution, etc. English

language also served as a *lingua franca* for the whole educated Indians which unified the people.⁴ Thus, Christianity and education contributed for the rise of nationalism.

The Sodo-Religious Movements: The first and foremost rationalizing effect of English education was the questioning of the existing sodo-religious practices. Raja Rammohan Roy was the first and the best representative of this new spirit of rational inquiry into the basis of religion and society. He refuted the worship of multiple gods and goddesses and advocated the worship of one true God. He was the founder of the "Brahma Samaj" in 1828.⁵ Roy was against the social evil practices and it was through the joint cooperation of the missionaries that certain practices were abolished. Another movement was the "Arya Samaj" which was founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati at Bombay, in 1875. He rejected the caste system and proclaimed the rights of everybody to study the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures. The Ramakrishna mission and the Theosophical Society.

spearheaded the reform movements. Thus, all these movements glorified the Hindu society and religion which created a national consciousness as against the foreign religion and rule.⁶ Besides, the development of press enabled the writers to spread the national consciousness through the periodicals and news papers in both English and regional languages.

Political Development between 1857-1885 : Following the revolt of 1857, there was a rapid growth of Indian nationalism. The spirit of national consciousness was intensified in this period with the discontent and disaffection against the British rule. In July 1867, W.e. Banerji who later became the first president of the Indian National Congress, demanded for a representative and responsible Govt. of India. In 1874, Krishtodas Pal, a politician, proposed for similar Govt. in his article "Home Rule for India" in *Hindoo Patriot*. Being unsatisfied with the existing political associations, a few political thinkers of Bengal, started in 1875 a new association called "Indian League." The aim of this was to stimulate the sense of nationalism among the people and awaken their political consciousness. ⁸ In the following year, the Indian League was supplanted by a new political organization called "Indian Association" which was inaugurated in 1876, in Calcutta.

Christians' Involvement in the Indian National Movement : Indian Christians responded to the calls of national movement through their various Christian organizations. These Christian organizations arranged conferences, camps in which several issues were discussed including political issues. At times political problems were debated, passed resolutions

and sent to the concerned authorities, and thereby the Indian Christians voices were made heard ..

The first Christian organisation which had played a role in the national movement was the 'Bengal Christian Association' founded in 1878; by a group of Christians in Calcutta with a view to create a national, independent Indian Church. The first president of this association was Krishna Mohun Banerji and one of its active members was Kali Charan Banerji. In 1887, K. C Banerji and Shome formed the 'Calcutta Christo Samaj' which was a Christian parallel to the Brahmo Samaj. Its purpose was for the propagation of Christian truth and promotion of Christian union. Its confession was the Apostolic Creed.¹⁶In 1886, the 'National Church of Madras' was founded by an Indian medical doctor, S.Parani Andy with a group of Indian Christians in Madras. In 1892, the 'Lucknow Christian Association' was formed and also the 'Poona Christians Association' .¹⁷ Those Associations were primarily set up to deal with the social and economic problems of the Christian community by every legitimate means. At the same time, they were very much critical of the missionaries and the western Christian theology and tried to indigenize it~ which indicated clearly the presence of the spirit of nationalism. Those Associations played an important role to mobilise Christian opinions in support of the struggle for national freedom.

SOCIO-POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AMONG THE OPPRESSED

As noted above, most mission work—both evangelistic and social service—was done among the poor of the society. They were the ones who were responsive and in direst need. Whether they converted or not, they gained a new self-image through the proclamation of the Gospel and the critique of Hinduism. The formerly untouchables now were “harijans,” children of God.

This new self-respect resulted in social and political movements against their historic oppressors. Part of the movement was religious, as noted above. With a democratic form of government in the newly independent country, came the possibility of new political power. No longer would the oppressed quietly accept that they deserved their plight because of bad karma in previous reincarnations.

The mission work had sown seeds of social revolution. Those in economic power in the land had reasons to oppose the spread of this “dangerous” thinking. With political elections conversions were no longer just a religious matter. Conversions changed constituencies. A convert from Hinduism would be far less likely to accept his previous Hindu political leaders. Politicians do not want changes in the constituency which elected them. They had political reasons—though couched in religious terms—for inhibiting conversions as much as possible.

People with new self-dignity and new urgency for social justice organized themselves politically. One can note that the areas of the country with the longest history of Christian presence (Bengal and Kerala) are the ones with the strongest Communist influence. The Christian Gospel gave the new sense of dignity and urgency, and the Communist Party enabled those aspirations to be realized politically.

Similarly, dalit movements, primarily in the South—where Christian influence once again is the greatest—have managed to elect dalit-dominated state governments. In these states of strongest Christian influence, there is little expectation that the Hindu-dominated, traditional parties will gain hegemony in the foreseeable future. These socio-political effects of Christianity are not unnoticed by threatened political powers in the land.

One current counter-reaction by Hindu landlords, especially in the North, has been to forcibly put down dalit sociopolitical movements. They have organized their own armies like Middle Age feudal lords in Europe. If any dalit leader or group rises up to assert their rights, these armies attack some remote dalit village away from government scrutiny or police intervention. Dozens of men, women, and children are indiscriminately killed, simply as a means of intimidation.

Of course, the dalits claim that the government does nothing to protect them because they are controlled by these same Hindu landlords. As we will see, Christians are known to be peaceful and non-violent. However, the spread of Christian teachings and critiques does have revolutionary sociopolitical ramifications. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when He said, as noted at the start of the article: “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” These broader effects are very difficult to control and direct. One can understand why those in power would want to stop Christianity's spread.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the role of Christian missionaries in socio-economic transformation of the region.
2. The role of the Christian community in the politics at local, district and state level.
3. The level of their political and social aspirations.
4. The changing patterns and processes of participation at grassroots level politics.
5. To examine the future prospects for the Christian community in the changing scenario of the country.

6. The social indicators (like education health, vocational expertise, economic influence etc) of the community.
7. The community's social interactions and relationships with other groups and segments.

CONCLUSION

The history of India from the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries was a history of the national struggle for freedom. We have also noted that there were several factors for the rise of nationalism. In the courses of the national movement, the Indian Christians had raised their voices through different organizations and sometimes as individuals. The Indian Christians as a Church did not participate in the national movement. However, there were quite a good number of Indian Christians who had made valuable contributions towards the national movement for freedom.

New Christian movements are an important fact of contemporary history with significant implications for doing theology. Many (not all) of the new Christian movements in India are Pentecostal or Charismatic in character. Even prior to Pentecostal beginnings at Azusa Street and Topeka, touches of Pentecost were experienced in India. . "The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Mukti Mission of Pandita Ramabai in Pune, India, in June 1905 is normally regarded as the origin of the Pentecostal revival in India. An earlier manifestation of tongues and other charismatic gifts had been reported in 1860 at Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu.

Revivals have been recorded in North East India from as early as 1897. Manifestations such as unison dancing, singing and praying were noted in the 1905 revival, whereas tongues, healing and prophecy were more recent phenomena, associated with the Mizo so-called "high revival" of 1935.

Indian Christianity is incarnate in a diversity of cultures as the new movements demonstrate. Indigenous Christianity is vigorous. India in 1995 observed the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Church of North India and in 1997 celebrated the 50th anniversary of the merger which created the Church of South India. CSI and CNI are significant ecumenical milestones, rightly celebrated as creative achievements in indigenization. Simultaneously have arisen hundreds (perhaps thousands) of new entities arising spontaneously from the Indian soil.

These diversified independent churches and structures should not be overlooked. Diversity notwithstanding, Indian Christianity has in common with churches in other sections of the non-Western world "an

indigenous, grassroots leadership; embeddedness in local cultures; and reliance on a vernacular Bible."

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