Writing a Social History of Christianity in India

John C. B. Webster

Back in February 1974 the editorial board selected by the Church History Association of India to oversee and publish a multivolume history of Christianity in India prepared a statement on the “New Perspective,” from which this proposed history was to be written. This statement began by saying that “the history of Christianity in India has hitherto often been treated as an eastward extension of western ecclesiastical history.” The editorial board proposed instead to set its history “in the context of Indian history,” a perspective which would both “require a fresh evaluation of existing material” and bring new information to light. This “New Perspective” had four components: (1) the sociocultural, which focused attention on the Christian people in India as an integral part of India’s sociocultural history; (2) the regional, as the basic working unit of study because of India’s regional sociocultural diversity; (3) the national, to highlight common features and interconnections among India’s Christians; and (4) the ecumenical, to explore both common features and denominational diversities within Christianity itself.1

The editorial board had much to react against. All the early general histories of Christianity in India, as well as the denominational histories, focused on foreign missionaries and their encounters, methods, work, issues, challenges, and accomplishments. The Indian Christian community was largely ignored. The textbook then used in theological seminaries for required courses in Indian church history, C. B. Firth’s Introduction to Indian Church History, published in 1961, was basically an institutional history, giving space to the development of the Syrian, Roman Catholic, and Protestant churches as independent entities.2 An “Indian social history” framework, the editorial board believed, offered a better vehicle than a missiological or ecclesiological framework for what it wanted to achieve, namely, gaining a better “insight into the changing identity of the Christian people of India through the centuries.”3

It was one thing, however, to propose a “New Perspective” and another to implement it. Teachers and researchers in Indian church history were not trained to write such a history. Moreover, the mission sources on which they were dependent for the information they needed paid little heed to the Christian people of India, concentrating instead upon the missionaries and their work. The authors of this new history thus found themselves operating at almost total cross-purposes with their source materials and did not know quite what to do. The Church History Association therefore conducted special workshops for them on research methodologies that might address this particular problem.

To date, the Church History Association of India has published three large volumes covering all of India for the first eighteen centuries and two shorter volumes on Tamil Nadu and North-east India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.4 The first volume, covering the period from Christianity’s debated beginnings in India with the apostle Thomas in A.D. 52 up to the arrival of St. Francis Xavier in 1542, had to deal with stories embedded in legend, folklore, and very late sources. The next volume, going up to the end of the seventeenth century, posed the first serious challenge to the editorial board’s ecumenical approach, as it dealt with major conflicts between the Roman Catholic Portuguese and the Syrian Christians in Kerala. The third volume, on the eighteenth century, probably the least-studied period of all, made extensive use of primary sources in a wide range of Indian and European libraries. The author’s draft had to be revised by several scholars following his death. All three volumes were divided into sections that described regional histories separately, with generalizations for the period as a whole being reserved for the concluding section. The board soon found, however, that it was not possible to publish single volumes on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (originally one for North India and the other for South India), as there was simply too much history to be contained in a single volume or to be mastered by a single historian. They therefore decided to assign the regional histories for the last two centuries to different authors and to publish them separately.

I was assigned Northwest India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Northwest India covers not only the present Indian states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the Union territories of Delhi and Chandigarh, but also the present Pakistani states of Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province, as well as the Tribal Areas along the Afghan border. I relate the history of Christianity in the entire region up to Independence and Partition in 1947 and then limit myself to the Indian side of the border for the years after Independence. Since I have been working on the history of Christianity in this region off and on for almost forty years, I had a more detailed story to tell than could be confined within the covers of a 200-page book. This history is thus being published independently of the multivolume project as A Social History of Christianity: Northwest India Since 1800 by Oxford University Press in New Delhi. A subsequent revision and abridgment will appear later in the Church History Association of India series. The remainder of this essay is devoted to sharing my experience of writing this history, in case others who might be inclined to attempt social histories of Christianity in other parts of the world want to know what may be involved. I confine my observations to sources, conceptualization, and readership.

Sources

Missionaries wrote about “the work,” not about “the community.” This habit has forced social historians to scan huge amounts of source materials—reports, proceedings, minutes, mission magazine articles, missionaries’ personal correspondence with their mission boards—in order to glean enough relevant anecdotes, accounts, descriptions, lists, statistics, photographs, and the like on which to base a history. To make matters worse, if the social history is to be ecumenical, as the “New Perspective” requires, these source materials are apt to be so widely scattered as to be almost beyond reach. In Northwest India there were English Baptists; American, Scottish, and New Zealand Presbyterians; British and Canadian Anglicans; German Moravians; American Methodists; Salvation Army officers from all over; Seventh-day Adventists; and Belgian and Italian Capuchins, no two of which have their archives in the same place! The task of getting to and consulting one’s source materials is thus quite daunting and expensive.

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The nature of my Christian sources changed over time. Most of the early mission sources were produced for the edification of supporters both “back home” and in India. By the end of the nineteenth century, missionaries were publishing weekly or monthly newspapers and magazines in India primarily for one another, for example, the _Indian Witness_ (Methodist), _Indian Standard_ (Presbyterian), _Lahore Diocesan Magazine_ (Anglican), and, in South India, the _Harvest Field_ (ecumenical Protestant), _Guardian_ (Indian Protestant), and _New Leader_ (Roman Catholic). Following the 1910 International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh and World War I, not only do reports of international deputations and commissions get added, but so too does an increased amount of survey research. Following World War II and then Independence in 1947, the missionary archive diminishes dramatically without being replaced by anything comparable on the Indian side, although the Christian community does become the subject of some very helpful social science research.

Despite the presence of such diverse sources in so many repositories, I did not get everything I was looking for. Three deficiencies were particularly frustrating. One was the general lack of relevant materials in Indian languages, as so few seem to have been preserved. The second is that the Indian “voice” is so silent in these sources. It does come through at key moments, often after passing through a missionary filter, but it would have been much better to have heard more independent Indian voices in the sources consulted. A third frustration arose after reading Susan Bayly’s excellent study of Christianity in nineteenth-century Kerala and Tamil Nadu, as she was able to focus on such things as Christian shrines, cults of saints, festivals, and disputes over ceremonial honors, which reveal so much about the inner relationships between Christianity and its various sociocultural environments. I could not find parallels in the Northwest, perhaps because Christianity there has been so Protestant for so long, but more probably because in the Northwest there was not the intercaste competition for honor and status within the churches that there was in the South.

**Conceptualization**

Basic to the social-history approach is the working hypothesis that since the Christian community emerged from within Indian society, the major clues to understanding its history are to be found in Indian social history rather than in the history of Christian missions. In short, Indian Christians have always been Indians. This is not to say that missionary theologies, missiologies, politics, liturgies, perceptions of India, institution-building, charisma, and willpower have been unimportant, but only that they are likely to have played roles subordinate to changing Indian sociocultural realities in shaping the Christian community over the years. Missionary capacity to effect change has long been overestimated, initially by missionaries themselves and more recently by all who blame them for the present ills of the Christian community. One has only to read the expressions of frustration that permeate their reports and correspondence to see the limits of their power.

Northwest Indian society, notwithstanding its religious diversity and all the political changes it has undergone, has been a highly integrated society, based on hierarchies of caste, gender, and age, and held together by kinship ties within each caste and by patron-client relationships between members of castes differently placed within that hierarchy. It is difficult to imagine why anyone in such a society would want to become a Christian. It would be wrong, however, to assume that everyone was equally happy living in that kind of society; some would already be individually or collectively alienated, even before encountering a Christian evangelist. The early converts in Northwest India were indeed drawn from the ranks of the individually alienated: migrants from other parts of India or men in Western employ or who had received a Western education. Women who converted apart from their families were most often already abused, widowed, or abandoned by their families. The Dalits (those belonging to castes deemed untouchable and ranked at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy) were collectively alienated and later converted in large numbers. The message of God’s love and forgiveness was unexpected good news to the individually and socially alienated.

In this history Christianity is depicted both as a religious movement from within Indian society and as an Indian community defined by religion (rather than by caste or lineage). Both movement and community took decades to develop, and both underwent changes over time. Missionaries provided the initial leadership, organization, and ideology for Christianity as a movement, but there would have been no movement and no challenge to the prevailing sociocultural order had Christianity not attracted significant numbers of Indian inquirers and converts. It was during the period roughly from 1881, when the first census of India recorded almost 4,000 Indian Christians in the region, up through World War I, when their numbers approached 300,000, that Christianity posed its greatest challenge to northwest Indian society and exercised its greatest influence as a movement through its diverse forms of evangelism, its prominent role in the region’s educational system, and its medical work, primarily among women and children. After World War I, however, Christianity quickly lost its momentum as a movement, never fully to regain it again. For one thing, the region turned its attention away from sociocultural concerns to concentrate primarily on nationalist and communal politics. For another, church leaders began concentrating more on “Christianizing” and fully incorporating large numbers of recently arrived converts into the churches than on adding new ones. Only in recent years have evangelicals and Pentecostals revived the earlier evangelistic priority, both winning new converts and provoking a strong backlash.

Christianity as community in Northwest India is, apart from growing numbers, a function of two quite different things. The first is the caste/community structure of Indian society and the way it operates. In the nineteenth century, and even on into the twentieth, a Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh from a “respectable” caste or lineage was outcasted upon conversion to Christianity. The old ties of kinship and sociability were broken for these converts, and Christianity became their community, within which they married and had their social life. Although Dalit castes did not excommunicate converts, thus making community boundaries between Christian and fellow Dalits less rigid, these patterns have continued on into the present, although in less stringent forms, so that Christians are identified as belonging to a separate and distinct community in a caste/community-based society.

Christianity as community is also a function of the internal cohesion and interdependence of its own membership. Converts from a variety of religious and caste backgrounds initially formed a fairly cohesive urban community. The rural Chuhra conversion movement from the 1870s onward changed that demographic dramatically. Since then, increased social mobility, the influx of Christians from other parts of India, emerging class differences, and often competing denominational differences between those in the historic Protestant, Roman Catholic, and evangelical/
Pentecostal forms of Christianity in the region have meant that internal cohesion has been severely strained. Christianity as a community is therefore not just a sociocultural “given” in Indian society; it is something that must be worked at and struggled with all the time.7

This emphasis upon Christianity as community points to the other major theme running throughout this history, namely, the changing images and identity of the Christian people in Northwest India. Image, self-image, and identity have been very much a product, not just of Christianity’s Gospel, but also of its origins and associations (Jesus was not an Indian, and Christianity was brought to India by foreigners); of the locations within the Indian caste hierarchy from which Christian converts have come; of the community’s relative size, resources, influence, and “clout”; of the patterns of both social and religious interaction with other communities that it has fostered; and of the implicit and explicit political alliances (if any) it has formed. Not all Indians have given the same weight to each of these considerations in their perceptions of Christianity; some considerations are products more of controversy than of “the facts,” and all of them have changed over time. All needed to be examined over the entire period of Christianity’s presence in Northwest India in order (as the editorial board proposed) to gain “insight into the changing identity of the Christian people [there] through the centuries.”

Readership

This history has been written primarily for two sets of Indian readers. One consists of members of the Christian community, particularly in Northwest India. While denominational histories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries abound, this has been the first attempt to write the history of the whole community in this part of India. My assumption has been that they need as much information as I can provide about their origins and how they got to where they are now. The Christian community there, as elsewhere in India, has been attacked verbally and physically during the past decade of Hindutva (lit. “Hinduness”) ascendancy, and it has been engaged in important internal debates. My hope is that this book will provide some solid historical ground for them to stand on, as well as a clearer sense of their own identity as Christians, as they engage in these struggles.

The other set of Indian readers I have had in mind has been the members of the academic community, and especially the historians of modern India. They and their Western counterparts have made an indispensable contribution to my history. Thanks to their work, the field has grown tremendously, so that what I know now about the changing regional context in which Christians have lived and interacted—whether social, political, or religious—I could not have known when I first began gathering material for this book. In contrast, Christianity, and Indian Christians in particular, continue to find little or no place in histories of modern India. Christians are a small minority in India and an even smaller one in Northwest India, and so are easy to ignore. Beyond that, however, is the fact that historians of modern India have had few solid monographs on Indian Christianity, especially in the twentieth century, to draw upon when writing their histories. This history is designed to fill that gap in a way that meets their academic standards, and so to make Christianity and Christians better recognized as integral parts of the modern history of the Indian people.

My intentions with regard to the book’s Western readers are less sharply defined. I think that India specialists will find it helpful in the same ways Indian academics might. I expect historians of Christian missions to find not only my perspective complementing their own but also the information this history contains enriching their understanding of Christian missions. Finally, I hope that those whose positions in church bodies require some understanding of their Northwest Indian (and Pakistani) partners in mission or who have associations with the churches there as missionaries or mission supporters will find this history enlightening and helpful, clarifying within a broader historical perspective their parts in the story it has to tell.

Writing the history of Christianity in India (or elsewhere) can be an important missionary vocation if certain conditions are met. Obviously, one’s history must meet the academic standards set by the profession so as to be taken seriously. It should be written in a language relatively free of academic jargon and understandable to the intelligent nonspecialist. It should also be published in a place and at a price that make it accessible to its intended readership. And, as indicated above, its contents should be conceived so as to deepen historical understanding of the Christian people. Writing that meets these goals can perhaps help Christians and their neighbors alike relate better to their past and present, as well as provide a useful resource for interfaith understanding.

Notes

1. “A Scheme for a Comprehensive History of Christianity in India” (mimeographed), pp. 1–2. This statement was reprinted, but with a slight omission in the sentence on the sociocultural component, in Indian Church History Review 8 (December 1974): 89–90.


4. The five volumes so far published in History of Christianity in India are the following: vol. 1, From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century [up to 1542] (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1984), by A. Mathias Mundadan; vol. 2, From the Middle of the Sixteenth to the End of the Seventeenth Century [1542–1700] (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1982), by Joseph Thekkedath; vol. 3, Eighteenth Century (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1997), by E. R. Hambly; vol. 4, pt. 2, Tamilnadu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1990), by Hugald Grafe; and vol. 5, pt. 5, North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992), by Frederick S. Downs.


7. India has had an especially bad experience with communal history. The historian of Christianity must therefore examine the community’s internal diversity and tensions in relation to those within the wider society so as to avoid inadvertently falling into this trap.
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