# CHRISTIAN MINORITY IN INDIAN MULTICULTURAL DIVERSITY: ISSUES OF EQUITY, IDENTITY AND EMPOWERMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

India is not a nation of immigrants; it is a homeland, a civilization society. Since liberal multiculturalism is a product of immigrant societies, there are significant differences between the Indian model of diversity and the Western liberal multicultural scheme. The Indian constitution does not declare India to be multicultural and Indian identity is closely associated with the majority Hindu culture. Therefore communities that differ from it are designated as minorities. Nevertheless, guarantees in the Constitution protecting the rights of these minorities made a multicultural society possible in India. Yet minorities are seen in religious context only. The problem, thus, does not lie in the mere distinction between majority and minorities but with the idea that irreconcilable differences exist between them as well as in the persistence of discrimination. Moreover minorities and majorities are seen to increasingly clash over such issues as language rights, regional autonomy, political representation, education curriculum, land claims, national anthem or public holidays (Raj and Mc Andrew, 2009).

In this article, after recalling the complexity and diversity of the Hindu majority and the definition of various minorities, we examine the situation of one of the most important religious minorities of India, the Christians, as well as some of the challenges it faces in terms equity, identity, and empowerment.

## MAJORITY AND MINORITIES: COMPLEX AND CONTESTED CONCEPTS IN INDIA

The Hindu majority is itself not a culturally homogeneous community because of the presence of four hierarchical castes (almost similar to class in Western context) containing numerous sub-castes within them. The hierarchical caste system, which has dominated Indian society for over 3000 years, was developed by the Brahmins (Hindu Priests) to maintain their superiority over the less educated and less skilled (Kethineni, 2010). Over time, the caste system was formalized into four distinct classes (*varnas*). At the top of the hierarchy are the Brahmins, who are considered arbiters in matters of learning, teaching, and religion. Next in line are the *Kshatriyas* who are warriors and administrators. The third category is the Vaisyas, who belong to the artisan commercial class. Finally, the Sudras (Backward Caste) are farmers and peasants. It is significant that conversion to Christianity or accepting Christ as Saviour has taken place in all the four castes since the first century when Christ's disciple Thomas brought the Gospel of Christ to people of South India and still continues today.

Beneath the four castes there is a fifth group, which is not included as part of the Indian caste system. Individuals from this group are literally untouchable by the rest of the castes; these socially excluded people describe themselves as "Dalit" (Massey, 1997). For centuries, Dalits were not treated as part of the mainstream Indian Society and were traditionally assigned menial and degrading jobs. Gandhian liberals referred to them as Harijans (children of God) and the Government of India officially calls them "schedule castes." Indeed this was based on the British government notification whereby the Simon Commission drew up an official list of socially excluded caste and tribes in 1930 called the "Schedule Castes" (SC) and "Schedule Tribes" (ST). "Scheduled" means they are on a government schedule that entitles them to certain protections and affirmative actions. According to the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People of the UNHCR (2009), as of 2001 there are approximately 166.6 million Dalits, out of India's population of a billion. Reports estimated that some 16 million Dalits are Christians. The Schedule Tribes or Adivasi (Indigenous people) constitute 84 million of the Indian population. Among then two million belong to a Schedule Tribe or are Adivasi Christians (UNHCR: 2009).

In addition to this complex composition of the so called Hindu majority, India has its share of minorities—generally defined in religious terms—though the Constitution does acknowledge the existence of linguistic

minorities (Joseph, 2009). Indeed the Constitution of India has copied the identification of Indian minorities from the report prepared by the Advisory Committee on minorities submitted to the Constituent Assembly in August 1947 (Raj, 1988). As the report records, till this stage, the seven minority communities officially accepted were (1) Anglo-Indian; (2) Parsees; (3) Plain tribesman in Assam; (4) Indian Christians; (5) Sikhs; (6) Muslims; (7) Scheduled Caste. While the Constituent Assembly was in the process of "practically unanimously" accepting the Report, an ardent Brahmin leader, K.M. Munshi, asked for a seemingly innocent amendment: to (a) delete the Scheduled Castes from the list of minorities, (b) include the following addition, "I-A: The section of the Hindu Community referred to as Scheduled Castes as defined one of the Government of India Act 1935, shall have the same rights and benefits, which are herein provided for minorities specified in the Schedule to para 1." (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1947). This amendment was "constitutional fraud," (Rajsekar, 1983) and was fatal to the Schedule Caste who became Christians as they were denied the same privileges enjoyed by the Schedule Caste who are not Christians, which is one of the issues raised in this paper. Thus five religious groups are currently recognized by the Indian constitution as religious minorities: Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs and Parsis.

## INDIAN CHRISTIAN MINORITY

As per the 2001 census, there are about 24 million Christians in India (nearly equal to the population of Canada), and among them 18 million are Catholics. Christianity (2.3% of the total Indian population) is India's largest religion after Hinduism (80% of the population) and Islam (13.4%) (Nasiruddin, 2007). The Christian population is concentrated in three major areas: South India, on the Konkan Coast, and among the Tribal people of Jharkhand State and the seven states of the North East. In South India the major Christian centres of Christianity are Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh (Ooman, 2000). The majority of the Christians in Kerala, constituting about 19% of the population of the state, trace the origin of their faith to the 1st century missionary activities of Thomas, the disciple of Christ. While the Portuguese Mission tried to bring them under the Latin rite, many continued to adhere to their traditional rites, some under the Catholic Church and others outside. The Tamil Church is overladen with layers of traditions, from St. Thomas to the Portuguese and beyond, including the great wave of conversion from the 18th to the 19th century. Other centres of Christianity are Goa (where the Portuguese set up the seat of the Church), Mangalore and Bombay. Among the tribal people, the Catholic Church has a pronounced presence in the state of Jharkhand and in the seven small states of Northeast India. In opposition to the widespread perception of Christians as a privileged group, linked to the association of Christianity with the British colonial power, it is important to stress that the majority of Christians in India belong to the Schedule Caste (16 million) and Schedule Tribes (2 million) categories. Together they constitute some 18 million Christians (more that 70% or 75% of the community), which is substantial (Nasiruddin: 2007; Catholic Bishop's Conference of India: 2011).

## ISSUES OF EQUITY, IDENTITY AND EMPOWERMENT

The Indian Constitution recognises the Christian minority and the rites that have been described above. Yet there is discrimination in the form of inequity relating to identity and empowerment. Main issues for concerns are related to a restrictive interpretation of constitutional protections, the limits imposed to conversion as well as the persistence and even increase of violence against the community.

The first issue can be clearly linked to the historical factors alluded to before. Indeed, in August 1950 the Dalit or Schedule Cast Christians encountered major discrimination when the President of India issued an order through the Ministry of Law which states: "Notwith standing anything contained in paragraph two no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu or the Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Casted." (Raj, 1988) Christian organizations like the National Christian Council, the Catholic Bishop Council and the Catholic Regional Committee of Nagpur all sought for the removal of this discriminative order but without success. In 1984 and 1985, two petitions of Christian Dalits were presented before the Supreme Court, seeking removal of their discriminative content. In its judgment the Court affirmed not only that the Constitution enjoins upon the President also to specify which Castes or which parts of those castes are to be considered Scheduled Castes and that only the Parliament can overturn the President's decision, but that the caste system is a phenomenon peculiar to Hindu (not Indian) society. Since the President knew that Hindu and Sikh Dalits suffered from serious disabilities and backwardness, he could limit constitutional protection to them (Webster, 2009).

Thus religion was used as criterion in 1950 to define the Schedule Caste and according to it only those backward castes (socially, educationally, economically) who professed Hindu religion should be considered in the category of Schedule Caste. On the basis of this criterion all other people professing Islam, Christianity and Buddhism were left out. However, in 1990 the third paragraph of the

Presidential Order 1950 as amended by the Parliament extended constitutional benefits to Dalit Buddhist, along with Dalit Hindus. In 1990 in Parliament, while stating the object and reason for proposing to include Buddhists of Schedule Caste origin in the list of Scheduled Castes, Sri Ram Vilas Paswan (who was then the Union Minister of Welfare and Labour) made clear the criterion saying:

> *Neo-Buddhists are a religious group which has come into existence in 1956 as a result of a wave of conversion of the Schedule Caste under the leadership of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. Upon conversion to Buddhism they became ineligible for statutory concession and facilities available to the Schedule Castes to them also, on the grounds that change of religion has not altered their social and economic conditions... they objectively deserve to be treated as the Scheduled Castes... (Raj, 1988).*

The important point in Paswan's statement is that this amendment of 1990 to the Presidential Order of 1950 has changed the criterion about religion, by clearly stating: "that the change of religion" does not alter "social and economic condition." This truth had been accepted and approved by the Parliament of India at the time of the Second amendment of the Presidential Order of 1950. This position, however, is not extended to Christians. In a report of March 2011, it was revealed that the centre seem tilted against the inclusion of "Dalit" Christians and Muslims in the Schedule Caste list, arguing the need for evidence to show that converts continued to face discrimination of the same degree as before their exit from the Hindu fold (NCCI Newsletter, 2012).

Thus because of this distinction Dalit Christians do not have the same empowering opportunities as non-Christian Dalits such as reserved seats and special support (violation of the Articles 15, 29 and 47) in government jobs (Violation of Article 16), and in the Parliament and State legislatures, Municipality and Panchayats (violation Articles 330 and 332). Moreover there is usually a less generous interpretation of the provision of Article 26 regarding the right of minorities to manage their own educational institutions when the latter are linked to the Christian minority.

A second issue is the limit imposed on conversion. The States of Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa and Tamil Nadu have passed laws restricting or prohibiting conversion. In 1977, the Supreme Court of India ruled in the case Rev. Stansilaus VS Madhya Pradesh that the right to propagate religion did not include the right to convert others to one's own religion. In other words, Article 25(1) granted the right to evangelize, but not to proselytize. In 2003, ruling on certain provisions of the Orissa Freedom of Religious Act (1967), the Supreme Court observed: "What Article 25(1) grants is not the exposition of its tenets." (Webster, 2009). But then, what is the freedom to practice and propagate with restrictions—how does one spread his religion if not through conversion?

Finally the Churches in India have released documents indicating that violence against Christians has increased since 1998 more than between1950 to 1997. In the states of Gujarat, Orissa, Punjab, Karnataka Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, violence against the Christians has increased. The conspiracy begins by fanning hatred, creating Mythology of Hate through disinformation and by repeating falsehood. The conspiracy is to brand the Christian community as aliens. By propounding a thesis "One people, One Nation and One Culture," the efforts of this group tend to denounce the pluralistic traditions of Indian culture, the richness of its diversity and the spiritual contribution of its varied faiths. Anyone who is different is branded as an enemy, and attacked, coerced and assaulted. The attacks and violence on the Christian community are well planned. Firstly, the attack is on the physical symbols of the Church, especially on personnel involved in grass roots empowerment including priests and nuns. The attempt is to scare, coerce, humiliate and threaten life. The second pressure is on the institutions, again with the apparent objective to ensure that the Christian community social outreach is curtailed, its contribution to nation building minimized (Molishree, 2006). The final attack is on Christian witnesses. It is designed not just to break the spirit but to weaken Christian faith.

Foreign Christian missionaries have also been the targets of attacks. In a well-publicized case, Graham Staines, an Australian Missionary working among lepers, was burnt to death while he was sleeping with his two small sons in his station wagon in Orissa village in January 1999. Such violence on foreign missionary continues in other parts of India too. In its annual human rights report for 1999, the United States Department of State criticized India for "increasing societal violence against Christians."(Nahan, 2006). The report listed over 90 incidents of anti-Christian violence, ranging from damage of religious property to attacks against Christian pilgrims. Between July 2000 and December 2007, there have been more than violent attacks committed against Christians in Orissa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh (Minority Christian, 2010). In some of these cases, the acts of violence include forcible re-conversion back to Hinduism of converted Christians, distribution of threatening literature and destruction of Christian cemeteries.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The situation of the Christian minority in India clearly demonstrates that even if India defines itself as a secular and pluralist country, cultural prejudices and discrimination toward pursuing a Christian way of life and managing empowering institutions run high at the individual, group and state level. India while evolving into a modern state needs to address and be sensitive to multicultural ideas of equality of cultures and of religious communities in the public domain. Discrimination is still widespread and in the case of Christians is closely entangled with deeply entrenched historical factors which probably make it more difficult to address than in immigrant receiving societies, where diversity is a more recent phenomenon. Nevertheless there could be some benefits to increased comparative studies of problems and solutions in Canada and India in this regard.

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## LA MINORITÉ CHRÉTIENNE DANS LA DIVERSITÉ INDIENNE: ENJEUX D'ÉQUITÉ, D'IDENTITÉ ET D'HABILITATION

Il existe de grandes divergences entre les approches indiennes entourant la diversité et le libéralisme multiculturel des sociétés occidentales. Dans sa constitution, l'Inde ne se déclare pas multiculturelle, et l'identité indienne demeure fortement associée à la culture hindoue majoritaire. Les communautés qui ne se conforment pas à ce modèle dominant sont considérées comme des minorités, et leurs droits sont garantis par la constitution. La discrimination cependant persiste, du même coup que l'idée selon laquelle il existe des différences irréconciliables entre la majorité et les diverses minorités.

### Majorité et minorités: des concepts complexes et contestés

La majorité hindoue elle-même est très loin de représenter un segment homogène de la population, puisqu'elle est sous-divisée en quatre castes hiérarchiques et des milliers de sous-castes. Au fil du temps, le système des castes s'est vu cristallisé en 4 classes distinctes (*varnas*): les Brahmans, qui s'occupent des affaires intellectuelles et religieuses; les *Kshatriyas*, guerriers et administrateurs; les Vaisyas, les artisans; et finalement les Sudras (caste arriérée), les paysans et fermiers.

Il existe un cinquième groupe, qui n'est pas inclut dans le système des castes indien. Les individus de ce groupe sont littéralement « intouchables » par les membres des autres castes. Ces individus s'identifient comme Dalits. Pendant des siècles, ils ont existé en marge de la société indienne, et se voyaient assigner des basses tâches, voire des tâches dégradantes. Le gouvernement indien les désigne sous le nom de castes répertoriées. Répertoriées signifie qu'ils sont identifiés comme tels dans la constitution et qu'ils reçoivent ainsi certaine protections. Ils bénéficient aussi de mesures d'actions positives. Il y aurait 170 millions de Dalits en Inde, sur une population d'à peu près un milliard. 16 millions d'entre eux sont Chrétiens.

De plus, l'Inde compte un bon nombre de minorités, définies généralement sur des bases religieuses. Cinq groupes religieux sont présentement reconnus comme minorités religieuses par la constitution indienne: les Musulmans, les Chrétiens, les Bouddhistes, les Sikhs et les Parsis. Cela signifie que les Dalits chrétiens sont reconnus comme minorité religieuse, mais qu'ils ne profitent des mêmes mesures affirmatives que les Dalits non-Chrétiens.

## LA MINORITÉ CHRÉTIENNE EN INDE

Selon le recensement de 2001, il y aurait 27 millions de chrétiens en Inde, dont 1,8 millions de catholiques. Le christianisme est la troisième religion la plus répandue, après l'hindouisme (80 %) et l'islam (15 %). La population chrétienne se concentre majoritairement dans le sud de l'Inde, sur la côte du Konkan, et parmi les populations tribales du Jharkhand et des états du Nord-est. Dans le sud de l'Inde, les chrétiens vivent surtout au Kerala, au Tamil Nadu, en Andhra Pradesh, à Goa, à Mangalore et à Mumbaï. Contrairement à la perception très répandue que les chrétiens forment un groupe financièrement privilégiée, il est important de noter que la majorité des chrétiens appartiennent à la catégorie des castes et des tribus répertoriées. Il s'agit du cas de près de 24 millions de chrétiens, soit 85 % de la communauté.

## DES PROBLÈMES D'ÉQUITÉ

La constitution indienne reconnait les minorités chrétiennes. Mais il y a encore discrimination. Parmi les problèmes on note une interprétation restrictive des protections constitutionnelles, les limites imposées aux possibles conversions, et la violence persistante contre la communauté.

Les protections accordées par la constitution aux minorités sont parfois inégalement réparties ou restrictives. La religion fut l'un des critères utilisés dans les années 1950 pour définir ceux appartenant à des castes répertoriées, et seule une caste arriérée se déclarant comme Hindoue pouvait être enregistrée comme caste répertoriée. Cela n'incluait donc pas les musulmans, les chrétiens et les bouddhistes. Cependant, en 1990, le troisième paragraphe de l'ordre présidentiel de 1950 fut modifié par le parlement, afin d'étendre les bénéfices des castes répertoriées aux Dalits bouddhistes. Cela fut fait, selon Sri Ram Vilas Paswan (à ce moment-là ministre du travail), car la conversion ne modifie pas la condition économique et sociale. Bien que cette vérité ait été acceptée par le parlement indien, le statut des Dalits chrétiens et autre convertis n'a pas été modifié. Dans un rapport de mars 2011, il fut révélé que le centre était réticent à l'idée d'inclure les Dalits chrétiens et les musulmans dans la liste des castes répertoriées, demandant des preuves que les convertis continuaient à subir la même discrimination qu'avant leur conversion et leur renonciation à l'hindouisme. Les Dalits chrétiens, donc, ne jouissent pas des mêmes opportunités que les Dalits non-chrétiens, comme par exemples des places réservées dans la fonction publique et du support éducatif.

Un deuxième problème émerge des limites imposées aux possibilités de conversion. L'Arunachal Pradesh, le Rajasthan, le Madhya Pradesh, l'Himachal Pradesh, le Jharkhand, l'Orissa et le Tamil Nadu pose des restrictions ou interdisent tout bonnement la conversion. En 1977, la court suprême indienne promulgua que le droit de propager sa religion n'incluait pas le droit de convertir d'autres personnes.

Finalement, les églises indiennes ont fait circuler des documents qui semblent indiquer que la violence contre les chrétiens a augmenté plus vite depuis 1998 qu'entre 1950 et 1997. Dans les états du Gujarat, d'Orissa, du Punjab, du Karnataka, du Rajasthan, de l'Uttar Pradesh, du Tamil Nadu et de l'Andhra Pradesh, la violence contre les chrétiens auraient augmentée.

## CONCLUSION

La situation de la minorité chrétienne en Inde démontre clairement que même si l'Inde se définit comme un pays séculier et pluraliste, les préjugés culturels continuent d'influencer les individus, les groupes et les états. La discrimination est encore très répandue, et dans le cas des chrétiens, est influencée par des facteurs historiques qui rendent sa gestion plus difficile que dans les sociétés d'immigration, où la diversité est un phénomène plus récent. Malgré ces différences, davantage d'études comparatives examinant les problèmes et les solutions à cet égard dans les sociétés indienne et canadienne seraient bénéfiques.