

Identities and Universalisms in the Missionary Context of India

India is one of the most ancient civilizations in the world, with a history of at least five thousand years and one of the most diverse cultures in the world. India has carved its own universal identity as home to diverse religions, ethnicities, cultures, languages, and lifestyles, yet, thriving together as one nation. Diversity, adaptability, tolerance, and harmony are deeply engrained in the religious texts and the Indian Constitution as well as in the hearts and minds of people. Over the centuries, these diversities have not only co-existed but also mutually enriched and even gave birth to new religions, through the fusion of religious-cultural identities. This is the product of a dynamic cultural exchange among the religions, without sacrificing identities.

All the characteristic diversities and complexities of India as a nation are visible in Indian Christianity as well. India has three Catholic Churches or Rites, several groups of Orthodox Christians along with almost all Protestant and Evangelical denominations, not to mention the sub-denominations of Indian origin. Indian Christians are ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and ritually diverse, yet are proudly Christians. They are actively engaged in evangelization by proclaiming the Gospel by word and deed. Their contribution to nation-building is much larger than their numbers.

In this article, I will focus on the subtleties of identities and universalisms in India, primarily from a religious perspective, particularly of Christian mission. We will start by looking at the overall Indian reality of identities, followed by a look at the Christian identities situating it in the contemporary Indian context. In the present era of globalization, many think that technology has ushered in an era of universalism, dissolving identities in its onslaught. In fact, just the opposite is true, increased globalization is leading to a resurgence of identity consciousness that

threatens universalism. Identities and universalisms cannot exist, one without the other. Based on the analysis of the Indian Christian reality, we can learn that identities and universalisms are in a relentless flux of co-existence and/or dominance, mutual enhancement and/or distortion, never ever to settle.

1. The Religious Identity of India

Religion plays a vital role in the lives of Indians and India is home to almost all the world religions, besides all the Indian folk religions. Yet India is a secular democratic republic according to its constitution. While religious identities are strictly maintained, tolerance is treasured as a great value by all Indians. A major Pew Research Survey of religion across India in 2019 has found that religious tolerance is a civic and religious value for all Indians: “Across the major religious groups, most people say it is very important to respect all religions to be truly Indian. ... Indians are united in the view that respecting other religions is a very important part of what it means to be a member of their own religious community.”¹

Despite the age-old tradition of religious and cultural tolerance, contemporary India is undergoing an identity crisis, partly produced by globalization and identity politics. The majoritarian quest for hegemony and homogeneity threatens the identity and existence of minorities and challenges the age-

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/-religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/>. This Pew Research Center Survey of religion across India was based on nearly 30,000 face-to-face interviews of adults, (including 22,975 who identify as Hindu, 3,336 who identify as Muslim, 1,782 who identify as Sikh, 1,011 who identify as Christian, 719 who identify as Buddhist, 109 who identify as Jain and 67 who identify as belonging to another religion or as religiously unaffiliated), conducted in 17 languages between late 2019 and early 2020.

old universalisms present in the sub-continent. The multi-religious identity of India has turned volatile and ambivalent in recent times.

1.1. An age-old civilization of Tolerance

India is the birthplace of 4 world religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, not to mention the number of tribal religions in India. Hinduism is the *primaeva* religion of India, described as *Sanadhana Dharma*, from which different religions originated. India is also home to all other world religions such as Parsees, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam already from the early years of their origin. In addition, two syncretic religions were created in India. In 1582, the Mughal emperor Akbar, declared a new religion under the name *Dīn-i-Ilāhī*, literally meaning religion of God or divine religion, in a futile attempt to merge the various religious identities of his subjects into one new universal religion. This new religion did not endure even in his own lifetime. A century ago, Baha'i faith was born as the newest global belief system, which teaches the oneness of God, the unity of humanity, and the essential harmony of religion. It is particularly noteworthy for our reflections that the universalization of various religions into one is never successful.

1.2. Independence struggle as a catalyst

In the year 1947 India gained political freedom and a new identity as a modern nation, under the visionary leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and other freedom fighters, along with a handful of far-sighted European missionaries. However, on the same day of independence, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned along religious lines into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan, causing millions of people to find a new identity and migrate to the nation of their religious affinity. It did not take much time or perceptible forces to suddenly change loyalties and redefine belongingness and identity.

While Pakistan chose to evolve into an Islamic republic, India, fortunately, chose to be a secular nation with a constitution (1950) that hails democratic and secular values². Thus, the

long-standing spirit of diversity was merged into the Indian national identity, essentially as a celebration of the diversity of languages, cultures, religions, and ethnicities. Even 70 years into independence, the post-independent ideals of secularism and unity in diversity are still the mainline ideology in India. Despite all signs of turmoil and polarizations and even occasional extremist and violent clashes, the post-independence ideal of secularism and religious tolerance is still the mainline attribute of what it means to be “truly Indian.”

We have a clear case of how the absolutization of identities and narrow thinking can split nations and generate unending animosity and conflicts. While the freedom struggle served as a positive force in favour of sustaining universal values and principles for creating one nation out of 600 small kingdoms, a narrowly defined identity politics worked equally powerfully to create two nations out of one in a matter of days, splitting families and creating artificial borders and a permanent enmity.³ Identities are so brittle and subtle enough to consolidate into new reality perceptions, ignoring universal ideals.

1.3. The changing scenario and the ambivalence of identities and universalisms

India is once again going through another identity crisis, due to identity politics by right-wing ideologies of the majority community. With the rise of Sangh Parivar or the Hindu nationalist movements and the controversial policies of the nationalist government in office since 2014 at central and state levels, there is a condensation of Indian identity into Hindu identity in political, social, cultural and even religious spheres. The leaders of the right-wing organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) do not shy to contend that everyone who lives in ‘Bharat’ is already a Hindu, and there

meaning of ‘secular’ in India is different from the western sense of secular vis-à-vis religious. The term secular in India means, neither favouring nor denouncing any one person, culture, religion, ethnicity, or language.

³ The partition of India generated never-ending animosity between two newly born nations, India and Pakistan fought two battles and a proxy war ongoing with never-ending enmity and hatred and destruction. Even a cricket match between India and Pakistan is viewed as a full-scale war.

² Article 15 of Indian Constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste, gender or place of birth, while Article 25 guarantees freedom of conscience and the free practice and propagation of religion. The

are no 'Ahindus' (non-Hindus) but only 4 types of Hindus — 'proud, reluctant, unfriendly, ignorant.' They dream of turning India into a 'Hindu Rashtra' with the ideal of 'one nation, one culture, one religion', where every citizen adopts the Hindu way of life under a new constitution.

The Christians, Muslims, and some of the tribals oppose clubbing everyone under Hinduism. To them, Hinduism is not just a way of life but a religion. The Tribals, Christians, and Muslims have different religions and ways of life, and they are Indians⁴. They fear that the RSS ideology of the supremacy of the Hindu race and religion could even lead to the suppression of others as subservient and second-class citizens.

Many optimists think that politically driven Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, cannot ultimately damage the fabric of Indian communities because of the tolerance to diversity unique to India. However, the supremacist dogma of coalescing majority religious identity into national identity through electoral politics⁵ is slowly leading to polarization of the Indian society for fear of minorities being deprived of their ancestry, culture, and religion. The traditional Indian ideal of tolerance has tilted towards a "tolerant but separate"⁶ identity among followers of different religions.

⁴ It is to be noted that Christianity and Islam reached the first century of their origin and existed in India, without ever seeking supremacy or dominance. 500 years of Muslim rule or 300 years of European (Christian) rule did not challenge the fabric of fraternity in the nation. The new-found religious identity became defining and dividing factor not only between India and Pakistan but also among all followers of religions of both Indian and non-Indian origin.

⁵ The elicitation of religious sentiments for political gains is more destructive and harder to heal than any other rivalries because religion is a deep-rooted and non-negotiable sentiment.

⁶ Pew research also indicates that more and more Hindus, especially those who voted BJP "tend to see their religious identity and Indian national identity as closely intertwined," the survey found, with nearly two-thirds (64%) saying it is "very important to be Hindu to be 'truly' Indian." And to speak Hindi to be authentically Indian.

2. Identity of the Christians in the Indian polity

Christianity in India dates to the first century. The ancient Christian community of Kerala, known as Thomas Christians, after St. Thomas the Apostle, was an integral part of South India. The second phase of Indian Christianity begins in the sixteenth century with the arrival of European missionaries. While more Christian communities got established all over India, starting primarily in coastal areas, Christianity began to be known as a foreign religion of the colonialists. The third phase of Christianity in India belongs to the post-Independence period when indigenous missionaries moved to the whole of India and established missions and started educational, medical, charitable and development work, along with the proclamation of the Gospel and the establishment of the Church.

2.1. The Apostolic Church of Thomas Christians

St. Thomas the Apostle arrived in India in AD 52 along with Jewish traders and established 7 Christian communities or churches in Kerala, then known as the Malabar coast.⁷ There is an unbroken tradition and presence of a robust community in Kerala known as Thomas Christians, with strong Aramaic roots. Patristic and other ancient documents as well as early European and middle eastern travelers have amply testified to the existence of apostolic Christianity in India.

Ancient Christianity in India had a unique identity, described as 'Christian in faith, Oriental (Syrian) in worship and Indian in culture.' They embraced the Christian faith without sacrificing their cultural heritage and were well accepted by the population. It was also closely linked to the sister church in Persia, because of the apostolic connection, as St Thomas is believed to have founded both Churches. The Persian Church sent prelates, through whom the Syrian liturgical traditions and prayers were adopted at least from the fourth century. The Thomas Christians formed a

⁷ Recent scholarship has suggested that St Thomas had evangelized North-western India on his first trip to India via the silk route. However, no traces of that community are yet unearthed.

unique community of Christians who guarded their Christian, oriental and Indian identities and lived in perfect harmony with other religions and other Churches. It is a perfect example of an enculturated Christian community, where identity and universalism are in perfect balance.

2.2. Arrival of European Christianity and Evangelization of India

The second wave of Christianization started in the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese, Spanish and English colonizers. While the native Christianity was limited to the Malabar coast, the European missionaries started missionary activity all over India and both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, as they existed in then Europe began to take root in India, especially among the coastal lines. While Spanish-Portuguese missionaries spread Roman rite Catholicism, Anglican and German missionaries planted Protestant varieties of Christian faith in various parts of India. As Christianity spread to other parts of India through the European missionaries, began to be perceived as the religion of the colonizers, a foreign religion of recent religion.

The arrival of the European Christians negatively impacted the native Christians too. Finding the native Christianity different, the Portuguese and Spanish missionaries set on a mission to purge it of 'heretical' elements by replacing the hierarchy with Europeans, recasting priestly formation, burning the liturgical books, and introducing the Roman liturgy. The forced 'annexation' and 'Romanization of Malabar Christianity' was accomplished by the colonizers through the Synod of Diamper in 1599. The growing tensions finally led to the split of Thomas Christians in 1653 through the Koonan Cross oath. The re-casting of the 1500-hundred-year-old Christianity into the Roman garb led to the splitting up of the Thomas Christians into a group that valued loyalty to the Pope above traditional practices and another group that valued the 'way of Thomas' above the 'way of Peter'. Today the original Thomas Christians of India comprise of two catholic and several orthodox and Jacobite churches.

2.3. Christianity in the post-independence India

After Independence, Indian Christians quickly moved into leadership and widespread missionary activities.

However, the westernized lifestyles, church organization, liturgical rituals, and music continued, although Christians in India tried to adapt to Indian religiosity and adopted a lot of Indian practices. One major reason is the higher education of the clergy in European universities and the continuation of the same theology and formation system in Indian seminaries. Although Indian Christians aspire to look more Indian, inculturation is not a mainline feature, except in specialized centres and Ashrams which have adopted Indian religious ideals, theological ideas, lifestyle, art and architecture, music, and rituals in their quest to be truly Indian and truly Christian.

Most Indian Christians value their faith and religion as very important, in life and share with other Indians a profound sense of the divine and a religious outlook on life as common characteristics of all Indians. The church is part of their social life like a second home for many. Sunday worship, evening family prayer, personal prayers, fasting and other ascetic observances, giving money to Church, reading the Bible, and special devotions like the rosary, novenas, and pilgrimages mark their life cycle.⁸ Like the rest of Indians, Christian festivals attract huge crowds, processions, bands, and fireworks. Along with several Christianized rituals adopted from temple rituals, some beliefs rituals and customs, superstitions, and celebrations rooted in the Hindu religion too have crept into Christians. Amidst people of other faiths, Christians maintain their distinctive identity and faith and yet live in harmony and friendship with all others, sharing their national epics and celebrating national festivals like Diwali and Onam. The distinctive identity of the Indian Christians is that they render educational, medical and development services mostly benefitting the non-Christians.

⁸ Ariana Monique Salazar, "8 key findings about Christians in India," <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/12/8-key-findings-about-christians-in-india/>, JULY 12, 2021.

2.4. Demography of Indian Christians

The picture of Christianity in India cannot be complete without investigating the demography of Indian Christians. Christians make up hardly 2.4% of the 1.3 billion population of India, making roughly 32 million Christians, nothing compared to roughly 180 million Muslims and 980 million Hindus. The Christians are geographically distributed in the South, North-East and coastal regions of India. About half of the Christians live in South India and make the majority religion in a few small North-Eastern states. Approximately 37% of Indian Christians are Catholic, belonging to 3 different rites, two eastern and one the Roman Latin rite, 13% Baptists, 7% Church of North India and 7% Church of South India and 36% of other Eastern and evangelical denominations. There is no significant cohesion among the various denominations, rendering Christian identity vulnerable.

Another demographic factor is that a disproportionately large number (57%) of Indian Christians identify with Scheduled Castes (33%) and Scheduled Tribes (24%), and, unfortunately, they face discrimination in the Church and in the nation. With conversion, their religious affiliations change but the stigma of 'low origin' continues to stick with them and they are forced to forfeit their right to reservations in educational institutions and in Government jobs. This is a blot on Indian Christianity that Dalit converts are still at a position of disadvantage from perceptible educational and economic disparity, hardly any inter-marriages, few priests and religious from the community until recently and, in some places, separate churches and burial grounds. Despite all the apparent disadvantages, Dalits are keen to embrace Christianity for spiritual reasons, like the idea of a liberating God, who has power over evil spirits – Dalits are really benefitting exorcisms and healing prayers – and the physical, psychological, and spiritual healing they experience.

3. Christian Mission in the Ambivalent Conditions of the Day

We have seen above that tolerant religious India is slowly going through an identity crisis and turning virulent for motives mostly political. Since the 1990s, Hindu activists have gained momentum, putting forward the narrative that Muslims and Christians are not true Indians and they worship a foreign God. Eleven states in India have already put in place anti-conversion laws⁹, fondly named 'freedom of religion law' under the pretext of protecting the Hindu religion. They are also pushing for such a law at the national level. Despite there being no data about forced conversions taking place and the consistent census data showing that the Christian population in India are not growing, Hindutva groups are accusing Christians of mass conversions¹⁰.

The anti-conversion laws form a great challenge to Christian missionary activity because the Hindu fringe groups use it as a weapon to restrict the religious freedom of the minority faith groups and to obstruct even innocent Christian activities like worship in the church, singing Christmas carols, private gatherings and even blocking humanitarian aid and persecuting those who have genuinely become Christians from a Hindu background. Christian United Forum reported 486 violent acts 2021 and 127 in 2022 against Christians. It is notable that the states with anti-conversion laws account for more incidents of violence against Christians than all the other states combined. Strangely, these laws often exclude or tacitly permit

⁹ The wording of the law generally states that 'no person should convert or attempt to convert, either directly or indirectly, any person from one religion to another by use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means.' As such they look right, no one should be converted by force or allurement and there is constitutional protection against it.

¹⁰ Mostly this accusation gained momentum with the publication of the book *Harvesting Our Souls: Missionaries, Their Design, Their Claims*, by Arun Shourie in 2000. It is interesting to note that Shourie was invited by the Catholic Bishops to talk on "The Hindu perception of the work of Christian missionaries in India", at the Pune Consultation to review the work of the Church in India, in connection with the celebration of fifty years of the existence of the CBCI in 1994. In that meeting, he was given various church documents for his review and he published his book in 2000.

conversions and re-conversions to Hinduism, even by force, or inducement, calling it *Ghar Vapasi* meaning ‘return to the religions of one’s forefathers. Another weapon used by state machinery against Christians is the strict scrutiny and restriction of foreign funds received by Christians, under the pretext that it is being used for mass conversions.

The religiously carved nationalism has, thus, succeeded to some extent to depict the Christian mission as suspicious and anti-national activity at least in the mind of some of the population. Even the educational, developmental, and charitable works by Christians are interpreted as a hidden agenda for conversion. This has made evangelization a challenging activity. The institutional approach to mission followed by the Catholic Church and the direct proclamation of the Word followed by Protestant and Evangelical Christians are equally impacted by the organized opposition and propaganda of the growing number of ultra-nationalists. Christians in India have hearkened to the advice of Paul Timothy, and are determined to “proclaim the Word ... ready when the time is right and even when it is not [*keeping a sense of urgency, whether the opportunity seems favourable or unfavourable, whether convenient or inconvenient, whether welcome or unwelcome*]; ... with inexhaustible patience and [*faithful*] teaching.” (2Tim 4:2, the Amplified Bible). For all Christians “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 18) and that is happening through the collective and individual witness of the Church and Christians through their service and sufferings. Mission continues despite opposition and persecution.

4. Universalization of Identities vs identification of Universals

After analyzing the interplay of identities and universalisms in the Indian religious scenario, we will briefly look at the relationship between identities and universalisms. Unlike the balance of identities in Europe thanks to secularization and religious homogeneity, different identities in India are combined like a rainbow of colours, making the Indian reality more complex. India

is a land of diversity where one gains his identity amidst myriads of others who are different and yet share a lot in common to make one nation. At the same time, Indians have witnessed the break-up of India in the name of religious identities. The age-old culture of religious tolerance and unity in diversity is once again threatened by the political maneuvers to absolutize the majority religion and culture as the unique identity of the nation.

In matters of religion and culture, no individual religion or culture can exhaust Indianness. Identities and universalisms exist in a constant dialectical dynamic, sans permanent resolution. We can never have one and only one universal interpretation, but many interpretations of one universal reality of God. What is common to many interpretations makes the universal possible. Thus, diversity is the foundation of universalism, rendering both oversimplifying harmonization and absolute diversity equally untenable. Pope Francis describes “an authoritarian and abstract universalism” that seeks to eliminate all differences and tradition as “a superficial quest for unity” and a “one-dimensional uniformity.” “This false universalism ends up depriving the world of its various colours, its beauty and, ultimately, its humanity. ... human family needs to learn to live together in harmony and peace, without all of us having to be the same.” (FT100).

In philosophy, the relationship between identity and universalism can be equated to the oldest and the hardest philosophical problem of one and many. One is one and many are many by the very reason of identities. Universal is an ulterior reference point based on religious, cultural, social, or political identities. Overemphasis on otherness leads to chaos, while the absolutization of the oneness leads to totalitarianism. Universalism is possible only when identities are maintained in dynamic tension. In other words, universalism is oneness in many-ness.

In history, the same dynamics is described as particularism and universalism.¹¹ All historical events are particular and different particulars existing in dialectical tension create the universal because the particular is rooted in the

¹¹ Nathan Rotenstreich, “Universalism and particularism in history,” in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 37, No. 1 (1983), pp. 21-36.

universal and the universal is manifested in the particular. This makes it possible for different circles of history to exist side by side, creating common spaces wherever they overlap, indicating that people of the same nation can share different histories according to their identities. In the Indian context, Hinduism cannot be universalized, because the fabric of India consists of all religions, cultures, diversities of languages, customs, and traditions. Indianness is an idea shared by most Indians, without losing their own particular religious, cultural and social identities, and hence, the monopolization of Indianness by the Hindutva group is unjustified and counterproductive to the national identity itself.

In nature too, the sustainability of the natural ecosystem depends on the diversity of the species living therein, because intra-species competition for the same resources is often more violent than inter-species competition, which is complementary. Diversity increases sustainability. Even in human ecosystems, history teaches that diversified societies prosper better than totalitarian ones. Where identities are respected and fostered, individuals and groups contribute more to the common good. Hence a universalism beyond functional common laws and agreements is not conducive to a peaceful and harmonious society.

Conclusion

The dynamics of identity and universalism in a multi-religious, multicultural, and multiethnic society like India, is one of the self-segregating religious identities vacillating between 'tolerance and segregation,' in an apparent effort to find peaceful coexistence. The dynamics of identities and universalism are potent to birth friendship and animosity, creation and destruction. The assumed and attributed identities in India have wreaked havoc in India at the partition, and today the politicization of religious identities has generated religious hatred and violence surpassing caste-based and even criminal violence in the nation. The unity in diversity is the beauty of India and hence the present effort of the majority to homogenize the society is dangerous to the Indian identity as tolerant and peaceful nation.

Christianity in India was and is truly Christian and truly Indian. Indian Christians are not only keen to adapt to the Indian cultural and religious practices, but they are also less probable to segregate themselves from people of other religions or cultures, despite hatred and persecution from them. The Church esteems the followers of all the other religions (NA2) and "has a high regard for their manner of life and conduct, their precepts and doctrines", yet, as Pope Francis says, Christians are convinced that they cannot let "the music of the Gospel" cease to resonate in the hearts, homes, and public sphere because "the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." (FT277)

Christians in India maintain their distinctive identity and faith and yet live in harmony and friendship with all others, because, as *Fratelli Tutti* 30 expresses it beautifully, "isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal." With this spirit, Christians continue to render educational, medical, and social services mostly benefitting most non-Christians, especially the poor and the marginalized, in India. The representative Christian figures like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Graham Steins of Orissa, Tribal Christians of Kandhamal, Sr Rani Maria of Indore and Father Stan Samy were more Indian in their lifestyle, attitude and love for the nation and its people, than most self-proclaimed nationalists. They are just a few luminaries from among the hundreds of Christian missionaries who render selfless service to Indians. Christians believe that all human beings belong to a single human family, and hence, what India needs today is a "culture of encounter", engagement and closeness (FT30) to transform humanity from within through the power of the Gospel.

(Ref.: *Spiritus - Revue d'expériences et de recherches missionnaires*, n° 249 Décembre 2022 Published in French : *Identités et universalismes*, pp. 455 - 469).