

The Integration of Indian Christians into India Leading up to the Partition of 1947

Zhizhou He

Morrissey School of Arts and Sciences, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, US
hezs@bc.edu

Abstract: As one of Great Britain's main oversea assets going into the 1900s and with its rich traditions and diversity, India and its road to independence have drawn much scholarly interest. Studies of pre-independence modern India have always centered around the development of Indian nationalism that became the backbone of the Quit India movement, eventually leading to the establishment of a new nation and exit of its colonizer. Almost inseparable from India's independence is the Partition of 1947 that witnessed the formation of two sovereigns which, in existing works and research, features the culmination of religious conflicts between the two largest religious groups in the peninsula. This hyper-focus on the main players has led to gaps in comprehending the roles of other minority groups that shared the stage alongside Hindus and Muslims. While these groups did not and could not become as politically influential as the political triangle among Hindus, Muslims, and the British, their struggles and mere existence helped shape the political landscape within the region and paved the foundation to India's path in becoming a secular state. This paper explores the discourse of Indian Christians, the nation's third largest religious community, leading up to the fateful summer day in 1947. Using primary sources as evidence and secondary sources as guidance, it examines the majority vs. minority dichotomy within pre-independence India under a hypersensitive religious context and how Indian Christians maneuvered the political waters to achieve social integration. In doing so, it attempts to explore the prospect and methodology of achieving religious coexistence between a religious majority and religious minorities in the nation-building process.

Keywords: Indian Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Indian Nationalism, Partition, Majority vs. Minority, Religion, Integration

1. Introduction

The partition of India was directly a result of the inability of various religious and political factions to resolve the minority problem in India. Escalation of violence and development of communal politics aggravated the deep sense of distrust and communal division between Muslims and Hindus. Despite efforts from prominent Hindu nationalists such as Gandhi and Nehru to prevent a partition, the rejection of Muslim sovereignty by a Hindu-majority Indian Congress only confirmed the belief held by Jinnah and Muslim Leaguers that Muslims were fundamentally different from their Hindu counterpart and would remain inferior politically [1].

Unlike the Muslims, the Indian Christian community was not large enough to form its own state. If the community were to survive in the new India without becoming the new "Muslims", it had to

accommodate itself to the Hindu majority while safeguarding its fragile minority rights under the secular ideology India had pledged itself to. While the Muslim League became fixated with preserving its separate identity out of distrust for Hindus, Indian Christians eagerly shed their affiliation to British colonialism and adopted the new Indian Nationalist outlook. In practice, they posed themselves as the other “other” --- a middling force between opposing Hindu and Muslim communities that carried on with its internal functions while intensifying its political involvement and cooperation within the nationalist movement. In time, the Christian advocacy of self-rule and freedom increasingly identified with the sentiments of the Independence Movement. While previous works also discuss the integration of Indian Christians into Indian Society, their main focus is often set on Muslim - Hindu relation or they do not specify the strategy employed by Indian Christians in achieving such an objective, particularly the abandonment of separate electorates as a political leverage to avoid complete cultural absorption. A closer study of Indian Christians and their eventual success at social integration reveal the possibility of religious toleration and coexistence not only in India, but also in other former colonies with complex religious power dynamics.

With a mixture of various primary and secondary sources, this paper argues that the Indian Christian community secured its fundamental rights and integrated within the new India by severing its ties with British Colonialism, indigenizing the church, and giving up separate electorates during the constitution-drafting process.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper bases its analysis on primary sources (including the Constitutional Assembly Debates records and various Christian periodicals) available from 1940 to 1948 that capture attitudes of the Indian Christian community leading up to the partition, particularly those of Indian Christian politicians and institutions. It also incorporates some secondary works for reference. Due to the lack of academic research on this specific topic, it mainly makes use of primary documents.

3. Historiography of the Indian Christian Community

Muslims were not by any means the only minority group in India. Indian Christians, Sikhs, tribes and backward classes, and Anglo-Indians shared similar anxiety over the future of minority rights and representation in India. All parties were acutely aware of the intrinsic theological distinctions between Hinduism and their respective religious practices that gave rise to communal gaps and conflicts. Just before the partition, Indian Christians stood as the second-largest religious minority in the country at over 7 million members behind only the Muslim community [2]. First introduced to the Indian Subcontinent as Syrian Christians and later modified by Portuguese and British colonial forces, Christians in India formed their own separate religious community. Not only did this translate to the exclusion of Indian Christians from local ceremonies and temples, the Christian missionary practice that placed its focus on the uplift and conversion of low-caste Hindus became increasingly controversial during the nationalist movement, resulting in harassment, exclusionary state policies against low-caste converts, and in some cases, violence [3].

The Indian Christian community grew substantially at the onset of the independence movement, increasing from around one million in 1860 to nearly five million in 1930. The tremendous success of its missionary work became the target of Hindu Nationalist politicians. Arya Samaj, a movement founded to reconvert former Hindus and reverse the decline of the Hindu community, released an official statement that “Christian missionaries - we do not want them anymore”, whereas Mahatma Gandhi claimed in 1930 if “[he] had power and could legislate, [he] should certainly stop all proselytizing [4].” In addition to Hindu opposition to its most fundamental operation, the element of fear was instilled among the Indian Christian community when it witnessed escalated communal

violence between the Hindu majority and Muslims [5]. Therefore, it was with extreme caution that Indian Christians injected themselves into the state-building process.

The future of Indian Christians in India was dependent on the community's relation with the struggles of the independence movement. To enjoy fair representation and protection under the new constitution, Indian Christians faced the challenge of recreating their identity through indigenization. Headed primarily by a Hindu-majority Congress, the movement drew parallels between Indian patriotism and devotion to Hinduism. Minority communities worried that India would become a Hindu state and adopt a nativist framework. This fear was not unfounded --- Indian Christians were often omitted as Indian nationals due to the community's synonymous connection to British imperialism. At the early stages of the movement, most Christian missionary works in India were backed by British funding. From the perspective of some Indian Christian leaders and the majority of British church workers, the cause of peaceful missionary work in India was indivisible from British control. A far cry from its endorsement of the Indian National Congress and political participation of Indian Christians at the beginning of the twentieth century, British missionaries and Indian mission journals such as *The Harvest Field* continuously condemned plans to subvert British rule during the Quit India Movement. Speaking at the 1942 Episcopal Synod, Bishop Azariah, who had spent thirty-three years in the villages in Andhra Pradesh, reported that the depressed classes felt they owed everything to the British and were afraid of Congress gaining control [6].

As the Indian national consciousness began to grow, Indian Christians found themselves at a crossroad between religion and self-rule. This gave rise to a freedom movement within the Christian community that advocated for the separation of religion and state. In the meantime, a decrease in British intervention allowed for the development of nationwide identity building. Indian Christians, especially those of upper-castes, sought to disassociate themselves from stereotypes that accused Christianity as a British establishment and instead prioritized their Indian heritage [7].

4. Rejection of British Loyalism

Contributing to the gradual separation of Indian Christianity from its British predecessor was British missionaries' refusal to fully domesticate the Church according to Indian society. Indian Christians undoubtedly benefited from the backing of the evangelical British government, receiving occasional, generous funding, patronage, and political representation that became the basis of missionary works. British ties, to an extent, also protected Christians from outright religious discrimination and violence. However, as communal conflicts became increasingly prevalent, British desire to maintain religious neutrality created disadvantages for Indian Christians. In an effort to deny accusations of religious preference and favors granted to the latter, the government practiced a "nervous disavowal" of Indian Christians signified by a reluctance to appoint Indian clergy as church and government officials despite ample qualification [8]. This posed a threat to the growth of Christianity in India by limiting the Indian Church to a mere subordination and product of British missions and, in its organizational make-up, never fully Indian.

The lack of Indian identity within the church also inhibited the efficacy of missionary work and conversion projects. As this paper discusses below, conversion was fundamental to the survival and expansion of Indian Christianity. Without the presence of Indian missionaries, followers of non-Christian religions became less incentivized to choose Christianity as their new belief. This inspired the founding of the National Missionary Society that dedicated itself to the continuation of church works with Indian clergymen, money, and methods. Although it never claimed any explicit political agenda, the missionary society became a driving force behind Christian Indianization and embodied the spirit of independence against colonialism and identified with the nationalist movement. Indian Christians, mainly high-caste elites and the youth population, gathered at the forefront of the fight for independence, making remarks that Great Britain could leave if it was unsupportive of Indian self-

rule. These voices, along with the shift of Indian Christianity to become more Indian in its ideology and operation became the main narrative and representation of the Indian Christian community amidst the nationalist movement.

P. Chenchiah, a first-generation convert to Christianity, wrote “we want first of all an Indian nation... to develop an Indian culture and religious background that will weld the communities into a living whole [9].” Many Christians in India adopted the sentiment reflected in this statement as they began to situate themselves within the new coordinates of Indian citizenship. They began to consciously think of themselves as “Indian Christians” rather than “Christian Indians” and abandoned loyalism to the British for active Indian citizenry. In doing so, Indian Christians deviated from the reluctance shown by the Muslim League to recognize common grounds between religious communities and made a case for their participation and importance in post-independent India. Rev. Jerome D’Souza, one of eight Indian Christian representatives at the Constituent Assembly, urged his colleagues to regard Christians as Indians first and completely separate from British traditions [10]. Similarly, H.C Mookherjee attributed the Indian Christian community to be, fundamentally, an Indian community, and cited key Indian Christian contributors to the nationalist movement [11].

5. Indianization of the Church

As was the main objective of all religious communities, the guarantee of minority rights must be a prerequisite of Indian citizenship. When Nehru spoke of “social, economic and political; equality of status, of opportunity” and freedom before the law, the catch was that these fundamental rights would be available to “all the people of India [12].” The future safeguard of Indian Christian rights, then, was directly associated with the level of assimilation of Indian Christians Indians and their contribution to Indian independence. Upon embracing their Indian identity, however, Indian Christians remained cautious against the absorption of minority culture into the larger Hindu majority. Although the independence movement constituted a Hindu majority, Indian Christians rejected the branding of the movement or the new India as being Hindu-dominant, or that Indian nationalism should override minorities in favor of the Hindu majority. Cooperation of the community did not identify with any political party or religious group but ideals congruent and intrinsic to Christianity that aimed to progress the Indian state, receiving positive responses from progressive Hindu leaders. During the course of partition, for example, Indian Christian periodicals repeatedly rejected the escalation of communal division. This view, though innate to Christian ideals of unity and compromise, echoed in the comments of Hindu politicians who likewise did not wish to see a division of the new nation, and boosted the weight of Christian opinions within the Indian political scene.

Outside of high politics, Indian Christian organizations took various measures to make Christianity more indigenous and integral to Indian culture. With the greatest concentration of Indian Christian presence, regional Christian conferences in South India advocated for greater efforts to make the church “become truly Indian in its practices” [13]. This included the removal of pews and benches and the addition of silent meditation to accommodate outsiders and converts unfamiliar with traditional Christian customs. In its daily functions, the church also sought to educate its members on Indian history through the initiation of Indian history and literature courses. The Indian YMCA, another British Christian establishment, was sceptical of Indian self-rule and spoke out for India’s involvement in the British Commonwealth of Nations [14]. As the prospect of an independent India became inevitable, its leading periodical called for the transition of the Church to become more Indian and national, and encourage greater participation of its youth members in the new Indian society. Such reforms could be seen as propagandas designed to assuage social differences between Indian Christians and non-Christian Indians, nevertheless, they displayed a unified Indian Christian voice that was outspoken about becoming more Indian in daily practices. As these divisions of the Indian Christian church were more in touch with its members than high politics and its participants, it was

essential for them to prepare Indian Christians, on a popular level, for their gradual embrace of a newly defined nationality so that they may benefit from its laws while avoiding communal conflicts.

The Indianization of Christian practices was conducted in a manner that did not transgress religious boundaries. In 1943, it was noted in an edition of *Young Men of India* that non-Christian members within YMCA had significantly outnumbered Christians [15]. Although it provided courses and discussions that facilitated the exchanges of Christian and non-Christian religious ideals and teachings, the Indian Christian Church did not formally recognize non-Christians involved in its functions as Christians. Similarly, communal uplift projects and service for Indian troops during WWII were based upon the assurance of religious neutrality and Indian citizenship, exemplifying the idea of integration without cultural absorption [16].

6. Support for Joint Electorates

The integration of Indian Christians into Indian society begged for a solution to the question of minority representation, which manifested itself in the form of separate electorates for minority groups granted by the British government. Indian Christian leaders learned from the failures of Hindu-Muslim negotiation and orchestrated their campaign for unity under tremendous efforts to compromise on non-essential conditions. Indian Christian politicians opted for the abandonment of this system based on the Christian religion's ideological tendency for social unity, and in practice, the system's restrictive effects on regional and national minority politics. This decision perfectly aligned with the majority attitude towards communal politics, allowing for reciprocity of amicability between the two communities and setting up the stage for Indian Christians to insert their will into the drafting process of the constitution.

Although it was designed to empower minority communities, in reality separate electorates limited minority performance during the voting process. Separate electorates essentially meant separate voting and election, and oftentimes it did have its intended effects in provinces where a national minority made up a significant portion of the local population. For Indian Christians, this voting system was advantageous especially in Madras and Travancore where the community had its largest concentration of population [4]. In other regions where the community made up a minor portion of the overall voting populace, the limited number of positions prevented them from meaningful participation in the policy-making process. The disadvantage of separate electorates was further amplified on a national scale. Even when Indian Christians were able to secure most of their reserved seats, there were simply not enough seats for elected Christian delegates to influence a majority voting process. Separate electorates guaranteed minority representation, though it functioned on the grounds that the minority would maintain its minority status and that Indian politics would continue to operate based on religious division.

The promise of religion-based communal representation presented a contradiction between communal interests and the unity of India. It became a prevalent belief that one religious community could not fairly or accurately act on behalf of another community's best interest and that there was little overlap between their political objectives. Voters of one religion, then, were unlikely to support candidates of other religious backgrounds. Leading up to Indian independence, the Indian Church was divided into a Protestant faction and a Roman-Catholic faction. This meant that continuous implementation of separate electorates could weaken the Christian community itself. Indian Christian politicians in the Constituent Assembly understood that their community could only have a say in their future and remove the hindrance of communal representation if it embraced joint electorates. In doing so, they would be able to gather votes from outside the Christian community from sympathizers of minority causes and Christian ideologies.

When the report from the Minority Commission offered Indian Christians reservation of seats in Madras and Bombay, Mookherjee objected to such a measure and argued for Christian participation

in joint electorates. For nationalist minority leaders such as Mookherjee, reservation of seats was “forcing candidates on unwilling electorates.... We do not want to thrust ourselves on unwilling electorates [17]. The majority community will naturally think that we are encroaching upon their rights.” It was unappealing not only to minorities in its limitation of political power but also to the majority as it would obstruct the democratic process through special accommodations. Only through joint electorates could Indian Christians and other communities find common grounds as Indians, a scenario previously considered unrealistic due to communal divisions. During the assembly meeting on Jan 25th, 1947, Mookherjee observed, “the cause of the poor Christian Indian was no better than the cause of the equally poor Hindu Indian and the equally poor Mussalman Indian. [10]” Echoing Mookherjee’s sentiments were writings from the Guardian criticizing communal representation and pledging Indian Christians to “the abandonment of this undesirable system. [18]” The creation of shared grievances would elevate Christian causes to become national and pull non-Christian voters closer to the Christian community.

Perhaps the most pivotal reason behind the community’s rejection of separate electorates was the hope that by refusing special treatments, Indian Christians would be able to present themselves as trustworthy and gain support from the majority for obtaining protection of their fundamental religious rights. The partition of India into two states was largely motivated by the inability between Muslims and the Hindu majority to trust each other to fairly represent the interests and rights of both majority and minority groups. Separate electorates served as a harbinger of religious communal politics in which all religious communities were to safeguard their rights not with, but against others. As mentioned earlier, due to their small population size, it was infeasible for Indian Christians to quit India and form their own religious state as the Muslims did. Therefore, their only option was to trust the majority to fairly represent their interests within non-communal settings. Indian Christian representatives and publications extensively demonstrated their resolution in fostering a trusting atmosphere. When he was questioned by reporters on the fairness of the majority to protect minorities rights, Mookherjee responded, "Well, of course I think [the majority community is going to be fair]; but I want you to watch for yourself and draw your own conclusions. [17]” In the aftermath of the partition with mass immigration as the backdrop, a piece in the National Christian Council Review encouraged Christians to stay within their current dominion and trust both nations would protect minorities and their rights [19]. In doing so, Indian Christians not only initiated a cycle of trust with goodwill, but they also put the community forward as a test for the new secular Indian State to guarantee minority rights. In taking a staunch position over the issue of communal representation and the partition, as the next section furthers, Indian Christian representatives were able to focus on essential Christian rights and secure favorable terms in drafting the constitution..

7. Rejection of British Loyalism

Muslims were not by any means the only minority group in India. Indian Christians, Sikhs, tribes and backward classes, and Anglo-Indians shared similar anxiety over the future of minority rights and representation in India. All parties were acutely aware of the intrinsic theological distinctions between Hinduism and their respective religious practices that gave rise to communal gaps and conflicts. Just before the partition, Indian Christians stood as the second-largest religious minority in the country at over 7 million members behind only the Muslim community [2]. First introduced to the Indian Subcontinent as Syrian Christians and later modified by Portuguese and British colonial forces, Christians in India formed their own separate religious community. Not only did this translate to the exclusion of Indian Christians from local ceremonies and temples, the Christian missionary practice that placed its focus on the uplift and conversion of low-caste Hindus became increasingly controversial during the nationalist movement, resulting in harassment, exclusionary state policies against low-caste converts, and in some cases, violence [3].

8. Safeguarding the Right to Propagate and Convert

The willingness on the part of Indian Christians to abolish communal reservation hinged on the protection of fundamental rights. They substantiated this position with the relinquishment of separate representation and used it as political leverage to secure the most fundamental aspect of the Christian religion --- the right to propagate and convert. Unlike Hinduism, Christianity at its core was a religion whose development and growth depended on the success of its propagation and conversion of non-Christian populations. Contention over the right to propagate and convert was decisive to the future of Indian Christianity. Christianity was not native to India, and throughout its existence in the country, the Christian notion of equality had come into direct conflict with the caste system deeply rooted within Indian society. Historically, Indians of lower castes had suffered from caste-based discrimination. Rejection of castes within the Christian religion made conversion especially appealing to members of the untouchable class who yearned for social and economic equality. Although the Indian Church did not support the caste system, many converts retained their former caste identity that became the basis for discrimination. By 1914, over a million Dalits had converted to the Christian faith [20]. The conversion of low-caste Hindus boosted the strength of the Indian Christian community, though it led to increasing frustration among Hindu nationalists during the independence movement at a time when its success rested on numerical strength.

Christian writings attributed sensitivity surrounding Christian missions to the system of separate representation, where mass conversion was seen as a militant means for Indian Christians to gain political power. The topic of conversion became the main source of hostility towards Indian Christians and intense debates at the Constituent Assembly. Algu Rai Shastri, a member of Arya Samaj and supporter of anti-conversion laws, evoked mass conversion as an atrocity against Hinduism and the Indian State, analogizing familial religious heritage to “trees go with the land” with the implication that India was to remain a Hindu state. He attacked Christianity for exploiting low-caste Hindus and dividing them from India’s natural religion [21]. Many Hindu representatives shared Shastri’s views and, during the debate over religious freedom, proposed to remove freedom of propagation from Article Nineteen of the draft constitution. They emphasized the prohibition of forced conversion and Purshottam Das Tandon, another Hindu politician, sought to proscribe the conversion of minors below the age of eighteen [21].

Indian Christian writings frequently cited the right to propagate and convert as the only demand of the community [22]. These rights were unquestionably essential to the Christian religion, yet their fight for the protection of religious freedom under the new constitution becomes more significant when it is appraised from a comprehensive perspective of Indian minorities. Despite the branding of the new India as a secular state, the exit of the nation’s largest minority rekindled fear within minority communities that India could become a Hindu state. When placed under such context, the outcome of the conversion problem could be indicative of the future of religious minorities in India. Indian Christian representatives and their sympathizers showed clear awareness of this fragile situation and posed the right to propagate under freedom of speech included in the constitution.

Propagation itself did not guarantee conversion, rather it was a form of religious expression fundamental to Christianity. By no means did Indian Christians support or condone forced conversions, and to ease a tightening Hindu attitude towards militant conversion, Indian Christians pledged not to abuse religious freedom for political ends. Likewise, forbidding the conversion of minors jeopardized the growth of the Christian faith. Frank Anthony, an Anglo-Indian representative, expressed concerns over a minor’s inability to convert [21]. In the case of their parents being Christian converts, insistence that minors should be forced to accept Hinduism as their hereditary religion would split the family apart.

Propagation and conversion were not uniquely Christian enterprises, for Muslims and Hindus also sought to convert outsiders, and in the case of the latter, it was to reconvert former Hindus back to their old religion. On this issue, Indian Christians garnered support from a majority of Hindu politicians including B.S Moonji, Vice-President of Mahasabha who, in his correspondence with the National Christian Council, supported the right for all religious groups to propagate and convert [23]. After intensive debates, Indian Christian representatives were successful in their pursuit for religious freedom. On May 1st, 1947, the Constituent Assembly moved “freedom to propagate” to be included as a fundamental right for all religious sectors in the draft constitution and dropped clauses forbidding the conversion of minors. This was seen as a political victory for religious minorities and showed a glimpse of harmonious coexistence with the Hindu majority.

9. Conclusion

The Christian community in India bore the stereotype of being the remnant of Western colonialism as the community received occasional, preferential treatment from the British government. As the prospect of an independent India loomed over the horizon, it was confronted with the challenge of resituating itself within Indian society. The partition of India took place as a result of mutual distrust between a religious majority and minority and their shared inability to envision a future of toleration and peaceful coexistence. Whereas the Muslim League had a large numerical foundation to form a sovereign state, Indian Christians had no choice but to integrate their ideologies with Indian culture and shift their loyalty from the British to support Indian independence.

At the onset of Indian independence Indian Christians, politicians, educators, and youths, initiated their own movement within the church that identified with Indian nationalism. Indian Christian politicians such as H.C. Mookherjee inserted themselves onto the central stage of the construction of a free India, while the Indian Church severed its close ties with its British counterpart through increasing self-reliance and the indigenization of its practices. Its continuous and growing support of the independence movement, pervasive economic uplift projects, and denunciation of communal division, including the partition, secured the Indian Christian community a respected place within the political scenes of the new India.

From a broader perspective, the integration of Indian Christians into post-partition India presents a potential solution to religious conflicts following the creation of a political vacuum after Britain’s exit. During the aftermath of the partition, Indian Christians carefully maneuvered the political waters and aimed to gain trust from the Hindu majority. They rejected separate representation on the basis of its undesirable effects on Christian and Indian politics. By forgoing this special treatment, they were able to mitigate Hindu anxiety and win majority support in securing the most fundamental tenet of the Christian religion --- the right to propagate and convert. As one the nation’s leading minorities after the formation of Pakistan, Indian Christians presented themselves not only as allies of the Hindu majority, but also as a test for the new-found Indian secularism in its treatment of all minorities. They avoided a similar fate as the Muslim community and attained, at least temporarily, a peaceful resolution within the religious majority-minority dichotomy. Further research is necessary for determining the efficacy of this attained outcome.

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