

# Untouchability and Catholicism: The Case of the Paraiyars in South India

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The question of untouchability lies at the heart of the history of Christian missions in India and missionaries have constantly been preoccupied with the lowest sections of Indian society. The missionaries either wished to avoid being associated too closely with the Untouchables or, conversely, concentrated their main efforts on converting of them. These strategies have had important consequences on the structure of the Indian Church, and account for a basic distinction between north and south. In the north, where conversions have been more recent, mostly from the colonial era, Catholics are mainly of low caste origin, either tribal or Untouchable. In the south, by contrast, conversions started long before the British Raj and have cut across all castes, including a small number of Brahmins. As a consequence, the church in the south is divided into castes and thus reproduces the structure of Indian society. One could argue that the experience of the South Indian church thereby contradicts the egalitarian premises of Christianity. This is not, however, a unique case and during the course of its history the Church has always been able to adapt itself to various social circumstances. Furthermore, it would be rather ethnocentric or even anachronistic to read the history of the Indian Church according to the values of the present time.

Besides, in many respects the development of the Indian Church has been remarkable. Although it has never been too closely associated with the colonial power as such, in the past Christianity was regarded as a foreign religion: in the 16th century, for example, the missionaries asked the prospective convert whether he wished to enter "the *farangi kulam*" (Bayly 1989, p. 388). Christianity soon became perfectly integrated within Indian society, in such a way that one might argue that today it is one of the native religions. From the author's own experience, it is clear that the Hindu majority in Kerala or in Tamil Nadu does not consider Christianity a foreign religion and it can be argued that Christianity has had an impact on Hinduism. This is particularly clear in the case of social reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahma Samaj, and of

course, Gandhi with his emphasis on love. But more pragmatically, the Hindu people neither hesitate to participate in Catholic religious activities (mass, etc.) nor to visit Catholic shrines. There is a whole tradition of Catholic myths, miracles, and saints which have developed in India and have become part of the country's religious landscape. Finally, the Catholic system of education has had a great impact on Indian society.

The Catholic population of India has never developed any sentiment of foreignness. They have never been associated with any foreign power as such, and have always considered themselves Indian. Nothing in their dress or cultural habits distinguishes them from the Hindu majority. There are very few organizations which are specifically Christian and politically the Catholics tended to support the Congress party, which until recently held the parliamentary majority.

In many respects, the Christians cannot even be said to constitute a community. High caste Christians, for instance, have done little to defend the interests of the Untouchable Catholics. In Kerala, the Syrian Christians are much closer to the Nayars or other high castes than to the Catholic fishermen. In other words, the Catholics of India have not developed a sense of separate identity. Unlike the Sikhs, there is no territory where they are a numerical majority and, of course, they do not have a separate language. Therefore, they are inseparable from the local population and have been strongly influenced by local religious and social practices. Myths linking the origin of Christianity to India usually emphasize this native anchorage of the Christians.

A final point deserves to be stressed about the Catholic population of India. Their integration within the Indian population has been accompanied by a strong indigenization of the clergy. European missionaries are now very marginal within the Church and all leading positions in the hierarchy or in the different orders have for long been held by natives. As such, the Indian Church increasingly reflects the vitality of India's religious life. There has been a growing process of acculturation and a reinforcement of the na-

tive character of the church. Given this vitality, Indian Catholics will probably play an increasing role in the Church of the 21st century.

### Missionaries and Untouchability

Early missionaries were keenly conscious of the danger of being too closely associated with the lowest sections of the Indian population. The alternatives were simple: either concentrate on the low castes and thereby give up the idea of converting the whole of the society by becoming a low caste religion or try to convert the whole of the society. Francis-Xavier arrived in Goa in 1542 and, by converting 15,000 Mukkuvar and Paravar fishermen of the Southern coasts, willy-nilly opted for the first solution. At the time, the missionaries cared little about Hinduism and their converts had to give up all remnants of Hindu worship, such as the use of sandalwood paste or the casting of horoscopes. However, the Jesuits missionaries soon understood that this attitude would not lead to a massive conversion of Indian society and they changed their strategy. This was particularly true in the Nayak kingdom of the Tamil country where similar contempt towards the Hindu tradition was unthinkable. There, the missionaries were left to their own devices, without politico-military assistance and had to resort to different means of persuasion. Their most remarkable figure was undoubtedly the Tuscan aristocrat, Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656), who reached Goa in 1602 and Madurai in 1606. De Nobili introduced new concepts into Catholic missionary work in India. His three main innovations were:

- (1) Like Matteo Ricci in China, he considered that the top layers of the society had to be converted first and then the bottom would follow automatically.
- (2) The beliefs, practices and religious tradition of the Hindus had to be taken seriously. De Nobili studied the Vedas in order to be able to debate with the pundits and he dressed himself as a sannyasi, concentrating his efforts on the upper section of the society. He adopted a vegetarian diet and avoided any contact with lower caste people.
- (3) Finally, he pointed out that many "Hindu" practices were secular and did not need to be rejected by the newly converted; therefore the sacred thread, the ashes on the forehead, etc. were in no way incompatible with Christianity.

This is not the place to review De Nobili's life and merits. However, we must recall that his methods were very soon contested within the Church itself. The debate between De Nobili and the Portuguese Jesuit Gonçalo Fernandes clearly illustrates what was at stake (Zupanov 1993). De Nobili's opponents reproached him for behaving as a Gentile and thereby cutting the church in two. They also pointed out that the religion and customs of the Brahmans belonged to an idolatrous system. The debate had some clear anthropological undertones and reminds us of the emic/etic or universal/relativist questions in anthropology.

De Nobili's success was limited. As time went on, his methods were increasingly accepted, probably because there was no alternative. However, though he did not really succeed in converting a significant proportion of Brahmans, not to speak of the whole society, his methods were instrumental in converting a fair proportion of "high and middle caste" people, for instance, the Vellalars and Udayars.

This was quite exceptional in the history of Indian missions. Beyond Kerala and Goa, significant numbers of high and middle caste people did not convert to Christianity. Christianity in most of India became the religion of tribals and low caste people, the majority of conversions taking place at a much later time. It is interesting to note that *pace* Bugge (1993), the Protestant missionaries were at first equally reluctant to concentrate on the low castes. They also realized that this would mean the end of their hope for a Christian India. In some places they went as far as refusing to convert Untouchables and generally speaking they wished to concentrate on individuals rather than on caste groups. The result was that they hardly converted anyone at all; from 1855 to 1872, the Presbyterian mission of Punjab converted 43 adults (Stock & Stock, p. 101). This would change radically in the years to come.

In the 1860s and 1870s Protestant missionaries become active in the aid programs which inevitably followed the famines. Then began what can be considered the swan song of the Christian missions in India, the so-called "mass-movement": suddenly, whole caste groups were interested in becoming Christian. The churches' attitude changed and they started converting people *en masse*; one-third of the Chuhra caste of Gujarat was converted to Christianity. In South India, hundreds of thousands of Nadars, Pulayars and Paraiyars were converted by the Church Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society. Even the Catholic missions witnessed a similar increase, mostly through the conversion of Untouchable castes. The diocese of Pondicherry, for instance, grew from 134,000 in 1873 to 205,000 in 1886 (Bugge 1993: 143, 145). In all the cases, Untouchables accounted for the immense majority of the new conversions. This meant that Christianity increasingly became associated with the lowest rungs of Indian society.

Another problem was that it soon appeared that conversion did not radically improve the social and economic position of the Untouchables. There is limited data regarding the Protestants but they tend to show that the Christians were not significantly better off than those of the same caste who chose to remain Hindu (Luke and Carman 1961). After independence, neither Catholics nor Protestants were included in the Scheduled Castes. They were therefore denied the advantages provided by the Government to the Untouchables; most importantly, they have not had access to government jobs reserved for Untouchables.

They have kept their traditional low status and are regarded just like any other Untouchable. In the South Indian Catholic Church, the problem has been further reinforced by the absence of anything like a Catholic community. People

of Untouchable origin have been marginalized within the Church itself. They hold no responsibility, very few of them ever become priests and they have not gained any material benefit. This is largely the situation that the author encountered in Valghira Manickam, a village in Southern Tamil Nadu.

### The Paraiyars of Valghira Manickam

The village of Valghira Manickam is of rather recent origin, inhabited mainly by Untouchables. Three communities live side by side. The majority of them are Catholic Paraiyars, about one-fourth are Hindu Paraiyars while the remaining one-fourth are Hindu Pallars. The Pallars are traditionally considered slightly superior to the Paraiyars which, in practice, amounts to very little. The following account will concentrate on the Paraiyars, in order to ascertain the level of integration of the Christian Paraiyars into the local Catholic church, and the relationship between Hindu and Catholic Paraiyars with a view to finding out what, if any, the differences are between these two sections which are socially very close.

It takes little time to realize how little the Paraiyars are integrated into the Catholic community. Valghira Manickam is a substation of Devakottai parish, the main church being in Ramnagar, two kilometers from the village. The parish priest resides in Ramnagar, very close to the village. Although low caste people constitute the majority of the Madurai diocese, they are under-represented in the clerical hierarchy and in the organization of the church. The villagers of Valghira Manickam even believe that it is either forbidden or at least impossible for a Paraiyar to become a priest. It has never occurred to them that they could have a role to play within the Church. Paraiyars, Vellalars and Udayars constitute the three main caste groups of the parish, each accounting for one-third of its population. But Vellalars and Udayars clearly dominate the parish and it would be hard to speak of a Catholic community. Friendship between a Paraiyar and an Udayar is impossible. The social distance between Catholic Paraiyars and Catholic Udayars is the same as among Hindu Paraiyars and Udayars. It is perhaps even greater because the Paraiyars vaguely know something about the Church as a community and realize they are being excluded from it. Therefore, they often express their bitterness about the Church, and will constantly complain that the Udayars receive all the Church benefits. Conversely, the Udayars do not see what they share in common with the Paraiyars. They consider the latter as very poor Christians, which is quite true. One cultivator told the author that death is the normal punishment for an Udayar who would marry a Paraiyar. It is clear that caste continues to be a significant factor shaping the local Church. When a new bishop was to be appointed in Madurai, Vellalars and Udayars organized demonstrations in Madurai to support their respective candidates. Paraiyars, on the other hand, have remained passive and dependent within the Church; they keep complaining that nothing is being done for them, that they have gained nothing by becoming Christians; in other words,

they expect social and material improvement from above. Although personalized dependency has declined, Untouchables have maintained an attitude of passivity, so typical of Untouchables in the past.

The parish priest is never to be seen in the houses of the Paraiyar villagers. The latter do not consider him a leader and view him as arrogant. They claim that he calls them by caste names — e.g. *parapayan*, a term of contempt — and that in addressing them he uses traditional derogatory expressions such as “*poda*” and “*vada*.” Consequently, the Paraiyars hardly ever go to the parish. It is a remarkable fact that the parish priest can by no means be considered a leader or a guide to the Untouchable communities. The Paraiyars furthermore point out that the Church organizations are not keen to employ them. Even when coolies are needed at the parish or at the nearby De Britto High Secondary School, they are not given priority. Very few Paraiyars have permanent jobs in those organizations whereas Udayars and Vellalars are found in great numbers.

The Paraiyars’ knowledge of Christian beliefs and principles is minimal. Jesus is certainly no matter of great devotion and is hardly ever referred to. They are sometimes labeled “nominal Christians” but one hesitates to do this as it implies that there are “good” and “bad” Christians, or that orthodoxy and fundamentalism are the only acceptable religious standpoints. Besides the Paraiyars consider themselves Christians and even though a good many of them marry without benefit of clergy, they do marry amongst themselves. Indian Catholics, including the Paraiyars, do not view themselves as alien, and it appears that by becoming Christian they have adopted a separate caste identity rather than a totally different religious faith. The Paraiyars have thus become endogamous by becoming Catholic but, otherwise, they have kept their traditional caste identity, and have remained very close to the Hindu Paraiyars. In Valghira Manickam, for instance, Hindu and Catholic Paraiyars emphasize this proximity; friendship and sexual affairs are common between members of the two communities. Children play together and houses are more or less mixed in the same streets. The Hindu Paraiyars are much closer to the Catholic Paraiyars than to the Hindu Pallars. It could therefore be said that, in this case, caste matters more than religion.

Both communities, which are socially quite undifferentiated, also share a lot of religious beliefs and practices. The Virgin of Velankanni, Arockyai Mary, is considered the main village deity. She protects the whole village from evil spirits and epidemics. Her shrine is popular among people who believe themselves possessed by evil spirits and who often stay there several weeks to be exorcised. The majority of them are Hindu (of all castes); Hindu and Christians share the same conception of the aetiology of afflictions and the corollary belief in evil spirits. Generally speaking, although Christianity and Hinduism are in theory very different and almost incompatible, the villagers constantly pointed out to the author that religious systems are human inventions, and that in the end, only God matters. Whenever they had to

comment about the diversity of Gods and saints, they would always reply; "God is one, it is men who give him different names." Catholics would say, for instance, that there are many statues and shrines to the Virgin Mary: in Valghira Manickam, Poondi and Velankanni; yet there is, of course, only one Virgin Mary. Similarly men call God "Jesus," "Shiva" or "Mohammed" but there is only one God. Their beliefs and practices are not always consistent with this claim but in the end what matters to them is that religion is not perceived as a factor of division. It is more a matter of social identity than of conflicting views.

### Conclusion

The Paraiyars of Valghira Manickam have gained little by becoming Catholic. If we compare them to the Hindu Paraiyars who live in the same village, they do not appear to have made significant socio-economic progress. On the contrary, evidence tends to show that they have fallen behind the Hindus. The latter seem more open to the outside world. Catholic Paraiyars, for instance, tend to marry within the village and a limited number of nearby villages whereas their Hindu counterparts look further afield. Although the practice has been forbidden by the Church, cross-cousin marriages are much more widespread among Christians than among Hindus. Again this shows that the Christians have remained more traditional than the Hindus. This can also be seen from the occupations followed by the villagers. Christians have largely remained in what could be called the traditional sector, i.e., agricultural labor, coolie work and brick-making. In all, 159 out of 211 working-age Christians are in this sector whereas very few Hindu men still work in this sector. Hindu men find jobs outside the village economy, and more Hindus have migrated out of the village. It is, of course, difficult to estimate family budgets but it is clear that the Christians are worse off than the Hindus and in any case there are more Christians living in mud huts (54% of Hindu houses are made of concrete as against 28% of Christians). Partly due to their exclusion from the Scheduled Castes, Catholics have not developed a common cause with militant scheduled caste organizations and have not developed a political consciousness. In short, Catholic Untouchables seem to be losing on all grounds; they have not been included in a religious community, they have not experienced material gain and they have been isolated from Scheduled Castes movements. The Paraiyars are aware of this and resent it. They often discussed the conversions of Pallars to Islam in the early 1980s in Meenakshipuram, not far from their village. But it was clear to them, however, that conversion was no solution to their social and economic problems.

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