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Postcolonial Anxiety and Anti-Conversion Sentiment in the *Report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee*

Chad M. Bauman

Introduction

Conversion to Christianity is one of the most politically charged issues in contemporary India and has recently been very much in the news.¹ For example, in 2006, on the fiftieth anniversary of B. R. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism² hundreds of *dalits* gathered to convert, some to Buddhism and others to Christianity, rejecting Hinduism, a religion they claim oppresses and demeans them. In attacks on Christians in Orissa at the end of 2007 (and associated reprisals), dozens of churches, homes, and businesses were destroyed, hundreds of people were injured, and thousands were displaced. In eastern Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, on which this paper focuses, conversion also stirs controversy. In the summer of 2006, the Madhya Pradesh state government tightened its regulations regarding conversion, requiring that both potential converts and those who would convert them should make their intentions clear to government officials well in advance. In Chhattisgarh, too, tensions over conversion to Christianity have occasionally led to isolated incidents of anti-Christian violence, most recently as an indirect effect of the December 2007 violence in nearby Orissa.

Some Hindus, particularly those with sympathy for *hindutva* politics, see in conversions to Christianity the sinister strategy of a "foreign hand"—either that of the pope or, as V.

K. Shashikumar (2004) suggested in a recent *Tehelka* article, of George W. Bush, putative leader of (non-Catholic) Christians worldwide. It is difficult to disentangle the many factors involved in contemporary anti-conversion sentiment, and given the fact that nationalistic ardor often accompanies and informs such sentiment, it is not easy for scholars, whether Indian or non-Indian, to engage in research on the topic without becoming personally embroiled in the controversies that surround them.³

It is therefore my intention to remove myself to some historical distance from contemporary events in order to investigate the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity (and resistance to it) from what I hope is the safe historical vantage point of the 1950s. The paper draws upon the Madhya Pradesh state government-sponsored *Report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee* (1956), known popularly as the *Niyogi Report*, after the name of its chairman, to argue that the ambivalence (and sometimes hostility) towards conversion to Christianity felt by many central Indian Hindus in this period was not merely the expression of inter-religious jealousy, but also, and perhaps more significantly, the manifestation of understandable postcolonial anxieties about the very survival and coherence of the Indian nation.

It is of course immediately necessary to admit that distinguishing religious from political concerns is not particularly easy in this context (or any other in the modern world). As Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan assert in *The Crisis of Secularism*:

Religion's role in the modern world has been vastly reconstituted, so much so that religious debates and conflicts are no longer primarily waged over matters of belief, the true god, salvation, or other substantive issues of faith, as they once were; it is instead religion as the basis of *identity* and identitarian cultural practices—with co-religionists constituting a community, nation, or “civilization”—that comes to be the ground of difference and hence conflict (2007: 3; emphasis in original).

The Niyogi Committee's work was commissioned by the Madhya Pradesh government and provoked by allegations that Christian missionaries were inducing lower-caste Hindus and tribal peoples to convert with promises of employment, education, or health and other social services. The resulting *Report*, based on two years of research and transcribing hundreds of extensive interviews with people from all over the state, suggested that large numbers of *dalits* and *ādivāsīs* were converting to Christianity, that the number of Hindus in the region was declining, and that the ultimate goal of Christian evangelistic work was secession—either in the form of a Christian-dominated state within the Indian Union or an independent Christian nation along the lines of Pakistan.

There had been a good number of mass movements to Christianity in India in the first half of the twentieth century, enough that the phenomenon could not be ignored. For example, several thousand Garas converted to Christianity in the 1920s and 1930s in Orissa and the eastern region of what is today Chhattisgarh (but which was at the time part of Madhya Pradesh) (Pickett, Warnshuis, Singh, and McGavran 1956). Though they had a more substantial effect elsewhere (such as the northeast), these movements were not, in central India, sufficient to produce a significant shift in the religious demographics of the region, a fact which is probably more obvious in retrospect than it was at the time.

Nevertheless, at the moment the trend seemed a rather alarming one to many central Indian Hindu nationalists. It is for this reason that I maintain that resistance to conversion to Christianity in this context emerged not out of concern for the spiritual state of converts so much as out of anxieties, real and perceived, about the survival of the fledgling Indian nation. These anxieties placed certain Hindus in a defensive posture, causing them to seek, as a bulwark against national disintegration, a primordial, unalterable, and unifying cultural essence. Given the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Indian nation, which prevented unity on ethnic or linguistic grounds, many identified “Hindu-ness” (*hindutva*) as that unifying essence, an idea and a term suggested by V. D.

Savarkar's influential tract, written in 1923, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (but which had less clearly articulated precursors). M. S. Golwalkar, influential leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, had also insisted in *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) that minorities pledge their allegiance to symbols of Hindu identity, which he viewed as part and parcel of the Indian national identity (Jaffrelot 2007: 97). For Golwalkar, privatized religion, as Europeans understood it, was only a part of religion, which in the fullest sense was that which regulated society and which therefore has an important role to play in the political realm. These ideas still maintained currency for many Hindu nationalists in India in the 1950s. *Hindutva*, as Savarkar understood it, did not coincide exactly with Hinduism, but Hinduism remained an important element of *hindutva*, particularly in the popular imagination (Jaffrelot 2007: 15). To those who embraced such a definition of Indian unity, converts to Christianity (or Islam) were by definition foreigners, to be treated with suspicion as potential traitors, and at the very least represented a threat to national unity. While resistance to conversion was expressed in the idiom of religion (that is, preserving Hinduism), therefore, it was provoked by political concerns. The fact that the two cannot be easily disentangled reflects, as Needham and Sunder Rajan argue, the peculiar nature of religion in the modern period as well as the postcolonial context of 1950s India.

The *Report* remains an influential document today. As discussed below, it is often invoked by contemporary Hindu nationalists as an indication of the methods and goals of Christian missionaries, even contemporary missionaries. The *Report* was in fact republished as recently as 1998 by Voice of India, publishing house of the (recently deceased) Sita Ram Goel, because, as he claimed on another's authority, "Christian missionaries had bought all available copies [of the original] and destroyed them" (1998: vii). Goel's introduction frames the *Report* as one of four documents which created a "rift in the lute" of missionary propaganda and exposed the (in his view) pernicious methods and goals of missionaries.⁴ The other documents were K. M. Panikkar's *Asia and*

Western Dominance (1953), Om Prakash Tyagi's "Freedom of Religion Bill" (proposed unsuccessfully in the Lok Sabha in 1978), and Arun Shourie's *Missionaries in India* (1994).

Goel's claims, and many of those recorded in the *Report*, are and were contested by many Christians and their supporters. It is therefore important to note that this article deals with perceptions of reality, not necessarily with reality itself. Nevertheless, perceptions of reality constitute their own kind of historical fact. Indeed, perceptions of reality may be a more important determinant of behavior than reality. It is for this reason that while this paper does not take every testimony recorded in the *Report* to be historically accurate—some in fact are quite outlandish—it does take them to be historically important and meaningful and therefore attempts to account for them with reference to the social and historical context in which they were given. The point of considering what probably amounts in some instances to misperception is not to perpetuate rumor and exaggeration, and the ill feelings associated with them, but rather to examine their origins and thereby, hopefully, to gain some better understanding not only of the *Report's* historical context, but of our own as well. The article begins with a Prologue, which locates the present discussion in a wider historical and theoretical context, and then provides a brief overview of missionary work in the region before moving on to a fuller discussion of the *Report* and its implications.

Historical Prologue

There is nothing particularly unique about the 1950s, nor even about the postcolonial period with regard to concerns about the unity of India and Indians. Even before independence (in 1947), nationalist leaders struggled against the forces of potential disintegration. Mohandas K. Gandhi is of course known best for his leadership in the independence movement. But Gandhi knew that *svarāj* (self-rule) could never be

achieved by a divided community. He therefore put a great deal of effort into securing the widest unity possible.

Indian Muslims represented one potential threat to unity, and Gandhi's failure to convince Muhammad Ali Jinnah⁵ and other Muslims that they would be valued citizens of an independent India led in the end to Partition. Working to ensure the unity of untouchable and other Hindus also preoccupied Gandhi, for he feared that British divide-and-rule politics might eventually separate the great mass of lower-caste Hindus from the rest of the Hindu community. Therefore, in 1932, when British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced the Communal Award, which provided separate electorates not only for Sikhs, Muslims, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and Indian Christians, but also for "the depressed classes," Gandhi protested by beginning a fast unto death from his jail cell in the Yeravda Prison. Within a few days Gandhi struck a compromise with Ambedkar, who had supported separate electorates, whereby the untouchables would vote with other Hindus but would receive a certain number of reserved seats in legislative assemblies (Coward 2003).

At the same time and for similar reasons, members of the Ārya Samāj and similar organizations were employing *śuddhi*, a purificatory or reconversion ceremony created with the approval of many orthodox Hindu Brahmins to help combat the evangelizing methods of Muslims and Christians and stem the tide of Hindu defections (Llewellyn 1993: 99–103). Gandhi was also concerned that Christian and Muslim evangelizing might draw large numbers of the untouchables away from the Hindu fold. For this reason he became, in the 1930s and 1940s, increasingly opposed to mission work, especially that aimed at converting Hindus (Harper 2000: 292–345). In 1937, for example, Gandhi called the evangelistic efforts of Vedanayagam Azariah, first Indian Bishop of the Anglican Church, "anti-national" (Frykenberg 2003: 7–8).

In the Constituent Assembly discussions (1946–50) Hindu lobbies pressed for a constitutional ban on conversion, fearing that Hinduism, portrayed as a non-proselytizing

religion, would be overtaken by Islam and Christianity. This fear of conversion, Gauri Viswanathan argues, “produced a strange marriage between Gandhi and the Hindu nationalists, who in all other instances denounced him for making concessions to Muslims but nonetheless heralded him as the voice of reason when he opposed Christian proselytism” (2007: 335). Despite their concerns, however, Article 25, Section I of the eventual Constitution gave everyone in India (whether citizens or non-citizens) the right “to profess, practise and propagate religion.”

Concerns about the integrity of the Indian nation that was coming into being therefore informed inter-communal relations even before the 1950s, and they continued to do so even long afterwards. Sometimes this concern was a factor in tensions between Hindus and other communities. For example, a key component of the anti-Sikh riots in 1984, argues Rajni Kothari (1985), was the belief, among Hindus, that Sikhs were “more like enemies than friends, that they were the cause of national disintegration” (cited in Tambiah 1997: 108). Some Sikhs had called for an independent “Khalistan,” and largely Christianized tribal communities in India’s northeast continue to call for their own independence today. Because of this and other factors, Ainslie T. Embree argues that India’s natural concern for territorial integrity has taken and continues to take on a “religious coloring” (1990: 47). Despite being grounded in events which took place in central India in the 1950s, therefore, the analysis which follows is also of more general relevance to discussions regarding twentieth and twenty-first century inter-communal tensions in India.

Mission Work in the Region

Given the topic of the *Report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee*, it is necessary at this juncture to say a few words about mission work in the region. As indicated above, the *Report* focused on the state of Madhya Pradesh, where in 1955, as

the Niyogi Committee was gathering its data, thirty-two Protestant missionary organizations were at work (National Christian Council of India 1955: 119–21). Nearly all of these organizations were of foreign origin, staffed at least in part by foreign missionaries and funded from abroad. Nevertheless, roughly half were by this time under Indian leadership. A few of the missions were sponsored by Indian churches that had recently been established by foreign missionaries, such as the Mennonite Church in India, which grew from the work of the American Mennonite Mission, or the United Church of Northern India, a conglomeration of Indian Protestant denominations, the most important regional partner of which was the American Evangelical Mission of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Still other missions, such as the Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association, were associated with denominations that had a much longer Indian history. The 1951 Census of India recorded 88,000 Protestants in the state, 62 percent of them in the eastern half which, in 2000, became the state of Chhattisgarh (National Christian Council of India 1955: 38). Roman Catholics were also prominent in Madhya Pradesh.

Of the Protestant missionary organizations active in Madhya Pradesh at the time of the *Report*, the largest in terms of converts and educational, medical, and other service-oriented institutions were the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had established a mission in Khandwa in 1905 (Harper 1936: 71), the United Church of Northern India, the Disciples of Christ United Christian Missionary Society, and the American Mennonite Mission (World Missionary Atlas 1925: 104ff; National Christian Council of India 1955: 119ff). The last three of these four were active in areas on which this paper focuses, the Chhattisgarh region of eastern Madhya Pradesh, which was roughly coterminous with the contemporary state of Chhattisgarh. For this reason I will say a brief word about each of them.

As indicated above, the most significant member of the United Church of Northern India in Chhattisgarh was the American Evangelical Mission of the Evangelical and Reformed Church (hereafter the Evangelical Mission). The Evangelical Mission was

established by six small German immigrant denominations in the United States, which would eventually join the (German) Evangelical Synod of North America (Bauman 2004: 65). The Evangelical Synod of North America merged with the Reformed Church in 1934 to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church (which later joined the United Church of Christ). In 1865 members of those six original denominations met in New Jersey and decided to send Reverend Oskar Lohr as a missionary to India. Lohr had in fact previously been a missionary in Chhota Nagpur with the Gossner Lutheran Mission, but had to abandon his post during the Indian Mutiny (or First War of Independence). Arriving in India in 1868, Lohr and his family decided to establish a mission station in Raipur, which is now the capitol of Chhattisgarh, and to work among the low-caste Camars, most of whom were by this time followers of a deceased nineteenth-century reforming Hindu named Guru Ghāsīdās and were calling themselves Satnamis. The Evangelical Mission grew slowly until the end of the nineteenth century, though Lohr and the missionaries who joined him continued to open new stations in the region and founded a number of schools, orphanages, hospitals, and a printing press (Bauman 2004: 65–70).

In 1885 the Disciples of Christ, who had previously been working in western Madhya Pradesh, opened a mission station in Bilaspur (now the second largest city in Chhattisgarh). Though the mission did not explicitly target the Satnamis, most of its earliest converts came from that community. And as on the Evangelical Mission field, the Disciples of Christ gained few converts until the famines, though they too continued to extend their stations into rural areas (Bauman 2004: 73–75).

A series of devastating famines in 1896–97 and 1898–99 provoked large numbers of conversions on both the Evangelical and the Disciples of Christ mission fields, in part because it produced in some Hindus a crisis of faith and in part because the missions administered government work projects which supplied the destitute with jobs and food. During the first famine, Evangelical missionaries were feeding over 9,000 famine victims

a day with government funds (Seybold 1971: 41, 42). Hindus became Christian in droves, though large numbers of them eventually reverted to Hinduism. Of the 2,000 people baptized by Evangelical missionaries during the famines (1897–1900), for example, around 600 later reverted to Hinduism (Pickett, Warnshuis, Singh, and McGavran 1956: 87). The missions established orphanages which were immediately filled to capacity. Though both the Evangelical and the Disciples of Christ missions experienced decline in the first decade of the twentieth century (due largely to post-famine reconversions), they continued to grow steadily thereafter until the period of the *Report*. By 1945 there were, between the two missions, roughly 10,000 Christian adults (Bauman 2004: 78).

In the period leading up to India's political independence, the desire for ecclesiastical autonomy among Indian Christians on the Evangelical and the Disciples of Christ mission stations grew considerably. Accordingly, in 1925, the Evangelical Mission organized the India Mission District, merging leadership of the mission and Indian church. In 1938 leaders of the India Mission District decided to join the United Church of North India, which the United Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Churches of Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand and Wales, the Church of Scotland, the London Missionary Society, the Congregational Churches of America, and the Moravian Church had already joined (Seybold 1971: 102). In 1947 Indians were given full responsibility for evangelical work in the United Church of North India, and by 1954, when the Niyogi Committee began its work, all authority had been transferred to Indian hands, though several foreign missionaries were still working under the direction of Indian leaders. The Disciples of Christ devolution of authority followed a similar pattern, though the Disciples did not join the United Church of North India until after it had been merged, in 1970, with the Church of North India (Seybold 1971: 102–9).

The American Mennonite Mission was opened in Dhamtari, south of Raipur, in 1899 and was therefore shaped by the famines right from its inception. Though the Mennonites had intended only to open an orphanage and a hospital, famine exigencies demanded a far

more extensive and hasty development of the mission. Almost immediately, the mission began administering British government funds to employ 9,000 workers and feed 14,000 hungry victims of famine (Lapp 1972: 44–46). The mission did establish orphanages for famine victims but received far more orphans than it had expected. By 1900 there were 389 orphans under Mennonite care (Lapp 1972: 101–2). Despite the swift growth of mission institutions, however—the mission opened a widows’ home, established schools, built several leprosaria, and bought a village in the first decades of the twentieth century—the mission received far fewer converts than the Evangelical or the Disciples in Christ mission fields. As many as 85 percent of those who did become Christian were either orphans or students in the mission-run schools (Lapp 1972: 119). Moreover, the composition of the Mennonite community was far more diverse than that of either the Evangelical or the Disciples of Christ communities. For example, the 1936 Annual Report of the American Mennonite Mission indicates that of the converts on the mission field, 35 percent were Telis, 20 percent were Gonds, 12 percent were Camars, 9 percent were Mahars, and the rest belonged to other castes (Lapp 1972: 127). Nevertheless, as on the Evangelical and the Disciples missions, the vast majority of converts came from the lower castes or, in the case of the Gonds, from *ādivāsī* groups. By 1955 there were 1,479 Christians in 11 congregations in Indian Mennonite congregations in the region (Lapp 1972: 166).

The Mennonites began, earlier than most missions, to attempt a transfer of authority to Indian hands. A “home mission” was established in 1917. The home mission was envisioned as an evangelical agency to be funded and directed by Indian Christians themselves. The plan failed twice, however, before finally abandoned in 1937 (Lapp 1972: 163). At the same time, a committee had been formed to investigate full devolution of the mission. In 1940 properties were transferred to the India Mennonite Conference, and an ultimately unsuccessful power-sharing constitution was tested in the 1940s. Its failure provoked a period of some tension between Indian and American Mennonites

(Lapp 1972: 183–89), but finally, in 1952, the American Mennonite Mission ceased to exist, though American Mennonites continued for some years to support Indian Mennonites with funds and missionaries (Lapp 1972: 188).

Until the establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in India in 1886, Nagpur (currently in Madhya Pradesh) was a suffragan of Madras, which was an archiepiscopal see. At the same time, the Calcutta diocese was expanding westward into the Chhota Nagpur plain, which lies just east of Chhattisgarh (Capuchin Mission Unit 1923: 153). (The Chhota Nagpur mission field will be discussed in more detail below.) Until the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, the region of Chhattisgarh was on the margins of Roman Catholic evangelical work in India. A year after the establishment of a Catholic hierarchy, though, Nagpur became a diocese (in 1953 it became an archdiocese). Later, dioceses were established in Raigarh-Ambikapur (1951), Jabalpur (1954), and Amravati (or “Amraoti,” today in Maharashtra, 1955). As with the Protestant missions, the Roman Catholic church grew slowly until the very end of the nineteenth century, when the rate of conversions increased (Capuchin Mission Unit 1923: 159). The famines were surely a factor in that increase, as was the quality of Catholic education and the advocacy of Catholics on behalf of oppressed *ādivāsī* peasants in the far northeast of Chhattisgarh and eastwards into the Chhota Nagpur plain (in and around today’s states of Jharkhand, Bihar, and Orissa). In the year the *Report* was published, the Madhya Pradesh dioceses collectively claimed to serve over 100,000 Catholics (Pothacamury 1957: 62–63). Today about one out of 11 Catholics in India reside in the Chhota Nagpur region (Shourie 2007: 19).

The Report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee

Seven years after India’s independence, the government of Madhya Pradesh noticed a dramatic increase in complaints about the activities of Christian missionaries, particularly

in its northeastern regions, in and around the formerly princely states that had been merged into Madhya Pradesh in January 1948 (*Report I.6*).⁶ These complaints generally involved the claim, in one form or another, that missionaries in the region were employing “force, fraud, or...illicit means” (*Report I.163*) to win converts from among the “illiterate aboriginals and other backward people” (167). When the state government inquired, Christians denied the claims and asserted that in fact the Christian community was being persecuted and harassed by the Hindu majority. Dismayed (and probably seeking political gain vis-à-vis the more secular Congressites who controlled the Madhya Pradesh government at the time), the Jana Sangh in Madhya Pradesh launched an “Anti-Foreign Missionary Week” in protest. The protest was called off when the government announced its planned enquiry (Jaffrelot 1996: 164).

Ostensibly to investigate all of these claims, the government of Madhya Pradesh resolved, on April 14, 1954, to constitute a committee charged with conducting a thorough inquiry (Fox 2006; Kim 2003: 60–61). The committee, and the report which it produced two years later (1956), came to be known by the name of its Chairman, Bhawani Shankar Niyogi, a retired chief justice of the High Court at Nagpur. But the official publication name, *Report of the Christian Missionaries Activity Enquiry Committee*, perhaps indicates the focus of the investigation.

Over the next two years, the Committee made two extensive tours of the state, contacting over 11,000 people in 77 locations, interviewing several hundred of them on the record (although in public fora), and accepting written testimonies from 375 others (*Report I.2*). The Committee also drafted and widely distributed a detailed questionnaire, 385 copies of which were returned. Of these, 55 were from Christians and 330 from non-Christians. These were all gathered together in the Committee’s *Report*, which ran to nearly 1,000 pages.

A paragraph in the report itself summarizes the perceptions that the Committee encountered during its travels:

There was no disparagement of Christianity or of Jesus Christ, and no objection to the preaching of Christianity and even to conversions to Christianity. The objection was to the illegitimate methods alleged to be adopted by the Missionaries for this purpose, such as offering allurements of free education and other facilities to children attending their schools, adding some Christian names to their original Indian names, marriages with Christian girls, money-lending, distributing Christian literature in hospitals and offering prayers in the wards of in-door patients. Reference was also made to the practice of the Roman Catholic priests or preachers visiting new-born babies to give “ashish” (blessings) in the name of Jesus, taking sides in litigation or domestic quarrels, kidnapping of minor children and abduction⁷ of women and recruitment of labour for plantations in Assam or Andaman as a means of propagating the Christian faith among the ignorant and illiterate people....The concentration of Missionary enterprise on the hill tribes in remote and inaccessible parts of the forest areas and their mass conversion with the aid of foreign money were interpreted as intended to prepare the ground for a separate independent State on the lines of Pakistan (*Report I.3*).

Based on its findings, the Committee made a number of recommendations to the Madhya Pradesh government. Among them were that missionaries whose primary aim was proselytism be asked to withdraw; that all religious bodies involved in conversion be registered with the government; that the government control, through licenses, the publication of religious “propaganda” (that is, publications); that potential converts obtain the approval of a statewide board constituted for this purpose; and that a law be passed prohibiting the use of medical or “other professional services” for making converts (*Report I.153–65*).

As is perhaps already clear, the Committee was not entirely unbiased. Hindus associated with conservative groups like the Hindu Mahasabha, which were

fundamentally opposed to the spread of Christianity, were responsible both for the instigation of the *Report* and for some of its most radical assertions. There was in fact one Christian on the Committee, but Christians complained that he did not adequately represent and advocate their position (*Report* I.170–71). Of the Hindus on the Committee, one was a well-known member of the Ārya Samāj and a frequent critic of Christian missionaries (Menon 1999). Moreover, many of the most anti-Christian testimonies recorded in the *Report* were provided by upper-caste Hindus who naturally (and correctly) perceived, in the conversion of *ādivāsīs* and lower-caste Hindus to Christianity, the decline of their power and influence. Finally, witnesses sometimes claimed that missionaries employed tactics which most missionaries had long since rejected. None of the testimonies, with one or two rare exceptions, were subjected to cross-examination. Moreover, whereas most of the Christian claims of harassment were dismissed outright by the Committee as spurious and baseless, the Hindu testimonies were largely accepted at face value by the Committee. The testimonies contained within the *Report* must therefore be taken as a chronicle of opinion, not of historical fact. Nevertheless, all historiography rests tenuously on the sometimes biased and inaccurate testimonies and recollections of those from the historical period in question, and the task of the historian is therefore to attend to as many voices as possible, particularly those (such as the subaltern) which are often silenced in official chronicles.

Moreover, the questionnaire distributed by the Committee would fail miserably if it were held up to modern sociological standards, primarily because it repeatedly asks leading and even baiting questions. One question, for example, is, “What, to your knowledge, are the methods used for conversion?” So far so good. But the second part of the question is, “Are any of the following methods used?” Suggestions are then given for what kinds of methods might be employed: advancing loans, promising free facilities, promising help in litigation, offering employment, holding out hopes of better marriages, threatening danger of eternal damnation, and so on (*Report* II.A.182).

One particularly eloquent Catholic respondent to the questionnaire accused it, with some justification, of “perfidious suggestion” (*Report* II.A.200) and “barefaced impertinence” (203) and added, “Surely, the members of the Committee are fully aware that such a series of veiled charges—for often these are not questions, but scarcely veiled accusations—is a potent means to exacerbate sectarian feeling, and to incite religious fanatics to lay charges against those whom they dislike, yes, false charges without number” (198). In fact, Catholic Christians were so embittered by the work of the Committee that they requested the government of Madhya Pradesh to discontinue it. The appeal was denied, so Catholics in the state were directed by Eugene D’Souza, archbishop of Nagpur, to cease cooperating with the Committee’s enquiry. (Copies of Catholic correspondence with the Madhya Pradesh government and the Niyogi Committee are included in the *Report* [II.B.1–49].) Many Protestant groups, on the other hand, continued to cooperate with the Committee’s research, hoping that by doing so they might influence it favorably.

Nevertheless, while the questionnaire may have been flawed, and while some of the testimonies recorded by the Committee may have been biased and others simply fabricated, what strikes the reader first is the great erudition and—much of the time—fairness and sympathy exhibited by members of the Committee in the analytical sections of the *Report*. This is particularly so in parts of the *Report* which cover the history of Christianity, Christian ecumenism, Christian missions, and missionary strategy in India and beyond. The Committee did its homework. It read scores of reports from local missionary bodies as well as from international ones such as the International Missionary Council. J. W. Pickett, Roland Allen, William Hocking, M. M. Thomas, and Arnold Toynbee make appearances in the Committee’s footnotes, as do reports from the meetings of the International Missionary Council at Whitby and Tambaram. The Committee’s reading list, as the list of names mentioned above indicates, was decidedly skewed in the direction of writers who were critical of various aspects of contemporary

missionary practice, and, to be fair, the *Report* generally did not adequately acknowledge the fact that Pickett, Allen, and others were mission insiders seeking to improve missionary practice (rather than do away with it altogether). Nevertheless, the *Report* often compliments missionaries for their accomplishments. More than once it recognizes contributions missionaries had made to Indian society and even waxes eloquent about the potential greatness of a “real welding of Indian spirituality and Hebrew ethics” (*Report* I.159).

It is difficult to judge the effect, if any, of the *Report* on Hindu-Christian relations in the region. Many nationalistic Hindus welcomed the report, some declaring that it had “exposed” or “disrobed” (*naṅgā kar diyā hai*) and thereby disgraced the missionaries and the missionary enterprise in general (Goel 1998: vii). Whether caused by the *Report* or not, tensions did continue to mount between Hindus and Christians, particularly in the eastern part of the state. A year after the *Report* was published a Christian hostel and social service institution founded by Evangelical missionaries in Raipur (now the capitol of Chhattisgarh), the Gass Memorial Centre, was looted, burned, and destroyed by a mob. There were local and specific causes, but these seem to have merely held a match to the powder keg of strained inter-communal relations (Bauman 2004: 291–93, 2008: 237–39).

At the national level the *Report* reopened debates about conversion and the Constitution. Its suggestion, for example, that the right to convert be limited to Indian citizens (and not extended to foreigners) emboldened Hindu nationalists who had never fully accepted the Constitution’s protection of the right of religious propagation. Viswanathan (2007: 336) argues that the *Report* was one factor in a 1977 Supreme Court Ruling which specified that the right to propagate religion did not necessarily include the right to convert and which allowed states to produce “Freedom of Religion” bills requiring potential Hindu converts to indicate their intent to local officials.

Such bills, some of which had already been legislated, contained language influenced by that of the *Report*’s recommendations (Jaffrelot 2007: 234). For example, “Freedom of

Religion” acts legislated in Orissa (1967) and Madhya Pradesh (1968) take the *Report*’s recommendation that the government establish “suitable control on conversions brought about through illegal means” (I.160), such as force, fraud, and inducement, and prohibit (in words shared by the two acts) “conversion from one religion to another by the use of force or allurement or by fraudulent means....” The Arunachal Pradesh “Freedom of Religion” Act, passed in 1978, uses similar language, forbidding conversions “by the use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means.”

Since that time, the *Report* has become a touchstone of debates on conversion in India. On one side stand Hindu nationalists, for many of whom mere mention of the *Report* is deemed evidence enough that conversions to Christianity were and are still today (despite fifty intervening years) largely the result of force, fraud, and inducement and that the *ādivāsīs* and lower-caste Hindus were and are being lured to Christianity in large numbers by promises of money, education, healthcare, and other social services, not for “spiritual” reasons. Members of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in Rajasthan, for example, recently reintroduced an anti-conversion bill in the state House. According to the *Times of India*, one party member, “quoted the 1954 report of the Niyogi Commission and said that the population of Christians in India was increasing” (Times News Network 2008).

Arun Shourie, economist, former government minister, and former editor of the *Indian Express*, is perhaps the best-known and most eloquent of those who use the *Report* in such a way. His *Missionaries in India*, first published in 1994, is a pointed but relatively restrained critique of Christianity and mission work in India, which grew out of a lecture he was invited to deliver to a meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India in January 1994. Shourie quotes repeatedly and extensively from the *Report* to establish what he considers the *modus operandi* of missionaries in India and asserts that very little has changed since the 1950s. The targets of missionary work (that is, ignorant and impecunious *ādivāsīs* and *dalits*) remain the same, he claims, as do the means of

conversion (allurement through social services and denigration of Hinduism) and the problems attendant upon these means, such as a high rate of superficial and materialistic conversion (and therefore reconversion), and the perception among non-Christians that Christianity is inappropriately associated with (foreign) power and wealth (Shourie 2007: 8–9, 19, 28, 33, 179–202).

On the other side of the debate stand those who feel the Niyogi Committee's *Report* was biased from the start, and therefore both neglected the many good things Christians had done and inaccurately portrayed missionary work in the region. In a speech to the Catholic Council of India on December 2, 2007, for example, John Dayal, member of the National Integration Council and president of the All-India Catholic Union, argued:

Ravi Shankar [chief minister of Madhya Pradesh at the time of the *Report*] and Niyogi [were] both pathologically hostile to Christianity. Their target was the Catholic Church, working among tribals who they and their group had been exploiting for decades. The All India Catholic Union's associations in the state, really active Catholic Associations gave extensive documentation. As did the Church. But the report was a forgone conclusion. Acting on it Madhya Pradesh passed the Religious Freedom Act affectively [*sic*] banning all conversions, and as effectively coercing the Tribals to espouse the Hindu faith, a practice the Sangh Parivar codified in its criminal Ghar Wapsi programme.

Many Indian Christians also assert that missionary methods have changed substantially since the 1950s and that it is therefore unfair to condemn contemporary Christians with evidence from that era. Moreover, they ask rhetorically whether Hindu nationalists, a good number of whom were educated in Christian schools, would prefer that Christians did not offer the social services they did.

Criticism of the *Report* and those who wield it as evidence and support in anti-conversion campaigns has come from other quarters, too. In an article entitled “Literacy and Conversion in the Discourse of Hindu Nationalism,” Gauri Viswanathan assails the *Report* for:

highlighting loss of control over free will through weakness, ignorance, and poverty as a reason for outlawing conversion altogether, since it left the economically deprived sectors of Indian society particularly vulnerable to the inducements of converting to another religion....The Niyogi Commission’s landmark report set the lines of an argument that have continued to the present day, blurring the lines between force and consent and giving very little credence to the possibility that converts change over to another religion because they *choose* to (2007: 336–37; emphasis added).

Countering those who see in Christian social services an unacceptable inducement to conversion, and drawing upon Amartya Sen’s conviction that access to basic health and educational services are a universal human right, Viswanathan asserts, “It can and should be argued that if missionaries give people services they would otherwise not have had, no one has a right to restrict their activities, particularly when there are no other state-supported or private initiatives” (2007: 347).

The *Report* is therefore embroiled in contemporary academic debates about power and agency as well as in wide-ranging political controversies involving disagreements about civil rights, the nature and utility of secularism in India, and the nature of Indian-ness itself. It is for this reason worth taking the time to situate the *Report*, as I now do, in its historical context and in that light interpret its findings, recommendations, and rhetoric.

Causes of Postcolonial Anxiety

In India around 1954 there was a great deal of national anxiety. To some extent this anxiety can be traced to the effects of living for several centuries under foreign rule. Kenneth W. Jones argues, for example, that “As a result of centuries of foreign domination the Hindu community, in spite of its majority status, took on many of the attitudes that are typical of suppressed minorities” (1981: 448). Yet I am interested not so much in the lingering psychological effects of colonization as on the perceived threats to Indian survival in the 1950s (though the two are clearly related). In this period the nation was still militarily insecure and the threat of disintegration was real. It should therefore be clear that I am not suggesting that Indian “anxiety” or “insecurity” at this time was merely a sign of some collective psychosis. Rather, this sense of insecurity was grounded in very real regional, national, and geopolitical threats. In the mid-1950s there were a number of internal threats to Indian security. The formerly quasi-independent princely states had only recently, in 1948, become part of the Indian Union, one of them (Hyderabad) requiring some unfriendly persuasion. The Nagas were fighting for more autonomy in Assam, a threat to which the government responded with military intervention in 1955. The Portuguese had not yet agreed to accede Goa, which led to yet another military intervention in 1961. The final status of Kashmir also had yet to be settled.

External politics also threatened to destabilize the young country. Just before receiving independence, the land of India had been divided, by order of the British Radcliffe Award, into Pakistan and India, after a hasty and controversial process that many Indians viewed at the time as the last and most pernicious of colonial intrusions. Moreover, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that many Indians at the time viewed Partition as a tragic amputation of their homeland, relations quickly soured between the two new states, leaving India wedged between the unfriendly wings of East and West Pakistan.

Cold war powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, played chess with weak and formerly colonized states in the region in their ambitions for world domination, and both

set their eyes on South Asia. In 1954 the United States' decision to sign a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with Pakistan gave un-aligned India a specific reason to worry and raised anxiety about the possibility of direct or indirect American aggression. India tightened its rules regarding the granting of visas to foreigners, in particular to Americans and American missionaries. One Niyogi Committee witness proclaimed: “[The] majority of region [*sic*] missionaries are Americans and due to Pakistan-American pact their activities are suspicious” (*Report* II.A.139). Whether the tightened rules reflected genuine suspicion or were merely a retaliatory measure, they were officially justified on the former grounds.

Indian and foreign Christians were often perceived by Hindus to be on the wrong side of these conflicts or potential conflicts. For example, as the Niyogi Committee reported, though many Hindu Indians were in favor of annexing Goa, a Catholic periodical, *Nishkalank*, asked in August 1950, “Why does India desire that Portugal which has been exercising sovereignty for 400 years over Goa should surrender it?...Only a handful of Goans...are shouting for the merger of Goa with India” (*Report* I.126). In addition, the independence movement in Assam had come about, it was widely perceived, as a result of the Christianization of Naga tribes. And of course the memory of British colonialism associated Christianity, in the mind of many Hindu Indians, with imperialism. The apparent neo-colonial aspirations of the United States, another “Christian” nation, simply reinforced the impression.

Stanley J. Tambiah contends that in the decades after independence, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh considered four groups of people enemies of the Hindu nation: “Indian followers of foreign religions, such as Islam and Christianity; Communists and their sympathizers; westernized members of the Indian intelligentsia; and foreign powers” (1996: 246). Christianity was associated, in the minds of many Indians, with all of these groups except the Communists. It is not surprising, therefore, that Christianity fell under suspicion in Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere among India's Hindu nationalists.

To make matters worse, the secular-minded government of independent India had taken what some Hindus considered to be an overly acquiescent stance towards the spread of Christianity. India's Constitution granted all citizens "Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship" and "Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion" subject of course to "public order, morality and health." Some Hindus worried that these constitutional rights had been interpreted too liberally, allowing even foreign missionaries to attack Hindu beliefs and practices under the guise of religious freedom. Writers of the *Report* expressed astonishment that Christians would, as they saw it, abuse their rights after India had granted all communities religious freedom despite the objectionable "methods used by foreigners under a foreign Government," the fact that Christians, as they saw it, did not participate in the national struggle "apart from a man here or a man there," and the belief that "backdoor methods to sabotage the national movement may have been used" (*Report* I.95).

The *Report* itself asked, "Can any right thinking man assert that such vile attacks on the religion of the majority community in India [are] part of Christian religion or [are] conducive to public order or morality?" (I.121). In fact, one of the recommendations made by the *Report* (I.89) was that the Constitution stipulate that these rights extended only to citizens of India and not foreign missionaries.

To many like-minded Hindus, Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of India, himself was ultimately to blame. His uncompromising secularism led him to block the Indian Conversion (Regulation and Registration) Bill before the Indian parliament in 1954, which would have made conversion from one community to another more difficult. In fact, on October 17, 1952 he actually distributed a letter to his chief ministers instructing them to clamp down on the harassment of Christians in their states.

In addition to these national concerns, Madhya Pradesh had a few of its own. In January 1948 the formerly princely states of Raigarh, Udaipur,⁸ Jashpur, and Surguja were merged into Madhya Pradesh, greatly increasing the population of *ādivāsīs* in the now

enlarged state. Before the merger, 18 percent of Madhya Pradesh's population had been *ādivāsī*. In the former princely states the figure was around 53 percent (*Report I.6*). In the Chhattisgarh region of eastern Madhya Pradesh, the majority of converts to Christianity came from the *ādivāsī* peoples and the Hindu lower castes. Many missionary groups therefore consciously or unconsciously concentrated their efforts on such communities, where the response to evangelistic work was often the greatest. The princely states, however, had been given some measure of autonomy in their agreements with the British Government and those in this region had managed, for the most part, to prevent the entrance of missionary groups into their territories through anti-missionary legislation. Udaipur, for example, had promulgated the “Anti-conversion Act of Udaipur” on July 9, 1946. The Act stipulated that no priests were allowed to enter except once a quarter, for 48 hours—and only with prior permission—in order to celebrate mass with Christian communities near the border. Some missionaries disobeyed this and similar legislation (Pothacamury 1957: 63). After the merger, however, the legislation of the former princely states gave way to that of Madhya Pradesh and the Indian Union (where no such legislation existed). No longer constrained by anti-missionary laws, missionaries inundated the formerly closed regions, often to attend to Christian communities which had established themselves despite the absence of missionary work. Inter-communal conflict and conversions to Christianity increased dramatically, as did concerns that the rapidly Christianizing region would demand autonomy. It eventually did, and it is to that movement that we now turn.

The Jharkhand Movement

Even before independence, *ādivāsīs* in Chhota Nagpur had been pressing for a state of their own. (The Chhota Nagpur Plateau is now largely within the boundaries of Jharkhand, which was carved off from Bihar to form a new state in 2000, but also

included parts of what are now Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Bihar.) Several names had been floated for the proposed state (among them Adivasisthan), but the name that became most popular was Jharkhand (“Land of Forests”). Before independence, the movement was of little concern to Madhya Pradesh, but the Chhota Nagpur Plateau (and therefore the proposed Jharkhand) included the princely states of Raigarh, Udaipur, Surguja, Korea, and Jashpur, which had been merged into Madhya Pradesh in 1948 (Singh 1983: 10). The Jharkhand movement therefore threatened to peel off from Madhya Pradesh territory it had only recently assimilated.

Christians associated with the Gossner Lutheran Mission and the Roman Catholic Church were involved in the Jharkhand movement from its inception. The German Gossner mission had been established in the late nineteenth century by the Catholic priest-turned-Protestant (Lutheran) John Evangelist Gossner (1773–1858). In 1841 he sent a missionary party of six to work among Gond *ādivāsīs* in the region, but four of them died relatively quickly. In 1844 the Gossner mission sent four more missionaries to work among the Kols (another *ādivāsī* group) in what is today Bihar (Neill 1985: 354–55). Eventually they established a lasting station at Ranchi (today the capitol of Jharkhand). The *ādivāsī* peasants (Gonds, Kols, Oraons, Mundas, Santhals) in the region were cruelly oppressed by their generally upper-caste landlords (*zamīndārs*), who appeared to be in league with the judges—also upper-caste—which prevented the peasants from seeking legal redress. Though there were few converts initially, when the legal work of the missionaries on behalf of the dispossessed *ādivāsīs* became more widely known, large numbers of *ādivāsīs* began to convert. The first were converted in 1850, and by 1857 (at the time of the Mutiny/War of Independence) there were already 900 Christians on the mission (Tete 1984: 12). Many of these were in fact brought in to the mission not by foreign missionaries but by *ādivāsī* catechists, who had been trained by the mission. But they did not hide the fact that they sought missionary help in addressing their temporal problems (Tete 1984: 355–56).

Belgian Jesuits moving westward from Calcutta, where they were in charge of the West Bengal mission, were the first to work in the Chhota Nagpur region. Though other Catholics had been sent to the region as early as 1869, the true founder of the Catholic work in Chhota Nagpur was Father Constantine Lievens, S.J., who was sent to the region in 1885. Lievens mastered local land laws (British laws had not yet come fully into effect), and, as one Catholic history book put it, “this knowledge of the law became Fr. Lievens’ net to draw thousands of heathens into the Bark of Peter” (Capuchin Mission Unit 1923: 154). Lievens became famous for his legal advocacy, and in 1888 alone he christened more than 11,000 people and prepared 40,000 catechumens in 832 villages (Plattner 1957: 121). Later that year Lievens moved into the region of Barway, which had sent him a delegation indicating the whole region was ready to become Christian. Lievens helped the Oraon *ādivāsīs* in the region in their struggle against the *zamīndārs* and established his conditions: “If the whole village was ready to come over to...Catholicism he was willing to help them and so sometimes the whole village became Catholic. This he did because he wanted to make the whole of Barway region Catholic. He baptized in thousands so that people would find solidarity and would not fall back into paganism” (Tete 1984: 27). In three weeks he baptized 13,000 people and placed 10,000 more in preparation (Capuchin Mission Unit 1923: 134; Pothacamury 1957: 76). In 1927 the diocese of Ranchi was created. In 1951 it had its first Indian Bishop, an *ādivāsī*, and in 1952 Ranchi became a metropolitan see. By the time of the Niyogi Committee’s work there were in Chhota Nagpur over 300,000 *ādivāsī* Catholics (Pothacamury 1957: 76).

In addition to their legal advocacy, both the Gossner and the Roman Catholic missions helped local *ādivāsīs* form self-help collectives of various kinds. In 1872 the Gossner mission established the Chota Nagpur Christian Co-operative Bank. In 1893 a Catholic worker named Hoffman established the Chota Nagpur Catholic Co-operative Credit Society. In 1898 Lutheran graduates of Gossner schools formed the Chhota Nagpur Christian Association, which became the Christian College Union in 1918 when

Catholics joined. These associations were open only to Christians, but in 1912 the Chota Nagpur Charitable Association was established for all *ādivāsīs*, Christian or not. Some years later a Lutheran student organized the Chota Nagpur Unnati Samaj. The Unnati Samaj's most significant (but ultimately fruitless) work was petitioning the visiting British Simon Commission in 1928–29 for special privileges for the *ādivāsīs* and a separate administrative unit for the Chota Nagpur region. Catholics formed the Chota Nagpur Catholic Sabha in 1936, which joined with the Unnati Samaj and a local farmers' collective (the Kisan Sabha) in 1938 to form the Adivasi Mahasabha (on the history of these various organizations, see Ghosh 1998: 37–40; Ratan 1992: 108–10; Roy 1992: 97–98; Singh 1983: 2–4).

The constitution of the Adivasi Mahasabha, no longer merely a society of Christians but one with political aims, stated that:

It is essential that these aboriginal districts forming as they do [a] compact area most intimately bound together as between themselves by racial, linguistic, cultural, historical and agrarian bonds should be constituted into a separate administrative unit, for the sake of furthering the racial, economic, educational, cultural and political interest of the backward people of this area (whose distinctive unity and whose right to separation from Bihar has in a way been admitted and recognised by the Simon Commission and the framers of the Government of India Act, 1935) (*Report* I.50).

Having failed to be granted a “separate administrative unit” at the time of independence, the Mahasabha shifted its focus to more proximate goals. It protested the inclusion of Surguja and Jashpur in Madhya Pradesh, agitating instead for their inclusion in the state of Bihar (which had, at the time, a greater proportion of *ādivāsīs*).

In 1950 the Adivasi Mahasabha became the Jharkhand Party. In 1952 the party campaigned on a platform focused on gaining the *ādivāsīs* their own state and won

several dozen seats. The founding president of the party was Jaipal Singh. Singh—a Munda who had been raised by Anglican missionaries, had studied at Oxford, and was on India’s Olympic gold medal-winning field hockey team in 1928—became a member of Parliament (Ghosh 1998: 40–41; Munda and Keshari 2003: 218). Many of the other officers of the party were Lutheran and Catholic Christians. In 1953, just before the Niyogi Committee began its work, the Jharkhand Party was petitioning the States Re-organisation Commission asking for the establishment of a separate state of Jharkhand (Ghosh 1998: 42–43). (Since the commission conceived of regional cohesion largely in linguistic terms, and the *ādivāsīs* of Chhota Nagpur did not share a common language, the petition was ultimately rejected.)

Singh and the Jharkhand movement had the clear support, whether direct or indirect, of many Indian Christians and foreign missionaries in the region (*Report I.10, II.A.349*). One witness told the Niyogi Committee, “I am a Christian....I attend [the Catholic] Gholeng Mission for prayers. After prayers, the foreign Missionaries of Gholeng preach against Hindu religion and state that Adivasis and Christians were still slaves and will be free only after they [get] Jharkhand” (*Report II.B.127*). Many Christian *ādivāsīs* clearly looked forward to a Jharkhand ruled by Christians. The movement was by no means a merely Christian movement, though. By the 1950s support for the Jharkhand movement was widespread among *ādivāsīs* and even among other communities in the region (Mullick 2003: vii).

Many Hindus in the Chhattisgarh region of eastern Madhya Pradesh found the movement troubling for a number of reasons. The first of course was political. Here again, it appeared to them, Christians were entangled in a movement which threatened political disintegration—this time of the state of Madhya Pradesh. There was a more fundamental issue that troubled certain Hindus as well, though: the movement for Jharkhand implied a sharp distinction between *ādivāsī* peoples and Hindus (or at least upper-caste Hindus) that some Hindus rejected as illegitimate. In fact, some members of

the Niyogi Committee believed that missionaries in the region emphasized this distinction only in order to attract *ādivāsīs* away from Hinduism and towards Christianity. That may have been true, in some cases, though the *ādivāsīs* themselves clearly had reasons for distinguishing themselves from high-caste Hindu landowners, and many missionaries may have been echoing a distinction made by those with whom they worked. The issue of the extent to which the *ādivāsīs* and *ādivāsī* religion can be said to be (or to have been) Hindu had been much debated by Hindus, *ādivāsīs*, and scholars long before the *Report* was published and continues to be debated today (Dirks 2001). Nevertheless, the *Report* insists on the existence of a more sinister missionary agenda: that “In order to consolidate and enhance their prestige, and possibly to afford scope for alien interests in this tract, the Missionaries were reported to be carrying on propaganda for the isolation of the Aborigines from other sections of the community and the movement of Jharkhand was started” (I.9).

According to others, the rabbit hole, so to speak, went even deeper. The *Report* asserts:

The separatist tendency that has gripped the mind of the aborigines under the influence of the [Gossner] Lutheran and Roman Catholic Missions is entirely due to the consistent policy pursued by the British Government and the Missionaries. The final segregation of the aborigines in the Census of 1931 from the main body of the Hindus considered along with the recommendations of the Simon Commission which were incorporated in the Government of India Act, 1935, apparently set the stage for the demand of a separate State of Jharkhand on the lines of Pakistan (*Report* I.49).

One of the most common perceptions recorded in the *Report* was that Christians were using the threat of a future Jharkhand state ruled by Christians in order to pressure non-Christians to convert. One Deopatram, from Balrampur, near the Gossner and the Catholic centers at Ambikapur, complained, “missionaries try to influence me by saying

that shortly there will be Jharkhand raj of the Christians and they will give salt and cloth, etc., at cheap rates” (*Report II.A.42*). V. N. Dube, interviewed at Ambikapur, where Catholic missionaries were active, said, “Christians say that shortly they will have Father or Christian Raj and they will be driven out and only the Christian will remain there. Others will be driven away” (*Report II.A.37*, see also II.A.17, 42).

Isaistan and American Neo-Colonialism

Ultimately what many Hindus in the region feared about the Jharkhand movement was not merely that it would become an independent state, though that was reason enough for fear, but that it would become an independent Christian state with political priorities and loyalties at odds with those of India. Some Christians apparently were making it clear that this was what they desired, abandoning the name Jharkhand and calling instead for an independent Isaistan,⁹ Massihistan,¹⁰ Krististan, or Christiansthan. A little farther west in Madhya Pradesh, in Amravati, the Niyogi Committee interviewed Shri Khaparde, an ex-minister, who said, “[In Gondia, where there was an American Methodist Episcopal mission] the President of the Christian Society declared that some day he hopes to have a Christiansthan in India, just as there is Pakistan there is to be Christiansthan, Budhistnan [*sic*], Jainisthan and how many more sthans I do not know.” Growing more serious he added, “This is a matter of alarm. We think that if the Christians conceive the idea of Christiansthan, then there is a great danger to the land being split and divided into small pieces and, thus, we are going to lose our [integrity, independence], self respect, religion, culture and all our past history” (*Report II.A.86*, see also II.A.128). Few, if any Christians interviewed denied that they wished for such a land. For example, in 1954, *Masihi Awaz*, a periodical printed by the Evangelical Mission in Raipur, declared (in Hindi), “In these [current] circumstances, would it not be fitting that some land be taken from both India and Pakistan in order to create a country for

Christians also along the lines of Pakistan?” (*Report* II.B.157; my translation). Here again it is uncertain whether Christians are calling for a state within the Indian Union or an independent country, along the lines of Pakistan.

Witnesses were quick to compare the Jharkhand movement to those in Assam, Burma, and other parts of Asia. In its history of Christian missions, the *Report* itself declared:

This attempt of the Adiwasis initiated by the Christian section thereof is a feature which is common to the developments in Burma, Assam and Indo-China among the Karens,¹¹ Nagas, and Amboynes. This is attributed to the spirit of religious nationalism awakened among the converted Christians as among the followers of other religions. But the idea of change of religion as bringing about change of nationality appears to have originated in the Missionary circles...(I.50–51).

Worse yet, calls for an independent Isaisthan conjured up the specter of that worst of political disintegrations: Partition. Moreover, it was not merely on the eastern frontier of Madhya Pradesh that non-Christians worried about the possibility of an independent Christian state. Though the Jharkhand movement had never officially called for an autonomous nation, in response to the Committee’s questionnaire, T. Y. Dehankar, president of the Bar Association in Bilaspur, where Disciples of Christ missionaries were active, declared, “We have lately a bitter experience of the vivisection of our mother-land. We do not want repetition in that regard” (*Report* II.A.315, see also II.A.86).

Another witness, a Brahmin pleader from Jashpur, where Catholic and Gossner missionaries had worked, stated things more directly: “The idea of Jharkhand is on the lines of Pakistan. To this end, the Missionaries have been trying and before Pakistan was created they had close associations with the Muslim League”¹² (*Report* II.B.134, see also II.B.157). In its recommendations the *Report* states, in a moment of self-reflective candor, “Cries of Christisthan or Massihisthan are foolish and dangerous. Young,

independent India, still smarting under memories of the partition of India on grounds of religion is very sensitive to anything dangerous to the solidarity and security of the country” (I.158, see also I.60). Not surprisingly, some viewed Christians as a potentially seditious fifth column. The *Report* asserts that “Missionary organisations are so wide-spread in this country that they seem to constitute ‘a State within the State’ ” and goes on to suggest that such was the design of the pope, the National Christian Council of India, and/or the International Missionary Council (I.31).

The conversion of Indians to Christianity, witnesses argued, also entailed their denationalization. This of course was not a new assertion. Savarkar defined a Hindu (that is, one who was truly welcome in India) as one who considers “Bharat-Bhoomi [the Land of India] from the Indus to the Seas as his father land and Holyland” (1949: 10). Implied in this definition is that converts to “foreign” religions (like Christianity and Islam) have extra-territorial loyalties and can therefore not be reliable citizens of India.

Members of the Nagar Hindu Sabha in Pusad (District Yeotmal, now Maharashtra), in whose town a small Nazarene hospital had been founded, averred to the Niyogi Committee in a written statement, “By conversion, nationality is changed and there is no affection for mother country. Pakistan has come into [existence] because of conversion” (*Report* II.A.120, see also I.145, II.A.86, 141, 147, 283). Similarly, an advocate from Sagar, where the Swedish Evangelical Missionary Society had worked among the Gonds, testified, “At some crucial moment of real trial and stress for the security of Bharat [India] those who have outside affinities and outside affiliations may not prove helpful to the security of Bharat and it might lead to further division and disruption of our land. The happenings in Jharkhand and Assam are a pointer to this” (*Report* II.B.165).

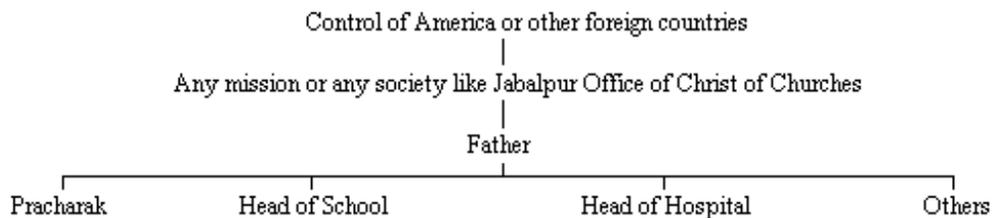
Christians in India were not merely denationalized, but imbued, according to many witnesses who appeared before the Niyogi Committee, with a profound and traitorous love of America and its culture. It is striking how quickly America replaced Britain as India’s great bogeyman. Of the 480 foreign missionaries in Madhya Pradesh at the time

of the Committee's work, 236 were American (*Report I.104*). This great number of American missionaries in India was understood by some as part of America's anti-communist cold war strategy. In a chapter on "Christian Post-War World Policy" the *Report* explains, as it saw it, the reason for America's interest in India:

In view of the radical shift since 1945 in the International balance of power which has affected every country in Asia, [the United States] finds itself devoid of any Asian territory. She has partly compensated for this by establishing military bases on the Pacific fringe of Asia from Japan to the Philippines. The drive for proselytization in India is an attempt to acquire an additional base which of course would be psychological (I.58).

Some witnesses were even convinced that missionaries taking photographs of mission stations from airplanes were in fact working covertly for United States' military planners (*Report II.A.116, 122, 135*).

The *Report* includes a chart submitted by T. Y. Dehankar, quoted above, which summarizes how he understood the relationship between America and the missionaries he met in Madhya Pradesh (II.A.302). I reproduce it here:



One of the ways that American missionaries worked towards the goal of political and cultural domination, some believed, was by establishing community projects (schools, hospitals, and so on) in which, according to witnesses,

...they try to tell you that American way of life and American help alone can save you and that China and Russia are your enemies....It is their attempt to bring everything Indian into contempt and disrepute and try to impress the coloured people that they are sub-human, low and inferior and also convince Indians that they have no escape unless they follow and obey the white races. They seem to be keen on propagating the American way of life...(Report II.A.87).

There were many Indian Christians involved in the struggle for independence and the vast majority of Christians were loyal, patriotic Indians. Yet for those anxious about the survival of the Indian nation, or those willing to exploit such anxieties for political gain, the evidence of a sinister Christian plan seemed obvious enough. The seemingly ubiquitous sign of American influence, wealth, and power even provoked an occasional outburst. One Christian, Isabux of Basna, an area of American Mennonite mission work, complained, "I have been troubled by American gang too much....Here, there is American imperialism....Money comes from America. I have moved in missionary melas [festivals]. They tell lies. They are mad after luxury. They will prove worse than the British. Mennonite is a gang" (Report II.A.12).

Tolerance, Triumphalism, and "Christian" Imperialism

To some witnesses, Christian America's neo-colonial pretensions were but a manifestation of a larger problem. That problem was that Christianity was, around the world, an intrusive, meddling, and imperialistic religion. Few of the witnesses appearing

before the Committee put it quite that baldly, and the claim would seem downright preposterous, I imagine, to many Christian Americans, but the notion that Hindus mind their own business while Christians stick their noses in everyone else's was a common one in this context, as was the similar and related assertion that Hinduism is tolerant whereas Christianity is triumphalistic.

Here is where context is key. Christians frequently tend to use political and military metaphors to express their central hopes and beliefs. One need, for example, look no further than the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Though such a political metaphor would rarely if ever appear in Hindu discourse, Hindus are not unfamiliar with the religious use of symbolic speech. It is therefore conceivable that in an apolitical environment a Hindu would understand a phrase like "Thy kingdom come" metaphorically. But there is of course no apolitical environment, and given the many threats to the integrity and survival of the Indian state outlined above and given the ever-increasing power and reach of Westerners and Christianity, one can imagine why such language would be perceived as a literal statement of ominous political goals.

If military and political metaphors are common in Christian language, they are ubiquitous in twentieth-century Christian missionary rhetoric. The *Report* itself objects to the title of a Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society pamphlet, *World Conquest Soon by God's Kingdom*, and to the practice of calling missionary groups "invasion teams" (I.57, see also I.140). In the context of postcolonial insecurity and power disparities it is not at all surprising that some Hindus would find such phrases disconcerting.

One witness argued that "God's kingdom on earth which the missionaries preach, means Christian Raj. But ours is not a Christian Raj. Missionaries may be using idiomatic language in their prachar [preaching], but it has adverse effect on our illiterate brothers" (*Report* II.A.141). Another complained that he had heard Christians sing a song in Hindi which translated as "Hindustan will be won for Christ." "All Government officers were

present,” he said. “We understood the meaning of the function and the song as ‘though the Britishers have gone, Americans want to rule the country’ ” (*Report II.A.92*). (A foreign missionary who had attended the same function was present at the hearing and did not deny the lyrics of the song.)

Given the tendency of local Hindus to take such triumphalist terminology at face value, the *Report* urges missionaries to be careful about their language: “Even terms like ‘Kingdom of God’ must be explained in their true spiritual sense in order to obviate the hurting of any susceptibility. How much more should Christians dissociate themselves from demands for a Jharkhand State or an Adivasisthan?” (I.159). Christians interviewed responded in various ways. One group of foreign missionaries associated with the Swedish Evangelical Missionary Society in Betul (which was by this time under control of the Indian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Madhya Pradesh) explained, “We speak of ‘Thy Kingdom’ but we do not mean any worldly kingdom. We mean the Kingdom of God in Heaven” (*Report II.A.167*). An Indian Roman Catholic preacher from Lunda, who the transcriber notes was “having a chuti” (a shaven head with a tuft of hair at the back—a sign of Brāhmanical orthodoxy), responded as well, saying “We have no instructions to preach politics. We simply speak of religion and not politics.” But notice, as he continues, how political his religion really was: “We say there is God’s raj. You find out his religion and you will get it. We need not worry about anything. In God’s Raj everybody will have everything” (*Report II.A.47*).

Christians spoke often, too, of their primary loyalty to Christ. Such language, in combination with already existing fears about the denationalization of Christian converts, seemed to confirm the impression that Christians could not be loyal and patriotic citizens of India. Hindu members of the Niyogi Committee were struck by phrases in missionary literature such as “colony of heaven,” “in the country but not of the country,” and “historical community of the redeemed” (I.144). Assertions that the Christian Church was “World Wide,” “Supra-national,” and “Supra-racial,” common in ecumenical and

evangelical circles at the time, suggested to writers of the *Report* that “Christians in a State owed double allegiance.... Ordinarily there might be no clash, but in case there was a conflict of loyalties between Christ and State, the true Christian had necessarily to choose obedience to Christ” (I.57, see also 144, 147).

Some members of the committee interpreted the phrase “Partnership in obedience,” made famous by the 1947 meeting of the International Missionary Council in Whitby, in a similar vein. Whereas for members of the International Missionary Council the phrase embodied their hopes of dismantling paternalistic and Western-dominated institutional structures in missionary lands, Hindus understood it, at best, to indicate extra-territorial loyalties and, at worst, to suggest that there would be a partnership in which Indians would obey foreign Christians, something similar to the “Subsidiary Alliance which the conquering British had with the Nizam [of Hyderabad]” (*Report* I.150, 144).

A school play put on by the Methodist Johnson Girls’ School in Jabalpur managed to offend a number of witnesses who came before the Niyogi Committee. A Hindu student at the school described the objectionable scene in the play:

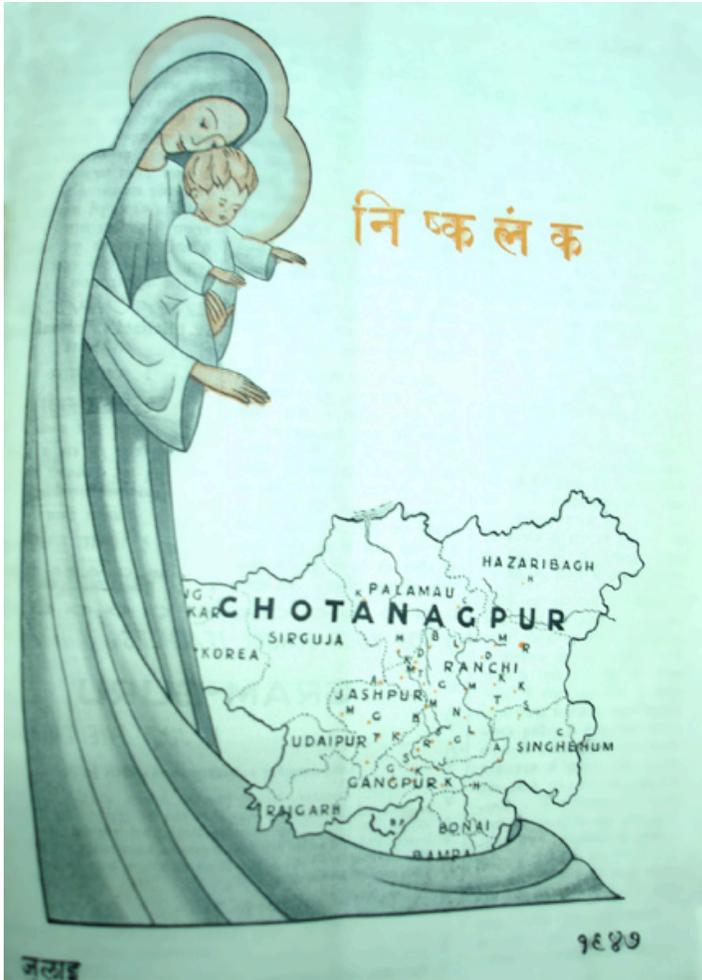
During the course of the drama, the four quarters of the world were represented by four directional winds which brought their flags, one representing Pakistan, another representing England, third America and the fourth representing India, i.e., the Indian National Flag. After some dialogue, the Indian Flag was hoisted. Then, after some time, some sound was heard from behind the stage and then one holy person came and she said “We wish that there should be peace in the whole world.” Then a girl came with a flag having the sign of the Cross. Then that flag was hoisted on the top of all the other flags. This would bring peace in the world and it would be hoisted all over the world. I and other Hindu girls felt that this was a disrespect to our National Flag (*Report* II.B.142).

In response, Miss Zilla Soule, the school's principal, defended the drama, saying that it had been approved by the entire staff which included Hindu and Muslim teachers and that, furthermore, the Indian national flag was the only one on stage which had not been made of paper. Nevertheless, notice again how in the perception of these and other Hindus, the common Christian assertion that allegiance to Christ trumps allegiance to any and all worldly powers is heard instead as a pledge of allegiance to a future worldwide Christian empire.

Conclusion

Members of the Niyogi Committee found one visual image particularly troubling, and the reasons why are instructive. The image to which the *Report* refers is from the cover of the October 1947 edition of a Catholic periodical, *Nishkalank*.¹³ On the left side, extending from nearly the bottom to the top of the page, is the Virgin Mary shown in flowing robes (see Figure 1). Her head is bowed graciously as she looks down and to the right. In her left arm she cradles the baby Jesus. Both she and Jesus are encircled by halos, and their arms extend forth, palms earthward, toward a map of Chhota Nagpur which appears at their feet.

Figure 1:



Later in the issue a textual explanation of the image is given:

When will the Ranchi Holy Land be dedicated to the Mother Maria? Oh, the Queen of Chhota Nagpur, by your grace Christ-king entered this land with splendour and established his residence here. Oh, thou Virgin of the Resurrection, at this moment, when false prophets are trying to appropriate Chhota Nagpur, enter thy kingdom with triumph and invite the Hindus, (unconverted) Lutherans, Anglicans and others to be with you and your son (*Report I.A.51*).

The *Report* cites the image and text as proof that Catholics were supporting the Jharkhand movement. But is it?

Most Christians seeing this image, particularly in conjunction with the text, would, I imagine, interpret them both as an articulation of the Christian desire to see the people of Jharkhand become Christian. The pose would be understood as a suggestion of humble benevolence, and the hand gesture as a blessing. The “dedication” referred to in the text would be taken as a spiritual one and the “false prophets” as those who oppose Christianity. Mary is the “Queen” of heaven (not Chhota Nagpur), and Jesus is the “Christ-king” of a spiritual kingdom, though Christians would assert that he also has power, should he wish to wield it, over the earth (not associated with any particular temporal power). The phrase “enter thy kingdom with triumph,” though clearly sensational, would be read by most Christians as a request that the Virgin provide spiritual support to Christian evangelistic efforts.

But given political concerns about the potential disintegration of both Madhya Pradesh and the Indian nation, it is perhaps not surprising that it might be read differently. Once again, the triumphalist language used by *Nishkalank*'s authors makes a more sinister reading of the text possible. Mary is after all called a “Queen,” and Jesus the “Christ-king.” Moreover, there is no particular reason why one need interpret the “dedication” mentioned in the text as a spiritual one. The Virgin is asked to enter her kingdom “with triumph.” And the “false prophets” are unidentified. Are they, as Christians might understand it, opponents of Christianity, or are the “false prophets” Hindus or social and political leaders who opposed the Jharkhand independence movement? Read in this way, the text would be perceived to suggest that the Virgin and Jesus are not so much blessing Chhota Nagpur as asserting their authority (read: Christian authority) over it. The region does appear, after all, at their feet in a position symbolic in India of submission (one greets one's elders, for example, by crouching at and touching their feet).

It is of course possible that such a reading is a more accurate reflection of the intentions of those who created the image and authored the text. Perhaps there were members of the *Nishkalank* staff who wished to use it in support of the Jharkhand movement. Editorial policy, fear, or caution may have encouraged them to do so indirectly, veiling their political ambitions in the language of religion. The point I wish to emphasize here, though, is that no matter how innocent the intentions of those who produced this document, the political and social climate was such that it could not but have been read by some Hindus as a statement of Christian imperialistic aims.¹⁴

We will probably never know the intentions of those who produced this image and its accompanying text. What this discussion does demonstrate, however, is the importance of context. These days it is not unusual to suggest that one's situation influences one's perspective, and the term "perspective" itself implies as much. Whatever the source of contemporary Indian discomfort with missionaries and Christian conversion, it was, in this context, not so much about religion *per se* as it was about politicized religion (if the two can ever be distinguished). It was about religion as the basis of a political and communal identity. Ambivalence about and hostility towards Christian conversion in this context must therefore be seen not so much as a reflection of concern for spiritual souls (or selves, as the case may be) so much as a competition for (Hindu) bodies, political bodies, bodies which constituted, according to Hindu nationalists, the grounds of Indian unity and therefore needed to be preserved in order to preserve the unity of India itself. Yet again, there was for many Hindu nationalists something about the nature of Hindu spirituality itself which allowed for and contributed to this imagined and hoped-for national unity, and so the distinction between concern for souls and concern for bodies may be, on at least one level, an artificial one.

Moreover, I am not suggesting that the intentions of Christian missionaries were spiritual and religious while those of Hindu nationalists were material and political. In

fact, drawing on evidence from the *Report*, Arun Shourie argues that from the very beginning of Christian history:

Jesus was overshadowed by the Church; and since then the Church has become preoccupied with itself. The...objectives its members have pursued have not [been] to live the life of Jesus, but the objectives characteristic of most secular organisations—numbers, market shares, the debates over one marketing strategy over another, the weighing of rituals, even of which aspect of the doctrine is to be emphasised and which is to [be] underplayed in the light of what effect either is liable to have on the market share. The sacred secularised, from St. Francis of Assisi to a marketing agency...(2007: 19)

Whether Shourie's analysis is correct is not my concern. The point, rather, is that in a context of politicized religious identities, of religion as the basis for communal identities, both sides of this conflict view each other as being concerned purely with numbers and therefore with political gain.

Hindu nationalists have been more open than Christians, perhaps, about their concern for numbers. Islam and Christianity are both explicitly missionary religions, and at least since Lieutenant Colonel U. N. Mukerji's letters, "Hindus: A Dying Race," appeared in the *Bengalee* (1909) and raised the specter of Hindu extinction, some Hindus have found the growth of Christian and Muslim populations troubling, fearing that Hinduism, which they perceive to be non-proselytizing, would eventually be swamped by the growth of these "foreign" religions.¹⁵

That concern persists even to the present day. In *Paravartan Back to Hinduism: Why and How* (1999), Raj Eshwar asserts, "History is witness to the fact that in whichever part of India the percentage of Hindu population declined, it was cut off from the national mainstream and eventually seceded from the country" (an excerpt of the text appears in

Jaffrelot 2007: 245). As Sita Ram Goel put it in his introduction to the reprinting of the *Report* in 1998, Christianity “has never been a religion; its long history tells us that it has always been a predatory imperialism par excellence” (3). Moreover, “theological blah blah notwithstanding, the fact remains that [Christian] dogma is no more than a subterfuge for forging and wielding an organizational weapon for mounting unprovoked aggression against other people” (Goel 1998: 3). In addition, according to Goel, Jawaharlal Nehru was, because of his support for secularist policies and rejection of anti-conversion legislation, “a coolie carrying the White Man’s Burden” (1998: 7). One can therefore still clearly see today (as in the 1950s), how thoroughly entangled are the issues of conversion, secularism, identity, and national unity. I have not sought in this article to evaluate, judge, or condemn anti-conversion sentiment in the 1950s, but rather to analyze and interpret it with reference to its context of regional and national instability and postcolonial imbalances of wealth and power in such a way that this analysis might also, if only by inference, inform contemporary Hindu-Christian tensions as well.

Notes

1. I would like to thank those who attended the 2006 annual meeting of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of the article which I presented there. I would also like to thank students attending my 2007 course, “Religion, Politics, and Conflict in South Asia,” at Butler University for helpful feedback on a version of the article I mercilessly forced them to read. Finally, I am grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful criticisms and suggestions.

2. Ambedkar, the Columbia University educated lawyer, was the most prominent of Indian *dalit* leaders in the first half of the twentieth century and converted from Hinduism to Buddhism in 1956 to protest the former’s treatment of the lowest castes (Jaffrelot 2005; Queen 1996).

3. Francis Clooney, S.J., Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard University and past president of the American Academy of Religion, has recently and unintentionally, for example, been drawn into the fray (Menon 2006).

4. This version of the *Report* is a reprint. It is an exact duplicate, and retains the organization and pagination, of the original.

5. Jinnah was the most prominent of Indian Muslim leaders in the late colonial period and served both as the president of the All-India Muslim League and as Pakistan's first governor-general.

6. The *Report* can also be found online at <http://www.bharatvani.org/books/ncr/>.

7. The regularity of claims of kidnapping and abduction is particularly astounding.

8. This Udaipur should not be confused with the city of the same name in Rajasthan.

9. "Īsāi" means "Christian" in Hindi.

10. "Masīh" means "Messiah" in Hindi.

11. The Karens had pressed for a separate state of Burma at the Round Table Conference in 1930, and in 1937 Burma became a colony administered separately from India (Wolpert 1997: 322).

12. Feeling somewhat marginalized by the Indian National Congress, the Adivasi Mahasabha, precursor to the Jharkhand Party, did indeed make an alliance with the Muslim League around the time of Partition. The Muslim League was at the time considering pressing for a corridor linking what became East and West Pakistan. The corridor would have moved through Chhota Nagpur (Mullick 2003: xv).

13. The image actually appeared on the front page of every issue from June to November in 1947. Thanks to George Gispert-Sauch, S.J., for making me aware of this and for securing a copy of the image for me from the Vidyajyoti College of Theology library in Delhi.

14. It is interesting that Christians have from the beginning been accused of divided loyalties. Jesus himself was crucified ostensibly for claiming to be the “King of the Jews,” and early Christians were persecuted on the grounds that they would not participate in rituals expressing loyalty to the emperor.

15. For an argument against the notion that Hinduism is and always has been non-proselytizing, see Sarkar (2007).

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