The Twice Marginalized: Ex-Mennonites in India

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The primary religious identity of Mennonites in India is that they are Christians. Their primary social identity is that they are almost all from poor, outcaste, or tribal groups. This combined religious and social identity determines their relationships to other Christians, Hindus, and Muslims and their legal status as Indian citizens. None of this is altered significantly if Mennonites leave the Mennonite Church and identify with another Christian group. But when Mennonites leave their Christian identity, either by simply rejecting it or by formally taking on a Hindu identity, then the religious, social, and legal changes are substantial. This change from a Christian identity is the principal focus of this paper.

Mennonites in India

There are 1,500 Mennonite congregations in India with 250,000 members.[1] These churches originated from European and North American Mennonite missionary activity that began in the late nineteenth century. Two main motivations have directed Mennonite

missions in India. First, the influence of pietism and evangelicalism resulted in a strong emphasis on "missions" in the late nineteenth century among many Mennonite groups. In the United States Mennonites established "home missions" projects in major cities and "foreign missions" among Native Americans in frontier regions.[2] Second, Mennonites also raised funds for international relief efforts in response to appeals to help support victims of earthquakes, famines, and wars that were reported in church periodicals and public newspapers.[3]

The first Mennonite missionaries to India were Abraham and Maria Friesen, Mennonite Brethren (MB) from south Russia.[4] In 1889 Abraham Friesen became pastor of an American Baptist Missionary Union (AMBU)[5] church in Nalgonda, about 100 kilometers east of Hyderabad. MBs in the United States were inspired by stories of the Friesen's ministry in India, so when they established the American Mennonite Brethren Mission (AMBM) they sent their first missionaries to the same region of India in 1899.[6] The first Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference (GC) Mennonite missionaries came from the United States to India in 1899 and 1900. Both of these groups established mission centres in the Chhattisgarh region about 500 miles southwest of Calcutta.[7] The Brethren in Christ Church established their first mission in the state of Bihar in 1914.[8]

Mennonites[9] went to these regions of India to establish churches because those areas were underserved by other Protestant mission groups. Within India "comity agreements" among Protestant groups were created to minimize competition with each other in geographical areas.[10] This mutual division of territory into spheres of mission work effectively produced regional denominational monopolies. Each group was usually the sole representative of Protestant Christianity in its region.[11] Thus while from a global ecumenical perspective the Christians in a region might be described as Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, or Mennonites, from a local perspective their primary identity was simply Christian. Over the years, regional Christian homogeneity diminished as churches grew and transportation improved. Denominations and independent churches are now intermingled in most regions of India and the movement of members between churches is common.[12] But from the perspective of the majority Hindu and the large Muslim populations, and in terms of legal status, such inter-confessional mobility does not change the primary religious identity of Christians. Their denominational identity is incidental.

Twice Born and Dalit

India's society has traditionally been structured by a caste system[13] in which the distinctions and interactions between caste groups are strictly regulated in all areas of life: occupations, marriage, social status, purity, interpersonal relationships, physical contact, and religion. The three upper castes (Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya) are "twice-born" (*dvija*).[14] The lowest caste group, the Shudra, are not twice-born and are relegated to occupations and roles that serve the upper castes.

Below these castes is an "outcaste" category, the "untouchables". Gandhi tried to dignify their status by calling them *Harijans*, "Children of God". Today the name usually preferred by these people is *Dalit*, "the oppressed".[15] They constitute about 25 percent of the Indian population. Dalits are consigned to occupations regarded as ritually impure and polluting, such as leatherwork, butchering, removal of rubbish (including carcasses) and human waste. Traditionally Dalits lived outside villages and were prohibited from drinking from the village wells or eating in places where the "caste Hindus" ate. They could not enter temples or attend school.

Since 1949 it has been illegal to use the term "untouchable" and to discriminate on the basis of caste, although such discrimination is still widespread.[16] A list or "Schedule" of low and outcaste groups was officially established and "reservations" were made for members of such groups in schools and the civil service. A similar Schedule was established for minority tribal populations. The opportunities offered by this "affirmative action" are highly prized. Through them many members of these groups have achieved significant professional and economic success.

Twice Marginalized

Mennonite churches in India, like churches of most Christian groups, were established primarily among marginalized people, poor, low caste or outcaste, and tribal groups.[17] They were almost all illiterate. Many of the first Mennonite converts were low and outcaste employees of the missionaries, residents of the leprosy hospital, orphans, or children at schools established by missionaries. Nearly all Mennonites were people already marginalized by caste and economic status.

But their conversion to Christianity marginalized them the second time. In the joint family system of India relationships are

defined by birth, marriage and caste. Money is shared and property is held jointly. Children are socialized collectively. Religious identity and practices are shared. The family is closely linked to relatives and to members of the common caste. Christian converts created disruption within their families and communities.

A Christian convert was often expelled from the joint family, barred from contact with children, and excluded from property rights.[18] The crucial step that precipitated these social sanctions was baptism. This signified the rejection of one's birth community and identity in favour of another.[19] During the time leading up to baptism there was, and still often is, tremendous social pressure to remain loyal to the community of birth. As the pressure mounted during this pre-baptismal period Mennonite churches commonly used this time (up to a year) for intense teaching and support for converts. Many new Christians endured beatings, destruction of homes, expulsion from villages, and public humiliation. Sometimes this was enough to prevent them from being baptized. Other times the continued harassment after baptism induced them to return to their ancestral religion and to be reincorporated into their family and caste community.[20]

There is a further consequence of this second marginalization that affects Christians. Indians from the scheduled castes who would normally be eligible for reserved positions in schools and in the civil service are excluded from these rights if they become Christian (or Muslim). This has been a highly contested matter in India for many years.[21] The rationale in favour of this exclusion is that since these religious communities declare that they do not recognize caste distinctions, those who join them lose their caste identity and thus should not be eligible for privileges available only to people who are scheduled castes. The argument against this exclusion is that whether low caste and outcaste people are Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, or Muslims, they are mistreated and marginalized in education, employment, housing, and social relationships. Their identity is known in villages and small towns. And in other places their identity becomes quickly known because of their names, which identify them by language, region, and caste. Furthermore Christians, like Muslims, often have names that express their religious identity. Names like Mary, Miriam, Hannah, John, Abraham, and Thomas are common. So even if Christians have names that do not reveal their caste identity, their names identify them as Christians and make them vulnerable to religious and caste discrimination.

In this context, who are the "Ex-Mennonites", how did they become "ex", and what is their current situation?

Ex-Mennonites Generally

Religious groups everywhere do not record losses as carefully as gains. New members are counted and celebrated. Ex-members are forgotten. Mennonites in India are no different. There is no widespread, systematic, documented information about former Mennonites. Ex's are not often tracked, thus their motivation for leaving and their current situation is usually unknown. But anecdotes, impressions, and estimates are offered by various authors and current Indian church leaders.[22] Some of these describe phenomena that are familiar in many places. Three are distinctive to India.

Briefly, these are reasons why people leave Mennonite churches in India that are not much different from reasons why people leave Mennonite churches anywhere.

1. Professional or personal relocation. Since Mennonite churches are in specific regions that are mostly rural and largely poor, relocation to another region or to major urban centres usually means leaving the Mennonite church.[23]

2. Preference for other churches. Other local churches may be attractive alternatives because of their dynamism or because they provide programs that meet the interests and needs of a person or family. Programs for youth are a common reason for families to move to new congregations and change their religious affiliation.

3. Problems in Mennonite churches. These may be congregational or broader denominational issues. They may involve theological or pastoral concerns, dissatisfaction with leadership, inadequate facilities, or divisive internal conflicts.[24]

4. Attraction to independent congregations or movements with charismatic leaders. The non-denominational Assemblies started by Brother Bakht Singh (1903-2000) in Hyderabad and other parts of India,[25] for example, have many former Mennonite followers. In addition, a substantial number of Mennonites retain their Mennonite church identity but participate primarily in the Assemblies.

5. Marriage. Women nearly always move to the church of their husband and his family, especially if they become part of an extended family household.[26]

6. Drift away from church. This is usually the most gradual departure. It happens for greatly varied personal, relational, lifestyle, and theological reasons. Sometimes relationships with individual church members

remain positive, but church and Christian identity are no longer a significant factor in a person's life.

There are three distinctively Indian reasons why Mennonites in India leave the church or disavow their Christian identity: persecution, Hindu cultural-religious practices, and caste identity.

Persecution in India

Christians are persecuted in many regions of the world, but the persecution of Mennonites and other Christians in India has several distinctive characteristics.

India has long had a plurality of religions and it is therefore often regarded as a model of religious pluralism. This implies that the various religious communities in India interact with each other with mutual respect, regarding each other as valid pathways to meaningful lives and to the divine. But in a dominantly Hindu setting pluralism has a distinctive character. Along with a broad affirmation of the validity of many pathways there is a strong emphasis on the importance of remaining in the tradition of one's birth and family. All people, whether Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, or Christians are expected to follow the religious traditions into which they are born. To leave the tradition of birth is to betray family and community.[27] Religious pluralism is expressed through fixed communal identities. Within those identities substantial aspects of other religious worldviews can be incorporated. For example, Hindus may revere Jesus or Mary or Christian saints along with a wide diversity of Hindu gods, goddesses, and spiritual exemplars. They do not need to reject their primary Hindu religious identity to do so.[28]

Mennonite beliefs and practices are rooted in the premise that individuals can and must make a commitment to follow Christ alone and become part of the Christian community, regardless of their family's religious identity and in spite of pressures from family, peers, or the state. Pluralism, from this perspective, is interpreted primarily as the freedom to choose a religious identity.

This difference in understanding religious identity has caused countless disagreements and confrontations in India. Some Hindu organizations in India, such as the Arya Samaj,[29] actively challenge and confront Christians who attempt to propagate their religion to those outside their own religious community. These confrontations have gone on for more than a hundred years. Mennonites from all regions of India have experienced physical and vocal disruption of

their public and private meetings.[30] The Arya Samaj has designed "reconversion" (*shuddhi*) ceremonies and expectations for those who wished to revert from Christianity back to Hinduism.

Persecution can break the commitment to Christ and the Church. Throughout the history of Mennonites in India there have been individuals and families who left the church and returned to their ancestral religions because of persecution.[31] Sometimes they did so during the extended period of baptismal preparation, sometimes after baptism.[32] Persecution included beatings, destruction of homes and churches, expulsion from villages, exclusion from the community's water supply, and public humiliation. Individuals were sometimes abducted by their families and moved out of the local community to prevent their baptism. There is little or no documentation of how they were subsequently treated by their families and Hindu communities.

Hindu Cultural-Religious Practices

In Hindu culture most life-cycle occasions are marked by ceremonies and rituals that are explicitly religious, such as lighting sacred fire, offering gifts to the images of gods, invoking gods for protection or good fortune, and reciting sacred words and texts. Celebrations of birth, marriage, and death as well as occasions such as the beginning of a new business, planting and harvesting crops, experiencing illness and accidents, departing on a journey, or preparing for university examinations usually involve religious ceremonies. Mennonites, like most other Christians, expect that their church members will not participate in such ceremonies. Social-religious sanctions against those that do have sometimes included ex-communication.[33]

Christians are sometimes drawn into these ceremonies in three major ways. First, when a Hindu family member dies, it is difficult for Christian members of the family not to participate in the funeral activities if the rest of the family wishes them to be present. Being present but refusing to participate in the ritual activities can seem disrespectful. Yet participating selectively is complicated. When Christians participate they sometimes explain this by appealing to the Pauline suggestion that eating meat offered to idols is acceptable so long as it does not offend someone else.[34] But it often does offend someone else and this has led to ruptures in the church family.

A second common challenge for Christians is participating in community events that involve religious practices. Christians and

other members of a community may be solicited for funds to refurbish the local temple, to support children marching in the annual procession honouring a god or goddess, or to propitiate a god when the rains have not come in time or when illness strikes.[35] Some Christians refuse such requests consistently, others do so selectively, and explain their participation as an act of community solidarity. These differences can cause dissension in the church, and have led to the departure of members.[36]

Third, Hindu religious life provides many rituals to address all of life's opportunities and challenges: childbearing, illness, the success of crops, protection from storms and floods, finding a propitious date for a wedding, and much more.[37] Protestant Christianity offers little ritual for most of these situations. As the anthropologist Paul Hiebert noted, this "excluded middle",[38] between the abstractions of theology and the naturalism of scientific technology, is where most people in the world address the major issues of life. In the absence of rituals for such events, many Christians in India have used the practices of their Hindu communities, generally with some modifications to make them more Christian. Sometimes this incrementally draws people back into their Hindu worldview and community. In other situations it has led to creative syncretism.[39]

All three of these adaptations to the dominant Hindu way of life have at times led to the expulsion or disgruntled departure of people from the Mennonite church. Expulsions were more frequent and rigorous during the early decades of the missionary era. Mission reports occasionally mentioned with sadness that some members of the church had been excommunicated for worshipping idols.[40] There seem to be no systematic records of how many of these people subsequently returned to the church or whether they reverted to their former Hindu religious practices and communities.[41] The practice of ex-communication is much less frequent among Indian Mennonites today,[42] just as it is far less common among North American Mennonites.

Caste Identity

As noted earlier, one of the consequences of the second marginalization of Christians is that they are excluded from the positions in schools, the civil service, and elected bodies that are reserved for those from low and outcaste groups.[43] Although they are from those groups, they are ineligible because they are Christians.

This is one of the most perplexing current challenges for Mennonites in India. Ways of resolving it exist, allowing Mennonites to receive these advantages in education and employment. But these solutions raise significant questions of identity and integrity.

A common solution takes this form.[44] A child is born to an outcaste, "scheduled caste", Mennonite family. The parents anticipate that the child will face discrimination because of both its caste and its Christian family identity, so the child is registered with a Hindu name. In daily life the child may be commonly known by a different, more "Christianized" name that is very similar. For example, the Hindu name Yeshoshiva (the eminent Shiva) could be exchanged with Yehoshua (Joshua). Or Vikas (enlightened) could be the name used in school while Viswas (believer) might be used in church. When the time comes for the child to be registered for school and for educational benefits the Hindu name is used. As the child grows to adulthood the same alternation between names occurs.

But as children reach adulthood another requirement often arises. A certificate authenticating caste identity needs to be signed by a local official. Sometimes a Mennonite pastor is asked by the official to certify that the person in question is not a Christian, which is taken to mean that the person is not baptised. This process is more complicated once people have been baptized, for then it is usually necessary for them to formally renounce their membership in the church before they can get a certificate. Pastors are often under great pressure from their church members to delay the baptism of young people and to provide certificates confirming that the person is not a Christian. Then these young adults can be eligible for the educational and employment opportunities like other members of their caste group, and thus become well established in universities and professions.

Discussion about this issue in Mennonite churches are ongoing. Some argue that until a person makes a profession of Christian faith that is confirmed by baptism and entry into church membership, that person is not formally a Christian, even if raised in a Christian home and enculturated into a Christian identity. The person's default identity, by official Indian standards is the caste identity which is a Hindu category. Thus the person is a Hindu unless explicitly claiming another identity. As a Hindu the person can appropriate elements of other religious practices and devotion, and some of these elements may be Christian. Some argue that this is consistent with viewing faith in Christ as a "way" and not a

separate religion. Others say that a person is a Hindu or a Christian, one or the other.

As a result of this complex issue, a significant number of people are not so much "Ex-Mennonites" as "near-Mennonites" or "non-Mennonites". Some carefully protect this status by staying away from the church and limiting public social interaction with Christians of their own low or outcaste group. For some this becomes a way of life and they never enter the church. For others this is a provisional status, to be adopted until its benefits have been utilized.

There are factors that mitigate the pressure to deny or delay Christian identity. Mennonites in India established many educational and some professional institutions, partly to serve their communities and create opportunities for Christian witness, but also to provide education and employment for Christians who would not have similar opportunities in the public system. These institutions still provide these alternatives, although their capacity is very limited. Second, some people who are low caste have become economically self-sufficient enough to pay for education in other private institutions that do not allocate openings based on caste. Finally, the economic liberalization and economic growth of India in recent decades has created many new employment opportunities. Competing for scarce positions in government service is not as attractive as it once was.

Summary and Concluding Observations

In the Indian context the categories "Christian" or "ex-Christian" define people more significantly than "Mennonite" or "Ex-Mennonite". Their Christian identity decisively shapes their social location and opportunities.

Indian Mennonite leaders consistently indicate that they are not greatly concerned about Mennonites who for various reasons find their way into other churches. At times a significant number of people move from a church or denomination because of internal conflicts or weaknesses. Those internal problems cause considerable grief and disruption and must be addressed. At other times other Christian groups become compelling alternatives. That situation cannot be avoided in an era of great Christian diversity in many parts of India. Of course, both of these dynamics can just as easily favour Mennonite churches. They sometimes gain members from the troubles of other churches, and they are sometimes attractive alternatives to members of other local congregations.

Within India the dominant cultural expectation is that each religious community will socialize and retain its members. Raising children within their own ancestral tradition is normative. Christians are free to socialize their children into the church. The frequent fierce opposition to Christian activity is almost never against the pastoral care and formation that is an internal activity of the Christian community. It is conversion of people from other religious traditions that is so widely criticized and adamantly opposed.

While no public opposition to Mennonite young people being socialized into their churches exists, the complex social and legal forces of persecution and marginalization often result in Mennonite families and churches themselves being major agents of restraint. Christian formation and incorporation into the church is sometimes delayed to allow young people to take advantage of benefits that can help them to establish themselves economically and professionally.[45]

Mennonites in India are twice marginalized by their Christian outcaste identity. They profess a faith and offer a community that attracts others with similar social status, but rarely those of higher status. Yet, even as a partly disenfranchised and often persecuted minority, these communities of faith continue to grow and to serve others in the name of Christ.

Notes

1 There are two substantially different numbers available, both accessed on September 20, 2014. These 2012 numbers are from the GAMEO website http://gameo.org/index.php?title=India .The Mennonite World Conference (MWC) website cited 150,000 members in 1,400 congregations based on "2009 or earlier" data. http://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/mwc_world_directory_w_links_minus_cover.pdf The discrepancy is based on differences in the Mennonite Brethren data, which show an increase of congregations from 840 to 964 and members from 103,488 to 200,000 between 2006 and 2012.

2 See James C. Juhnke, *A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Mission* (Newton KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 1-14, and Wilbert R. Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Missions 1850-1999* (Elkhart IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000), 38-42, 50-52. Mennonites in Canada followed a similar pattern of "foreign" and "home" mission later in the 20th century. Their foreign mission activity was usually undertaken through the mission organizations already established by American Mennonites.

3 Edmund George Kaufman, Mennonite missionary to China (1917-1925) and President of Bethel College (1932-1952) wrote, "It has been pointed out that emergency needs have helped to stimulate Mennonites to take an active

interest in the relief of suffering and how this activity has been carried over into the missionary interest after the emergencies subsided. The same can also be said regarding the establishment of orphanages, old people's homes, hospitals, and other charitable institutions. The history of Mennonites is one of much persecution and suffering and they themselves have always had a warm heart and open hand for those in need." *The Development of the Missionary and Philanthropic Interest among the Mennonites of North America* (Berne, Indiana: The Mennonite Book Concern, 1931), 117-18. One example is the Mennonite response to George Lambert, an entrepreneurial minister from Indiana who travelled around the world in 1894-95. Later, when he became aware of the famine in several regions of India in 1897 he raised substantial money and grain through a public appeal. He travelled to India in April 1897 and oversaw the distribution of food and money. While there he sent weekly reports to the Mennonite paper, the *Herald of Truth.* Later he published those reports in a book titled *India, the Horror-Stricken Empire, Containing a Full Account of the Famine, Plague, and Earthquake of 1896-97. Including a Complete Narration of the Relief Work Through the Home and Foreign Relief Commission* (Berne, IN: 1898). For an assessment of his importance see Lapp, chapter 3.

4 Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telegus: The Mennonite Brethren Mission in India 1885-1975* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1997), 1.

5 Penner, 3.

6 Penner, 12-13.

7 Now named Kolkata.

8 In addition to Peter Penner's account of MB missionaries and their mission agency, Paul D. Wiebe has written, *Heirs and Joint Heirs: Mission to Church Among the Mennonite Brethren of Andhra Pradesh* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2010). The story of the Mennonite Church in India has been told by John Allen Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India, 1897-1962* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972) and P.J. Malagar, *The Mennonite Church in India* (Nagpur: National Council of Churches in India, 1981). Ruth Unrau wrote, *A Time to Bind and a Time to Loose: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church mission involvement in India from 1900-1995* (Newton, KS: Commission on Overseas Mission, General Conference Mennonite Church, 1996). For an account of Brethren in Christ mission see, Harvey Sider, *The Church in Mission.* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1975). Missionaries and mission agencies published twenty-five year and fifty year anniversary volumes in addition to regular annual reports. There are numerous memoirs and biographies of Mennonite missionaries in India. Mennonite archival collections in Fresno, CA, Newton, KS, Goshen, IN, Waterloo, ON, and Winnipeg, MB and Mennonite church periodicals have been rich resources for this study.

9 From this point on "Mennonite" refers to churches and individuals within the Mennonite World Conference family whether their name is Mennonite, Brethren in Christ or some other regional or local designation.

10 Lapp, 25, 96. Penner, 4, 17-20. This was a common Protestant mission practice globally. See, R. Pierce Beaver, *Ecumenical Beginnings in Protestant World Mission* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons,1962). See also, R.G. Tiedemann, "Comity Agreements and Sheep Stealers: The Elusive Search for Christian Unity among Protestants in China," *International*

Bulletin of Missionary Research 36, no. 1 (2012): 3-8. The concerns that led to comity agreements in India are outlined in Michael Bergunder, "Proselytism in the History of Christianity in India," in *India and the Indianness of Christianity*, ed. Richard Fox Young (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 181-195. George Lapp recounted, in a summary of Mennonite Church mission in India, that the first Mennonite Church missionaries chose Dhamtari because "The Home Board had insisted that they do not locate within thirty miles of any other established Missions in order not to encroach on their territory or work." Goshen HM 1-143 Lapp Box 3, File 7.

11 The Mennonite Brethren entered their region as partners with the American Baptist Missionary Union (AMBU). Over time the area was formally divided between the two groups into "fields" of primary responsibility.

12 Wiebe, (2010), 297. In a report titled "Forty Years of Mission Work in India", P. A. Penner wrote that during the previous year (1940) a large number of people who had "come knocking at our Church doors are Christians belonging to the English Baptist Mission." He also described the many ways in which the General Conference Mennonite Mission (GCMM) cooperated "with neighbouring Missions in the various phases of missionary activity." *India Calling,* 2, No. 1, January 15, 1941, 1-2.

13 This social system has been widely documented and analyzed. For example, Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (London: Paladin, 1972). For the purposes of this discussion the brief description by the sociologist Paul D. Hiebert is a sufficient overview. See his, *Christians in Andhra Pradesh: The Mennonites of Mahbubnagar* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1988), 5-10. The separate but related concepts of *varna* and *jati* are described in his account of the caste system.

14 They are born once physically. Then, about twelve years later, male members of the caste undergo the sacred thread ceremony and are initiated into the second stage of life.

15 Wiebe, (2010), 188.

16 Marc Galantar, *Competing Inequalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984) provides an extensive description and analysis. Galantar and many others also confirm that despite these legal provisions, discrimination based on caste is still extensive. See for example the "Human Rights Watch" report, http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/14/india-un-members-should-act-end-caste-discrimination.

17 See Wiebe, (2010) 14-23, 158-167. During the years of British rule in India the term most commonly used for this segment of Indian society was the "Depressed Classes". See for example the "Minutes of the Executive Committee of the National Christian Council", January 10-13, 1936, 4-6, in Goshen IV-17-4 American Mennonite Mission – India, Secretary File 1935-39, National Christian Council.

18 Unrau, (1996) 107-108.

19 Baptism was often the time when Christians changed their names to European or Christian names or to Christianized versions of their former names. For example, a convert named Sevak Ram (servant of Ram) declared at his baptism that he would henceforth be known as Sevak Masih (Servant of Christ). *India Calling,* August 15, 1943, 1. This practice was common among Protestants in India from as early as the 18th century. See, Heike Liebau, "Country Priests, Catechists, and Schoolmasters as Cultural,

Religious, and Social Middlemen in the Context of the Tranquebar Mission," in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500,* ed. Robert Eric Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: William D. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 81.

[20] Such persecution is described in Mennonite mission reports in church publications, in reports that missionaries wrote to mission boards, and in many studies of Christian churches in India. For example, C. H. Unruh's "Nalgonda Reports" for 1929 and 1930, in Box 4, A250-6-2 Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services: India Mission Records, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA. The General Conference Mennonite Mission (GCMM) publication *India Calling* often reported such persecution. For example, S. T. Moyer's article, "Religious Freedom?" in May 15, 1943, 4. In a letter to his father, dated January 15, 1934, Peter A. Penner of the GCMM wrote that a couple was about to be baptized but changed their mind when their son threatened to kill himself. Bethel, MLA-MS-14, Peter A Penner Papers, Box 3, File 20. See also, Wiebe (2010), 190-192, and chapters 9-11 and Wiebe (1988), 128-131. Mennonite churches established in areas with substantial Muslim populations experienced strong resistance to Christian preaching, conversion, and baptism. Social sanctions against converts were very strong.

[21] Originally the Constitution extended these rights only to Hindus. In 1956 the Supreme Court extended these rights to Sikhs and in 1990 to Buddhists. After much advocacy within India and much criticism by human rights groups internationally, the Supreme Court in 2005 indicated that it was open to hear the case to extend these rights to Christians (and Muslims). In 2011 it indicated it would examine the case. There has been no action. The current federal government in India and many state governments are strongly opposed to extending these rights to Christians and Muslims. See, http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/supreme-court-to-examine-quota-benefit-to-dalit-converts/article1108895.ece, and http://www.dalitnetwork.org/go?/dfn/news/C149/ (accessed January 14, 2015). Another reason that this exclusion is so strongly contested is that members of scheduled tribes do not lose their status when they become Christians. For a discussion of controversies about the conversion of tribal people see Bengt G Karlsson, "Entering into the Christian Dharma: Contemporary 'Tribal' Conversions in India", in *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans's Publishing Co., 2002).

[22] I acknowledge with gratitude that some of the information and many of the perspectives offered here depend largely on my email correspondence with Emmanuel Minj and C. S. Joel in 2014. Minj was Director of the Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India (MCSFI) for twelve years. Joel is currently surveying Indian Mennonite Brethren churches in cooperation with Mennonite World Conference.

[23] The Mennonite Brethren have several churches in Hyderabad (population 8 million) and a small presence in Mumbai (population 13 million). There are several Mennonite churches in Kolkata (population 15 million). These urban centres are so large that many Mennonites who move there do not live within a practical distance from a Mennonite congregation. Other major urban centres in India have no Mennonite churches.

[24] Wiebe, (2010), 171.

[25] Wiebe, (2010), 345. See also, http://www.brotherbakhtsingh.com /home.html

[26] The movement of women to the churches of their husbands is also the basis for membership gains in Mennonite churches. An Indian church leader commented in an email to the author (March 23, 2014) that the losses and gains from this factor probably were about equal.

[27] Many Hindu critics regard Christianity as a foreign religion and thus conversion to Christianity is also a betrayal of national identity. For example, in October 2000, K. S. Sudershan, the leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) publicly stated that Christian conversions undermined Hindu dominance, and encouraged secessionist movements. Cited in Susan Billington Harper, "The Dornakal Church on the Cultural Frontier," in *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans's Publishing Co., 2002), 183. The same criticisms are often made against Islam. See Wiebe, (2010), 330.

[28] This perspective began to be articulated in the early 19th century by leaders like Rammohun Roy. In 1893 Vivekananda brought this message to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. During the 20th century Gandhi articulated this view many times in speeches, interviews, and his many published writings.

[29] For a brief summary of the early history of this Samaj see Kenneth W. Jones, "The Arya Samaj in British India, 1875-1947," in *Religion in Modern India*, ed., Robert D. Baird (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 2nd edition, 1989), 27-54. The *International Review of Mission*, printed an Arya Samaj statement titled "Christian Missionaries – We Do Not Want Them Any More," in Volume 26, 1937, 394-403. General Conference missionary P.A. Penner summarized Arya Samaj core beliefs in a letter to *The Mennonite*, May 14, 1903, 5.

[30] Wiebe, (2010), 191-192. See a description of such incidents by Aldine C. Brunk, Goshen HM 1- 445 Brunk Box 1, File 11. Also George Lapp, Goshen HM 1-143 Lapp Box 4, File 17. Also J.D. Graber, "Strong Opposition," *Gospel Herald*, May 2, 1940, 120. Members of the Arya Samaj frequently publicly challenged evangelists to answer questions about the reliability of the Bible and the deity of Jesus that had been raised by European skeptics. They also raised questions about the credibility of Christianity by citing the misdeeds of its leaders.

[31] Wiebe, (2010), 266 cites an instance in 2010 when 37 of 100 Mennonite-Christian families in a village "reconverted" to Hinduism.

[32] Reports of such persecution that were published In Mennonite periodicals often focused on those who endured persecution and remained firm in their resolve to be baptized. For example the story of Jharruh written by P. W. Penner in *The Mennonite*, November 17, 1942, 20.

[33] This has been an ongoing and complex issue for all Christians. Susan Billington Harper describes how Christians were caught between the pressure to participate, from the dominant Hindu culture, and the pressure not to participate, from their churches. They faced serious consequences for either choice. See *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), chapter 8.

[34] I heard this rationale expressed in conversations during several visits with Mennonite church leaders in India in 1982-84. This was sometimes coupled with comments about the importance of honouring parents and keeping good relationships with family members.

[35] Paul G. Hiebert describes such an incident and its consequences in, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle", *Missiology,* Vol. X, No. 1, 1982, 35-47.

[36] Harper, (2002), 192.

[37] Wiebe (1988), 71-72

[38] Hiebert, *op. cit.*

[39] Harper, (2002), 195-196.

[40] The papers of John J. Thiessen (1893-1967) missionary with the GCMM in India, contain references to people being put out of the church for behavior that included participating in non-Christian religious activities. Bethel, MLA-MS-224, Series John Thiessen, Box 1.

[41] There are occasional hints in early mission reports that some members who were expelled from the church or who left of their own volition later returned to the church. For example, in 1915 the statistics included in the *Fifteenth Annual Report of the American Mennonite Mission* had the category "Number reclaimed" in the description of membership. At Sunderganj, that year, there were eight.

[42] This is the assessment of a Canadian Mennonite leader who has had regular contact with Indian Mennonite churches since the mid-1960s and of Indian Mennonite leaders who responded to the author's inquiries.

[43] They are also excluded from many preferential agricultural and home loans.

[44] This account is based substantially on an extended description of this issue in an unpublished thesis by Etala David Solomon at Trinity International University in 2008 titled, "Change and Continuity: Influences on Self–Identity of Christian Dalits of Madiri Puram Village in South India (1915-2005)". See chapter 6.

[45] *Ibid.* Solomon describes the complex pressures on pastors to provide the documentation that will help people get "scheduled caste certificates".