SPECIAL ISSUE | INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE IN INDIA: THEOLOGICAL REVISIONING

Politics of Easy Conversations: Savarna Faith Dialogues in India.
Nidhin Donald

Politics of Easy Conversations: Savarna Faith Dialogues in India.

Nidhin Donald
Jawaharlal Nehru University

This essay is a commentary on the contexts of Christian-Hindu dialogues in India. The first section would briefly capture the prevalent meanings of 'Christian-Hindu dialogues' in order to understand whether caste as a system critically informs these conceptualizations. The second section would try to place 'Christian-Hindu dialogues' within the framework of the 'Indian Nation' scripted primarily by a Savarna public sphere. This would be done by categorically analysing a book by Srambickal Kuruvilla George, a forerunner in inter-faith dialogues in pre-colonial India. The final section would contrast the dominant mould of 'Christian-Hindu dialogues' by specific examples of leaders and events from Anti-Caste movements in Kerala and elsewhere. This essay is an attempt to expose the underlying sociological assumptions of dialogues, especially Hindu-Christian dialogues.
Keywords: Christian-Hindu dialogues, Nationalism, Anti-Caste movements.

During one of my recent journeys in Delhi metro I overheard an interesting conversation which might serve as a good starting point for this essay. Two young men in this crowded metro were engaged in an 'inter-faith' dialogue of sorts. The 'Hindu' in this conversation was curious to know more about the 'Christian' and his history. The former began with a generally held notion that Christian Missions bribed people to embrace Christianity. The latter or the 'Christian' in this conversation did not deny this notion but responded by stating that 'those (bribed) Christians are lowly, *we* are not one of them'. This response was followed by a comprehensive explanation of the hierarchy within Indian Christians with the help of the national *Chaturvarna* scheme. The 'Christian' also gave everyday examples of this hierarchy in order to conclude that he (and his community)

belonged to the top rungs of the imagined Indian Christian world!

This anecdote can be dismissed with the help of a counter-anecdote which comprehends Christianity differently. I am deeply aware of its limits. However, what interests me is the epistemology of this conversation. The way of knowing and comprehending one's faith in a 'commonly-shared' language has been a perennial concern of inter-faith dialogues. In the above conversation the 'Christian' explains his identity within a system of caste hierarchy by creating a despised 'other' within his own imagined religious community. This despised 'other' is kept at a spiritual and material distance. Reproduction of this distance in everyday life is comprehended as an act of spiritual merit which places the participant at the top of the hierarchy. The whole thread of explanation was relatable to the 'Hindu' who is also deeply invested in the idea of caste-based hierarchy. The 'commonly-shared' language in the above case is drawn from a collective investment in the social hierarchy of caste.

Do we find any sustained examples of such an investment? The answer would be a yes. Kerala Council of Historical Research has collected over 200 family histories of Syrian Christians . I am in the process of studying a select few. A common thread which connects them is a shared investment in the notion of 'high birth' clearly articulated within the scheme of caste. The repeated mention of Brahmin origin in these literary productions cannot be traced back to any reliable historical source. However, as an oft-repeated myth it has gained a lot of social currency. The langauge of hierarchy is a way of communicating with a larger public (beyond one's church) which is legally identified as Hindu. In other words, the on-going project of family histories which include convening *Kudumbayogams* (family meetings), dedicating a committee to write the history and genealogy of the family, collecting and auditing funds for the project, launching and disseminating the book with the help of church infrastructure etc. is a conversation of privilege with a Non-Syrian Christian public. The cultural Hinduness emanating from the Brahmin origin is articulated as a reason for 'peaceful co-existence' with Hindu neighbours. Several textual strategies are utilized to press this point.
In short, the epistemological basis of dialogue can be a shared and naturalized notion of caste hierarchy.

This brings me to my central question: what is the language and context of Hindu-Christian dialogues in India? Does 'caste' inform its language and contexts? A detailed, exhaustive study of socio-historical contexts and language of inter-faith dialogues (in this case Hindu-Christian Dialogues) demands a lot of research time. This essay is limited in its scope and I do not make any exhaustive claims. However, the essay may sociologically inform and unsettle underlying as-

sumptions and categories of Hindu-Christian dialogues in India.

Michael Von Bruck (1992) in his essay points out that inter-faith dialogues envisage a sharing of *collective religious* experiences in a common language of comprehension. However, one can ask, what can be termed as 'collective experience'? Is it a sum total of all scattered fragmented and hierarchal experiences tied together due to a presumed 'unity' of religious identity? Or are they those experiences which are produced as a result of collective acts of meaning? The first proposition is internally fractured and would be sociologically emptied out very soon. The second preposition would considerably and logically reduce opportunities of 'collective experiences' as it demands unified collective action. Communal riots would probably top the list of 'unified collective action' in India.

Dialogues take place in specific places and contexts. It often assumes certain objective material conditions for its execution. It also demands at least operational definitions of the groups which are engaging in such dialogues. Though, the dialogue by itself may deny any fixed definition for groups, it does require definitions to identify the participants (Pannicker 1989; Chatterjee 1989). In other words, if we imagine a 'Hindu-Christian' dialogue, one needs to identify the 'Hindu' and the 'Christian'. If the same person claims to be both, as we have seen in the example of scholars like Raimundo Pannicker and Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, the individual still needs to mark out 'what' he calls Hindu and 'what' he calls Christian. This identification should be backed up by reasons. In short, definitions, identifications, differentiations and reasons for all of them need to be listed. One cannot escape these tasks completely. The bare minimum is warranted in the very idea of 'inter-faith' dialogues.

The terms 'dialogue' in the context of religion, assumes the need to overcome conflict and share 'religious experiences' harmoniously. Scheffler (2007) explains that mutual respect and absence of violence (in conversations) are preceded by histories of violence or social tensions. He writes that 'dialogues' have also led to bloody wars. Such bloody wars were then overcome by territorial exclusions, making 'dialogues' irrelevant.

He further argues that 'dialogue' has been a literary genre, which witnesses individuals endowed with what Pierre Bourdieu would call 'communicative resources' to prove the superiority of their view and expose the weakness of the opponents. He calls it a kind of 'intellectual warfare' which intersects with socio-political tensions. Trying to understand and contextualize dialogues would then mean a probe into the 'worlds' beyond words.

Scheffler writes that 'legitimate participation' in inter-faith dialogues is drawn from the 'recognized' intellectuals of a given faith. This would quite naturally

exclude many experiences and curtail the social scope of such a dialogue. Also, as Bruck points out that one who shares cannot be separated from what is shared. These observations are quite valid in the Indian context. However, along with attempts to prove the worth of one's faith, there have been active attempts to legitimize existing and 'newly-codified' social hierarchies through inter-faith dialogues.

The categories involved in inter-faith conversations are often frozen, denying each other the opportunity to grow beyond the already achieved community of believers. Thus, legally and socially, Muslims, Christians and other 'permanent' religious minorities would always remain 'minority'. They are getting into conversations with the legally identified 'Hindu' religion which would remain a decisive majority. Thus, one enters the dialogue as a permanent minority – a socio-legal status. This status has been further deepened in post-colonial India with successive attempts by State Governments to evolve an array of anti-conversion laws. Thus, quite clearly it is a dialogue between 'unequal' groups.

As mentioned above, only the 'recognized' intellectual participates in such dialogues. In a caste-valorised society, one can clearly guess the social composition and language of the 'recognized' dialoguers. Let me quote at least two examples to put across my point.

Krishna Mohun Banerjea was one of the earliest 'Brahmin' converts of the famous Scottish Presbyterian Missionary Alexander Duff. He is also considered the first Christian Convert, 'who made a serious attempt' to indigenize Christianity. He was ordained as a priest in 1852. Exploring relations between Christianity and Hinduism was one of his major academic concerns. He argued that 'Hindu Christians' are the only group who do justice to the theory and practice of 'Brahmanical Aryans of India'. He wrote that if the 'authors of Vedas' were to return they would at once recognize the 'Indian Christians'. (Massey 2014: 97-98)

Vedas and the cultures of Brahmanical Aryans were held as the 'shared' values which would connect Hindus and 'Hindu Christians' by Krishna Mohun Banerjea. How does he sociologically explain this selection?
The case of individual Brahmin converts to Christianity 'merits' a separate enquiry. Conversion brought them face to face with identity dilemmas and epistemological crises. According to Julius J. Lipner (1999), Brahmabandhav Upadhyay exemplifies these tensions and dilemmas. He writes –

> Was he a Hindu or a Christian? Surely he couldn't be both! Was he a reformer or a revivalist of Hinduism, of Christianity?

Lipner argues that Upadhyay cannot be easily placed in any 'disjunctive categories' of 'social, religious and political phenomena' of 19th century colonial India. However, in the same biography, one finds enough proof to conclude that Upadhyay closely held his caste-identity of being a Brahmin through the thick and thin of the 'identity crisis' in his life. Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya's letter to Annie Besant, in the heyday of his 'Christian' read as follows

"[...] As a genuine Brahman I was, while very young, agitated by the desire to know God (Brahmajijnasa) [...] In short, dear madam, I am a Brahman by birth and a Christian and Catholic by faith. [...] I therefore invite you to a public discussion with me on the above subject... I am a Brahman by my present and first birth, and you profess to have been a Brahman in your last birth. It is a Brahman's duty and a Brahman's privilege to hold religious discussions[...]" (Lipner 159)

Clinging to one's caste-identity with such resolve is not a surprising fact in Christianity. In the case of 'individual' upper caste theologians like Upadhyay it was also a strategy to communicate/dialogue with a larger 'upper-caste' audience. The almost 'rabid' repetition of the value-loaded noun/adjective 'Brahman' in the letter is an illustration of such a communication (Shobhana, 2016).

 Among the Savarna Christian theologians, especially the variety of Upadhyay (one can include A.J. Appasamy, Vaman Narayan Tilak in this list among others) the fear of 'denationalization' by embracing Christ was a perpetual dilemma. This dilemma was rooted in their social contexts, the policies of Colonial Government, and the rise of 'Hindu' nationalism (Aloysius, 1998). Keeping their 'upper-caste' titles and jatis intact, with periodic furnishing was a strategy to deal with these fears. These theologians also devised methods to 'indigenise' Christianity, often always invoking brahmanic cultural symbols. Thus, irrespective of their religious affiliation; their everyday personal and 'national' life continued to be forged in the grammar of castes. Hindu-Christian Dialogues are part of such a 'national life'. Now, let me move on to explain a specific case of such a dialogue with the help of S.K. George's book, a forerunner in inter-faith dialogues in early 20th century.

S.K. George's inter-faith dialogues
S.K. George's book 'Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity' was first published in 1947. This book is a product of a 'Hindu-Christian Dialogue' marked by the socio-political processes of its times. Before entering into the details of the book it is necessary to have a primary know-how about the author and his social field.

S.K. George was an Anglican theologian, a product of Bishop's College, Calcutta. By the second decade of the 20th century he decided to leave the Church and join M.K. Gandhi's movement. In the 1930s, S.K. George appealed 'Indian Christians' to join the Civil Disobedience Movement and embrace Satyagraha as 'cross in action.' He is revered as the perfect example of a Christian nationalist who did not mind straining his relationship with the Anglican Church. S.K. George was one of the early theologians to institutionalize the practice of inter-faith dialogue by organizing an All Kerala Inter-religious Students Fellowship in 1937 (Benjamin).

> Such a sphere of associated life was housed and nurtured by Christian Missionary infrastructure. They identified themselves as 'Indian Christians' and were closely associated with the 'national' elite. For example, S.K.George was a close associate of M.K. Gandhi and lived in Sabarmati Ashram for a very long time. Similarly, George Joseph described as the 'first Kerala Christian nationalist' (Joseph, 2003) was the editor of Young India brought out by Gandhi; K.T. Paul, the Christian representative to Round Table Conference was yet another close associate of the top nationalist leadership. Their associations with 'nationalist conscience' and attempts to merge or melt with the 'nation' can be understood with greater clarity only when we juxtapose their identities, lives and work with the events which characterize nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. (Shobhana).

Aloysius times the emergence of nationalism in India in the concluding decades of nineteenth century. In the biography of K.T. Paul, published in 1938, one finds the description of how the Indian Association was formed in 1876 which later facilitated the formation of Indian National Congress. As a child, Paul was influenced by Rev. Kali Charan Banerjee, 'the Christian Nationalist' and marks the Madras Session of Congress as an influential event in his life. One finds similar instances in the life of Narayan Vaman Tilak8, a Chitpavan Brahmin convert, baptized in 1895, who wrote many patriotic songs (Amaladoss 246 in Shobhana)

Savarna Christian public life in colonial India was not an exclusive self-sufficient sphere; one can only understand its emergence and growth in tandem with the Savarna Hindu public life which shaped nationalism in India. They were travelling together on major issues, responding to each other and finding an audience amongst themselves or in the 'West'. They were neighbours and friends, studying in common schools and colleges, speaking a common language. The fact, that they were all part of the 'Brahmanical' ruling class, is crucial in understanding the nature of their public life.

It is within such a context of shared national sentiments that individuals of 'high-birth' across religion were conversing with each other. These conversations

of common but 'inter-faith' contexts were largely oblivious and dismissive of lower-caste experiences and articulations of religion and public life. This point would be further deepened as we take a closer look at S.K. George's work.

Analysing the Book

> "It is my hope that this little book may awaken the interest of the Indian Christians to the reality of the problem and help them to give their faith its proper place in India's religious setting." – Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in the forward to S.K. George's 'Gandhi's Challenge to Christianity', p.6-7.

As Radhakrishnan predicted this book provides a blueprint on how Indian Christians should discipline their faith and find a 'proper place' in India's religious settings. It sets the conditions of conversations for dialogues in an 'Independent' India. The underlined assumption in the foreword and throughout the book being that India (Nation) is primarily 'Hindu'.

However, one finds no attempt to define 'Hindu' in the book. In fact George himself holds Hinduism as timeless, 'essentially mystical and non-dualistic' (p.42) making a tangible, material definition impossible.

In Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's '*Annihilation of Caste*' (1979) he exposes the nature of Hindu religion as a 'religion which upholds the sacredness of caste' or in other words it is a religion of caste. In his logical deliberations he also gives a positive account of what a religion ought to be. Religion should be based on principles and not commands and prohibitions (rules). It should be universal and responsible. It should practice fraternity and should work towards common goals. Hindu religion *in its practice* hardly qualifies as a religion, he describes it simply a collection of 'legalized class-ethics'.

However, we don't find any fundamental attempt by S.K. George to sociologically or politically ground the meaning of religion or Hinduism. He draws completely from an 'idealized' abstraction of Hinduism propounded by M.K. Gandhi. Gandhi's conceptualization of Hinduism cannot be separated from the political history of 'Hinduism' which kick starts only during colonial times. He draws his definitions from Semitic religions and its symbolisms. Like many other Savarna Hindu reformers of his times, Gandhi attempts to present a unified body of Hindus, based on a re-invented notion of Chaturvarna and by prescribing mostly from a single book – *Bhagvat Gita*. His definitions of Hinduism did not have any empirical base or material grounding. Instead of addressing the issue of castes, he develops a narrow and half-baked focus on untouchability. Gandhi's 'ideal' Hin-

duism was a product of his articulate mind. It did not emerge from the everyday practice of the society. It was completely blind to the struggles of the subaltern groups.

S.K. George shares this position of theological purity with Gandhi. For example, in the second chapter titled 'Gandhi and Peace' S.K. George compares the 'frail, half-naked' 'tender plant-like' appearance of Gandhi with the 'Servant of God'. He describes this appearance as an 'enigma to the Western World'. He calls Gandhi an embodiment of 'suffering'. Interestingly such celebrations of ' poverty' emerge from an individual who was born and brought up in one of the wealthiest Syrian Christian families (Srambickal) with opportunities to study abroad and a successful career as a writer and professor. The same contradiction is evident in the life of M.K. Gandhi.

S.K. George has tried to 'indigenize' Christianity through Gandhi's methods and metaphors drawn majorly from 'Hindu cosmology'.

S.K. George views evangelization as a treachery/betrayal of 'larger interests' which compounds as Hindu and national interests. Untouchables described as the 'submerged sixth' by George are just populations (and not persons) which constitute the main drawings of converts. According to him, they are converted without any spiritual actualization.

Any disturbance to a caste-ordained Hindu social order is seen as an act of national betrayal. In other words, nationalist Christians should uphold the sanctity of the existing order or reduce the problem of caste to 'untouchability'.

He consistently tries to place 'Christ' within Hinduism. This exercise is crucial as it philosophically determines the location of Indian Christians in a 'Hindu' India. He invokes the concept of *Ishta Devata* to achieve his goal -

'Today this battered Christian creed is thrown into the melting-pot of religions and civilizations, which is what the world is at the present time. Particularly in India it comes into the closest contact with Hindu thinking. The Hindu world-view is something that has maintained itself for centuries and is finding new life today. Is reconciliation possible between that and Christian thought? Is there a place in it for the personality and ethic of Jesus, for the cult and devotion centering round him? The Hindu will not say no. Hinduism is no closed, no credal system. It has certainly a place for Jesus among the many leaders and teachers it reverences as revealers of God to man, nay, as incarnations of God in His aspect as the Lover and Redeemer of man. Its conception of a favourite God, *Ishta Devata*, would sanction even *an exclusive worship of him* to those who find in such adoration the way to God-realization.' p.44 (Italics mine)

Very clearly, George invokes the concept of 'Ishta-Devata' as a strategy to legitimize 'exclusive worship' of Christ in an intrinsically self-sufficient and meritorious Hindu nation. Christ becomes one among an array of Gods and Goddesses worshipped in India without any scope of positive dissent. He substantiates this argument by pointing out how Western traditions of Christianity embraced cultures of Greek and Rome. Similarly, Christianity needs to be placed within Hindu intellectual traditions. It goes without saying, that caste, rather untouchability is viewed as a peripheral subversion which has not harmed the essence of Hinduism.

George attributes Christian missions to have catalysed nationalism in India. The rise of nationalism he argues has led to a 'new awakening' making India a 'veritable melting pot'. In such a context, he imagines Christianity to play the role of a 'little leaven' and not a 'rival' of the ancient religion of the land. In other words, Christianity should not grow as an oppositional discourse. This conception of Christianity, again, contradicts and betrays the social and political contexts of lower-castes in general and lower-caste Christians in particular.

In order to illustrate the prescribed role of Christianity, George gives the example of his own community – the Syrian Christians. He describes and explains the survival of the community in the following words –

'It settled down as a caste or community within Hindu society, accepting beliefs like the transmigration of souls and that Christian baptism was not essential for salvation.' – p.47

' [...] The survival of this small community through the centuries and its material prosperity under Hindu rulers show the tolerance of Hinduism and its willingness to assimilate other faiths, provided these are prepared to shed their exclusiveness and militancy.' (p.48)

In this book, which conceptualizes 'Hindu-Christian' dialogues through Gandhi, celebrates Syrian Christians as an example of spiritually nationalist citizens of India – a role model for all minorities.

This brings me to the personal crisis of S.K. George and Savarna Christians like him (discussed in some detail in the first section). Attempts to mitigate personal identity crisis and finding ways to negotiate with a nationalist elite which is predominantly Hindu has meant prescribing a formula for subordination and acceptance of status quo. I have argued elsewhere that S.K. George's work is a contribution to 'Hindu nationalism' prescribing strategies for peaceful subordination of religious minorities. This literary work falls in place with the historical trajec-

tory of S.K. George's Syrian Christian community, which actively aligned with upper-castes to oppress Avarnas and Dalits in Kerala.

George is convinced about the dominant position of Hinduism in India. He clearly argues that no attempt should be made to replace it or claim equivalence. He images this 'subordination' of minority religious thought with the help of the following metaphor -

> Any new light, any new emphasis that another religion may bring, must be added to the ancient faith, rather than seek to blot out the ancient light. Sometime after I had that experience in the Hindu temple I happened to see a Christian church built in Hindu style, as some Christian churches are coming to be built in India; and I was reminded of some of the smaller shrines adjoining the central structure in Hindu temple yards, and I seemed to see a vision of the future of Christianity in India, existing by the side of, never seeking to displace, the giant structure of Hinduism [...] p.51

The metaphor of 'smaller shrines' co-existing beside the 'giant structure' of Hinduism is very interesting in contemporary times. S.K. George is a philosopher of subordination. He imagines a similar role for all religious minorities. The metaphor is a path to claim nationalism under conditions of permanent subordination.

S.K. George lays down the conditions of dialogue within a frame of methodological nationalism. He views M.K. Gandhi as a launching pad for Christian claims to 'nationalism'. He also sets the tune of the power relation that Hindu-Christian dialogues should assume. In all of this, he completely evades the experiences and articulations of lower-caste Christian majority.
I will expand on these evasions and absence in the next section.

Anti-caste grounds of dialogue and dissent

> Some people mock and laugh at the idea of conversion for material gain. I do not feel hesitant in calling such persons fools. A religion which preaches what will or will not happen to the soul after death may be useful for the rich. (Ambedkar 2004)

The above lines are excerpted from a Marathi speech delivered by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1936 (Dadar) a year after his declaration to not 'die' a Hindu.

His speech underlines the material basis of conversion. He connects it to political representation, democracy, power and the urgent need to build social strength.

He hardly ever separates *material* and *spiritual* aspects of life. It is in the combined and irreducible unity of the material and the spiritual that he places the relevance of religion. Thus, any conversation which evades materiality and speaks only in terms of theological abstraction was abhorred by him as an indulgence of the *rich and idle* (Ambedkar 2004).

He appealed for conversion to achieve humanity, strength, organization, liberty and happy domestic life. Again, the material thrust of his argument should be underlined. This view is shared by many anti-caste intellectuals, leaders and communities who creatively shaped their approach to religion and in the process re-worked its basic tenets.

Aloysius in his essay on Periyar's views on Buddhism points out that the social, political and moral trajectory of subaltern groups stood against the 'dominant, national reconstruction of a non-differentiated and conflict free history of the sub-continent'. Subaltern groups departed from manifestations of 'classical religionism' which was characterised by an obsession with texts, sacred languages, meaningless rituals, near-omnipotent priestocracy and irresolvable questions of God, soul and life-hereafter (Aloysius 2005).

In his essay 'The Condition of the Convert' Ambedkar (1989) systematically puts up his sociological critique of Christianity. He asks whether the 'untouchable' Christian has access to public wells, schools, hotels, buses, barber shops, laundry services, public offices and 'touchable' quarters of the village. For Ambedkar, religion is for man (and not the other way round) and should have a 'practical programme' based on a code of social morality shaped by fraternity, equality and liberty. If positive human life with decent material conditions is not possible within a religion, such a religion is of no practical use.

Furthermore, if religion is used to 'sanctify or ennoble' poverty, it needs to be rejected. He quotes several white missionaries who legitimized and rationalized the practice of caste as a 'social distinction' commonplace in every society around the world. The continuation of caste-based distinction was seen as a strategy or a 'policy' of making Christianity easy.

Robert De Nobili embodies this policy. In order to gain 'good' converts he declared himself a 'high caste' Raja from Rome. He accepted castes and practiced untouchability. He appointed high-caste servants and appointed a Brahmin cook in his Madurai home. His ways convinced many upper-castes to convert (Massey 74).

There are several such examples. Clearly, upper-caste Hindus were at the centre of the dialogue and practice in India. However, lower-castes authored new chapters in dialogue forcing at least a few missionaries to change their focus.

T.M. Yesudasan in his emancipatory and scholarly book titled 'The Genealogy of Scapegoats' narrates the story of 'Kali', a pioneer Christian. Kali was a thirteen year old slave-girl, who spent days underground after the abolition of slavery in Cochin to decide her course of liberation. Yesudasan points out that she weighed the possibilities of making life better and finally decided in favour of the English Missionaries. In July 1827 she knocked at the door of the CMS Mission Compound and demanded entry. The Missionary couple, Samuel R. and his wife were bewildered and were faced with a moral crisis by her determination. They knew her entry into the compound would invite the wrath of the upper-caste Christians. However, ultimately, they had to yield to her determination.

Yesudasan further mentions that young Kali not only survived in the Compound but also learnt how to read the 'New Testament' and demanded membership in the Church. She embraced Christianity and took up the name 'Lucy'.

The story of Young Kali is not an isolated episode. It is symptomatic of how Dalits had to fight their way into Christianity. These historical acts were 'political', if we understand politics as an organized process through which a community tries to fulfil certain goals to make their lives better and more liveable (Yesudasan).

The story of Kali or the story of Ditt (Massey), a pioneer Christian from the Chura caste who founded the Christian community in Sialkot region of Punjab stands in clear conflict with Gandhi's opinion on Dalit entry into Christianity. He writes in 1936 that 'harijan' conversions 'wherever it has taken place' were conversions of convenience which cannot be seen as acts of any spiritual value. He writes and Ambedkar quotes –

'Harijans have no mind, no intelligence, no sense of difference between God or No-God'.

Let me remind the reader that Gandhi was and continues to be celebrated as the 'embodiment' of Hindu-Christian Dialogue (Dabholkar). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1995) points out that the failure of Christian Missions to convert large numbers of Brahmins or other upper-caste Hindus can be traced to the basic tenets of Christianity, brotherhood and equality, which if put to practice, upsets the status quo. On the other hand, the steady flow of lower-castes into the Church clearly proved their reception to such universal principles. Ambedkar at once turns Gandhi's arguments against Dalit Christians upside down.

For Gandhi, 'conversion' was a 'convenience' which cannot be qualified as a spiritual act. Gandhi's conception of spirituality did not take into account the need for dignity and material comfort. On the other hand, Babasaheb human-

izes Dalit Christians and recognizes their agency and struggles. He puts forward a materialist understanding of religion.

Yesudasan critically denounces the term 'conversion' which assumes a move from one organized religion to the other. This assumption does not stand any historical or empirical test. History tells us that Dalits and lower-castes were not part of any organized religion comparable to Christianity.

Aloysius (2005, 2016) underlines that it was only during the colonial rule that a unified Hindu religion, 'recognized, labelled and integrated' within the Brahmanical Varna system came into being. Further, he underlines the historical processes in nineteenth century (permanent settlement of Zamindari system, documentation and interpretation of scattered Sanskrit texts as repositories of culture and religion, translation of this book view into legal codes etc.) which led to the formation of a unified Hindu religion. Such historical processes racially profiled a vast majority as Shudra and Ati-Shudra denying them access to public institutions. The Brahman and his preserves were made the standard and the 'natural leader' of a highly diverse and plural society speaking different tongues and enjoying different levels of autonomy.

Aloysius' anti-caste historical investigation and Yesudasan's rejection of the word 'conversion' places the entire project of inter-faith dialogue in jeopardy. The basic definition of religion and the pedagogy of inter-faith dialogues are drawn from the experience of Semitic religions. Many inter-faith dialoguers, time and again, do talk about the 'non-dualistic, mystical and non-dogmatic nature of Hinduism'. If this is factual, then what exactly is Hinduism in practical and operative contexts of inter-faith communication? Who is a Hindu? What is identified as Hinduism? Other than an undemocratic legal and administrative construct which can be traced back to the nineteenth century, what exactly is being referred to as 'Hinduism'?

This is an epistemological and political challenge. As argued in the first section, if faith representations are the sum total of the collective experiences of its people, sharing a common space (physical, emotional or intellectual), what exactly is the 'Hindu experience'? A similar question can be raised to Christianity in India as well. Ambedkar points out that other than a 'common inspiration' there is nothing that is common to the Indian Christian community. They are fragmented in terms of caste, race, language, region and denominations. What can be validated as common faith experiences of Indian Christians in a shared space?

One can surely argue that inter-faith dialogues are not always about 'representatives' of groups talking to each other. It could also mean 'individuals' talking to each other and sharing their individual experiences of faith. Raimundo Pannicker

(1989) explains this as a stage in inter-faith dialogue. However, can we completely divorce the individual experience from socio-political practices and historical processes? Why would one call it 'inter-faith dialogues' and not 'inter-personal faith dialogues'? Furthermore, who are these 'individuals' sharing a common physical space, speaking in a shared language devoid of irritants, anger or conflict?
The politics of decorum which is valued in such engagements makes room only for certain easy conversations. It would surely not include anti-caste intellectuals and leaders like Poikayil Yohannan or Pampadi John Joseph.

Poikayil Yohannan, a Paraya Slave, embraced Christianity and nurtured expectations of making life better. However, he soon realized the total control of institutional resources is in the hands of Savarna Syrian Christians. He creatively confronted them in meetings through his songs. Sanal Mohan (2005, 2011) recollects Yohannan's participation in the Maramon Convention where he confronted the Savarna groups. In an expanded vision of inter-faith dialogues, this would surely qualify as one. However, it does not strictly subscribe to any politics of decorum; rather it underlines the methodological use of anger and conflict.

Poikayil Yohannan formulated his own faith in 1910 - *Pratyaskha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS). PRDS programmes often began with the burning of the bible. This symbolic act was a rejection of intellectual slavery. Yohannan/ Gurudevan argued that bible was primarily an account of the Jewish people and was marked by specific contexts of time and place. The need to articulate one's own history lies at the heart of his rejection of Bible. Can't this qualify as an inter-faith dialogue? Why is 'anger' and positive dissent seen as negative? Audre Lorde in her essay 'Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism' (1982) writes –

> Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives.

Audre recognizes that anger is a source of progressive energy. She starts her essay by recognizing the trap in 'fearing one's own anger'. Lower-caste Christian experience of Christianity acknowledges the function of dissent and anger. If one compares the language and dialogic contexts of S.K. George and Kali or Poikayil Yohannan one realizes the glaring divide in their social visions.

S.K. George, very much like the 'Christian' dialoguer in the Metro recognizes

the need to hold on to the cherished notions of caste-based social hierarchies. On the other hand, anit-caste dialogic spaces have negated logics of hierarchy, ignored fears of 'denationalization' and thereby developed a language of possibility for the oppressed.

In lieu of a Conclusion

This commentary has been sociological. However, drawing clear lines between sociological and theological domains would be a blunder. Socio-cultural and po-litico-economic contexts influence and transform theology. The social standing and endowments of individuals and groups interpreting religion has always affect-ed its emancipatory potentials. Christianity clearly brings out this intersection of contexts and religious experience. One glaring site of this intersection is inter-faith dialogues, especially Hindu-Christian dialogues. The newly-formed constructs of nation, nation-state, national caste system, minority-majority binaries and myths of Hindu antiquity come to play in full swing. The work of S.K. George is highly instructive on this count. He lays down the conditions of submissive dialogue for minorities (esp. Christian Minorities) belittling the experiences and fights of the Christian Majority inside and outside the Church. Hindu-Christian dialogue has often been an attempt by Indian Savarna Christians to assert their 'Hinduness'. This uncritical acceptance of 'Hinduness' is foundational to all inter-faith engage-ments. Such an acceptance is a response to the demands of 'Indian Nationalism'. It is also a strategy for the Christian Savarna Public Sphere to maintain its spaces of hegemony with the help of their Hindu Savarna friends. This strategy shuns any constructive discourse concerning the paradigms of caste and theology which emerges from subaltern locations.

In this essay, I have argued that one finds 'anti-caste grounds' of dialogue and dissent in the life of anti-caste movements. Anti-caste movements provide several creative and diverse responses to religion. However, they seem to be completely absent in the 'intellectual' deliberations of inter-faith dialogues in India. They have constantly made the white west their audience, valorising attempts to re-invent tradition (Abraham, 2008).The need to ask fundamental questions to this essentially political project of status quo cannot be understated. If we fail to do that, they would continue to remain 'easy conversations' of the privileged few.

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