Negotiating Traditions: Popular Christianity in India

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Abstract
This paper will look at converted Christian communities on the Indian subcontinent and the emergent rich bricolage of religious traditions. A narrative of Indian Christianity takes us almost imperceptibly into the realm of cultural convergence and communication. While the concepts of 'syncretism' or 'composite culture' have framed many discussions regarding this interaction, newer perspectives have begun to emerge. Syncretism sometimes implies the harmonious interaction of different religious traditions, while ethnographies bring up a far more complicated picture of contestation and struggle. We also need to look closely at patterns of religious interaction and engagement. Christianity may take from Hinduism, but this is not always the case. Sometimes both Christianity and Hinduism simultaneously engage with a different religious and cultural environment. Processes are more complex than they at first sight appear and, as this paper will attempt to show, some amount of historicisation is essential when understanding the ways in which they work.

Introduction

A discussion about Indian Christianity takes us almost imperceptibly into the realm of cultural convergence and communication, dialogue and dispute. While the concept of 'syncretism' or the notion of 'composite culture' have framed many discussions regarding this interaction, a much greater degree of sophistication has now begun to emerge. Syncretism is an attractive concept, not least perhaps because it seems particularly apt for the South Asian context. Everything in India (and South Asia in general) seems fluid and easily transmissible (Daniel, 1984; Trawick, 1990). The fluidity of cultures should not, however, blind us to the modes of signifying difference. Differences sometimes become manifest in the process of their mediation.

If syncretism implies the harmonious interaction of different religious traditions untouched by any sullying implications of contestation and struggle, then its value in the Indian context is even more doubtful. Further, when

viewing patterns of interaction we need to take the inquiry deeper. Christianity may take from Hinduism, but Hinduism is not everywhere the base environment, somehow already there, established and constant. Sometimes both Christianity and Hinduism *simultaneously* impact on a different religious and cultural environment. This is what happened among some tribal communities in the north-east of India. Christianity might take from these other cultural environments, from Islam, for instance, or from a particular tribal worldview. Or it might get 'Hindu' ideas through the grid of Islam, or vice versa. Processes are more complicated than they at first sight appear and some amount of historicisation is essential when understanding the ways in which they work.

The notion of 'composite culture' does not address the question of the negotiation of boundaries. It takes the existence of boundaries for granted, and rarely enquires into the mechanisms of framing difference. The dichotomy of the 'great' and the 'little' traditions sometimes constructed as the 'doctrinal' and the 'folk' or the 'text' and the 'context' dominated a great deal of anthropological writing on religion. Most of this writing tends to view the 'great' tradition as a static body of essential doctrine, belief and practice. The idea of the 'great' tradition as a systematised set of scripture or doctrine that is standard across times and cultures abstracts it so entirely from the domain of history that it is unable to perceive the particularity often sculpted in the shape of that tradition.

Another difficulty with this construction emerges when religio-cultural ingredients traceable to local or indigenous influences are assumed to be only remnants, which will soon fade and give way to the universal great tradition. This allows the dichotomy to be permeated with an implicit hierarchy, permitting covert entry of the idea that one set of traditions is authentic and enduring, the other somehow erroneous and fleeting. The dwindling away of the presumed remnants is not evidenced by contemporary ethnographies. Changes in the relation between Christianity and local traditions are not arbitrary, but may be linked to shifting social and political contexts. More recent writing on Christianity in India (Mosse, 1986; Bayly, 1989; Ram, 1991; Dube, 1995; Robinson, 1997) has configured the terms of the debate rather differently and we shall pursue the themes in greater depth presently.

Constructing and Mediating Boundaries

This section uses the ethnographic materials to try and understand the ways of negotiating boundaries and traditions among different groups. Among certain Christian groups, *jati* boundaries operated as the limits of the community. In

other cases, the Christian community was forged out of the conversion of different castes. Both inter-caste relations within particular communities and the construction and mediation of boundaries between Christians and their neighbours in different regions are relevant. One of the interesting cases is that of Kerala's Syrian Christians. This fish, pork and beef-eating group of Christians managed to negotiate their status in Kerala society in such a way that they were, and continue to be, held in high regard. This participation by the Syrian Christians in the moral codes of high-caste Hindu society, however, never completely erased the differences between the groups.

The history of the Syrians shows that they resembled elite South Indian Muslim trading communities in that they were separate from the 'Hindus' but integrated in terms of regional cultural attributes and had a strong sense of their geographical and vocational mobility. They came to own large tracts of land probably as rewards for their service to the Hindu rulers of the Malabar region. They were also granted titles and various kinds of honours and these defined them as a high ranking group within the local hierarchy (Bayly, 1989). As a high caste group, Kerala's Syrians maintained themselves distinct from other (later) Christian converts in the region. They had their own churches and the separate Syriac rites. It appears that like the Nayars, the Syrian Christians had a long past of cultivating warrior skills and serving the various ruling chiefs. The local rulers treated them with the honour due client warrior groups. The Syrians adhered to the rules of ritual purity held by the high caste Nayars and in the region's social hierarchy were accorded the same position. In fact, they were even granted the right of access to Hindu temples and sacred territory. Syrians of prominent families were patrons and sponsors at Hindu temple festivals (Fuller, 1976).

Ethnographic accounts of contemporary Syrian Christians also shows the extent of their participation in regional social and moral codes. The ceremonies of birth and marriage manifest many similarities with Hindu custom, particularly in the use of ritual substances, such as sandalwood paste, milk, flowers, areca nut and rice. Hindu symbolic codes, ideas about ceremonial foods and *prestations*, therefore, inform the domestic ceremonies in all life-affirming rituals. But the boundaries do not entirely disappear. Each group maintains its individuality within Kerala society, aware of and accepting similarities as well as differences. Though their cultic traditions have absorbed much from regional cultures, the inner life of the Kerala Syrian community is significantly ordered by its specifically Christian ethic and world-view (Visvanathan, 1993). The particular location of the Syrian Christians within Kerala's social structure perhaps permitted them to shield their uniqueness while participating, with great honour, in the region's cultural traditions. Their

incorporation as a *jati*, on par with the Nayars, ensured that their internal *jati* culture and traditions could remain distinct and respected as such by other groups, while they maintained their status by following the prevailing norms for inter-*jati* interaction.

If the Kerala instance marks out a group that integrated itself harmoniously with the traditions and codes of high caste Hindu society, it also shows how such a group might assimilate from Islamic culture. Kerala has always had substantial Muslim and Christian populations. Hence, it is not surprising that Islamic traditions should interweave with Christian ones, as much as Hindu traditions do. The Syrian Christian cult centred on the Mylapore shrine of Saint Thomas had considerable overlap not only with the South Indian cult of Murukan-Subrahmanya, but also with the cults of Muslim *pirs* in the nearby regions. The tradition of Saint Thomas attributes his death to the wound of an arrow or lance which, aimed at a peacock, hit him by mistake. Early Christian iconography depicts the peacock as a symbol of the resurrection and in one South Indian version of the martyrdom, the saint is said to have been shot by a hunter aiming at the most beautiful of a pride of peacocks. The bird dies and is transformed into a human being, revealed as Thomas. As the wounded bird rises into the air, it leaves behind a human footprint on a slab of stone. Certainly, the glorious entry of the saint in heaven following upon his death is prefigured in such a depiction (Bayly, 1989:263–265). The motif also binds in with prevailing South Indian traditions. The peacock is the preferred *vahana* of Murukan, the Shaivite deity, just as the lance is one of his typical markers. Other forms of the merging of traditions are perceived. South Indian cults, both Hindu and Muslim, often revere the foot impressions of divine and saintly beings. Like some of the forest *pirs* of the Kerala Muslim tradition, the saint was also said to be a creature of the wilds, retreating to a jungle cave and, ultimately, falling victim to a forest hunter (Bayly, 1989:264).

Clearly, the modes of assimilation are not confined to what Christianity adopts from 'Hinduism'. Certain strands within Hinduism assume greater relevance. In the case of the Syrians, it refers to the warrior traditions: the traditions of the Nayars or the cult of the warrior divinity Murukan. Moreover, the sharing of traditions extends here to regional Islam as well. South Indian Sufi and Shaivite traditions had in common the theme of the wounding of the divine being and his subsequent resurrection (Bayly, 1989). Syrian Christianity may have absorbed something of Hindu warrior traditions filtered through Muslim cults or perhaps something of Muslim *pir* traditions captured within the Murukan complex.

Patterns of interaction and assimilation may not always be quite so harmonious. There are contexts in which a Christian group's relationship with Hin-

duism, for instance, may assume a particularly antagonistic form. The Catholic Camars of Uttar Pradesh are a marginal Dalit community who distance themselves from Untouchability, but also subvert both Brahmanical supremacy as well as the Catholic mission. Thus they manage to carve out some autonomous space even if it is only tactical and shifting (Schmalz, 2005). Their myths challenge the authority of the Brahmans and they have been known to use ritual occasions, such as the celebration of Holi, to express their anger against the Brahmans. Similarly, the ethnography on the Catholic Mukkuvar community shows that its relationship with Hinduism is also problematically defined. The group occupies a very lowly position within the South Indian social hierarchy. Its popular Christianity takes particular strands from Tamil non-Sanskritic Hinduism, in turn subverting these.

The image of Mary is dominant in Mukkuvar popular Christianity, but all reference to her virginity is suppressed; she is revered simply in her maternal aspect as Maataa and is worshipped as a divine being in her own right. Maataa has some qualities of a Tamil village goddess, particularly in her power to heal through possession. Mukkuvar religion also has a place for Hindu female divinities, such as the non-Sanskritic female village deity Eseki and her companions SuDalai MaaDan and Vannara MaaDan. Within Tamil Hinduism, Eseki has both harmful and redemptive powers in her capacity as a village goddess, and she is worshipped more prominently by the castes that are low in the social order. In this form and in her power to inflict wrath and destruction, the goddess inverts the Sanskritic image of the female divine as the submissive consort of a male deity. By opening its boundaries to the entry of Eseki and her companions, Mukkuvar popular Christianity both sets itself at a distance from Sanskritic imaginings and establishes a close but contentious relationship with Tamil lower Hinduism (Ram, 1991:61–75). Eseki is stripped of her redemptive capacities. It is the Maataa who retains the powers of healing. Eseki and her companions are viewed as purely evil beings. In the course of the healing process, Hindu gods and goddesses are often held responsible for the misfortune faced by the Christians (Ram, 1991:102–103).

The Mukkuvar fisherfolk are despised by upper-caste Hindus but, as they make their living outside agrarian society, they are not dependent on the latter for their material sustenance. The contests between the Hindu and Christian divinities, waged on the battleground of sickness and healing, may be viewed as encapsulating the antagonism of the fisherfolk towards agrarian Hindu caste society. Hindu gods and goddesses are the principal targets of the healers' rebukes. They are said to be the cause of Christian illness and adversity. The relationship of antagonism is condensed in the representation of Eseki as Mary's destructive, demonic other. This relationship captures the ambivalent,

indeed even hostile, stance of the Mukkuvars to caste Hindu society (Ram, 1991). It is therefore an expression of their autonomous religious identity that they are able to incorporate Hindu divinities while defining them, in opposition to the benevolent Maataa, as unrelentingly evil. This autonomy is achieved in part because of the separation of the fisherfolk from the socio-economic world of the agrarian caste system. Thus, while sacred boundaries may be fluid, the relationship with Hindu deities may be contested rather than simply syncretic.

The Paravas of the Coromandel Coast were converted to Christianity by the Portuguese about the same time as the Mukkuvar in the 16th Century. They too were a low-caste coastal community outside the domain of agriculture. However, the Paravas appear to have negotiated their position rather differently and their ability and motivation to do so must have arisen in part because of their access to wealth from the revenues of maritime trade and a certain amount of prestige from their participation in that trade. As pearl fishers, the Paravas benefitted from pre-colonial maritime business. Parava histories draw on images of the past to construct the community as a regal one (Roche, 1984). Kshatriya identity is assumed and the Paravas sometimes see themselves as the progeny of Shiva and Parvati, their profession being a result of divine ordinance. Paravas used the symbols of Christian identity to shore up their claims to royal origins. Shunned by the high castes, their access to wealth and education after conversion ensured that they could attempt to spread out, urbanise, acquire new skills and enter different professions. All these aided in the process of upward social mobility.

The Paravas appear to have adopted, with considerable enthusiasm, the insignia and marks of Christian and Portuguese nobility and high rank. The caste head or *jathithalaivan* wore a gold cross and chain and assumed the title of 'Senhor dos Senhores.' It clearly served the purpose of the Portuguese to patronise this group for they could then recruit the skilled labour of the Paravas to keep the activities on this 'fishery coast' running smoothly. Moreover, by offering the Paravas protection from sea-faring Muslims groups in the region, the Portuguese were able to bind them in clientage and to extract some of the profits of the trade in pearls (Roche, 1984; Bayly, 1989). For the Paravas, the appropriation of Christian customs and practices served to render their caste identity much more cohesive and to lend legitimacy to their claims for Kshatriya status. The Paravas retained a series of specialist service castes, including barbers and washermen, in clientage. Corporate identity was maintained by the strict rule of endogamy. The assumption of Christian names and patronymics by the Paravas underlines their separate religious identity. It is also a mechanism employed in their bid for upward mobility. The Portuguese

gave only the Paravas the right to use these patronymics, in recognition of their status. Such a privilege did not extend to other maritime castes (Roche, 1984).

Undoubtedly, for the Paravas, tightening the boundaries of caste around the symbols of Christian identity became crucial for their social aspirations. Their position differs from the other groups described above. For the Syrians maintaining their status was critical; the Mukkuvars, or the Camars, lack the wherewithal to back a claim for higher rank. They distance themselves and assume a posture of antagonism towards caste society. The Paravas want to be recognised and to move up as an élite group in the caste hierarchy. The traditions of *jati* endogamy and of retaining the services of client castes are basic to maintaining the cohesion of the group. These combine with critical inputs from their Christian patrons. Together, such mechanisms reinforced the corporate identity of the *jati* and set it on its upward climb.

Village Religion

As a function both of their location within milieu often steeped in Hindu ethos, and their separation from it through their distinct religious identity, many groups developed ideas about a complex pantheon of Christian divine beings and the ritual modes by which their power could be accessed parallel to those existing about deities within Hinduism. Throughout western and southern India these ideas developed more fully, given the complex practices associated with temple festivals that they could draw on. Catholicism, with its panoply of saints and the different advocations of the Virgin, was much more likely to partake of such traditions. The divine benches in particular Protestant traditions were much barer, offering less scope perhaps for more flamboyant devotionalism.

In any case, Catholicism in these regions typically had its feast days, processions and cults, and its forms of worship incorporated many aspects of regional devotional traditions. Mosse (1994:305–306) gives a detailed account of the Catholic cult of saints in a village in Tamil Nadu's Ramnad district. Christianity trickled into these hinterland regions through trade and pilgrimage networks. It was the Jesuits of the Madurai mission who gradually extended their control over the Christian traditions of this region.

Christians are a tiny minority in Tamil Nadu's population, living effectively in a Hindu social and cultural environment. The Jesuits in charge of the Ramnad mission encouraged devotion to the saints, even while they rejected outright anything they associated with the Hindu religion. This encouragement

led to the development of complex ideas about a Catholic pantheon that was parallel to the Hindu divine universe. Christian villages evolved forms of worship for their rich calendar of saints' feasts that included processions and the making of offerings and vows. All these were available within the sacred traditions of local Hinduism.

There are at least three levels in the divine hierarchy. At the highest levels, the cultic traditions were distinct and separate. The deities of the great tradition of Brahmanical Hinduism are seen to belong to a different universe from the Trinity of Christian divinity. The rites conducted with the churches by ordained priests belong to one domain, the rites performed by the Brahman priest to another (Mosse, 1994:306). The interpenetration of cults is rare at this level. At the next level, though, the level of Mary, the saints and of the different Hindu village gods and goddesses, the intermesh increases. Catholic saints are included in the pantheon of the Hindus. Christians participate to greater or lesser extents in the worship of Hindu deities, particularly at annual temple festivals. At the final stage, much lower down in the hierarchy of the gods, at the level of ghosts and sundry divine agents of adversity, the interaction in cultic activity is at its greatest (see also Caplan, 1987).

As in some other regions of India, Mary is worshipped as a divine being in her own right and is not confined to her role as Mother of Christ. In fact, it appears that she and Christ together delegate power to the saints, whose power is seen as derivative. She is viewed as entirely benevolent, a representation that calls to mind the image of her held by the South Indian Mukkuvar. In fact, in western India too, Mary is the embodiment of all that constitutes the good sacred; ghosts (*bhut*) have a more ambiguous, potentially harmful quality. Saint James is the patron of the village described by Mosse, who guards its territory. The Hindu deities of the village are subordinate to him. The god Muniaiyar is represented as guarding the south door of Saint James' Church and punishing those who make false oaths in the church (Mosse, 1994:313).

Thus, while Saint James is said to violently punish those who offend him, the actual punitive role is assigned to his 'guardian deity,' the Hindu god Muniaiyar. Christian divinities retain the pure and holy powers; the more violent ones are projected onto their Hindu divine subordinates. Nevertheless, the demonisation of the Hindu gods and goddesses that we saw among the Mukkuvar does not take place. What really occurs is a split between benevolent and violent powers of the Christian deities. Saint James derives his power from Christ and the Virgin, yet his power is more violent and more circumscribed than theirs. They are benign. Their power is universal. He is more vengeful; his power is limited to the confines of the village. Muniaiyar is said

to enact the punishment; but he is acting only on behalf of Saint James and in his name.

Here lies the crux of the difference I perceive with Mukkuvar religion. The Mukkuvars demonise Hindu gods and goddesses, holding them responsible for a range of ills and misfortune that the Catholics have to face. This was attributed partly to the antagonistic social relations that the Catholic fisher-folk have with caste Hindu society. With the Ramnad Christians, divine punishment is meted out through subordinate Hindu deities but they are acting out the will of the Christian saint. The reality of the world of Alapuram Catholics is one of shared social interaction with the village Hindus. They are bound together by social and economic ties, by relationships of patronage and clientship, perhaps even kinship. Catholic images of their deities appear to acknowledge the continued relevance of shared interaction with Hindus and their social and divine worlds.

The relationship is hierarchical, however. The supremacy of the Christian divinities is admitted, even while they work out some of their powers through Hindu divine assistants. The hierarchy turns into an absolute divide when viewed outside the social and ritual context of the village. Saint James is also a deity of the 'forest.' The 'forest,' as it is mostly employed, is opposed to the village as confusion is to order. However, it is also a world in which the relational understanding of the divine that prevails in the context of the village gives way to absolute values. In the realm of the 'forest,' Christian divinities are simply pure and good. Evil is taken on by ghosts, spirits of the dead and Hindu divinities of the lower end of the pantheon. 'Forest Saint Paul' or 'Forest Saint James' exorcise these demons (Mosse, 1994:321).

The close interaction of Hindus and Christians in everyday social life finds its spiritual parallel in the incorporation of Hindu gods in village Christianity. The Hindu divine beings are, however, encompassed by the super-ordinate power of Christianity and this hierarchical relationship is sharpened into a complete separation when one moves outside the realm of the village, into the 'forest,' the more universal world of the non-relational divine. Here all Christian divine forms begin to partake of the untarnished purity that Christ and the Virgin alone claimed in village religion. In other words, this Christian group like others we have discussed retains a space for the expression of its separateness from its social and religio-cultural milieu. And, in doing so, participates in the absolute division between 'good' and 'evil,' Christian values and pagan ones that its Christian affiliation is premised upon.

I would like to return, though, to the world of village religion to bring out much more fully the complex interweaving of traditions that one finds when looking at the celebration of church feasts (Mosse, 1994; Robinson, 1998).

Festivals are marked by ritual processions in which the deity is taken around his/her domains in a distinctive chariot (*ter* in Tamil). He or she receives the offerings of her devotees and returns them in the form of *prasatam*. The Parava festival for Our Lady of Snows at Tuticorin was a lavish affair in which the image of the Virgin was wheeled around the streets surrounding the church on an immense *ter*. The Virgin is considered to be goddess and ruler of the domains she surveys. Her accoutrements and apparel signified her royal status. The deity would be shielded by a regal silk umbrella and her *prasatam* in the form of consecrated petals from the garlands that adorned the image and the chariot were distributed among the devotees. The ceremonial exchanges affirm the sovereignty of the Virgin and the loyalty of her subjects (Bayly, 1989:344).

There is no confusion of sacred images though, even while the continuity with Hindu ritual traditions is maintained. At Avur in Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu, described by Waghorne (1999), the style of the *ter* closely resembles that used by Hindu temples in the region but there are significant differences. The chariot has three layers of wood rather than six or seven as in Hindu chariots. Each layer is supposed to signify one realm of the Hindu gods. The author, therefore, surmises that the three layers of the Christian chariot signify the Trinity. The carved images on the chariot all reference particular events from the life of Christ or that of the saints. The image of the Risen Christ is draped in the auspicious (and pure) attire of the Brahman: silk *dhoti* and upper cloth of white silk with a gold border draped over the shoulders. The devotees hold up their inverted umbrellas to receive the *prasadam* of blessed flowers that adorned the chariot.

The intricate weaving of signs establishes and mediates differences. It is critical that the chariot procession records the rule of the Christian divine over his or her subjects. It is not a Hindu divinity being worshipped, under the 'garb' of Christian images. Neither can we argue that the continued presence of Hindu symbols and ritual elements at these celebrations denotes falseness of faith among the Christian believers. We need to examine more carefully, as I have tried to show above, the different ways in which and the varying levels at which boundaries are drawn and signified. Also, we might wish to remember that these are historical processes and, thus, there could well be changes over time. When the religious landscape, as Bayly shows in her work, was one which centred around kings, renunciants and goddesses, the 'declaration' of a much more exclusive religious identity was less crucial. It came in a later period, perhaps hastened by the disruptive processes and impact of colonial rule.

One of the best examples has been documented by Bayly, who shows that in the case of the Syrian Christians (1989:290–294), the colonial period saw

a dramatic deterioration in the relations between Syrians and Hindus of the higher castes. Colonial policies led to a disruption in the joint mechanisms of celebrating temple and church festivals which had existed earlier between the Syrian Christians and the higher Hindu castes. The colonial authorities seemed to think that the Syrians had been forced to contribute to temple festivals and ordered a cut in what they conceived of as wasteful expenditure on such festivals. Grants were now made to Syrian churches and this, among other things, exacerbated the tension between the groups. The Syrians had also begun to experience social and economic pressure due to the diminished position of their patrons, the rajas, who entered into tributary alliances with the British. Missionaries in the region added to the general turbulence by equating low-caste Christian converts with the Syrians and campaigning for rights and honours for them on par with the latter.

All this led to greater distinctions being drawn between the Syrians and upper-caste Hindus. By the end of the 19th Century, Syrians were regularly kept out of Hindu festivals. There were often violent conflicts between the groups. The missionary drive to 'reform' the heathen-influenced rites and practices of the Syrians led to tensions and splinter groups within the community itself. It became a matter of greater importance to fight one's rivals within the community — in court battles for church treasury control or the like — than to regain lost ground with the high-caste Hindus. Syrian social relations with the high-caste Hindus were quite radically transformed. In other words, the relations of a Christian group with particular sections of Hindu society is not something that remains static for all time but might be altered by changing social, political and economic circumstances.

Does Hinduism itself never assimilate from Christianity? Perhaps we need more detailed studies, but Mosse's (1986:452–453) account of a Hindu goddess in a local area where Christianity has been around for some three centuries or so gives a fascinating glimpse of the kind of intricate interweaving of traditions that could be revealed. The representation of the Virgin as having only 'cool' benign powers has already been referred to. Sexuality and death are banished from her immaculate presence, crushed in the form of the serpent beneath her feet. Desire, power and the capacity for unpredictability and evil are projected onto various Hindu goddesses. Catholics visit Hindu goddesses when they are infected with *amma noy* (mother diseases).

Catholics implicitly view the Hindu goddess as manifesting the complementary opposite of the Virgin's benign powers. However, Hindus also appear to attribute to the ordinarily violent local virgin goddesses some of the features associated with Mary, apart from the fact that they worship Mary herself at her major shrines. At Aranmanakaria, there is a shrine to a Hindu virgin goddess.

The shrine lies outside the village and the deity is carried into the settlement during village festivals. The virgin goddess has her own festival at which people gather in huge numbers. The goddess is known as 'child birth chaste'. Myths about the foundation of the shrine link the goddess to milk, a substance that is associated with coolness, and to childbirth. The Virgin Mary is unaffected by pollution, related to menstruation or birth. Her female devotees may approach her images and worship when they are menstruating or during the period of pollution following birth. Virgin goddesses within the Hindu tradition are known to be angered if approached by women in states of pollution. Unlike other virgin goddesses, though, the one here is like the Virgin Mary unaffected by and tolerant towards birth pollution. The goddess's power is conceived of as benevolent, indulgent and cool. As Mosse (1986:453) says, '[W]e cannot rule out the possibility of an influence of over 300 years of popular Catholicism on local Hindu cults.'

The Agro-ritual Round

One of the major areas of the interaction of cultures arises in the case of agricultural communities. Where Hindus and Christians live together within the same agro-ecological niche and where they order their lives by the local agricultural round, they very often maintain similar celebrations and rituals. The extent to which this might happen will vary extensively from context to context and will depend a lot on several factors, including the particular pattern of the conversion (individual or group, for instance), the degree of institutionalisation of the religious activity in the area (the availability of priests and pastors), and the relationship that missionaries had with the local people and their indigenous traditions. This last is structured, in turn, by the moment and motive of the activity of mission itself.

In Goa, conversion was backed by the Inquisition and the regime was ordered by a strict repugnance of all indigenous 'substance.' Moreover, conversion was largely confined to the districts touching the coast, where whole villages were converted to the new faith. Converts lived surrounded by the inland Hindu districts, but had fewer day-to-day interactions with Hindus for most of the period of colonial rule. Social separateness was achieved, though cultural traditions remained alive. In this region, the pattern of agricultural rituals remains in place with a difference. In terms of their substance, the signs and symbols of the Hindu and Christian religious calendars differ, but they are mapped out in structurally similar ways. What has altered is the religious content or matter carried by the symbols; their relational composition stays the same. The missionaries seem to have permitted Christian rituals to retain

indigenous form and function as long as the object of worship was a Christian divinity and the means of worship, such as prayers, were Christian in content. One finds, therefore, that the annual church calendar is moulded in significant ways to accommodate to the rhythms of the indigenous socio-ritual and agricultural world.

In the regional Hindu religio-agricultural calendar, the festive year begins with the celebration of the harvest centred on the festival of the birth of Lord Ganesh, which falls around late August or early September. During the course of worship, the new paddy is offered to the deity. After the celebrations, the deity is immersed, being carried to a nearby river in procession, to the accompaniment of prayers and songs. The celebration of the harvest feast among Catholics shows traces of continuity with indigenous traditions. The celebrations are usually centred on the feast of a particular saint, which falls during the harvest season. These might be different for different villages. For instance, in the village studied by the author the feast is instituted in the name of Saint Bartholomew. However, other villages celebrate it in the name of Saint Lawrence (10 August), Saint Ignatius of Loyola (3 August) or on the day commemorating the Assumption of Our Lady (15 August). The feast usually commences with a procession to the paddy fields, accompanied by the sounds of beating drums and the playing of music. The parish priest ritually cuts a few ears of grain and these are carried back to the church. Some ears of grain are placed in the arms of the statue of Saint Bartholomew, in whose name the feast is celebrated. Other items, such as the flowers and vegetables of the season, are also placed at the altar in offering. Interestingly, Catholics refer to the feast as *amchi Gonsha*, or 'our Ganesh' (Robinson, 1998).

From a different area, the Tanjore, Salem and Ramnad districts of Tamil Nadu, we get another picture of harvest celebrations (Mosse, 1986) and rituals marking the different phases of the agricultural cycle. This is an area where Christians are still in small numbers and a majority of them belong to the Dalit community. They interact with Hindus in the course of everyday life. They are connected by bonds of marriage and kinship to Dalits who are not Christian converts. They join with other Dalits in the struggle to earn a livelihood and work for Hindu high-caste landowners. They are also entrusted with the traditional duty of their caste — to perform as musicians at festivals when the village deities are being worshipped. They are part of an intricate web of relations that embeds them socially and culturally in the regional Hindu agrarian caste society. Moreover, this is a hinterland region that was for a long time not very securely linked with the institutionalised church, whose presence was felt more strongly in the coastal areas.

Catholics in this region usually work on fields or shepherd cattle belonging to the wealthier Hindu high-caste landholders. They maintain the rituals

accompanying the first ploughing like their Hindu neighbours. Ploughing and sowing take place at the auspicious moments prescribed for them astrologically and are accompanied by a series of rites. The harvest festival is Pongal and it is the day that the rice of the new harvest is cooked for the first time. The next day is Mattup Pongal or the day when cattle are worshipped and feasted. Christians who labour on the farms of Hindu landowners will perform the ceremonies along with Hindu or Dalit labourers. They receive clothes and gifts from the landlord and, with the other workers, offer Pongal (the new cooked rice) and incense to the cattle in worship (Diehl, 1965).

Santal converts in central India were few in number and the converted were highly dependent on missionaries for mediation with the British law courts in their disputes against landlords and for employment and educational assistance. This suggests that the likelihood of the success of the prohibitions imposed by the missionaries may have been greater. The missionaries tended to isolate the small Christian communities from their non-Christian neighbours and to insist on adherence to a strict set of norms. The drinking of rice-beer and dancing were prohibited and the converts were forbidden from participating in any of the traditional religio-cultural ceremonies. The main seasonal festival was *Sohrae*, or the harvest festival, which falls in the month of Pus (December–January). At *Sohrae*, the Santals bless their cattle, make offerings of thanksgiving to their village and ancestral spirits and partake in general rejoicing and merry-making. A lot of rice-beer is drunk and the Santal code of sexual conduct is relaxed for the period of the festivities.

The missionaries considered the drinking and sexual licence associated with the festival as sinful and encouraged the Santal converts to celebrate Christmas week, temporally the closest annual Christian celebration to the *Sohrae*, as their harvest festival. Christmas songs are sung to *Sohrae* tunes and tea, puffed and parched rice and sweets are shared. On New Year's Day, the new paddy is offered at the Mass and each household receives a basketful of paddy. Games and competitions are organised (Troisi, 1979). While the celebration of Christmas week in this way does incorporate some of the elements of the traditional harvest festival, it still ensures that the Christian Santals remain separate from and outside of the communal celebrations organised by those who have not converted.

Lifecycle Rituals

The celebration of lifecycle rituals among different Christian groups lies in the area of individual or family-based ritual and takes us into a realm that is both

separate from and interlinked with the kinds of collective rites and cults we have been analysing above. Among most Christian communities, the rituals of birth, marriage and death partake of both Christian symbolism and the associations emanating from local cultural contexts. Some communities have also retained rituals relating to a girl's first menstruation. Among Goan Catholics, the rite of baptism is similar to the Hindu naming (*namakarana*) ceremony because in both the child is seen as becoming a part of the family and a particular lineage group. At baptism, the child 'becomes Christian.' He or she is also named at this time. Before baptism, a child is simply that (*bhurgem*, or child). At baptism, the child is given a name. The name of the child will be that by which s/he is known within her/his family, circle of kin and in her/his caste group. If the child is from a high caste, s/he will be addressed by name by members of the lower castes, who will also add the respectful suffix *bab* (for a male) or *bai* (for a female). Giving the child a name makes the child an individual and confers on him/her social identity. The child is formally brought within the fold of society: family, caste group and religious community.

Syrian Christian lifecycle rituals, like Goan ones, fuse two different aspects. They link the individual to the church and its canons of beliefs and rites; but they are also rooted in domestic and kinship spheres and animated by sociocultural codes that express the continuity between the Christians and the regional traditions of Hinduism within which they are situated. The two aspects cannot be easily mapped onto a distinction between church-centred and domestic rituals. Visvanthan suggests this from her ethnography of Kerala's Christians, but the distinction does not work everywhere. In Goan marriage rituals, for instance, the nuptials (*resper*) in the church themselves mediate the ritual separation of a girl from her natal family and her incorporation into her marital home. Further, the Inquisition too attempted to insinuate itself into domestic rituals. Its regime is long dead, but it has left its impress on these rites. Visvanathan herself admits that the domestic and canonical aspects of ritual are linked in complex ways. Domestic rites often 'prepare the key celebrants for the canonical rituals through the codes of food, *prestation* and formalised language.' They are 'marked off' and thus prepared for the rite of passage into which they enter within the sacred space of the church (1993:102).

Birth rituals, for instance, are initiated much before the rite of baptism and already mark the child as the central subject of ceremonial activity. The child is fed honey and gold in a ritual not long after its birth and prayers are said for its health, joy in life, love of God, and service of men. It is prayed that the child will 'run like a deer and sing like a sweet bird.' The first person to feed the child in this ritual, usually the mother's father, mother or brother, is said

to pass onto the child his or her character. Visvanathan suggests that the ceremony 'integrates the newborn within the circumference of human existence by the ritual act of the transmission of qualities from adult to infant' (1993: 21). Word is sent around to the child's father's house and he and his relatives come for a festive meal.

Baptism takes place fifty-six days after the child's birth, when the mother's birth pollution is said to have ended. The child is washed and anointed with holy oils and is also given bread and wine as at Communion. A name is conferred on the child and he or she is also confirmed into the church as part of the same rite. The water that is used to baptise the child is prayed over by the priest so that it is vested with the following qualities. It should 'be comforting, joyful, a symbol of the death and Resurrection of the Christ.' It 'should purify the soul and body, it should loosen the bonds of evil, forgive sins, give light to body and soul, and symbolise the baptism of rebirth' (Visvanathan, 1993:127).

Some Christian communities have retained rituals connected with the marking of a girl's entrance into puberty. The first menstruation is, for instance, marked among Tamil Nadu's rural Christians (Fuller, 1976; Mosse, 1996). The observation of this ritual may not, however, have much to do with the maintenance of notions of 'pollution.' Though menstrual blood is polluting, it is the subsequent menstrual periods that are more hedged around by restrictive measures. The first menstruation in many parts of southern India is an auspicious occasion for it celebrates the girl's fertility and marks her readiness for marriage.

Marriage ceremonies in many communities and marriage customs related to choice of spouse, prohibited or prescribed categories of marriage partners and the like remain distinctly similar to practices of the wider, surrounding society. Here I will speak a little about marriage rituals and the ways in which they mediate Christian and indigenous notions. Christianity often interfered in marriage customs, prohibiting some because they were considered to be contrary to Christian living and ethics. Among the central Indian tribal Santals, for instance, the practice of 'sindradan,' smearing the bride's forehead with vermilion, was prohibited. The converts no longer wore their bridal wear in the tribe's traditional saffron colour. It was the exchange of rings in front of the priest in church that came to be the central matrimonial rite (Troisi, 1979).

I have already suggested possible reasons for the success of these kinds of prohibitory dictates among the Santals. The coercive potential of the regime in Goa has also been referred to. The Inquisition prohibited a wide range of customs and rituals associated with marriage, including the singing of

particular songs and the use of certain ritual substances. Various transformations took place, but one finds that structure and meaning of celebrations connected with marriage remain the same among Catholics and Hindus.

An interesting instance comes from the ceremony of setting up the stoves for the cooking that will be done during the marriage. Some days prior to the wedding a *mantov*, or tent of bamboo sticks and palm leaves, is usually set up behind the house and stoves of mud (*choolha*s) are made. New cooking pots are placed on them. Behind the stoves a cross made of palm leaves is placed by the Christians' and the Lord's Prayer and some other prayers are said thanking God on the happy occasion and invoking His divine blessing that everything goes well. The auspicious time for setting up the *choolha*s among Hindus and Christians of the region is around mid-day. It is an hour of fulfilment and 'completeness,' when the sun is high in the sky and people are replete (*bor potache*).

The Inquisition prohibited Catholics from placing betel leaves or areca nuts under the *choolhas* set up at marriages. These substances are used by Hindus to symbolise the auspiciousness of the occasion. They appear to have been replaced by the symbol of the cross, acceptable within Christianity. A Christian prayer is said for God's blessings. Christian symbols dominate but the web of signification reveals (or perhaps conceals?) other associations which are the complement of the Hindu ritual. Certainly, despite their differences, the ceremonial substances are equally identified with notions of the auspicious and celebratory aspect of the moment.

Marriage is a parting of the ways for a girl and her natal family: she moves to her husband's home and her visits back to her own home begin to decrease over time, especially when she lives a distance away. This is a patrilineal, patrilocal society. Inheritance passes down the male line and girls are considered transitory members of their natal home, 'guests' who go away after a while and, therefore, cannot be given a share in paternal landed property. Instead, the rights of girls are limited to receiving a 'dowry,' consisting of jewellery, clothes and items that might be useful in their new homes. The stress on the male line, combined with minimal rights accorded to daughters, remains among most caste-based agrarian Christian communities, where land is the main inheritable property.

Interestingly, in cases where conversion takes place against a background of matrilineal and matrilocal structures, as in some north-eastern tribal communities, it has the effect of creating and strengthening a patrifocal tendency (Natarajan, 1977; Nongbri, 1980). One of the possible reasons for this is the patriarchal inclination of many denominations of Christianity, such as Catholicism, for instance. When Christian communities emerge out of patrifocal Hinduism, as in Goa or among Kerala's Syrian Christians, I have suggested

that the convergence of various social, material and cultural elements tends towards the continuation, and perhaps reinforcement, of this structure.

In light of this, it is interesting to view the ceremony of the bride's send-off among Goan Catholics and some other western Indian Christian groups. Marriages take place in the groom's village or hamlet and, after the celebrations and feasting, the bride's family and friends have to return home. They are usually escorted to the borders of the village, where the ceremony of the boundary or *shim* is performed. This ceremony underlines the separation of the bride from her natal home; she has been transferred to another family, which now assumes rights over her fertility and labour, her productive and reproductive capacities. A line is drawn along the path, usually using *feni*, a local liquor. The bride's family step across it, she remains on the other side. She cannot cross the line; her place is now her husband's home and his village. The bride's parents will usually bless their daughter that she may bear children and will enjoin her to perform her duties obediently as wife and daughter-in-law in her marital home.

Ceremonies of marriage among Syrian Christians involve intricate connections with regional traditions. Each step in the preparation for the marriage is a ritual step and is accompanied by a number of celebratory songs: songs for the bride's ceremonial bath the day before her marriage, songs for the moment she dons her clothes, songs for the journey from her natal home. On the day of the marriage, the ritual of *guru dakshina* is performed. The groom in his house and the bride in hers make an offering of money wrapped in a betel leaf to his or her first teacher. This is a moment in the ritual of separation, the *yatra choikuga* (taking leave to go on a journey). The teacher blesses the bride or groom. After this senior relatives will come forward to give their blessings. Such rituals set apart the bride and the groom for the ceremonies that will centre on them in the church.

The wedding rite implicitly follows Pauline understandings of Christian marriage as holy and sacred, meant not for erotic love but for the achievement of a greater spirituality. The male symbolism of Christianity assumes dominance when the relationship between groom and bride is compared to that between Christ and his church (Visvanathan, 1993). If the husband is Christ himself, the wife, as his church, is under holy obligation to submit to his (divine) will. The central symbol of the sacred union of bride and groom is the tying of the *thali*, referred to as a cross in the church ceremony, by the groom around the neck of the bride. Then the *mantrakodi* (the *sari* gifted to the bride by the groom) is placed over the head and shoulders of the bride. The couple's hands are joined by the priest and the blessings of the saints, Mary and Christ are called upon them.

The stress on the transfer of the bride to the house of the groom is brought out by the verse which emphasises that the bride must leave her family to live with her husband and he must, in turn, treat her with love and kindness. At the end of the wedding service, the couple goes to the groom's house for the wedding feast. At this time, the bride is required to change into the *mantra-kodi*, symbolising that she now belongs to the groom and his family. It is not without significance that this ceremonial garment must be worn new and unwashed (Visvanathan, 1993:108).

At the groom's house, the groom takes his wife's right hand and they enter together with the right foot forward. The groom takes the bride to his mother and places her in her care (*ammae epichu*). The groom's sister or father's sister takes a small *kindi* (bronze vessel with a spout) containing water along with a *kinni* (shallow container) with a betel leaf, some water and a fine muslin cloth containing some powdered rice and some grains of unhusked rice. A hole is made in the cloth. The woman dips the muslin cloth in the water and touches the brow of the bride and the groom thrice. Visvanathan (1993:109) suggests that the rite signifies fertility and auspiciousness. Its elements certainly constitute symbols of sexuality and procreation. The *kindi* stands for the masculine principle, the *kinni* for the feminine. Unhusked rice is said to symbolise reproduction and powdered rice, consummation.

Death rituals are framed by the Christian discourses regarding life in Christ after death but, in many communities, they also partake of Hindu symbols and notions. These notions often appear when one looks at the organisation of household rituals. Christian death in Goa, for instance, is informed by ideas regarding widowhood, the concept of inauspiciousness and the honour due to ancestors, which bring it into accord with regional Hindu traditions. Sometimes, such ideas are concealed behind or enmeshed with Christian beliefs to a very great extent. Due to the Inquisition, perhaps, this is certainly the case in Goa. Among Goan Catholics, death is regarded as the moment of release of the Christian soul from the ties and struggles of life. The body might be reduced to dust but the soul awaits communion with the Maker. Bells toll to announce the death of someone in the village. Neighbours and relations start arriving at the house where a death has taken place. The body is washed and dressed and laid in the front room, the head towards the family altar. The bereaved sit close to the body to receive condolences.

The ornamentation of the body follows certain socio-cultural codes. It is the female body, in particular, that is marked in death by the presence or absence of jewellery, symbolising different social states. A married woman, whose husband is alive, is dressed as a bride in all her wedding finery. Her body is adorned with gold jewellery and she wears the glass bangles that symbolise the married

state among all communities in the region. A widow's body is unadorned by jewellery and is buried in black. A widower too is usually dressed in black or sober shades, while a man whose wife is alive is dressed like a bridegroom. The body is identified as Christian by the cross which is placed between the hands as they are joined together on the chest. A rosary may also be entwined between the fingers.

At the time of the funeral, kin, friends and neighbours gather at the house. The priest comes to pray over the body, which is lifted by four close male kin and carried to the church. The mourners walk on either side of the bier. The priest intones the rosary or other prayers, to which the people give appropriate response. The body is taken into the church and laid before the altar. Mass is celebrated. After Mass, the coffin is carried to the cemetery, where the final prayers are said. The readings, sermon and final prayers express the realisation that mourning for the dead person is part of coming to terms with the loss for relatives and friends. The individual death is also located within a framework that gives it meaning in terms of collective beliefs. Continuity is underlined by the understanding that the dead person enters the mystical body of the church. The last journey is not an end but a prelude to a new beginning: resurrection and union with Christ 'when He comes again in glory.'

The coffin is lowered into the grave and each person shovels a spade of earth over it. When a man dies, his widow's glass bangles are broken on the edge of the coffin before it is lowered into the grave. Once home after the funeral, all jewellery other than the wedding ring is removed. A woman who has been widowed does not take a lead role in marriages or other festive celebrations. The room where the person died is kept locked with a lit lamp in it. The liminal period, during which earthly bonds still exercise a pull on the dead person, continues until the requiem service is held a month after the death. At the end of this period the room is opened.

A few days after the death of her husband, a woman visits her brother's house. She is accompanied by another widow from her affinal village. In her brother's house, she enters the kitchen where food, a dish of oil and a set of black garments are kept for her. The woman accompanying her oils and combs out her hair. The two eat, take the clothes and leave. They are usually not received by anyone during this visit because the sight of a widow, as in regional Hindu ideas, is considered inauspicious. The visit, however, marks the end of the period of intense mourning during which the widow would not have moved out of her house. Through the symbol of the garments, it signals her re-entry into the social world in her new station.

A month after the death, a requiem service is held. This is the 'Month's Mind.' Informants say that with this Mass the dead person's soul is 'at peace.'

Mass is an occasion to pray, according to Christian tradition, for the 'peace of the dead person's soul' and that his 'sins may be forgiven.' People also assert that a person's incorporation into the realm of ancestors is completed by this ritual. Before the Month's Mind, the spirit of a dead person is still about. With the ceremony, the spirit is assimilated with the ancestral shades; the deceased becomes a *purvoz* (ancestor), is entitled to respect and honour and must be remembered on appropriate occasions. On occasions of marriage, for instance, among both Christians and Hindus a meal is served in honour of the ancestors of the bride and the groom.

While the holding of meals in honour of ancestors was prohibited among the converts by the Inquisition, it persisted and this is perhaps because it was reframed by particular Christian notions. The Hindu feast is known as *mellianche jevan* and certain categories of relatives, usually affinal, are feasted in the name of the ancestors. Among Catholics, the meal is termed the *bhikran jevan* and poor persons (*bhikarin*) from the village are invited for it. It is conceivable to argue that the Inquisition forced this transformation. The shift may have become a means whereby the meal for ancestors could be preserved by merging it with notions acceptable within the Christian tradition — a simple act of kindness to the poor and deprived.

Thus, the Month's Mind not only preserves its Christian purpose of praying for the peace of the soul of the Christian dead but also, very interestingly, appears to function as a parallel to the Hindu ceremony of *sapindikarana*, which is held at the end of the mourning period for a dead person. This is the occasion on which the dead person is united with the ancestral spirits of the house. At this ceremony, four pots are filled with water, camphor and sesame seed. Three are offered to the *pitras* or *purvoz* and the fourth to the *preta* (the ghost of the person who has just died). The contents of the fourth pot are then poured into the other three. With this, the *preta* joins the ranks of the *pitras* (ancestors).

Death rituals among the Syrian Christians bring out the clarity of Christian ideas regarding eternal life after death, though they also show, in part, the impress of regional traditions. The dying person is turned facing east (the direction associated with the Second Coming of Christ). Hands are folded across the chest in an attitude of prayer. The priest comes to the house and recites the creed of faith. Eyes, nose, ears, mouth, hands, legs, feet and stomach are anointed with holy oil. Holy Communion may be administered. With the completion of these rites, the person dies a Christian death, a death 'in the faith.' Following death, the eldest son closes the eyes of the dead person. Neighbours and kin arrive at the house, bringing food and beverages. The kitchen fires of the house remain unlit.

The body is bathed and dressed in clean clothes. It is laid in a hearse and taken to the church. Much of the funeral service in the church relates to the idea of Christ's Second Coming. Christ will come again at the Last Judgement and save those who have lived good Christian lives. Holy oil is poured over the body a second time and the priest prays for the peace of the soul of the deceased. The body is lowered into the grave with a veil over the face and prayers are recited referring to the soul's entry into the presence of the Lord. The death marked a period of fasting for all present. On return to the house, vegetarian food is served to all, breaking the fast. The house is in mourning, though, and meat, fish, eggs, curds, milk and ghee are not served.

For forty days, the house remains in mourning, signified by fasting and abstinence. It is believed that the soul of the dead person is still around during this period, not freed yet from attachment to earthly bonds. The third, ninth, sixteenth and thirtieth days after the death are marked by mourning feasts with vegetarian food. For forty days, the lamp in the room where the person died remains lit. The forty-first day signifies the end of the mourning period and is marked by the cooking and serving of non-vegetarian food (Visvanathan, 1993:132–144). The dietary restrictions initiated by death partly assimilate Hindu death taboos and notions regarding the auspicious and inauspicious, while the discourse on the expectation of life after death is explicitly framed by Christian traditions. In earlier centuries, Syrian death rites had paralleled Hindu ceremonies to a greater extent. The distinctions instituted themselves much more later, perhaps as a result of the struggles between the communities during the colonial period.

Mosse attempts to explicate more distinctly the relationship between Christian death rituals and concepts and practices of purity and impurity arising out of caste beliefs and ideology (1996:463–465). Christian funerals resemble those of Hindus; in the studied Alapuram village of Tamil Nadu both communities bury their dead. Death is marked by wailing and the tolling of bells. A Paraiyar drummer announces the death to relatives, who bring the customary gifts of rice and cloth. The sons and daughters of the deceased wash themselves in the village tank. The village barber collects water to wash the body and prepares the sacred thread for the chief mourner to wear across his body, from right to left. Agnatic relatives pour oil and cleansing powder on the dead person's body and the orifices are sealed with turmeric and betel leaf. Ankles, toes and wrists are tied together with strips from a new *sari* by the barber, and a coin (later to be given to the washerman) is placed on the forehead. The body is washed and dressed and placed on a wooden bier.

The priest, wearing black vestments, comes from the church to bless the body, accompanied by altar boys carrying a cross and lighted candles. He

circumambulates the body in an anti-clockwise direction, sprinkling holy water and dispensing incense. The bier is taken to the church, accompanied by the tolling of church bells and the keening of Paraiyar women. Paraiyar drummers lead the procession and the barber lets off firecrackers. The bier is rotated in the church to face towards the altar, where the priest in white vestments conducts the funeral Mass. The grave is usually dug by Paraiyar or Chakkiliyar service castes. Women do not usually follow the cortège to the grave. The barber cuts the threads on the body and removes the jewellery. Money and betel leaf are placed on it and collected by the Dalit funeral servants. The barber shaves and removes the sacred thread of the chief mourner, who marks a sign of the cross over the body in the grave. Earth is shovelled over the body and candles and incense sticks left burning at the site. Mourners arrange payments for the drummer and other service castes, and take a purificatory bath before returning to the house.

High-caste Utaiyar and Vellalar funerals are along these lines. The lower-caste Natar or Pallar Catholics cannot command the services of the village barber, washerman or drummers. They have their own inferior service castes. For instance, the Pallars are served by a Dalit barber-washerman 'funeral priest' and by Chakkiliyar funeral servants, who perform tasks, such as the digging of the grave. On the third day after a death, agnatic relatives pour water on the grave and smooth the earth. They light candles and burn incense at the grave and return home for a wash with oil. The final rite usually occurs after sixteen days, during which period there are prohibitions on the holding of weddings, the performance of pilgrimage, the completion of new houses, sexual intercourse and the preparation of certain foods. The final rite consists of the installing of a cross on the grave, the removal of a widow's *thali* and the 'tying of the turban' performed by affinal relatives. The widow bathes and is garlanded with a *sari* before her *thali* is removed and dropped into a dish of cow's milk. The chief mourner is greeted with a tray of turmeric water by the women of the house, when he returns from the cemetery after installing the cross. He is presented with *dhotis* and towels, first by his affinal relatives and then his agnatic ones.

Mosse argues that the theological emphasis in Christian funerals is on rites, such as extreme unction, before death, while Hindu rituals stress rites after death. The popular practice, however, brings both together and Christians take over from Hindus the elaborate set of rites concerned with separating the dead from the living even though they do not share their ideas on the rebirth of the soul. Structurally, Christian and Hindu rituals are similar: they effect a separation and transition between living and dead and work to manage the danger and pollution surrounding any death. The body is bathed and

participants wash and prepare themselves against any harmful influences. The journey from the house to the cemetery involves the crossing of the boundaries between the living and the dead. The transition is completed on the sixteenth day, when heat and impurity are removed and the mourners re-enter social life, renewing ties with affines and others.

Hindus and Christians share a repertoire of symbolic substances and procedures that effect these transformations (Mosse, 1996:466). Cooling and purifying substances include turmeric, cow's milk, betel and water. Particular procedures define sacred spaces, such as circumambulation. Certain operations ward off evil spirits: the lighting of lamps, drumming, letting off firecrackers or the tying of threads. Blocking the orifices protects against pollution, while cutting the threads on the body at the grave effects separation. Christians employ the same ritual specialists as the Hindus at their funerals, as at some other lifecycle ceremonies. Nevertheless, in some ways the church stands outside the realm of distinctions between the pure and the impure (Mosse, 1996:469–471). It is not that inferior castes perform servile tasks, such as digging the grave, because they are impure; the reverse could be equally true. Purity and impurity are less important in themselves than as an idiom to express relationships of patronage and dependence, dominance and inferiority. Funeral service is referred to as *atimai velai* (servile work), rather than as impure.

'Impure' duties such as drumming or performing funeral service become acceptable when the remuneration is increased and when one can use the kind of drum employed by high-caste temple musicians and on auspicious occasions, such as weddings. The implication of servitude eliminated, the roles are more palatable. While caste distinctions do enter the church in terms of the distribution of rights and honours in festive celebrations, critical ideas of purity and pollution are kept outside (Mosse, 1996:475). The black vestments and anti-clockwise circumambulation of the priest signify the sombre aspect or inauspiciousness of death, rather than impurity. No temple would allow the entry of a deceased body; the Catholic dead are taken inside the church. During the funeral rites, the dead person is symbolically identified with Christ. S/he will rise again like Christ who died and rose from the dead. Death is finally understood against the background of Christ's sacrifice. His death redeems the dead and brings them to everlasting life.

Conclusion

Several themes and issues have emerged from this paper and might be briefly recalled. I have argued that syncretism is perhaps too easy a tool to be employed

in the study of popular Christianity in India, particularly when what is usually studied is the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity and what the second takes from the first. The comparative perspective I adopt in this paper enables us to see that while the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity is critical to the narrative of Christian communities in many parts of the country, it is not the whole story. In some places, tribal religions or Islam are equally, if not more, significant and they have to be woven into our accounts.

Where Christianity is in obvious interaction with Hinduism, the nature of that contact need not be self-evident. There is no guarantee that Christianity and Hinduism are always in agreeable association with each other. Nor that Christianity borrows from Hinduism wholesale, rather than from specific strands of it. It has been established very definitely that the fact that assimilation does take place may never be read as an indicator that differences do not persist or go unrecognised. The extent and form of association as well as the nature of differences that persist have been related to a complex configuration of elements. The temper and constitution of the religious and political regimes within which the interaction between missionaries and local people gets established plays a critical role for the kind of popular Christianity that develops in a particular area.

Hinduism may give as well as receive, and the relationship between Christianity and local traditions rarely remains a static one. Shifting social, historical and cultural circumstances are likely to reconfigure it in different ways. As we have seen there is struggle and contestation; there is a politics of religious interaction which cannot be ignored. In general, the richer ethnographic material relates to the south and west of India; central, northern and eastern Christian communities are ripe for further analysis. Caste communities have been better served by anthropologists and sociologists than tribal ones. Christian traditions require differentiation: does Catholicism actually encourage greater assimilation than Protestantism? In addition to Hinduism, the relationship of Christianity with Islamic and Sufi traditions needs more careful examination in those areas where it is likely to be of some relevance. The aim is not accretion, but a more sophisticated understanding of patterns of interpenetration across traditions and cultures than has often been achieved.

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