INDIAN COLONIALITY AND INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

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Abstract: **India, a prominent country in the subcontinent, spans 2,933 kilometers from east to west and 3,214 kilometers from north to south, with a total land area of 3,287 square kilometers, encompassing diverse topographical features. Prior to colonialism, India was a culturally rich and religiously diverse land, with history dating back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Various empires such as the Mauryan, Gupta, and Mughal empires shaped its history. Major religions included Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and the caste system was integral to society. Women's rights were limited, and India had extensive trade connections with the Middle East, East Asia, and Europe. Colonial rule, characterized by European exploitation and modernization efforts, began with Vasco da Gama's arrival and expanded with the British East India Company's dominance by the 19th century. The British colonization brought significant changes, including economic exploitation, cultural suppression, and political subjugation. This paper employs a decolonial methodology to challenge Euro-centric worldviews and highlight the experiences of marginalized communities. It advocates for education on religious diversity, interfaith dialogue, legal protection, inclusive representation, and community engagement to promote mutual respect and understanding. Government policies should aim to eliminate discrimination and support religious minorities, while structural inequalities must be addressed. Empowering religious leaders and promoting peace-building initiatives are crucial for fostering reconciliation and inclusivity. These strategies should be contextually sensitive, considering the unique needs of different religious communities.**

Keywords: **Colonialism, Religious Diversity, Decolonial Methodology, Interfaith Dialogue and Cultural Suppression**

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a major country in the subcontinent. It stretches 2,933 kilometres from east to west and 3,214 km from north to south. Its total land area, 3,287 square kilometers, is large enough to include practically all of the world's topographical features. Before colonialism India was a land of rich cultural and religious diversity dated back to the Indus Valley Civilization around 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE, and have seen the rise and fall of various empires such as Mauryan, Gupta and Mughal empires. Also, the country was highly developed civilization with a strong economy and advanced systems of education, science, art and architecture. The major religious practice were Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikshism for the people. And caste system was an integral part of Indian society, women had a prominent role in society and enjoyed less rights and freedoms. Before arrival of colonial powers, India's international trade connections extended to the middle east, east Asia and Europe for centuries, and Indian ocean was a hub of maritime trade. Colonial rule is the practice of a nation seeking to increase or maintain its control over other people or territories, usually with the intention of advancing or exploiting them for the benefit of the colonizing nation and assisting the colonies in modernizing according to the colonizers' standards, particularly in the areas of economy, religion, and health.

The impact of colonialism in India has multifaceted reaching in which British colonization lasted for over two centuries from mid-18th century to till India's independence in 1947. During this time, the British East India company (private individuals) and the British government exerted control over India's political, economic, and social systems brought significant changes and lasting effects. The coloniality continues in Economic exploitation, cultural suppression, political subjugation, legacy of violence and trauma and infrastructure development. Therefore, this paper uses a decolonial methodology to find the appropriate challenges the dominant Euro-centric worldview and centering the experiences and knowledge of marginalized communities. It also involves in engaging with indigenous epistemologies, centering the voices of indigenous peoples, and critically examining the legacies of colonialism.

Conceptualizing Coloniality in India

The term "coloniality" describes how colonialism continues to have an impact on countries and cultures even after it has been officially ended. The effects of colonialism are still evident in many facets of Indian society today, such as politics, culture, economics and religious identity. Colonialism influenced the political systems that exist today. The British established a centralised government with a bureaucratic legal system that is still substantially in place.

As a result, there is now a concentration of power in the hands of the federal government, which limits local towns' autonomy and sustains a top-down style of government. In the **economic point** of view, In order to increase their own wealth, the British colonial authority took use of India's resources and labour. Multinational businesses and rich elites continue to take resources and labour from disadvantaged areas, so this legacy of exploitation is still felt today.

A larger platform for the internalisation of western **culture** was formed by the expansion of education and the penetration of the colonial market, which was mostly made up of the expanding middle class. The British imposed their language, culture, and values on Indian society and established a hierarchy that marginalised indigenous knowledge systems in favour of Western forms of knowledge. As a result, the English language and Western cultural norms continue to dominate India, frequently at the expense of regional languages and customs. The **social** hierarchies during British rule was Caste, religious, and ethnic-based societal inequalities were exacerbated as a result of the British's employment of the divide-and-rule strategy to maintain their control over India. Indian culture is still shaped by these systems, and there is still a lot of prejudice and violence towards disadvantaged groups.

Railways and telegraph lines were among the **infrastructure** projects the British developed in India, although these undertakings frequently served British interests rather than that of the Indian people. They also left a legacy of bad maintenance and neglect, which resulted in infrastructural issues that still exist today. Indian society has been affected for a long time by the brutality and suffering left behind by colonialism, including massacres, torture, and imprisonment. They continue to influence India's political and social landscape and have contributed to ongoing tensions between various populations till today. It is crucial to interact with the viewpoints and experiences of individuals who have been marginalised by colonialism and its continuing impacts in order to fully comprehend the concept of coloniality in modern India. In order to do this, it's important to pay attention to all viewpoints and acknowledge how colonialism continues to affect Indian society

Christianity in India: From Imposition to Indigenous Identity

With the arrival of European colonisers in India during the 15th and 16th centuries, Christianity spread rapidly. The indigenous people were forced to adopt the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonisers' faith, and conversion was a major goal of their colonial mission. Christians built churches, schools, and hospitals all over India, and some of them actively urged newly converted Indians to follow European cultural norms.

Indian Christians were significant participants in social reform movements and the Indian independence struggle in the 19th and 20th centuries. Some well-known Christian figures, including C.F. Andrews, a close friend and associate of Mahatma Gandhi, championed a version of Christianity that was in line with social justice and Indian nationalism. Today, Christianity is the third-largest religion in India, with around 28 million followers, and the majority of Indian Christians are members of indigenous communities rather than descendants of European colonizers. While the legacy of colonialism still lingers in some aspects of Indian Christianity, the faith has also become an important part of India's diverse religious landscape and a source of inspiration for social justice movements.

The Complex Identity of Indigenous Christians in Post-Colonial India

The identity of indigenous Christians in post-colonial India is complex, as they navigate the tensions between their Christian faith and their Indian identity. RobertEric Frykenberg an American historian, has studied the history of Christianity in India, particularly during the colonial era, stated that Christianity arrived in India during the colonial period, and many indigenous communities were converted to Christianity by European colonizers. This history has left a lasting impact on Indian Christianity, as many Indian Christians still grapple with the legacy of colonialism and its impact on their community.

On the one hand, Indian Christians have a strong sense of their Indian identity, with many of them seeing themselves as Indian first and Christian second. They participate in Indian cultural and religious festivals, speak Indian languages, and draw inspiration from Indian traditions. At the same time, however, Indian Christians also face pressure to conform to Western Christian norms, particularly from Western missionaries and organizations that continue to operate in India. Such Indian Christians have shown a range of attitudes towards western adoptions. It is important to note that the views and practices vary among different individuals and Christian denominations to have a common western adoptions to considered or embraced.

Western Imposition

The major aspect of western imposition was the cultural and social influence on cultural practices, norms and values often imposed on Indian converts lead to a blending of western and Indian traditions. Many critics argued that the colonial-era conversions and subsequent missionary activities distorted and alienated indigenous religious practices and weakened the fabric of Indian society. Such as; **Liturgical Practices:** Indian Christians have adopted various Western liturgical practices, including hymnody, order of worship, and liturgical calendars. These practices often reflect the influence of Western Christian denominations, such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant traditions. **Theological Education:** Indian Christians have sought to incorporate Western models of theological education in their seminaries and Bible colleges. This includes adopting

curricula, teaching methodologies, and accreditation systems that are influenced by Western theological institutions.**Ecumenism:** Indian Christians have actively participated in ecumenical movements, which aim to promote unity among Christian denominations. These movements often draw inspiration from Western ecumenical organizations and dialogues, seeking to foster cooperation and dialogue among different Christian traditions in India. **Social Outreach and Charitable Initiatives:** Indian Christians have been inspired by Western models of social outreach and charitable work. They have adopted practices such as running orphanages, schools, hospitals, and other social welfare institutions that are modeled on Western approaches. **Leadership Structures:** Some Indian Christian denominations have adopted Western models of church governance and leadership structures, including concepts like bishops, presbyters, and deacons. This is particularly evident in denominations with historical connections to Western missionary efforts. **Music and Worship Styles:** Indian Christians have incorporated Western musical styles and instruments into their worship practices. This includes the use of Western hymns, choirs, organs, and other Western musical elements in their worship services. **Architecture:** Some Indian churches have adopted Western architectural styles in the construction of their church buildings. This includes designs inspired by Gothic, Romanesque, or other Western architectural traditions. Overall, the Western imposition on Christianity in India is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It carries both positive and negative aspects, and its impacts continue to be debated and studied in the context of India's diverse religious and cultural landscape.

Indigenous Identity

Indigenous expressions of Christianity in India encompass a variety of cultural elements and traditions that are specific to the local context. These expressions are often influenced by the cultural diversity of India and the pre-existing religious practices. Here are some examples: **Contextual Worship**: Indian Christians incorporate local languages, music, and dance forms into their worship services. They infuse traditional Indian instruments, such as the tabla, sitar, or harmonium, into their worship music. Cultural elements like colorful attire, flower decorations, and incense are also used. **Folk Christianity:** In various regions of India, indigenous forms of Christianity have developed that incorporate folk traditions and rituals. These expressions often intertwine Christian beliefs with local customs and practices, creating unique syncretic forms of worship. **Indigenous Liturgical Adaptations**: Some Indian Christian communities have adapted their liturgical practices to reflect local cultural elements. This may include incorporating traditional Indian prayers, gestures, or rituals into the order of worship. **Rituals and Festivals:** Indian Christians celebrate Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter with local customs and

traditions. They may integrate elements from local festivals and celebrations, like processions, dances, or special meals, into their observances. **Art and Iconography**: Indian Christian art often incorporates local artistic styles and techniques. Artists create paintings, sculptures, and icons that reflect Indian cultural aesthetics while depicting biblical stories and Christian themes. **Indigenous Leadership Structures**: Certain Indian Christian communities have developed leadership structures that align with local customs. This may involve recognizing community leaders or elders who play a significant role in decision-making and spiritual guidance. **Inculturation of Christianity:** The concept of inculturation refers to the adaptation of Christian beliefs and practices to the local cultural context. Indian Christians have sought to contextualize Christianity within Indian culture, allowing for a harmonious integration of faith and cultural expressions. Indian Christians demonstrate the richness of Indian cultural heritage and the creative ways in which Christianity has been embraced within the local context.

In addition to the above western impositions and indigenous identity, human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and International Christian Concern have published reports and documented cases of discrimination and persecution faced by indigenous Christians in India. These reports often highlight economic and social challenges, including caste-based discrimination, marginalization, denial of access to resources, and social exclusion. This economic and social challenges made the indigenous Christians to reconcile their faith with their Indian identity. And some struggled to reconcile this with their own cultural heritage. This has led some to reject certain aspects of their faith or to develop their own distinct forms of Christianity that blend Indian and Western elements. One of the key challenges that indigenous Christians face is reconciling their faith with their Indian identity. And some Indian Christians have struggled to reconcile this with their own cultural heritage.

Indian Christian Theology: Integrating Indian Culture and Christian Beliefs

Christianity in India has often been associated with Western theologies and practices, and with the above challenges, made the Indian Christian theologians to think and to integrate Indian culture and Christian beliefs in a way that affirms the value of indigenous cultures and promotes a more inclusive understanding of Christianity. This theological framework reflects the broader effort to create a unique Indian Christian identity that is grounded in Indian culture and history.

One key element of this framework is the emphasis on the diversity of Indian cultures and the value of pluralism. Indian Christian theologians have recognized that India is a diverse country with a rich history of religious and cultural traditions. They have sought to develop a theology that affirms the value of this diversity and promotes mutual

respect and understanding between different cultures and religions.

Another key element of this framework is the integration of Indian cultural practices and symbols into Christian worship and liturgy. Indian Christian theologians have sought to create a form of Christianity that is accessible and meaningful to Indian people, and that reflects the unique cultural context in which it is practiced. This has involved the use of Indian languages, music, and art in Christian worship, as well as the incorporation of traditional Indian symbols and stories into Christian teachings.

However, this integration of Indian culture into Christianity has also been met with criticism from some quarters especially those who blended with western elements. Some critics argue that it dilutes the purity of Christian doctrine and risks creating syncretistic forms of Christianity that blend incompatible beliefs and practices. Others argue that it reinforces social divisions and perpetuates caste-based discrimination, as some Christian communities in India have been accused of practicing caste-based discrimination despite their Christian faith.

Debating the Role of Christianity in Colonialism and Indigenous Identity in India

"Debating the Role of Christianity in Colonialism and Indigenous Identity in India" accurately captures the ongoing discussions and debates surrounding the complex relationship between Christianity, colonialism, and indigenous identity in India. However, it is important to recognize that this title does not reflect a singular or monolithic view of this relationship, but rather a range of perspectives and opinions. Sanal Mohan an Indian scholar who has written extensively on the impact of Christianity on Dalits in India argues, that Christianity has offered a pathway for social and economic mobility, challenging the oppressive caste system and providing opportunities for Dalits to escape marginalization. Rowena Robinson a sociologist, has researched the social impact of Christianity on tribal communities in India suggests that, Christianity has played a significant role in empowering and mobilizing these communities by providing education, healthcare, and promoting social equality.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a political scientist and public intellectual, has discussed the potential of religious conversion, including to Christianity, in addressing social and economic inequalities in India, explains that, religious conversion can provide a path for marginalized communities to escape their oppressive social conditions. Francis X. D'Sa is a theologian and scholar who has focused on the liberative aspects of Christianity for marginalized communities in India writes on the role of the church in promoting social justice, empowering Dalits, and challenging oppressive systems. Angana P. Chatterji, an anthropologist and human rights scholar, has explored the impact of Christianity on tribal communities in India. She discusses how Christian missions

have provided spaces for political agency, education, and social reform among these communities.

On one hand, Christianity has played a liberating role for indigenous communities in India. They point to the work of Christian missionaries in promoting education and healthcare, as well as their efforts to challenge caste-based discrimination and other forms of social inequality. They also argue that Christianity has provided a sense of community and belonging for many marginalized groups in India. On the other hand, Gyanendra Pandey, an Indian historian, has explored the impact of colonialism and Christianity in India, examines how Christian missionaries were often complicit in colonial projects and how their activities sometimes contributed to the marginalization of indigenous cultures. Meera Nanda, an Indian philosopher, has written extensively on the relationship between religion, science, and secularism in India, discusses how Christian missionary activities, particularly during the colonial era, were associated with the suppression of indigenous knowledge and the promotion of cultural dominance. Partha Chatterjee, an Indian historian and political theorist, has explored the cultural and political aspects of colonialism in Indi, analyzes the role of Christian missionaries in shaping colonial governance and the ways in which their activities were intertwined with imperial power structures. Vasanthi Srinivasan, an Indian scholar, has examined the impact of Christian missionary education in colonial India, discusses how Christian missionaries used education as a tool to reinforce colonial ideologies and cultural assimilation. Therefore, Christianity in India has been used as a tool of oppression by colonial powers. They point to the history of forced conversion and the imposition of European cultural norms and practices on indigenous communities. They also argue that Christianity has been used to justify colonialism and to perpetuate a sense of cultural superiority among European colonizers.

Indian scholars and intellectuals have emphasized the complexity and nuanced nature of the relationship between Christianity, colonialism, and indigenous identity in India. The notable voices who have discussed this perspective are Ashis Nandy, T. K. Oommen, Gauri Viswanathan, and, Peter van der Veer, a Dutch anthropologist and sociologist, all argued that the connection between Christianity, colonialism, and indigenous identity asserts the assimilation and resistance which intricately entangled for colonialism, the intricate nature of Christian missionary education in India had varied effects on indigenous identity and this connection shaped the regional social, cultural and political contexts for the growth of local identity. The Christianity has had both positive and negative impacts on indigenous communities in India, and that its role in colonialism was not always straightforward or consistent.

Theological Evaluation and Suggestions

Indigenous Christians in India have had to confront the legacy of colonialism and its impact on their community. Many Indian Christians are descendants of converts who were forcibly converted by European colonizers, and this history has left deep scars. Some Indian Christians feel that their community has been left behind in the wake of India's independence, and that they continue to be marginalized by the dominant Hindu majority.

The Bible does not explicitly use the term "indigenous community" since it was written within specific cultural and historical contexts that differ from the contemporary concept of indigenous peoples. However, there are biblical principles and passages that can be relevant to the concerns and experiences of indigenous communities. A few biblical references that highlight themes of justice, inclusion, and the value of diverse cultures. Leviticus 19:33-34: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." This passage highlights the biblical call to hospitality, kindness, and fairness towards strangers or foreigners, reflecting the value of inclusivity and care for those who may be considered outsiders. Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This verse speaks to the equality and unity found in Christ, emphasizing that all distinctions based on ethnicity, social status, or gender are transcended in the Christian faith. These passages, among others, provide a foundation for understanding the biblical principles of justice, inclusivity, and the recognition of the value of diverse cultures and identities. They can be applied to engage in theological reflections and discussions that affirm and uplift the experiences and concerns of indigenous communities.

With these biblical references, indigenous Christians in India have found ways to assert their identity and to contribute to Indian society. Many have been active in social justice movements and have worked to promote the rights of marginalized communities. Some have also sought to reclaim their own cultural heritage and to develop forms of Christianity that are uniquely Indian. Working towards indigenous identity and embracing diversity in religious identities requires a multifaceted approach that involves individuals, communities, institutions, and governments. Here are some strategies to achieve these goals:

Education and Awareness: Promote education and awareness about different religious traditions, beliefs, and practices. Incorporate religious studies and interfaith dialogue into school curricula to foster understanding and respect for diverse religious identities. **Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration**: Encourage interfaith dialogue and collaboration between religious communities. This can involve organizing interfaith events, discussions, and initiatives that promote understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation among different religious groups. **Legal Protection and Equal Rights:** Advocate for legal protection and equal rights for all religious communities. Ensure that laws and policies safeguard the rights of minority religious groups and prohibit discrimination based on religious identity. **Inclusive Language and Representation**: Encourage the use of inclusive language and representation in public discourse, media, and educational materials. Avoid stereotypes and promote narratives that celebrate the diversity of religious identities and their contributions to society. **Community Engagement and Empowerment:** Foster community engagement and empowerment by supporting initiatives that celebrate religious diversity. This can involve cultural festivals, community events, and platforms for religious communities to share their traditions, stories, and values with the wider society. **Promote Mutual Respect and Dialogue:** Foster an environment of mutual respect and open dialogue where people from different religious backgrounds can engage in meaningful conversations. Encourage individuals to learn about and appreciate the religious beliefs and practices of others without trying to convert or assimilate them. **Government Policies and Support**: Advocate for government policies that promote diversity and protect the rights of religious minorities. Governments should actively work towards eliminating discrimination and creating an inclusive society where individuals are free to practice their religious beliefs without fear or prejudice. **Addressing Structural Inequalities**: Recognize and address structural inequalities that disproportionately affect religious minorities. This includes addressing socio-economic disparities, access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and representation in positions of power and influence. **Empowering Religious Leaders:** Support and empower religious leaders who promote inclusivity, dialogue, and respect for diverse religious identities. Provide resources, training, and platforms for religious leaders to engage in interfaith initiatives and bridge-building efforts. **Promote Peace-building and Conflict Resolution**: Encourage initiatives that promote peace-building and conflict resolution among religious communities. Support mediation and dialogue processes to address religious tensions and conflicts, fostering understanding and reconciliation.These strategies should be implemented in a contextually sensitive manner, respecting the unique needs and challenges faced by different religious communities.

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[2]. The portion of the Indian subcontinent under colonial authority was governed by colonial powers from Europe. European influence was exercised during the age of discovery through both conquest and trade, particularly in spices. Christopher Columbus first set foot on American soil in 1492 while looking for the riches and prosperity of India. A little time later, towards the end of the 15th century. Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese sailor, was the first European to reestablish direct trading connections with India. trading conflicts between nations to India. Early in the 17th century, the Dutch Republic, England, France, Denmark, and Norway all established trading posts in India. The second half of the 18th century saw conflict between France and Great Britain for control, which included both direct military action and proxy Indian rulers. The French influence was reduced after Tipu Sultan, a strengthened Indian king, was defeated in 1799. Early in the 19th century, this was followed by a swift expansion of British influence across the majority of the Indian subcontinent. By the middle of the century, the British had already established direct or indirect rule over almost all of their provinces and presidencies, as well as the most populated and lucrative regions of the British Empire, earning them the moniker "Jewel in the Crown of the British."

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