

# **Indian Catholics and Civil Society: *Initiatives and Challenges in Pre-Independent India*<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

It appears that Christians in pre-independent India, and especially Catholics, were in a dilemma about their role in the civil society and its various agencies. On the one hand, one could notice positive efforts to involve in the civil societal functions, and on the other, there was also a hesitation to do so due to various reasons. This essay tries to bring to limelight some of their efforts and initiatives as well as the possible reasons for their hesitation.

Before entering into this enquiry, it would be helpful to assess the nature of the then civil society with its primary concerns, discourses, and the situation in which the Catholic Christianity in India found itself.

To put in a nutshell, the primary concern of the then Indian civil society was naturally the independence of India. The Indian national movement was gradually gaining the support of the vast majority of the Indian people; interestingly, the national movement had also supporters from among other nationalities too – people like C.F. Andrews, Annie Besant, Sutherland and some foreign missionaries. Upheaval against the rule of the East India Company and later of the Crown started right from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> From the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, the national movement took an organised shape; from the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the national leader, it acquired more intensity. Slowly the freedom struggle entered into the everyday discourse of the people.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on my doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Madras, Department of Christian Studies, guided by Fr Dr Felix Wilfred. Most of the points are elaborately dealt in the thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Most historians consider the Revolt of 1857 as the first struggle for independence; however, there were also other risings against the British even before 1857. Cf. Bipan Chandra and others, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001), 41-60.

Yet, political freedom from the British was not the only concern of the then Indian civil society. There was also another inner movement for social freedom, that is, freedom from the social oppression, especially from that of caste-tyranny. Starting from Mahatma Phule, it was continued till independence by the leaders like Ambedkar and this particular struggle continues even today.

There was still another inner movement in the Indian civil society; it was the movement of the minority religious groups especially that of the Muslim community, aimed at relieving themselves from the domination of the majority Hindus.

Thus the pre-independent Indian civil society was characterised by the triple freedom movement: political, social and religious.

Coming to the situation of the then Catholics, the most important fact to remember is that they were a very negligible minority. They never reached even 3% of the total Indian population. Therefore, for the majority community, Catholics – or Christians in general – were not a factor of serious consequence. They (Christians) were often considered by the majority community as a denationalised group and supporters of the colonisers. At times they were pushed to a defensive position and had to prove their loyalty to the nation.

The religious leaders of the Catholics (bishops and priests) were mostly foreign missionaries who had limited their space of operation to religion and the field of social work and education. Though social work and education had a lot to do with the civil society, their main focus was not involvement in the civil society, but rather missionary work. There was also the oft-repeated allegation that their social works in the fields of education, medicine and uplift of the poor had the primary objective of religious conversion – an allegation that can be disputed and that needs more research. All the same, it cannot be denied that most of the missionaries had religious conversion as an important objective.

The above observations may lead one to the conclusion that the Catholics were completely cut off from the rest of the people in the society; in other words that the Catholics did not have anything to do with the civil society. As noted at the beginning, there were ample examples of Catholics – including some foreign missionaries – who had actively

involved in the activities and discourses of civil society. At the same time, there were also many challenges and hurdles that they had to face. The following is a brief perusal of such factors.

## 1. Initiatives of Catholics in Civil Society

Certain initiatives of the Catholics that led to the involvement in civil society during the colonial period could be identified. It is not very certain whether they were conscious about their contribution to the civil society through these means. Through their journals, associations, discourses and activities, Catholics in that period did promote the interests of civil society and its agencies. Some highlights follow.

### 1.1. Journals and Discourses

Three well-known centres of Catholic Christianity during the colonial period, namely, Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai) were having their journals, namely, *The Examiner*, *The Herald* and *The Leader*. *The Examiner* was a weekly, started in Bombay in 1850 and it has achieved an uninterrupted publication till now. From the start, it claimed to be the official paper of the Catholics of India. *The Examiner* was in general pro-colonial but it dedicated considerable space for discourses on civil matters such as politics, society, etc.

*The Herald* was published from Calcutta even earlier than *The Examiner*. But it had interruptions and changes of names. It came out first as *The Bengal Catholic Herald* from 1841 to 1865; then it ceased publication for sometime and *Indo-European Correspondence* took its place during the period between 1865 and 1899. *The Herald* reappeared again with the name *The Catholic Herald of India* (new series) in 1903 and continued till 1925, having Fr A. Gille SJ as its editor. His pro-Indian stance cost him his editorship and the weekly was abruptly stopped after a few issues edited by Fr Dandoy SJ. It was again revived in 1931 with the name *The Herald* (Town Edition). This paper, especially during the editorship of Fr Gille SJ, bore articles and views of civil and national interests. The editor openly supported Indian national movement and its leader Mahatma Gandhi and also supported the idea of promoting Indian clergy.

During the absence of *The Herald*, in 1927, a lay Catholic, H.C.E. Zacharias started a weekly with the name *The Week*, claiming to fill the gap created by the absence of *The Herald*. It was initially financed by

the Bengal Catholic Association. After a year, it was transferred to Bombay. Ill health compelled its editor, H.C.E. Zacharias, to fly abroad for treatment and A. Soares, another layperson, edited it. *The Week* was a full-fledged nationalistic paper fully dedicated to civil and political interests. However, its appearance was made impossible by the Ordinance Rule of 1932.

In Chennai, an official Catholic paper was started in 1887 called *The Catholic Watchman*. In 1921, the paper was renamed as *The Catholic Leader* and in 1937, it was re-published as *The New Leader*. *The New Leader*, under the editorship of Fr P. Thomas, continuously brought out items of national and civil interests. Political news, opinions and comments were the paper's highlights until independence.

These journals were functioning as vehicles of discussions and even debates on various issues connected with the civil society. One could see passionate but healthy, and sometimes even polemical, debates on issues like Indianisation of Indian Christianity and missionaries, Catholic and political actions, viability of democracy in India, legitimacy of British rule in India, communal electorates, Catholics' membership in Indian National Congress and so on.

These journals also brought out articles, views and notes on different aspects of the civil, social and political life. They were aimed at enlightening the readers. Readers' feedback also found place in them. In short, these journals, apart from being religious papers, also promoted civil discourses to a great extent. They covered practically all areas of the civil society, such as politics, political ideologies, religion (also other religions like Hinduism), education, social evils like tyranny of caste, measures to uplift the downtrodden and so on.

Some of the main contributors to these journals were Prof. William Coelho, who wrote a series of articles on the new Indian Constitution in *The Examiner* (1936), Prof. F. Correia-Afonso, whose writings on various issues of national interest could be found in the issues of *The Examiner* from 1925 through 1942, Fr J. Duhr, who elaborated the relation between language of education and Indian nationalism in *The Examiner* (1934), Mr A. Correia Fernandes, who wrote series of articles on Democracy in *The Examiner* (1939-'40), Fr D. Ferroli, who wrote on various themes in *The Examiner* (1933-'34) and *The Clergy Monthly* (1936), Fr. R. Gonsalves,

who wrote on various subjects in the issues of *The Examiner* (1926-'32), Fr H. Heras SJ, who initiated the heated debate on Indianisation thorough his articles in *The Examiner* (1927-'28), Fr Ernest R. Hull SJ, who also edited *The Examiner* for a long time and wrote several articles (1915-'28), Fr A. Lallemand SJ, who wrote in *The Week* (1927-'28) against the British and even against the editor of *The Examiner*, Fr L. Raymond, an Indian priest, an educationist and an admirer of Jawaharlal Nehru, who wrote several articles on education and freedom of India in the issues of *The Examiner* (1938-'46), Prof. M. Ruthnaswamy, who, apart from writing in *The Examiner*, *The Week*, *The Herald*, *The New Review* elaborately on Constitution, published several books on the subject, Mr A. Soares, who edited *The Week* and wrote in it as well as in *The Examiner* vehemently against any kind of communalism, C.J. Varkey, an earnest Congressman from 1920s, who also wrote several articles in *The Examiner*.

As it could be noticed, the contributors were not only Indian priests and laypersons, but also missionaries. There were also other contributors whose short articles appeared now and then; their names are not mentioned here.

### ***1.2. Associations and Meetings***

Sometimes the Catholic community might look quite introverted without much involvement in concerns other than religious. But at least two motives made them form associations of civil nature: their quest for an Indian identity and nationalistic aspirations.

Formation of Indian Christian Associations in Bengal and Madras, East Indian Association of Bombay, South Canara Catholic Association, etc, bear witness to their quest for an Indian identity. Dominated by foreign missionaries and influenced by European culture, at a point, Indian Catholics woke up and tried to establish their 'Indianness.' Expressions such as 'Indian Christian' and 'Indian Catholic' could be seen here and there in the journals. The realisation of their Indian identity gradually led them to nationalistic aspirations.

Nationalistic aspirations were not encouraged by most of the Catholic missionaries during colonial period. Due to various reasons, which will be seen in the next section, many vociferous missionaries were trying to discourage Catholics from joining the Indian national movement. At the same time, there were also a handful of them, like Fr A.

Gille SJ and Fr Arthur Lallemand SJ (both in Calcutta), who were strong supporters of Indian nationalism and who encouraged Catholics to join the national movement. Nationally oriented Indian Catholics were trying to establish that being a Catholic and a nationalist were not incompatible.

When the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, it is said that many Christians were its members. But gradually their number decreased because of the increasing Hindu domination in the Congress.<sup>3</sup> A kind of political awakening took place among Catholics from 1920s when some of them started joining the Indian National Congress. Mr C.J. Varkey could be considered one of the pioneers of such a movement. At one point, he expressed his wish that all Catholics should join the Congress Party. In the elections held in 1937, four Catholic candidates, who contested on Congress ticket in Madras Presidency, won. While important leaders like Mr C.J. Varkey, Mr George Joseph, Mr Arogyaswami Mudaliar, Mr S. Arpudaswamy Udayar, Mr Roche Victoria were registered members of the Congress in the Madras Presidency, Mr J.A. Saldanha, Mr Joachim Alva, Mr B.S. Gilani and a few others were members of the Congress in the Bombay Presidency.

Another interesting factor was the launching of the Nationalist Christian Party in 1930, during the time of Salt Tax Agitation and Civil Disobedience Movement. It was a joint venture of all Christians. Mr Joachim Alva, a Catholic, was its founder and the first president. The first activity the party took up was to go in a procession to the Congress Party office and extend its support to the Salt Tax Agitation and Civil Disobedience Movement.<sup>4</sup> The party seems to have continued till Independence conducting meetings in support of the national movement.

Still another feature was the All India Catholic Congress meetings conducted every year from 1932 to 1939 (as reported in *The Examiner*), in which lay Catholic politicians took active part. In fact each meeting was presided by such political leaders; and civil matters, such as, political and nationalistic issues attracted central attention.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kranti K. Farias, "Nationalism among Catholics of Western India with Special Reference to Catholics of Mumbai," *Indian Church History Review*, XXXV/2 (December 2001), 172. Cf. also Hugald Graf, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. IV, part 2: *Tamil Nadu in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, for CHAI, 1990), 230.

<sup>4</sup> The event is vividly narrated in *The Week*, VII/15 (July 10, 1930), 238.

Likewise, in 1928, when Simon Commission visited India, different groups of Catholics conducted meetings in support of the Commission as well as against it. Since Indian National Congress did not accept the Commission, Mr Arogyaswami Mudaliar resigned his post as minister in support of the Congress. His decision was applauded by a large number of Catholics gathered in a meeting, in which he explained the circumstances of his resignation.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3. Other Involvements in Civil Society

Some individual Catholics could be seen as examples of active participation in civil society. Brahmobandhab Upadhyay's involvements in the national struggle is well known and they do not need to be mentioned here. Likewise, another person, perhaps less widely known, was Mr Joseph Baptista. He is called the father of Indian Home Rule Movement; it was he who suggested to Mr Tilak to start the movement, even before Ms Annie Besant launched the movement. Mr Baptista was elected its president when Mr Tilak started the Home Rule League.<sup>6</sup>

H.C.E. Zacharias, who has been already mentioned in relation to *The Week*, was perhaps the first Catholic to take a bold step to openly support Indian nationalism through a journal started precisely with that objective. He had been the editor of *Guardian*, a Protestant nationalist journal, and thus pioneered joint action in matters of national and civil interest. He also had affiliation with the 'Servants of India Society' of Lala Lajpat Rai.

His successor as the editor of *The Week*, A. Soares, also had a similar spirit. Along with others like Mr B.S. Gilami, Mr C.J. Varkey and Mr F.X. D'Souza, he participated in the joint meetings of Indian Christians. It was such associations and meetings that made Christians as a whole to give up separate electorates.<sup>7</sup> Another feature that adds credit to Christians in pre-independent India was their neutral and peace-making

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<sup>5</sup> Reported by *The Week*, III/17 (April 26, 1928), 365-367.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of his biography and activities, see K.R. Shirsat, *Kaka Joseph Baptista. Father of Home Rule Movement in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1974). Cf. also Kranti K. Farias, "Nationalism among Catholics of Western India," 168-204.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. "Indian Christians and Communal Problem," *The Examiner*, 91/1 (January 6, 1940), 10-11.

role during the communal struggle between Hindus and Muslims. This seems to be a continued service because this factor was remembered by Mr H.C.E. Zacharias in his book, *Renascent India. From Rammohan Roy to Mohandas Gandhi*, published in 1933 and later in 1942 by *The Herald*. Mr Zacharias mentions about the pacifying role of 'inter-communal city ward committees' during the communal conflicts. He also mentions that one such ward committee was led by Mr A. Soares.<sup>8</sup> Just before the Independence, that is in 1946, *The Herald* reported:

The role of Christians in the existing communal tangle was also clear. While the two communities were drifting further and further away from each other the Christians in this country have taken up the role of striking a clear midway path and at the same time reconciling the Hindus with the Muslims. Christians had many ideas in common with both Muslims and Hindus and thus holding as it were a central position, they are doing a great deal in the matter of reconciling the two warring communities.<sup>9</sup>

The foregoing examples show how the Catholics along with others had tried to be active in the civil society both at discourse and action levels. They also had to face certain challenges that slowed down their enthusiasm in national and civil matters. The following section may shed some light on those challenges.

## **2. Challenges and their Impact**

The main challenges faced by the Catholics during the pre-independent period could be seen from two angles: challenges from within and challenges from outside.

### **2.1. Challenges from within**

First of all, as mentioned earlier, Catholics constituted a very small minority. This minority consciousness worked adversely in their minds. They wanted to keep their identity by keeping away from the majority community. They were encouraged to form associations within the religion and give importance to 'Catholic Action.' Especially, they were discouraged to involve themselves in active politics fearing that politics would divide them.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. H.C.E. Zacharias, *Renascent India. From Rammohan Roy to Mohandas Gandhi*, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1933), 287.

<sup>9</sup> *The Herald*, L/50 (December 29, 1946), 1 and 6.

Secondly, Catholic religious leaders did not encourage Catholics to join with other Christians even in civil matters. It was a time when ecumenical spirit was not developed. Instead, polemics between Catholics and Protestants was at high pitch. Journals from both sides did not spare any opportunity to criticise and mock at each other.

Thirdly, the civil society of the time was mainly concerned with independence. Catholic leadership had two kinds of difficulties with regard to that. First, the Catholics had apprehensions with regard to their future in independent India. British rule, though a Protestant one, had given religious protection. After independence, India would be ruled by Hindus. Would it be safe for Christians! Therefore, involvement in civil society, especially in its struggle for freedom would not be a wise thing. Secondly, they also had an ideological difficulty. Catholic teaching always insisted upon obedience to legitimate authority. Unfortunately, most of them did not raise the question as to what extent a foreign rule was legitimate in India! On the contrary, Catholic leaders believed that British rule was good and providential for India. Both these apprehension and conviction made the Catholic leadership discourage the involvement of Catholics in civil society and its concerns.

Next come two of the Catholic Christianity's structural difficulties: clericalism and dependency on Rome. The laity had to depend upon the clerics for direction in all matters including civil, social and political ones. The clergy, on their part, depended on Rome for direction even in civil matters. One striking example would be the case of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. An early writer on Upadhyay, Fr Alfons Văth, brings out the attitude of Msgr Zalewski, the papal delegate, with regard to the politics of Upadhyay: "Mgr. Zalewski hated his political ideas like poison."<sup>10</sup>

## ***2.2. Challenges from outside***

The primary concern of the civil society was the freedom struggle, and it was led by the Indian National Congress. As noted earlier, the Christian participation in it gradually reduced. The main reason for that decline was Hindu domination. As time went on, Hindu religious overtones began to rise in it. The national movement in India was very

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *The Week*, IV/1 (July 5, 1928), 17-18.

much intertwined with Hindu revivalism. The influence of factional and communal forces like the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha, and the likes, in the movement increased the fear of the Catholics. Tilak's strategy of Ganesh worship and Shivaji festival to instil national feeling were also other examples of this factor.<sup>11</sup> Most supporters of nationalism were staunch Hindus who did not see Christians as different from the oppressors. With regard to the Catholics, at least a section of them seemed to have perceived the national movement as a Brahmin movement.<sup>12</sup> The project of nation building seemed parallel to Hindu revivalism.

The attitudes of national leaders also seemed unfavourable to Christians. Some striking examples could be cited: first, the prime leader of the national movement, Mahatma Gandhi, was not favourable to the missionary activities. Once, his unfavourable statement (in 1931)<sup>13</sup> created great surprise even among nationally oriented Catholics. Some Catholic leaders grabbed that opportunity to warn Catholics about their involvement in national politics. Similarly, many other national leaders were very critical of Christians. A Hindu Mahasabhaite, Mr Ramananda Chatterjee, started a Journal, *The Modern Review* in 1907. From the first issue onwards, the review bore notes and comments highly critical of Christians, presenting them as denationalised and supporters of the oppressor. The main attack of the national leaders, however, was on the conversion works of Christians.

After diarchy system was introduced in India in 1918, Indian National Congress came to power in some Presidencies. One of the legislations of the Congress government was the 'Prohibition Act' (prohibition of liquor). This did not amuse Catholics because they were

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bipin Chandra and others, *India's Struggle for Independence*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *The Examiner*, 4/73 (January 28, 1922), 40.

<sup>13</sup> "Asked (by an Assoc. Press Representative) if he would favour the retention of foreign missionaries when India secured self-government, Mr Gandhi replied: If, instead of confining themselves to purely humanitarian work and material service to the poor, they limit their activities, as they do at present, to proselytising by means of medical aid, education, etc, then I would certainly ask them to withdraw. Every nation's religion is as good as any other. Certainly India's religions are adequate for her people. We need no converting spiritually." *The Examiner*, 82/13 (March 28, 1931), 145.

worried about the mass wine. The message they got was that the Congress would not consider the religious sentiments of Catholics.

A fatal blow to the civil and nationalistic outlook of Catholics came with the Sophia College incident in 1942. Sophia College was a Catholic college for women run by Sacred Heart Nuns in Bombay, and affiliated to the Bombay University. Rumours were afloat that proselytising was going on in that college. K.T. Shah had written about it in one of the issues of the *Bombay Chronicle*. *The Examiner* inserted a brief account to deny the allegations and said that the single case of conversion was that of certain Miss Gool Dhalla,<sup>14</sup> a Parsi girl, and it had nothing to do with the college, for she had already planned to embrace Catholicism two years earlier, and when she converted she was no longer a student of that college.<sup>15</sup> K.T. Shah was firm in his accusations. By then some began to write letters questioning the future position of the Christians in India.<sup>16</sup> K.T. Shah's allegations were refuted by none other than the Catholic nationalist A. Soares, with a write-up filled with sarcastic remarks.<sup>17</sup> In the following year, the lay Catholic leaders were busy preparing to establish associations and organisations to protect their future. They were pushed to a defensive position which made them deflect their attention from the growing national and civil involvement. The following year was very crucial. K.T. Shah continued his attack by moving a resolution in the University Senate to disaffiliate the College. An enquiry committee was set up and it approved the motion. The Senate passed the motion of disaffiliation, with a clause that the affiliation will be continued for three more years.<sup>18</sup> In the issue of April 29, *The Examiner* published the decision of the Government of Bombay on Sophia College, namely that the college was not to be disaffiliated.<sup>19</sup> This was a glad tidings for the Catholics. In the meantime, there were countrywide

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<sup>14</sup> Later, known among the Catholics as Sr Vandana.

<sup>15</sup> *The Examiner*, 93/44 (October 31, 1942), 539.

<sup>16</sup> See the letter of P.V. Domingo from Ahmedabad in *The Examiner*, 93/47 (November 21, 1942), 578.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Aloysius Soares, "'Proselytising' in Sophia College," *The Examiner*, 93/47 (November 21, 1942), 581-582.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. "The Debate in the Senate," *The Examiner*, 95/8 (February 19, 1944), 85. For the full detail of the proceedings, cf. "University Senate Meeting," *The Examiner*, 95/8 (February 19, 1944), 88-92.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. "Sophia College Decision," *The Examiner*, 95/18 (April 29, 1944), 205.

protest meetings by the Catholics against the move to disaffiliate Sophia College from the University.

The main effect of these challenges was the withdrawal from civil society. Catholics began to concentrate once again on organising themselves along religious lines. But they joined other Indians in the jubilation of independence.

### **3. Some Observations**

Catholics' involvement in civil society in pre-independent India seems to be more pronounced than what it is in present times. Official Catholic journals, though claimed to be away from politics, served as forums for discussions and debates in civil and political matters. But their interaction seems to have been limited within Catholic journals only. One could find very rarely any Catholic writing in secular papers. The same trend continues even today. Catholics' contribution in secular papers is very negligible. Even Catholic papers do not seem to contain much matter that interests civil society. In this sense, it is a setback of the Catholic press. Secondly, Catholic political leaders played important role in Catholic conferences. But today, after all importance given to the laity, one can hardly find any lay leader in such conferences. Has clericalism increased? Or has lay leadership been discouraged? It is worth questioning why today there are not many enlightened and dedicated national leaders among Catholics. It all may depend on the importance Catholic Church gives to civil society.

It is true and commendable that the Catholic Church is currently doing a lot for the uplift of the Tribals, Dalits and other oppressed groups. The service of the Church in the field of education (as far as it is not commercialised) is also noteworthy. At the same time, there are still more to be done in the civil society. There are several current issues in which the Church can involve in self, such as the debates on reservation, representation of women in politics, debate on conversion, and so on. The Indian Catholic Church, with its efficient clerical and lay personnel, can serve as a catalyst for social transformation, if it is ready to involve itself fully in the civil society.