

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

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Introduction

The Christian mission in India has had little success due to some reasons such as the work of the church/mission was seen as a threat; the mission was considered as something that breaks the community; and, the mission did not connect to the real need of the people. All these problems can be seen as the outcome of the insufficient concern on the peoples' culture and cultural anthropology as well. Therefore the dramatic change of the mission trends seen since the second half of the 20th century brings awareness to study the culture of the recipients of the Gospel. M.M. Thomas states that the churches today face no greater challenge than the one they encountered in the situation of religious, cultural and ideological pluralism. This challenge is most real in its effort to redefine Christ, Church and Christian mission.¹

Therefore, this paper concentrates on how cultural anthropology could be employed in the context of religious nationalism in India, in which the aim of the study would focus on how religious nationalism is a cultural issue and then cultural anthropology is prescribed as a tool to deal with today's religious issue in India. This paper would not occupy a detail study on cultural anthropology but tries to reveal its necessity in India. It concentrates mainly on its activity and relationship with the Christian mission in India hoping to do better the mission work in the context of religious nationalism in India.

1. Religious Nationalism : A Cultural Issue

Religious nationalism is not simply to be understood as secular nationalism replacing religious identities and duties, religious and national identities coexist and even reinforce each other. Religious nationalism, or the union of religious and national identities, is an increasingly significant aspect of nationalism.² The link between religion and nationalism is not a new area of research. Nevertheless, it became important in recent years, may be because it is having significant political impacts. When there is a clear and constant relationship present between religion and nationalism, a hybrid term of the two is then useful to use in the study of this phenomenon: that of 'religious nationalism'. It signifies a relationship between the concepts of 'religion' and 'nationalism', which are not fundamentally close ideologically. As such, appearances of religious nationalism depend on religious, historical, political, and

¹ T. V. Philip, *Christianity and Religious Pluralism* (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1988), 3.

² "Religious nationalism," accessed on 25.9.2024, https://www.google.com/search?q=religious+nationalism+examples&sca_esv=02c44965d6d4b280&sca.

cultural contexts. For example, countries like Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey seek to develop political legitimacy from reference to religious rather than secular policies; it then determines the use of religious nationalism. In this respect, as these countries are Muslim-majority countries, their state ideologies may be characterized as 'Islamic nationalism'. Likewise, India is a country said to emphasize 'Hindu nationalism' under its present government. Frankly speaking, Indian society is very much intertwined with the Hindu religion and culture.

When we come to the area of religion, what is the basic reason for opposing Christian conversion in India? It is undoubtedly seen in India that the Hindu nationalism is a key factor to create disunity in Indian society. On the other hand, the history of Christianity in India experienced major mistakes in spreading the Gospel. It is definitely right to say that the Church was more or less blind to the value of other religions in the past. Most missionaries were ignorant of the value and richness of Hindu culture and other Asian religions, instead they were seen as pagan religions.³ According to Hindu nationalists, Christianity is considered to be a foreign religion and conversion to it means the abandonment of Hindu/Indian culture. Christianity, as expressed so far in India, is definitely closely linked with the colonial rule; therefore, accepting it would mean accepting once again the colonial power which is against the patriotic spirit of India. Thus baptism is considered as a symbol of assimilation of the converts to the European life-style, ignoring completely their cultural roots.⁴

According to the Hindu nationalists, every nation has its own faith to be as good as that of any other and affirm that the faith held by the Indians is adequate. Another point where Christian missionaries are accused is using unethical means to convert people. Hindus point out that the missionaries used not only monetary allurements, but also psychological pressure as far as possible.⁵ In some places like Goa, it is said that there was much pressure from the Portuguese colonial rulers to convert the people. It is known that the Portuguese banned the public celebration of Hindu rites and feasts under pain of life-sentence, instead they granted benefits, favours and privileges to converts, in order to promote conversions.⁶ The Hindu nationalists never want a Hindu to become a Christian, and are taught not to compromise with anything which threatens the national interest or the culture of the recipients. With the

³ M.P. Raju, *Religious Conversion: Legal Implications* (Delhi: Media House, 1999), 105.

⁴ Hirudaya Swamy Sakarias, *Belong to the Church Without Baptism of Water?* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2009), 37-38.

⁵ Sakarias, *Belong to the Church Without Baptism of Water?* 40-43.

⁶ Sakarias, *Belong to the Church Without Baptism of Water?* 33-34.

commitment to the concept of one nation, one people and one culture, they never support the so-called conversion.⁷ These problems which are embedded in the heart of India create difficulties to Christian cultural anthropologists. On the other hand, to a Christian, presenting Christ to the people around the world is considered as the main vocation which our Lord Jesus Christ commands, and the nature and calling of the Church demands.⁸ These opposing perspectives create difficulties, to live harmoniously in the pluralistic context of India.

When we see the above discussion, it is apparent that a major problem lies in the misunderstanding between Indian culture and Christian culture. Therefore it is a must to prescribe studying culture of the people in order to bring justice in such a country. Therefore, to make at least a small move forward, this paper seeks to enquire whether cultural anthropological study is appropriate as an instrument in the context of such religious nationalism.

2. Cultural Anthropology

The term “anthropology” is derived from the Greek noun *anthropos* meaning ‘man’ and *logia* meaning the “study of,” which literally means “study of human”.⁹ Therefore, the definition made by Jack Davis Eller is vibrant enough as he writes that it is, “The study of the diversity of human behavior in the present.”¹⁰ Cultural anthropology studies human behavior that is *learned* rather than genetically inherited. That means, it does not much concern with the description, but mainly concentrates on better understanding of *why* and *what* people are.¹¹

There are several methods in doing cultural anthropology such as ethnographic research, grounded theory, and participatory research and action. Those are very much relevant to employ in culturally diverse society.

3. Cultural Anthropology : A Challenge

India must be one of the most challenging countries to engage with cultural anthropology because it contains different kinds of people. Therefore, in order to know the importance of cultural anthropology in India, one should know the real situation, only then one will realize

⁷ Sakarias, *Belong to the Church Without Baptism of Water?* 46.

⁸ Darrel L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 184.

⁹ Jan. A.B. Jongeneel, *Missiological Encyclopedia Part 1* (Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2006), 284.

¹⁰ Jack David Eller, *Cultural Anthropology: Global Forces, Local Lives* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 6.

¹¹ Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 29.

the importance of cultural anthropology there. Therefore the following are the challenges and directions of cultural anthropology in India in brief:

3.1. Pluralistic India

India is a vast country which has a long history. Its society has evolved through the ages and has also been affected by foreign influences. Not only in the society, even within the church, there is scope for pluralism in theology, in liturgy, in missionary activities etc. Indian society is pluralistic in culture, linguistics and religion. Indian pluralistic society has many groups such as women, men, racial, ethnic groups as well as broad categories like the rich, middle class and poor. On the other hand, in spite of those diversities, Indian community shares certain bonds of unity like geographical areas, constitution, parliament, etc. All these pluralism create difficulties to carry on an anthropological study; on the other hand it brings great challenges for the success of Christian mission.

India is also known as a religiously diverse country which is home to at least nine recognized religions. The major religions practiced in India are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism. Zoroastrianism, Judaism and the Baha'i Faith. India is the birthplace of some of the world's major religions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism claim India as their country of origin, and although Zoroastrianism and Baha'i faith do not have Indian roots today, the largest numbers of followers of these religions are found in India.¹²

People eat different foods, build different kinds of houses, speak different languages, and there is a way of greeting different from one another. It has a diverse list of spoken languages among different groups of people. At least 800 different languages and around 2000 dialects have been identified. The Constitution of India has stipulated the usage of Hindi and English to be the two official languages of communication for the national government. Additionally, it contains a list of 22 official languages (including Hindi and English).¹³ In order to carry on ethnography in India, a researcher would surely find difficulties as such amount of languages existed in India. In spite of such diversity, it would be on the other hand interested to enter into the study of culture.

The current world has been experiencing a deep crisis in the cultural framework of different societies. They have become the arena for new powers of evil, destruction, dehumanization

¹²Nitishi, "Religious Diversity in India," accessed on 5.9.2024, <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/essay/religious-diversity-in-india/47344>.

¹³ Accessed on 5.9.2024, <http://www.axistranslations.com/translation-article/national-languages-of-india-list.html>.

and death. Aram has explained the present situation that the contemporary world is moving towards one dominant culture. In spite of the development, the emergence of this new global mono-culture threatens humanity and all of creation. The new global culture is mainly based on profit, quantitative growth and exploitation. The emerging culture denies participation, sharing and equal rights, instead dehumanizes and disintegrates local cultures. In short, secularism, materialism and technology have made cultures exclusively human-oriented, yet less humane.¹⁴

Therefore, we realize that the rapid growth and development of the present world worsens culture, needs to be rescued. There have been discussions and writings on the reason why the Christian church must and how it will incarnate itself. Contemporary world is in a situation which is torn between two opposite forces: a search for cultural roots and ethnic identities which is becoming increasingly separatist and destructive. Therefore the church is in a situation that commits her to a fresh exploration of the issues in relation to the Gospel and cultures.¹⁵ To tackle the issues lying between Gospel and culture, anthropological study must be promoted.

3.2. Development, a Perpetuator of Inequalities.

It is no doubt to say that even India is experiencing rapid changes in every sphere of its social life. This change results in a chaotic situation which can be taken as an unhealthy sign to become a strong nation, moreover it makes difficulties in Christian mission work. The said economic development is also contributing to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.¹⁶

According to Suzanne C. Toton, technological development also has to be considered as ex-communicator of people. Multinational Corporations certainly have introduced new technology in the Third World, particularly in the mining and manufacturing industries. She says, "...the technology introduced is more suited to the needs of multinationals than to the needs of the countries in which they operate."¹⁷ For this reason, technology is largely capital intensive, that is, geared to the type of production that uses as little labour as possible. In

¹⁴ Aram I, "The Incarnation of the Gospel in Cultures: A Missionary Event," in *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization*, edited by James A. Scherer & Stephen B. Bevans, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 30-31.

¹⁵ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing Discussion within the Ecumenical Movement*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), ix.

¹⁶ N.K. Gauraha, "Role of Anthropology in a Rapid Changing Scenario," in *Anthropology in Contemporary Societies*, edited by A.N. Sharma and S.K. Rawat (New Delhi : Sarup Book Publishers, 2012), 165-166.

¹⁷ Suzanne C. Toton, *World Hunger* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 56.

countries in which unemployment has reached a crisis proportion, capital intensive technology only aggravates the problem.¹⁸

Thus, rapid changes in the present world, like technology, expansion of cities, increasing heterogeneity etc., have created anonymity, impersonality and alienation in the present context everywhere. In other words, our present society faces fracture, disintegration and atomization. Not only in a society abroad, even the heart of families are fractured which results in the difficulties to educate children as our working patterns have less time for children. The present society sees the rise of individualism which leads to less commitment for others in the society, again resulting in erosion of social bonds, loss of faith in public institutions, drug abuse, and crime and so on. In Britain, it is said that one-third of marriages end in divorce which in-turn those children experience the bad results of divorce. Even America and other European countries witness the increase of divorce in the family.¹⁹ Therefore, it is an urgent task to consider individualism as a major issue to deal with in contemporary situation.

Several social scientists consider the main cause of multiple fractures experienced by the contemporary society is the so called *social atomism*. This theory recognized the importance of the individual in relation to all around him, which is encouraged by the growing individualism in the modern world; no one realizes about what is happening among the neighbours and is not involved in anything around them.

S.M. Michael considers the importance of protecting the sacredness of family and one's own responsibility towards community. From this communal standpoint the value of others is possible to make aware in the society, and then each person also has his/her duties and obligations to others. This kind of following communitarianism would be easily done for Christians by strengthening parishes and dioceses, and should be a cultural counter group.²⁰ Individualistic culture which has strongly emerged in the modern world is in need of a counter culture otherwise the cultural values we see in a community may become extinct.

Therefore, the developments we see in the present situation are directed towards the rich. The majority of modern facilities are available for the rich; even the scheme like "below poverty

¹⁸ Suzanne C. Toton, *World Hunger*, 56.

¹⁹ S.M. Michael, & Jose Joseph, eds., *The Emerging Challenges to Christian Mission Today* (Pune: Ishvani Kendra, 2016), 31.

²⁰ Michael, "The Emerging Cultural Challenges to Christian Mission Today," 32-33.

line” is not much help for the poor.²¹ In order to eradicate poverty, and to challenge the rise of individualism, who and what can play a significant role? This question is in need of giving answer through an anthropological study. These developments brought by globalization or post-modernity become the arena of the Christian holistic mission work. Doing research is the emergent task; research should be done by the anthropologists to suggest for the future direction of mission work in India.

4. Evaluation

We recognize the fact that India is a multi-religious and pluralistic cultural country, in which Christian mission carries on its ministry. In spite of such plurality and diversity, it is to be taken as divinely bestowed blessing and grace. The Church’s mission in this context calls for it to be a truly dialogical community. The mission agencies or the church has to keep in mind its vocation to be the “light of the world” and “salt of the earth.” We have to create a common forum of dialogue and liberalize action through which misunderstanding, hatred, discord and discrimination could be opposed, and we could together build up a nation with justice, peace and harmony.

For the purpose of such mission direction, cultural anthropology is taken as one of the initial stages for methodology in doing mission anywhere. Unless an anthropological study is taken up, how can the Christian mission find out the exact point for the relationship with people of other faiths. The Gospel can meaningfully be appropriated only in relation to culture. Thus, Krupa expresses the relationship between culture and Gospel as, “... culture is not a barrier but complementary to gospel.”²² The approaches coming up recently are mostly carried out opposing the colonial or traditional mission work, where the colonizer’s culture was given loyalty.

When we look back to the time of Jesus, the Gospel broke down the barriers that divided the people into Jews and Gentiles, slaves and masters, males and females, rich and poor, us and them. Christians were called to be citizens of the kingdom of God, in which people from all nations and cultures were brought into common fellowship without destroying their ethnological distinctiveness.²³ In contemporary situation, the Bible and missionary message along with learning the local language is not sufficient for cross-cultural mission. The task of

²¹ N.K. Gauraha, “Role of Anthropology in a Rapid Changing Scenario,” in *Anthropology in Contemporary Societies*, edited by A.N. Sharma and S.K. Rawat (New Delhi : Sarup Book Publishers, 2012), 167.

²² Bethel Krupa, “Church, Gospel & Cultures: Case Study from Parakkal,” in *The Community We Seek: Perspectives on Mission*, edited by Jesudas M. Athyal (Tiruvalla: Christian Sahitya Samithi, 2003), 151.

²³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985), 15

communicating effectively in another culture is far more difficult than imagined. Traditional colonial practices experienced that there is still a big gap between the Bible and cultural setting of contemporary India. Therefore, cultural anthropological study should be given more importance in order to accomplish its work before and while doing Christian mission anywhere.

N.K. Gouraha believes that anthropologists are the only ones who are able to involve in eradicating poverty and to change the social set up in India. He said, “It is only the anthropologists, who have specialized skill to understand the effects of change in cultural pattern and social set up.”²⁴ In almost all the states in India, murder, kidnapping, corruption and other social evils become very common today. Vijoy S. Sahay believes that only competent anthropologists can accomplish all these works after intensive study of situation, because anthropologists would examine holistically their socio-economic, political and cultural conditions but not look at the phenomena of extremism.²⁵

In doing anthropology, anthropologists face lots of problems. The World Bank has realized the potential of anthropology today, they employ anthropologists in their resettlement or rehabilitation schemes, even in their developmental plans. But, the government of India has undermined the role of anthropology which can be seen as anthropologists hardly occupy significant position in the Planning Commission today. In the Anthropological Survey of India, hundreds of posts of anthropologists are lying vacant for over two decades, and this institution also has become ineffective in influencing the government in framing developmental policies.²⁶ This problem reveals that the Government is also responsible to make use of anthropologists to develop the growth rate of the country in every areas.

Even in Christian mission work, cultural anthropology has a rich contribution to make in every sphere. Nevertheless, the mission work does not give it a central role as it should be. However, the mission trends and models coming up recently are much related with the culture of the indigenous people. As the challenges in India are real and emergent, the direction of cultural anthropology also should always move towards the need of the people who are in need of restoration.

²⁴ N.K. Gauraha, “Role of Anthropology in a Rapid Changing Scenario,” 168.

²⁵ Sahay, “Contribution of Anthropology to Contemporary Societies,” in *Anthropology in Contemporary Societies*, edited by A.N. Sharma and S.K. Rawat (New Delhi : Sarup Book Publishers, 2012), 329.

²⁶ Vijoy S. Sahay, “Contribution of Anthropology to Contemporary Societies,” 326.

Like some other developing countries, Indian anthropology also has its own discipline, but anthropologists still rely on the international monographs to aid their research. Julie Davis has mentioned that the anthropological theories of India are still related and combined with the Western theories. Here, it is an emergent to get away from the Western theories, so that the theories may be made out of Indian context.²⁷ Then, the methods used in anthropological study will be more acceptable as the research will be done without mixed with outside theories and methods.

The advantage of the native anthropologists is that the fieldworkers do not need to learn a new language, culture and lifestyle. The indigenous scholar can also reject the previous studies done at the time of colonization. Moreover, a scholar can easily work his/her research from home in local and district as well.²⁸

The most important point in doing mission is to communicate the Gospel in different cultures without degrading the meaning. For this purpose, Paul G. Hiebert suggests different areas to concentrate by cultural anthropologists, such as: linguistics, communications, cultural differences, culture, social structure, religion, culture change, recent development, past and present.²⁹ Therefore, in the context of religious nationalism, the anthropologists should engage with these areas to know the real need of the people in his/her Christian mission work.

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²⁷ Julie Davis, "The We-They Distinction in Anthropology," in *Anthropology in India*, edited by S. Saksena, et.al. (New Delhi : Serials Publications, 2010), 93.

²⁸ Julie Davis, "The We-They Distinction in Anthropology," in *Anthropology in India*, 95.

²⁹ Paul G. Hiebert, "A Reading for Cultural Anthropology," accessed on 23.9.2024 <https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/mission.htm>.

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