



THE TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA- A STUDY

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ABSTRACT;- Christianity's arrival in India is traditionally attributed to the apostle Thomas, one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus. According to a popular tradition, Thomas traveled to the Malabar Coast, a region on the southwest side of the subcontinent. It was in this area he's said to have established seven churches, laying the groundwork for a community known as the **Thomas Christians** or Syrian Christians. This Christian community is among the oldest in the world and refutes the argument that Indian Christianity is merely a product of Western colonial influence. Christianity in India, though not as widely practiced as Hinduism or Islam, has a rich and intriguing history that dates back almost 2,000 years. Its origins, influence, and contributions to Indian society are profound, albeit lesser known. Here are nine things you should know about Christianity in India. Most prominent among these missionaries was **William Carey**, a British Baptist missionary who arrived in Serampore, Bengal, in 1793. Carey, along with his colleagues Joshua Marshman and William Ward, made significant contributions to education, social reform, and the development of regional languages. Their work, known as the Serampore Mission, set the tone for future Protestant missions in India. Missionaries provided support for widows and outcast women, who were often marginalized in society. They set up shelters and homes, providing these women with a safe refuge and the means to earn a living. Christians advocated for the rights of women and encouraged them to take active roles in the church, including as educators, health workers, and evangelists. This was an important step toward empowering women and promoting their active participation in public life.

KEYWORDS;- CHRISTIANITY, PROTESTANT CATHOLIC WILLIAM CARRY WILLAM WARD JOSHUA MERSHMAN FAITH INDIA

INTRODUCTION

Christianity in India, though not as widely practiced as Hinduism or Islam, has a rich and intriguing history that dates back almost 2,000 years. Its origins, influence, and contributions to Indian society are profound, albeit lesser known. Here are nine things you should know about Christianity in India.

1. The 'doubting disciple' is said to have spread the faith to India.

Christianity's arrival in India is traditionally attributed to the apostle Thomas, one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus. According to a popular tradition, Thomas traveled to the Malabar Coast, a region on the southwest side of the subcontinent. It was in this area he's said to have established seven churches, laying the groundwork for a community known as the **Thomas Christians** or Syrian Christians. This Christian community is among the oldest in the world and refutes the argument that Indian Christianity is merely a product of Western colonial influence.

2. Christian missionary efforts have been influential for over 400 years.

The history of Christianity in India is deeply intertwined with the saga of Christian missions. The missionary fervor of the European colonial era, in particular, marked a pivotal phase in Indian Christianity's history. Catholic missionaries from Portugal arrived in the 16th century,

establishing Jesuit missions and introducing the Roman Catholic faith to new regions. Other colonial powers, including the **British, Dutch, and Danish**, sent Protestant missionaries who established churches and expanded the influence of the faith. This effort came from different denominations, including Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist missions.

Most prominent among these missionaries was **William Carey**, a British Baptist missionary who arrived in Serampore, Bengal, in 1793. Carey, along with his colleagues Joshua Marshman and William Ward, made significant contributions to education, social reform, and the development of regional languages. Their work, known as the Serampore Mission, set the tone for future Protestant missions in India.

3. The ‘father of modern missions’ transformed Indian languages.

Christian missionaries not only spread their faith but also transformed Indian vernacular languages. Their efforts to translate the Bible into various Indian languages led to the standardization of grammar and vocabulary, effectively helping to mold these languages.

In 1801, Carey was entrusted with the task of teaching Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi at Fort William College. His linguistic proficiency led him to translate the Bible into multiple languages, including Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Hindi, Assamese, and Sanskrit. He worked on translating parts of the Bible into 29 other languages and dialects.

Alongside Marshman, he edited a Bhotia grammar book and developed grammars for six other languages. Carey and Marshman also created dictionaries for Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi and undertook the colossal task of translating three volumes of the epic Sanskrit poem Ramayana.

4. Christian missionaries made significant contributions to Indian education.

Missionaries founded some of the earliest modern educational institutions in India, including schools, colleges, and universities. These institutions offered a previously unavailable Western-style education.

Institutions like **St. Xavier’s College** in Mumbai, **Loyola College** in Chennai, and **St. Stephen’s College** in Delhi were established by Christian missionaries and continue to be recognized for academic excellence. At a time when education for women wasn’t given importance, Christian missionaries played a crucial role in promoting women’s education in India. They established numerous schools for girls, advocating for gender equality and challenging societal norms.

5. Missionaries sparked social reform throughout society.

Missionaries established schools in remote areas and provided education for marginalized communities, including lower-caste groups and tribals, who were often denied education in mainstream society. This was a significant step toward inclusivity and social reform.

The missionaries actively campaigned against social malpractices such as the caste system, untouchability, child marriage, and Sati, a ritual where a widow would self-immolate on her husband’s funeral pyre.

Missionaries provided support for widows and outcast women, who were often marginalized in society. They set up shelters and homes, providing these women with a safe refuge and the means to earn a living. Christians advocated for the rights of women and encouraged them to take active roles in the church, including as educators, health workers, and evangelists. This was an important step toward empowering women and promoting their active participation in public life.

6. Christianity has influenced Indian art, literature, and architecture.

Christianity in India has adapted to local cultures and traditions, resulting in a unique blend of Indian and Christian practices. This integration is evident in the architecture of churches,

liturgical music, and local customs. For instance, in Kerala, the tradition of “**Puthen Pana**” involves singing a narrative poem about the life of Jesus during the Holy Week.

Indian authors have written novels and short stories that explore Christian themes and the experiences of Christian characters. A prominent example is **The God of Small Things** by **Arundhati Roy**, which delves into the lives of a Christian family in Kerala, exploring themes of caste, love, and social transformation.

India has numerous Christian landmarks, such as the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa, which holds the remains of Francis Xavier. The St. Thomas Mount in Chennai, believed to be the place where the apostle Thomas was martyred, is another significant religious site.

7. Christianity in India is regionally and denominationally diverse.

Although Christianity is spread across the country, South India is home to about half of the Christians in the country, with a particularly vibrant Christian community in the southern states. In the more sparsely populated Northeast, Christians make up a relatively large share of the population, with the vast majority belonging to tribal communities. Christian populations can also be found in other parts of India, such as **Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa**.

However, the concentration of Christians varies from one region to another, depending on factors such as the prevailing rite and tradition and the length of time Christianity has existed in those regions.

The ancient Thomas Christians of Kerala, for example, have a distinctive culture compared to Christians in other parts of the country. While **many Indian Christians** identify as Catholic (37 percent), a variety of other denominations are present in India. For example, 13 percent of Indian Christians are Baptists, 7 percent identify with the Church of North India, and another 7 percent identify with the Church of South India.

8. A substantial portion of Indian Christians engage in syncretism.

Religious syncretism, the merging of different and often incompatible faith traditions, is an all-too-common practice in India (just as it is in the U.S.). A significant portion of Indian Christians incorporates beliefs and practices from other religions, with a majority (54 percent) believing in the **concept of karma**. Many Indian Christians believe in reincarnation (29 percent) and ascribe purifying powers to the Ganges River (32 percent), both of which are fundamental beliefs in Hinduism.

It's not uncommon for Indian Christians to participate in customs associated with other religions, such as celebrating the festival of Diwali (31 percent) or adorning a bindi on the forehead (22 percent), a practice typically observed by Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain women.

9. Persecution remains a persistent threat.

Religious persecution of Christians in India has been on the rise in recent years, with Hindu extremist groups, local governments, and nationalist Hindus seeking to “**purify**” **India by making it entirely Hindu**. These persecutors view Christian converts as traitors to the Hindu homeland and aim to eliminate them to appease Hindu deities.

CONCLUSION

Christians in India face **various forms of persecution**, including attacks on churches, arrests, and detention on false charges of forced conversions. For example, Hindu-nationalist informants in many villages report on the activities of Christians, leading to attacks and arrests. In some cases, Christians have been forced out of their villages, and hundreds have been jailed for practicing their faith.

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