



## Research Article

### Race, Caste, and Missionary Work of the Syro-Malabar Catholics in Postcolonial India and the US

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In this article, I discuss the rise of Syro-Malabar Catholic missionary work in India in the mid-twentieth century and the United States today. At a time when India was beginning to curb foreign missionary work in India, in-house Syro-Malabar Catholic missionary work was on the rise. I examine the racial differences between (white) Catholic missionaries and (brown) dominant caste Catholics. In India, there are three rites of Catholicism: Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, and Latin. While the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites are considered 'forward' caste in the state of Kerala, Latin Catholics are recognized as OBC. The majority of Catholics in India are Dalit and Adivasi, but the Catholic hierarchy remains overwhelmingly dominant caste. Thus, there is a caste division between rites of Catholicism in India which plays into missionary work. This caste dynamic is key in understanding Syro-Malabar missionary work especially outside of the state of Kerala. In the US, Syro-Malabar dominant caste priests may experience racism especially in predominantly white rural areas where they have little support systems in place. They also may be sent to Native communities, entering into the long history and present of Catholic settler colonialism. I examine how caste and race configures Catholic missionary work by specifically examining how the Catholic hierarchy is structured by caste, how caste and race may shape how spiritual labour is perceived by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and how caste and race shape how priests themselves view the spiritual guidance of white, Indigenous, Dalit Bahujan, and Adivasi parishioners.

*caste, race, catholic, missionaries, colonialism*

## Introduction

This article examines missionaries from the Syro-Malabar rite of Catholicism in India (OR18).<sup>1</sup> While South Asian Studies tends to imagine Christian missionaries as white and American/European and converts as brown and 'indigenous', it is estimated that 70% of Catholic missionaries in India come from the Syro-Malabar rite *within* India (OR18).<sup>2</sup> In addition, many Syro-Malabar Catholic priests are today traveling to countries in the Global North as missionaries leading to a 'reverse missionary' phenomenon where brown priests are

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rite' refers to the distinct traditions in liturgy that arose within the Catholic faith over the centuries in different locations throughout the world. While the Western world (and many postcolonial nations where Catholicism was brought by Western missionaries) operates under the 'Latin' rite, there are Churches in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and India in the Eastern rites with distinct liturgies and traditions. These rites or 'Churches', while distinct from one another, are in full communion with the Catholic Church in Rome. It does get confusing and so below, I discuss the rites of Catholicism and specifically the Syro-Malabar rite and its relation to the Latin rite in depth (also see OR18).

<sup>2</sup> Much of the Catholic missionary work within India is conducted by Syro-Malabar Catholic priests in Latin rite dioceses in North India.

missionaries amongst mostly white congregants.<sup>3</sup> In order to understand the complex racial dynamics animating Catholic missionary work in India and the US today, it is essential to examine both the historical shift in the Syro-Malabar Catholic rite's stance on proselytisation and the influence of caste hierarchy in Indian missionary work. In this article, I examine the origins and influence of caste and racial hierarchies while providing an overview of Catholic missionary work in/ from India post independence.

The article is divided into two parts. In part one, I discuss the historical narratives and caste dynamics that helped to anchor the distinct community identity of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in order to contextualise the growing numbers of (South Indian) Syro-Malabar Catholics engaged in missionary work in (North Indian) Latin Churches. This surge is especially significant in light of xenophobic fears of a 'threat to the (Hindu) nation' which has fueled anti-conversion legislation and anti-Christian violence in many Indian states. In the second part, I turn my attention to Syro-Malabar Catholic priests engaged in missionary work in the US examining how, on the one hand, dominant caste networks have allowed for the migration of Catholic elites, and on the other hand, such migration has produced racial anxieties as brown Indian priests necessarily have to navigate the United States' complex racial hierarchy while simultaneously entering into a long, and continuing, history of Catholic settler colonialism. I focus on the Syro-Malabar rite because the Syro-Malabar rite is the second largest of the Eastern rites after the Ukrainian Church and has the most vocations (ordained priests) of any of the Eastern rites of Catholicism (OR8).<sup>4</sup> The rite appears to be the most active in Indian Catholic missionary work in the US.<sup>5</sup> In addition, my focus on the Syro-Malabar rite stems from an auto-ethnographic project of which this article is a part. I come from a Syro-Malabar rite lineage—my parents were part of this Church before they migrated to Germany in the 1960s, and then to the US. Although I was raised in Montana in the Latin rite and the nearest Syro-Malabar congregation was over 1000 miles from where I was born, many missionary priests in the neighboring state of North Dakota and later in Montana were and are from the Syro-Malabar rite. Thus, this article is based on ongoing auto-ethnographic research on Indian priests and missionary work in the rural West.

### Rites of Catholicism and Caste

'Rite' refers to the distinct traditions in liturgy that arose within the Catholic faith over the centuries in different locations throughout the world. There are 23 different rites of Catholicism, the largest being the Latin rite of Catholicism with which readers will be most familiar. While the Western world (and many postcolonial nations where Catholicism was brought by Western missionaries) operates under the Latin rite, there are Churches in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and in India with liturgies and traditions that differ from the Western Latin rite. These Churches are part of the Eastern rites or Oriental rites. Eastern rite Catholics number about 16.3 million (OR21) and include the Coptic Catholics of Egypt, Maronite Catholics of Lebanon/Syria, and Byzantine Catholics of Greece, among other Eastern Catholic rites. The Eastern Code of Canon law defines rite as "the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary heritage,

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<sup>3</sup> In the US, Catholic missionaries from India are sent to Native American reservations and to Latina Spanish-speaking Churches as well.

<sup>4</sup> Vocations refers to the numbers of men entering the priesthood. According to the *National Catholic Register*, "the Syro-Malabar Church accounts for 6% to 9% of the worldwide total of diocesan priests, religious priests, nuns, and seminarians giving India the highest vocation ratio in the world" (OR8).

<sup>5</sup> My research on Indian Catholic missionary work in the Global North is focused on the US. The majority of missionaries in the US are diocesan priests. The US does not gather data on the diocese or rite these priests come from/are ordained in, only the US diocese in which they serve. Thus, it is difficult to get accurate data on the exact number of missionary priests in the US from the Syro-Malabar rite. My qualitative research shows 64% of my participants are from dominant caste backgrounds.

distinguished according to peoples' culture and historical circumstances, that finds expression in each autonomous Church's way of living the faith" (OR21). Some examples of particular 'cultures' or 'historical circumstances' could be sacred language (Latin or Syriac) or the Apostle associated with evangelism in different locations (St. Peter in Rome or St. Thomas in India). Both Eastern rite Catholics and Latin Catholics are in full communion with the Vatican belonging to 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Faith' as described in the Nicene Creed which is recited at mass by the faithful in all rites of Catholicism. Faithful Catholics baptised or receiving sacraments in an Eastern Catholic rite are fully able to attend mass and receive communion in the Latin rite and vice versa. With a special 'bi-ritual' faculty from the Vatican, an Eastern rite ordained priest can practice mass or be a missionary in the Latin rite and vice versa. In theory then, rites do not separate Catholics from each other. Rather, rites should only be an expression of multiple ways of being Catholic globally. In practice, however, the rites of Catholicism can be very separate from one another. In India, the separation between rites is even more complex because it occurs along caste lines.

There are three rites of Catholicism in India; Latin, Syro-Malankara, and Syro-Malabar.<sup>6</sup> The Latin rite was brought to India by the Portuguese in the 16th Century. The Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar rites belong to the Eastern rites. The Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar rites are united in a shared origin story, shared sacred language, and by caste. According to oral histories, St. Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve Apostles, came to Kerala, South India in the year 52 CE, converted Brahmins to Christianity, and was later martyred outside of Chennai. The historicity of this evangelical mission of St. Thomas is recognised and supported by the Vatican. St. Thomas spoke in the language of Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic used by early Christians. Thus, the 'Syro' part of the Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar rites refers to their Syriac traditions and language. Before the 1960s, the Syro-Malabar mass was conducted in the Syriac language, just as Latin was the language of choice for Western Catholic masses. Now, the Syro-Malabar mass is conducted in the vernacular language of Malayalam. But the importance of the Syriac language remains in particular prayers, chants, words, naming practices, and in seminary training. Both the Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar rites, in addition to certain other Christian denominations including Syrian Orthodox Christians, Marthoma Christians, and Knanayan Christians, are all known as 'Syrian Christians' because of their origin stories (caste and conversion), their shared Eastern traditions, and the historical and ongoing importance of the Syriac language to their shared heritage. Of all the denominations of Christians that fall under the umbrella of 'Syrian Christians', the Syro-Malabar Catholics are the largest.

Whether or not St. Thomas actually came to India and whether or not he converted Brahmins is a matter of dispute from those outside the St. Thomas/ Syriac communities. For one, the social organising system of caste was not the norm in this area of India at the time and only started to consolidate somewhere between the 7th to 10th centuries. Secondly, much of the early history of the Syrian Christians is carried forward by oral traditions. Nevertheless, clergy and members of the Syriac rites in India believe in the St. Thomas apostolic mission, and St. Thomas is very much celebrated. St. Thomas' portrait can be found in almost every Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala today, the name 'Thomas' is very common in the community—illustrated in my father's name and my surname. St. Thomas' feast day, July 3rd, is called *Dukhrana* or 'remembrance' and is an important feast day for all Syrian Christians. The Syro-Malabar Church has urged all public universities in Kerala to view July 3rd as a holiday, as most Christian institutions in the state already do. It is not just the community that holds onto

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<sup>6</sup> There are also dominant caste Catholics who identify as Knanayan. Knanayan Catholics do not have their own rite of Catholicism. In 1911, Pope Pius X erected the Vicariate Apostolic of Kottayam for Knanayan Catholics which was later raised to an Eparchy co-extensive with the Syro-Malabar Church.

this belief in St. Thomas' visit to Kerala and their ancestors being dominant caste. Wider Kerala society also understands the Syrian Christians to be dominant caste. The Syrian Christians became merchants and landowners and their accrued generational wealth led to economic, social, and political power in the caste-stratified society. In 849 CE, a series of edicts were hammered onto a set of copper plates giving the Syrian Christians certain rights that mirrored the rights afforded to caste-privileged peoples in Kerala society. Today, the Syrian Christians remain the largest landowners in Kerala, India (Zachariah 2006: 28) and, as a 'forward' caste, they do not qualify for reservations.

After the arrival of Vasco deGama on the Kerala coast in 1498, Portuguese Catholic missionaries came to this area of India. St. Francis Xavier converted tens of thousands of Muslims and Hindu fisher-folk to Latin Catholicism. As mentioned, 'Latin' refers to the Latin language associated with Western Christianity and denotes a liturgical and sacred language different from 'Syriac'. The Portuguese tried to Latinise the Syrian Christians in a Synod in 1599. In 1653, some of the Syrian Christians rebelled against Portuguese Catholicism in an event known as the *Coonan Kurisha* or 'crooked cross oath'. These Syrian Christians became what we now know as 'Orthodox' Christians in the region. There were a number who stayed faithful to Catholicism, but did not want Latinisation either. This group became the Syro-Malabar Catholics. The Syro-Malankara are a small group of Orthodox Christians who attempted and were successful in reuniting with Rome in the 1930s. Latin Catholics are differentiated from Syro-Malabar Catholics and Syro-Malankara Catholics not just by language and liturgy, but also by caste and origin story. As Syro-Malabar Catholics would see it, Latin Catholic history in India is not the mission of one of Jesus's own Apostles, but rather, the evangelical mission of foreign/ coloniser Portuguese missionaries centuries later. Since Portuguese missionaries worked along the coast and primarily with fisher-folk, the landowning dominant caste merchants from the Syrian Christian community set themselves apart from them. Syro-Malabar priests insisted on separate seminaries, objected to Latin Catholic priests using their vestments, and even from having Latin Catholic priests trained in the Syriac liturgy (Podipara 1986: 60). Latin Catholics experienced and continue to experience casteism from dominant caste Christians and Hindus. While the Syrian Christians are considered 'forward caste' in Kerala, Latin Catholics are considered OBC (Other Backward Castes) in the state. When the Kerala government tried to create scholarships for Latin Catholics in 2015, Syro-Malabar Catholics protested, saying such scholarships would divide the Christian community (without discussing how the Catholic community is already divided by caste). Latin Catholic concerns and the plight of fisher-folk seem far removed from the concerns of the Eastern rite clergy. For instance, while Latin Catholic priests have joined fisher-folk in protests against a shipyard in Kochi that will displace Latin Catholics, the Syrian Catholic hierarchy meets with Narendra Modi and the Hindu Right to discuss the falling price of natural rubber on the world market—a business where the Syrian Christians are prominent. Thus, the Catholic religion usually does not unite Syro-Malabar Catholics with Latin Catholics politically or socially.

While these caste dynamics play out via Latin and Syrian Catholic rites in the state of Kerala where St. Thomas Christianity has a long history, they may not be as well known in other areas of India where Christians in general and Catholics specifically are assumed to be Dalit Bahujan and/or Adivasi. In the late colonial period, India witnessed mass conversions of Dalit and Adivasi communities to Christianity; these mass conversions were, moreover, facilitated by foreign missionaries. This is not to imply that European missionaries were necessarily anti-caste in their missionary endeavors or that Dalit and Adivasi Christians did not employ their own agency and self-determination in these mass conversions. In fact, British Anglican missionaries tried to first work amongst Syrian Christians, believing their Eastern traditions/ Catholicism to be lackadaisical and hoping that the reforming of the dominant caste Christians would result in the transferring of Dalit Bahujan workers to Protestant Christianity with them.

But the Syrian Christians held fast to their Eastern/ caste traditions much as they rejected Portuguese Latinisation centuries before. Only after the Syrian Christians broke from the Church Missionary Society in 1836 did British missionaries start to work amongst Kerala's Dalit slave castes (Mohan 2016: 45). As Sanal Mohan explains in his research on caste, prayer, and social space, colonial modernity was shaped by missionary Christianity which fundamentally altered public life for many of Kerala's slave castes. Through their own Dalit schools, chapels, and prayer meetings, a new social imaginary was possible as Kerala's most oppressed castes challenged caste segregation and casteist practices imposed upon them (Mohan 2016: 46). The impact of caste activism and a new social landscape that public life and prayer provided played a role in these mass conversions. Now, the majority of Catholics in India, an estimated 65%, are Dalit (OR11). In some states, that statistic is much higher. In the state of Tamil Nadu, for example, 75% of the Catholics are Dalit (OR22).

(Foreign white) missionaries coming to convert (Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi) Hindus to Christianity stoked fears that the Hindu community was on the demographic decline, motivating anti-conversion legislation in many Indian states in nationalist India.<sup>7</sup> In *Religious Freedom and Mass Conversion in India*, Laura Jenkins (2019) has given an overview of anticonversion legislation in India starting from regional laws passed in the early 20th century such as the Raigarh State Conversion Act in 1936 or the Udaipur State Anticonversion Act of 1946. These state laws were followed by national bills post Independence such as the Indian Conversion Bill of 1954 and the Backward Communities Religious Protection Bill of 1960 (ibid). As Jenkins explains, "Regardless of shifts in motivations or justifications, political leaders and administrators have used the laws to patronise and scrutinise lower castes, Adivasis, women and group converts, making them less eligible for religious freedom" (ibid: 139). Today, there is widespread (dominant caste) support for regional 'religious freedom' laws to curb all missionary work—foreign and domestic—especially when missionaries work amongst Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities. The Indian Government has even blocked (and then subsequently removed the block after outcry) foreign funding to Mother Teresa's celebrated organisation, 'Missionaries of Charity'. Investigative reporting by the *New York Times* has found that in Modi's India, anti-Christian vigilantes are "sweeping through villages, storming Churches, burning Christian literature, attacking schools and assaulting worshipers" (OR13). Chad Bauman's research on Pentacostal Christians has shown that Hindu nationalist attacks on Christians often single out Indian pastors/ evangelists by targeting their evangelistic activities, following them to and from Churches and attacking missionaries in their homes, or even attacking family members of evangelists (Bauman 2020: 83-86). In March 2021, an executive order under the Modi government placed restrictions on the Overseas Indian Citizenship (OCI [Overseas Citizens of India]) visa prohibiting research, journalism, and *missionary work* (emphasis mine) in India by registered Overseas Indian Citizens—restrictions previously not part of the OCI since its inception in 2005 (OR23). But while conversion activities may face Hindu Right opposition, Syro-Malabar Catholic (brown) missionaries with caste privilege and ties to dominant caste Hindus may not be scrutinised with the same lens.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Jenkins discusses how mass conversions to Christianity also engendered a debate over whether or not Dalit Christians should receive reservations (because Dalit Christians are not recognised as Scheduled Caste), created a legacy of other mass conversions over the years, and created a narrative of whether or not the conversion is "authentic" based on spiritual sincerity (Jenkins 2019: 36-37).

<sup>8</sup> To be sure, Syro-Malabar institutions in North India have also been attacked by the Hindu Right. For instance, in 2021, St. Joseph School in Ganj Basoda, Madhya Pradesh, run by Syro-Malabar monks, was attacked by a Hindu Right mob of over 500 because it was alleged that the school was actively engaged in conversion activities. My purpose here is not to dismiss the anti-Christian violence leveled at Indian missionaries, but rather, to think through how caste and race might set some missionaries apart from other missionaries in the larger social imaginary of who a missionary is in relation to the

is something that the Syro-Malabar Church has actually prided itself in. As the late Syro-Malabar Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil stated (OR4):

In India our missionaries are appreciated. Fundamentalists complain that missionaries have European faces and names, life-style and customs and that they are almost all foreigners who came with colonialism. Whereas we are an all Indian Church. We have the same Indian culture as Hindus. For us missionary work is easier.

Almost as a symptom of this marked difference between missionaries, there is less scholarly discussion and research into the rise of Syro-Malabar missionary work in the 20th and into the 21st century despite the Catholic rite's profound presence in missionary activities today.

### **Syro-Malabar Missions within India**

Generally speaking, missionary work was not a feature of the Syro-Malabar rite for most of its history. In a caste stratified society, dominant caste peoples distance themselves and segregate from Dalit Bahujan peoples, cutting off access to dominant caste enclaves, economic opportunities, and from socio-political power. Evangelistic activities are antithetical to any group invested in the caste system. As B.R. Ambedkar notes when discussing conversion and the Hindu religion (OR9):

Caste is inconsistent with conversion. Inculcation of beliefs and dogmas is not the only problem that is involved in conversion. To find a place for the convert in the social life of the community is another, and a much more important, problem that arises in connection with conversion. That problem is where to place the convert, in what caste?

If Syrian Christians worked amongst Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities, they would be 'allowing' oppressed caste people to enter into a dominant caste community which would breach the norms of the caste system—a system which Syrian Christians benefited from. In addition, this breach of caste norms would work against dominant caste Christian and Hindu alliances which are forged across religions to uphold the casteist patriarchy. As Syro-Malabar Catholic Archbishop Andrew Thazhat explains, "after the 8th century, Thomas Christians became safe and secure in the caste system following its own secluded methodology; at the same time, it had the adverse effect of not venturing for proselytization" (Thazhath 2008: 21). Thus, evangelisation and missionary work was not something the Syrian Christians invested in from the very beginnings of Christianity in India. Rather, the Syrian Christians sought to create political and economic ties to dominant caste Hindus which, to this day, tends to separate dominant caste Syro-Malabar Catholics from Latin Catholics. Later, Syro-Malabar Catholics were restricted from missionary work by the Western Latin rite. When the Portuguese arrived in India, the Vatican gave jurisdiction for missionary work outside of the area of Kerala to the Portuguese/ Latin rite. Because the Syrian Catholics were not really involved with missionary work for the caste reasons I have outlined above, this did not seem to be much of an issue for Syro-Malabar Catholics until the 20th century.

One reason for this change could be the influence of foreign Protestant missionaries. In the mid-19th century there was a higher density of Protestant missionaries in Kerala than in any other part of India (Jeffrey 1992: 97). One sect of Orthodox Syrian Christians were very much influenced by Anglican missionaries and initiated a set of reforms in worship and prayer that

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populations they work amongst. Further, I seek to understand which (if any) hierarchical divisions between missionaries may be deemed as 'acceptable' in caste stratified India.

led to the founding of the Marthoma Church. The Marthoma joined the conglomeration of Churches now called the 'Church of South India' which includes Protestant Churches with Dalit Bahujan Christians. The impact of Protestant missionaries in Kerala was felt not just by Marthoma Syrian Christians, but by all religious groups and castes, as Dalit Bahujan Christians aided by Protestant missionaries fought for schools and education, fought against unjust labour practices and the sharecropping/ tenant system, and fought for land redistribution. Dalit Bahujan Christian women fought for the right to use the dominant caste breast cloth in a highly visible anti-caste movement that lasted for decades in Kerala's public sphere. In this period of social reform, we see Kerala society go from one of the most caste stratified societies in India to one of the most educated, although high literacy rates and education has not eradicated casteism. In turn, dominant caste Hindus and Christians gradually began to see themselves as 'casteless' in their reluctant acceptance of temple entry, breast cloth usage, and universal education. Castelessness does not mean anti-caste. Rather, it is a way for dominant caste people who do not experience casteism to point the finger at Kerala's historical 'bad actors' (those who stripped Dalit Bahujan Christian women of their breast cloth, prevented temple entry, or burned down Dalit Bahujan Churches and schools) as they invisibilise their own caste, power, and networks in the present (Subramanian 2019, Deshpande 2013).

I cannot say with certainty that the Syro-Malabar rite took its cue specifically from Protestant missionaries in the sudden change to embrace missionary work. Neither Portuguese Catholics nor British Protestant missionaries managed to sway Syro-Malabar Catholics from their Eastern rite/ caste 'traditions' which would suggest that Syro-Malabar Catholics would not necessarily wish to emulate Protestant missionaries. That said, it is clear that previously, there were little to no missionary entities within the Syro-Malabar rite, and suddenly we see the founding of missionary orders such as the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament (MCBS) in 1933 with evangelising as one its prime endeavors. Given the ubiquity of Protestant missionaries in Kerala in the 19th century, the impact of Dalit Bahujan Christian activism and social reforms in Kerala, and the gradual embracing of castelessness amongst dominant caste Hindus and Christians, all were at play leading up to the founding of such missionary orders within Syro-Malabar Catholicism. As mentioned, regional and national laws began to curb missionary work in India starting in the early 20th century. But in post-independent India, the 'threat' of conversions took on a new valence: threat to the cohesion of the nation. In 1956, the Madhya Pradesh government published the 'Niyogi Committee Report on Christian Missionary Activities'. The report warned that Hindus were on a demographic decline as Dalit and Adivasi communities were converting to Christianity. As Chad Bauman argues, the extreme anxieties around conversion were tied to the anxieties about the (Hindu majority) new nation (Bauman 2008: 183):

these anxieties placed certain Hindus in a defensive posture, causing them to seek, as a bulwark against national disintegration, a primordial, unalterable, and unifying cultural essence. Given the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Indian nation, which prevented unity on ethnic or linguistic grounds, many identified "Hindu-ness" (hindutva) as that unifying essence...

But the flip side of this coin is that desire for Hindu/ Indian homogenisation and opposition to *foreign* Catholic missionaries led to an increase of *Indian-born* Catholic missionaries working within India. Syro-Malabar Indian missionaries did not arouse the same kind of anxiety from the Hindu majority as white foreign missionaries. The differences between white missionaries and Indian 'natives' was marked not just by race but also by wealth, mobility, and culture. That is, white missionaries had the means to travel and their culture was markedly different than their converts. These differences in wealth and mobility, in addition to their whiteness marked European missionaries as visibly and culturally different than in-house Indian missionaries.

Indeed, the Syrian Christians are again and again described as ‘native’ Christians in the colonial historical record (Report on the Census of Travancore 1876: 160-161), tying them to new converts in a way that no white missionary could lay claim to. The above mentioned MCBS order founded in 1933 describes itself as “An *Indigenous* (emphasis mine) Catholic Clerical Religious Congregation” (OR1). Further, white missionaries worked amongst Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities in a way that dominant caste Hindus and Christians historically did not. As dominant caste Christians, the Syrian Christians had a long history of not upsetting the caste order, but of enforcing it. ‘Indigenous’ Christian missionaries were thus not as easily marked as threats to the caste/national order. And hence, we paradoxically see Syro-Malabar priests start to engage in missionary work within India at the same time as conversions were seen as a threat to the Hindu majority/ Hindu nation and laws were enacted to curb conversions.

By the 1960s, another change was taking place. Vatican II recognised the rights of individual (Eastern) Churches which created a new discourse on missionary work within the Syro-Malabar rite. We begin to see resentment amongst Syrian Christian clergy for being restricted by the Vatican from missionary work outside of Kerala.<sup>9</sup> Rather than contextualising the lack of missionary work of the Syro-Malabar Church within a history of caste realities which did not encourage evangelising, an east/ west binary takes center stage that portrays the Western colonising Church as unfairly restricting the Eastern ‘indigenous’ Syro-Malabar Church. For example, in “Theological Considerations of the Ecclesial Mission and the Pastoral Care of the Migrants of the Syro Malabar Church,” Dr. George Karakunnel writes (2009: 82, 87):

The insistence of the Latin hierarchy in India on the principle of “one territory, one bishop, one jurisdiction” has been in direct opposition to equal rights of the Orientals to minister to their faithful and to evangelize (p. 82) ... Suppression or subordination of non-Latin traditions, even of local variations of the Latin tradition, has been a fact of history. Missionaries who came for evangelization succeeded in establishing the supremacy in imposing their form of Christianity over the Church of St. Thomas Christians in South India (p. 87).

It is true that the Western Latin rite did try and Latinise the Eastern rite Syrian Christians and restricted the Syro-Malabar Church geographically to Kerala. It is also true that the Syro-Malabar Church fought for centuries to maintain their traditions and for ‘indigenous’ bishops. However, the supposed restriction on missionary activities by the Latin rite is awkward, at best, when placed within caste hierarchies that structured the Syro-Malabar rites’ relations with other groups. Centuries before Portuguese arrival in Kerala, there were no restrictions placed on the Syrian Christians by the Vatican or any other entity and still, missionary work was not common. Today, Syro-Malabar Catholic ordained priests can be missionaries in the Latin rite if they receive bi-ritual faculty from the Vatican, meaning that the Vatican has granted the priest permission to celebrate in the Latin rite. And the Syro-Malabar rite has hardly been restricted from this either. Especially after Vatican II, many Syro-Malabar priests have become bi-ritual and now are missionaries in Latin rite Churches across India. So much so that by the end of the 20th Century, 70% of all missionaries in North Indian Latin dioceses were priests who were ordained in the Syro-Malabar Church (Kaniamparampil 2008: 189). Further, in the late 20th and into the 21st century, many Syro-Malabar priests with bi-ritual faculty have obtained leadership positions in Latin rite dioceses outside of Kerala. This means that dominant caste priests are bishops in Churches where many, if not all, of their congregants are Dalit Bahujan or Adivasi. Of the 180 Catholic bishops in India today, only 11 are Dalit (OR22). The first and only Dalit cardinal was appointed in India in 2022. In the state of Tamil Nadu where 75% of

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<sup>9</sup> The fact that missionary work is often conducted outside of Kerala is of note, and I discuss it below.



Catholics are Dalit, only one out of 18 bishops are Dalit and there are no Dalit archbishops (OR22). In the Spring of 2022, widespread protests erupted after yet another non-Dalit archbishop was appointed in the state (OR22). To be sure, some of these non-Dalit bishops have been ordained in the Latin rite. But many are Syro-Malabar with bi-ritual faculty in the Latin rite. Out of the 120 bishops in Latin dioceses in North India, 35 of them are Syro-Malabar priests (Kaniampampil 2008: 189). This is a clear case of *institutionalised casteism* where the institution of the Catholic Church in India reproduces the caste hierarchy in appointments and leadership. Though bi-ritual faculty can be granted to a Latin ordained priest to administer sacraments in the Syro-Malabar rite, it is difficult to say how often this happens. I have yet to attend a Syro-Malabar mass officiated by a priest ordained in the Latin rite in Kerala. And the numbers currently indicate that bi-ritual faculty is more often granted to dominant caste priests going to Latin Churches than the other way around (OR20). Given the long history of Syro-Malabar priests advocating for separate seminaries and vestments, and objecting to Latin priests being trained in the Syriac language, the granting of bi-ritual faculty appears to be asymmetrical. As a Syro-Malabar missionary priest (deliberately kept anonymous to protect the identity of research participants) with bi-ritual faculty in the Latin rite explained to me in 2019: “In Kerala, you know, Kerala Churches are very strict. Kerala Churches only take Syro-Malabar priests only in the Syro-Malabar dioceses. Only Latin in the Latin dioceses” (2019).

I mentioned that recent Syro-Malabar missionary work is mostly conducted outside of Kerala. Rite, caste, and conversion/ origin stories for Christians are very apparent in the Kerala context where there is a long history of Christianity in the region and a strong Syrian Christian (caste) presence in the socio-political landscape. That is not to say that cross caste Catholic missionary work is not conducted in Kerala. Catholic missionary work across caste does exist in Kerala. It's just not as common as cross caste missionary work in North India. Further, the handfuls of Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi Syro-Malabar converts in Kerala may not be integrated with the existing Syro-Malabar Catholic community and established Churches. Syro-Malabar families tend to attend their family Church and will cite ‘tradition’ as the reason they would not attend a Syro-Malabar Church frequented by Dalit Bahujan converts, even as caste may be a co-shaping factor for the lack of integration. This holds true for other denominations in Kerala with a dominant caste/ Thomas origin story as well. Prema Kurien has found that “while evangelists belonging to the Mar Thoma Church do work among lower castes in Kerala and in other parts of India, such convert communities are formed into separate parishes and are not integrated into the Syrian Christian community or parish” (2017: 69). As Anderson Jeremiah writes, caste divisions in the Churches of South India keeps them from ecclesial communion and “unable to bear a holistic witness to the gospel in their territory” (2014: 108). Jeremiah's research on Dalit Studies and Christian theology also points out that such caste divisions (perpetuated by dominant caste Churches) means that Christians may not stand in unity against the continued attacks on Churches and oppressed caste Christians by the Hindu Right (ibid: 108). And indeed, this is what we see happening with dominant caste Christians—some Syro-Malabar ‘Chrisanghis’ are even joining right wing groups that are quite vocal in their support for Hindu Right Islamophobic policies (OR16). In short, the Syro-Malabar Church went from centuries of very little to no missionary activity, to a profound presence in missionary work *especially* outside of Kerala in Latin rite dioceses with Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi faithful. This presence was Indian (dominant caste) missionaries working amongst Indian (Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi) communities mostly outside of Kerala and thus was not and is not seen as an outside foreign presence in the same way that a Western (white) presence is. And with this new Syro-Malabar Catholic presence in missionary work, the caste hierarchies of a previous age which divided Syro-Malabar Catholics from Latin Catholics continues on in the Indian Catholic clerical hierarchy. And, as I examine below, these caste hierarchies continue to ramify and impact missionary work by Syro-Malabar priests who emigrate to the US, along with other dominant-caste Indians, as they have done in increasing numbers since 1990.

## Race, Caste, and Indian Missionaries in the US

Often, Indian Catholic missionaries are not included in demographic data on diaspora studies on South Asian Americans. Their labor is just different from that of IT professionals, doctors, or nurses—the jobs most associated with Syrian Christians in the diaspora (George 2005, Benjamin 2013, OR14). However, in the late 20th century, Western Europe and the US saw a sharp decline in (white) Catholic vocations to the priesthood. With this decline came a rise in Catholic missionaries from the 3rd World serving in 1st World Churches and a large number of these missionaries are coming from India (CARA Report 2014). Today, 25% of diocesan priests in the US are foreign born (CARA Report 2014). And in some dioceses, that number is even bigger. In the diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin, for example, 33% of diocesan priests are foreign born (OR7). South Asian Americans, while racial minorities in the US, are overwhelmingly from the dominant castes. This skewed migration was aided by US immigration laws. For many decades in the 20th century, the US settler state had laws restricting the migration of peoples from Asian countries including India—such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act of 1924. But racist immigration policies changed in 1965 with the Hart–Celler Act. Hart-Celler allowed for the migration of ‘skilled professionals’—doctors and engineers—to migrate to the US, such as my father who was a doctor and my mother who was a nurse. The 1965 Act has had a profound effect lasting over many decades: Indian Americans are now the second largest immigrant group after Mexicans (OR24) and the Indian American population grew from 206,000 in 1980 to about 2.7 million in 2021 (OR15).

In 1990, another US immigration act created a number of new visa categories, including the H1-B and R-1. In terms of fueling South Asian migration, the H1-B visa has been particularly significant. The capacity to hire highly educated and trained workers for ‘specialty occupations’ on relatively short-term (3- to 6-year) visas ‘diversified’ the tech industry; in Silicon Valley an estimated 75% of software engineers come on the H1-B visa from India (for ‘Temp. Professional Foreign Workers’ [2022] see OR5). But this diversity was in race alone, as the caste make-up has been extremely homogenous. In fact, of Hindu Indian Americans who identify with their caste, 83% are from dominant caste backgrounds and only 1% is Dalit (OR10). With the 1965 Act and creation of the H1-B visa in 1990, only those with an education, particularly with medical and engineering degrees, and with generational wealth and/ or family support were able to migrate. Indian Americans thus are currently the most wealthy racial minority in the US, and tend to be college educated (OR12). In contrast, Indians without accrued generational wealth, and Indians who have experienced caste apartheid and discrimination in education face almost insuperable barriers. This is a direct result of caste in India—especially when we think of how institutionalised casteism and caste discrimination in education affects Dalit Bahujan students, and how caste privilege begets wealth by cutting off access to opportunities, networks, jobs, and promotions to oppressed caste peoples.

Indian Catholic priests started coming to the US before the 1990 legislation, but they increased significantly after the creation of the religious worker R-1 visa which was created alongside the H-1B. The US Catholic Church has lobbied to expand the religious worker visa, to expedite visas for missionary Catholic priests, and to move temporary religious worker visas into permanent visas (see OR3, OR2, and OR6). Like the H1-B, migration via the R-1 visa reveals similar patterns of caste privilege. My ethnographic research suggests that many Indian priests on missions to the US are from the Syro-Malabar rite with bi-ritual faculty in the Latin rite.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> That said, I have had difficulty in finding exact numbers and statistical data on caste and migration of priests. The US Catholic directory records the diocese in which the priest serves in the US, not the rite in which the priest was ordained or diocese they are from in India.

64% of priests I have interviewed, known personally through my family, and encountered during field research in the rural West have been from dominant caste backgrounds (27 out of 42 priests). In addition, many bishops in the US have ties to Syro-Malabar dioceses in India, setting up networks to receive Syro-Malabar diocesan missionary priests specifically. For instance, the Syro-Malabar diocese of Sagar in Madhya Pradesh has close connections with the Great Falls-Billings diocese in Montana. North Dakota's Bismarck diocese historically has had a close relationship with the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament—the Syro-Malabar missionary order I discussed above, which was created in 1933 during a time when India was turning away foreign (white) missionaries and in response, cultivating 'indigenous' missionaries.

In India, Christians constitute only 2% of the Indian population (OR17). But they constitute 18% of the Indian American population (OR12). While the majority of Christians in India and the majority of Catholics specifically are from Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities, the majority of Indian Christians in the US are from dominant caste backgrounds (Kurien 2017: 3). Further, because 'Indians' function as if they are a homogenised racial minority, "no reliable estimate of the number of Latin-rite Catholics from India in the United States is available" (Williams 2008: 150). Even as Latin Catholics are more numerous in India, there remains a lack of networks and lack of opportunities for Latin Catholics to come to the US in comparison to Syro-Malabar Catholics (Williams 2008: 149). The racial homogenisation of brown Indians and a lack of understanding of caste in the diaspora causes non-South Asian Americans and South Asian Americans hailing from religions outside of Christianity to treat Syro-Malabar Churches in the US as 'ethnic minority' Churches representative of 'Indian Christianity'. A report for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops on Asian American and Pacific Islander Catholics found that Eastern Rite Indian Churches in the US were ethnically homogenous. They also found that Indian Latin Catholics in the diaspora chose to not attend Syrian rite Churches, but rather, chose to be minorities in white or mixed raced American (Latin) Catholic parishes (Bruce et.al 2017: 45). For the Syrian Christian diaspora, this may create a second and third generation with little to no knowledge of their caste privilege amidst a society-wide ascendancy of discussions of race, potentially at the expense of caste. It also means that white bishops and the US Catholic community, in addition to scholarly research on the South Asian diaspora, is thinking very little about caste and Christianity in the diaspora. As caste protections in non-discrimination policies become an ever more politicised issue with dominant caste peoples arguing that caste protections are not necessary in American schools, companies, and cities, it is vitally important that both religious institutions and scholars of religion not overlook caste in Christianity and how caste is shaping missionary work in the US.

Race does affect Indian priests' experiences of missionary work in the US and my ongoing autoethnographic research is revealing ways in which they both experience racism and try to benefit from a self-produced 'model minority' identity. While Syro-Malabar missionary priests administer pastoral care to Syro-Malabar congregants in urban centers like Chicago and Houston, they are also bi-ritual priests serving in Latin rite Churches in white, Latina, and Indigenous communities in the US. My research has focused on (mostly) Syro-Malabar priests in rural Montana and North Dakota where the majority of the congregations they serve are either white or Indigenous. These areas are rural, with no South Asian American grocery stores, family networks, or cultural centers. As a result, Indian missionary priests often form their own networks relying on each other for advice and friendship. Sometimes priests can experience overt racism from their brother priests or parishioners. Other times, there could be unexpected cultural misunderstandings and innocent ignorance. And many times, it's hard to know which is which. For instance, Syro-Malabar priests are very much welcomed into houses, revered by parishioners, and constantly around other priests in India. White priests in American parishes often lead more solitary lives in comparison. An Indian Syro-Malabar

missionary priest in the rural West recounted to me a story where the white priest in the parish, who was tasked by the bishop to stay with the missionary priest, left him alone at the rectory and went to stay at another rectory by himself in a nearby parish. It was winter and the Indian missionary had never even seen snow. But the white priest failed to explain how to use a thermostat, leaving the Indian priest to sleep in his coat and under many blankets until a congregant showed him how to turn on the heat. Is this a clash of cultures where the solitary American life of priests did not match up with the more social one of Syro-Malabar culture? Or was the white priest not interested in helping the Indian missionary priest literally leaving him in the cold? In the rural West, Indian missionary priests are sometimes stationed on Native reservations. Indian priests thus enter into a long and disturbing history and present reality of Catholic settler colonialism that has been brutal and genocidal. This history and present is hardly discussed by their white congregations or by US Catholics who are non-indigenous because settler colonialism aims to disappear the Native and center the settler. This also means that an Indian missionary priest's first service as a missionary outside of India could be on a Native reservation and he could be given little to no explanation of the Indigenous peoples he will be working with. But while Indian missionaries and white priests may not be aware of the long history and present of the Catholic Church as a settler colonial Church, Indigenous communities themselves are aware and continually deal with centuries of abuse by Catholic missionary priests and nuns. The diocese of Great Falls-Billings in Montana, the diocese of my birth, went bankrupt in 2017 to reorganise its assets just months before the trial was set in a lawsuit brought by sexual abuse survivors—most of them Native survivors and most of the accused priests stationed on Native reservations (OR19).

The histories of race and caste of Indian Catholicism can play a profound role in how Syro-Malabar Indian missionary priests configure their 'service' on Native reservations. Researching South Asian Canadian workers on the tar sands, Nishant Upadhyay (2019) has argued that the self-production of South Asian Canadians as racial 'model minorities' needs to be understood through the intersections of settler colonial capitalism, white supremacy, religious divisions, and casteism. South Asian Canadians map their 'immigrant' contact points with land, labour, and Indigenous people through these intersections which engenders a sense of belonging, and entitlement over and against Others. As they explain (ibid: 154):

While the Native body is distinct and particular to the local contexts in the Americas, my interviewees construct and understand Indigeneity through an assemblage of additional Others, namely, the Black Other, caste Other (including Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi and Tribal peoples), and the Muslim Other. Through these constructions of the self and Others, the latter are rendered interchangeable (whereby grammars for recognizing one Other are conflated with those of knowing another Other), homogenous (all other Others are imagined to be similar), and disposable (none of the Others matter).

In many ways, the entry of Indian priests on Native American reservations illustrates what Upadhyay's research has first uncovered. For instance, during one mass on a reservation, I listened to an Indian missionary priest from a dominant caste rite give a sermon to a handful of Indigenous and white congregants about his missionary work amongst Adivasis in North India. He explained how, although he was an immigrant and unfamiliar with American culture or racial politics, working amongst tribals in North India prepared him for working amongst Indigenous peoples in rural America. Adivasis and Indigenous peoples on the Reservation are interchangeable and simultaneously homogenous, and this interchangeability/homogenisation shapes how the dominant caste priest understands his work in both North India and on the Native reservation.

## Conclusion

The differences between Catholic rites is extremely denomination specific and complex, even for Catholic scholars. But when we delve into the rites of Catholicism in India, we can see the ways in which the relatively new phenomenon of missionary work within the Syro-Malabar rite has been structured by existing caste divisions and assumptions about (white) foreigners and (brown) 'natives'. Race and missionary work in the Indian context engendered anti-Western postcolonial anxieties about foreign missionaries and the need to control and question Dalit Bahujan and Adivasis' faith. Simultaneously, the speed at which the Indian Catholic Church reproduced the caste system in clerical hierarchies in within-India missionary work clues us in to how salient and pervasive casteism is in the postcolonial Indian nation-state. When we attend to the racial and caste-based dynamics in which Indian missionaries in the diaspora are embedded, we see racial differences between Syro-Malabar Catholic priests and larger (white) Catholic population, non-South Asian assumptions that 'Indian' Churches are 'ethnic' Churches without an understanding of caste, and Syro-Malabar missionaries placed on Native reservations entering into a long and on-going history of Catholic settler colonialism. While originally, foreign priests filling in for small parishes in the US was seen as a stop-gap measure due to temporary shortage of (white) vocations, the model of 'importing' priests has been in place for decades and shows no signs of stopping. The landscape of Catholic life in many US dioceses has been shaped by the arrival of Indian priests for over 40 years. But despite this reality, the Catholic Church in the US and scholars of South Asian diaspora have been slow to examine caste in Christian communities or think through the racial intricacies of 'reverse missionary' labour.

The material effects of caste networks and migrations with missionary work can be manifold especially when we think through the socio-economic realities of remittances to families and the funneling of monies back to (specifically) Syro-Malabar dioceses. Further, I mentioned that the 2nd and 3rd generation of Indian Christians in the US—Christians overwhelmingly hailing from dominant caste backgrounds—could potentially be raised to understand only their racial minority identity, and not ever discuss the effects of caste power and privilege in their places of worship or in their social groups. As Dalit Bahujan South Asian Americans continue to share stories of caste discrimination they are facing in the US, the ascendancy of discussions of race over caste in the dominant caste Christian diaspora could unfortunately work to homogenise all Indian Christians and push forth a false narrative of a casteless diaspora. This became clear, for example when a Knanayan American Christian attending a Syro-Malabar Church brought an Indian flag to the Capitol riots, then claimed that Trump supporters' acceptance of his racial minority presence proved that all Trump supporters were not racist. Meanwhile, no discussion of caste in the diaspora or the privileges afforded to dominant caste Christians in migration needed to be mentioned (OR25, OR26). I see a very real danger here if particular experiences of Indians as 'model' racial minorities are homogenised across castes and then dominant caste peoples are reticent on the topic of caste in the diaspora. I see the need for more research on the subject of caste and race in the Christian diaspora in general. More specifically to this article, the reverse missionary phenomenon begs for more statistical data informed by caste realities and for a nuanced understanding of race: an understanding that sees missionary work as embedded in conceptions of foreign vs. 'indigenous' missionaries even as Indian priests can face racism as 'ethnic minority Catholics' in the US today.

## Acknowledgments

I am honored to contribute to this special issue. I would like to thank the Dr. Deepa Dandekar and Dr. Eliza Kent for their careful and thoughtful edits, for their most excellent comments and suggestions, and their extreme patience with me in meeting deadlines. A special thank you to Dr. Carmel Christy and Dr. Sanal Mohan for comments and suggestions.

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