

Historiography in Transition: Shifts in Indian Christian Historiography

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Abstract:

This paper examines the significant transition in Indian Christian historiography from colonial, denominational, and Eurocentric frameworks to more critical, contextual, and inclusive approaches. Early historiographical writings largely emphasized missionary enterprises, ecclesiastical authority, and Western theological paradigms, while marginalizing indigenous traditions and the lived experiences of local Christian communities. In the post-independence era, particularly through the initiatives of the Church History Association of India (CHAI), scholars began to reconstruct Christian history within the broader socio-cultural, religious, and political contexts of India. By engaging Nazarani traditions and incorporating postcolonial critiques, historiography has increasingly shifted toward a “history from below.” Emerging methodologies, including feminist, subaltern, and Dalit historiographies, challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding issues of gender, caste, and marginality. Despite these advancements, Indian Christian historiography continues to rely heavily on colonial archival sources. Therefore, critical re-reading and reinterpretation are essential to recover silenced voices and to construct a more balanced, indigenous, and contextually grounded historical discourse.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, subaltern studies, Dalit historiography, CHAI, Nazarani tradition, decolonization, indigenous perspectives.

Introduction

Ancient, medieval and modern historiographies focused on economically, socially and politically powerful men and those who were authoritative but excluded the roles of women, children, minorities and less authoritative persons (Haokip, 2017). This notion has been changed by the evolution of new theologies and historiographies from below that is from the so-called less-known, less-privileged, less-acknowledged and so on. Thomas (2010) argues the need to re-interpret history from different perspectives as history has been fairly been understood and interpreted ranging from community to community and there are no such re-interpretations available in India.

1. Historiography

Historiography literally means the art of writing history, the development of ideas and techniques associated with the writing of history and the changing attitudes towards the nature of history

(Sreedharan, 2009). According to Ali (2010), Historiography is the history of history; it is the history of historical thought. It is the history of ideas which prompted a historian to adopt a particular line of thought. According to John (2014), historiography is the study of perspectives, it helps to understand and evaluate the historical consciousness of the historians as well as their techniques of writing history. Historiography refers to the methodology of historical research while analyzing historical writings.

2. Indian Christian Historiography before Indian Independence

Till fifteenth century, there was only one Christian community in India, that of the St. Thomas Christians. Their historical consciousness can be accessed from their oral traditions, customs and practices (Mundadan, 2003b).

2.1 Nazarani Historiography

Nazarani (Christian) historiography presented by John (2014) receives momentum in Indian Christian historiography for the St. Thomas Christians. The earliest source of the story of Saint Thomas in India is the apocryphal "Acts of Thomas", whose origin is unknown. The oldest copies we have are from the third and fourth centuries. The indigenous traditions of Saint Thomas Christians in India say that the Apostle Thomas arrived in 52 AD, founded seven churches in Malabar, and later traveled to Mylapore, possibly China. The *Thomma Parvam*, *Ramban pattu*, *Margam Kalli pattu* are old songs still sung at special events, recounts his journey, miracles, and conversions, including baptizing 1,400 people and raising the dead. Oral traditions, inscriptions, and family records trace many Nasrani families' Christian roots directly to Thomas claim unbroken lines of up to seventy generations. These earliest sources are unacknowledged by historians for a long time, making the mission history of St. Thomas as impossible, but the living generations and the testimonies of Thomas Christians mark the tradition. Nazrani historiography is the struggle of Thomas Christians against colonial rule *Koonen* Cross event and *Koonen* cross oath are their religious experiences in against the western colonial rule and hierarchy (John, 2014).

2.2 Denominational Historiography

In the middle ages, Indian Christian history was the history of popes, bishops and other high ranking church workers but history neglected the role of women, children and congregational members. During the modern missionary movement, missionaries wrote reports and details about their work for the churches which send them so as to satisfy the sponsor for the need of more financial and other supports. Those histories written in India were mostly denominational and patriarchal which never reflected native involvement. This attitude was due to the euro-centric cultured Christianity which termed nothing good outside Europe and America and rest of the people and their culture were termed as dark, heathen, satanic, evil, lost, sinners in need of salvation that can only offered by a white, male evangelical Christian (Haokip, 2017).

2.3 Colonial Historiography

Colonialism has influenced the writing of church history; Portuguese, Dutch and British were the colonizers who devalued the social, religious and cultural virtues of India and wrote history from the colonial power influence perspectives (James, 2013). History of Christianity in India has been written by historians of the colonial era who were misinformed and manipulated the history as per their convenience. The history of Christianity in India is understood as a story of foreign mission, triumphalism, missionaries and the mission methods. The Europeans neglected the Indians and their history from a colonial mindset; however, it was “history from above” (Rao, 2014).

3.Paradigm shift in Indian Christian Historiography

Paradigm is a set of theories that explain the way a particular subject is understood at a particular time (Kuhn, 1962). According to Thapar histories of Indian sub-continent have subscribed to change of many paradigms (Thapar, 2002). Traditional historiography was concerned with politics and history from above, but the new or modern approaches to history is that deals with every human activity which is culturally or socially constituted, that is from below. According to Bruke, de-colonization and feminism are two movements which had a great impact on recent historical writing. Mundadan (2003 b) suggests that future historiography should include the ecological movements as in theology and ideology.

The colonial authors wrote for the western readers with western mission perspectives. These were histories of mission and missionaries from the west and not of the Indian church but western attempts to create one but failed to reflect the native Christian communities and their participation (Mundadan, 2003 a). So, the need of the hour was realized by Indian Christian historians and thus resulted with a shift in approach to Indian Christian history and historiography. Unlike the medieval India, the modern thinkers show great interest in history. This interest might have arisen as a result of a political and social need, with the independence movement in India (Mundadan, 2003 b). The other reason for this change was the Indian Christian historians identified the inadequacies of earlier resources and cultural biases of the European intellectual tradition and religious norms (James, 2013). However, post-colonial Christian historians have now begun to re-write history and one can see newness within Indian Christian historiography (Rao, 2014). Thus, the focus shifted from western mission achievements in India to the Indian church achievements on its people with several historiographies like post-colonial, post-modern, post-patriarchy, subaltern, dalit, tribal and adivasi perspectives.

4.Aftermath of India’s Independence: CHAI Historiography

Indian Christian historians urged that the indigenous church must build its own historiography (James, 2013). With the independent nation, Indian Christians began to search for its own selfhood of writing, and to re-discover its methodological writings of Indian Christian historiography (Philip, 1987). Kaj Baago insisted that the History of Christianity in India should be studied from a new perspective which means an Indian perspective (Thomas, 2014). The Church History Association of India (CHAI) came forward to face the challenge and started a project to write a history of Christianity from an Indian perspective. The researchers and historians took up the challenge of re-doing/ re-writing the history of

Christianity in India, as most of the available Indian Christian history was just a mere extension of the Western ecclesiastical history.

KajBaago comments,

“What was needed was a history that located the Church firmly in the Indian historical context. It must describe Christian history as a real encounter of the Christian gospel with the soul of India, as the process of the planting of the gospel inside the Indian culture, the Indian philosophy, and the Indian religion” (Mundadan, 1990).

Based on the observation made the eminent Indian Christian historian KajBaago, CHAI began to formulate plans to re-write history from a wider contextual perspective giving attention specially to the socio-cultural history of the Christian community in India which was national as well as ecumenical which brought forth a new stimulus in the way people read history and the need further arose to write history from a non-dominant approach giving shape to the marginalized people to bring out their histories. CHAI published articles and books which were concentrated on regional perspectives, thus giving rise to varied scholarship within history of Christianity in India, thus making a significant contribution of making history (Thomas, 2010). But the question arises whether CHAI was successful in its endeavors.

5. Postcolonial Historiography

Postcolonial studies are the outcome of a meaningful engagement of textual, historical and cultural expressions of the societies that are disturbed and transformed by the various historic realities of colonial presence. The postcolonial studies to a great extent decolonize the categories created by the colonial West and even involved in liberating their imagination to create a vital autonomous space (Oommen, 2003). The post-colonial historiography refers to the development of a new historiography that emerged as a protest against the colonial historiography which taking serious about people’s own way of telling and writing history especially as they experienced it in the past and as they experience that connection reality in the present (James, 2013). The outcome of postcolonial historiography is deconstructing what has been produced by the west. It urges the historians to deconstruct and decolonize the structure of colonial minds to get autonomous space to the colonized minds (John, 2014). Postcolonial approach to history is different in its perspectives and it is the “history from below”. This approach attempts to rewrite the history from the perspective of the neglected people and communities, Christian historians, anthropologists and sociologists made attempts to re-read the colonial history. Therefore, the postcolonial approach to Indian church history is history of marginalized (Rao, 2014).

5.1 Feminist Historiography

Indian society is very much unequal, stratified and hierarchical, where women were considered as less human than the men and are always dependence to men and suppressed under the pressures of socio-economic, political and religious restrictions. (James, 2013). The attention of feminist critique and analysis evolved from the background of exclusion, experience and invisibility of women in history (Oommen, 2003). Feminist historiography has two main tasks. It criticizes and deconstructs the male cultural paradigms on the one hand and the other hand it formulates new perspectives in an attempt to

transform traditional androcentric values. Feminist scholarship criticizes patriarchy for privileging, prioritizing men at the cost of dehumanizing women. It is also a critical of the economic, racial, educational, social, cultural and ethnic discrimination. Feminist methodology takes women's experience very seriously and these experiences became starting point of Feminist historiography (Longchar, 2010). Many of the Feminist writers have shown the need to reappraise the Christian past, giving honor and recognition to an army of faithful women, whose practice, defense, and proclamation of their faith had hitherto passed unnoticed by much of the Christian church and its historians (Mcgrath, 2001). Feminist methodology still suffers without unanimity. But however, there is an agreed point on the basis for their critique and analysis on exclusion, experience and invisibility of women in the writing of history. This alienation became the starting point of their reconstruction of history (James, 2013).

5.2 Subaltern Historiography

Dominant groups within Christianity who were mainly following caste strand got the most attention in historical discourses since Indian freedom movement in early twentieth century (Oommen, 2003). Subaltern history is the history of suffering people. It is the history of the sons and daughters of the soil; the working class; the less fortunate ones. It is the history to hear the people and their voices which have been silenced in the dominant discourses; it is an effort to make the subaltern people speak in their own language, a language of the protest, resistance and negation (Thomas, 2010). Subaltern studies criticized the historiography of Indian nationalism, which has been dominated by colonialist elitism. It strongly opposed the defining of nationalism as the response of the Indian elite to colonial context. Subaltern historiography rejected this view because only dominant/elite were projected as agents of nationalism. According to Ranajit Guha, such elitist histories cannot explain Indian nationalism for us because it fails to acknowledge the contribution made by people on their own, independently of the elite, to the making and development of Indian nationalism. So, subaltern historiography searches for the real autonomous agencies and real locatedness of the agencies of change and transformation in Indian society and to identify the policies of the people that are neglected in the un-historic historiography. The important aspect in subaltern historiography is the re-categorization of ideas, concepts, people etc., and the deconstruction of history. Thus, subaltern methodology includes various themes and issues like indigenism, re-categorization, deconstruction, re-reading and re-definition of text, which are considered necessary tools for writing history (James, 2013). Due to the oppositional reading to the elitistic approach of history of Christianity in India, a shift of writing history from the Christian elite and the dominant people to the masses and people from Dalit and Tribal background emerged.

5.3 Dalit Historiography

Massey (1994) critiques the existing historiography because dalits, struggles, pain and pathos were neglected by the elite-caste Christians (Jeyakumar, 1999). Ambedkar analyzed the cause for the pathetic situation of Dalits as caste system. He believes that any effort to improvise the lot of the Dalits should be directed towards uprooting the caste system itself. So, as long as caste system exists, outcaste will exist. This could be understood as human-made but not God-given and this should be eradicated and hence their history needs to be re-written (James, 2013). While analyzing history, dalits were ignored or

considered as no people. These are the people who need to know their past, which alone will reveal them that once they were also fully human beings, enjoying all benefits of a normal human being which includes land, property, human dignity, natural resources, human freedom etc (Massey, 1994). Thorough analysis shows that a majority of Christians in India are Dalits (Shiri, 2012). So, now the need of the hour is that Dalit people must be understood with their perspectives and experiences and their history should be recorded to re-write Dalit history. Dalit historiography is based on their experiences, their sufferings, their aspirations and their hope. In this way Dalit historians are on the process of reconstructing their history. This could be possible only through Dalit consciousness and addressing issues which will pave way for their holistic wellbeing (James, 2013). Webster's contributions towards Dalit historiography was remarkable with the agenda of bringing forward the Dalit communities which were in the peripheries of history into the focal point or the centre stage like any other communities in India. This helped in crafting historical narratives with the developing historiography meaningful and liberation for the Indian Christian communities (Vanlalpeka, 2017). Being a foreigner, Webster has his own limitations and preoccupations towards Dalit community. So, this could be analyzed and flaws must be rectified.

5.4 Tribal Historiography

Regarding history, for many centuries tribal history, their life affirming socio-cultural values have been ignored, neglected, exploited, discriminated in every set of their lives (James, 2013). Verghese (1996) said that, "Read Indian history as it is taught and you will scarcely know the NEI exists," or it "remains in the periphery of the periphery," "It remains somewhere there." For centuries, tribals have been told repeatedly by the high caste society of India that they are no people with any history and culture of their own. The tribal history was written from colonial and mainline society of Indian perspectives (Jala, 2002). So, tribals need to have their own historiography based on their own life experiences and it should be produced by tribals of India from their native perspectives. Tribal's experiences of oppressions, their traditional stories, myths, symbols, dances, songs, their deep-seated spirituality, their oneness with the land and environment etc., which are all very essential assets in the process of making tribal historiography (James, 2013).

5.5 Adivasi Historiography

The first and foremost thing for doing Adivasi theology and Adivasi historiography is the question of Adivasi identity. Kerketta (2009) unraveled the experience of Adivasi Christian community in central India as having a heavy impact of dominant theology on their psyche. the collective struggle for justice, peace, identity and survival and reclaiming their right to have a space of their own and dignified life and their struggles are to be historicized (Verghese, 2016). Minz's (2002) prophetic call towards Adivasi communities is notable here, he observes, "All tribals are going to be Scheduled Castes (SC) and then merged into dominant group. This process of assimilation is rapidly going on and it is a matter of few years or a decade or two, when the Adivasis will be completely assimilated and their separate identity will be forgotten." This threatening situation could be addressed by Adivasi historiography which will take Adivasi identity as starting point. Also, the historical consciousness of Adivasi identity, culture

based on human and spiritual values, land and forest are life affirming entities, experiences of suffering, and alienation etc. could strengthen the writing process of history (Kerketta, 2009). This could be carried out through new theologies and historiography of separate communities.

6. Methodological Issues in Doing Indian Christian Historiography

Indian Christian history goes back to the 1st century itself; it was only in recent years that one can see the growing interest in its historiography and methodological concerns. A critical view on the methodology of Indian church historiography particularly of the 19th and 20th century reveals that all was not that well as we read in books. Along with the widespread of Christian mission, colonial power had had its fair share of influence in all walks of Indian life, even in the writing of history of Christianity. The pre-independent historians devalued the social, religious and cultural life of the Indians. Written documents on the history of Christianity in India by the various (examined) scholars mostly highlighted on and elevated the external positive successes of the various missions, missionaries and their strategies or methods. Although one cannot totally undermine their immense contributions which also serve as basic sources for our subsequent studies in the area, still we cannot ignore the fact that they were Western-oriented. The writers were western who published their work in the West, and were written solely from the western perspective. Hence in the process, they failed to reflect the experience, aspirations and understanding of the native Indian Christian community. They were but all success stories of the West, their power and their influence upon the uncivilized, pagan Indian people and their soil. As a result, the need for re-examination of Indian church history emerged.

A paradigm shift occurred, identifying the inadequacies of the age-old resources, which insufficiently camouflaged the European bias. Therefore, the local historians emphasized on the indigenous of its own historiography. Alongside the emergence of Indian nationalism, Indian religious renaissance also began to take its root. Based on the quest of re-doing the history of Christianity from a national and social history of the Indian Christians, there was a need to do history from a different perspective. Even though the efforts put by the Indian Christian historians is laudable, but still, one can find the presence of western missions and their accomplishments within the Indian history as still the Indian church is very much dependent on the west for its theology, mission methods and historical origins (Thomas, 2010).

Conclusion

Due to the emergence of new historiographies values of human lives are preserved, appreciated and recognized. The paradigm shift in the Indian Christian Historiography motivated Christian historians to recognize Indian Christianity from Indian socio, religious and cultural point of view. But still, we are mostly dependent on the colonial mission history documents for our own history. This could be used with critical analysis and identify colonial elements and read in between lines and understand the forgotten histories and untold stories of humanity. At present, counter histories to colonial histories are more evident but Christian historians should cautiously approach this because some elements were added in several histories which diminish or eliminate missionary activities and Christian involvement in nation building.

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