



## Christian Historiography: Changing Perspectives and Approaches in the Study of Christianity in India

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### ABSTRACT

*History of Christianity in India had been written and interpreted by Westerners and it is true that some of the early Christian historians distorted and twisted the real history of Christianity in India. In fact, most of the Christian historians, Protestants and Catholics, perceived history of Christianity in India as a "triumphant story of missions, missionaries, and missionary methods" (Webster 1979:98). In response to this western approach to history of Christianity in India, there is a changing approach which perceived Indian Christian historiography as a history of Indian church rather than of foreign missions. In this context the purpose of this paper is an exploration of the changing perspectives and approaches in the study of Christianity in India.*

**KEYWORDS :** Historiography, Christianity, Western, Indigenous

### Introduction

Indian historiography had a drastic change by the arrival of Europeans because they gave importance to theological and metaphysical interpretations that gave place to more rational and scientific theories (Ali 1981:332). Since the Europeans shaped the Indian historiography, their perspective was highlighted by neglecting the Indian perspective. Therefore the main problem in understanding the Indian Christian history is that on the one hand "colonial perspective" that approached history from the western perspective, on the other hand "postcolonial perspective" that approached history of Indian Christianity from the Indian perspective. Indian Christianity is much older compared to the Western Christianity. Christianity in India is viewed by non-Christians as a Whiteman's religion and "This disdainful attitude continues to be expressed toward Indian Christians" (Hedlund 2000:48). There are several reasons for this misconceptions; one among such reasons is Indian Christian historiography itself, because Indian Christian historiography had been dominated by Western Christian historians for centuries. The post independence Indian Christians started rewriting the Christian history and there is a change in Christian historiography.

### Colonial approach to Indian Church History

The colonial historians perceived and approached the history of Christianity in India from their Western perspective and the Christian history had been written in the context of the role of West in relation to the rest of the world. It was the "history from above" which highlighted the western mission's expansion in India and "often Christian missions have been included in these writings and are seen as willing accomplices of western expansion into other countries" (Mundadan 2001:41). Consequently, over the centuries the history of Christianity in India was understood, interpreted and perceived as Western Christian expansion in India.

### Post Colonial approach to Indian Church History

There has been a different perspective in postcolonial approach to Indian Christian historiography. It gave much emphasis on the neglected people's approach. The local context is given importance and it is different from traditional approaches of the Western context. Ranjit Guha's edited work entitled *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* gives a clear understanding on post colonial subaltern approach to the Indian history. In fact, postcolonial approach to history is different in its perspectives and it is the "history from below" (Ludden 2003:216). This approach attempts to rewrite the history from the perspective of the neglected people and communities. The secular historians, anthropologists and sociologists already made attempts to re-read the colonial history. Christian historians also followed their track. Therefore the post colonial approach to Indian church history is history of neglected Indian "people's church, people's theology, people's worship and people's institutions" (Mundadan 2001:57). This perspective and approach is yet to be improved in the Indian Christian historiography.

### Indian Church History: In changing perspectives

The perspective of Indian Christian history has been changed dra-

cally from the time of mid nineteenth century. *The History of Christianity in India: Aims and Methods* by Webster, *Changing approaches to Historiography* by Mathias Mundadan, Mundadan's biographical article on *Dr Kaj Baago*, and *Recent Studies of Christianity in India* by Kaj Baago etc. are some of the scholarly research articles that help us to understand the changing perspectives in Indian Christian historiography.

Rajaiah D. Paul, The author of *The Cross over India* (1952), attempted a shift from Western perspective to Indian perspective in understanding the history of Christianity in Indian. His focus was on "the history of Indian people" rather than the achievements of the western missions in India and the Indian perspective is given priority in his approach. One of the developments during this period is that there had been focus on "the history of the Indian church" and the history of "the Christian community" (Mundadan 2001:48). Hence the focus shifted from western mission achievements in India to the Indian church's achievements on its people.

Another significant changing perspective is that there is a drastic change from "Mission History" to Christianity's interaction with Socio, Economic, Political and Religions of Indian people. The Christian historians started looking at history from Christianity's interaction with Indian communities.

### Professionalization perspective

Kaj Baago pioneered the Indian historiography and his efforts had been resulted in professionalization of church history in India. Baago's main vision is that "Indian perspective" should be the central point "in the study of Indian Christian History" and he envisaged the "professionalization of history in India" (Mundadan 1989:101). His efforts to the establishment of post graduate studies in the field of "Church History" at United Theological Seminary (UTC) opened a broader scope to the study of Church history in India. Indigenous resources had been developed and the upcoming scholars started rereading the history of Christianity from the Indian perspective. Baago suggested that history of Christianity should be studied from Indian perspective and the academic focus of Christian theological studies in Indian should be "on the historical and functional aspect of religion rather than on the philosophical and theological" (Baago 1967:70). He made efforts to professionalize the study of Christianity in India especially in the academic circles. He made efforts to include "Christianity" as a branch of study in the department of religious studies in the University of Mysore. In fact, in several Indian universities, Indian Christian history has been studied from Anthropological, Socio and Economic perspectives.

### Indigenous perspective

Roger E Hedlund made significant efforts to study the history of Christianity in India from indigenous perspective. His argument is that Indian church history is written from the "Great Tradition" (Western story of Christianity) which neglected the "Little Tradition" (the story of indigenous Christianity). Indigenous Christianity is a world phenomenon and each indigenous Christian movement has a story which needs

to be told. Even though indigenous Indian Christianity has a rich heritage, it has been neglected by the so called Christian historiography.

### Church History Association of India's new approach

The CHAI (Church History Association of India) was established in the year 1935 to initiate the new approach to present the history of Christianity in India. Actually, "the association was founded with a view to give greater impetus to the study and writing of Indian Christian history with a nationalist and ecumenical perspective" (Mundadan 1985:5). Its approach to history of Christianity in India is purely Indian perspective and it envisaged to highlight the Indian historical context. Mundadan quotes a few sentences from the statement of CHAI perspective which says, "The history of Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate from it. The history will therefore focus attention upon the Christian people in India; upon who they were and how they understood themselves; upon the changes which these encounters produced in them, and in their appropriation of the Christian Gospel, as well as in the Indian culture and society of which they themselves were part" (Mundadan 1985:6). Therefore CHAI perspective is a new perspective which looks at history from the "insider view." Indian church history is the Indian Christian people but not merely the missionary history. ICHR which was initiated by CHAI had a clear vision to pioneer a new approach to the historical study of Christianity in India." Therefore the CHAI eventually committed to develop the history of Christianity from the Indian context. Its approach is Socio-Cultural, Regional, National and Ecumenical, but it has not given attention to the Dalit Christian history which needs a serious attention because Indian Christianity is mostly comprised with Dalits.

### Global and comprehensive perspective

Globalization is a rapid force in this twenty first century. Local history is the part of national as well as global because there is no "global apart local." Local history has always significant place in global history. Since Christian faith is a global faith, Indian church history should be perceived from global perspective. Mundadan expresses that the history from below, local history, should always in line with the global history so that it is balanced in its approach (Mundadan 2001:59).

### Conclusion

The changing perspectives and approaches motivate Christian historians to perceive Indian Christianity from Indian Socio, Religious and Cultural point of view. As a result the recent Christian historians started writing Indian Christian history from indigenous perspective; nevertheless the old habit of exaggerating western missions and their achievements in Indian church history has been very much present in Indian Christian historiography because Indian church is still dependent on the West for its theology, mission methods and historical documents. In this context, there is a great need to construct the Indian Christian historiography from the Indian Socio, Economic, Cultural, Religious and Political perspective. At the same time "Indian Christian History" should be approached from global perspective because it is a global faith.

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