In 2001 the Census of India recorded just over 24 million Christians. Christians were India’s second largest religious minority with 2.3 per cent of the population, well behind the Muslims (12.4 per cent) but ahead of the Sikhs (1.9 per cent), Buddhists (0.8 per cent), and Jains (0.4 per cent) (Census of India 2001: xxvii–xxviii). This Christian minority was distributed very unevenly throughout the country. In the hill states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya in northeast India, Christians comprised 90 per cent, 87 per cent, and 70.3 per cent of the population respectively, whereas in each of four north Indian states they were a mere 0.1 per cent of the population. The largest number of Christians was in the south Indian states of Kerala, with over 6 million, and Tamil Nadu, with close to 4 million (Census of India 2001: xxix–xxxiii). While these figures have been contested (Frykenberg 2008: vii), they do show how difficult it is to generalize about Christians in India because their regional histories have been so different. In order to place their present situation in context it is therefore necessary to provide some historical background.

**From Christianity’s arrival to India’s independence**

Christianity came to India by sea and spread inland over the course of the centuries. According to a long-standing tradition, which has neither been proven nor disproven, it was first brought to what is now Kerala in 52 AD by St Thomas, one of Jesus’s disciples. Other traditions mention one Thomas of Cana leading a group of Christians from Persia to Malabar in 345. These Christians followed a Syrian rite of worship (hence Syrian Christians) and were ecclesiastically related to the bishop of Edessa. By the time the Portuguese arrived, Christianity in India was still nothing more than either the religion of some inhabitants of foreign enclaves or a high status *panth* within Hindu society on the southeastern coast.

Once the Portuguese had established themselves in Goa in 1510 Christianity began to spread. In 1514 the Pope gave the kings of Portugal both the right and the responsibility to establish and maintain the Christian Church in the lands under their rule. Under this Padroado (patronage) arrangement several Catholic religious orders came to evangelize India. Francis Xavier, one of the original Jesuits, led two fishing communities on the southern tip of India, the Paravas and Mukkuvars, to convert en masse; others won over entire villages
around Goa and along the western coast. In 1599 the Archbishop of Goa succeeded in bringing all of the Syrian Christians in Kerala under formal allegiance to Rome.

As Roman Catholic Christianity spread and moved inland during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it incorporated members of castes differently ranked within regional caste hierarchies. Caste distinctions and rivalries thus entered the churches and missionary policy at the time generally favoured maintaining those distinctions and hierarchies (Mosse 2012: 31–46; Bayly 1989: 321–351, 379–419). When Portuguese power and financial support declined, Rome began to play a larger direct role in spreading the Christian faith in India. This led to jurisdictional disputes between Rome and the Portuguese Padroado that were not settled until 1886. Christianity itself also began to diversify. In 1653 a large group of Syrian Christians split off from the Roman Catholic Church and resumed their ecclesiastical connections with the Syrian churches of West Asia. In 1706 the first Protestant missionaries arrived in the Danish settlement of Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu. Thus, as Christianity entered the nineteenth century, there were three branches of the Church present in India instead of just one: a Kerala-centric Syrian Orthodox Church, a very small Protestant presence in Tamil Nadu, and a widely spread but divided Roman Catholicism depleted of its earlier Portuguese resources.

The British East India Company, unlike the Portuguese, was under no mandate to evangelize the people of India. In fact, the Company was suspicious of Christian evangelists as potential disturbers of a profitable status quo and had also taken over the traditional ruler’s responsibilities for protecting the holy places of other religions (Frykenberg 2008: 169–205). Only in 1813, in response to Evangelical pressure at home, did it permit British missionaries to enter its territories; other missionaries were not allowed in until 1833. Thereafter, Protestant missionaries came to India from the United Kingdom, the European continent, and North America in increasing numbers.

Historians have written extensively about those missionaries as innovators and modernizers in nineteenth-century India (Webster 2012: 143–55). Their primary aim throughout the century remained evangelistic. They preached a gospel of individual salvation expressed primarily in other-worldly terms (Webster 1976: 30–34, 2007: 48–55) through street preaching, the distribution of Christian scriptures and tracts, the education of young men and women, and medical and other forms of humanitarian work, especially among women. Undergirding these efforts were translation work, the development of Indian languages for these purposes, and the voluntary society as an organizational model for impacting society. The missionaries, sometimes most reluctantly and at other times enthusiastically, critiqued not only rival religious beliefs, but also such religiously sanctioned practices as caste hierarchy and the treatment of widows.

This challenge to the prevailing moral and religious order evoked a variety of responses from local and regional elites. Those individuals and nuclear families who converted were immediately outcasted. Reformers sought to redefine their religious traditions and modernize their social practices to blunt the missionary challenge. Others counter-attacked both verbally and by setting up rival schools, petitioning the law courts, and even by using violence, as was most evident in 1857 (Sherring 1859). However, for the vast majority of people, especially in the villages, such conversions posed no challenge at all.

It was not individual and family conversions so much as large-scale, caste-based, rural conversion movements that both changed the situation of Christianity in India and posed its most serious challenge to the prevailing socio-cultural order. The first of these was the Nadar conversion movement in southern Tamil Nadu and Travancore during the 1840s in which whole villages converted (Hardgrave 1969: 43–70). The next was a movement among the
Pulayas of Travancore inspired by (successful) missionary agitation for the abolition of slavery (Gladstone 1984: 110–122). Other Dalit castes soon converted in significant numbers, most notably in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, western Uttar Pradesh, and the Punjab (Webster 2009: 40–92). In addition, Tribals, first in central India and then in the northeastern hill areas, converted in large numbers starting in the nineteenth century. Not only did these movements add significant numbers to the Christian population and change Protestantism from an urban modernizing community into a predominantly poor and illiterate rural community, but they also provoked reformers to pay attention to the plight of oppressed groups, especially after 1909 when the British instituted communal electorates. Now conversion movements could affect the balance of communal power in the country, since conversion changed not just one’s religious affiliation but also one’s political constituency.

These conversion movements have been matters of considerable controversy. All of them occurred among subordinate groups within Indian society whose conversion was strongly opposed by dominant groups. Gandhi considered Dalits incapable of discerning, mentally and spiritually, what religion was best for them, a patronizing attitude which has persisted and is embodied in post-independence anti-conversion legislation (Webster 2009: 138–139, 164–165). Historians who have studied these movements in some depth have depicted them as emancipatory movements characterized by Dalit or Tribal agency. In the Dalit case, they were motivated by a desire for greater respect and fuller human rights (Webster 2012: 156–162, 182–218), while Tribals found in Christianity a way to modernize without losing their tribal identities (Downs 1992: 154–155).

Politically, Indian Christians were well represented in the early years of the Indian National Congress (Oddie 1968: 53–54; Suntharalingam 1974: 256–264, 306–307; Webster 2007: 350–355, 185–186). They tended to be political moderates suspicious of the extremists’ religious nationalism. Both Protestants and Catholics formed their own political organizations, the Protestants taking a non-communal approach to national politics, whereas the Catholics did not (Mallampalli 2004: 108–156). Following World War I, Christians in mission employment were forbidden by government order to participate in politics, lest they jeopardize their mission’s continued presence in India (Jeyakumar 1999). Nonetheless by the mid-1930s the government had lifted the ban, Christian opinion had become largely nationalist, and many Christians were active in the struggle against British rule. A much smaller number, most notably in Travancore, played leading roles in the Dalit movement (Gladstone 1984: 343; Oommen 1993: 278–352).

At the same time there was also a nationalist movement against ‘missionary raj’ within the churches that in many respects paralleled the broader movement. Among Protestants this involved a gradual transfer of power from the foreign missions to the churches until the Indian churches, with their own leadership, became ecclesiastically independent of the missions that had brought them into existence. The Catholics simply replaced foreigners with Indians at the top of the Church hierarchy and religious orders.1 The Christian ashram movement and experiments in using Indian religious thought to convey Christian theological convictions were deliberate attempts to give expression to a Christian cultural nationalism after World War I. Christians, however, were already culturally Indian and Indian music, perhaps the most powerful and long-lasting expression of distinctively Indian culture in the form of zaburs, lyrics, and bhajans, had long been an integral part of Christian worship.

Thus, when India became independent in 1947, it had some 7 to 8 million Christians in its population,2 drawn mostly from the marginalized rather than ‘mainstream’ sections of Indian society. The major exceptions were the Syrian Christians in Kerala and the Vellalars in Tamil Nadu, although the Nadars were on the rise. Christianity also had a strong and influential
institutional presence consisting of schools, colleges, and hospitals, as well as a reputation for service to all regardless of caste, tribe or creed. Christians had a non-communal and progressive public image, especially with regard to the position and roles of women. They were thus well positioned and eager to play a constructive role in Nehru’s modernizing India of political democracy, economic development, secularism, and national integration.

The first half century of independence

The constitution of independent India, adopted in 1950, provided the legal parameters within which Christians and other Indians were to live together. Apart from the adult franchise opening up the vote to all, there were several provisions of the constitution that were of special significance to Christians. Christians gave up the communal electorates they had been granted in the 1935 constitution, both to express their confidence in majority rule within a general electorate and to depoliticize religious conversion (D’Souza 1949). The central Christian concern, however, was religious liberty which included the right not only to profess and practise but also (after intense debate over the right to convert) to propagate the religion of one’s choice (Article 25). Along with this went the right for all religious communities to manage their own religious affairs (Article 26) and for religious minorities to establish and administer their own educational institutions (Article 30).

The affirmative action articles of the constitution providing reservations and special benefits3 to Dalits and Tribals because of past disabilities (Articles 47, 330–342) proved to be problematic for Christians. All Tribals, regardless of religion, who belonged to a scheduled tribe, were eligible for these benefits and Christian Tribals availed themselves of them to improve their lot. However, the Presidential Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order of 1950 stated that ‘no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste’. Exclusion met with strong protests of religious discrimination from Christians both inside and outside the Parliament (Webster 2009: 169–172), but the Order was not modified. It was amended in 1956 to include Sikh Dalits and in 1990 to include Buddhist Dalits, but Christian and Muslim Dalits were unable to receive either these benefits or the special protections granted to other Dalits in subsequent legislation. This Presidential Order, in effect, not only punished Dalits for converting but also offered those belonging to religious minorities some powerful incentives to become Hindus.

It was soon followed by another indicator that the Constituent Assembly’s debate over conversion had not been fully resolved. In 1954 the government of Madhya Pradesh, where Tribals were not only converting to Christianity in significant numbers but also agitating for a separate Jharkhand state, launched an official inquiry into Christian missionary activities. In its report the Commission depicted Christianity as a foreign religion, and hence inherently unIndian, and as a tool of the neo-colonial, anti-communist United States in undermining India’s internal unity and neutrality in the cold war. Conversions among Tribals were seen as due to missionary use of force, fraud or inducements to win over a particularly vulnerable section of the population. Christian Tribals, on the other hand, considered not only the desire for deliverance from exploitation, social degradation, and evil spirits, but also a new sense of dignity as human beings to be the main reasons for both conversion to Christianity and the desire for political autonomy (Thomas and Taylor 1965: 93–121, 164–171, 190–201).4 While the Commission’s recommendations were rejected by the Central Government, the Commission’s view of conversion, especially with regard to the ‘weaker sections’ of Indian society, was carried over into a series of anti-conversion laws in Orissa (1967), Madhya
Pradesh (1968), Arunachal Pradesh (1978), Tamil Nadu (2002), Gujarat (2003), Rajasthan (2006), and Himachal Pradesh (2006). The underlying assumptions in all of them were that conversion is something one person does to another rather than something one chooses to do for oneself and that the ‘weaker sections’ had to be ‘protected’ from exercising the same degree of religious liberty that members of other sections of Indian society were granted.

While this inquiry was going on, there were similar conversion and autonomy movements among the largely Christian Nagas who had been led to believe that they could opt out of the Indian republic in 1947. Their peaceful movement turned violent, as did a later movement among the Mizos. In both cases the Indian army took strong measures against the insurgents and any deemed to be aiding them, but both movements were better contained by the grant of statehood in 1963 and 1986 respectively.

Despite these developments, anthropological studies of Christian communities from this period indicate that most Christians were far more concerned about survival and/or social mobility than about evangelism and winning new converts (Campbell 1961, Alter and Jai Singh 1961, Luke and Carman 1968, Godwin 1972). Census statistics indicate that the growth rate of the Christian population at that time was the same as that of the Indian population as a whole, except in the northeastern states of Manipur, Meghalaya, and Nagaland (Census of India 1972: 2–4). Church leaders were preoccupied with administrative responsibilities handed over by foreign missionaries, while Christian elites were concerned about Christian participation in nation-building, inter-faith dialogue, and the ‘Indianization’ of the churches.

By the mid-1970s there were clear signs that a Christian radicalism was emerging. Not only was the gap between the rich and poor widening, but evidence was also mounting that the ‘weaker sections’ were being exploited and oppressed to benefit the dominant (Abraham 1974; Indian Social Institute n.d.: 39). In 1974 a National Committee on the Status of Women in India issued a well-documented report showing that the status of women relative to men had actually declined in key respects since independence (Towards Equality 1974). With these changed perceptions of ‘Indian reality’ came increased Christian demands that the churches act in greater solidarity with the oppressed both inside and outside their own membership. Specifically, this was expressed in terms of giving priority to the needs of Dalits over those of the elites as well as to achieving equality of women and men over maintaining existing hierarchies of gender, caste, and class.

Progress in accepting and implementing these priorities was contested, slow, and very uneven. The churches’ involvement with the Dalit struggle is the best documented, one aspect of which was overcoming caste discrimination within the churches. This has been most prevalent in the south where members of several jatis differently placed within regional caste hierarchies have converted in large numbers and brought their caste rivalries with them into the churches. (In the north, where that did not happen, class distinctions have been more significant than caste distinctions.) Local patterns of discrimination have shown up in such forms as separate churches or separate seating, and even separate cemeteries for Dalit Christians; inferior roles in Christian festivals; and discrimination in the allocation of church resources, especially in the areas of education, employment, and financial assistance. Such discrimination has led to protests, to Dalits leaving to form churches of their own, and even to conversion to Islam and Hinduism (Webster 2009: 221–234).

Another aspect of the Dalit Christian struggle focused upon caste discrimination in the wider society, where they have faced the same social stigma, disabilities, and oppression as other Dalits. Here the main target was the 1950 Presidential Order that denied Christian Dalits the same compensatory benefits and protections to which other Dalits are entitled. After their initial protests against the Order failed, church leaders made only sporadic
attempts to change it until 1975 when they came together to prepare and implement a shared agenda. They then sent petitions and deputations to the Central Government in 1977, 1981, 1985, and 1988, all to no avail. They also brought a case before the Supreme Court which, in 1984, adopted a highly compartmentalized view of Indian society in stating that the petitioners had failed to show that Dalit Christians ‘suffer from a comparable depth of social and economic disabilities and cultural and educational backwardness and similar levels of degradation within the Christian community necessitating intervention by the state under the provisions of the Constitution’ (Kananaikil 1986: 49). In 1990 there was a huge rally of Dalit Christians in New Delhi, a smaller one in 1994, and a hunger strike in 1996 to back up their petitions, but with no greater success. In 1997 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which strongly opposed change, came to power and Christians saw that petitions and rallies were pointless (Webster 2009: 168–174, 234–245).

A third aspect was Dalit Christian involvement in the broader Dalit struggle, most often on local issues and through independent, secular non-government organizations. The Dalit Liberation Education Trust, founded in Chennai by Henry Thiagaraj in 1985, was an early example, moving in the course of its history from camps preparing educated Dalit youth for job interviews, to both rural and urban community organization, to human rights education, including training lawyers to fight cases in which Dalit human rights were violated. At a later stage in 1998, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, in which another Dalit Christian, Paul Divarkar, was National Convener, championed a broad range of Dalit concerns at the local, state, national, and international levels.

Growing activism on these three fronts exploded the myth that Christians constituted a community without caste, enhanced the sense of Dalit identity among Dalit Christians, and brought them into an increased solidarity with other Dalits based on an awareness of common grievances and shared struggle. Underlying all three struggles, and providing them with a rationale as well as a ‘spirituality of combat’, was Dalit liberation theology, which drew upon both the Bible and Dr B. R. Ambedkar’s analysis of Indian society (Webster 2009: 290–312).

Recent Christian involvement in women’s struggles followed a similar pattern. While Christians had played a very progressive role in this regard since the nineteenth century, they did so within a patriarchal intellectual and structural framework. Although in 1971 the Christian sex ratio was a very high 986 women for every 1,000 men v. a national average of only 930 (Census of India 1972: 23–24), and women’s religious orders as well as women’s organizations enjoyed a good measure of autonomy, they remained under the supervision of male-dominated church bodies. After the National Committee’s wake-up call in the mid-1970s, this began to change. Women demanded a greater voice in the decision-making bodies of their churches and, for Protestants, the ordination of women as pastors and priests. In 1980 the Church of North India and in 1982 the Church of South India voted to ordain women, two great symbolic victories for women. Other, but not all, Protestant churches have done likewise (Webster 1985; Faria 1985).

Christian women have also been involved in the broader women’s movement through existing Christian institutions and newer non-government organizations. One, Ruth Manorama, received the prestigious Right Livelihood Award in 2006 for creating and leading several non-government organizations (e.g. the Bangalore-based Women’s Voice, the National Alliance of Women and the Federation of Dalit Women), devoted to organizing and empowering poor and Dalit women, especially in the unorganized sector of the economy, in their struggles for better working conditions and full human rights. These efforts have been undergirded by women’s theologies (Gnanadasan 1986, 1994; Manorama 1994).
As indicated earlier, the major challenge facing Tribals outside the hill areas of the northeast has been resisting encroachments upon their traditional lands, autonomy, and way of life by an assimilative jati society which has looked down upon them as ‘primitive’. Christian Tribals have joined and even provided leadership in these struggles. In the hill states of the northeast, the Christian population has grown rapidly since independence and either is in the majority and rules or forms a significant minority. There Christians confront development issues through the separate agencies of Church and state. In both situations during this period Christian intellectuals have made conscious efforts to find a better ‘fit’ between the Christianity expressed by their foreign missionary predecessors and the cultural traditions of their own people (Vadakumcherry 1994; Minz 1994; Keitzar 1996).

The months following the first BJP victory at the polls saw more anti-Christian violence than in the previous 50 years of Indian independence put together. Between January 1998 and February 1999, 116 cases were reported. The most affected area was the largely tribal Dangs district of Gujarat, where Christians were assaulted, Christian schools and churches destroyed, and Christian meetings disrupted while the police either stood by or joined in the attacks. In a tribal area of Orissa an Australian missionary and his two young sons were burned alive as they slept in their Land Rover. All this violence was justified as a deterrent to conversion (Narula 1999). The furore picked up again in November 1999 when the Pope visited New Delhi to open a synod of Asian bishops. This time the government took strong action and the visit was both peaceful and polite.

The current twenty-first century scene

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Census indicated that the Christian population was just over 24 million, but with a growth rate slightly lower than that of the population as a whole. Thirty-four per cent of the Christian population was urban, slightly above the national average of 27.8 per cent. Its literacy rate of 80.3 per cent was well above the national average of 64.8 per cent, as was its female literacy rate (76.2 per cent v. 53.7 per cent). The sex ratio among Christians was an unbelievable 1,009 women for every 1,000 men, whereas the national ratio was a very low 930. These figures give the impression that Christians constitute a relatively advanced and progressive community, especially with regard to the status of women.

However, whereas the literacy rate of the overwhelmingly Dalit Christian population of the Punjab, who are not eligible for scheduled caste benefits, was a mere 45.8 per cent (well below the state average of 60.6 per cent), in the tribal states of Mizoram, Nagaland, and Jharkhand, where Christians are eligible for scheduled tribe benefits, the Christian literacy rates were 78.1 per cent, 56.5 per cent, and 56.9 per cent respectively (Census of India 2001: 1–48). This suggests that while some sections of the Christian community are making genuine progress, others are stagnating and becoming relatively worse off. Recent studies of specific Christian communities confirm the existence of such gaps. Four studies of Dalit Christian churches suggest that while there has been considerable upward mobility among urban Dalit Christians the condition of those who have remained in villages has in recent years been stagnant (Oommen and Webster 2002: 65–129). That picture of rural Dalit Christian stagnation is reinforced by two broader studies of rural Dalit Christians in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and northwest India (Shiri 1997; Dogar 2001).

Another significant demographic feature of the twenty-first century Christian community is its further internal diversification. The last two decades have witnessed a significant growth all over India of charismatic and independent churches, many if not most of indigenous
origin, which are outside the historic Christian ‘mainstream’. These offer more ecstatic forms of worship as well as public meetings in which faith healing of various kinds has been a prominent feature (Webster 2007: 298–301; Hedlund 2000). These charismatic churches have not only attracted members of more traditional churches to either switch or divide their church loyalties but also caused some ‘mainstream’ churches to incorporate charismatic elements into their regular Sunday worship services. They are also attracting participants and converts from outside the Christian community as their messages and energies are focused on individual problems (e.g. illness, misfortune) rather than on shared caste or tribal problems such as oppression and systemic humiliation. In fact, conversion movements have been rare in the twenty-first century; where conversions do occur, they are generally of individuals and nuclear families.8

As indicated earlier, Christianity in India is neither socially nor culturally homogenous. Where significant conversion movements took place within a particular caste or tribe, converts and their descendants have continued to identify with their caste or tribe. Thus the Anthropological Survey of India, using the community defined in terms of endogamy and a corporate existence as its chief characteristics, found that Christians in the Punjab constituted a single community, whereas in Kerala and Tamil Nadu they found multiple Christian communities (e.g. Syrian Christians, Latin Christians, Church of South India Christians, etc.). In Tamil Nadu 25, and in Kerala ten, categories of Christians were identified with caste labels such as Izhava Christians, Nadar Christians, Brahman Christians, Chakkiliyan Christians (Singh 1997a, 1997b, 2003). On the other hand, where converts have entered as individuals or nuclear families, they have identified more with the (generally urban) social class to which they belong by virtue of their education, occupation, and income level. Christian social practices and cultural preferences have tended to follow from these patterns of conversion and self-identification. Christians generally practise tribe and caste endogamy. Garo and Khasi Christians have maintained their matrilineal system of descent and tribal Christians generally, while eager to retain their traditional culture, have proven to be more open to influences from modern than from ‘jati’ or ‘sanskritic’ culture. Elsewhere caste provides the best indicator of socio-cultural adherences. To cite but two examples, in Andhra Pradesh dominant caste Kamma and Reddy Protestants prefer to attend their own assemblies rather than ‘mainline’ churches where Malas and Madigas worship (Raj 1998: 68–69), while the latter carry on their long-standing caste rivalries and often, while attending and supporting them, refuse to have official connections (through baptism or formal membership) with their churches lest they lose their Scheduled Caste status (Sudarshan 1998). David Mosse, upon returning to a village in Tamil Nadu where caste competition among Catholics for ceremonial honours during Christian festivals was rampant in the 1980s, found that now ‘caste distinction is evaded and erased from public space, and yet as a basis of claims to equal rights, caste is more visible than ever’ (Mosse 2012: 262).

What is true of caste is also largely true of existing relationships between Christianity and local cultures. There is caste in the churches but it has lost its divine sanction and become more associational in character, while caste hierarchy and discrimination receives little sanction and much criticism. Similarly, other local customs and practices surrounding child-rearing, marriage, kinship, and the like have been retained, modified, or replaced by ‘functional equivalents’ more in keeping with Christian belief and ethics. The sharpest socio-cultural contrasts between Christians and their neighbours are to be found, as might be expected, in the areas of foundational religious beliefs and ritual practices (Robinson 2003: 69–171; Singh 2003, 1997, Robinson and Kujur 2010).
Even in ‘Church politics’ Christians follow Indian cultural patterns based on patron-client relationships. The Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of South India, the Church of North India, the Methodist Church in India, and others are hierarchically structured with bishops, or their equivalents, at the top overseeing not only the clergy and local parishes but also a multitude of Christian institutions. Such centralization of power provides great scope for patronage in terms of appointments, employment, admissions, scholarships, and grants. These church structures have been dominated over the decades by men belonging to local or regional educated urban elites whose interests have been safeguarded, while others have received ‘leftovers’ and token acknowledgement. Progress towards changed priorities within the churches has been uneven, but the fundamental reorientation of the churches sought by advocates of liberation and equality, while much discussed, has yet to take place (Webster 1998; Webster 2007: 332–335).

Christians have also been active in civic life. While as yet there has not been a Christian President or Prime Minister of India, there have been Christian cabinet members, state governors and chief ministers, and speakers of the Parliament. Christians have been appointed to high positions in the civil and military services as well as to the Supreme Court. In the early years of independence, Christians were solid backers of the Congress Party, but in recent years with the rise of regional parties their political loyalties have diversified. The Congress can no longer take the Christian vote for granted.

Two public issues inherited from the past continue to be of special concern to Christians. The struggle to gain scheduled caste status for Dalit Christians took a decisive turn on 22 March 2004 when T. Franklin Caesar and the Centre for Public Interest Litigation filed a petition with the Supreme Court challenging the constitutional validity of paragraph 3 of the 1950 Presidential Order restricting scheduled caste status to Hindus on the grounds that, in violation of the constitution, it discriminates on the basis of religion. In response the (Congress) government sought the recommendation first of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities and then the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, both of which supported and became co-respondents with the petitioners. Christians and Muslims organized demonstrations demanding that the government file its counter affidavit so that the case could proceed to a decision, but it did not do so. One such demonstration in December 2013 was met with water cannons, canes, batons, and the arrest of, among others, the Catholic Archbishop of Delhi and the General Secretary of the Church of North India. Following the 2014 elections the new government is expected to file a counter affidavit in July 2014.

The other public issue has been the protection of not only the minority rights but also the very lives of Christians against external threats. The right of Christians to administer their own educational institutions – a major concern of Christian elites – was challenged in at least two cases affecting the prestigious St Stephen’s College in Delhi and the Christian Medical College in Ludhiana, Punjab. In 1991 and 2005 respectively, the Supreme Court upheld Christian minority rights (Webster 2007: 308, 314). More serious has been the continued anti-Christian violence, especially in rural areas, averaging over 200 incidents per year. As Bauman and Leech put it, ‘Hindu–Christian violence is routine not only in the sense of everyday, but also in the sense of regularized and routinized in the treatment of Christians and in the framing of Christianity as a threatening minority’ (Bauman and Leech 2012: 2198). Why the Sangh Pariwar has singled out the small, scattered Christian minority as such a threat has been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion (Bauman 2013; Bauman and Leech 2012), but one thing seems clear enough. The ancestors of the vast majority of Christians converted in order to escape from the experienced consequences of the kind of
religio-cultural homogenization that the Sangh Pariwar seeks to impose. The descendants of those converts, while culturally Indian in the ways described above, have also been advocates and beneficiaries of both Christianity and modernity, and so will probably continue to resist homogenization on Hindutva terms.

Conclusions

India’s Christians in the twenty-first century, whether viewed as constituting a community or as simply a religiously defined category of Indian humanity, are very much products of their history. This chapter has emphasized three aspects of that history which have had a strong bearing upon the present. One is the enduring significance of group origins in relation to a social order deemed by others to be sacred as well as of patterns of conversion which have resulted in far greater socio-cultural continuity than discontinuity with not only the pre-conversion past but also their present neighbours of other faiths. This distinguishes lived Christianity in India from Christianity elsewhere in the world. A second emphasis has been upon religious and social diversity among Christians themselves. This makes generalizations about them difficult and unity among them rather fragile, often only apparent when Christianity as such is being threatened from outside by legal or extra-legal means. A third emphasis has been upon an historical combination of both close cooperation and tension between Christians and other Indians over issues not just of religious belief and practice but also of distributive justice and human well-being.

Notes

1 This process is documented for the northwest in my A Social History of Christianity (2007), pp. 256–269. Churches in other regions underwent similar changes.
2 This rough estimate is based on the 1941 and 1951 Census figures provided on page 5 of ‘Religious Demography of India – Centre for Policy Studies’, www.cpsindia.org/d/religious/summary3c.pdf.
3 These included reserved seats in elected bodies from village panchayats to the Parliament; reserved quotas of government jobs; reserved seats and financial aid in educational institutions; welfare and development benefits.
4 The predominantly tribal states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh were formed in 2000.
5 Christianity actually spread much more rapidly in Arunachal Pradesh after the passing of this law than before it (Census of India 2001: First Report on Religious Data, p. xxxiii).
6 One organizational expression of this growing unity was the Dalit Solidarity Programme (1992), later Dalit Solidarity Peoples, a prime mover of which was James Massey. It brought Dalits of different faiths together to work on a common agenda.
7 www.rightlivelihood.org/ruth-manorama.html.
8 There have been conversion movements to Buddhism among Dalits in this century, but not to Christianity. The one exception I know of is the continuing Dalit Avatari (so named because they believe Jesus is the Dalit incarnation of God) conversion movement begun in the 1980s among the Bhangis in western Uttar Pradesh (Webster 2010: 110–112).
9 T. Franklin Caesar has provided documentation of this case without commentary in two papers presented at national consultations: ‘The Inclusion of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians: Constitutional and Social Justice Issues’ 1 June 2013 (Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy and National Law School of India University Bangalore: sponsors) and ‘Demand of Scheduled Caste Status by the Dalit Christians and Muslims’, 19–20 November 2013 (Jama Millia Islamia). His case gained support from the United Nations Human Rights Council, the European Parliament Working Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom as well as many groups and political parties within India. T. Franklin Caesar, correspondence with the author, 25 May 2014.
10 A ‘family’ of organizations strongly committed to Hindutva (‘Hindu-ness’) agendas for India.
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Christians in India
