

From Siddis to Dalits: Racial Prejudice in India, the Legacy of the Caste System

Dos Siddis aos Dalits: Preconceito racial na Índia, o legado do sistema de castas

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ABSTRACT

The African nations and India have several common features, and both were the subjects of colonial exploitation and oppression for a long period. Yet, in recent decades, the thousands of African students in India have faced harassment and intimidation at the hands of the local public. Why is there so much hostility between the people of the two regions? What makes the African students and youth in India tick against the backdrop of xenophobia and socioeconomic deprivation? In attempting to answer these questions, this paper argues that the discrimination the African diaspora communities experience in India is rooted in India's identity as a society built on the Hindu system of caste hierarchy. The paper further points out that the African indigenous religions and cultures, on arrival in India, blended with the local traditions in the process providing a spiritual and emotional anchor for the immigrants.

RESUMO

As Nações Africanas e a Índia têm diversas características em comum, e foram sujeitas à exploração e opressão colonial por um longo período. Ainda assim, nas últimas décadas, os milhares de estudantes africanos na Índia têm enfrentado assédio e intimidação nas mãos do público local. Por que há tanta hostilidade entre os povos das duas regiões? O que faz com que estudantes africanos e jovens na Índia se liguem ao pano de fundo da xenofobia e da destruição socioeconômica? Na tentativa de responder essas perguntas, este texto argumenta que a discriminação que as comunidades da diáspora africana experienciam na Índia tem suas raízes na identidade da Índia como uma sociedade construída sobre a hierarquia do sistema de castas Hindu. Este artigo também indica que as culturas e religiões indígenas africanas, ao chegar à Índia, se misturaram com as tradições locais nesse processo, proporcionando um ponto de apoio espiritual e emocional para os imigrantes.

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A young Kenyan woman is pulled from a taxi in Noida near Delhi by a group of men and beaten. In the same city in the same week, a mob storms into a mall and attacks two Nigerian students shopping. In Delhi a Nigerian student was beaten with steel dustbins, kicked and punched by a large mob inside a mall. The protesters alleged that Nigerians supply narcotic drugs to students but police investigating the case said they are unable to find any evidence for this. In the Southern Indian city of Bengaluru a Tanzanian woman is attacked by a mob which tore off her T-shirt and set her car on fire. The group was angry about a Sudanese man who had run over a woman earlier that day with his car. The traumatized Tanzanian lady did not know the Sudanese man. The only similarity was that both happened to be black and from Africa. These are but a few of the physical assaults experienced by young African students in India in recent years. The frequency of the attacks during the past few years raises several questions about racial attitudes in India. "Why do they hate Africans so much", asked Abdou Ibrahim, senior adviser to the Association of African Students in India.² India and the African nations have several common features. Both were the subjects of colonial exploitation and oppression for a long period. Why should there, therefore, be so much hostility between the people of the two regions? What makes the African students and youth in India tick against the backdrop of xenophobia and socioeconomic deprivation? To what extent do religious worldviews and practices remain relevant for Africans and their descendants in the face of negative public perception in India? These are some of the questions that become relevant as we discuss racial prejudices in India, especially those that are directed at African students, youth and other immigrants.

Within this overall context, this paper will argue that the discrimination the African diaspora communities experience in India is rooted in India's identity as a society built on the Hindu system of caste hierarchy. But it is further pointed out that the African indigenous religions and cultures, on arrival in India, blended with the local traditions in the process providing a spiritual and emotional anchor for the immigrants. In the context of this background, this paper has the following parts: (a): A historical sketch of the African presence in India, and a social analysis of the lack of assimilation and integration with the mainstream Indian society. (b): The roots of the discrimination the African diaspora communities experience in India is

² Geeta Anand and Subasini Raj, "Attacks Against African Students Rise in India, Rights Advocates Say". <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/world/asia/african-students-india-mob-attacks.html> [Cited, October 28, 2019].

understood as a legacy of the caste system in Hinduism and the concept of purity and pollution deeply embedded in the Indian social psyche, both playing a crucial role in maintaining the required distance between different groups of people on racial/caste lines. (c): The resilience and dynamism of the African religions in India contribute tremendously in sustaining the immigrants as they are reminded of their shared African heritage and common identity.

With the presence of the African diaspora in India, race and caste, two exploitative social systems, converge raising in the process crucial questions about the oppressive characteristics of religion, racial politics, human rights and social justice. If, however, religion is a part of the problem, religion can also be a part of the solution, and this paper will look at both the oppressive characteristics of religion and its liberative potential.

THE AFRICAN PRESENCE IN INDIA:

India and Africa have a shared history that dates back to trade relations in the early centuries of the Common Era. Ethiopian coins from the 4th century CE have been found in southern India. Several African groups came to India as traders or were brought there as slaves. Their subsequent generations, known as Siddis to denote their African origins, settled down in the country and went on to play important roles in the history of the region. While many Siddis were slaves, some escaped slavery to establish communities of their own, and some others established Siddi principalities. A case from the seventeenth century is that of Malik Ambar³, an Ethiopian brought to India as a slave. In the Deccan region of India, Ambar gradually grew independent and powerful becoming a military leader and a popular Prime Minister of the Ahmednagar Sultanate, a medieval Indian kingdom located in northwestern Deccan. Like Ambar, several other African slaves rose to positions of power and prestige in India.

There are today tens of thousands of Siddis in India and, despite their long history in the country when they held positions of power and privilege, educationally and economically they are a marginalized community. While the current generation of Siddis are far removed

³ B. N, Goswamy, "Malik Ambar: A remarkable life" in *Spectrum*, August 13, 2006. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2006/20060813/spectrum/art.htm> [Cited, October 28, 2019].

from their African origins and are well integrated with the local society, they have retained some of the African musical and dance traditions. Despite threats to survival, Africans and their descendants in India strive to preserve their cultural heritage and religious identity.

Immigration from Africa to India has continued to the present time with higher education being an area of great attraction for the African youth and students. It also helped that at the political level, India enjoyed cordial diplomatic relations with many African nations.⁴ However, for the African students who came to India, assimilation with the local society proved to be a major challenge. The extremely color-conscious mainstream Indian society ostracized them to a great extent. There were cases across the country of African students being marginalized in the classrooms by both other students and teachers, attacked by the public in the marketplace, denied housing and harassed in numerous other ways. The thousands of African students in Greater Delhi lead a life of insecurity even as more students come to India from Africa. Mob violence combined with racial prejudices has led to accelerated attacks on African youth and students in India. The question is, how do we understand the unprecedented hostility the Africans face in India and what is the way forward.

THE ROOTS OF DISCRIMINATION:

The roots of the discrimination the African diaspora communities experience in India can be traced back to India's identity as a society built on the Hindu system of caste hierarchy. While Hinduism is based on the caste system, today caste pervades the whole Indian society including several other religions. It is therefore important to undertake a brief survey of the caste system at this juncture. The ancient Hindu text Rigveda states that the division of the Indian society is based on the divine manifestation of four castes. According to legends, the priests and teachers were cast from the mouth of Brahma (a creator god), rulers and warriors from Brahma's arms, merchants and traders from his thighs, and workers and peasants from his feet. One long-held theory about the origins of South Asia's caste system states that the Aryans from central Asia

⁴ For a comprehensive study of Indo-African relations, see *Trends in Indo-African Relations* by Ajay Dubey, Manas Publications, 2010.

invaded South Asia and introduced the caste system as a means of controlling the local populations. The Aryans defined key roles in society, then assigned groups of people to them. Individuals were born into, worked, married, ate, and died within those groups (castes).

In addition to the four castes, there is a fifth group in Hinduism, the outcastes who did the menial jobs such as cleaning up after funerals, dealing with sewage, and working with animal skin. They come in the broad category of 'Dalits' though there are a number of subdivisions with the Dalit community. The great social divide in India is based on the notion of the Hindu understanding of ritual pollution and purity; the Brahmins, the highest caste, were considered the embodiment of purity while the outcastes represented pollution. Physical contact between the two groups was absolutely prohibited and therefore, the Dalits were also called 'the untouchables'. While the Dalits constitute almost 20% of the Indian population (over 200 million), they are peripheral to the Indian society and there is little social mobility among the various castes.

A critical analysis of history is fundamental to understanding the situation of the Dalits. History is fundamental in the sense that the realization of the Dalits as the subjects of their destiny is essential for the recovery and recapture of their lost dignity. There were a few significant movements in the past that were aimed at the liberation of the Dalits; these movements and the protest and resistance of the Dalits went through several phases. The Bhakti movement (a movement within Hinduism for religious reforms by adopting the method of devotion to achieve salvation) between the 14th and 16th centuries CE symbolised the aspirations of the lower caste communities for an egalitarian society and religion. It is also important to note that there were non-Brahminic traditions in Indian history such as the pre-Aryan civilizations and, from orthodox systems of philosophy, there were the Lokayata or the Charvaka traditions. These movements and traditions were eventually either suppressed or co-opted into the mainstream by the dominant castes or by British colonialism.⁵

Although born into an upper caste, Mahatma Gandhi spent much of his life working to bring the untouchables equality. It was Gandhi who first named the untouchables 'Harijans', meaning "children of God." The untouchables, however, preferred the term, Dalits which means

⁵ George Oommen, *The Emerging Dalit Theology: A Historical Appraisal* (Indian Church History Review, Vol. XXXIV, Number 1, June 2000), p. 19

the oppressed, broken and scattered. James Massey captured thus the wide usage of the term Dalit:

Dalit is thus not a mere descriptive name or title, but an expression of hope for the recovery of their past identity. The struggle of these "outcastes" has given the term dalit a positive meaning. The very realisation of themselves as Dalit, the very acceptance of the state of "dalitness," is the first step on the way towards their transformation into full and liberated human beings.⁶

The term 'Dalit' thus does not mean the poor or the outcast; it really denotes the state to which a certain section of the people have been reduced through religion and culture and who now are forced to continue living in that predicament. They are outcastes and poor, because according to the architects of the caste hierarchy, they are not fit to be included in the fourfold graded caste structure of the traditional Hindu society. On the basis of this status, they were made to bear extreme kinds of disabilities in the form of oppression for centuries, which made them almost lose their humanness and finally they reached the state of being a 'no- people'.⁷

Closely linked to the plight of the Dalit communities in India is an appraisal of the Christian missionary movement in the country. Though Apostle Thomas is believed to have brought the gospel to India as early as the first century CE, Christianity spread to most parts of the country due to the work of the western missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant. The missionaries were quick to perceive that the Indian society was based on the caste structure and that its peoples were hierarchically arranged. The missionaries had a practical interest in understanding caste and adjusting their mission strategy accordingly, because caste was perceived as a major hindrance for evangelism. Consequently, they adopted a mission strategy which was not only in favor of the upper caste people but also biased against the low castes and Dalits because it was feared that their entry into the church would lead to 'baptized heathenism' and become a deterrent to upper caste people embracing the Christian faith.⁸ However, the dominant

⁶ James Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), p. 3.

⁷ K. P. Kuruvilla, "Dalit Theology: An Indian Christian Attempt to Give Voice to the Voiceless" (Unpublished Paper).

⁸ V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp. Bible Studies in Dalit Perspective* (Madras: Gurukul, 1992) p. 37

castes did not enthusiastically welcome the gospel or become Christians in large numbers, while the Dalits expressed an eagerness to embrace the Christian fold, in their hundreds and thousands and in mass movements. V. Devasahayam outlined the profound impact the entry of the Dalits to the Indian church had:

It was the Dalits (not missionaries) who took the initiative in mass movements and the missionaries were forced to respond to this Dalit initiative. There was a dramatic increase in the membership of the church. Due to mass movements, the nature of Christian church was transformed from a tiny, urban, educated community of mixed social origins to a predominantly poor, rural, illiterate Dalit community. A permanent Dalit stamp was marked on the church and it is this church that has come to stay.⁹

History however has also shown that the “permanent Dalit stamp” on the church remained largely symbolic as the power structures in the church continued to be controlled by the urban educated communities, often from the dominant castes. That also goes to show that though religious conversion often emerged from the urge to escape oppression and enslavement, the result was not always liberation and fuller humanity.

SEEKING SPIRITUAL RESOURCES:

The mass movements of the 19th and 20th centuries that led to the conversion of the Dalits to Christianity was a significant chapter in the history of the Dalit movement in India. In tune with their self-understanding and the articulation of their faith, in the 20th century Dalit theology emerged as the Christian and Biblical expression of the pathos of the Dalits. It is therefore important to briefly review the course and content of Dalit theology.

While there were in India non-Brahminic traditions, the classical and mainstream Indian Christian theology had, by and large, ignored these dimensions of the Indian heritage and instead, embraced an approach to theology that was, on the one hand, western in orientation and on the

⁹ Ibid., p. 38

other, firmly rooted in the Brahminical culture and ethos of India.¹⁰ One of the tasks of Dalit theology, therefore, was to develop an Indian theology that was truly indigenous in nature. “The task of indigenous theology is one of theological creative interpretation of Indian history and of discovering or capturing ‘our story of salvation’.”¹¹

While rejecting the traditional Indian Christian theology which was largely dependent on the Brahminical tradition, as well as the classical confessional theology based on formulated doctrines applicable supposedly for all times, Dalit theology represents a paradigm shift in our understanding of God-human relation. Finality, in this sense, is in the revelation of God and this revelation has a dynamic aspect to it that takes a fresh meaning in each new context. Arvind Nirmal therefore believed that theology always has a heuristic dimension, an enquiry of truth. He wrote, “Although theology is in pursuit of the Transcendent Truth, its conceptual and heuristic tools have to be derived from empiric and imminent realities. All theological discourse is based on models and metaphors drawn from *this* world.”¹² He further elaborated this point thus:

Whether it is the traditional Indian Christian theology or the more recent third-world theology, our theologians failed to see the struggle of Indian Dalits for liberation, as a subject matter appropriate for doing theology in India. What is amazing is the fact that Indian theologians ignore the reality of the Indian Church. While estimates vary, between 50 and 80 percent of all the Christians in India today are of scheduled caste origin. This is the most important commonality cutting across the various diversities of the Indian Church that would have provided an authentic liberation motif for Indian Christian theology. If our theologians failed to see this in the past, there is all the more reason for our waking up to this reality today and for applying ourselves seriously to the ‘task of doing theology.’¹³

Dalit theology emerged out of the conviction that theology should be rooted in the context and, in the Indian situation, as a conscious reflection of the oppressive situation of the

¹⁰ J. Russell Chandran, “Rev. A. P. Nirmal: A Tribute” in *NCCI Review*, January 1997, p. 30

¹¹ Arvind P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: CLS, 1990), pp. 172-173

¹² *Heuristic Explorations*, p. 7 (*Emphasis as in the original*)

¹³ Arvind P. Nirmal, *Toward a Christian Dalit Theology*, R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994, p. 30

Dalits. In this sense, the Dalit theological movement was a corrective to the institutionalization of inequality and inaccessibility within the Indian Church.

The primary source for doing Dalit theology is the Dalit experience of suffering and pain, for the narration of the story of their pathos and protest has an essential place in their spiritual quest for salvation and liberation. In their Biblical reflections, the Dalits identified the depth of their suffering with the cross of Christ. While the cross is central to the Christian faith and practice, the Dalits realized that the traditional interpretations of the cross needed to be revisited in order that they could have a vision of the cross that can both shatter their caste prejudices and strengthen their resolve to fight them. The Dalits affirm that they need to have a relook at the cross, recognising Jesus as the representative of the oppressed collective.¹⁴ Under Jesus' overarching commitment to humanity, the cross should be understood as a human choice.

Dalit theology is an essential part of the 'irruption of the poor' within the Indian church. The church of the poor demands not merely an economic and political change, but also a perspectival one. Those who seek to make the church fully Indian, fully relevant and fully missional, should be prepared to struggle against the forces that perpetuate the Christendom model of the church. Those who join this struggle must also be ready to pay the ultimate price.

THE RELEVANCE OF AMBEDKAR¹⁵ FOR THEOLOGIZING:

Following the 125th birth anniversary of B. R. Ambedkar in 2015, there was a renewed interest in the relevance of this champion of the downtrodden people for theologizing in India. In a brilliant exposition of the significance of Ambedkar for theologizing in India, P.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 54

¹⁵ B. R. Ambedkar was born on 14 April, 1891 in Mhow in the present-day Madhya Pradesh state in India. Though born into a poor low Mahar (Dalit) caste who were treated as untouchables and subjected to socio-economic discrimination, Ambedkar rose to be an eminent jurist, economist, politician and social reformer who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination towards the untouchables, while also supporting the rights of women and laborers. He was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee that prepared the final draft of the Constitution of the Republic of India. Faced with discrimination in Hinduism, he declared: "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu". Convinced that Buddhism was the only way for the Dalits, along with 380,000 others from the Mahar community, on 14 October, 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism. He died six weeks later.

Arockiadoss outlined the relevance of Ambedkar in doing Christian theology in India today.¹⁶ From Ambedkar we learn that it is imperative to adopt the Dalit perspective and reject the elite perspective in order to do theology in India. Ambedkar has given concrete as well as valid principles required to make a liberating religion which should be “earthy, historical and political to make the earth resemble the heaven in which we believe.” Through his mission and message, Ambedkar’s life project became one with God’s own historical project. God’s liberating actions became present in Ambedkar’s liberative praxis. Therefore, “though Ambedkar has not spoken about theology or engaged himself in glorious euologisation on God”, his life and mission are more than mere source materials for theologizing; they in themselves have a deep theological significance.¹⁷

Arockiadoss’s affirmation that Ambedkar’s life project became “one with God’s own historical project” is likely to generate a serious debate in the theological circles on the validity of Ambedkar’s method for theologizing. Samuel Thambusamy, while agreeing that Ambedkar has great significance for theologizing in India - particularly theologizing from a dalit perspective - feels that liberation alone does not warrant the task of theologizing. Using the Tillichian criterion for theological system¹⁸, he contests Arockiadoss’s position that Ambedkar’s life and message are more than source material for theologizing in India. According to Thambusamy,

¹⁶ Arockiadoss lists ten areas where Ambedkar’s life and message are relevant for theologizing in India today: 1. Ambedkar’s life project is a theological project, 2. From him we learn the right perspective for theologizing, 3. Ambedkar provides us with the right option for theology, 4. He provides a paradigm for identifying and interpreting the signs of the times, 5. Ambedkar helps us to identify the messianic people of India, 6. From Ambedkar we learn that the Dalits, and their likes, are the real subjects of theologizing in India, 7. From him we also learn that the language of Dalit theology will be angry and conflictual, 8. Ambedkar gives the basic norms for critiquing religions and entering into interreligious dialogue, 9. Ambedkar provides the right yardstick to evaluate the church in India and its various missionary efforts, 10. He also supplies a critique for judging the erstwhile Indian theologies and inculturations. (Refer: V. Devasahayam (Ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK & Gurukul, 1997), pp. 290-313)

¹⁷ Refer: V. Devasahayam (Ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK & Gurukul, 1997), p. 291

¹⁸ “According to Paul Tillich, any theological system must satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every generation” [Source: Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p.3] Quoted by, Samuel Thambusamy, *The Significance of Ambedkar for Theologising in India* (Unpublished Paper)

A serious limitation of this [Arockiadoss's] view is that it is tilted towards speaking to the 'context' and does not relate it to the Gospel 'message'. It is true that Ambedkar's theanthropic praxis cannot be ignored, and his concerns and agenda are valid for the theological task in India. But, this needs to be unified with the 'eternal truth' of the gospel in order to balance the two poles. Fr. Arockiadoss's contention seems untenable if we apply Tillich's criteria for a theological system.¹⁹

Whether as source material for theologizing or as the base for a new theological methodology itself, it is undisputed that Ambedkar cannot be ignored in the faith-reflection of Indian Christians.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION - A DALIT PERSPECTIVE:

A discussion of Ambedkar's relevance would invariably include the question of religious conversion as a tool for the liberation of the Dalits. In modern India religious conversion has historically been a weapon of the downtrodden communities for liberation from oppressive and enslaving social and religious traditions. Even before Ambedkar came on the scene, at mass conversion programs, Dalits in large numbers joined Christianity. Ambedkar's life-long study of the inseparable link between Brahminical Hinduism and casteism led him to make the famous statement: "Even though I was born as a Hindu I will not die as a Hindu." And his last political act was the embracing of Neo-Buddhism along with six hundred and fifty thousand Dalits in 1956, just a few weeks before he passed away. Conversion continues to be an attractive option for the oppressed people of India.²⁰

What, however, is the continuing relevance of conversion, especially in the present Indian context in which religious fundamentalism and communalism, with their professed hostility towards conversion to the minority communities, are playing a centre-stage role in public life? In

¹⁹ Thambusamy, *The Significance of Ambedkar for Theologising in India* (Unpublished Paper)

²⁰ *The Hindu* (October 15, 2004; Chennai Edition) reported that hundreds of Dalits from the southern States had, on October 14, 2004, embraced Buddhism in the presence of monks from the Nagpur Monastery, in Perambalur district. "Renouncing" Hinduism and Hindu Gods were among the oaths administered at the ceremony, organized by the Dr. Ambedkar Youth Front and the International Buddhist Youth Organisation (IBYO).

a significant debate between Swami Agnivesh and M. M. Thomas on the question of inter-religious conversion in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, V. Devasahayam forcefully argued for a “Dalit perspective on Conversion.”²¹ According to Devasahayam, the whole discussion on conversion, or the attempt to understand conversion, has been taking place from the perspective of the elite or the so-called upper caste, who were trying to dominate, rather than see it from the perspective of the subjects of conversion. “For the Dalits, conversion was not child’s play as Ambedkar would say, but it is concerned with how to make humans, how to make life, purposeful. It was a search for human dignity, and self-affirmation. It meant a new religion which also meant a new community and a new identity for the Dalits.”²²

Not only on the question of conversion, but also on baptism which is the visible sign of the new identity of the converts, the Dalit perspective is different from the ecclesiastical as well as mainstream theological thinking. The church’s mainline doctrine of the indispensability of baptism has been questioned in modern times by nationalist and ecumenical theologians. M. M. Thomas, in his article, ‘The Church – the Fellowship of the Baptised and the Unbaptised?’²³ stated that in India baptism often amounted to the cutting off of one’s ties with one community and the embracing of another community, a fact which has kept several Hindus who have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior from being baptized. In view of the ambiguity of the relevance of baptism in the Indian interreligious and political context and in reference to the positions taken by several leading theologians²⁴, Thomas stated that the question of giving to the unbaptized Christ-

²¹ Broadly speaking, the debate was between the positions: “I personally refuse to be converted” (Swami Agnivesh), “I believe in conversion... there is a necessity for decommunalising conversion” (M. M. Thomas) and, “We need to have a new perspective, and a new viewpoint which should be the perspective of the oppressed Dalits and the backward class” (V. Devasahayam). For details see, J. John & Jesudas Athyal (ed.), *Religion, State and Communalism: A Post-Ayodhya Reflection* (Hong Kong: CCA, 1995), pp. 95-131

²² , J. John & Jesudas Athyal (ed.), *Religion, State and Communalism: A Post-Ayodhya Reflection* (Hong Kong: CCA, 1995), p. 110-111.

²³ Prasanna Kumari (Ed.), *Liberating Witness* (Dr. K. Rajaratnam’s Platinum Jubilee Commemoration Volume I, Published by Gurukul Theological College, Madras, 1995), pp. 8-16

²⁴ In this context, M. M. Thomas refers to several studies. Two of them are: 1. The NCCI Consultation in the 1960s on ‘Renewal in Mission’ where it was argued that “in the perspective of the Bible, conversion is turning from idols to serve a living and true God’ and not moving from one culture to another and from one community to another as it is understood in the communal sense in India today” and further that so long as baptism remains a transference of cultural and communal allegiance, “we cannot judge those who while confessing faith in Jesus are unwilling to be baptized” [*Renewal in Mission*, NCCI, p. 220]. 2. The studies of the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in this area – notably, a survey conducted in the city of Chennai where it was revealed that many people in the city who had accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior had chosen to continue in their own religious, cultural and caste communities without conversion to the Christian community.

devotees in other religious communities a sense of full belonging to the spiritual fellowship of the church including participation in the sacrament of the Lord's supper, needed to be explored.²⁵

Dalit theologians too agree with others that a society divided on narrow communal and sectarian lines and Christianity cannot co-exist, but they prefer to describe the Indian society as primarily caste-ridden or 'casteist'. The question therefore is whether we can meaningfully talk of participating in a casteist society which is anti-Christian. "The sin of the church is not that it has isolated itself from the social and cultural community but more precisely that it has failed to isolate itself to come out of this cultural and social community and it has failed to evolve a new social order."²⁶ Ram Manohar Lohia and others have pointed out that the struggle against caste and patriarchal structures should go alongside the efforts to build up tolerance towards Muslims and other minorities. In other words, challenging the demonic forces of caste is essential for the protection of the secular fabric of the Indian society as well.

SIDDIS TO STUDENTS - THE AFRO-INDIAN TRADITION LINGERS ON:

It is essential to locate the marginalization the African students, youth and the other immigrant communities experience in India in the larger context of the survey undertaken in the previous sections on the long tradition of caste-based exclusion and oppression, the plight of the Dalits, their struggles for a place under the sun, the development of Dalit theology as an expression of the spiritual resources that sustained the Dalits in their suffering and struggles, and the contextual challenges Dalit theology faces today. The question, why do the African students still come to India despite the ostracization and humiliation they experience there is a relevant one. Historically, there was a sharp difference between how higher education developed in India and Africa. In the 19th century the European colonizers argued that Britain must avoid "the Indian disease" in Africa. "The Indian disease" referred to the development of an educated middle class, a group most likely to carry the virus of nationalism. Consequently, the spread of higher education in Africa was mainly a post-colonial development. Despite all these limitations, there was a time

Refer also to the Gurukul publication, *The Debate on Mission – Issues from the Indian context* (Edited by Herbert E. Hofer, 1979)

²⁵ *Liberating Witness*, pp. 13-14

²⁶ *Religion, State & Communalism*, p. 112

when the African universities maintained a high standard, and the best and the brightest Africans stayed at home for their higher education. Nigeria's Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka, Tanzania's post-independence leader Julius Nyerere, Namibia's first president Sam Nujoma and several other leaders were educated in African universities. However, underfunding and mismanagement, coupled with what the Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani called the "NGO-isation of the university" has stripped Africa's centres of higher learning of their reputation. Despite being a strong believer that the next generation of African scholars should be trained at home, Mamdani finds the current scene in the African universities quite dismal, as he outlined to Laura Freschi in an article:

Today, intellectual life in [African] universities has been reduced to bare-bones classroom activity. Extra-curricular seminars and workshops have migrated to hotels. Workshop attendance goes with transport allowances and per diem. All this is part of a larger process, the NGO-ization of the university. Academic papers have turned into corporate-style power point presentations. Academics read less and less. A chorus of buzz words have taken the place of lively debates...²⁷

In many African institutions of higher education, academic research has been reduced to mere consultancy-driven research, devaluing original research or intellectual production in Africa. A 2015 list by the Times Higher Education, a British publication, named only five African institutions among the top places for research.

For all these reasons, those African parents who can afford it, send their children abroad for studies. India, known for quality education which is also inexpensive compared to Europe or North America, is a favorite destination of these students. For those from English-speaking African countries, the language of higher education in India is an additional positive.²⁸ India's sector of higher education has flourished in recent years, led by world-class, state-funded institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management,

²⁷ Laura Freschi, "African Universities: Creating True Researchers or "Native Informers" to NGOs?" <http://www.nyudri.org/aidwatcharchive/2011/05/african-universities-creating-true-researchers-or-%E2%80%9Cnative-informers%E2%80%9D-to-ngos> (Cited, October 29, 2019).

²⁸ Jahnavi Sen, "Africans in India: Pictures that Speak of a Forgotten History" in *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/politics/africans-in-india-pictures-that-speak-of-a-forgotten-history> (Cited, October 29, 2019).

besides a number of well-run private universities and colleges. The country's higher education sector is now one of the largest in the world with over 26 million enrolled in tertiary education.²⁹ This is the dilemma faced by the African immigrants, mostly young students, in India. They agree that India is a selectively racist nation but they also realize that the country has the potential to fulfil their dreams.

Similar is the situation of the Siddis in India. Though the Siddis today are far removed from their African origins and have spent centuries with indigenous Indian populations speaking local languages, they have retained some of their religious and cultural traditions. Through historic paintings and photographs, there are efforts today to look at their forgotten histories in order to give them the recognition they deserve.³⁰ There is a remarkable deal of eclectic syncretism in the religious beliefs and cultural values of Siddis, who often married with native communities in India and participated in regional cultural and political systems. In several places in India, the religious and cultural practices of the Siddis constitute a nucleus of the religious beliefs of the local communities and is a mosaic of elements from Brahmanic Hinduism, Sufi traditions, tribal beliefs, Zoroastrianism and Dalit practices. Several Siddi shrines in Gujarat focus on the curing of spirit possession, the removal of barrenness and impotency in devotees, and delivering of justice through ordeals of truth. While retaining the basic heritage of African traditions, by adapting diverse religious beliefs and cultural practices, these shrines that are visited by members of diverse religious and ethnic communities, exhibit an eclectic nature. "Siddis have contested and amalgamated some of the mythical elements from the host culture with insertions of their own rituals from their tribal past, such as offerings of blood sacrifices, cigarettes and alcoholic drinks during the annual festival of Nash."³¹ Thus with the appropriation of a common religious vocabulary and rituals, the Siddis have reinterpreted beliefs and ideas from diverse communities. As Helene Basu put it, by "eclectically combining and mixing Sufi, Bhil, Hindu and African

²⁹ Itika Sharma Punit & Omar Mohammed, "Indians think Africans are "frauds and prostitutes"—so why do they still come to India to study?" in *Quartz India*. <https://qz.com/india/613920/despite-discrimination-and-violence-why-do-african-students-still-come-to-india/> [Cited, October 29, 2019].

³⁰ In order to highlight the achievements and retrace the lives of prominent Africans who settled down in India, the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library created in 2016 the 'Africans in India: From Slaves to Generals' exhibition in collaboration with the United Nations 'Remembering Slavery' program. See, <https://www.un.org/en/events/slaveryremembranceday/exhibit2016.shtml> [Cited, October 29, 2019].

³¹ Karan Singh, "Syncretic heritage of Africans in India: Identity and Acculturation" in *The Newsletter* No. 72, Autumn 2015. https://ias.asia/sites/default/files/IIAS_NL72_07.pdf [Cited, September 25, 2018].

cultural elements, the cult of Gori Pir can be understood as a new, uniquely creolized cultural production that has been brought about by the interactions of Siddi with their social environment.”³²

The resilience and dynamism of the African religions in India require a close scholarly attention that should explore how they are central to the everyday lives of Africans and their descendants. A proper grasp of their complex religious cosmologies, traditions and cultures will improve the understanding of African peoples in conditions of globality. The well-known dance Dhamal which is a marker of the Siddi identity in India has “many similarities with the East African Swahili Ngoma tradition in its presentation, use of instruments as well as conception.”³³ The musical instruments used during Dhamal also has several similarities with various African instruments found in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Angola. Despite the eclectic and syncretic nature of the Siddis’ religious and cultural practices, the leaders of the community found festivals and other such gatherings as occasions to remind the people of their shared African heritage and to stimulate common identity concerns among the people. The Siddis were reminded that they have come from Africa and that such occasions serve to empower one another.

It has been a long and complex journey from the original African immigrants to the modern day African university students in India. In both the cases, African-Indians are becoming increasingly conscious of their African identity. While the overriding reality of caste has shaped to a large extent the lack of assimilation of the people of African origin in India, the lingering presence of both the Siddis and the students in the country point towards deep streams of religious and cultural practices that bind the diverse contexts together.

³² Basu, H. 1998. ‘Hierarchy and emotion: love, joy and sorrow in a cult of black saints in Gujarat, India’, in Werbner, P. & H. Basu (eds.) *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cult* (London: Routledge, 2016), 67.

³³ Karan Singh, op.cit.