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# SACRED REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIAN CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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## Introduction

In the field of religion and mission studies in history, anthropology has contributed much, for instance, by thinking about the concept of *conversion* itself and interrogating the way in which it has been looked at in the past. Now, it is acknowledged that conversion is not an «event»; it is a process and it may continue through the life-course of an individual or even a group. It is a dynamic process and one which cannot be pinned down to a specific moment in time. It is also not necessarily a «life-changing» event; it may be so slow and gradual in its impact and enmeshed as part of the stream of a person's life as to proceed almost disregarded.

Another aspect that anthropological studies bring out is with regard to the nature and construction of religious or sacred symbols, representations and rituals. Studies of religious symbols and representations among Indian Catholics take us almost imperceptibly into the

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realm of cultural convergence and communication, dialogue and dispute. Clearly such rituals and divine representations are viewed as partaking not only of Christian symbolic ideas but also Hindu ones, since Catholics are typically converts and live alongside of and among largely Hindu communities. The concept of «syncretism» or the notion of «composite culture» has been often used to understand the nature of religious symbols and practices.<sup>1</sup>

Syncretism is, indeed, an extremely alluring concept, not least perhaps because it seems particularly apt for the south Asian context. Isn't everything in India (and south Asia in general) so fluid and easily transmissible?<sup>2</sup> The fluidity of cultures should not, however, blind us to the modes of signifying difference. Differences sometimes become manifest in the very mediation of them. If syncretism implies the harmonious interaction of different religious traditions untouched by any foul implications of contestation and struggle, power and politics then its value in the Indian context is even more dubious. And we should enquire further when viewing patterns of interaction. Catholicism may take from Hinduism, but this is not always the case. Hinduism is not everywhere the base environment, somehow already there, established and constant. Sometimes both Catholicism and Hinduism *simultaneously* impact on a different religious and cultural environment. This is what happened among some tribal communities in the north-east of India. Catholicism might take from these other cultural environments, from Islam for instance, or it might get 'Hindu' ideas through the grid of Islam, or vice versa. Processes are

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Diehl, Carl G. 1965. *Church and shrine: Intermingling patterns of culture in the life of some Christian groups in south India*. Uppsala: Hakan Ohlssons Boktryckeri; Souza, B.G. D'. 1975. *Goan society in transition: A study in social change*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan; Godwin, C.J. 1972. *Change and continuity: A study of two Christian village communities in suburban Bombay*. Bombay: Tata McGraw-Hill Co.; Gomes, O. Gomes. 1987. *Village Goa: A study of Goan social structure and change*. Delhi: Chand and Co.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see Daniel, Valentine E. 1984. *Fluid signs: Being a person the Tamil way*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Dumont, Louis. 1980. *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Trawick, Margaret. 1990. *Notes on love in a Tamil family*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

more complicated than they at first sight appear and history has a vital role to play in anthropological understandings of the ways in which these processes work.

The notion of 'composite culture' leaves unaddressed the question of the negotiation of boundaries. Taking their existence for granted, it rarely enquires into the mechanisms of framing difference. The dichotomy of the 'great' and the 'little' traditions otherwise constructed as the 'doctrinal' and the 'folk' or the 'text' and the 'context' dominated a great deal of anthropological writing on religion. Most such writing tends to view the 'great' tradition as a static body of essential doctrine, belief and practice. The idea of the 'great' tradition as a systematized set of scripture or doctrine that is standard across times and cultures abstracts it so entirely from the domain of history that it is unable to perceive the particularity often sculpted in the shape of that tradition.

Another difficulty with this construction emerges when religio-cultural ingredients traceable to local or indigenous influences are assumed to be only remnants, which will soon fade and give way to the universal great tradition. This allows the dichotomy to be permeated with an implicit hierarchy, permitting covert entry of the idea that one set of traditions is authentic and enduring, the other somehow erroneous and fleeting. The dwindling away of the presumed remnants is not evidenced by contemporary ethnographies. Changes in the relation between Catholicism and local traditions is not arbitrary, but may be linked to shifting social and political contexts.

In this paper I use the available ethnographies to look at specific divine representations of four different Indian Catholic groups: the Parava pearl-fishers of the southern coast, village Goan Catholics, the Mukkuvar fisherfolk of Tamil Nadu, the agrarian Catholics of Tamil Nadu. The paper enables us to see how usefully anthropology and history combine in the understanding of the construction of sacred representations; how there is contestation rather than only harmonious syncretism in the ways in which different communities construct their symbols of divinity; how the construction of sacred representations is linked to group identity and

boundary-demarcation; how both Hinduism and Catholicism are selectively interpreted, rather than indiscriminately accepted, by different communities in accordance with their own social and cultural location within wider regional societies; and, finally, how indigenous religio-cultural elements do not disappear with time but remain embedded and enmeshed with universal Christian traditions in ways that answer the particular social imperatives of diverse groups.

All these ideas are extremely useful from the theoretical perspective of placing religion in European history-writing and will, therefore, be valuable for our discussions in this seminar.

### **Constructing boundaries, mediating traditions: Single caste communities**

When we talk of the influence of Hindu ideas among convert Catholic groups, caste always emerges as part of the discussion. Among Catholic Mukkuvars and Paravas, *jati* (caste) boundaries operated as the limits of the community. In other cases, as in Goa, the Catholic community was forged out of the conversion of different castes. One is, therefore, interested both in inter-caste relations within particular communities and in the construction and mediation of boundaries between Catholics and their neighbours in different regions. Patterns of interaction and assimilation may not be harmonious. There are contexts in which a Catholic group's relationship with Hinduism, for instance, may assume a particularly antagonistic form. The ethnography on Mukkuvar popular Catholicism shows that its relationship with Hinduism is problematically defined. This is a fact that is no doubt linked to the Mukkuvar's very lowly position within the south Indian social hierarchy.

Mukkuvar popular Catholicism goes far beyond what is taught by the Catholic church. It takes aspects from Tamil Hinduism, in turn re-configuring and subverting these. But it is not the Brahmanic Hinduism of the high-castes that the Mukkuvars draw on. Rather, Mukkuvar popular religion takes from Tamil non-Sanskritic traditions, though even here the

relationship is not simple. The tension is most clearly seen in the Mukkuvar representation of the feminine divine: the distinction between her benign and evil forms.<sup>3</sup> While the sacred image of Mary is dominant in Mukkuvar popular Catholicism, all reference to her virginity is suppressed and she is revered only in her maternal aspect as Maataa. The Mukkuvar Catholic Maataa has some qualities akin to the Tamil village goddess. Like the goddess, the Maataa may both cause and cure disease. Mukkuvar religion also has a place for Hindu female divinities, such as the non-Sanskritic female village deity Eseki and her companions SuDalai MaaDan and Vannara MaaDan. Within Tamil Hinduism, Eseki has both harmful and redemptive powers in her capacity as a village goddess, and she is worshipped more prominently by the castes considered low in the social order. From this perspective, the goddess inverts the Sanskritic image of the female divine as the submissive consort of a male deity. By allowing the entry of Eseki and her companions, Mukkuvar popular Catholicism both sets itself at a distance from Sanskritic Hinduism and establishes a close but uneasy relationship with non-Sanskritic Hinduism.<sup>4</sup>

In the popular Catholicism of the Mukkuvar, the goddess Eseki does not retain her redemptive capacities. It is the Maataa who has the powers of healing. Eseki and her two companions are viewed as purely evil and destructive beings. Battles between these divinities are fought on the terrain of faith healing. The healer's body may be possessed by the Maataa or one of several saints, usually Saint Anthony or Saint Michael. In the course of the healing process, Hindu gods and goddesses are often held responsible for the misfortune faced by the Catholics. Eseki and her companions are turned from deities to demons and rage, through the victims they possess, against the divine Maataa and the saints.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ram, Kalpana. 1991. *Mukkuunvar Women: Gender, hegemony and capitalist transformation in a south Indian fishing community*. London: Zed Books Limited, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Ram 1991, 61-75.

<sup>5</sup> Ram 1991, 102-3.

The Mukkuvar fisher-folk are despised by the upper-caste Hindus but they make their living outside the framework of agrarian society and are, thus, not dependent on the latter for their material sustenance. The contests between the Hindu and Catholic divinities, fought on the battleground of sickness and healing, may be viewed as bringing out the antagonism of the fisher-folk to agrarian Hindu caste society. Hindu gods and goddesses are the targets of the healers' rebukes. They are said to bring illness and adversity to Catholics. The relationship of antagonism is seen in the representation of Eseki as Mary's destructive 'Other'. This relationship captures the hostile stance of the Mukkuvars to caste Hindu society.<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore an expression of the autonomy of the Mukkuvar's religious identity that they incorporate Hindu divinities while defining them as evil. This autonomy can be achieved as Ram suggests, in her brilliant ethnography on the Mukkuvar, in part because of the separation of these fisher-folk from the social and economic world of the agrarian caste system.<sup>7</sup> What the ethnography illustrates, therefore, is that even while sacred boundaries may be fluid and permit divinities across the divide, if one might so put it, to converse with each other, the relationship with Hindu deities may be contested rather than simply syncretic.

The Paravas of the Coromandel coast were converted to Catholicism by the Portuguese about the same time as the Mukkuvar in the sixteenth century. Their position in the regional social structure was akin to that of the Mukkuvar, in that they too were a low-caste coastal community outside the domain of agriculture. However, the Paravas appear to have negotiated their position rather differently from the Mukkuvar and their ability and motivation to do so must have arisen in part because of their access to wealth from the revenues of maritime trade and a certain amount of prestige from their participation in that trade. As pearl fishers, the Paravas benefited from pre-colonial maritime business and considered themselves

<sup>6</sup> Ram 1991, 61-75.

<sup>7</sup> Ram 1991, 102-3.

the guardians of the coastline. Parava histories draw on these images of the past to construct the community as a regal one.<sup>8</sup>

Kshatriya identity is assumed and the mythical lineage of the Paravas perceives them as the direct descendants of the gods. They are sometimes said to be the progeny of Shiva and Parvati, their profession being a result of divine ordinance. Paravas used to good effect the symbols of Catholic identity to shore up their claims to royal origins. Shunned by the high castes, like the Mukkuvar, their resistance was not confined to projecting their battles onto divine mediators in the realms of thaumaturgy. Far more prosperous than the Mukkuvar, their access to wealth and then to education after conversion, ensured that they could attempt to spread out, urbanize, acquire new skills and enter different professions. All these aided in the process of upward social mobility.

The Paravas appear to have adopted, with considerable enthusiasm, the insignia and marks of Catholic and Portuguese nobility and high rank. The caste head or *jathithalaivan* wore a gold cross and chain and assumed the title of ‘Senhor dos Senhores’. It clearly served the purpose of the Portuguese to patronize this group and its leader the *jathithalaivan*, for they could then recruit the skilled labour of the Paravas to keep the activities on this ‘fishery coast’ running smoothly. Moreover, by offering the Paravas protection from sea-faring Muslims groups in the region, the Portuguese were able to bind them in clientage and to extract some of the profits of the trade in pearls.<sup>9</sup>

For the Paravas too, the relationship was very beneficial. Their appropriation of Catholic customs and practices served to render their caste identity much more cohesive and to lend legitimacy to their claims for Kshatriya (regal) status. It was the Jesuits who aided in this process. In 1555 the Padroado authorities brought a statue of the Virgin from Manila and installed it in a chapel built for the Paravas. This is the figure of

<sup>8</sup> See Roche, Patrick. 1984. *Fishermen of the Coromandel*. Delhi: Manohar Publications.

<sup>9</sup> See Roche 1984, also see Bayly, Susan. 1989. *Saints, goddesses and kings: Muslims and Christians in south Indian society, 1700-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Our Lady of Snows. Our Lady of Snows has a European legend attached to her, but in Tamil Nadu she became the centre of a very south Indian cultic tradition. Her sacred image was moved to a big church in Tuticorin and she became the chief patroness and protector of the Paravas. The creation of the Tuticorin Virgin cult allowed the caste headman to assume the attributes of a 'little king' because it is the right of Hindu kings to hoist the temple flag and initiate the celebrations of tutelary gods or goddesses.<sup>10</sup>

Here, of course, the rites of worship were Catholic, but they followed indigenous patterns. Just as other Hindu gods or goddesses, Our Lady of Snows had a *ter* (ceremonial chariot) built for her, in which she was taken in procession around her church. *Prasatam* was distributed in her name, consisting of the consecrated flower petals from the garlands adorning her image and her chariot. The flags used in the processions were adorned with a mixture of Saivite and Vaishnavite sacred symbols. There was a five-headed cobra (protector of Lord Vishnu), a bull (Nandi, companion of Siva) and other symbols of kingship such as a lion, an elephant and a tiger. While their feast had much in common with Tamil Hindu temple festivals, Paravas, before conversion, would have played a very marginal role in such festivals. It is as Catholics that they were able to carve out for themselves a new caste lifestyle and a set of rituals centred around the sacred representation of the Tuticorin Virgin that shored up their claims to Kshatriya or kingly status.<sup>11</sup>

### Interaction and engagement: Multi-caste communities

As a function both of their location within milieu often steeped in Hindu ethos, and their separation from it through their distinct religious identity, many groups developed ideas about a complex pantheon of Catholic

<sup>10</sup> Bayly 1989, 102-3.

<sup>11</sup> Bayly 1989, 346-7.



divine beings and the ritual modes by which their power could be accessed parallel to those existing about deities within Hinduism. Throughout western and southern India these ideas developed more fully, given the complex practices associated with temple festivals that they could draw on. Catholicism, with its panoply of saints and the different advocations of the Virgin, was much more likely to partake of such traditions.

In any case, Catholicism in these regions typically had its feast days, processions and cults and its forms of worship incorporated many aspects of regional devotional traditions. Let us analyse here the detailed account of the Catholic cult of saints in a village in Tamil Nadu's Ramnad district.<sup>12</sup> Catholicism in this region did not come with colonial rule. Rather, it trickled into these hinterland regions through trade and pilgrimage networks, following on conversions by the Portuguese along the coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was the Jesuits of the Madurai mission who gradually extended their control over the Catholic traditions of this region.

Catholics are a tiny minority in Tamil Nadu's population, living effectively in a Hindu social and cultural environment. This gives us a context within which to examine another comparative example of the construction and mediation of identity of a Catholic group and to relate it to the instances already analysed. The Jesuits in charge of the Ramnad mission encouraged devotion to the saints, even while they rejected outright anything they associated with the Hindu religion. This encouragement led to the development of complex ideas about a Catholic sacred pantheon that was parallel to the Hindu divine universe. Catholic villages evolved forms of worship for their rich calendar of saints' feasts that included processions and the making of offerings and vows. All these were available within the sacred traditions of local Hinduism.

One can argue that there are at least three levels in the divine hierarchy. At the highest levels, the cultic traditions were distinct and separate.

<sup>12</sup> Mosse, David. 1994. "Catholic saints and the Hindu village pantheon in rural Tamil Nadu, India", *Man* 29: 305-6.

The deities of the great tradition of Brahmanical Hinduism are seen to belong to a different universe from the Trinity of Catholic divinity. The rites conducted with the churches by ordained priests belong to one domain, the rites performed by the Brahman priest to another.<sup>13</sup> The interpenetration of cults is rare at this level. At the next level, though, the level of Mary and the saints and of the different Hindu village gods and goddesses, the intermesh increases. Catholic saints are included in the pantheon of the Hindus. Catholics participate to greater or lesser extents in the worship of Hindu deities, particularly at annual temple festivals. At the final stage, much lower down in the hierarchy of the gods, at the level of ghosts and sundry divine agents of adversity, the interaction in cultic activity is at its greatest.<sup>14</sup>

As in some other regions of India, Mary is worshipped as a divine being in her own right and is not confined to her role as Mother of Christ. In fact, it appears that she and Christ together delegate power to the saints, whose power is seen as derivative. She is viewed as entirely benevolent, a representation that calls to mind the image of her held by the south Indian Mukkuvar. In fact, in western India too, Mary is the embodiment of all that constitutes the good sacred; ghosts (*bhut*) have a more ambiguous, potentially harmful quality.<sup>15</sup> In the Tamil Nadu context being examined here, Saint James is the patron of the village, who guards its territory. The Hindu deities of the village are subordinate to the authority of Saint James. The god Muniaiyar is represented as guarding the south door of Saint James' church and punishing those who make false oaths in the church. Muniaiyar is, in fact, here only playing a role he already plays for the Hindu village god Aiyandar: that of subordinate or guardian deity.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Mosse 1994, 304-306.

<sup>14</sup> See also Caplan, Lionel. 1987. *Class and culture in urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; and Robinson, Rowena. 1998. *Conversion, continuity and change: Lived Christianity in southern Goa*. Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>15</sup> See also Godwin 1972.

<sup>16</sup> Mosse 1994, 312-13.

Thus, while Saint James is said to violently punish those who offend him the actual punitive role is assigned to his 'guardian deity', the Hindu god Muniaiyar. Catholic divinities retain the pure and holy powers; the more violent ones are projected onto their Hindu divine subordinates. Nevertheless, the demonization of the Hindu gods and goddesses that we saw among the Mukkuvar does not take place. What really occurs is a split between benevolent and violent powers of the Catholic deities. Saint James derives his power from Christ and the Virgin, yet his power is more violent and more circumscribed than theirs. They are benign. Their power is universal. He is more vengeful; his power is limited to the confines of the village. Muniaiyar is said to enact the punishment; but he is acting only on behalf of Saint James and in his name.<sup>17</sup>

Here lies the crux of the difference I perceive with the Mukkuvar representation of the divine. The Mukkuvars demonize Hindu gods and goddesses, holding them responsible for a range of ills and misfortune that the Catholics have to face. This was attributed partly to the antagonistic social relations that the Catholic fisher-folk have with caste Hindu society. With the Ramnad Catholics, divine punishment is meted out through subordinate Hindu deities but they are acting out the will of the Catholic saint. The reality of the world of Alapuram Catholics is one of shared social interaction with the village Hindus. They are bound together by social and economic ties, by relationships of patronage and client-ship, perhaps even kinship. Representations of deities among the Catholics appear to acknowledge the continued relevance of shared interaction with Hindus and their social and sacred worlds.

The relationship is, however, hierarchical. The supremacy of the Catholic divinities is admitted, even while they work out some of their powers through Hindu divine assistants. The hierarchy turns into an absolute divide when viewed outside the social and ritual context of the village. Saint James is perceived not only as a village deity, but also a deity

<sup>17</sup> Mosse 1994, 312-14.

of the 'forest', the world of chaos and disorder outside the realm of structured social life. The 'forest' both really and notionally, as it is mostly employed, is opposed to the village as confusion is to order. However, it is also a world in which the relational understanding of the divine that prevails in the context of the village gives way to absolute values. In the realm of the 'forest', the world of the 'exterior' outside the village, Catholic divinities are simply pure and good. Evil is taken on by ghosts, spirits of the dead and Hindu divinities of the lower end of the pantheon. Vannatu Cinnapar or 'Forest Saint Paul', 'Forest Saint Anthony' or Saint Anthony the Hermit (Vannatu Antoniyar) or Saint James in his form as 'saint of the forest' exorcise these demons.<sup>18</sup>

Outside the world of the village, Hindu gods do become demons, purely evil and destructive. The close interaction of Hindus and Catholics in everyday social life finds its spiritual parallel in the incorporation of Hindu gods in *village* Catholicism. Mosse argues that the Hindu divine beings are, however, encompassed by the super-ordinate power of Catholicism and this hierarchical relationship is sharpened into a complete separation when one moves outside the realm of the village, into the 'forest', the more universal world of the non-relational sacred representations. Here all Catholic divine forms begin to partake of the untarnished purity that Christ and the Virgin alone claimed in village religion. There is a disjuncture, hence, between Catholicism entangled in the social world of village relationships and ritual hierarchy and Catholicism as a more universal faith, released from these concerns. In other words, this Catholic group like others we have discussed retains a space for the expression of its separateness from its social and religio-cultural milieu. And, in doing so, participates in the absolute division between 'good' and 'evil', Catholic values and pagan ones that its Catholic affiliation is premised upon.<sup>19</sup>

I would like to return, though, to the world of village religion to bring out much more fully the complex interweaving of traditions that one

<sup>18</sup> Mosse 1994, 320-321.

<sup>19</sup> Mosse 1994, 321-325.

finds when looking at the celebration of church feasts.<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of the festival, usually a ten-day affair, the flag is raised. The raising of the flag symbolizes, for both Hindu and Catholic festivals, the movement of the deity from within the sacred precincts to the village as a whole. The flag-pole is not just symbol but embodiment of the divine in the midst of his/her people. The protective role of the deity over the people is captured by re-imagining the boundary of the shrine as the boundary of the village as a whole. From the moment the flag is raised up until the end of the festival, residents are not supposed to leave the village for overnight stay and are required to maintain greater moral and sexual purity.<sup>21</sup>

Festivals are marked by ritual processions in which the deity is taken around his/her domains in a distinctive chariot (*ter* in Tamil). He/She receives the offerings of her devotees and returns them in the form of *prasatam*. As seen above, the Parava festival for Our Lady of Snows at Tuticorin was a lavish affair in which the image of the Virgin was wheeled around the streets surrounding the church on an immense *ter*. The Virgin is considered to be goddess and ruler of the domains she surveys. Her accoutrements and apparel signified her royal status. The deity would be shielded by a regal silk umbrella and her *prasatam* was distributed among the devotees. The ceremonial exchanges affirm the sovereignty of the Virgin and the loyalty of her subjects.<sup>22</sup>

There is no confusion of sacred representations, though, even while the continuity with Hindu ritual traditions is maintained. At Avur in Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu, described by Waghorne, the style of the *ter* closely resembles that used by Hindu temples in the region but there are significant differences. The chariot has three layers of wood rather than six or seven as in Hindu chariots. Each layer is supposed to signify one

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, Rowena. 1995. "Two ritual calendars in southern Goa". *Cambridge Anthropology* 18: 23-39.

<sup>21</sup> Mosse 1994, 319-320; Waghorne, Joanne P. 1999. "Chariots of the God/s: Riding the line between Hindu and Christian". *History of Religions* 39: 95-116.

<sup>22</sup> Bayly 1989, 343-344.

realm of the Hindu gods. The author, therefore, surmises that the three layers of the Catholic chariot signify the Trinity. The carved images on the chariot all reference particular events from the life of Christ or that of the saints. The representation of the Risen Christ is draped in the auspicious (and pure) attire of the Brahman: silk *dhoti* and upper cloth of white silk with a gold border draped over the shoulders. The devotees hold up their inverted umbrellas to receive the *prasadam* of blessed flowers that adorned the chariot.<sup>23</sup>

The intricate weaving of signs establishes and mediates differences. It is critical that the chariot procession records the rule of the Catholic divine over his or her subjects. It is not a Hindu divinity being worshipped, under the 'garb' of Catholic images. Neither can we argue that the continued presence of Hindu symbols and ritual elements at these celebrations denotes falseness of faith among the Catholic believers. We need to examine more carefully, as I have tried to show above, the different ways in which and the varying levels at which boundaries are drawn and signified. Also, we might wish to remember that these are historical processes and, thus, there could well be changes over time. When the religious landscape was one which centred around kings, renunciants and goddesses, the 'declaration' of a much more exclusive religious identity was less crucial. It came in a later period, perhaps hastened in part by the disruptive processes and impact of colonial rule.

Where Hindus and Catholics live together within the same agro-ecological niche and where they order their lives by the local agricultural round, they very often maintain similar celebrations and rituals.<sup>24</sup> The extent to which this might happen will vary extensively from context to context and will depend a lot on several factors including the particular pattern of the conversion (individual or group, for instance), the degree of institutionalization of the religious activity in the area (the availability

<sup>23</sup> Waghorne 1999.

<sup>24</sup> See Souza, A.B. D'. 1993. Popular Christianity: A Case Study among the Catholics of Mangalore. PhD diss., University of Delhi.

of priests and pastors) and the relationship that missionaries had with the local people and their indigenous traditions. This last is structured, in turn, by the moment and motive of the activity of mission itself.

In Goa, conversion was backed by the Inquisition and the regime was ordered by a strict repugnance of all indigenous 'substance'. Moreover, conversion was largely confined to the districts touching the coast, where whole villages were converted to the new faith<sup>25</sup>. Converts lived surrounded by the inland Hindu districts, but had fewer day-to-day interactions with Hindus for most of the period of colonial rule. Social separateness was achieved, though cultural traditions remained alive. In this region, the pattern of agricultural rituals remains in place with a difference. In terms of their substance, the signs and representations of the Hindu and Catholic religious calendars differ, but they are mapped out in structurally similar ways. What has altered is the religious content or matter carried by the symbols; their relational composition stays the same. The missionaries seem to have permitted Catholic rituals to retain indigenous form and function as long as the object of worship was a Catholic divinity and the means of worship, such as prayers, were Catholic in content. One finds, therefore, that the annual church calendar is moulded in significant ways to accommodate to the rhythms of the indigenous socio-ritual and agricultural world.

<sup>25</sup> Goa may be divided into the 'Old Conquests' taken over by the Portuguese in 1510 and the 'New Conquests', which they did not command until the eighteenth century. The 'Old Conquests' consist of the districts now identified as Tiswadi, Mormugao, Salcete and Bardez. It is in this area that the large-scale conversions took place. The area of the 'New Conquests' consisting of Pernem, Ponda, Bicholim, Canacona, Sanguem, Quepem and Satari came under Portuguese control in the late 1700s. These areas remained largely Hindu and mass conversions were not initiated here, partly due to the new political realities facing the Portuguese at this time given the context of the changing nature of their power relations, both with Indian states and other European countries. Hence, Goan Catholics were surrounded by Hindu areas, but were largely socially distinct. Cultural continuities remained though, indexed in part by songs recording the converts' concern with and consciousness of Hindu ways or the shared ritual traditions that emerge in a variety of contexts.



An instance may be elaborated, that of the harvest. In the regional Hindu religio-agricultural calendar, the festive year begins with the celebration of the harvest centred around the festival of the birth of Lord Ganesh, which falls around August or early September. The worship of Ganesh is usually performed by the head of the family. An earthen image of the deity is installed on a dais under an arch decorated with flowers, leaves, fruits and vegetables. The principal offering is twenty-one *modaks* served on a banana leaf (the *modak* is a sweet prepared from lentils and unrefined sugar). On the following day, the new paddy is offered to the deity. In most houses, the deity is immersed on this day, being carried to a nearby river in procession, to the accompaniment of prayers and songs.

The celebration of the harvest feast among Catholics shows traces of continuity with indigenous traditions. It is in fact possible that the missionaries themselves realized the importance of the harvest for the converts and instituted its celebration within the church calendar. However that may be, the celebrations are usually centred around the feast of a particular saint, which falls during the harvest season. These might be different for different villages. For instance, in the village studied by me the feast is instituted in the name of Saint Bartholomew. However, other villages celebrate it in the name of Saint Lawrence (August 10), Saint Ignatius of Loyola (August 3) or on the day commemorating the Assumption of Our Lady (August 15).

The feast usually commences with a procession to the paddy fields, accompanied by the sounds of beating drums and the playing of music. The parish priest ritually cuts a few ears of grain and these are carried back to the church. As the ears of grain may be placed before the image of Ganesh, so some ears of grain are placed in the arms of the statue of Saint Bartholomew, in whose name the feast is celebrated. Other items such as the flowers and vegetables of the season are also placed at the altar in offering. Interestingly, Catholics refer to the feast as *amchi Gonsha*, *our* Ganesh. Catholic feasts in Goa often involve elaborate distinctions of rank; the high castes usually retain the privileges of carrying the image in procession. It is they who have the right to dress and adorn the image

and decorate the altar during the main church feasts. Most Goan Catholic villages are multi-caste in character; they, thus, offer a perspective different from the one observed above for the Paravas or the Mukkuvars. As in village Tamil Nadu, high and low castes have their different roles during feast days and there are also, now more often than earlier, contestations of rank between different groups over the 'honours system' that traditionally prevailed in church celebrations.

## Conclusion

Several themes and issues have emerged from the comparative study of sacred representations in this paper and might be briefly recalled. I have argued that syncretism is perhaps too easy a tool to be employed in the study of popular Catholicism in India, particularly when what is usually studied is the relationship between Hinduism and Catholicism and what the second takes from the first. The comparative perspective I employ here enables us to see that while the relationship between Hinduism and Catholicism is critical to the narrative of Catholic communities in many parts of the country, it is not the whole story. Where Catholicism is in obvious interaction with Hinduism, the nature of that contact need not be self-evident. There is no guarantee that Catholicism or Hinduism are always in agreeable association with each other. Or that Catholicism borrows from Hinduism wholesale, rather than from specific strands of it. It has been established very definitely that the fact that assimilation does take place may never be read as an indicator that differences do not persist or go unrecognized. The extent and form of association as well as the nature of differences that persist have been related to a complex configuration of elements. The temper and constitution of the religious and political regimes within which the interaction between missionaries and local people gets established plays a critical role for the kind of popular Catholicism that develops in a particular area.

Hinduism may give as well as receive, and the relationship between Catholicism and local traditions rarely remains a static one. Shifting social and cultural circumstances are likely to reconfigure it in different ways. We still need more careful enquiry into many issues. Greater ethnographic and historical detail is required with regard to Catholic iconography and festive regalia, the symbols and substances different Catholic groups employ on different ritual occasions and the meanings they give to them. We need more and deeper accounts of the nature of the relationship between Catholic and other divine hierarchies and sacred representations. Do the forms of reverence addressed to Catholic and Hindu divinities differ? Are they assigned different terrains? Are they believed to possess different forms and degrees of sacred power? How are gender and status implicated in the construction of the sacred pantheons and the styles of devotion? I hope the project of studying religion in the process of the Portuguese Expansion will pave the way for the detailed and nuanced analysis of some of these issues through the creative engagement of historical and anthropological tools. At all times, a comparative perspective, such as the one adopted in this paper, may help us comprehend better the differences across cultural contexts, *but also* the pattern that these differences often take.