

Towards Resolving the Nationalist Dilemma: Gandhi and the Indian Ecumenists in Early 20th Century

In 1921, in Alwaye, the northern most town in Travancore, four young Indian Christians, who were graduates and teachers of Madras Christian College, established a college. It was not only the first college to have been established and managed by Indian Christians without the support of European and American missionary societies, but was also one of the pioneering ecumenical institutions in India. Moulded by the ecumenical ideals of Madras Christian College, the founders of the college hoped their initiative would pave the way for co-operation among the various denominations in Travancore, who at the time, mired in various legal disputes, would not see eye to eye, as well as produce young men and women who would bear witness to the sacrificial love of Christ in the social and national life of India.

Five years into the establishment of the college, in 1925, M. K. Gandhi visited the college on his way to participate in the Satyagraha against untouchability in Vaikom, and was taken in by the 'ideal situation' he found in the college. It was rather bold of the founders of the college to invite Gandhi at the time. He had just been released from prison after the first nation-wide agitation against the British administration and had already been identified as a trouble-maker. The European and American missionaries, except a handful of them, suspected his motives and found his frequent evocation of Christ disconcerting. Yet, this had not prevented the founders of the college from inviting him to their new institution.

The admiration that these four men had for Gandhi in the early decades of 20th century was not an isolated instance, but consistent with the general attitude shared by ecumenists across India. They had their differences with Gandhi, especially in the 1930s, over the question of religious conversions.¹ Yet, in spite of such differences, they shared a deep respect for him. The influence that Gandhi's and Tagore's experiments in community living and village-centred constructive work had on the establishment and development of the *ashram* movement is well known and have been written about widely. But, what was it really about him that elicited the interest and respect of the ecumenical community, especially at a time when he was just rising to prominence? After all, Indians themselves were rather unclear and undecided about him. Gandhi had just initiated his first nation-wide agitation and which, much to the bafflement of the nationalists, was

¹ Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 291-352.

called off because certain agitators had burned down a police station leading to the death of twenty-three policemen. Gandhi's silence over the conviction of these agitators was also making people restless. So, what was it about him that drew the admiration of the ecumenists?

The supposition put forward by this paper is that in many respects, for the Indian ecumenists, the thoughts and actions of Gandhi seemed to confirm and validate the ideas and assumptions they have been holding about how India could be redeemed. At a time when their nationality as well as their commitment to global missionary movement was suspect, this validation by Gandhi, who had emerged as the undisputed leader of Indian nationalism, was reassuring for the ecumenists and they felt hopeful, at least temporarily.

Early 20th century was the high noon of anti-colonial nationalism in India. It spread rapidly and widely across the sub-continent. There was an increased awareness of the implications of British rule, a growing restlessness with the coercive power of the state and the apathy of the local elite, and an eagerness to delineate the objectives and course of nationalist struggle. This was also the time when nationalism tended to increasingly and explicitly pander to consolidated Hinduism, placing Indian Christians in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, the prevailing nationalist sentiment decried the European and American missionaries as purveyors of colonial domination, and tended to portray Christianity as a 'foreign' religion that needed to be opposed, and therein putting the onus on Indian Christians to prove their nationalist credentials. On the other hand, Indian Christians, especially the educated ones, were increasingly becoming weary of the colonial attitude and racial politics prevalent in missionary work and church administration. They were keen to assert their independence, but without severing the close association they already had with churches and missionary societies across the world.

Distanced by the nation, early ecumenical leaders like V. S. Azariah, K. T. Paul, Lilavati Singh, etc. sought to resolve this dilemma by keeping themselves aloof from political nationalism, and implementing various initiatives in tune with their idea of what India is what India ought to be. The Indian ecumenists were essentially men and women who conceived India not in political, but in religious terms. They were of the impression that India has a natural inclination towards religion. However, much of this religion had become 'dead routine' rather than a 'living reality'. It had failed to become a moral force that informs 'every thought, word and deed'. This had to be corrected, and to do so, Christ, who is the embodiment of the moral man, would have to be introduced to India

through evangelisation and bearing witness to the sacrificial love of Christ in the national and social life of India. The spiritual transformation that would result from this, the moral awakening, will eventually lead to the real redemption of India.

The Indian Christians were to have an important role to play in this transformation. They were to bear witness to the sacrificial love of Christ, and be the catalysts of this change. Towards this end, the Indian ecumenists established institutions and developed programmes that were aimed at 'elevating' the nation and its people. These were to undertake mission work and reconstruction work among the rural poor, and to produce academically trained professionals who would be of service to the nation and its people. These would be entirely 'Indian' initiatives. In other words, these initiatives would be managed and supported entirely by Indian Christians. This was found to be necessary, especially given the racism prevalent in European and American mission institutions and the lack of independence. However, there was also a deep awareness of the insularity and parochialism that such 'national' endeavours may come to have, and hence, the insistence on greater co-operation, fostering of 'friendships', with missionary societies and churches across the world, albeit in non-hierarchical terms.

Gandhi had an entirely different background from that of the ecumenists, and his articulations were more or less independent of the ecumenists. Yet, the foundations of his thoughts and actions on how India could be transformed seemed to resemble that of the Indian ecumenists. The points of affinity surpassed the points of difference. Gandhi was suspicious of 'politics' and was essentially a religious man himself. Although there were differences in terms of how they classified or termed their religions, their approach to religion was similar. His battle for India, though termed 'nationalist', was not confined to mere transfer of power from Britons to Indians, but for the transformation of the social and moral life of India, a process that had to start with village reconstruction. It was also for restoring the self-respect of Indians, to forge an organic unity with their civilizational past as well as keep their country open to 'cultures of all lands to be blown about.'

Nationalism and Indian Christians, 1885-1915

Nationalism in India had its formal beginnings in the 1860s and 70s with the proliferation of numerous voluntary organisations founded by leading members of the emergent middle class. They took up issues ranging from the exploitation of India's economic resources to the disenfranchisement of Indians from the administrative services to the plight of indentured labourers taken to work in British plantations and colonies elsewhere.

Though provincial in character, these voluntary organisations yearned to come together on a national platform. The Indian Association made a few attempts in this direction in the early 1880s. But, the more successful attempt was that of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The Congress took up the various issues that voluntary organisations had already raised, passed resolutions on them, and petitions were submitted to the British administration for redressal. The nationalism of this period remained an elitist affair, taking to moderate means for attaining redressal. It also tended to be largely of liberal and secular persuasion; as N. Subrahmanyam, an Indian Christian municipal commissioner in Madras, said: 'all come together with one desire – to consider and discuss questions affecting the welfare of this common country, or common motherland.'²

The participation of educated Indian Christians in the nationalist deliberations during this period was one of 'hope, enthusiasm and active involvement'.³ Most of them were from the Bengal Presidency and graduates of Alexander Duff's, Free Church Institution and were already involved in various campaigns for social reform. The most prominent among them included Krishna Mohan Banerjea, who was the first Indian to be an ordained minister of the Anglican Church, and the first President of the Indian Association, and Kali Charan Banerjea, who was a member of the India League and played an important role in coordinating between the provincial associations of Bengal and Bombay presidencies. The participation of Indian Christians in the Congress was also very high considering the proportion of Christians there were in India at the time – about 2.5 percent of the total attendance when they accounted for less than 0.79 percent of the population.⁴

However, from the last decade of the 19th Century, Indian Christian participation in the national movement came to be marked by 'disillusionment, increasing suspicion and withdrawal'.⁵ It could be argued that this was part of the wider disillusionment and frustration that many young nationalists, across religious divide, were beginning to have with the moderate and 'part-time' politics of the Congress, which was proving to be ineffective. But, the more plausible reason was the increasing conflation of 'syndicated' or 'organized' form of Hinduism with nationalism.

² Quoted in George Thomas, *Christian Indians and Indian Nationalism, 1885-1950: An Interpretation in Historical and Theological Perspectives* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 1979), 88.

³ Geoffrey Oddie, "Indian Christians and National Identity, 1870-1947," *The Journal of Religious History* 25, no. 3 (October 2001): 356.

⁴ Oddie, "Indian Christians," 356-357.

⁵ Oddie, "Indian Christians," 357

Christian missionary activities and the related mass conversions, especially of the lower castes and the tribes; revivalist movements among the Muslims; campaigns of the various social reform movements and the related assertions of women and lower castes; and the various reformist colonial legislations – all this generated much fear and anxiety among the Hindu caste elite across the Indian sub-continent during the second half of 19th century, and there was a growing refrain that the 'Hindu' way of life was in danger, hence the urgent need to defend, consolidate and strengthen it.⁶ Besides reinventing Hinduism to meet the demands of modernity, it was increasingly felt that to do so, the restoration of 'Hindu' rule was essential.

Novels and other writings of the celebrated author, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, published in the 1880s, romanticized the golden past of 'Hindu' rule which was disrupted by the Muslims and the British, and which now had to be restored. In 1890s, with the growing disillusionment with the 'moderate' and 'elitist' politics of the Congress, in Punjab, Harikishan Lal, Lala Lajpat Rai and the Arya Samajists argued that Congress should openly and boldly base itself on the mobilization of Hindu masses. In Bombay Presidency, Bal Gangadhar Tilak used Hindu symbols and festivals as a means to generate mass appeal around nationalism. In the early 1900s, speaking at the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal, Tilak glorified the greatness and strength of India from Vedic times, the shared heritage and culture of the people, and the need to consolidate all sects into a 'mighty Hindu nation'.⁷ Such clarion call for a 'Hindu' nation was premised on the idea that Muslims and Christians could not be legitimate heirs to the nation.

The first mass based nationalist agitation was against the partition of Bengal in 1905. In response to British high-handedness and insistence to divide Bengal without any consideration for the popular will, the youth took to 'organized and relentless' boycott of British goods, educational institutions, courts, government offices and suspected loyalists; on the other, there was encouragement and establishment of 'swadeshi' schools, industries and other self-help initiatives. Over the next few years, the agitation became radicalised and state repression also intensified. Moderate sections among the nationalists continued to follow peaceful protests and civil disobedience. But, they were not successful. Moreover, the British administration introduced certain piecemeal reforms in order to appease them. Meanwhile, the more radical sections began to form armed

⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 358-390; Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

⁷ Dilip Simeon, "Communalism in India: A Theoretical Examination," South Asia Citizens Web, accessed September 10, 2020, <http://www.sacw.net/article2760.html>

groups, sabotaging state institutions and carrying out political assassinations. The British administration came down heavily on them. Many were arrested on charges of sedition and imprisoned. Those who evaded arrest went into exile and the Congress split into two, between the moderates and the radicals. While there was a growing internationalisation of India's anti-colonial movement, the nationalist movement in India went into a lull until the First World War and the arrival of Gandhi from South Africa in 1915.

During the first decade of 20th century, anti-colonial nationalism became increasingly and explicitly 'Hindu'. It was common for Hindu festivals to be turned into occasions for nationalist mobilization, Hindu deities and myths to be frequently evoked during patriotic speeches and demonstrations, and protest actions to be launched after offering prayers to Hindu deities. Tilak, who had talked of a 'mighty Hindu nation', had emerged as one of the popular nationalist leaders, the 'radical' who represented the rage and restlessness of the masses against the British administration and the 'moderates'. Following the split in the Congress, he was tried for sedition and imprisoned for six years. This had further bolstered his image as the quintessential 'nationalist' who was willing to sacrifice his life for the nation.

An aspect that reinforced the divisions and exclusions inherent to nationalism was the 'swadeshi'/foreign dichotomy that became prevalent in nationalist rhetoric. It was during the agitation against the partition of Bengal that the idea of 'swadeshi' gained much popularity, wherein British made goods would be boycotted and domestic industries would be encouraged in order to resist the exploitative and dependent economic relations that Britain imposed on India. However, in due course, this idea came to assume a wider meaning, wherein anything that was deemed 'foreign' – not just goods, but institutions and persons too – needed to be shunned. In a context where religious minorities were assumed to be following 'foreign' religions, the implications of 'swadeshi/foreign' dichotomy was far more serious and alienating.

The Indian Christian Dilemma

Over the years, the close association that most Indian Christians had with European and American missionaries ever since the beginnings of colonial expansion had generated an image of them as those receiving the patronage and support of the colonialists, as purveyors of a 'foreign' religion that is determined to undermine Hinduism. In the early 20th Century, as consolidated Hinduism became conflated with nationalism, and as

swadeshi/foreign dichotomy began to inform nationalist rhetoric, this image became further amplified. In fact, the swadeshi/foreign dichotomy denied any scope for ambiguities in nationalism – everything had to be either native or foreign, and mechanically so. There were numerous efforts among educated Indian Christians from upper caste backgrounds to ‘Indianise’ Christianity and identify with the national movement, some even to the extent of acknowledging political Hinduism. Yet, nationalism was reluctant to recover them as ‘Indians’ on account of their Christianity.⁸ As William Paton, the British ecumenist, remarked, an Indian Christian ‘is probably as much of a patriot as any Hindu or Moslem, and his love for Christ has not made him love India the less. But if he tries to enter the nationalist movement, he is sometimes met with the cold shoulder... Many educated Christians feel this difficulty intensely. They are nationalist in sentiment, but they feel themselves debarred by their Christianity from taking part in the movement.’⁹

Ironically, disowned by the ‘nation’ for their association with the missionaries and a ‘foreign’ religion, Indian Christians were also subordinated and discriminated by the missionaries for being ‘Indians’, further heightening their dilemma. V. S. Azariah began his well-known address at the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh by stating: ‘The problem of race relationship is one of the most serious problems confronting the Church today.’¹⁰ The racial discrimination and attitudes that was prevalent in the British administration was also prevalent in mission work and church administration.¹¹ Even though, from mid-19th Century, the stated objective of European and American missionaries was to establish self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating churches in their mission lands, in reality, they were reluctant to hand over responsibilities to local Christians.¹² However capable or brilliant some of the local evangelists and missionaries may have been, it was taken for granted that they would be considered only in subordinate capacities, as mere ‘native workers’. As Richard Collins, a CMS missionary in Travancore lamented in the 1860s, ‘the attitude of the dominant race is naturally to keep all power in its own hands, to leave no room for independence of action in the conquered; but to use every capacity to be found among them subordinate to itself.’ The

⁸ MSS Pandian, “Nation as Nostalgia: Ambiguous Spiritual Journeys of Vengal Chakkarai,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 51/52 (December 27, 2003-January 2, 2004): 5357-5365.

⁹ William Paton, *Social Ideals in India*, (London: United Council for Missionary Education, 1920), 67.

¹⁰ V. S. Azariah, “The Problem of Co-operation Between Foreign and Native Workers,” *The History and Records of the World Missionary Conference Together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1910), 306.

¹¹ Oddie, “Indian Christians,” 351.

¹² Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 72.

European missionary is no different. He 'often puts himself practically in the false position. He settles down, for the most part, as a pastor of a large district, where he uses native agency entirely in subordinate capacities... and so, in every phase of mission progress at present, the European is the only aggressor.'¹³ Collins had stated this in reference to George Matthan, an Indian missionary, who had a 'mind almost capable of anything', whose literary powers and intellectual prowess far exceeded his European contemporaries, yet came to be subordinated and circumscribed.¹⁴

By the late 19th Century, educated Indian Christians were getting increasingly exasperated with the racial politics in missionary work and church administration, and they yearned to become independent, self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. Even though Indianisation of the administration had become a burning issue in nationalist politics and the British administration was being increasingly pressured to concede to the demands of the Congress, in mission work, it continued to remain a remote possibility. There were a few isolated instances of Indian Christians establishing institutions and churches that would be independent of European and American missionary control and dominance, such as the National Church of India in Madras founded by S. Pulney Anand and the Christo Samaj founded by Kali Charan Banerjea and J. C. Shome in Calcutta. But they were short-lived and failed to contribute anything substantial towards correcting the systemic racism that had permeated every sphere of missionary work and church administration.¹⁵

The response of Indian Christians to this dilemma was largely dependent on their social location within a highly stratified society. Those Christians who were from rural, lower and untouchable castes, and 'tribal' backgrounds were the least affected. Much to the chagrin of the nation, determined to free themselves from the yoke of caste oppression and become 'modern', they had converted to Christianity *en masse*. The demands of the nation was anyway a burden to them. Hence, they preferred to remain aloof from the national movement, and generally indifferent to being cast aside by the nation and dependent on the Euro-American missionaries.

Meanwhile, in contrast, those Christians who were from educated and upper/forward caste backgrounds were the most unsettled. As mentioned earlier, they were the ones who were eager to identify with the nationalist movement and its aspirations; to challenge

¹³ Richard Collins, *Missionary Enterprise in the East: With Special Reference to the Syrian Christians of Malabar and the Results of Modern Missions* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1873), 162.

¹⁴ Collins, *Missionary Enterprise*, 171.

¹⁵ Pandian, "Nation as Nostalgia," 5357.

the racial politics prevalent in mission work and church administration; to assert their independence and also lend support to projects that attempted to 'Indianise' Christianity. Yet, the ones who felt abandoned by the 'nation' as well as found to be 'insubordinate' by the missionaries. Troubled by this, they tried to address their predicament in multiple ways. While some broke their ties with the missionaries, repressed their Christian identity and pursued nationalist politics; some chose to remain aloof from both, the missionaries and the national movement, and pursue their own individual interests. The Indian ecumenists, who were also from educated and upper/forward caste backgrounds, sought to resolve this dilemma by staying aloof from nationalist politics and focussing their attention on their 'religious' idea of India and what it ought to be. It is to this template that we now turn.

Redeeming India, 1900s-1920s

The changing hues of nationalism and the abandonment of the nation certainly unsettled the Indian ecumenists. However, their response was to distance themselves from political nationalism, and become pre-occupied with working towards the 'nation' they envisaged. The framework through which Indian ecumenists interpreted and explained their idea of India and what it ought to be was essentially religious. To begin with, they believed in the common dictum of the times that there was a 'natural instinct for religion inherent in the Indian people', that India is a 'deeply religious country'. However, much of this religion had tended to be divorced from morals and this had 'always been the weak side of Indian religions'.¹⁶ Hence, it is important to introduce Christ, who is the embodiment of the moral man, to India. It would be through Christ that India would be redeemed from everything that enslaves her and make her truly independent. Reminiscing about the address that Lilavati Singh, an ecumenist and educator, delivered at the Ecumenical Missionary Conference held in New York, in 1899, Bishop J. M. Thoburn wrote of how Singh 'impressed upon many thousands of thoughtful minds that *the conversion of a nation meant the elevation of a nation.*'¹⁷ India may work towards her political freedom, but eventually it is her conversion that would *elevate* her. This was one of the reasons why at a time when nationalism was spreading across the sub-continent and becoming a mass movement, as Susan Billington Harper says, V. S. Azariah 'moved in the opposite direction: away from politics and toward the evangelization of an isolated and impoverished rural area.'¹⁸

¹⁶ Florence L. Nichols, *Lilavati Singh: A Sketch* (Boston: Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, 1909), 28-29.

¹⁷ Nichols, *Lilavati Singh*, 23.

¹⁸ Harper, *In the Shadow*, 80.

In taking forward the task of 'elevating' India, the ecumenists focused their attention on mission and constructive work, especially among the impoverished and marginalised communities in rural areas. The nature of work included evangelisation, attending to the social and economic needs of the converts through adult education and income generation schemes, and the overall improvement of rural areas by undertaking welfare activities covering every aspect of village life. At a time when most of the political nationalists were enamoured by the large scale industrialisation and modernisation driven by capitalism in the west, and desired to 'develop' India on similar lines, the attention that the ecumenists paid to the 'upliftment' of the rural areas was novel, and in many ways, as it shall be seen later, anticipated the emphasis that Gandhi gave to the regeneration of villages. In addition to mission and constructive work, attention was also given to transforming the field of higher education with the intention of producing academically trained professionals who would be of service to the nation. These institutions, which provided liberal arts education, aimed at the overall development of the students in Christian and humanist values.

In undertaking these tasks, the Indian ecumenists insisted on the necessity of claiming self-respect and independence to overcome racial subordination and discrimination; as well as nurturing cross-cultural 'friendships' that would be non-hierarchical and based on mutual respect. The support and encouragement that the Indian ecumenists received from well-wishers in India, the world ecumenical bodies like the WSCF, YMCA and YWCA, and ecumenical leaders like John R. Mott and Sherwood Eddy was crucial in launching and sustaining some of these initiatives.

The earliest institutions that Indian ecumenists established were two missionary societies - The Indian Missionary Society of Tinnevely (IMS) in 1903 and the National Missionary Society (NMS) in 1905. The objective of both these missionary societies was to nurture missionary spirit among Indian Christians to propagate the gospel in India and its adjoining countries through local efforts and resources. The members of these societies would strictly be Indian Christians. Europeans and Americans could extend their co-operation or be honorary members, participating in their affairs as visitors, but were not to become involved in the management of the society. Resources would be generated from Indian Christians themselves and no money was to be collected even from non-resident westerners. Mission personnel would also be local missionaries and evangelists. Hence, the slogan, 'Indian money, Indian men and Indian management'. Further, both

these societies, through their work, were to facilitate inter-church cooperation and draw divided churches in India closer together.¹⁹

The NMS had about hundred branches all over the country within a year of its establishment, and it had reached out to almost all the local churches in India within the first five years. Through various campaigns, it also inspired Christian students, especially from urban centres, to work with the NMS. In tune with the general patriotic fervour of the times, the necessity of doing mission work for the sake of 'national redemption' was also explained to them. The NMS remained aloof from the national movement that had intensified following the partition of Bengal, but it did not hesitate to use the nationalist rhetoric to advance its own interests. Politically contentious terms like 'swadeshi' and 'national' were often used in their mission literature. While the primary task of these missionary societies was to spread the gospel in rural areas through regular itinerant preaching, magic lantern services, and other programmes, they also attended to the social welfare of converts, women, untouchables, and other deprived sections of the rural society, with what was possible within their own means.

In many respects, given the composition of the two societies, the use of nationalist rhetoric, and their emergence contemporaneous with nationalist agitations, it would seem like Azariah and his colleagues were echoing the swadeshi fervour of the times, a mimicking of nationalist politics to prove their 'nationalist' credentials. But, this was not so. The National Missionary Intelligencer, the journal of the NMS, remarked in one of their reports that their motives were not 'the same jealousy of the foreigner that marks the sinister side of *swadeshi*'.²⁰ It was neither based on any irrational fear of the 'foreigner' nor an expression of parochial thinking. To the contrary, it was an assertion of self-respect and independence aimed at setting the relationship right, of introducing 'a new element of reciprocity' between the indigene and the foreigner, of fostering a new relationship of 'friendship' rather than dominance – one where 'I respect his individuality and remember that he has peculiarities, rights, and responsibilities of his own, which require, in some measure at any rate, that a feeling of equality and freedom shall pervade our relations and our intercourse with one another.'²¹ Azariah and his colleagues had conceived both the societies not as insulated and parochial institutions but as 'national' institutions that desired to be in wider communion with missionary movements and churches across the world. As products of the ecumenical movement, they firmly believed in the possibilities

¹⁹ Harper, *In the Shadow*, 75-90.

²⁰ Quoted in Harper, *In the Shadow*, 88.

²¹ Azariah, "The Problem of Co-operation," 308-309.

of trans-national 'friendships' as opposed to trans-national dominance in taking mission work forward.

The thrust of these missionary societies to reach out to rural population also made its leaders aware of the deeper social and economic problems that afflicted rural India. Azariah's interventions as a missionary in Dornakal went beyond evangelisation to addressing problems faced by untouchables, women and destitute. It was another prominent ecumenist, K. T. Paul, who linked evangelisation work with what he termed as 'rural reconstruction'. Paul was the honorary treasurer of the NMS in 1905. Subsequently, he became the organising secretary, and then after Azariah moved on to become a full time missionary in Dornakal in 1909, the general secretary of the NMS. Having travelled widely across India during this time, Paul became closely aware of the various problems endemic to Indian villages and once he became the national secretary of the YMCA in 1912, he committed himself to making 'rural reconstruction' the main programme of the Indian YMCA. Paul defined rural reconstruction as the 'improvement of village life in all its different aspects'.²²

Under the leadership of Paul, YMCA began its rural reconstruction programme in villages where there was a considerable Christian population. To begin with, the programme involved establishment of co-operative credit societies to ameliorate the economic conditions of the villagers. This was followed by introducing income generating opportunities for them through setting up various cottage industries. As many villagers from untouchable caste backgrounds were exploited as a result of the lack of basic education, adult education programmes were also undertaken. Subsequently, there was a suggestion to develop what was known as the 'lighthouse policy', wherein certain centres in different parts of India would be adopted as demonstration centres. In these centres, 'a steady and complete programme of rural welfare activities must be carried on throughout the whole field of rural life and in all its various aspects.'²³ These centres would then become a 'model' for adjoining villages to reconstruct themselves. In these centres, Paul was keen to go into every small aspect of village life, work towards its improvement through the active participation of villagers, and thereby initiate the overall development of villages. The various areas of intervention included development of village markets, improved livestock rearing practices, ensuring supply of easier supply of good seeds and sale of produce, introduction of cottage industries, establishment and supervision of co-

²² H. A. Popley, *K. T. Paul: Christian Leader* (Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1938), 70.

²³ Popley, *K. T. Paul*, 70.

operative banks, development of healthcare facilities, establishment of village libraries and night schools, and promotion and development of sports, theatre and arts.²⁴

Higher education was another key area where Indian ecumenists became involved in during this period. The work of Lilavati Singh at Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow is significant in this respect, especially since its focus was on the higher education of women – an area where there had not been much Indian initiative. Unfortunately, given her short life, she was able to accomplish only little of what she had desired. Yet, acutely aware of the pitiable state of women's higher education in India, she felt it is a matter of utmost importance to focus her energies on fostering a college atmosphere where Indian women would become more self-confident and academically qualified to be of service to other Indian women and the nation at large.²⁵ Throughout her career, especially working within an institution that was not 'Indian', Singh was deeply disturbed by the racism among staff and students of the college. While Thoburn herself was extremely amiable to Indians, there were a considerable number of Europeans and Eurasians who did not share that attitude. Singh often had to take on the responsibility of protecting Indian students and ensuring that their self-confidence was not marred by the racism they encountered. She also hoped the college would recruit more Indian staff who are highly trained as the presence of an 'Indian' staff often tended to have a positive effect on the confidence of Indian students.

While colleges founded by Euro-American missionaries such as Madras Christian College and Isabella Thoburn College, had adopted ecumenical ideals, the first Indian initiative towards this end came from four young Indian ecumenists, K. C. Chacko, C. P. Mathew, V. M. Ittियerah and A. M. Varki, who established the Union Christian College in Alwaye, in 1921. The staff of the college were drawn from both Christian and non-Christian traditions, and the everyday affairs of the college was to be managed by a fellowship of staff drawn from the different denominations in Travancore whose responsibility it was to foster 'an atmosphere free from the divisive traditions that have hindered co-operation in the past'.²⁶ The college was to be a fully residential institution and it was to be developed on the lines of the traditional gurukula system of education, to ensure the overall development of students through constant student-teacher interaction.

²⁴ Popley, *K. T. Paul*, 73-74.

²⁵ Nichols, *Lilavati Singh*, 38-39.

²⁶ Letter of K. C. Chacko and C. P. Mathew, Madras, 16 March 1921. Reproduced in *Silver Jubilee Souvenir* (Alwaye: Union Christian College, 1946) 58-59.

The college was to be 'thoroughly Indian in character', both in management and atmosphere. This was to 'keep the college near to the spirit and genius of our people' and to 'find room for the development' of a new and complete human even 'within the narrow bounds of a cast-iron system of education'.²⁷ Though Indian, every effort was to 'be made from the start to keep it open to living influences from all parts of India and the West'.²⁸ The college expected to gain from its association with a few Europeans and Americans on the staff and 'to profit from the best counsel that western educational experience can provide'.²⁹ The founders of the college were far more categorical about the responsibilities that they had towards the nation. In one of the letters addressed to the well-wishers of the college, requesting financial assistance, they stated: '...the Christians in India are today called upon to give of their best without stopping to stipulate terms for their service, that it is their duty "not to be ministered unto, but to minister." We have no greater desire than that like our Master before us "who went about doing good", we may, poor and despised as we are, shoulder our humble share of the day's burden among the many tasks that confront the nation at present time."³⁰

Points of Affinity

In 1915, Gandhi arrived in India from South Africa. By then, Paul had already begun rural reconstruction work and it had been almost a decade since Azariah had begun mission work. The national movement had gone into a lull and Gopal Krishna Gokhale was the only moderate nationalist left fighting the British. But, he was old and unwell, and had urged Gandhi to return and give leadership to a movement that was marred by divisions. On his return to India, he travelled the length and breadth of the country for a year, and in 1917, became involved in his first agitation on behalf of indigo farmers in Champaran, and thereafter another peasant movement in Kheda and mill worker's strike in Ahmedabad. In 1919, he launched his first nation-wide agitation against the British – the non-co-operation movement – and soon enough, he became the undisputed leader of the national movement.

The rising stature of Gandhi in the national life of India was a moment of hope and reassurance for the Indian ecumenists. Surely, this was part of the general reassurance felt by Indian Christians throughout India, wherein with Gandhi gradually coming to the

²⁷ K. C. Chacko & C. P. Mathew, *The Union Christian College, Always, South India* (Madras: Methodist Publishing House, 1921), 5.

²⁸ Letter of K. C. Chacko and C. P. Mathew, *Silver Jubilee Souvenir*, 59.

²⁹ Chacko & Mathew, *The Union Christian College*, 5.

³⁰ Chacko & Mathew, *The Union Christian College*, 7.

helm of affairs, there was a feeling that they would once again find acceptance within the national imagination. In 1916, Congress had expelled several 'extremists' and along with them, several advocates of Hindu nationalism. In 1920, Gandhi forged an alliance with the Khilafat Movement³¹ and there were several assurances made of his commitment to religious tolerance. On the question of religious conversion of the 'depressed' castes, Gandhi himself was not too assertive as he would be in the 1930s, and much of his remarks in relation to Christianity during the 1910s and 20s were more about his utmost regard for Christ and the Sermon on the Mount.³²

Beyond this, another factor that drew the deep admiration and regard of the Indian ecumenists towards Gandhi was the extent to which he seemed to echo their understanding of how India could be redeemed; and in echoing it, how he also seemed to give credence to it in the 'national mainstream'. For those who had been distanced from the nation, this was a point of affirmation, however short-lived it was, and they were hopeful. As K. T. Paul remarks, it 'gave to the whole national movement an altogether fresh vision of high purpose and noble possibility, higher and nobler than had ever been realised before.'³³

The general pre-occupation of the historiography on the relations between Gandhi and the Indian ecumenists has been on the conflict between them, especially in the 1930s over the question of religious conversion of the 'depressed castes'. This focus on the 'conflict', in spite of the soreness it produced on both ends, unintentionally overlooks the deep affinities that existed between the ecumenists and various other personalities and persuasions that existed during those times, the most prominent among them being Gandhi. While being aware of the differences and debates between them, it is equally important to identify the points of affinity between them. The fact that Azariah remained hurt, saddened and silent in the face of Gandhi's invectives against him in the 1930s speaks much more about the affinity he felt and the deep respect he had for Gandhi than the indifference and indignation he had for him.

Gandhi was an unusual leader for a political movement. He had a deep suspicion of 'politics' and its pervasiveness in the modern times. This suspicion was also shared by his contemporary, Rabindranath Tagore who felt that in the modern times, 'politics' had taken on an organised and mechanical form, 'driving its tentacles of machinery deep

³¹ It was a movement of the Indian Muslims calling for the restoration of Ottoman caliphate, who came under severe restrictions and sanctions following the First World War,

³² Oddie, "Indian Christians," 359-360.

³³ Quoted in Popley, *K. T. Paul*, 178.

down into the soil' negating all that is moral and natural.³⁴ Gandhi found politics to be 'absolute dirt, ever to be shunned'.³⁵ He was hesitant to call himself a political man though he was leading a political movement. Rather, he preferred to identify himself as a religious man. He had once told Henry Salomon Leon Polak, a close associate and journalist from his time in South Africa: 'most religious men I have met are politicians in disguise; I, however, who wear the guise of a politician, am at heart a religious man.'³⁶ Further, he asserted that the 'politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries.'³⁷ Yet, he also felt that as a religious person, he had to identify himself with the whole of mankind, and that he could not do unless he took part in politics. For the 'whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments. I do not know any religion apart from human activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities which they would otherwise lack, reducing life to a maze of 'sound and fury signifying nothing'.³⁸ Though politics as such was resentful, religion had the capabilities to purify it, to give meaning and purpose to it. And not just politics, but every thought, word and action.³⁹ In other words, for Gandhi, religion was the pivot on which every sphere of life was to be experienced and approached.

Gandhi didn't privilege any particular religion over others, though his own foundations were in the Hindu traditions that he was born and brought up in. He didn't believe in the sectarian boundaries that different religions built around themselves, but sought the universal truth that underlies all religions.⁴⁰ He prodded followers of each religion to look within themselves, examine if their doctrines and practices appealed to reason and morality, and reform it from within.⁴¹ He neither insisted on places of worship, images, rituals or ceremonies nor did he entirely reject them. Though he had no special 'veneration' for any of them, he didn't find any harm in people finding meaning in it as it is part of human nature to do so.⁴² However, he warned against religion becoming just a

³⁴ Tagore, *Nationalism*, 50.

³⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, June 18, 1925, 214

³⁶ Quoted by H. S. L. Polak, "Appreciations", *Speeches and Writings of M. K. Gandhi*, (Madras: G. A. Nateshan & Co., 1922), 40.

³⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, May 12, 1920, 2.

³⁸ M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, December 24, 1938, 393.

³⁹ M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, February 10, 1940, 445.

⁴⁰ Gandhi, *Harijan*, February 10, 1940, 445.

⁴¹ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, July 21, 1920, 173.

⁴² M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, October 6, 1921, 318; *Young India*, September 26, 1929, 320; *Young India*, November 5, 1925, 378.

'dead routine' or resorting to 'mechanical worship'.⁴³ He felt that such religion was no religion at all. Religion had to be a vital force, permeating all spheres of life, in all the practical affairs of humankind, transforming them and enabling them to find themselves and their maker.⁴⁴

In Gandhi's religious framework, India was not a 'nation' in the political sense of the term. When Gandhi used the term 'nation', he neither used it to refer to a political entity nor was it entirely binding on his larger idea of 'swaraj' or self-rule. For Gandhi, as it was for Tagore, India was a civilizational entity that has had a history of 'continual social adjustment' of races as well as 'the spiritual recognition of unity' of differences.⁴⁵ It stands for 'synthesis of the different cultures that have come to stay in India, that have influenced Indian life, and that, in their turn, have themselves been influenced by the spirit of the soil.'⁴⁶ It is 'a mingling of the cultures represented by the different faiths and influenced by the geographic and other environments in which the cultures have met'.⁴⁷

However, with the introduction of 'modern civilisation' through the British rule, India had enslaved herself to the greed, aggrandisement, alienation and irreligion inherent to 'modern civilisation'.⁴⁸ For Gandhi, the nationalists, in their eagerness to imitate the west, had not recognised that India was being 'ground down not under the English heel but under that of modern civilisation.'⁴⁹ In effect, it meant that one wanted 'English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English, and, when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan. This is not the Swaraj that I want.'⁵⁰

Swaraj, according to Gandhi, was the continuous realisation of the process wherein even an individual is able to disentangle himself from all that enslaves him and become fit to govern his own self as a moral being. It is not just about independence from 'foreign' government or 'national' government, but independence from every form of control external to one's own self.⁵¹ It is something to be experienced internally, and thereby determine one's principle of action in the external sphere. This understanding of swaraj

⁴³ Letter of S. Radhakrishnan, August 15, 1921, *Silver Jubilee Souvenir*, 60.

⁴⁴ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, May 5, 1925, 164.

⁴⁵ Tagore, *Nationalism*, 48.

⁴⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, November 17, 1920, 6.

⁴⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, April 30, 1931, 88

⁴⁸ M. K. Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj", in ed. Anthony J. Parel, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 26-74.

⁴⁹ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 42.

⁵⁰ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 28.

⁵¹ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, August 6, 1925, 276.

was not satisfied with mere change of political rule, but the overall 'elevation' of the nation to a higher moral plane.

In working towards this swaraj, the reconstruction of rural life was as important for Gandhi as the political movement for national independence. As he said: 'To serve our villages is to establish Swaraj. Everything else is but an idle dream.'⁵² Much of Gandhi's involvement in village reconstruction occurred from the 1930s onwards. However, he had already begun to realise the necessity of it from the time he had taken a tour of India on his arrival from South Africa. In 1916, speaking at the inauguration of Benares Hindu University, Gandhi said: 'Over seventy-five per cent of the population are agriculturists... But there cannot be much spirit of self-government about us, if we take away or allow others to take away from them almost the whole of the results of their labour. Our salvation can only come through the farmer.'⁵³ For Gandhi, the theme of India living off its farming population, and how she will never be a self-respecting nation if the farmers fails experience swaraj was a recurring one. In 1924, he wrote:

'Hitherto the villagers gave died in their thousand so that we might live. Now we might have to die so that they may live. The difference will be fundamental. The former have died unknowingly and involuntarily. Their enforced sacrifice has degraded us. If now we die knowingly, our sacrifice will ennoble us and the whole nation. Let us not flinch from the necessary sacrifice, if we will live as an independent, self-respecting nation.'⁵⁴ (YI, 17-4-1924, p. 130)

In the same year itself, he further called on the people to identify themselves with the living conditions and struggles of Indian villagers.⁵⁵ It was not until the 1930s and 40s that Gandhi proposed plans towards how village reconstruction could happen. In this regard, he was in no way a pioneer. As it has already mentioned, YMCA had taken it up in a similar vein in the 1910s and 20s. Tagore also had reflected much on it and carried out several experiments in it contemporaneous with YMCA. Gandhi's plan for village reconstruction went a step ahead and deliberated on the necessity for 'village swaraj', wherein it would be a 'complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity.' The village republics would grow their own food and manufacture their own clothing; do away

⁵² M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, December 26, 1929, 420.

⁵³ M. K. Gandhi, "Benaras Hindu University Speech, February 4, 1916", in ed. Shriman Narayan, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: The Voice of Truth, Vol. 6*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968), 8-9.

⁵⁴ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, April 17, 1924, 130.

⁵⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, September 11, 1924, 300.

with caste and untouchability, and everything done on a co-operative basis; develop their own cottage industries, farm lands, schools, recreational spaces such as playgrounds, theatres and public halls; and establish their own water treatment facilities and sanitation systems. They would be governed by a panchayath of five members elected annually. They will be the executive, legislative and judiciary. Though there will be village guards appointed by the villages, there would be no punishments, and 'perfect democracy based on individual freedom will be ensured'.⁵⁶ Towards this end, eventually, the state itself would have to wither away and power would be devolved to the lowest unit, so that swaraj can become a reality. Needless to say, Gandhi became far more sceptical of any of this happening as India became an independent nation-state.

Finally, for Gandhi, the claim to swaraj was not a pretext for parochialism and exclusiveness, rather it was 'intended to pave the way to real, honourable and voluntary co-operation based on mutual respect and trust.'⁵⁷ Gandhi's necessity to clarify this point came about in the context of Tagore critiquing the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhi and the Congress. From 1916 onwards, Tagore has been a staunch critique of nationalism. His novels and lectures of the next five to ten years were replete with illustrations pointing to the dangers of nationalism. He was not as hopeful as Gandhi about the possibilities of the movement, and feared that the cry for 'non-cooperation' will lead to a blind and parochial rejection of the west, rather than a dialogue with the west, where both, the west and the east can learn from each other. It is in response to this that Gandhi felt the need to clarify, and he lucidly put his point across: 'I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.'⁵⁸ He further argued that, 'the present struggle is being waged against compulsory cooperation, against one-sided combination, against the armed imposition of modern methods of exploitation, masquerading under the name of civilisation' and not at blindly rejecting the possibilities of co-operation with the west.⁵⁹

Both, Tagore and Gandhi acknowledge the fact that on account of the west dominating the east, the latter has never acquired an opportunity to know itself enough to be reveal its true nature to the west, and engage in a meaningful conversation with the west. As Tagore says, 'for a long time we have been out of touch with our own culture and

⁵⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, July 26, 1942, 238.

⁵⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, June 1, 1921, 172.

⁵⁸ Gandhi, *Young India*, June 1, 1921, 170.

⁵⁹ Gandhi, *Young India*, June 1, 1921, 172.

therefore the western culture has not found its prospective in our life; very often found a wrong prospective giving our mental eye a squint.' Similarly, Gandhi says, 'It is my firm opinion that no culture has treasures so rich as ours has. We have not known it, we have been made even to depreciate its study and depreciate its value. We have almost ceased to live it. An academic grasp without practice behind it is like an embalmed corpse, perhaps lovely to look at, but nothing to inspire or ennoble.' It is in realisation of this fact that both interlocutors felt the immense need for nurturing self-respect and self-reliance among Indian people, so that they may recover and forge an organic unity with their own lost 'self' and therein, enter in to a 'honourable and voluntary co-operation' with the west 'based on mutual respect and trust.'

Having had a glimpse of Gandhi's understanding, it would be fruitful to come back to the Indian ecumenists. The affinities there were between the Indian ecumenists and Gandhi may already be quite evident. Yet, it may be fruitful to briefly refer to it. To begin with, they were all located outside and beyond 'politics' and were essentially religious people who experienced India, made sense of India and articulated about the transition she needed in particularly religious ways. Though the ecumenists gave primacy to the promotion of Christianity and Gandhi gave primacy to being involved in a more personal quest for the universal truth that underlies all religions, which became a point of confrontation subsequently, there was unity in their attempts to make religion a 'living reality' that permeates every aspect of life rather than a 'dead routine'. Ultimately, both their concerns were towards the formation of the 'moral man' who would be complete and self-governing in every way. Sensitive to their calling, both of them identified the villages of India as the site where they should begin the 'reconstruction' of India. Though, the ecumenists anticipated Gandhi, there was much continuity in their thoughts on rural reconstruction. Finally, in striking a balance between co-operation and non-cooperation, both of them insisted on the necessity for Indians to be able to stand on their own feet, forge an organic link with their 'lost' self, and enter into co-operation with the west on honourable and respectful terms.

In 1931, when K. T. Paul died, Gandhi wrote an obituary note. It said: 'The nearer I came to him the more I respected him. His Christianity appeared to me to be broad and tolerant. It not only did not interfere with his being a thorough nationalist, on the contrary, in his case it seemed to have deepened his nationalism.'⁶⁰ Paul was one of the few Indian ecumenists that Gandhi had some constructive interactions with, and if he had lived

⁶⁰ M. K. Gandhi, "Homage to K. T. Paul", Simla, May 15, 1913, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol. XLVI*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1971), 152.

longer, surely he would have ensured a stronger association between Gandhi and the ecumenists. For, the intellectual and spiritual affinities between them were strong. Both, Gandhi and the ecumenists would have had a meaningful dialogue and worked together towards realising the India they had imagined. In 1938, Gandhi in his interview to John R. Mott, lamented the fact that Christians seemed hardly interested in being part of or cooperating in rural reconstruction programmes.⁶¹ Given its origins in what the YMCA had initiated, it is unfortunate how everything had so quickly changed by the 1930s. The misunderstanding between Gandhi and Bishop Azariah, which had more to do with the interference of British and American missionaries than the 'intolerance' of Gandhi, further worsened the possibilities of any constructive dialogue between Gandhi and the ecumenists.

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⁶¹ "Discussion with John R. Mott", December 4, 1938, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol. LXVIII*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1971), 170.