

Christian fundamentalism and the media in South India

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The turn towards Hindu nationalism in India has been a subject of academic study for over two decades. Events such as the pogroms (February-April 2002), against Muslims in Gujarat immediately after the Godhra killings in February 2002, the murder of the Australian-born evangelist Graham Staines (January 1999) and the destruction of the Babri Masjid (December 1992) received international and national media coverage.

In the three instances mentioned above, members belonging to the Sangh Parivar, the family of right-wing Hindu organisations who gave ideological succour and people-support for the previous Hindu nationalist, Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government in India, have either been charged with aiding and abetting violence against minorities or are in the process of being charged for the offences. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism, including recent events such as the railway bombings in Mumbai (July 2006), has also received coverage in the national and international media and become part of global academic discourses involved in either understanding, supporting or contesting the 'war against terror'.

Christians in India have generally had a positive image in the media and the national imaginary given their involvement in education at school and college levels, in health care and national development. As a relatively small minority (2.4% of the population), their presence or expressions, have traditionally not been a cause for concern, or viewed as a threat to majoritarian identities and futures. This stands in contrast to Muslims who at close to 10% of the population are significantly present in most parts of India, are involved in the very trades and professions that lower and middle class Hindus are either involved in or covet, and whose involvement in bloodletting during the Partition of India, presence in neighbouring Pakistan and in disputes over Kashmir, have made them a suspect population among the Hindu nationalists in particular.

Their ideologues have made determined efforts, offline and online, to de-legitimise and problematise the Muslim Indian binary. Evelyn Kallen (1998: 7) describes the ways in which this 'invalidation' is constructed via a sequence of three main stages:

1. 'Invalidation myth (prejudice): definition of target group as inferior and/or dangerous.
2. Invalidation ideology: development of theory of vilification and provision of supporting arguments and "evidence" to "justify" denial of fundamental human rights.
3. Platform for action: incitement to hatred and harm (discriminatory action); denial of human rights.'

Christian fundamentalism in India

Even to suggest that there is a relationship between the media and Christian Fundamentalism in Chennai, South India, might seem odd to readers of Media Development, whose prior knowledge of the subject is perhaps limited to the influence of the religious right-wing on the Bush administration or/and the rise and fall of tele-evangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart and in the recent past, the evangelist Ted Haggard, the president of the 30 million member National Association of Evangelicals in the USA.

Some readers will have knowledge of the relationship between the media, politics and religion in

Brazil – the Tele Rede network in Brazil owned by Edir Macedo and his Universal Church of the Reign of God, and the ex-President of Zambia, Frederick Chiluba’s brand of politicised, conservative Christianity. But Christian fundamentalism in India has rarely figured as an academic project except the study by Lionel Caplan (1987) – ‘Fundamentalism as a Counter-Culture: Protestants in Urban South India’, and in the recent past, the investigative writing by Edna Fernandes (2006) – ‘Holy Warriors: A Journey into the Heart of Christian Fundamentalism’.

The latter has sections on Christian Fundamentalists in two states in India, Goa and Nagaland, and indicates that there are contested issues arising from the practices of conservative Christianity in India. There is, in the on-line world, a vast amount of information on the activities of Christian groups in India on web-sites supported by the Hindu right-wing and concerned secular groups with www.Christiansagainstaggression.org being the most informative site that monitors the activities of Christian mission in India.

While Muslims remain the major target for Hindu nationalists, the rise of muscular Hinduism between 1980-2005, and in particular, their involvement in government, led to the creation of national projects and spaces directed towards the interrogation of religious minorities inclusive of Christians, that were earnestly pursued by various groups within the Sangh Parivar, particularly by diaspora Hindus based the USA.

The ex-Minister of Divestment, Communication and Information Technology in India, Arun Shourie’s (1994, 2000) critiques of Christian mission lent this project academic respectability. Shourie’s trenchant account of historical and contemporary Christian mission, in particular Catholic mission, is difficult to contest given that education and health were and are used by a variety of Christian denominations, as entry points for Christian conversion. The ‘rice Christian’ and of late the ‘tsunami Christian’ is a reality in India.

While the historical churches in India, in particular the Syrian Orthodox, have been chary of embarking on any aggressive form of Christian expansionism, some post-colonial churches – Catholic and Protestant – certainly have taken seriously the Biblical injunction to proclaim the Word and to ‘make all nations Christian’. While the traditions of mainstream Christian mission, for the most part, continue to be carried out within the larger framework of respect for religious pluralism and secularism and the constitutional framework of respect for faith communities, the exponential growth of Pentecostal and in particular neo-Pentecostal churches in India over the last two decades has been accompanied by altogether more aggressive projects of Christian mission.

These churches, para-churches, house churches, Christian associations and networks that can be counted in the thousands all over India share a number of characteristics:

- 1) They are independent of the mainstream Christian churches in India.
- 2) In terms of numbers they can vary from a handful of members who belong to a house church to an Assemblies of God mega-church that has tens of thousands of members.
- 3) These churches are involved in catering to niche groups – the urban poor, youth, the new rich.
- 4) They are not accountable to a synod or to a larger authority, and as a result there is little or no oversight on how moneys are spent..
- 5) They receive large amounts of foreign contributions.

6) Many are family-based and run.

7) While there are differences in style and approach, these churches share certain fundamentals? ? Biblical inerrancy, the need to be ?born again?, salvation for the elect, etc.

8) Many are involved in media ministries including Christian broadcasting.

Why Chennai

I chose Chennai for my study because of a familiarity with the city of my birth but also because the various denominations representative of Protestant Christianity have had a significant historical presence in the state of Tamilnadu. The Church of South India, the first expression of the ecumenical movement, was established in Madras in 1948. The Pentecostals have been around for decades (Burgess: 2001), so has Christian broadcasting and this city today is considered the fastest growing hub of Christianity in South Asia.

1) According to the 2001 census, 5.2% (3.8 million) of the 62 million people in Tamilnadu are Christian. This figure, along with figures for the whole of India that suggests a decline in Christian numbers between 1991 and 2001 (2.4 to 2.3%) is contested.

2) Southern Tamilnadu was the first mission field in India to be actively wooed by Protestant missionaries starting with the Tranquebar Mission that was established by the Royal Danish Missionaries represented by two Germans Bartolomaus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau in July 1706 (Hudson: 2000).

3) In terms of Christian revival, the first recorded outpourings of the Spirit, manifestation of tongues and other gifts was reported in 1860 at a mission in Tirunelveli in Tamilnadu (Hedlund: 2001)

4) It has had a strong presence of Pentecostal churches and conservative forms of Christianity that led to the religions scholar Lionel Caplan (1987) to write the first academic work on Christian fundamentalism in India.

5) Tamilnadu had a strong anti-Brahmin movement and traditions of tolerance that still remain. While North India and Central India have witnessed a rise in anti-Christian feeling during the last two decades, the South has remained relatively free of attacks on Christians. The repeal of the anti-Conversion laws by the government of Tamilnadu promulgated in 2002 and withdrawn in 2005 is an indication of the religious dynamics that continue to favour minority communities unlike in North and West India where the conflict between Christians and Hindus have become a lot sharper.

Christianity in contemporary Chennai

The changing nature of Christianity in India during the last two decades is, to some extent, a reflection of the changing nature of needs and expectations of people living in the context of accentuated forms of economic globalisation. While India remains a predominantly agricultural country, economic liberalisation, the discourse of Hindu nationalism, the success of the IT economy and the media revolution have contributed to the strengthening of an urban identity and

to the re-creation of the image of a new, self-assured and self-confident nation.

While there is no denying the successes of the Indian economy, its obverse, including the adverse consequences of globalisation, has not made the news to the extent that it should. The death of agriculture has led to migration to already over-crowded cities, Structural Adjustment Policies have led to the gradual withdrawal of government support for rural development, starvation-related deaths are now commonplace, and divides between the rich and poor have become extraordinarily pronounced in cities such as Mumbai and Bangalore.

New migrants to the cities formed the bulk of the congregations of the early Pentecostal churches in Chennai. This trend has continued although it is now complemented by settled congregations catering to the needs of the urban upper and middle classes. Chennai and its suburbs alone have upwards of 2500 churches ? consisting of indigenous churches, house churches and a variety of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches which, according to some observers, makes it the fastest growing hub of Christianity in South Asia.

Numbers can of course be disputed ? but the sheer numbers of churches listed in church directories available in Christian bookshops point to their growing presence. Raj & Selvasingh (2004: 10) have observed that, 'Chennai is privileged to have the highest number of churches of all the cities in South Asia.' In 1994 there were about 1,400 churches in Chennai?in 1999?1864 churches?small churches (formed) 'by the influence of the Pentecostals.' Mega churches include the New Life AOG church in Saidapet, Chennai with its 35,000 members and 10,000 at a sitting services.

The clearest evidence, however, of church growth in Chennai is the Chennai Christian Directory (2000) which lists 3000 churches and parachurch organizations in this city inclusive of the Beulah Church (8 churches), End Time Zion (14 churches), Marantha Full Gospel Church (27 churches), Moving Jesus Mission (3 churches), Pillar of Fire Mission (6 churches), the Village Evangelism of Indian Mission (5 churches), Indigenous Churches (645), Assemblies of God (120) among very many other churches in Chennai. This directory also lists 46 Bible colleges, 23 Christian media centres, 122 Christian magazines in English and Tamil and 114 church planting missions. There is every reason to believe that there has been a further growth in these sectors of late.

Bourdieu in Chennai

In order to make sense of this reality, I employed concepts from the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu ? field, habitus, distinction, symbolic capital ? to try and get to grips with this contestation. In a sense it is not a visible, obvious, in your face kind of contestation ? but is a much more measured contestation represented in other ways by mainstream accommodations with new forms of worship, the communication of a specific all India Christian identity often by leaders of the new churches, the presence of these new churches in every nook and corner of Chennai ? posters, rallies, conventions, coverage in the media, the post-colonial presence of missionaries from the West and the strong presence of Christian broadcasting, both transnational and domestic.

One of the interesting features of the new church is their spatial presence in Chennai, their embrace of the official city and the unintended cities, the rural in the urban, their being part of and catering to a globalising Chennai and Chennaites (Prakash: 2002, Manokaran: 2005). There is a real sense in which Pentecostalism intrinsically is a religion that was made to travel, for it is part of the flows of the global, as at home in a crowded market area as in a gleaming Mall (Dempster et.al: 1999, Cox: 1996).

Mendieta (2001:20), observes that 'religion appears as a resource of images, concepts, traditions and practices that can allow individuals and communities to deal with a world that is changing around them,' in the midst of places and shopping, leisure and recreation, production and consumption, an observation that captures the new church in changing Chennai. The cell

church movement in India is an organic expression of church growth in the era of globalisation. Since church planting and the harvesting of souls are fundamental objectives of the new churches, members belonging to tightly knit cell churches are required to facilitate a viral replication of these cells.

A number of these new churches may be called indigenous churches responding to the fulfilment of local needs although as many are influenced by the Health and Wealth Gospel linked to the Faith movement. Stephen Hunt in a perceptive essay on the Health and Wealth Gospel, observes that the success of this model relates to its value-addedness:

'Pentecostalism serves to develop attributes, motivations and personalities adapted to the exigencies of the de-regulated global market. It has integrated the urban masses into a developing economy through the protestant work ethic and active citizenship. At the same time, the mobile new professionals and the educated in mega-cities carry a work ethic that results from a strict Pentecostal upbringing. The explanation for the success of the Faith movement is that it can adapt itself to such complexities. This makes it a global "winner"' (Hunt, 2000: 344).

Bourdieu's analysis of the role played by culture in social domination and the specific concepts he invokes to study the links between ideational and material power can be applied to understanding a variety of societal fields, including that of religion. Bourdieu's project of constructivist structuralism attempted to bridge the differences between the objective and the subjective, between agency and structure, between cultural idealism and historical materialism and was an attempt to theorise the mutually constitutive connectivities between social structures and actors.

Bourdieu, like Weber, Durkheim and Marx, was of the opinion that religion was a declining institution. While Bourdieu did not value religion as anything more than an aspect of false consciousness and his interest in religion is not as developed as that of his other concerns including art and culture, a number of his key concepts, inclusive of 'belief', 'distinction', 'field' and 'habitus' are derived from his readings of Max Weber or based on his observations of the culture of Catholicism in France (Dianteill: 2003).

Bourdieu's relatively unknown study, *Genesis and Structures of the Religious Field* (1991: 9) is the only work that I have come across in English that is explicitly concerned with the relationship between the religious field, symbolic capital and religious power.

The cultivation of 'distinction'

Bourdieu's emphasis on the cultural basis for 'distinction' seems particularly apt to understanding mediated forms of Christianity in India today. There is a nation-wide platform (televisual) for the mediation of 'distinctiveness' and it is being mobilised to create distinctions between the old and the new, the old church and the new church, new doctrine as opposed to old doctrine, new sources of Biblical authority and the validity of interpretations, new understandings of the qualities of a pastor to the legitimisation of the objectives of Christian ministry and the individual's relationship with God.

This distinctiveness is not only reflected in the personal grooming and rhetorical styles adopted by evangelists and tele-evangelists but his/her complete symbolic repertoire. Tele-evangelists, such as Benny Hinn and others, in an elemental sense have reclaimed a belief in religion as fundamentally about using magical powers to effect healing, restoration and reconciliation. In Weber's way of thinking, magic was the basis for early forms of religion that depended on a magician's coercion of the divine for human ends.

The advent of organised religion led to the superseding of magic and the magician and to the establishment of an extensive metaphysics of religion. As Weber (1963: 30) has pointed out, 'The full development of both a metaphysical rationalisation and a religious ethic requires an

independent and professionally trained priesthood, permanently occupied with the cult and with the practical problems involved in the cure of souls.'

However, despite the institutionalisation of organised religion, reliance on magic as the basis for delivery from the chains of the devil has remained a potent sub-text in all the major religions and in the many religious cultures and traditions found throughout the world. Mainstream Protestant Christianity's overt rationalisation of its faith, its denial of alternative, popular expressions of healing and its inability to deal with the 'unexplainable' has been exposed as wanting and out of touch, particularly so in the context of the rise of tele-evangelists, who have, by their reliance on magic, contributed to what one might call the 're-enchantment' of Christianity.

One can argue that 'healing' is among the most distinctive features shared by the tele-evangelists and neo-Pentecostal preachers and this makes their ministry different from that followed by other ministries. Healing connects to the spirit world, to malevolent forces that play a significant role in the lives of people living in globalised contexts throughout the world. The recognition of evil in the world of the everyday allows for a continuation of belief in the presence of evil – the principalities and powers that are graphically described in the language of the Bible.

It also connects to the belief in the supernatural that remains a residual element in the lives of Hindu converts to Christianity. The power to heal is a powerful draw and especially so in a globalised world where access to healing is mediated by professionals. In the Indian context, there has always been space for faith-based healing and healers although Christian evangelists are responsible for making faith healing a public spectacle.

In Bourdieu's way of thinking, these elements of distinctiveness are implicated in a politics of power that works through a 'misrecognition of (their) material interests' (Swartz, 1996: 3). Tele-evangelists such as Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Sarah and Peter Hughes, Sam Chelladurai, Brother Dhinakaran and others, communicate themselves as persons chosen by God to do God's command, often through a highly personalised repertoire of unique, oftentimes idiosyncratic, symbolic capital that is communicated via expressive styles and methods of audience identification. Such attempts at identification are often highlighted at the expense of the often intense materiality of these enterprises.

This disconnect is powerfully visible in the living histories of numerous evangelists and tele-evangelists in India today whose self-interest has been made invisible by many layers of mediated pietistic purposefulness. Television has been used to cultivate 'disinterestedness' as for instance Benny Hinn's frequent confirmations that God is the healer not him or the more disingenuous advertisements on God TV fronted by Indians who claim that the funds are required solely for the greater glory of God's ministry and plan for India.

This misrecognition is reflected in what is a common sub-text shared among many Christians and people of other faith in India that Benny Hinn, and other tele-evangelists, whatever their shortcomings, are God's representatives on earth. They have been blessed. There is a misrecognition of the real connections between the other-worldly metaphysics of these preachers and the very real-world materiality of their ministries.

What Weber and Bourdieu have tried to stress are the correspondences between the exercise of religion and the exercise of power, the exercise of ritual power as an exercise of material power.

Christian television in Chennai

There are five avenues for Christian television in India. 1) The occasional space on the national broadcaster Doordarshan for Christian programmes; 2) Transnational satellite channels including GOD TV, CBN, TBN, MiracleNet, and Daystar TV that are available on cable; 3) Christian programming on a variety of secular cable channels available throughout the country on Raj TV,

Zee TV, Vijay TV and numerous other channels; 4) stand alone indigenous Christian cable channels such as Blessing TV, Angel TV, Shalom TV, Jeevan TV and others; 5) Web-based telecasting for instance Jesus Calls? ?Num.TV?. Webcasting remains an evolving reality in India with limited audiences.

Indian Christian channels	Trans-national Christian broadcasters	Secular channels featuring Christian programming
Angel TV	God Channel/TV	Teja TV
Blessing TV	Daystar	Maa TV
Jesus TV	MiracleTV	Z Marathi
Shalom TV	Christian Broadcasting Network	Vijay TV
Jeevan TV	Trinity Broadcasting Network	Podhigai
New Hope TV	TCT World	Tamilan TV
Grace TV	EWTN	AsiaNet/Asianet Global
Manna Channel		Raj TV
TamilTV		Alpha One
		Win TV

		ETV-2
		Namma Cable
		Star Vijay
		Raj Digital Plus
		ETC TV
		Star News
		SAB TV
		Sony YV
		Jaya TV
		DD1
		SS Music

		<p>Sakthi TV</p> <p>Zee Kannada</p> <p>Namma Cable TV</p> <p>Alpha Bengali</p> <p>Nayuma Cable TV</p>
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Status of Christian TV in Chennai

During the research that I conducted in Chennai, it became clear that among English speaking middle classes, GOD TV and Daystar TV, were the two transnational Christian channels that had audiences in Chennai. However, these audiences remain small. While GODTV maintains that it is available in 216 major and minor cities in India – from Aizawl, Mizoram in North East India to Trivandrum, Kerala which is located close to the tip of South India, with a total audience reach of 21 million, the Nielsen-owned audience rating company TAM Media Research India's February 2006 viewing figures for GOD TV reveal that it has a total reach of 3.9 (4.6%) million homes out of an all India wide market of 85 million cabled homes.

GOD TV's audience figures for Chennai of 150,000 viewers (3.53%) out of an estimated 4.2 million cabled homes is not exactly flattering. Daystar's TV Chennai figures of 270,000 viewers is only marginally better. A third transnational channel, MiracleTV, whose offices are situated in Chennai, fared even worse on TAM ratings. While they have no presence in Chennai, their all-India reach for the said period was 600,000 (0.7%).

A number of Christians involved in this industry were of the opinion that for the purpose of 'reaching the unreached', a stand-alone Christian channel's chances of recruiting audiences was severely limited by the fact that 1) there literally are hundreds of channels vying for audiences; 2) in a primarily 'Hindu' country, a channel dedicated to furthering the project of Global Christianity had limitations; and 3) English-only programmes have restricted reach.

It is for this reason that many independent Christian producers such as Good News TV and Jesus Calls produce Indian-language based programmes for premier local channels. While Jesus Calls programmes are available on GOD TV in English five days a week, the bulk of their programmes are on a host of local channels in local languages, Sahara One TV, Star Vijay, Win TV, Raj TV, Surya TV, Asianet TV, Namma Cable, Alpha Bengali, ETV-2 and others. This makes sense for Raj TV's February 2006 viewership figures for Chennai was 3.6 million (85.3%) of the cable audience in Chennai.

GOD TV in Chennai

GOD TV was established by a UK-based South African couple, Rory and Wendy Alec in 1995. In 2004, they moved their broadcast office to Israel and today it is a 24-hour, global channel available throughout the world. As their tag line states, 'broadcasting from the Holy Land to the ends of the earth?'. With seven separate feeds, carried on 12 satellites, plus a further three non-contracted satellites, the GOD Channel is currently broadcast around the world to 275 million people in more than 200 nations and territories. As the founders exult in Armageddon-speak (2005: 20), 'The darkness across the heavenlies of Britain and Europe had been pierced and the first bastion taken ? the years 1995-2005 were to be a death blow to the devil?s hold on the media, opening up the airways for the Gospel and sending the forces of darkness reeling.'

Endorsed by Pat Robertson, Joyce Meyer, Crefilo Dollar, Dhinakaran, Benny Hinn and other ?healing? and ?prosperity? evangelists, the GOD Channel is a slick, Christian channel that features 21 ministries of recognised tele-evangelists including Kenneth & Gloria Copeland, Jesse Duplantis, Billy Graham, Benny Hinn and others, praise and worship programmes that include Christian rock and gospel (Dream On TV) and the Australia-based Hillsong TV, magazine programmes, news and current affairs programmes, counselling programmes, celebrity interviews, review of the arts and programmes for children including the Bed Bug Bible Gang and the Story Keepers.

All this in order to extend their vision expressed thus:

'With a servant's heart we will equip His Body to reach the lost through media. This ministry exists to enable every television household to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they may believe in Him, call upon His name, and be saved.'

There are a handful of Indian evangelists on the God Channel including Sam Chelladurai (Apostolic Fellowship Tabernacle, Chennai), Paul Thangiah (Full Gospel Assembly of God, Bangalore) and Dhinakaran (Jesus Calls, Chennai). But the majority are US-based. Apart from these Indian evangelists the only Indian presence is the regular evening solicitation for funds presented by Indians. As the Regional Director for Asia, Middle East and AustralAsia explains:

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'As more channels crop up and crowd the limited bandwidth in India, cable operators have hiked prices and are unwilling to negotiate?Our needs are great?.thank you for your assurance of partnering us on a monthly basis.'

Further research opportunities

This article highlights fragments from a study of Christian Fundamentalism and the Media in Chennai currently being written up by the author. The Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal turn in India offers a plethora of research opportunities. There is a need to understand India as a conduit for global-local flows of Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism, the presence of new Christianity in globalising India, the Christian religious commodity circuit in India, meaning-making and the consumption of mediated religious products, the political economy of Christian media production, the contested nature of Christianity in India, and last but not least, the politics of Christian separatism.

Equally importantly and against the tendency for churches to establish their own broadcasting outlets, there is an urgent need to establish the presence of inter-faith cable and satellite television in India.

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