

Catholics on the Margins in India

Dalits and Adivasis

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This article discusses the lives of the Catholic Dalit and adivasi communities in India and surveys recent theologies developed in this context. These communities constitute the majority of Catholics in India today, but they have frequently been neglected in theological discussions, and they continue to suffer discrimination both in Indian society and in the Catholic Church. The author reviews a number of interpretations of biblical theology in relation to Dalit experience, as well as the Christology of a pioneering adivasi theologian and a Trinitarian theology developed in relation to adivasi life. The article concludes with reflections of the author on his experiences among the Warli tribe in the northern part of the state of Maharashtra, including local examples of contextualization of Catholic faith.

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In North America and Europe, much of the attention to Christianity in India has focused on dialogue with the classical Brahmin Hindu tradition, especially as represented by the Rig Veda, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita, and the later philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Leading Catholic figures such as Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux, O.S.B.), Bede Griffiths, O.S.B., and Raimon Panikkar dialogued very creatively with the resources of this tradition and shared their experiences with the world.¹ As a result, discussions of Hindu-Christian dialogue have often focused mainly on the relations between Christianity and the Brahmin tradition of India, including its practice of yoga, meditation, and its Sanskrit literature.

While the Sanskrit Brahmin tradition is extremely important, most Catholics in India do not come from this elite background but rather from the traditionally marginalized communities commonly referred to as *Dalit* (“suppressed” or “crushed,” i.e., those formerly known as the “outcastes,” “untouchables,” or “Pariahs”), and as *adivāsi*² or “tribal” (“from the origins” or “aboriginal,” i.e., the indigenous tribal peoples of India). According to some estimates, about 65–70% of Indian Christians come from a Dalit background, and another 15–20% from tribal communities.³

1. Shirley du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths* (Alresford, UK, and New York: John Hunt Publishing Co., 2004); Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

2. For commonly used terms from Sanskrit origins, we will not use diacritical marks. We will use them in cases of specific words from which commonly used terms are derived.

3. Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, “Introduction,” in Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, eds., *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2010), p. 5.

There is disagreement over the proper terminology for these groups. The Indian government officially uses the term “scheduled castes” to refer those formerly called “untouchable.” Mahatma Gandhi wanted to call those traditionally viewed as “untouchable” by the name, “*harijan*” (“children of God”). However, a leader of this community, B. R. Ambedkar, forcefully rejected Gandhi’s term as condescending and dismissed all of the Mahatma’s hopes that the caste system could be reformed.⁴ While some Hindus view Dalits as Hindus and protest Dalit conversions to Christianity, many Dalits insist that they have never been Hindu.⁵

The Indian government uses the term “scheduled tribes” to refer to the tribal or adivasi communities. The British introduced the term “tribe” into India, using it to classify certain groups as “Forest Tribes” under the category of “Agricultural and Pastoral Castes” in the Census of 1891.⁶ It is interesting to note the succession of changing British names for these people. The British Census Report of 1901 called them “Animists”; in 1911 they were called “tribal animists or people following tribal religion”; in 1921 they were “Hill and Forest Tribes”; the Government of India Act of 1935 called them “Backward Tribes”; and the 1941 Census simply called

4. After striving to reform the Hindu social system for years, Ambedkar decided it was irreformable. Toward the end of his life, he left the Hindu community and became a Buddhist. Today his followers are often called “neo-Buddhists.” B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma: A Critical Edition*, Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Valerian Rodrigues, ed., *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

5. David Mosse, “The Catholic Church and Dalit Christian Activism in Contemporary Tamil Nadu,” in Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, p. 249.

6. Joseph Marianus Kujur, “Indigenous Peoples: Their Identity and Struggle,” in George Keerankeri and V. P. Srivastava, eds., *Taking Text to Context: A Festschrift in Honor of Fr. T. K. John, S. J. on the Occasion of his 75th Birth Anniversary* (Delhi: ISPCCK Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2011), p. 222.

them “Tribes.”⁷ The Constitution of independent India classifies a number of communities as “Scheduled Tribes” without giving any criterion for distinguishing these from the nomadic tribes who are not included in this group. According to the 2001 census, there were 84.3 million tribal people in India.⁸

The most appropriate terminology for these communities is still in dispute. The most widely used term today for the scheduled castes is “Dalit;” but some Christians from a “scheduled caste” background very forcefully reject the label “Dalit,” insisting that they are Christians, not Dalits.⁹ Until the 1970s, Dalit Christians were usually called “the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin.”¹⁰ I will use the terms “Dalit” and “adivasi” or “tribal” because they are commonly used and widely accepted as terms of self-designation. Many Indian Catholic theologians such as Francis Gonsalves, S. J., use the broader term “subaltern” to include both communities and all others who are marginalized and oppressed.¹¹

Both Dalits and adivasis have long been marginalized and despised in Indian society; and both communities are still often looked down upon and usually have less education and financial resources. Tragically, these patterns often continue in the Catholic Church and other Indian Christian communities. Even though Catholics and other Christians in principle should not practice discrimination, in reality Indian Catholic communities are generally led by

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., p. 223.

9. John C. B. Webster, “Varieties of Dalit Christianity in North India,” in Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, pp. 102, 105.

10. S. M. Michael, “Dalit Encounter with Christianity: Change and Continuity,” in Ibid., p. 54.

11. Francis Gonsalves, *God of Our Soil: Toward Subaltern Trinitarian Theology* (Delhi: Tercentenary Publication ISPCCK, 2010).

people from upper caste backgrounds. Today there are numerous efforts to overcome the heritage of oppression and neglect and to integrate these peoples fully into Indian life, and many Catholics take leading roles in these efforts.

Some of the most creative efforts in contextualizing Catholic life in India are taking place among the Dalit and adivasi communities. This process is sometimes called “inculturation,” but here again there is a dispute over terminology. Some prefer to reserve the term “inculturation” for elite attempts to contextualize Catholic life in India, which has often been done in relation to the Brahmin Hindu tradition. These authors prefer to use the term “indigenization” to describe spontaneous, grassroots developments among the Dalits and adivasis. Jose Kalapura comments: “The church’s attempt at indigenizing religious life, called inculturation, is largely done at the initiative of the religious specialist: in the case of the Catholic church such steps are introduced by its official liturgical committees. Inculturation should be distinguished from indigenization, which takes place spontaneously in the lived religion of the people.”¹² Other terms used for this process are “vernacularization,” “contextualization,” “regionalization,” and “integration.”¹³

The situation of Dalits and adivasis remains problematic and unresolved, especially in the context of India’s process of rapid economic development, which has improved the economic lives of some, but has brought increased suffering to others, especially

among the poor. Francis Gonsalves states the problem and the agenda for theology in this situation:

Unfortunately in India, Christianity has been closely connected with colonialisation and is, on the one hand, still considered a ‘foreign religion’ of the elites, while, on the other, a majority of Indian Christians belong to the unprivileged and dispossessed groups who are struggling to secure their basic rights to food, land and just living. These communities are also often marginalized in the Church. Thus, theology has a dual responsibility of: (a) divesting itself of its foreign trappings and elitist agenda, and (b) committing itself to addressing ‘political’ issues like affirmative action (reservations) for Dalit Christians, land alienation and mass migration of adivasis, the rights and responsibilities of minority communities, etc.¹⁴

Dalit Christians and Biblical Theology

Traditional Indian caste-based society had a number of groups who were generally despised and discriminated against. Frequently, members of this group performed tasks that were perceived to render them impure, such as removing manure from the homes of the wealthy. There are some Indian Catholic theologians and bishops from the Dalit community, and there is an important and growing movement of Dalit theology, in which Dalit Christians interpret Jesus and other biblical figures in light of the Dalits’ experience

12. Jose Kalapura, “Margins of Faith: Dalits and Tribal Christians in Eastern India,” in Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, p. 92, n. 4.

13. George Mlakuzhyil, “Formation in Mission of Moses, Jesus, Disciples, and Jesuits,” in George Keerankeri and V. P. Srivastava, p. 95.

14. Gonsalves, p. 6.

of being despised, rejected, and killed.¹⁵ In 2001 James Massey, a Dalit Christian theologian, founded the Center for Dalit Studies (CDS) in Dwaraka, Delhi, to foster research on Dalit issues and concerns. The center “poses a challenge to the wider Indian theology by emphasizing the need to start theology from the situation and experience of the Dalits.”¹⁶ CDS launched a series of biblical studies: *The Dalit Bible Commentary*.

Leonard Fernando, S. J., explains the approach of Dalit Christian hermeneutics: “The Dalits and those on their side began to read the Bible and look at Jesus from the perspective of the oppressed. They began to own Jesus as *the* Dalit.”¹⁷ In this project, Dalit theology has adapted much of the method of liberation theology to the Indian context. Michael Amaladoss, S. J., notes that Dalits have applied the model of the Exodus to their experience of becoming Christian: “For the Christian Dalits, the move to Christianity from Hinduism is a liberating exodus experience. This experience guarantees an exodus hope for full liberation.”¹⁸ E. C. John, S. J., relates the Psalms to the lives of Dalits: “There are parallels to the Dalit experience today in the physical assault

to which the poor in the Psalms were exposed, their oppression, and defencelessness etc.”¹⁹ The personal laments of the Psalmist resonate deeply with the suffering of Dalits: “No other section of the Bible brings home the extent and depth of suffering and the urgency for action as the Psalms of personal Lament and I find this very relevant for some of the Dalit families whom I know.”²⁰

Shalini Mulackal reads the books of Ruth, Esther, and Judith from the perspective of Dalit experience, looking for points of contact between marginalized persons in the Bible and contemporary Dalit life in India. Mulackal relates three forms of inequality in traditional Indian society, namely, gender, caste, and race, to the world of the Bible. “The relevance of the book of Ruth to the Dalits comes primarily from the fact that Ruth, the main character of this book, comes from the land of Moab, a gentile nation, whom the Israelites despised and considered as ‘untouchable.’”²¹ Moab was seen as a land of sterility and death, and Mulackal compares the attitude of the ancient Israelites toward the Moabites to that of the higher castes in India toward the Dalits: “For the chosen people, Moab is very similar to the Dalit *Cheris* or *Colonies* where the so-called outcastes are made to live.”²² Even though many Israelites would have viewed Ruth with disdain, Ruth is assertive, loyal, and courageous. One of the most crippling difficulties of the subaltern communities in India is low self-esteem, and Mulackal draws a lesson from Ruth: “Her story can serve as a

15. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock, *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); James Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics: Rereading the Text, the History and the Literature* (Delhi: IPCK, 1994); Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (Surrey, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

16. George Keerankeri, “A Visionary of Integrity on the Move,” in George Keerankeri and V. P. Srivastava, p. 12.

17. Leonard Fernando, “Preface,” in *Dalit World—Biblical World: An Encounter*, ed. Leonard Fernando and James Massey (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies and Vidjyayoti College of Theology, 2007), p. 6.

18. Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 28.

19. E. C. John, “Dalit Biblical Theology,” in Leonard Fernando and James Massey, p. 44.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

21. Shalini Mulackal, *Ruth, Esther and Judith*, Dalit Bible Commentary, Old Testament 6 (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2011), p. 17.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

powerful model for the Dalits, especially for the Dalit women, and inspire them to be self-confident and assertive in their attitude, and in this way become agents of their own liberation.”²³

Mulackal draws a similar lesson from the narrative of Esther, a member of the powerless Jewish community at the Persian court who nonetheless develops her skills and helps her people:

In spite of being a member of a disadvantaged group, Esther developed her personality so well that she was chosen to be crowned as queen. She made use of all the opportunities provided in the royal court to develop herself. Similarly the Dalits are also capable of becoming experts in various fields if they get the opportunities to develop their potentials.²⁴

Turning to the book of Judith, Mulackal compares the Assyrians’ violent conquest and subjection of the Israelites to the vulnerable situation of Dalits: “One easily remembers the constant threat faced in many villages from the dominant groups by the Dalits even to this day. With the slightest provocation, terror is unleashed against them by setting their houses on fire, raping their women or brutally killing them.”²⁵ Like Ruth and Esther, Judith offers a model for Dalits, especially for the women. Judith responds to a world of men, war, and fear, with a woman’s beauty and courage: “The shrewd strategy she used, including prayer, tactics, the power of sexuality, and her capacity to organize the weak against the powerful, are indeed ‘the weapons of the weak’ which the Dalits

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 44.

25. Ibid., p. 86.

can easily use in their own liberation struggle against the forces of oppression.”²⁶

Dalits in India have traditionally been viewed as polluting the higher castes. Reflecting on the Synoptic Gospels, Sam Mathew emphasizes Jesus’ solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering (Mt 25:31–46) and draws a connection to the world of the Dalits:

Pollution, poverty and powerlessness are the three distinguishing features by which the Dalits can be differentiated from the lowest strata in other societies. The Dalits suffer slavery in their own country, and dehumanizing untouchability and impoverishment under caste-class oppression.²⁷

Thus the New Testament’s presentation of Jesus in relation to the purity code of Judaism has particular importance for Dalit biblical theology. Mathew explores the purity/pollution system of Judaism in the first century CE and argues that Jesus

was cutting at the root of his own religious tradition, which has become oppressive. He uprooted the whole purity/pollution system, which was one of the main causes of exploitation, oppression and exclusion. The basic cause of the Dalits’ suffering is also due to the laws that are derived from the scriptures of the dominant caste.²⁸

26. Ibid., p. 87.

27. Sam Peedikayil Mathew, “Suffering and Pain in Dalit World and Biblical World,” in Leonard Fernando and James Massey, p. 98.

28. Ibid., p. 102.

Mathew draws a direct lesson from Jesus' example for contemporary Dalits:

The attitude of Jesus and his disciples to the oppressive laws of their times motivates the Dalits to reject the laws that deny their cultural and human rights and keep them as slaves and outcastes. Jesus' complete rejection of purity laws challenges the Dalits and the non-Dalits who identify with them to break free from the imposed impurity and bondage.²⁹

Lest this interpretation seem to alienate Jesus from his Jewish heritage, Mathew does note that Jesus' breaking of the purity laws was

based on the creative use of the rabbinic tradition available in his context. . . . Here we find Jesus using resources available in his context for the liberation of the oppressed. The Dalits can also make creative use of their traditions and practices in their struggle for justice and freedom.³⁰

Maria Goretti, F.S., stresses the harsh conditions of Dalit life today: "[D]espite legislative initiatives and various policy efforts, the Dalits continue to remain abjectly poor, subject to forced labour, discrimination, and economic exploitation and brutal socio-religious atrocities even today."³¹ Like Mathew, Goretti cites the example of Jesus healing the woman with a hemorrhage (Mt

5:25–34; Mt 9:20–22; Lk 8:43–48) as rejecting the entire set of attitudes and practices regarding purity and pollution. Based on Jesus' example, she calls on Dalits to protest: "I am convinced that no outside force can bring liberation to our people unless Dalits dare to challenge the myths of caste purity and hierarchy."³²

Similarly, John Mohan Razu, S. J., decries the inequalities of Indian life: "It is nothing but an illusion to hold that India is an egalitarian society. . . . Caste largely determines the function, the status, the available opportunities as well as the handicaps for an individual."³³ Razu finds ambiguity regarding hierarchy in the Bible: "In the Scriptures, we find also the way in which hierarchy is being negated and not condoned. However, we also come across legitimization of hierarchy, which is also juxtaposed."³⁴ For Razu, the central example is that of Jesus:

Jesus' vision is mediated by praxis where the periphery is brought to the centre. It is not the holiness of the select few but the wholeness of all. This is nothing but the eschatological reversal where those who are at the bottom of society, segregated and segmented based on hierarchy, shall be brought to the fore.³⁵

George Mlakuzhyil, S. J., interprets the gift of life in the *Gospel of John* in relation to the experiences of the Dalit and the tribal communities, as well as other oppressive, life-denying powers:

29. Ibid., p. 103.

30. Ibid.

31. Maria Goretti, "Purity and Pollution," in Leonard Fernando and James Massey, p. 115.

32. Goretti, p. 129.

33. John Mohan Razu, "Hierarchy and Difference: towards a Biblical Critique of Social Stratification," in Leonard Fernando and James Massey, pp. 132, 133.

34. Ibid., p. 141.

35. Ibid., p. 149.

“Dalits and Tribals are discriminated against on the basis of caste and colour. Human dignity of the so-called outcasts is trampled upon and human rights of minorities are violated with impunity.”³⁶ Mlakuzhyil seeks to overcome the dichotomy between the dominant Hindu tradition and the oppressed communities by incorporating the positive aspects of the dominant Brahmin Hindu tradition into his interpretation of the *Gospel of John*, together with a concern for the oppressed. He notes the three classic Hindu ways of works (*karmamārga*), knowledge (*jñānamārga*), and loving devotion (*bhaktimārga*), and proposes that “the *Johannine path of faith and love* is a healthy *synthesis* of the three Indian ways of salvation. Besides, it inspires us to involve ourselves in the world and find God there in the midst of people especially among the poor and the oppressed, the marginalized and the outcast of society.”³⁷ Mlakuzhyil relates the *Gospel of John* to the various strands of the Indian religious traditions, Brahmin, Dalit, and tribal.

Maria Arul Raja interprets the biblical apocalyptic tradition in relation to Dalit experience. He notes that the caste system must present itself as necessary and exclude all alternatives: “Any culture assertively upholding the caste hierarchy tries to project itself as the only possible universe to be inevitably followed by everyone.”³⁸ He notes that historically the renunciant (*śramaṇa*) movements in Indian history were forced to the sidelines, co-opted, or destroyed by the dominant culture. In this situation, Raja looks to the *Book of Revelation* for a vision of an alternate world:

36. George Mlakuzhyil, *Abundant Life in the Gospel of John* (Delhi: VIEWS/ISPCK, 2007), p. 2.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

38. A. Maria Arul Raja, “A Casteless World Is Possible: Building Dalit Horizons from Apocalyptic Ethos,” in Leonard Fernando and James Massey, p. 171.

When Dalits encounter the apocalyptic narratives of the Bible, an enriched process of osmosis takes place between them and the Biblical subalterns. . . . The only way-out for the hapless disempowered by the multiple forms of repression by the ruling elite is through the apocalyptic irruption. . . . In other words, the apocalyptic visions are the weapons of the weak against the dominant forces.³⁹

Raja proposes a number of similarities between the world of Dalits and the world of the *Book of Revelation*; each world experiences tyranny and oppression in the present but projects a new way of living (casteless humanity, a new heavens and a new earth). In each case, there is a danger of being co-opted, but the vision of an alternate world inspires resistance to the respective hierarchies of power. Raja comments: “*Apocalyptic* world-view tries to tear apart the veils concealing the dynamics of the legitimization, status quoism, and pursuit of power at any cost.”⁴⁰ He hopes that this strategy can inspire Dalits to be more effective in national and international life, posing the poignant questions:

Could the experience of suffering itself be transformed as the raw material for evolving new discourses? . . . Can they [Dalits], without yielding to the outburst of unproductive expression even of the legitimate wrath, be bridge-builders between the caste segments warring with each other?⁴¹

39. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 177–78.

Dalit Christian theology proposes a moving vision of hope. Tragically, however, Michael Amaladoss acknowledges that the hopes of Dalits are not always fulfilled in Catholic Indian life today, even in Catholic religious orders: “Religious communities are meant to be counter-cultural. Unfortunately, they are as caste-ridden as the wider church.”⁴² Goretti laments: “In Christian churches even now in some places Dalits are given a particular place to sit for worship.”⁴³ Peniel Rajkumar similarly acknowledges the massive challenge and frustration of the present situation:

On the one hand we have the growing academic influence of Christian Dalit theology as a form of contextual theology, whereas on the other we have the glaring discrimination of Dalits within Christianity as well as the continued passivity of the Church to engage in issues of Dalit liberation. This incompatibility in my opinion is symptomatic of the practical inefficacy of Dalit theology. Dalit theology does not seem to have significantly influenced the social practice of the Indian Church.⁴⁴

There is no unanimity among Indian Catholics today over the proper attitude to the social distinctions and discriminations of traditional Indian caste-based society. In January 2012 at Xavier College in Mumbai, Anand Amaladass, S. J., and his German colleague, Güdrun Löwner presented their new book, *Christian Themes in Indian Art*. In the discussion that followed, Amaladass commented, “We have boundaries but we can cross them.”

42. Amaladoss, p. 30.

43. Goretti, p. 116.

44. Rajkumar, p. 1.

He applied this principle to cultural, social, religious, and caste boundaries. He thought it was naïve to think one could simply get rid of the caste boundaries, but he wanted a flexible approach to them. Another Jesuit present remarked that many younger Jesuits fiercely disagree with Amaladass and want to launch a more direct frontal assault on the caste system. Still another Indian Catholic priest told me that caste distinctions are completely irrational, but they are so deep in Indian culture it is hard to imagine this world without them.

Adivasis

The adivasis live on the fringes of Indian society in areas that were generally not integrated into the states of historic India, often dwelling in forests, jungles, and hills. Adivasi languages and cultures differ from those of the dominant Indian communities, and there is tremendous diversity among the adivasis across India. They were not part of the traditional caste system and have no internal caste distinctions in their heritage, but they frequently suffer discrimination from being excluded from Indian society. There were repeated protests and rebellions against outside forces throughout the period of British and independent rule; at the center of the disputes were land, forest, and water, together with cultural and social domination by outside forces, whether British or Indian elites.⁴⁵ In many cases, Christians played a positive role: “Contact with friendly European missionaries and Christians injected new courage into the adivasis who had so far been dejected and felt helpless. They were no longer submissive to their lot but stood up against the oppression of the landlords and asserted their rights.”⁴⁶

45. Kujur, pp. 223–24.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

The notification issued by the president of India in 1950 described the characteristics of the “Scheduled Tribes” as “primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness with the public at large, geographical isolation and socio-economic backwardness.”⁴⁷ In 1952, the Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes listed eight common features of these communities:

(i) they live away from the civilized world in inaccessible areas—forests and hills, (ii) they belong to one of three stocks—Negrito, Australoids or Mongoloids, (iii) they speak the same dialect, (iv) primitive religion ‘animism’, worship of ghosts and spirits, (v) primitive occupations: hunting, gathering of forest produce, shifting cultivation, (vi) largely carnivorous or meat eaters, (vii) primitive in dress and clothing, and (viii) nomadic habits and love for drink and dance.⁴⁸

The adivasis’ traditional religious practices are not those of Brahmin Hinduism. While some contemporary Hindus want to claim the tribal peoples as Hindus, this is disputed and is often rejected by the adivasis themselves. In various locations, many of the tribal communities have converted to Christianity, frequently with an entire community becoming either Catholic or Protestant. As in the case of Dalit conversions, these conversions are highly contested by some Hindus.⁴⁹ Bengt Karlsson describes the problem: “Christian conversion among tribal or indigenous people, during 1998 and 1999, reached the main area of Indian politics. . . .

47. Ibid., p. 211.

48. Ibid.

49. Leonard Fernando and G. Gispert-Sauch, *Christianity in India: Two Thousand Years of Faith* (New Delhi and London: Penguin Viking, 2004), pp. 192–199.

Changing religion is to some Hindu fundamentalists the same as a change of nationality, and to them only a Hindu is a rightful or ‘true’ Indian.”⁵⁰ There resulted a number of acts of violence: “Backed by accusations of ‘forced conversions’ of tribal peoples, the Hindu fundamentalists have intensified a campaign of terror and hatred against Christians, instigating violence, burning churches, beating priests, preachers, and ordinary church members, raping nuns, and killing people.”⁵¹ Some Hindus have pressured tribal Christians to “reconvert.”

To date, very few adivasi Christians have received formal theological education, and so most of the theological writing on adivasi Christian life and practice comes from people who are not themselves adivasis, such as Francis Gonsalves. In many schools today, adivasi children are the first in the history of their families to learn to read and write. As young adivasis receive more education, there will likely be more formal theological reflection from adivasi Catholics on the integration of the Catholic faith into their cultures. In the meantime, the following two sections present two theological perspectives, one from an adivasi theologian and the other from Gonsalves.

Adivasi Christology

Francis Minj, S. J., is an adivasi theologian who has written on the contextualization of Christology in the adivasi community, which he presents as “the first Christian theology developed explicitly

50. Bengt G. Karlsson, “Entering into the Christian Dharma: Contemporary ‘Tribal’ Conversions in India,” in *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India’s Religious Traditions*, Judith M. Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), p. 133.

51. Ibid.

from an *Adivasi* perspective, for *Adivasis*, and written to nourish the Christian faith of the local *Adivasi* church.”⁵² He is dean of the Tarunoday Regional Theologate near Ranchi in eastern India, which serves the central regions of India where many *adivasis* live. Minj notes that the traditional Sarna religion of the *adivasis* is marked by fear of evil spirits and witches. Because some Sarna *adivasis* and some Hindus have accused Christians of using force to convert *adivasis*, Minj insists on the importance of interpreting Jesus Christ contextually in relation to *adivasi* life and culture. He interprets Jesus Christ as “*Paramadivasi*” in the context of five tribes in the state of Jharkand in central India: Munda, Oraon, Kharia, Ho, and Santals. He explains that the word “*Paramadivasi*” is his own creation, based on the three Sanskrit roots: “*param*” means “supreme”; “*ādi*” means “primordial”; and “*vasi*” means “dweller.” “Just as the *adivasis* are the original dwellers, so too Jesus the *word* can be metaphorically construed as *Paramadivasi*, the Supreme Primordial Dweller, the image of the invisible God, and the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15).”⁵³

Minj relates Jesus Christ to the custom of venerating ancestors as role models, protectors, and mediators between God and humans. As firstborn of all creation, Jesus is “the greatest ancestor,” but he also revises the received notion of ancestorship: “Through his violent death Jesus challenges *Adivasi* cultural taboos. His murder would disqualify him ancestorship, but he defies the *Adivasi* taboo of denying ancestorship to those who die violently.”⁵⁴ This demands a rethinking of traditional *adivasi* perspectives.

52. Francis Minj, “Jesus Christ *Paramadivasi*: An Indian *Adivasi* Construal of Jesus Christ,” in Robert Lassalle-Klein et al., eds., *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 187.

53. Ibid., pp. 189–90.

54. Ibid., p.191.

Minj observes that traditionally, *adivasi* communities had no king or central ruling authority, but today they yearn for liberation from the dominant forces in society that enslave and demean them. Minj interprets Jesus Christ as the Liberator, “the voice of the voiceless” and the bringer of freedom: “Jesus Christ, the persecuted and the mutilated one, demonstrates his solidarity with the suffering *Adivasis*, instilling hope that their daily ‘death’ by exploitation will turn into liberation, if they follow his praxis.”⁵⁵ In traditional Sarna mythology, the horse is a symbol of “hostility, power, anti-life, and disharmony”; and Minj proposes in response that “Jesus Christ Liberator conquers the horse. A construal of Jesus as the highest, the noblest, and the best horse tamer, the one who forces the horse to acknowledge his Sonship, seems relevant.”⁵⁶ The images of Jesus as High Priest (*pahan*) and as Healer/Exorcist (*deonra*) also speak powerfully to *adivasi* society. In the Sarna religion, the *pahan* offers sacrifices of animals or food to propitiate God, to establish harmony, and to gain protection from evil. The *pahan* also offers sacrifices to spirits. Minj see Jesus “as the highest *pahan*,” citing the *Letter to the Hebrews*.⁵⁷ An *adivasi* myth tells of God dying in the disguise of a leprous boy to abolish sins; Minj proposes that Jesus transforms this myth and presents a new vision of salvation.⁵⁸

While *adivasis* look to exorcists (*deonras*) to protect them from evil spirits, these powerful figures can also do harm and thus are feared. Jesus as the divine exorcist is “a new kind of *deonra*.”⁵⁹ Indian society has long stigmatized the *adivasis*; Jesus’ touching of

55. Ibid., p. 194.

56. Ibid., p. 195.

57. Ibid., p. 196.

58. Ibid., p.197.

59. Ibid., p. 198.

the sick and the “untouchables” in his society (Mk 1:31, 1:41, 5:38–41, 8:22–25, 10:3; Lk 6:19) is a very moving image for adivasis.⁶⁰ Minj concludes that the image of Jesus Christ as Paramadivasi, including the four roles of Ancestor, Liberator, Priest, and Healer, can effectively convey the gospel to the adivasi community.

Adivasi Trinitarian Theology

While not an adivasi, Francis Gonsalves has lived among the adivasis and has developed a subaltern Trinitarian theology in the context of their lives. He boldly proclaims: “God is Tribe,” explaining that “the etymological root of the English word ‘tribe’ is *tribus*, derived from the root *tres*, meaning, ‘three. . . . Although God is One and Undivided, Jesus has also revealed to us that God is Three, *Tria*, *Tribus* (Father, Son, Spirit) while always remaining *Unus*.”⁶¹ Noting that “tribe” often has a negative connotation in ordinary speech, Gonsalves speculates that God would welcome such a name because of God’s concern for the poor and the despised. Gonsalves seeks to enter into the lived space of India’s subaltern communities, including adivasis, Dalits, women, and minority communities, to develop a Trinitarian theology for their context.

Gonsalves sees the Trinity as representing relationship, communion, and solidarity. He observes: “In the adivasi context, person and personhood is understood only in the light of relationship with community. In other words, to be a person one must be bound in relationship with one’s community.”⁶² He notes the differences between humans and God in this regard: “But, when

60. Ibid., p. 199.

61. Gonsalves, p. 150.

62. Ibid., p. 167.

we say ‘God is relational’ and speak of ‘person’ in God, we assert that being relational is the very *essence* or *nature* of God. Thus, while we *have* relations, God *is* the relations that God has.”⁶³ In India’s adivasi communities, Gonsalves proposes, the understanding of God as relationship, communion, and solidarity resonates deeply with the experience of “interdependence, sharing, caring, and community-spirit.”⁶⁴

Gonsalves reflects on the adivasis’ exuberant experience of dancing in light of dance as a traditional image of the Christian Trinity. He notes that for the adivasis, dance “symbolically expresses life, energy, rhythm, harmony, equality, movement, familiarity and solidarity. People dance around in a circle, arms intertwined, supporting each others’ bodies, while repeating a refrain that echoes joy, awe, gratitude, worship, sorrow, pain, suffering, petition and so on.”⁶⁵ Gonsalves suggests that the adivasis’ exuberance of dance relates to the experience of the triune God:

To sum, from the viewpoint of oppressed groups, subaltern trinitarianism can fulfill a *performance role* by conceiving of Trinity as a *God-of-movement* (eternally inhabiting all times, creating new spaces) and a *God-in-movements* (animating all life-giving and liberative eco-socio-historic-political processes), whose eternal perichoretic dance embraces the *here-and-now naach* [dance] of subaltern communities with the rhythm of *kenosis-plerosis*.⁶⁶

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid., pp. 173–175.

66. Ibid., p. 242.

The Warli Tribe in Northern Maharashtra

I would like to conclude this article with personal reflections on adivasi life and faith. The diversity of the tribal communities of India is so great that any generalizations about the current adivasi life and faith situation are difficult, and so I will share my experiences with one particular tribe. In January 2012, I visited the Warli tribal community in the diocese of Vasai, north of Mumbai (Bombay) near the Arabian Sea in the northern part of the state of Maharashtra, India. Many of the Warlis are Catholic, and they combine many aspects of their traditional rituals with their lives as Catholics.

Adivasi Christian Life

Life has long been difficult for the Warlis. Ajay Dandekar believes that in pre-colonial era the Warlis flourished as hunter-gatherers and pastoralists with free access to the forests; however, their situation changed in the colonial period:

But the forest laws introduced by the colonial state have proved to be a major watershed in the history of these communities. The emergence of forests as major commercial entities in themselves altered the context and the colonial state asserted its right over the forest, which meant an active intervention in the day-to-day life of these communities, who depended for their livelihood on the forest.⁶⁷

In 1936 the British commissioned the Symington Report on the Aboriginal Hill Tribes of the Partially Excluded Areas

67. Ajay Dandekar, "Introduction," in Avellino Remedios, compiler, *Mythos and Logos of the Warlis: A Tribal Worldview*, ed. Ajay Dandekar (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1998), pp. 11–12.

in the Province of Bombay, which states that the lives of the Warlis are "wretched in the extreme and constitute a blot on the administration."⁶⁸ The Warlis had suffered repeated encroachments on their traditional lands from the Portuguese, the Marathas, and the British. The dominant patterns of both colonial and post-colonial India severely disrupted their lives. Rudolf Heredia explains:

The colonial system with its monetized economy as opposed to barter, and legalized rights, as opposed to traditional and community ones, left the tribals even more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression. In spite of the apparent protection given to them by the new government after Independence, the deterioration in their life situation has only been further accentuated in post-colonial India. For their tribal culture was not able to cope with the changes consequent on the model of development now adopted.⁶⁹

Heredia warns of the current danger of "an ethnocide" of the Warli and other tribal peoples.⁷⁰ Historically, when outside groups came into contact with the Warlis, they, like other adivasis, withdrew to more remote areas. In many areas today, the integration of adivasis into modern Indian society is quite recent and is often problematic. Among the Warlis, the process is in varying stages depending on the location of the village.

The response of the Catholic Church to these challenges is resolutely practical, offering the Warli tribe resources and opportunities traditionally not open to them. My host, Archbishop Felix

68. Rudolf C. Heredia, "Foreword," in Remedios, p. 5.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Machado, the bishop of the diocese of Vasai, arranged for me to stay for five days at the diocesan mission center in Bahare in the northern part of Maharashtra. This center is part of the Vasai Janhit Trust, an outreach of the Catholic diocese of Vasai to help the adivasis in need. The Trust promotes livelihood projects for employment, seeks to empower women through Self-Help Groups, and cares for the health needs and education, offering programs in English and in leadership development. The Trust also sponsors projects to care for the environment, waste management, and agricultural development.

On my first morning, I went for a walk through the local Warli village with Fr. Prakash Ruma. It seemed like a walk back through time to a primeval past. The village buildings are mostly constructed from bamboo shoots placed close together, with a mixture of cow dung and mud used to cover the cracks, and with a thatched roof. Floors are of dirt, and often the lighting in the evenings is from candles. Inside the homes there is usually one section with a long horizontal beam where the animals are tied up during the monsoon season, when they stay inside the home. There are also signs of change, with some new homes being built of bricks or concrete. While traditionally homes did not have electricity, now more and more dwellings do. Some homes today have televisions, and many people have mobile phones. Some men drive auto rickshaws for a living, and some have motorcycles.

Many of the Warli are rice farmers during the farming season. Some then leave to go elsewhere for work on construction or brick-making during the other seasons. I was told that an adivasi worker in this area is often paid only 16 paise (100 paise = 1 rupee, or about 1/3 of a U.S. penny) for making one brick, but then the buyer sells the brick for 5 rupees (10 cents). Traditionally, most

adivasis have had no bank accounts and thus no accumulated financial reserves for times of need. As a result, the adivasis fall very easily into debt when they have to borrow from moneylenders or banks. The moneylenders and the banks frequently collude to charge very high interest rates even for very short-term loans, driving the adivasis further into debt. Often they have to borrow more money just to pay the interest on an earlier loan. Bonded labor is supposed to be illegal in India, but in practice many adivasis fall into a condition close to slavery, where they have so much debt there is no realistic way for them to escape. Tragically, the rate of suicides among farmers in India, especially cash crop farmers, is rising rapidly.

Another challenge is widespread hunger: 42% of Indian children are reportedly malnourished; however, one speaker at a conference on the Indian economy at Vidyajyoti School of Theology in Delhi claimed the figure was actually 46%. Many children develop stage 3 or 4 malnourishment; and if they remain in this condition for any length of time, there can be irreparable damage to their physical and mental development. At the Vidyajyoti conference we were told that some adivasi families will rotate the days on which members of the family eat. On a particular day, two persons may eat and then go out to work; on the next day another two persons will do so.

The Adivasi Jeevan Vikas Kendra (the social work center) in Bahare invites tribal people together for education and training on basic issues such as nutrition and hygiene. Through these programs they lowered the infant mortality rate from 86 per 1,000 to 24 per 1,000 in three years. In significant measure this success came through stressing proper nutrition for a woman when she is pregnant.

Traditionally, the Warlis had no formal education and relatively little contact with the broader world. Because the Warlis have historically been marginalized and mistreated, they often have an inferiority complex. One of the most important challenges today is to empower the Warlis to assert themselves appropriately in relating to outside cultures or government representatives. In this endeavor, education is among the most important services offered by the Catholic Church to the adivasi communities. Leadership programs in schools seek to develop skills, awareness, and confidence. In the Warli area there are a number of Catholic schools operated by the diocese of Vasai; and the Jesuits have a major educational complex at Talasiri, which serves as the center of a network of sixteen schools in the area. The Catholic schools in the villages are among the most powerful transformation factors for the adivasis. Many students walk up to seven kilometers barefoot to attend school. A few students have bicycles, but most have to walk either along the roads or across the fields. Many are the first generation in their family's history to be taught to read and write. Many students are not Catholic, and the schools foster attitudes of interreligious respect and acceptance.

On January 26 India celebrates Republic Day, commemorating the approval of the constitution of modern India. On January 25, I visited a school where I saw the student body assembled outside in front of the flagpole rehearsing for the flag-hoisting ceremony the next day. While having tea with the sister who is principal of the school, I noticed on the wall a poster with the head of Abraham Lincoln plus writing in the Marathi language, which I cannot read.

The next morning, Republic Day itself, Fr. Prakash insisted that I wear his white *kurta*, a long, loose-fitting garment that flows from

the shoulders to the knees. That morning, I went to visit the Seva Vidyamandir High School and Junior College in another village. Fr. V. J., the principal, invited me to his office for coffee; and again I saw the image of Abraham Lincoln plus writing in Marathi. This time I asked why the image of Abraham Lincoln was there. I learned that Lincoln's "Letter to the Headmasters" is honored throughout India as an inspiration for educators. My hosts told me that for the national ceremonies on Republic Day in Delhi, major foreign dignitaries came to visit such as President Nicolas Sarkozy of France. They decided that I would be their visiting foreign dignitary for this village school. So they gave me a large round badge with India's colors of orange, white, and green, and I marched in the procession. The students all applauded to welcome me.

Then, as the ceremony was beginning, V. J. leaned over and informed me that I was giving a speech. Fortunately, he had to translate my remarks into the Warli language, and so I would say a couple sentences and then pause for him to translate while I gathered my thoughts. I congratulated the Indian students on their nation's constitution and noted the importance of this for the nation's life. I told them about the tremendous importance of Mahatma Gandhi for Americans in learning to live out the values of our own constitution in the struggle for civil rights and for equality and justice for all. Then I told them I was pleased to learn of the importance of Abraham Lincoln for educators in India. I could not help but think how similar the circumstances of these students' lives are to Lincoln's: growing up in very simple homes, taking care of farm animals and crops, walking long distances barefoot across the fields to school. I told the students of Lincoln's love of reading and learning, and I told them I hoped I could one day welcome them to study at Georgetown University.

Another priest, Fr. Joel, came in during the middle of my remarks and heard part of what I said. He invited me to come to another village's primary school the next day and talk to the students about the importance of education: why should they go through all the effort to study? For many of them, none of the earlier generations of their family had ever gone to school. Again I invoked the examples of Gandhi and Lincoln. This time, when I told the students I hoped to welcome them to Georgetown University, the students erupted in extremely long, exuberant applause. Later, when I recounted this to Archbishop Machado, he became excited and said "Yes! Why not?" He said that when he was their age, he was not on any higher level of education than they, and maybe not even as high. He remarked that if someone had told him then that he would one day go to Fordham University in New York City and earn a PhD, he would never have believed it.

Traditionally, the Warlis lived mostly at a subsistence level. When people did accumulate more resources than were needed, they would celebrate by partying until the resources were exhausted, and then go back to work. The use and abuse of alcohol makes the problem worse. Alcoholic drinks were served as part of all traditional celebrations, and when people were partying, men would drink to excess as long as their money lasted, and only then go back to work.

To address the financial problems, the social work center has established Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with special attention to women. The basic principle is that no one receives anything for free—everyone has to pay at least something for goods and services received. The center lends money to groups of women and teaches them to use their funds to make more money and pay to back the center. Then they can borrow more and begin to build

up capital. I was welcomed into one home where a woman, who works for a bank, very proudly showed me her new purchase of large pots and pans, made with the assistance of her SHG. She would now be able to rent these to other families in the village when they were having a major celebration like a wedding; she was also launching a catering business and would prepare all the food for a family's celebration. The Vasai Janhit Trust provides a training program for women who want to be tailors and dressmakers. I attended the graduation ceremony for one group of young women who proudly showed me their manual sewing machines with pedals for the feet to make the machine operate.

The Catholic Church also provides medical care to adivasis, as at the Catholic hospital in nearby Talasiri, where I received a guided tour from an older Italian sister who has been there for decades. Next to the hospital is a residential treatment center for lepers, who would traditionally have been rejected by their communities. The sisters give them a dignified place to live, where their families can come to visit them.

Contextualization of Catholic Faith

I found that there is very creative work in contextualizing the Catholic faith into the Warli cultural life. Much of traditional Warli religious and spiritual life involved fear. Avellino Remedios, S. J., a pioneer in ministering among the Warlis for forty years, compiled the traditional lore of the Warli people and describes their worldview:

The Warli worldview, their value system, their organization, social and religious beliefs and cults are thus embedded in their belief in spirits. The good spirits are hidden and need

not be disturbed. . . . They placate the evil spirits and believe that the good spirits take care of themselves. The religious and social rites are done out of fear.⁷¹

In response to this situation, Remedios was the first person to translate the gospels into the Warli language. He told me that he began with the *Gospel of Mark* because he thought the Warlis were living very close to the world of Mark. The artwork of the Warlis often presents Christian biblical stories in the traditional style of their culture. Artists portray scenes from the life of Jesus in the traditional Warli manner of painting, using stick figures somewhat analogous to the petroglyphs of Native Americans in the southwestern United States. This kind of contextualization has generated considerable interest in the Catholic faith among Warlis who are not Christian. In Talasiri, I visited a large inquiry class for adivasis who want to learn more about the Catholic faith to consider the possibility of embracing the faith.

Catholic liturgies also incorporate elements of Warli culture into the sacramental life of the church. In a village near Talasiri, I concelebrated a memorial Mass with three Jesuit priests for a man who had died about two months earlier. On a bright Saturday morning, we gathered at the home of the bereaved family and then marched across a small field to the man's grave, which was loosely covered with stones with dirt in between them. As we each placed a lit candle among the stones on top of the grave, Vincy de Mello, S. J., sprinkled holy water, and the women sang a dirge which reminded me very strongly of the chants of Native Americans in the western United States. We then walked back to the home, where

a table was set up outside the home to serve as the altar. Near the altar was a chair containing a photograph of the deceased man with a garland draped around his image.

In front of the altar, between the priests and the people sitting on the ground, there was a simple, open structure constructed of bamboo poles, with a long thread suspended vertically. In front of the structure was a candle that symbolized both the light of Christ and the life of the individual. There was a coconut filled with water as a symbol of our thirst for God. The long thread had seven plants tied in it; it was cut during the ceremony, as a symbol of releasing the soul from all attachment to this world and allowing it to go to God. At this point in the ceremony, the mood changed from mourning to joy that the man is now with God.

At the offertory, there was a long procession in which everyone present came forward and made donations in three containers for the family, the church, and the community. After depositing the money, they placed flowers on the photo of the deceased man. After Communion the family came and stood behind the celebrant and placed their hands on his shoulders as he purified the chalice and consumed the water. Afterward there was a meal for all, serving chicken, rice, and potatoes.

On two evenings, I concelebrated Mass in village churches. Fr. Prakash wrote out the Marathi text of one paragraph of the Second Eucharistic Prayer for me to learn, so that I could concelebrate. I learned that the Marathi word for "Archbishop" is "Mahaguru" ("Great Teacher"), and so I prayed for Mahaguru Felix. The word for priest is "Dharmaguru" ("Moral Teacher"). On the first evening, the church was lit only by candlelight. It was very moving to me to consider that despite all the differences between the people in the village and me, we were united in celebrating the Eucharist.

71. Remedios, p. 19.

I managed to say my lines in Marathi, and people told me my pronunciation was very good.

After the Mass and an informal discussion, we were invited to a home for the traditional Warli initiation ceremony for a three-day-old baby girl. The midwife performs the ceremony, making noise by striking metal utensils together very loudly to scare away any evil spirits and then giving advice to the young girl: “When mother calls, run quickly to her!”⁷² “When father calls, walk slowly!” “Do not stay on the government step!” I was told that the first pieces of advice express the sense that the mother is the more secure guide for their young child than the father. The last warning reflects the traditional suspicion of all forms of government, who have traditionally brought trouble for the adivasis.

On my last evening among the Warli, we celebrated Mass in Marathi and again I prayed part of the Eucharistic Prayer in Marathi. The women were wearing their finest garments, with bright colors that were splendid. After the Mass, a Warli artist presented me with a traditional painting of the tarpa dance after the Mass. The painting depicts a long spiral of stick figures dancing around instrumentalists in the center, with huts and palm trees on the sides. As they were taking photographs of me with the painting, they wrapped it around me.

Normally, tribal custom forbids them to perform the tarpa dance between November and the monsoon season, but in honor of my visit they had requested and received special permission to do so from the tribal leaders. After Mass, we waited outside for the performers to prepare; but there was a long, long, awkward delay because they could not get the tarpa instrument to work

properly. They had not used it for quite a while. After some time, the dancers decided to use recorded music and brought a small music player that had a very tinny sound. They started to dance the tarpa, which is an undulating line dance that moves alternately fast and slow. Eventually, a man came out with the tarpa instrument repaired and he began to play, which improved the sound immensely. They danced for quite a while and then paused for photos with me. After that, a woman grabbed my hand and pulled me along with them. And so before I knew it, I was dancing the tarpa with them. It was most exhilarating. The reflections noted earlier by Gonsalves on the joyful, exuberant dance as a symbol of Trinity evoke something of the power of the moment.

The Warlis, like all the adivasis and Dalits in India, face enormous challenges as the world continues to develop and change ever more rapidly. In the dance of relationships in the Holy Trinity, the sufferings of the people are transformed into a unity that reflects the dynamic of the Trinity itself. This relational dance supported by the efforts and sacrifices of many good people offers an image of hope for the future.

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72. Ibid, p. 82.

India News: Muslims, dalits and adivasis "three of the most vulnerable sections of Indian society" make up more than half of India's prison population, according to former chief justice of Delhi high court Rajinder Sachar, who headed the committee that brought out a report on the condition of Muslim community in India in 2006, pointed out that there had been several cases of Muslim youths being acquitted after years in prison. "Poverty is more prevalent among these three communities and that becomes an obstacle in dealing with the legal system," said Colin Gonsalves, human rights activist and lawyer. "Our system has an ingrained communal and casteist bias. Also, the proportion of these communities in the police officers and even judiciary is less. Tribal groups or Adivasis are considered to be the earliest inhabitants of India. While India is widely considered a success story in terms of growth and poverty reduction, Adivasis in 2004-2005 were twenty years behind the average. Scheduled Tribes are often conflated with Scheduled Castes in the development literature, although they are completely different social categories. Physical remoteness and smaller numbers have gone together with political isolation and low voice in decision making for the Scheduled Tribes. There have been measures to assure defacto autonomy and self-rule to Adivasi... The Catholic Church in India is part of the worldwide Catholic Church under the leadership of the Pope and the Curia in Rome. It was established by St. Thomas the Apostle. There are over 19.9 million Catholics in India, which represents around 1.55% of the total population and the Catholic Church is the largest Christian Church in India. There are 174 dioceses in India organised into 29 provinces. Of these, 132 are Latin Catholic Church, 31 Syro-Malabar Church, and 11 Malankara Syrian Catholic Church The Indian Constitution promises its citizens equality in all aspects. Every person must be treated equally in the eyes of the law and in society. However, the reality is slightly different than what is reflected in our constitution. So let us understand marginalization. Then when industrialization started in India, Adivasis and their lands were exploited by rulers and the government. Most of the Adivasi population was found in Jharkhand, Orissa and other states of North-East India. But mining activities, commercial farming, timber industries and even war in some regions forced the Adivasis from their home and their occupations. They were pushed out of their homes and forced to migrate to other parts of the country. They faced a lot of difficulties due to their inability to merge with society. Dalits and tribal people make up 70 percent of India's 27 million Christians. Attendees at the New Delhi event that honored community work in the Dalit community and marked the 125th anniversary of the birth of B.R. Ambedkar, a past champion of Dalit rights. (ucanews.com photo by Ritu Sharma). Formulate policies. "We have to create space in the mainstream society for all people, especially for poor and marginalized." A group of Dalit Christians, led by the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, filed a complaint with the UN in June accusing the Vatican and the Indian church of not doing enough to curb discrimination against the community. The complaint accused church leadership of caste-based discrimination in "spiritual, educational and administrative places" of the church.