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RELIGION, RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN INDIA:
AN INTERROGATION

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PHD
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
APRIL 2012
DECLARATION

I hereby declare

(a) that this thesis has been written and composed by me resulting from the research I undertook as a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, and
(b) that this thesis is my own and original work, and,
(c) that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification in any other University or academic institution.

Signature:

Name: Muthuraj Swamy

Date: 06.08.2012
Abstract

This thesis is an assessment of interreligious dialogue in India developed as an approach to other religions in the context of exclusivist attitudes. While dialogue is important in such a context, nevertheless, in terms of its wider objectives of creating better relationships in society, it has some limitations which need to be addressed for it to be more effective in society. Studying the past 60 years of dialogue in India and undertaking field-research in south India, this thesis discusses three such limitations. Firstly, critiquing the notion of world-religion categories which is fundamental to dialogue, it argues that such categories are products of the western Enlightenment and colonialism leading to framing colonised people’s identities largely in terms of religion. Dialogue, emphasising the plurality of religions, has appropriated these notions although people live with multiple identities. Secondly the idea of religious conflicts serves as the basic context for dialogue in which dialogue should take necessary actions to contain them. While the concern to do away with conflicts through dialogue needs to be furthered, this thesis considers the multiple factors involved in such conflicts and works for solutions accordingly. Analysing through a case study a clash in 1982 in Kanyakumari district which continues to be termed as Hindu-Christian conflict, this thesis shows that there are multiple factors associated with each communal conflict, and dialogue needs to understand them if it is to work effectively. Thirdly it critiques the elite nature and methods in dialogue which ignore grass root realities and call for ‘taking dialogue to grassroots.’ The argument is that grassroot experiences of relating with each other in everyday living should be incorporated in dialogue for better results. What is proposed at the end is a necessity of re-visioning dialogue which can lead to fostering ‘inter-community relations based on multiple identities and everyday living experiences of ordinary people’ that invites one to enlarge the horizons to comprehend the plurality of relations and identities, not just plurality of religions, understand and address real-life conflicts and question naming conflicts as religious, and incorporate grassroot experiences of everyday living in continuing to work for a more peaceful society.
This work is dedicated to

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Abbreviations

1. BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party
2. CIRSJA – Centre for Inter-faith Relations, Studies and Joint Action
3. CISRS – Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
4. CPJ – Centre for Peace and Justice
5. CREED – Centre for Rural Employment and Education for Development
6. CSI – Church of South India
7. ECI – Election Commission of India
8. GoI – Government of India
9. GoTN – Government of Tamil Nadu
10. HMI – Henry Martyn Institute
11. IMC – International Missionary Council
12. MEET – Multi-religious Education by Extension in Tamil.
13. PASA – People’s Association for Social Action
14. PWDS – Palmera Workers Development Society
15. RSS – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
16. TTS – Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary
17. UTC – United Theological College
18. VHP – Vishwa Hindu Parishad
19. WCC – World Council of Churches
20. WPR – World Parliament of Religions
Introduction

(i) The Research Questions: Interreligious Dialogue and Peacemaking

a) The Research Hypotheses

Interreligious dialogue\(^1\) in contemporary society is done to create better relationships between people belonging to different religions by bringing them together in dialogue: it thus aims to establish peace and harmony in a society which has been devastated by conflicts between religions. There are some limitations in the method and process of how this is carried out, which is the focus of this research. The basic hypothesis of this research, drawing on Christian-initiated dialogue in the post-colonial Indian context over the last six decades, is that dialogue, in spite of its positive contributions to society by offering less aggressive Christian attitudes to other religions and redefining Christian mission within inclusive and pluralist paradigms, is still limited in peacemaking between communities in conflict. There are at least three important aspects in dialogue in this regard. First, the perception of the plurality of ‘world-religions’ between which dialogue should occur, the endorsement for fixed religious identities of people, the silence concerning how, where and why ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ were constructed, and the uncritical acceptance of these essentialised categories in dialogue. In other words, western constructions of ‘religion’ and its plural ‘religions’, religion as a separate category opposed to ‘secular’, ‘world-religion’ categories, and the European colonial creation of religious identities for people in India, have seldom been questioned in dialogue. Second, the uncritical reception and interpretation of ‘religious conflicts’ or ‘conflicts in the name of religions’, and the failure to appreciate that religious conflicts are often more than ‘religious’ conflicts and, often, not even ‘religious’ conflicts at all, ‘religion’ having become a mere useful peg on which to hang the violence. Third, the elite nature of dialogue in which grassroots people (and their life and issues) either become silent objects of discussions or are passive listeners to whom the ‘knowledge’ of dialogue should be passed on. Accordingly, the elite

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\(^1\) Hereafter I will use simply ‘dialogue’, except where the full phrase is required for a better understanding of the ideas expressed. In this thesis, I use ‘dialogue’ not just to refer to the act of dialogue, but also as a wide-spread movement involving many thinkers, perspectives and organizations.
nature of dialogue has ignored the actual living relationships among grassroot people – who have different religious identities as well as multiple community identities – and has put restrictions on dialogue. To be more effective in contemporary India, dialogue needs re-vision itself making use of the insights available from how grassroot people understand religion(s), use religious and other identities, perceive ‘religious’ conflicts, and relate with their neighbours from other communities including religions in spite of conflicts. Especially the multiple identities exercised in grassroot living – both crossing single fixed religious identities as well as crossing religious identities – can help those involved in dialogue to enhance their thinking and activities for constructing better models in their efforts for creating peace and harmony between people in the context of conflicts and violence.

b) The Elaboration of the Research Hypotheses

In the present context, dialogue has become a major theme of discussion as well as an act practiced in many parts of the world, especially among religious leaders, thinkers and theologians. There is much information regarding interreligious meetings and gatherings, conferences, seminars, workshops and invitations to interreligious collaboration. The vast amount of materials produced during the last few decades brings home the fact that there seems to be an increasing interest in this field. There are many institutions – mostly non-government organisations – churches, ashrams and academic centres committed to carrying out dialogue activities in different parts of the globe.\(^2\) One can notice that sometimes government and state institutions, which normally proclaim the separation of religion from the public sphere, are also involved in encouraging their citizens to maintain interreligious dialogue in order avoid what they perceive as religious conflicts, and keep law and order.\(^3\)


\(^3\) Many government administrators and political leaders today endorse interreligious dialogue for various reasons. One recent endorsement is found in the U.S. President Barack Obama’s speech at the Cairo University on 04-06-2009.
Interest in this current research derives from two sources. Firstly, from my appreciation of dialogue especially for its underlying objectives of reducing conflicts between people and creating better relationships, and the less aggressive attitudes it has offered for Christians to approach other religions, and from my involvement in dialogue activities for the last fifteen years which includes six years of full time work with interreligious organisations in South India. Secondly, and at the same time, it emerges from my perception of dialogue’s limitations in terms of its assumptions about the plurality of world-religions, and the manner in which it is carried out.

While in my undergraduate thesis in 2001, I evaluated the work of some interreligious organisations in South India, in this research, I have attempted to research through the above-mentioned limitations which I started to realise amid my post-2001 involvement in dialogue activities. Especially important is the attempt to show how the insights received from grassroot people, especially the way they interact with multiple identities, can help the promoters of dialogue to reconstruct and enhance their efforts in working for better relationships among people.

My involvement with dialogue started in 1998. I had then completed my undergraduate degree in Theology and had been involved in church ministry for a year. My undergraduate degree from Serampore University had courses involving dialogue (one such course was ‘Christians and People of Other Faiths’) and they had generated a lot of enthusiasm in me: I was convinced that dialogue was a better model compared to other models available for Christian relationship with other religions. To be involved in dialogue activities was in my thought for some time and I opted to join the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ), an interreligious organisation in my district, Kanyakumari, in Tamil Nadu, South India. My major work in CPJ was visiting villages and forming youth groups consisting of young people from different religions. In addition to that I also assisted in organising dialogue meetings and multi-religious celebration of religious festivals in villages. My interest in dialogue activities prompted me to upgrade my undergraduate degree to Bachelor of Divinity

4 By ‘less aggressive’ I refer to the Christian approaches in the past two centuries for taking other religions ‘seriously’, studying them with interest rather than treating them with disdain and as ‘heathen’, ‘pagan’ and irrelevant, and exercising a sympathetic approach.

at the United Theological College (UTC), Bangalore, where the study of religion and efforts for dialogue was popular during that time. My enthusiasm for dialogue encouraged me, as already noted, to do my BD thesis on dialogue. After my BD, I again returned to full time work in dialogue and joined the Centre for Interfaith Relations, Studies and Joint Action (CIRSJA). My work with CIRSJA helped me to continue my earlier work such as visiting villages and arranging multi-religious celebration of festivals, in addition to being involved in national level programmes. These activities helped me to gain some in-depth experience in dialogue programmes, and also to realise some of the limitations of dialogue especially when I met people in villages for follow-up meetings after the dialogue programmes.

During such meetings with ordinary village people, it was becoming clear that they looked at the interreligious meetings and celebration of religious festivals in their villages as occasional and political: that is, as some outsiders coming and conducting some programmes for village people in the presence of many political leaders. My conversations with people helped me to observe that religion was neither the primary nor the only aspect that was causing conflicts between them. People’s capacity to maintain peace and harmony in spite of their apparent lack of knowledge of dialogue; the different reasons for conflicts among them; how they solved those conflicts – all these things I learned in my interactions with the people in villages. These were not really new to my own life situation, but my interactions with people helped me realise how ignorant I had been to this reality and how inadequate was theological education on this point. This motivated me to study and evaluate the assumptions of dialogue in India and to record ordinary people’s understanding of religion(s) and religious conflicts and their relations and negotiations with each other, and to offer some tentative suggestions for how dialogue can be effective. This thesis is the result.

My experience and observations during my work with interreligious organisations led me towards the following questions: do people at the grassroots look at religions as it is presented by its elite religious leaders, thinkers and theologians? Are differences between religions strong among them? Can religions be put into single unified systems and differentiated from each other? Why are conflicts between
religions often spoken about, and uncritically accepted in the dialogue circles? If there are many causes for conflicts why is religion claimed as the prime cause? What are the different ways people at the grassroots understand and perceive relationships between religions and how do they live their everyday life in such contexts, and how are these different from elite conceptions of religion and dialogue? Discussion of these questions will be set out throughout this thesis.

Theoretically, the discussion of the limitations of dialogue in the present context may be started with observing the ambiguities in dialogue. Firstly, etymologically speaking, dialogue means conversation between two or more people, and therefore, interreligious dialogue means conversation between people belonging to different religions. Applied in this sense any conversations between people with different religious identities, both in the past and in the present, could be considered as interreligious dialogue. In such interactions the goals of dialogue vary from polemics and apologetics to understanding and learning from each other, or just an exchange of information. Moreover, the conversation does not need to be just about religion, but it can be on any issue or concern. It is simply dialogue – conversation – between people with different religious identities.

But in the contemporary period, interreligious dialogue is not simply any conversation between people with different religious identities. Rather it is presented as an important step in understanding one’s own religion and one’s neighbours’ religions, and thus a step towards better understanding and relationships between people of different religions. The presupposition is that dialogue helps to eliminate religious conflicts and tensions because religions have the potential to further the cause of world peace, if the process is explicated through dialogue. Dialogue is an approach in which positive attitudes and openness to other religions are implied, the view being that such positive attitudes between members of different religions are

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necessary to create better relationships among humans in society.\(^8\) This positive attitude varies from showing mutual openness and mutual sharing among the participants while keeping the distinctive features of their respective religions, or affirming and acknowledging the differences between religions while emphasising the unity of aim or intention of all religions, even though the latter is sometimes criticised in dialogue circles.\(^9\) Such dialogue is not just a practical activity, but it has become a sort of ‘ideal stance’ which is different from the ‘actualities of dialogue’.\(^10\) In this approach, the dialogue promoters write about it or articulate it purely in terms of theory and principle.\(^11\)

My focus in this research is on dialogue as it is understood by its proponents. In formal dialogue, it is more than an ordinary two-way conversation for it refers to particular types of conversation, or conversation with particular attitudes. Thus the term dialogue has been conceptualised, essentialised and imbued with ideas which refer to meanings beyond conversation, such as positive attitudes and tolerant approaches.\(^12\) While I would like to keep the term ‘interreligious dialogue’ or ‘dialogue’ to refer to formal dialogue, I would prefer to use different terms such as interreligious interactions or relations to refer to what happens and what has happened outside of the formal dialogue.

The second type of ambiguity in dialogue is related to the history or the past of dialogue: the different ways in which the various pasts of dialogue are talked about. Here there are generally two perspectives. First, whatever interreligious interactions happened (especially before the end of the colonial period) in the past were not genuine dialogues, for they were implicitly based on or had aspects of apologetics or


\(^12\) Raimundo Panikkar, “Foreword: The Ongoing Dialogue” in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, pp. ix-viii. In the same book see the article “World Council of Churches’ Perspective on the Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue” by Wesley Ariarajah where he says “dialogue is a spirit, a mood, and an attitude” (p.251).
polemics. Therefore new dialogue, which is a genuine dialogue or dialogue with a positive attitude, breaks with the ‘tainted’ interreligious interactions of the past. According to this perspective, the new version is appropriate for the contemporary context. The alternate perspective, and one which rejects this ‘tainted and pure’ dichotomy, links contemporary formal dialogue to the various interreligious interactions of the past, discerning common assumptions and intentions. The above perspectives are not absolute, indeed often the two poles touch, the past (otherwise rejected) called to add strength and validity to the present. For instance, while introducing his book Hindu-Christian Dialogue, Harold Coward says:

Hindu-Christian dialogue has had a long and checkered history. Up until the beginning of this century most Hindu-Christian interaction took place in India. The first half of this century saw the expansion of Hindu-Christian discussion to Europe and North America. Worldwide pluralism in the decades since the fifties has resulted in a gradual intensification of this interaction at both the lay and scholarly levels. But there has been no broad and sustained Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Coward here uses different terms such as ‘dialogue’, ‘discussion’ and ‘interaction’ to talk about his subject. This indicates the tensions involved in relating the present dialogue with the past interreligious interactions. On the one hand he talks about the ‘history’ of dialogue, and on the other hand he differentiates, but does not explicate, the ‘broad and sustained Hindu-Christian dialogue’ from the interactions of the past. Thus, one can see both the perspectives indicated above – relating the present dialogue with the past interactions as well as making dialogue serve new purposes. Coward continues to talk about early contact between India and the Greco-Roman world, Mughal Emperor Akbar’s summons to Jesuit Christians to take part in theological debates, the exchanges between European missionaries and Hindu elites like Raja Rammohun Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, Keshub Chunder Sen,

Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan within a framework of the past Hindu-Christian dialogue, which he nevertheless then downplays.

But dialogue, or precisely the awareness of and the emphasis on it, is a very new development in the global context and also in India. The idea that followers of different religions should participate in dialogue activities in order to understand the religions of each other and to create healthy relationships among them is a relatively new trend. While a general understanding of interreligious relations is that people with different religious identities are meeting, interacting and relating with each other in various ways (as in the past), the advocated dialogue is mostly associated with the imperative, ‘ought’. In other words, the ideas of interreligious links are: there should be dialogue; the urgency of the time demands it; people of different religions must come together in dialogue to overcome religious conflicts – commonly with the unspoken pressure that failure to engage in dialogue may contribute to, or even cause, violence; and proper preparation is necessary for taking part in dialogue. A striking feature of formal dialogue is the assumption that it is not happening among ordinary people and that this is the cause for religious conflicts and violence in society, solved only when the grassroots are educated about dialogue. This approach may imply that ordinary people are the perpetrators of ‘religious conflicts.’

Of course, it is true that dialogue, as articulated by its exponents, is not happening among many common and ordinary people but is restricted to the formal dialogue programmes which are mostly attended by elites. But what is ignored here is the fact that people belonging to different religions, at various places, times in history and levels, were and are in continuous interaction. While many times these everyday interreligious relations are ignored, sometimes they are treated as superficial and shallow, being not theologically grounded, or being done by unsophisticated

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18 A recent work which has similar ideas is Rebecca Kratz Mays, Interfaith Dialogue at the Grassroots, Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2009.
villagers. Against the ‘ordinary’, ‘familiar’ and ‘local’ interreligious relationships in the everyday living contexts, people are encouraged to take part in faithful and genuine dialogue. This research therefore critiques the assumptions and ideas behind this ‘new dialogue’, and the nature and methods of its practical execution, and in so doing, describes and discusses the relations among ordinary people with different religious identities.

Dialogue is found in academic and non-academic fields in various parts of the globe. It has acquired a significant place in the field of theology, particularly in Christian theology, and in Religious Studies – universities have departments and centres of dialogue and offer programmes and courses in it, and there are a number of centres and programmes outside university institutions as well widely endorsed and spoken about by churches and church related organisations, government and non-governmental organisations. This is mainly because of the assumption that the world is perceived as divided on the basis of religions, and hence efforts for dialogue are necessary to bridge chasms. Dialogue is encouraged because it is claimed, or at least assumed, that religions have potentials to create clashes between people, and/or plays a part in many such clashes. It is developed both in terms of its concept and practice. At the conceptual level, religions are compared in terms of their

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19 When I was sharing about my field research, one reputed theologian of dialogue from South India asked me: ‘what do the grass root people know about dialogue, and why do you want to do research among them?’ Since it was an informal chat, I maintain the confidentiality.

20 WCC, Guidelines, pp.10-11.

21 To mention a few from the western world, the Cambridge Interfaith Programme in the University of Cambridge (http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/), Interreligious Studies in Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin (http://www.tcd.ie/ise/study/), Dialogue Institute in the Temple University, Philadelphia, (http://institute.jesdialogue.org/programmes/temple/graduate/). In the Indian context Serampore University dialogue is an important topic in courses in Religion and Theology since 1970s, and UTC, Bangalore, and the TTS, Madurai give importance to this theme.


commonalities, their influences on and relationship to each other\textsuperscript{24}, and at the practical level various interreligious meetings, discussion forums and programmes are arranged. Discussion of common themes and the notion of ‘religions together for the common welfare’ of human beings are some important aspects of dialogue among interested theologians.\textsuperscript{25} One common assumption appears to be that just as cultures are said to do this or that, so too religions are said to dialogue. Neither of these abstract nouns such as religion or culture actually do anything, of course: rather do people with this or that ethnic or religious label (accurate or not) act in certain ways.

This kind of formal group-to-group dialogue has dominated the Indian context, especially Indian Christian thinking, since the post-Independence period and it continues to do so in spite of criticisms aimed at it from the so-called or self-proclaimed conservatives or evangelicals who fear syncretism, relativism, dilution and compromise of Christian truth.\textsuperscript{26} In India, dialogue was proposed as a viable tool for relationships among followers of different religions after Independence, when the question of the relationship of religious minorities in India such as Christians and Muslims with Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs became vital, and against the background of the religiously-based and also violent Partition.\textsuperscript{27} The initiatives were taken mainly by Christian thinkers, but later people from other religions also joined them.

\textsuperscript{24} For example, see Geoffrey Parrinder, \textit{Upanishads, Gita and Bible: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Christian Scriptures}, London: Sheldon Press, 1962. There are a number of such comparative studies done in dialogue.


\textsuperscript{27} In this, P.D. Devanandan is considered to be the pioneer of dialogue through his work as the founder director of the Christian Institute of Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) and his contributions to dialogue will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.
Indian nation-building was put forward as a common platform where people belonging to different religions could come together and relate with each other.\textsuperscript{28}

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed many such efforts taken in India through churches, non-government organisations, ashrams and research centres.\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, in the same period the Roman Catholic Church officially supported the need for Christian relationship with other religions in the Second Vatican Council\textsuperscript{30}, held between 1962 and 1965, and the World Council of Churches on the side of Protestant Christians, made many efforts for dialogue and produced the already referred to document ‘Guidelines on Dialogue’ in 1979. These attempts had much influence on the promoters of dialogue in India, who in turn also contributed to the WCC programmes and Vatican initiatives by participating in them and appropriated them in the Indian context.\textsuperscript{31}

Especially since the 1980s dialogue in India has concentrated on the issue of ‘religious conflicts,’ commonly referred to in India as communal conflicts.\textsuperscript{32} Believing that basically misunderstanding of religions among people leads to conflicts, dialogue claims that religious conflicts can be eliminated when people of different religions come together in dialogue. One common notion in dialogue is that the level of religious misunderstanding is high especially among ordinary people or people at the grassroots and because of this they are vulnerable to being involved in


\textsuperscript{29} They include Kanyakumari and Chennai dioceses of the Church of South India, CISRS, Henry Martyn Institute, (http://www.hmiindia.com/history.html) Dialogue Centres in UTC, Bangalore and TTS, Madurai. There are also many Roman Catholic ashrams such as Santivanam in Tamil Nadu for dialogue activities. These will be discussed in Chapter 2.


\textsuperscript{31} Devanandan participated in the WCC New Delhi Assembly in 1961, Thomas was in Central Committee of WCC, 1968-1975, and Stanley Samartha was the founder-director of the Sub-unit for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies in WCC; and Roman Catholic theologians in India such as D.S. Amalorpavadoss, played major role in appropriating Vatican II for dialogue in the Indian context through his National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC). See his book, \textit{Gospel and Culture: Evangelisation and Inculturation}, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1978; also \textit{Praying Seminar}, NBCLC, n.d.

religious conflicts. Therefore, it is claimed, these people have to be educated about dialogue to ensure the maintenance of communal harmony in the contemporary Indian context.

In Kanyakumari district in the State of Tamil Nadu in India – where I conducted field study for this research – one can find the above type of dialogue as it is found elsewhere in India. Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are the three major religions followed in this district and there are a number of dialogue activities in the district. In the 1960s and 1970s, the efforts of Vatican II and WCC have influenced the dialogue programmes in the district. However, dialogue was posed as an urgent need in the district after 1982 when, it is claimed, religious clashes were occurring between Hindus and Christians in the district. Many initiatives were taken by churches in the region, especially by the Roman Catholic Church, to create better relationships among people. Non-governmental organisations were established after this period for working for communal harmony and peace in society and already existing NGOs were also involved in promoting this purpose.

This research is concerned with critiquing these trends in dialogue in the Indian context over the last six decades. As mentioned earlier, I limit to picking up three aspects that I consider as the limitations of dialogue. First, how religion as a category is used in dialogue. As it is obvious, dialogue is preoccupied with religions and religious plurality. Often one can hear about the dialogue between ‘world-religions’. But what does it mean to talk about ‘religion’ (and its binary ‘secular’), ‘religions’ and ‘world-religions’ in the modern context? How have these categories been constructed? What was the context in which these categories were created? What

35 Roman Catholic Church in Kanyakumari District has a Dialogue Commission, CSI Kanyakumari Diocese works through its Laity Committee, and NGOs such as Thirvarutperavai and CIRSJA are also involved in dialogue.
36 Interview, C. Rajamony, a retired CSI Presbyter and dialogue activist, Nagercoil, 10-07-2008; and interview, Antony Tobias, a retired Catholic Priest and former Secretary, The Dialogue Commission, Kottar Diocese, Nagercoil, 22-06-2008. A note regarding footnoting interviews: when I first footnote an interview I provide the name of the interviewee, and the place and the date of the interview. Thereafter when referring to the same interview again, I just use the format – for example, ‘Interview, Rajamony’ – to avoid redundancy. See also Appendix IV that provides details of my interviewees.
37 Interview, Abdul Salaam, a Muslim and a dialogue activist, Nagercoil, 13-07-2008.
were their locations? Are these concepts familiar to people all over the world and in each Indian village? Answers for many of these questions lie in discussing how these categories have been constructed in the context of Western Enlightenment and western Christianity and how they have been passed on elsewhere through European colonialism particularly from the eighteenth century. The role of Western Orientalists, Christian missionaries, travellers and colonial administrators in creating religions and religious identities for the colonised people is an important aspect which nevertheless has been paid little attention in dialogue.

In the Indian context, one consequence of these forces was the imagination or construction of ‘Hinduism’ through the western notions of ‘religion’. While there are a number of traditions within what is known as Hinduism, the western intellectuals and administrators during the colonial times, in their observations and interpretations, simplistically made Hinduism a singular entity. Moreover, in the process, the Brahmanical traditions were selected to represent the whole of Hinduism for people in the West, which spilled over into Indian understanding. The Science of Religion or the comparative study of religions, established in the West during the 19th century, crystallised this process. As a result, Hinduism became a ‘world-religion’ or a ‘major religion’ as did Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Confucianism and others. In relation to the Indian context the imagination or invention of Hinduism is important to this study for this notion is uncritically used in, among others, dialogue. This is discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5.

Discussing the second limitation leads to investigate and understand what is termed ‘religious conflicts’ which is claimed to be crucial to the context of dialogue. As mentioned earlier, the purpose of dialogue, it is often claimed, is to do away with ‘religious conflicts’ and create communal harmony, peace-building and a non-violent society. In the global context of ‘terrorism’, this gets even further significance. The assumption that ‘religion’ or ‘religions’ contribute to violence, and the uncritical acceptance of this notion in dialogue has, in fact, set many limitations for dialogue. It

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39 King, Orientalism, Chapter 3.
is often overlooked that what is claimed as ‘religious violence’ often stems from socio-economic and personal struggles of people, and from the political intervention which plays with the religious identities of people in order to receive votes and to achieve political power. For instance, in India, what is termed ‘religious conflicts’, has been, at the roots, mostly a social issue involving caste domination and oppression, or economic struggles between people or people’s groups, or political manipulations for power or even personal problems between people. Questions such as how they evolve into ‘religious conflicts’ and how and why they are projected as such, and how these economic, political and social realities are overlooked in dialogue need attention. Convenience and benefit of power-holders apart, Chandra Muzaffar’s comment with regard to Malaysia may be relevant here: “Religion gives the strength that simple ethnic polarization does not because it…presents itself as a total world-view, with a total effect on people.”

Moreover, while talking about religious conflicts, dialogue simply accepts that religion, in one way or other, has been instrumental in creating conflicts among people and rush to propose what has to be done instead of analysing critically why and how these conflicts have occurred. As Elizabeth Koepping comments, responses to the issue of religious conflicts “easily slip into generalizations based on what ought to be the case according to power-holders – whether political, religious or academic – rather than working from what actually is the case in local daily life.”

Unfortunately dialogue promoters work as ‘power-holders’: they may well need the theme of religion or the designation of ‘religious conflicts’ in order to propose dialogue as a solution to eliminate them. Koepping continues:

While remaining at the level of reality as lived and observed over time risks drowning the observer in data, extrapolating too readily from the theoretical macro to some assumed micro-level risks labelling conflict or tension as religious in nature when other issues are more relevant. Not only do many such assumptions put religion in an unreasonably bad light, but the resulting misapprehensions may make the resolution of tensions all but impossible.

42 Koepping, “Family, State and Religious Conversion: Multiple Discourses from Malaysia and South Australia” in Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, 2/2, Autumn 2000, p.141.
Dialogue runs exactly into this problem: firstly either it labels conflicts among people as religious or uncritically accepts such labelling which has been done by power seekers such as politicians and others, and then offers dialogue as a solution to do away with ‘religious conflicts’.\(^4^4\) This trend in dialogue needs critical evaluation and this thesis attempts such an evaluation.

Discussing the third limitation brings out the elite nature of dialogue and its consequences. The nature of formal dialogue programmes, the participants, the locations of the programmes, their content and themes, their attitude to and impact on people who do not participate in these programmes need critical study. Often dialogue activists express the idea that dialogue should ‘reach’ or should be passed on to ordinary people, ignoring the everyday relationships of people. Does dialogue, which claims its concern is for building communities, take seriously the experiences of the grassroots people in relating with their neighbours?

Dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants... because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation, it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. The domination implicit in dialogue is that of the world by the dialoguers.... How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I record myself as a case apart from others – mere ‘its’ in whom I cannot recognize the other “I”s? How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of “pure” men [sic], the owners of truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members are “these people” or “the great unwashed”? How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite and that the presence of the people in history is a sign of deterioration, thus to be avoided?\(^4^5\)

These words of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, have been uttered in relation to the ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, but these are also very relevant to dialogue in India as these bring challenging insights to it. If dialogue separates itself from the silenced non-members of the dialogue, it is no longer a dialogue at all. Because what is then implied is that knowledge – knowledge of how to relate with people of other religions – is found or achieved only through dialogue done by a tiny minority. In dialogue or conversation, contrary to the worldview, there are not merely two kinds

\(^4^4\) Samarth, One Christ – Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology, Bangalore: South Asia Theological Research Institute, 2000, pp.7, 57-59.
of partners. There is always a group of people, an audience, who may not participate in dialogue but who are still important, because the implications of dialogue are always addressed to them. They are not people who lack knowledge, experience and any glimmer of a capacity for thought, which is how they inevitably have to function in ‘dialogue’ as the passive recipients of knowledge. It is here that the most crucial limitation of dialogue becomes identifiable. One anthropologist of religion, in a different context, thus says: “We tend to presume that everyone is as concerned with ideology, language, and thought as we are. We expect that the discourse of religion, especially, takes place on a sophisticated and high plane – “different” from the everyday and common”.46 I shall be arguing strongly that it does not. Yet dialogue mostly functions on the basis of this kind of illusion and this needs a critique.

(ii) Purpose, Scope and Limitations

The purpose of this research is to point out some of the important limitations of dialogue developed by its proponents in India and analyse them in detail in order to bring out its inadequacy in addressing the issues of violence and conflicts, which are claimed to be motivated by religions, and to offer some suggestions for dialogue to be more effective based on the grassroots realities of multiple identities in people’s ways of relating to each other. The proponents and promoters of dialogue include those who conceptualise dialogue and also individuals and organisations such as churches, ecumenical organisations and institutions that are involved in activities for social well-being. Hence these people are the primary audience to whom this research is addressed.

My approach in this research, basically, is not issue-based but rather has more to do with the methods in dialogue: I am more concerned with a critique of the notions behind dialogue, and the ways in which it is carried out, rather than looking at any particular theological issue within actual dialogue or between two particular religions. Of course, these are discussed, but only as examples as and when necessary. In the Indian context, I will be concentrating on Hindu-Christian, Christian-Muslim and Hindu-Muslim dialogues which are popular in South India

which is the location of my field research. As far as my field research is concerned, my aim is to critique what is going on under the aegis of dialogue in Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu in India today. However, this is not unrelated to conceptualising dialogue in India. Hence critiquing today’s practical activity of dialogue in Kanyakumari district is also to critique the theoretical and wider historical situations that have prompted this.

A number of works on dialogue has been done from different perspectives in Christianity in the recent years both at the Indian and global levels: a positive appreciation and recommendation of on-going dialogue especially in the context of Christian mission (witnessing in multi-religious contexts),\textsuperscript{47} theologies of dialogue and religious pluralism especially in terms of relevant Christology and Soteriology,\textsuperscript{48} coming together in dialogue for common purpose (interreligious ethic).\textsuperscript{49} As I have already mentioned, there are also critical approaches to dialogue which would do away with it and these mainly come from the so-called evangelicals,\textsuperscript{50} who claim that dialogue betrays Christian faith and mission. Criticisms also come from the non-Christians who fear that dialogue is another form of proselytisation or an indirect method for conversion. In the Indian context this criticism has often come from Hindu elites who suspect Christian initiatives for dialogue as a covert means for conversion to Christianity.\textsuperscript{51} This study is not primarily concerned with discussing dialogue related to Christian mission, or constructing any theologies of dialogue or critiquing dialogue from an extremist perspective. In my view, dialogue is still a better available model in Christian attitudes to other religions, and as I have mentioned above already there are a number of studies available related to this.

\textsuperscript{48} Numerous works are available from this perspective, and a recent work is Harsha K. Kotian, \textit{Christo Normative Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of the Works of Stanley Jones, Stanley Samartha and Paul Knitter}, Delhi: ISPCK, 2011.
This thesis also critiques the world-religion categories that ascribe monolithic identities to people. However, due to the non-availability of alternative terminologies I make use of the available terms. There are also limitations regarding defining ‘elites’ and ‘grassroots.’ While these two terms are ambiguous and relative and there is no clear line of difference, nevertheless in relation to my research elites can be the advocates of dialogue – mostly religious leaders, thinkers and activists – who think that formal dialogue should be propagated because it can bring better relationships among people, and the people at the grassroots are those who maintain relationships between each other irrespective of having multiple identities. Of course, it can be argued that even outside the formal dialogue, the elite proponents may maintain relationships, but my main contention is that non-elites are often targeted by elite dialogue activists to follow their directives for dialogue.

(iii) Research Method

The research method undertaken is both library-based and empirical. In the theoretical section, the concept of dialogue is discussed, particularly as it has been conceptualised by Christian thinkers in India in the post-Independence period. There are a number of thinkers working on dialogue in India, and the writings on this field are immense. However, this research will concentrate on the major trends pertaining to the purpose and methods (or nature) of dialogue. These will be studied against the present Indian context, and its limitations to address the context of communal tensions, conflicts and violence will be spelt out.

I undertook field research in Kanyakumari district in India for four months in 2007 and eight months in 2008 to study specifically how dialogue is practised among the proponents and promoters of dialogue who are mostly elites, and how relationships are maintained among people at the grassroots. My ethnographic field research was more of a reflexive ethnography. According to Charlotte Aull Davies, who has produced an outstanding work on reflexive ethnography, it is “a process of self-reference... in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and the
process of doing research”.\textsuperscript{52} For her, “it is possible to make comprehensive and positive use of this reflexivity while still avoiding the inward-looking radical reflexivity, associated with postmodernist critiques, which undermines our capacity to do research intended to produce valid and generalisable knowledge of other people, and not merely of oneself”.\textsuperscript{53} In my field research, I have used reflexive ethnography for many reasons.

I was born in this district and have lived here for more than 30 years. As I mentioned earlier, Kanyakumari is a district where people with different religious identities live. Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are the major religions in the district. This district is multi-religious in the sense not only that more than one religion exists, but also more than one religion is professed in the same family. That is, people following different religions live in one household. This trend could be found in the district for more than a century and this continues to be the case even today. I too come from such a family and I have lived in this reality from my childhood. My family was originally a Hindu family, and I am a converted Christian. While some of my family joined Christianity later, the rest continue to follow Hindu traditions. But we have continued to live in the same household. While living in this reality I never came to know either anything about ‘dialogue’ or anything about ‘religious conflicts’. We just lived it. (Even today many people in villages in this district do not know what exactly religious dialogue is, but they live in harmony with their neighbours from different religions – I found this reality in my field research, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 8).

My field work in Kanyakumari district consisted of three primary stages. The first stage was to study and understand the ‘religious’ conflicts in the district, which are claimed by the dialogue promoters to be the context that necessitated dialogue. I was revisiting the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ of 1982 and its impact on the whole district for the subsequent twenty five years. The purpose of doing this is to understand and study the conflicts not only within the religious context, but also within various other


\textsuperscript{53} Davies, \textit{Reflexive Ethnography}, p.272.
inter-linked aspects including socio-economic and political aspects. While this conflict had multiple factors and was primarily between fisher-folk people and inland people, for the last 28 years it is projected as religious conflicts. This will be presented in detail and analysed in Chapter 7. The data regarding the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ were collected basically through four methods. First, the primary and publically available written document regarding the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ is the report of the Commission by Justice Venugopal appointed by the State Government of Tamil Nadu to investigate the events. This is generally known among people in Kanyakumari district as the Venugopal Commission report. This report has been both welcomed as well as criticised by people in the district. To be more precise, as the report held both the Christians and the Hindus in the district responsible for the clashes and proposed solutions that favoured as well as challenged both groups, both groups vouch for it where it favours their cause and criticise it where it does not. Naturally, the report has some shortcomings, which will be discussed in chapter 8. Nevertheless this is the only document publicly available which provides people with a detailed report and analysis of the clashes, notwithstanding whatever limitations and conclusions it has. Secondly, I could get information regarding print media circulating at the time of the clashes which were used by both groups to attack each other. Wall posters, small notices and declarations in local newspapers were used as a means to incite violence. The third is the studies and reflections done on the clashes after the clashes were over. These include unpublished dissertations and other writings. Finally I interviewed people who have knowledge about the clashes and who directly witnessed them. In addition to studying the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’, I

54 An often-expressed idea regarding studying the past conflicts is that such research may re-kindle people’s feelings and memory of conflicts. In my own field work, I was confronted by some interviewees who claimed that researchers help continuing violence. However, in my research, I need to revisit the 1982 clashes, because the way it is projected by researchers and dialogue promoters as well as those with vested interests especially in the political arena. Interview, Balarasu, in his 40s, a dialogue activist and teacher, Nagercoil, 02-07-2008.


56 Christian fundamentalists who were criticising other religions, particularly Hinduism, Venugopal, pp.239-241.

57 Mainly the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which were criticising other religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, Venugopal, p.238.

also collected data regarding some of the recent conflicts in the district, which are often claimed to be linked to the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ and thus classed as ‘religious’. In this regard, I wanted to interview some politicians in whose discourse Mandaikadu conflicts occur quite often. I approached three district level politicians but only one responded from Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In addition to that I also interviewed some local social scientists and historians who approach the society and history of local people from different approaches and who have published materials pertaining to it which will be discussed in Chapter 3 and 7. I have made use of them especially in Chapter 7 where I analyse the clashes in the district. In addition to the information collected through interviews in the field research, I also make use of the insights I have received from my experience in working with dialogue organisations for the past fifteen years.

The second stage of field work was interviewing people associated with churches and NGOs who posited dialogue as the solution for the ‘religious clashes’ in the district. I studied what has been done both at the official levels and at the local church levels in the Church of South India, Roman Catholic and other churches. This involved studying the official declarations of the churches on communal harmony, and interviewing the pastors, priests and lay leaders who were involved in dealing with finding solutions for these clashes. I arranged interviews with the people who were involved in dialogue through the churches and NGOs. I did not apply any strict procedure in choosing my interviewees as I wanted to collect as much information as possible. Most of the interviewees were known to me earlier, and some were introduced to me by other interviewees for my research and I contacted them. Except for two Hindu interviewees who were bit hesitant to give interviews, all who agreed did so enthusiastically.

In total I interviewed 29 people involved in dialogue activities – 7 Protestant Christians (5 clergy, 2 lay people), 5 Roman Catholic Christians (4 clergy and 1 lay person), 11 Hindus (all lay people), and 6 Muslims (all lay people); 27 men and 2 women – both the women are from Hindu tradition; 21 people above the age of 50, 4 each in their 40s and 30s; 15 working in church or government or other institutions, 59 Interview, Velan, Kanyakumari, 12-07-2008.
11 retired from such work and 3 running business, and the minimum education qualification of all 26 people who were working or were retired was an undergraduate degree. I had prepared a set of questions for them and gave them in advance so that they could be prepared for the interview. The questions are found in Appendix 1. Most of the interviews were done at once which lasted between one and three hours, while some talked over two or three sessions. Some interviewees didn’t want the interviews to be recorded in the tape, even though they agreed to the using of their names, in which case I took notes, otherwise I could record the interviews. At the start of the interviews, I explained to them about my research and assured confidentiality wherever they require it. The interviews were conducted either at the homes of the interviewees or in their organisation premises. Both Tamil, the local language, and English were used in the interviews. What was discussed was how the promoters of dialogue understand religion(s), and their plurality, the relationship between them, and ‘Mandaikadu religious’ clashes and other subsequent conflicts together with efforts made at the time to talk about these clashes to people in villages and offer solutions. Specific information was gathered about the nature of the dialogue programmes, the methods and means they follow, the locations and the participants. The major purpose in this stage of field research was to study and understand how the dialogue promoters understood the context and definitions of ‘religious clashes’ and the extent to which their activities remain at elite level.

The third stage was studying how the ordinary people look at the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ and how they relate with each other irrespective of these clashes. I carried out this part of my field work in a village, Gramam (pseudonym), I chose for my field work. Gramam is nearby my native village and hence I could use my familiarity with some people in the village as the starting point for carrying out my field research. Firstly, I used participant observation methods to observe, understand and study how people at the grassroots relate with each other irrespective of religious differences. This included observing and studying their attitudes, the symbols and stereotypes that are used in relating/separating with each other, and studying how their memory of the past in terms of interreligious relationships has been formed. Secondly, there is a custom in the villages in South India called Thinnai Talking (Veranda Talking). People (mostly male who are not formally educated) irrespective
of religions and any other classifications gather in some public places in small numbers (nowadays tea shops are usually used for this), and discuss various issues including religion, politics, society and various day to day issues. They are mostly spontaneous, and I made use of these informal gatherings to collect data by participating in their discussions. Thirdly, I also conducted two formal focus-group interviews where Hindus, Christians and Muslims in the region came together and discussed issues related to religions, violence and inter-religious relationships. In addition to informal talks with many people in the village, for formal interviews I could approach 40 people in the villages from all religions (15 Hindus, 14 Christians and 11 Muslims), both gender (23 men, 17 women) as well as people who are young – in their 20s and 30s – as well as adults (19 Young, 21 adults). Their occupation was as follows: 10 people working in/retired from government or other institutions, 6 people doing small business or shop keeping, 11 people either farmers and masons or doing some coolie works or working in companies and 13 housewives. The 10 who work in government or other institutions have at least passed SSLC (10 years of study in school from the age of 6), whereas the education of those who are in business and are working in companies vary from schooling to postgraduate degree. Farmers, masons and others who are doing coolie works have no formal education at all or have some schooling at the primary level. The interviews lasted from as little as 5 minutes to more than three hours depending upon their interest and willingness to speak. The short interviews mostly pointed to others in the village who might give better information. Six interviews lasted for more than two hours (three from Hindus, two from Muslims and one from a Christian) where I could get a lot of information. All interviews were done at the homes of the interviewees. In my interviews in Gramam I was not very keen on recording the interviews at the start of it as it might lead to suspicion in villages and an abrupt end of the interview, but once people felt free to talk, I asked their permission to record, and where they agreed I could record them. Also, I had a set of questions (Appendix 2) which I had not given to them earlier, in contrast to the interviewed dialogue activists, and did not ask all questions when they clearly did not want to talk more.

From those who were willing to talk, I invited them to come for focus-group interviews and I could arrange two such interviews. The first was arranged on 23
June 2008 in the premises of the Hindu temple in the village. I had invited around 12 people from all three religions, both men and women as well young and adult, but 5 people (all men) – two Christians (one young, one adult); one Hindu (young), and two Muslims (one adult, one young) – turned up. The second was arranged on 08 July 2008 for another group in the CSI church premises. This time 8 people turned up – 3 Christians (adult men), 3 Hindus (one young man and two adult women) and 2 Muslims (two adult men). I explained the purpose of the research at the outset, and also asked permission for recording and all participants agreed for recording. Then I initiated discussions by posing questions and they enthusiastically participated in discussing them. The questions are found in Appendix 3, and the information collected from them are mostly used in Chapter 8, even though I also use some information in chapters 5, 6, and 9 as well. In addition to the formal focus-group interviews, some of the interviews I had with people in Gramam turned to be ‘informal’ focus-group interviews where when I was doing a formal interview with a person, their neighbours also came and joined. They listened to the interactions between me and my interviewees, and gradually participated in the discussions by expressing their views as well. This is the normal custom in villages, and most often for interviews for academic purposes this is productive rather than destructive. I conducted all interviews in Tamil. The main purpose of this stage was to collect data to study how grassroot people look at religions and religious conflicts, relationship between religious followers and how they relate with each other in their everyday lives and this information has been used in critiquing the elite nature of dialogue.

The concept of dialogue in India in general and its practice in Kanyakumari district in particular is interrogated using a postcolonial-subaltern framework. 60 Being aware that postcolonialism also has limitations, as it has been argued by many, this framework is applied critically for this study. This means that postcolonial theories will not be blindly accepted: where necessary they will be critiqued. My use of a postcolonial framework to study dialogue in the post-colonial context has several uses. Firstly it helps to understand and bring out issues related to the colonial

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60 A postcolonial-subaltern framework helps to critique the uncritical acceptance of colonial forms of knowledge and attitudes in the activities, especially of the elites in the once-colonised countries, and how those colonial aspects are used in understanding and interpreting the ongoing realities.
constructions of religions and societies, which have been so often uncritically accepted by the dialogue promoters. This has had an effect of setting a number of limitations for the execution of dialogue in India. Secondly a postcolonial framework helps to understand ‘religious’ conflicts in their multi-dimensional causative factors and to critique dialogue for its shallow understanding that religions (or misunderstanding of religions) are the major cause for ‘religious’ conflicts in Indian society. Thirdly, a postcolonial framework, with its emphasis on subalternity, helps to compare and contrast the formal elite dialogue programmes in Kanyakumari district with the actual, everyday relationships of people at the grassroots in villages irrespective of their religious belonging.

A word about the use of names of my interviewees in my field research is necessary. As I have already mentioned, I interviewed people in Kanyakumari district – both the dialogue promoters and grassroots people in villages. Some of the dialogue promoters have published literature on dialogue. Since I use their writings as well as information from interviews with them, I use their real names, except where they have asked for confidentiality, in my research in order to avoid confusions. But for my interviewees in villages I use pseudonyms since some information they shared was sensitive. They include both women and men, Hindu, Christian and Muslim. For the Hindu interviewees I use common names of Hindu gods and goddesses, for Christians I use Bible names, for Muslim men I use the common Muslim names and for Muslim women I use common Muslim woman names. The commonly used term for village in India is ‘Gramam’ and I use this term for the village which I have studied.

(iv) Summary of Chapters

Apart from Introduction and Conclusion this thesis has nine chapters.

Chapter 1 and 2 discuss the theoretical background of this research. Chapter 1 discusses the perceived antecedents of dialogue in the contemporary period such as comparative religion in the West, the World Parliament of Religions 1893, changing Christian missionary attitudes, Edinburgh in 1910, Jerusalem in 1928 and Tambaram in 1938 missionary conferences and inculturation in India. Chapter 2 provides a
historical outline of dialogue in contemporary India dealing with various efforts undertaken for dialogue especially in the Christian Protestant and Roman Catholic Church circles. How dialogue was conceived, formulated and practiced in relation to plurality of religions and scriptures, Christian mission, liberation theology and communal harmony, and how the nature and objectives of dialogue were laid down are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 3 discusses the background of my field research. After describing briefly the historical, cultural, religious, socio-economic and political backgrounds of Kanyakumari District, this chapter discusses the efforts taken for dialogue by people through Churches, mainly the Church of South India and the Roman Catholic Church, Government Institutions (local district administrations) and Non-government Organisations in the region. The background of Gramam village in Kanyakumari district where field research was done among grassroot people is also described in this chapter.

Chapter 4 and 5 evaluate the idea of religion basic to any dialogue activity, taking a post-colonial framework. Chapter 4 discusses the history of ‘religion’ and ‘world-religions’ which were constructed in the West and in India. Chapter 5 discusses how the idea of religion and religions developed in the West was appropriated by the elites in the colonies such as dialogue activists. How the colonial forms of knowledge, approaches and methods have been uncritically accepted and developed in dialogue is discussed in Chapter 5 and a critique is attempted in the light of grassroot realities where fixed religious identities are overcome in everyday lives.

The assertion in dialogue that religions (or religious misunderstanding) are both the root causes of the conflicts in society and solutions to those conflicts that follow is critiqued in chapter 6 and 7. My argument in Chapter 6 is that unless ‘dialogue’ places the conflicts and violence in which religions are claimed to be involved against the wider socio-economic and political contexts and the power relations involved, it will do little to address these issues. In order to enhance this argument, in chapter 7, the 1982 clashes in Kanyakumari district are analysed as a case study to draw out how other socio-economic and political factors in addition to ‘religious
fanaticism’ have been operative in those clashes, and why and how these clashes were reduced to being solely ‘religious’ clashes.

The elite nature of dialogue and the limitations that arise is discussed in chapter 8. Critiquing elite dialogue, and building on the insights from field research in Gramam in Kanyakumari District, this chapter discusses how the ordinary relationships among people at the grassroots work better than dialogue many times, how they deal with communal tensions and violence which dialogue aims to overcome and what are the challenges that relationships among grassroot people pose to formal dialogue groups.

Chapter 9 highlights the major findings and arguments and attempts to offer some directions for dialogue based on multiple identities of people at the grassroots that crosses fixed religious identities and religious identities. Their ordinary and everyday relationships with each other in spite of having no knowledge of formal dialogue can be utilised in constructing a more fruitful basis of dialogue to work for amity and peace amid communal violence.
Part I

The Concept and Practice of Interreligious Dialogue in India

This section provides the theoretical background of this research as well as the background of the field study in India. It has three chapters. Chapter 1 discusses what are generally considered to be some of the formative factors or antecedents of dialogue in order to show that most of these factors have their own background and context and that dialogue as it is explicated by its modern advocates is a new trend which started to appear in India and elsewhere since the period after European colonialism. Chapter 2 outlines some of the major trends in the development of the new and formal dialogue in Indian Christianity. The contribution of Christian thinkers in India for interreligious dialogue, the global efforts for dialogue by the World Council of Churches and Second Vatican Council and their impact on dialogue in India are discussed here. Chapter 3 provides the background of Kanyakumari district in India where I undertook field research among the proponents of dialogue, and among the grassroot people in villages regarding how relationships are maintained among them.
Chapter 1

The Antecedents of Interreligious Dialogue?

1.1. Introduction

As stated in the Introduction the emergence of dialogue has been commonly perceived in two ways: dialogue is relatively a new development inevitable in the post-colonial era where multicultural and multi-religious interactions are increasing, and dialogue has a long past history. While this thesis is concerned with the new dialogue as exercised in India in the post-colonial era, which will be outlined in the next chapter and detailed in subsequent chapters, here I shall discuss some perceived antecedents of dialogue. These include the comparative study of religions emerging in the mid-nineteenth century West; the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and the subsequent efforts to create peace throughout the world using religion; the increasing Asian/Indian insistence on religious harmony by thinkers like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan; changes in Christian missionary attitudes to non-Christian religions especially since Edinburgh 1910; and the inculturation of Christianity in the non-western world especially in Asia.

My purpose here is not to provide a history of dialogue in the contemporary period, which is already found in texts, but rather to consider two key points. First, these factors believed to have led to the emergence of dialogue were developed in particular contexts and for different purposes. For example, the comparative study of religions in the West came into being as part of the ‘true’ science of religions which had explicitly evolutionary dimensions. Yet it has been sophisticatedly related to the development of dialogue – even though such activities are resisted in the academic

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1 Pages, 4-8.
3 Selvanayagam, A Second Call, p.45
As a result, it has been decontextualised and many problematic issues involved with it, derived from its infancy, have been neglected. Second, this discussion is important for my research as it will provide a historical and theoretical background for chapters 4 and 5 where the invention of religion(s), word-religions and religion-secular distinctions in the West, the passing of these notions onto countries such as India through colonialism, and the uncritical acceptance of these realities in dialogue are critically assessed.

1.2. Comparative Study of Religions

Comparative religion, or the comparative study of religion, known also as the science of religion, emerged in the second-half of the 19th century. It primarily developed as a discipline in the West, primarily involved in studying the religions of the East. This endeavour was undertaken by those western academics who viewed religion as a phenomenon to be studied and not as a creed to be followed. Eric Sharpe thus comments:

between 1870 and the end of the century, it came to be more and more widely accepted that quite apart from the individual’s personal beliefs, to understand religion inevitably involved comparison – of material from different traditions, different parts of the world and different periods of human history. To this end the religious traditions of the world, past and present, were scoured for every scrap of evidence that might throw light on the origin and evolutionary development of religion as an apparently universal human activity.

The last sentence points to the most important aspect of comparative religion’s emergence: the evolutionary method. Louis H. Jordan, one of the early scholars to write a history of comparative religion, defines it thus:

with the purpose of promoting better relationship between religions, or offering directions for dialogue deriving from the insights arise from comparison. For some examples, see **Parrinder, Upanishads, Gita and Bible**; John Brockington, **Hinduism and Christianity**, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992, particularly chapter 8 – Contact, Conflict and Dialogue.


7 David Chidester in **Savage Systems: Colonialism and comparative Religion in Southern Africa**, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996, discusses the role of comparative religionists in the 19th c West to invent religion for people in Africa. For India, comparative religion in the West has helped consolidating one ‘Hinduism’ used now by Hindutva forces to exclude other religious minorities from the subcontinent. These issues will be discussed in chapter 4.

8 Sharpe, **Comparative Religion**, p.xii.
Comparative religion is that Science which compares the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another, and their relative superiority or inferiority when regarded as types.

Although the criteria provided by the Darwinian-Spencerian theory of evolution to study religions in terms of their superiority and inferiority were subsequently abandoned, this was a predominant aspect in 19th century comparative religion.

Moreover, when western colonialism was widespread and ‘western culture’ encountered the remaining part of the world, comparative religion endeavoured to study the religious customs and practices of the colonised worlds with the purpose of comparing and contrasting them with western Christianity. In this process, western comparative religionists created and constructed ‘religion(s)’ for many parts of the world, named the non-western cultures and peoples in terms of ‘their’ religion and religious traditions, and designated the tradition with which they came in contact as ‘the religion’ of the particular place or people. This essentialising process then came up with one religion which was presented as the representative religion for all people in the area irrespective of the multiplicities of actual ideas and practices.

Broadly speaking, the field of comparative religion was pioneered by Friedrich Max Muller. His *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) and *Chips from a German Workshop* are pioneer works in the field. Muller’s effort in translating books on Indian religious traditions, mainly on Brahmanical Hinduism, is considered to be the beginning of the ‘West-East dialogue’ in the religious spheres. He published the *Rig Veda* in four volumes in 1849, 1853, 1856 and 1862 respectively also editing and guiding the publication of *The Sacred Books of the East* in fifty volumes. By his pioneering works, Muller, “almost incidentally”, Eric Sharpe comments, “prepared the Western world for what has since come to be called the

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10 Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p.xii.
12 Muller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1881.
dialogue of religions, insisting not only on accuracy with regard to dead traditions, but sympathy with regard to living traditions”\textsuperscript{15}

Rooted in the work of Muller, comparative religion underwent many developments and shifts. Muller intended the comparative study of religions to be “an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important, religions of mankind”.\textsuperscript{16} Many western academics followed, studying the religions of the non-West and comparing them with western Christianity which, if that faith was taken as a yard-stick, or the yard-stick, was already a deviation from a truly comparative approach.

As it developed, comparative religion was related to the development of dialogue in recent decades in at least three ways. For good or bad, the academic study of comparative religion places more than one religion at a time under the microscope, which may seem somewhat similar to dialogue.\textsuperscript{17} Even though comparative religion basically did not aim for any dialogue between religions for world peace, as Sharpe comments,\textsuperscript{18} nevertheless it perhaps unwittingly provided platforms for some to work towards this end. A group of scholars in the West involved in comparative religion thought that it should lead to ‘dialogue among religions’ or ‘unity of religions’.\textsuperscript{19} However, this group of comparative religionists were not encouraged by others for whom the study of comparative religion had its own justification, and “the introduction of such ‘subjective’ and emotionally loaded categories as ‘dialogue’ into the discussion will inevitably mean the loss of precision and quality”, and engaging in dialogue is no part of their calling.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, directing comparative religion

\textsuperscript{15} Sharpe, \textit{Comparative Religion}, p.45.

\textsuperscript{16} Muller, \textit{Introduction}, p.34.

\textsuperscript{17} See note 5 above.

\textsuperscript{18} Sharpe, \textit{Comparative Religion}, pp.251-252. Sharpe considers this process as a deviation from the original understanding of comparative religion, and identifies the people involved in this endeavour as ‘enthusiasts’. He says: “The eirenic enthusiast was not welcomed, and soon came to realise that his interests would only be served by an entirely independent kind of gathering devoted to the goal of the final unity of all believers. The separation became more and more marked as time went on, and the scholarly climate of opinion began to turn away from unilinear evolution and world-wide comparison, and towards cultural history, culture circles and the uniqueness of religious traditions.”

\textsuperscript{19} Rudolf Otto is one such scholar who worked along this line. Sharpe, \textit{Comparative Religion}, pp.256-258.

\textsuperscript{20} Sharpe, \textit{Comparative Religion}, pp.251-252. Regarding the Christian perception of comparative religion Sharpe comments thus: “The more orthodox probably looked forward to the ultimate triumph of Christianity, though a Christianity enriched by the insights of the Sacred Books of the East. The
towards the dialogue between religions was becoming stronger towards the end of the nineteenth century,\(^{21}\) and this was performed at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

### 1.3. The World Parliament of Religions 1893 and Subsequent Developments

The World Parliament of Religions (WPR) held in Chicago in 1893\(^ {22}\) in connection with the city’s Columbian Exposition is, in Marcus Braybrooke’s words, “the greatest achievement of the first major inter-religious gathering”\(^ {23}\) and “remains a remarkable pioneer event, and no subsequent inter-faith gathering has come near to it in size or complexity”.\(^ {24}\) It was a Christian initiative to which representatives from many religions throughout the world were invited. The purpose of the Parliament was spelt out in its ten objects: the Parliament was mainly convened to show to humanity the common truths available in the major religions, to promote the spirit of human brotherhood and to work for international peace.\(^ {25}\) The general understanding about the Parliament for many decades was that it “signified a new pinnacle in human ‘evolution’ and religious ‘progress’, pointing toward a future of universal human harmony and good will.”\(^ {26}\) For those who thought this way, the Parliament set out the path for achieving unity between religions for generations to come.\(^ {27}\)

However, critics of the Parliament do not see it thus, for various reasons. One is the events that followed the Parliament – two world wars and holocaust. The other is the difference between the very real nature of the Parliament – what went on in the Parliament – and what is believed about the Parliament. Thus Ziolkowski says:

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\(^{21}\) Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, pp.253-262


\(^{27}\) Braybrooke, *Interfaith Organizations; Pilgrimage.*
There are many ironic contradictions about the Parliament of Religions….The particular contradiction…lies between understanding the parliament in its etymological sense as a *parlement*, literally a “speaking”, in this case a “speaking” among representatives of the world’s religions, which is how most of its participants and the public viewed it; and understanding the parliament as a “museum” or “exhibit” of religious faiths, “displayed” as “specimens”, which is how several of its promoters and a significant minority of contributing “scientists” of religion construed it.28

According to these critics, the understanding that the WPR 1893 was convened for dialogue among religions is not convincing. Rather what ultimately was aimed at was the fulfilment of other religions in Christianity. Even though one of the emphases was on universal brotherhood among religious adherents, nevertheless, ultimately the Parliament intended to express Christian supremacy over other religions. To quote Ziolkowski again:

Conceived and planned in part as a showcase for America’s industrial, scientific, and cultural greatness before the nations of the world, the Columbian Exposition thus found its spiritual counterpart in the Parliament of Religions, which was promoted to demonstrate the presumed supremacy of the Christian religions with which the growth of the American nation had been inseparably bound.29

For example, when religious harmony was proposed by the participants like Vivekananda according to which “each [religion] must assimilate the others and yet preserve its individuality and grow according to its law of growth,”30 the promoters of the Parliament contended that they never thought of evolving such trends out of the proceedings of the Parliament. They maintained that “the best religion must come to the front, and the best religion will ultimately survive, because it will contain all that is true in all the faiths”.31 In fact the third of the ten objects of the Parliament was “to promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood, among religious men of diverse faiths, through friendly conference and mutual good understanding, while not seeking to foster the temper of indifferentism, and not striving to achieve any formal and outward unity.”32 Commenting on this, Ziolkowski says that this point was “clearly made to defend against attacks by exclusivist Christians who condemned the very idea of setting Christianity in any sort of ‘comparison’ with

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28 Ziolkowski, “Preface”, p. x.
other faiths, and to assuage the fears of some that the parliament would encourage an attitude of ‘indifferentism’ regarding Christianity’s supposed superiority to other faiths”. However, In spite of these realities of the WPR 1893, what has become significant in post-Parliament memory is the retrospective perception of the Parliament by the dialogue activists who work for peace between religions. How this perception was carried out both in the West and in India in the beginning of 20th century is discussed below.

Building on WPR 1893, those who believed that comparative religion was meant for the unity of religions arranged many congresses and conferences in the early 20th century. The International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers – an organisation established under J. Estlin Carpenter, a Unitarian minister, Biblical scholar and a comparative religionist – was responsible for these congresses and conferences. This council organised series of meetings in many parts of Europe between 1900 and 1914, planned meetings in Asian countries being abandoned due to the First World War. Jabez T. Sunderland, a participant of WPR 1893 and responsible for these meetings in Asia, said:

Believing that there is one God over all the world, and that all religions contain truths that are of vital and permanent importance to men, representatives of all faiths were invited to come together to confer with one another as brothers, on the broad basis of the Universal Fatherhood of God and the Universal Brotherhood of Man.

These conferences were expected (i) to promote better acquaintance between adherents of different religious traditions; (ii) to emphasise ‘the universal elements in all the religions’; and (iii) to try to create in all the religions ‘the conviction that they have a great work to do together for the moral uplift of the world.

33 Ziolkowski, “Introduction”, p.56.
36 Braybrooke, Pilgrimage, pp.49-50
37 Braybrooke, Pilgrimage, p.50
38 Braybrooke, Pilgrimage, p.37
40 Sharpe, Comparative Religion, p.253.
There were many such efforts, and as result, a handful of organisations emerged in the West to work for these objectives locally and internationally. Some of them were the ‘League of Neighbours’, established in 1918 to work for political co-existence among equals; the ‘Fellowship of Faiths’, established in 1924 to work for spiritual unity; and a ‘Threefold Movement – Union of East and West, League of Neighbours, Fellowship of Faiths’, established in 1928 which became ‘the World Fellowship of Faiths’ in 1929. World Congress of Faiths, which had its first congress in London in 1936, World Interfaith Association, founded in 1963, the Temple of Understanding are some other notable interreligious organisations emerging in the 20th century.

These organisations made a proposal for a ‘World Conference for International Peace through Religion’, with preliminary conferences arranged in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. In Germany, Rudolf Otto was the main enthusiast, a scholar in the field of comparative religion who encouraged dialogue between religions. In 1921, he inaugurated an Inter-religious League in Germany by asking

> Who will save the world out of its common and enormous want and distress, into which we are sinking deeper and deeper? Politics, Science, Economics? They avail nothing with the vital things. And what is the vital thing? The vital thing is unanimous, strong and common will or responsibility of the entire cultural civilisation to master evil through mutual effort and a mutual aim, through a reciprocal responsibility and a well planned interchanging of purpose...

For Otto, “only ‘religion with its organisations, its education, its pronouncements, its chosen leaders and standards bearers’ is capable of fulfilling this purpose.” Nevertheless, he did not want “so much a world faith as a world forum, in which representatives of different traditions could meet together in opposition to the common enemy, variously called ‘materialism’ or ‘secularism.’”

Thus the West in the first part of 20th Century witnessed efforts for unity of religions or dialogue of religions, world peace and universal brotherhood using comparative religion. In this regard, as already noted, there were many exchanges between the

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42 Braybrooke *Interfaith Organizations; Pilgrimage*, pp.63-118.
44 Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p.257.
45 Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p.258.
organisers of interreligious forums in the West and in Asia, particularly India, seeking the cooperation of ‘Asian Religions’ or ‘Indian Religions’. The questions such as how people in India, especially ‘Hindus,’ viewed comparative religion, how they responded to the efforts taken in the West and what were some of their efforts in working for this, are discussed in the following section.

1.4. Comparative Religion in India

In India, even before the WPR 1893, there were efforts for what is considered to be the unity of religions. Raja Rammohun Roy, considered as one of the early-modern Hindu reformers and the founder of the Brahma Samaj, was a key figure. He believed that “all great religious traditions embody essentially the same truths and are liable to fall into distinctive and individual errors.”\(^4^6\) He had learned both Christian and Islamic scriptures and published *The Precepts of Jesus: the Guide to Peace and Happiness* in 1820.\(^4^7\) He basically advocated a multi-faith approach to religious problems and emphasised the equality of all religions.\(^4^8\)

Ramakrishna,\(^4^9\) another Hindu reformer with a belief in the equality and unity of religions, claimed that differences between religions were not important for attaining spiritual unity. He also learned about Islam and Christianity and claimed that he had seen visions of Jesus and Muhammad. He said that all religions were leading to the same goal and it is a mistake not to realise this fact. He was against conversion and proselytisation and maintained everyone should keep to his or her own religion.\(^5^0\)

Rammohun’s successor in the Brahma Samaj, and one of Ramakrishna’s disciples, Keshub Chunder Sen, also held similar views. He believed in the complementarity of religions, devising a practical programme called the New Dispensation. A synthesis of religions was a major part of Sen’s New Dispensation, to which he invited people thus:

\(^4^6\) Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p.254.
\(^4^8\) Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p.254.
\(^5^0\) Muller, *Ramakrishna*, p.177.
Come, then, to the synthetic unity of New Dispensation. You will see how all other dispensations are unified in this, a whole host of churches resolved into a synthetic unity. In the midst of the multiplicity of dispensations in the world there is a concealed unity, and it is of the highest importance to us all that we should discover it with the light of logic and science.\textsuperscript{51}

It was Vivekananda, another disciple of Ramakrishna, who became instrumental in promoting these ideas both in India and in the West.\textsuperscript{52} His participation in WPR 1893 and his message of harmony between religions and subsequent visits in the West are thought to have had a considerable influence on dialogue between religions for world peace. In India, he has been projected both as a national hero representing Hinduism to the West and working for religious harmony.\textsuperscript{53}

The interest of these thinkers in the dialogue of religions established a “climate of opinion in India for a certain kind of comparative religion – that which furthers, and is intended to further, a living dialogue of religions, and to aim ultimately at the acknowledged unity of all believers.”\textsuperscript{54} It was this climate the comparative religionists from the West experienced when they visited India at the start of 20\textsuperscript{th} century to get their support, and this climate they encouraged. At such a juncture, the contribution of Radhakrishnan, a comparative religionist, who worked both in India and in the West towards the dialogue of religions, becomes significant.\textsuperscript{55} For Radhakrishnan,

the different religious men of the East and the West are to share their visions and insights, hopes and fears, plans and purposes. Unhappily, just in the political region, so here also this is more an aspiration than an actuality. Comparative religion helps us to further this ideal of the sharing among religions which no

\textsuperscript{54} Sharpe, Comparative Religion, p.256.
longer stand in uncontaminated isolation.... They are fellow workers toward the same goal.\textsuperscript{56}

He insisted that this could combat divisions in the world by a growing sense of unity and co-operation, and more contact, more exchange, more mutual understanding between adherents of different religion.\textsuperscript{57} Radhakrishnan rejected the absolutist claim of any tradition to uniqueness, and held that such claims are disproved by comparative religion.

Thus we can note that comparative religion and the WPR 1893 influenced people in the West and in Asia in their activities for better relationships between religions in the international context. Although the idea of relations between religions of this group of comparative religionists was suspected by religiously orthodox people as syncretism and compromising one’s own faith,\textsuperscript{58} nevertheless, few comparative religionists worked for the unity, synthesising and relativising of religions. Robert Charles Zaehner, for example, the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics in Oxford University after Radhakrishnan, was opposed to any synthetic religion emerging out of practicing comparative study of religion.\textsuperscript{59} a Roman Catholic Christian, he believed in the supremacy of Christ despite being a comparative religionist.\textsuperscript{60} It is also evident from the fact that when the comparative religionists worked for a universal religion, they still made their own religion serve as the basis of such universal religion, as Radhakrishnan tried to do with Advaita Vedanta.\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, especially among comparative religionists in Christianity, remnants of the theory of evolution was still predominant which, in the final analysis, expected other religions to be fulfilled in or united with or in some cases replaced by Christianity.\textsuperscript{62} These aspects were prominent in the Christian missionary use of comparative religion in their ‘approaches’ or ‘attitudes’ to non-Christian religions, which are discussed in the following section.

\textsuperscript{56} Radhakrishnan, \textit{East and West in Religion}, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933, p.26
\textsuperscript{57} Radhakrishnan, \textit{East and West}, pp. 16-19
\textsuperscript{58} For an orthodox religious critique of comparative religion in the recent times see Bruce B. Lawrence, \textit{Defenders Of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against The Modern Age} (Studies In Comparative Religion) Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.
\textsuperscript{60} Zahner, \textit{Concordant Discord}, p.16.
\textsuperscript{61} Radhakrishnan, \textit{An idealist}.
\textsuperscript{62} J.N. Farquhar and T.E. Slater are two notable missionaries who held the fulfilment of Christianity view, and they will be discussed in the following section.
1.5. Christian Missionaries and Their Approaches/Attitudes to Non-Christian Religions

Christianity is believed to have entered into India in the very first century. However, the relationship of the early Christians with the people of other faiths in India is less known. But the relationship between Christians and the people of other religions became a matter of concern when the Western Christianity started to enter into India from the 16th century accompanied by Western imperialism. Both the Roman Catholic missions which entered India in the 16th century and the Protestant missions which entered in the 18th century looked down upon the people and their customs. It is a well-known fact that generally the missionaries, at least a section of them, considered people in their mission fields as heathens and preached against their way of life because of their belief that ultimately Christianity will triumph.63 Especially in the Indian context, Hinduism and the superstitious practices associated with it often came under criticism,64 particularly in the 19th and early 20th century when many Christian churches in the West sent their missionaries to India, and to other countries. The same period also witnessed a high level of Hindu reactions against Christian missionary attacks on Hinduism and people in India.65

Missionaries in India in the second half part of the 19th century were faced with two major developments. One was the rising Hindu reactions against Christianity and the other was the development of comparative religion in the West. Broadly speaking the study of comparative religion produced many changes in missionary attitudes to Hinduism. What are termed as the exclusivist attitudes of missionaries were modified “with the emergence of ‘comparative religion’ in the West, and the gradual acceptance of certain of its presuppositions – notably that of sympathy with all local manifestations of universal ‘religion’ – by members of Christian missionary corps.”66

63 William Carey, An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens, London: The Carey Kingsgate press Ltd., 1792. There a number of such well-known Christian missionary writings which have recently come under scrutiny.
65 For some of such reactions see Richard Fox Young, Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India, Vienna: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1981.
Nevertheless not all missionaries did it with the purpose of showing ‘sympathy’ or ‘tolerance’ to Hinduism. There was a missionary agenda, and comparative religion was used for studying other religions, especially Hinduism, to show that Hinduism lacked something, and was thereby inferior, and should be replaced by or fulfilled in Christianity. In spite of this, missionary use of comparative religion is significant, because the interest in comparative religion at least forced the missionaries to study and understand Hinduism, instead of despising it from a basis of ignorance, even though they would later use the outcome of the study to serve their ends.

The fulfilment idea in the Indian missionary context became well-known by the work of the missionary theologian J.N. Farquhar. His book *The Crown of Hinduism* became very popular in the field of missionary theology in suggesting the fulfilment of Hinduism in Christianity. For him, there were questions, searchings and longings for spirituality in Hinduism, which could find an answer in Christ. Farquhar developed this idea to work out “a more satisfactory relationship between Christianity and Hinduism than that of mere mutual exclusion”.

However, he viewed this relationship in terms of evolution, fulfilment being possible only by replacing Hinduism with Christianity. Farquhar thus said: “It is my conviction that, the Kingdom of God, having come to India, Hinduism must pass away, that it is the duty of the Hindu to give up Hinduism so that Christianity may take its place, and may thereby fulfil all that is in it of good.”

T.E. Slater, another missionary theologian also held similar views.

But there were some other missionary theologians who also held to the fulfilment idea, not to replace Hinduism but to fulfil the development of both Christianity as well as Hinduism by fulfilling each other. Missionaries such as William Miller,

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associated with the Madras Christian College, and Bernard Lucas held such views. Millar envisioned that

in future, Christianity would further develop as Hinduism and other Asian religions make their contributions to Christianity. Christ’s religion was one which sought to fulfil the aspirations embodied in other religions and which sought its own fulfilment or completion by being furnished with the peculiar contributions of other religions.  

Bernard Lucas, in his work *Our Task in India*, held similar views. He criticised Farquhar whose ideas were based on an ‘evolutionary’ understanding, according to which Christianity will survive of all religions. Lucas maintained that the Christian religion has to develop from the contribution of other religions for its own sake.

There were also missionaries in India who did not accept the fulfilment idea but who nevertheless undertook serious study of Hinduism in relation to Christianity. A.G. Hogg, was one such missionary theologian whose ideas of and attitudes to Hinduism are interpreted in relation to the development of dialogue of religions. He did not accept the fulfilment theory fully. Like the fulfilment theologians, Hogg asserted that there was a longing and seeking in Hinduism. But unlike them, he emphasized that there was also a finding in Hinduism. He differentiated between ‘faiths’ and ‘faith’ — ‘faiths’ as religious systems and ‘faith’ as spiritual response to God and maintained that Christians should admit the fact that ‘faith’ can be found in Hinduism.

These show that in the wake of the interest in comparative religion, missionary attitudes towards Hinduism underwent many changes. Christian supremacy still dominated missionary thinking, but Hinduism was not altogether rejected. Even where replacing Hinduism was emphasised, Hindus’ longing and search for

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74 Lucas, *Our Task*, pp.61-89
spirituality were affirmed. These are generally known as “sympathetic attitudes” towards Hinduism. Whether one identifies them as sympathetic or not, what was true is that many missionaries now took a great deal of interest in studying Hinduism. Commenting on the missionaries who used comparative religion for their missionary purposes Sharpe says that these missionaries – “in all whom the present-day ‘dialogue’ attitude was anticipated – had advocated an attitude of sympathy towards Hinduism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” How the formal changes in the missionary approaches to other religions existed in the three World Missionary Conferences are discussed in the next section.

1.6. World Missionary Conferences and Christian Attitudes to Other Religions

Within Protestant Christian circles, the three World Missionary Conferences in the first-half of the 20th century are considered to have helped the formation of dialogue. ‘Christian attitudes to non-Christian religions,’ and especially to Hinduism, was a major themes in all three conferences. It is generally accepted that deliberations on this theme in the conferences shaped and influenced the development of dialogue to a greater extent within Protestantism. In the following pages I briefly discuss how the theme of Christian attitudes to non-Christian religions was reflected in these gatherings.

At Edinburgh 1910, a Commission was appointed to discuss the “Missionary message and missionary problems in relation to non-Christian religions.” The commission made efforts to understand how Hinduism has been understood by the missionaries as well as by the converts to Christianity. It designed questionnaires for this and sent them to the missionaries and converts in the mission fields. Responses

79 Sharpe, “Goals”, p.79.
80 Selvanayagam, A Second Call, pp.50-53; Ariarajah, Hindu, pp.17-88.
from missionaries such as Farquhar, Slater, and Bernard Lucas indicated that Hinduism had to be respected and taken seriously as Hindus have a real longing for spirituality.\(^\text{82}\) The respondents maintained that Christians “should possess and not merely assume” a sympathetic attitude towards Hinduism.\(^\text{83}\)

The complex nature of Hinduism was emphasised by many respondents. Hinduism was viewed as not one but many, respondents differentiating between many ‘Hinduisms’ – “the popular religion of the village, ceremonial, and ritual Hinduism, the religion of the home, the social expression of religion, and a highly speculative and mystical religion – each demanded a different response from the Christian perspective.”\(^\text{84}\) Some respondents indicated that most of the people who have been converted to Christianity were not Hindus and had “little to do with what might be called Hinduism in the classical sense.” \(^\text{85}\) J.A. Sharrock, a missionary in India, responded that

> There are many millions who are classified as Hindus who lie between (Aryanism or) Brahmanism proper and animism. Their blood sacrifices, their propitiation of devils, their worship of goddesses and not gods, and their idolatry point more towards animism than Brahmanism. At best, India was very imperfectly converted by the Brahmans. The great mass of Sudras and outcastes know nothing of, and are slightly influenced by, Hinduism.\(^\text{86}\)

The respondents also dealt in detail with a number of points of contact between Christians and Hindus. They emphasised that Christians should build on these points of contact rather than the differences between Hinduism and Christianity which would lead to the rejection by Hindus. One missionary theologian in India, Bernard Lucas, maintained that the spiritual view of life in Hinduism is opposed to the materialistic conception of the West:

> Though the quality of this spiritual view may be very deficient, and though it may contain much which is erroneous, yet there can be no question that in Hinduism, religion is, and has always been, the supreme concern of the Hindu mind. The belief that the things which are seen are temporal, while the things which are not seen are eternal, is deeply ingrained in the Hindu temperament. Then I should say that the conception of the oneness of God, though essentially pantheistic and bound

\(^\text{83}\) Ariarajah, Hindus, p.20
\(^\text{84}\) Ariarajah, Hindus, p.19
\(^\text{85}\) Ariarajah, Hindus, p.20
up with polytheism is nevertheless a great religious asset, destined to be of immense value for the future of Christianity in India...\(^{87}\)

The Commission took these responses seriously and advised that in spite of the differences between Hinduism and Christianity, the missionaries should approach Hinduism with the desire to understand it. It supported and encouraged the idea that Hinduism is fulfilled in Christianity.\(^{88}\) However, Christian absolutes must be retained because it is Christ who fulfils the desires of all non-Christian religions. The Commission maintained that both these different facts are compatible with missionary activity.\(^ {89}\) The Commission also, as I have mentioned earlier, indicated that the missionaries should make use of comparative religion for their missionary purposes.\(^ {90}\) For Ariarajah, “The strength of the work of the Commission lies in its use of this very concern to evangelize the world as a theological argument for a positive attitude to, and life with, people of other faiths.”\(^ {91}\)

Jerusalem 1928\(^ {92}\) discussed Christian attitudes to other religions under the theme “The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems of Thought and Life”.\(^ {93}\) Nicol Macnicol,\(^ {94}\) a missionary in India, was invited to make the presentation on Hinduism.\(^ {95}\) Macnicol, like the respondents of the questionnaire during Edinburgh 1910, admitted the complex nature of Hinduism. He held that this difficulty arises particularly “because Hinduism appears, more than at any other time in its long history, to be undergoing a process of change and reconstruction which renders the whole religious system and organisation more ambiguous than ever in its central principles and more uncertain than ever in its boundaries.” \(^ {96}\) Having said this, Macnicol surveys the ‘Hinduism’ which had reacted to Christian missions. For

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\(^{92}\) This Conference was held at the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, over Easter 1928. For Ariarajah, secularism was an important issue in the context of this conference. Ariarajah, *Hindus*, p.32.


\(^{94}\) Macnicol was at that time a missionary of the United Free Church of Scotland in Poona, India, and a reputed scholar in Hinduism. Ariarajah, *Hindus*, p.34.

\(^{95}\) Macnicol, “Christianity and Hinduism” in *The Christian Life*, pp.3-52.

\(^{96}\) Macnicol, “Christianity”, p.31.
him, this contemporary Hinduism on which the missions should concentrate was led by Hindu Maha Sabha. He also says that Hindu reactions to Christianity have led to communal clashes.\footnote{Macnicol, “Christianity”, pp.8-9.}

Presenting his work based on the fulfilment idea, Macnicol proposed that the Christian attitude to Hinduism should be positive rather than rejecting it: “If Hinduism will let Christ enter within its ancient walls, then it will be found that he is no stranger, but one who has sojourned there before and who will find within it those who will recognise His Lordship and set him upon its throne”.\footnote{Macnicol, “Christianity”, p.41.} He talked about Hinduism in terms of ‘values’, and was severely attacked by the Evangelical Christians from Europe, especially from Germany, who saw this as a recognition of the validity of Hinduism as a faith tradition and thus a potential challenge to the uniqueness of Christianity.\footnote{Jerusalem Meeting Report I, p.352} In this regard, another significant aspect that was added at the Jerusalem meeting was W.E. Hocking’s idea that all religions should come together to fight against secularism. For Hocking, the spread of secularism “required a new alignment of religious forces, a recognition of alliance with whatever was of the true substance of religion everywhere.”\footnote{Jerusalem Meeting Report I, p. 369.} There was also a debate on this issue, again challenged by the Christian delegates from Germany, and also by Hendrik Kraemer.\footnote{Report of the Jerusalem Meeting, p.369.}

As in Edinburgh, the absoluteness of Christ was affirmed in Jerusalem and the Conference encouraged people of other faiths to join Christians to study the significance of Christ.\footnote{IMC, The Christian Life, p.491.} But the final report of Jerusalem 1928 was a bundle of contradictions in the eyes of those who have evaluated it, which prefigured the outcome of the forthcoming 1938 Tambaram.\footnote{For Ariarajah, there were four difficult-to-reconcile theological currents in Jerusalem 1928: Macnicol’s fulfilment aspect, Hocking’s liberal tradition, the continental delegates’ rejection of these, and the British delegates’ search for mediation between these; Ariarajah, Hindus, pp.50-51.} Thus James L. Cox is right when he says that the Jerusalem Conference was “sandwiched between Edinburgh 1910 and
Tamabaram 1938...providing a transition between the organizational thrust of missionary societies begun at Edinburgh and the theological concerns raised at Tambaram in reaction to Hendrik Kraemer's concept of “radical discontinuity.”

The contradictions of this conference can also be seen in the fact that it both affirmed the positive values of other religions and the need to join together with them to fight secularism, while maintaining the need for proselytisation and conversion from other religions. Thus Edinburgh 1910 and Jerusalem 1928, despite their emphasis on the absolute claims of Christianity, supported positive attitudes to other religions.

But the World Missionary Conference at Tambaram in 1938 took an entirely different position from that of Edinburgh and Jerusalem, mainly due to the book by Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch missionary in Indonesia. He had coined the term biblical realism “in order to express the idea that the Bible, the human and in many ways historically conditioned document of God’s acts and revelation, consistently testifies to divine acts and plans in regard to salvation of mankind and the world, and not religious experiences or ideas”. Influenced by Karl Barth, he distinguished revelation from religion whereby revelation was the “wisdom of God” to be found only in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Bible whereas religion was human religious experience. While Christianity generally comes under the prophetic religions of revelation along with Judaism and Islam, all others are “naturalistic religions of trans-empirical revelation”, which have “a primitive apprehension of reality”. For these religions revelation meant mediated knowledge accessed through concentration, asceticism and meditation and other derived religious experience whereas the revelation of God in Christ contradicted such human made knowledge.

This rather more conservative view was ultimately reflected in the Tamabaram Report which affirmed that revelation in Christ surpassed all other religions, and hence

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emphasized the need for conversion and proselytisation.\textsuperscript{108} Kraemer’s ‘radical discontinuity’ idea was not accepted by many Indian Christian theologians and some missionaries, and his idea was challenged by them even before the Tambaram meeting, his book being published well beforehand.\textsuperscript{109} Tambaram may well have affirmed the discontinuity concept in its final statement, but that did not stop Indian Christians discussing the matter.

Thus the three World Missionary Conferences in the first part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century provided platforms for the missionaries to reflect upon and discuss their changing attitudes to non-Christian religions. Unlike those who used comparative religion for a dialogue of religions, however uncertain in fact their capacity to see all as equal, the missionaries did not emphasise practical activities with Hindus for common causes such as world peace. Rather were terms such as ‘approach to Hindus’ and ‘attitudes towards Hindus’ prevalent among them, the discussion being entirely among missionaries for developing missionary methods. In other words, learning about Hinduism was an invitation for the Christian missionaries to change their attitudes to other religions, and not to work with the adherents of those religions. That how the Indian Christians approached these issues is discussed below.

1.7. Indian Christian Attitudes to other Religions: Efforts for Indigenous Christianity

While western missionary attitudes to Hinduism were slowly changing in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, a few missionaries moved from polemics to fulfilment to equity, the attitudes of Indian Christians to Hinduism also are important to consider. While many new converts to Christianity were made to separate from their old religions, there were also Indian Christians who made efforts to relate to Hinduism, generally within a search for an indigenous Christianity in India.\textsuperscript{110} In the early 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, indigenous Christianity in India meant ‘hinduized’ Christianity. The initial efforts for this are found in the works of the early Jesuit missionaries, among whom Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) is considered to be the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{108} IMC, \textit{The Authority of Faith}, pp.200-201.
\item \textsuperscript{109} A.N. Sudarisanam, ed., \textit{Rethinking Christianity in India}, Madras: Sudarisanam, 1938.
\item \textsuperscript{110} Baago discusses some of these pioneers in his \textit{Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity}, pp.88-101.
\end{itemize}
pioneer for contextualisation and for adopting Hindu religious (Brahmanical) symbols and traditions.\textsuperscript{111} Later thinkers such as K.C. Sen,\textsuperscript{112} Krishna Mohan Banerjea,\textsuperscript{113} Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya,\textsuperscript{114} A.S. Appasamy,\textsuperscript{115} and Sadhu Sundar Singh\textsuperscript{116} also made various efforts towards indigenous Christianity in India. Kaj Baago, a Danish missionary theologian who has worked in India and on Indigenous Christianity, defines indigenization thus:

\begin{quote}
Indigenization does not mean the mere adoption of certain Indian customs….The Indian church may adopt such customs and still remain a foreign body. Neither is indigenization simply the introduction of certain Sanskrit terms in Bible translations or sermons, however important this might be. Real indigenization means the crossing of the borderline. It means leaving, if not bodily at least spiritually, Western Christianity and the westernized Christian Church in India, and moving into another religion, another culture, ….\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Bengal Christian Herald} (which was later called \textit{The Indian Christian Herald}), started by Kali Charan Banerjea of Bengal and a few others, in its first issue in 1870 insisted: “In having become Christians, we have not ceased to be Hindus. We are Hindu Christian, as thoroughly Hindu as Christian. We have embraced Christianity, but we have not discarded our nationality.”\textsuperscript{118} The \textit{Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus} founded in Southern Tamil Nadu, \textit{The Calcutta Christo Samaj} founded by Krishna Mohun Banarjea, the \textit{National Church of Madras} founded by S. Parani Andi are a few early attempts for indigenous Christianity in India.\textsuperscript{119} The very names of these

\begin{itemize}
\item[111] Vincent Cronin, \textit{A Pearl To India: The Life Of Roberto De Nobili}, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959.
\item[117] Baago, \textit{Pioneers}, p.85.
\item[118] Cited in Baago, \textit{Pioneers}, p.3.
\item[119] Baago, \textit{Pioneers}, p.17
\end{itemize}
movements indicate how these Indian Christians conceived of indigenous Christianity.

One of the central features in the writings of the Indian Christian thinkers who made efforts to indigenise Christianity is that they related Christianity to Hinduism in its Vedic and Vedantic traditions in order to find parallels between the two faiths. The Arian Witness, by Krishna Mohun Banerjea, attempted to show the parallels between the Old Testament and the Vedas, with Christianity a logical conclusion of Hinduism. Parani Andi also did the same in his lecture Are not Hindus Christians? in Madras in 1849.

Brahamabandhab Upadyaya, a notable Indian Christian thinker wrote in the same mode. Sensing the difficulties of Western Christianity in appealing to the people in India, Upadyaya argued for an Indianised Christianity which should take Hinduism. Though a baptised Christian, he called himself Hindu-Christian or Hindu-Catholic. He incorporated the avatara concept in Indian Christianity and also the worship of gods and goddesses. He allowed worship of Sarasvathi, a Hindu goddess, as a symbol of wisdom in Christian institutions and encouraged Christianity to assimilate these traditions and transform them. Sadhu Sundar Singh also made efforts to indigenise Christianity – his theology is identified as ‘the water of life in an Indian cup’.

In the 20th century, the Madras Rethinking Group was involved in working for indigenous Christianity in India, thinkers such as Chenchiah and Chakkarai, who were part of the group, emphasising the importance of Hinduism for Indian Christians. Chenchiah as a convert from Hinduism was always proud of his Hindu

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121 Baago, Pioneers, p.17
122 Lipner, The Writings of Brahmabandhab.
124 Tennent, Building Christianity, pp.323-327
125 Baago, Pioneers, p. 46.
126 Boyd, An Introduction, pp.92-109
heritage. His conviction was that his Hindu heritage would deepen his understanding of Christian faith and this inspired his whole work.\textsuperscript{128} For him the converts in the past days hated Hinduism and surrendered themselves whole-heartedly to Christianity. But, he said, converts now have to regard Hinduism as their spiritual mother and discover the supreme value of Christ, “not in spite of Hinduism, but because Hinduism has taught them to discern spiritual greatness”.\textsuperscript{129} For him, loyalty to Christ and a reverential attitude towards the Hindu heritage need not confront each other.\textsuperscript{130}

We may note that these earlier Indian Christian efforts for indigenisation and inculturation are loosely related to the later development of dialogue.\textsuperscript{131} However, what is missing in this claim is any acknowledgement of the fact that many of these Indian Christians who strove for indigenisation and inculturation were high-caste Hindu converts who were relating Christianity to the dominant forms of religion in India, appropriating it to their own elite discourse. The Dalit, the folk and Tribal traditions of the majority of people in India were ignored in the interpretation of Christianity in terms of Indian traditions. A similar neglect of the traditions of the oppressed people is evident in contemporary dialogue activities, even though efforts are also taken to correct them, especially after the emergence of liberation theologies since the 1970s which have launched seething attacks on Indian Christianity for its alliance with dominance forms of Hinduism in India: this will be taken up in the next chapter.

\textbf{1.8. Conclusion}

It may well be possible that some of the above factors might have influenced dialogue in the post-Independence period. Nevertheless, as I have discussed above, each aspect has to be dealt within its own context. For example, as noted above, not all comparative religionists were interested in dialogue unlike understood either then

\textsuperscript{128} Boyd, \textit{An Introduction}, pp.163-164
\textsuperscript{129} Chenchiah, “Jesus and Non-Christian Faiths” in \textit{Rethinking Christianity}, p.49.
\textsuperscript{130} Chenchiah, “Jesus”, p.49
or now. Likewise, one of the primary purposes of the WPR 1893 was the affirmation of the superiority of western Christianity. Comparative religionists in India were primarily working within an eclectic religious framework predominantly with Advaita Vedanta as its guiding light. Christian missionaries were concerned with their attitudes to non-Christian religions, and the World Missionary Conferences discussed this theme, but they did not actually advocate *dialogue*. Indian Christian attempts for indigenisation were oriented towards the dominant religious traditions in India, while the folk traditions of Dalits and Tribals were ignored. Each factor has contributed to specific areas of thought and practice, but they are simplistically interpreted as being formative factors for dialogue, attention seldom being paid to various intricacies associated with them. Then, while these factors may help one to study the emergence of dialogue, they also have to be studied and understood in the context of the multiple and complex issues associated with each.
Chapter 2

Interreligious Dialogue in the Post-Colonial India: A Brief Outline of Major Trends and Developments

2.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed what are generally considered to be the antecedents of dialogue during the period up to 1940s, and evaluated them in the light of the multiple dimensions and purposes involved. In this chapter, I shall present a brief outline of the developments in the concept of dialogue in India since the post-Independence period, in order to provide a theoretical and historical background for the subsequent discussions. Broadly speaking, there have been at least five major developments in dialogue over the last six decades. First, during the 1950s and early 1960s, dialogue in Protestant Christianity in India primarily aimed at bringing adherents of different religions together for Indian nation-building and common community. Second, the predominant theme then among Roman Catholics in India was the dialogue between West and East, or western and eastern religions, on the basis of common spirituality and contemplative experience. Third, with the progressive efforts for dialogue within WCC and in Vatican II and with the increasing awareness of the plurality of religions, dialogue from the 1970s was increasingly becoming the model for Christian approaches to other religions replacing earlier models primarily based on the universality and supremacy of Christianity. In this regard various theologies of religious plurality and dialogue were developed, and in the process, the nature, method and objectives of dialogue were laid down. Fourth, the 1970s started to witness liberation theologies worldwide, and since 1980s Dalit theology in India began to challenge the Christian theological links to the dominant Hindu Brahmanical traditions in India. This then led dialogue to accommodate the concerns of liberation and the welfare of the poor and the downtrodden. Fifth, since the 1990s, especially after the demolition of Babri Mosque in Ayodya in 1992, dialogue has been increasingly related to religious harmony, peace and reconciliation in the context of religious conflicts. These developments are not strictly confined to the above time frames, as dialogue in India has multiple
dimensions in terms of its nature and purpose, and has responded to the changing contexts in India through the last sixty years.

Each of these major trends in dialogue will be discussed in some detail in this chapter, although the aim is not to discuss Indian theologies of dialogue in-depth. Rather I will provide a brief outline of the major trends: the specific limitations in dialogue mentioned in the Introduction which are the focus of this thesis will be discussed and analysed in Part II. Discussing trends and developments in a single chapter is a herculean task given the multifarious perspectives on dialogue in India, the many thinkers reflecting on this theme, and various agencies promoting dialogue in India such as churches, centres of dialogue, academic institutions, theological seminaries and research institutes and non-government organisations.¹

The focus is on major Indian Christian writings on dialogue which are involved in constructing theologies of dialogue. Contributions to dialogue from other religious groups in India such as Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, which are scattered in the many writings on dialogue during the last six decades, and from westerners writing about dialogue activities in India² cannot be discussed in detail here though they will be noted where possible. I will be primarily discussing Indian Christians developing the concept of dialogue in India or in the international circles – such as³ P.D. Devanandan, M.M. Thomas, Herbert Jai Singh, Russell Chandran, Stanley Samartha, Thomas Thangaraj, K.C. Abraham, Israel Selvanayagam, K.P. Aleaz, and David Immanuel Singh from the Protestant Christianity, Amalorpavadoss, Sebastian Kappen, Michael Amaladoss, Samuel Rayan and Felix Wilfred from Roman Catholic Christianity, and Paul Verghese, (also Paulose Mar Gregorious), Geevarghese Mar Ostathios from the Orthodox Christianity; and westerners adapted

¹ Jose Kuttianimattathil, a Roman Catholic scholar in India, has researched dialogue in India and gives an account of such agencies and their efforts in his lengthy volume, Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue, Bangalore: Kristy Jyoti, 1998, pp.78-107, 173-230.
² There are numerous writings available in this regard which include, Coward, ed., Hindu-Christian Dialogue; Knitter, One Earth Many Religions; John Parry; The Word of God is Not Bound: The Encounter of Sikhs and Christians in India and the United Kingdom, Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2009.
³ I shall just mention only their names here and discuss their writings and contributions later in this Chapter. Their biographical details and contributions are found in John C. England and Others, eds., Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements and Sources, Vol. 1: Asian Region, South Asia, Austral Asia, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002.
to Indian context and engaged in dialogue in India for longer periods such as Swami Abhishiktananda, Murray Rogers, Bede Griffiths, Klaus Klostermaier and Raymond Panikkar. When necessary, I shall also make use of Asian theologians on dialogue such as Sabapathy Kulandran, D.T. Niles, Aloysius Pieris, Wesley Ariarajah, R.S. Sugirtharajah and Peter C. Phan, who emphasise the significance of Asia in dialogue which clearly includes the Indian situation. I will not discuss the works of theologians and trends in dialogue separately but simultaneously, as one trend is dealt with by more than one theologian, and one theologian has contributed to more than one trend.

2.2. Christian Initiatives for Dialogue in the Early Post-Independent India

2.2.1. Early Protestant Christian Initiatives for Dialogue in India: Interreligious Cooperation for Nation-building

The beginning of formal dialogue in contemporary India can perhaps be attributed to the activities of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) which was founded in Bangalore in 1957. A prominent person associated with CISRS was Paul D. Devanandan who was its founder director. An ordained minister of the Church of South India, Devanandan developed CISRS along with many other interested thinkers in religion and dialogue, arranging dialogue programmes between people of different religions in India. Since 1957, CISRS has organised a number of consultations, seminars, workshops and conferences where priests, leaders and thinkers from different religions gathered for dialogue. Its journal, Religion and Society, has provided a strong platform to carry out the dialogue activities of CISRS, publishing many of the papers that were presented at the interreligious conferences.

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4 Panikkar has a dual of national identity as he was born of Indian and Spanish parentage and has lived in India working on Hinduism and dialogue.


6 Some of the other major thinkers include J. Russell Chandran, who was the Principal of UTC, located adjacent to CISRS, and M.M. Thomas who led CISRS after the death of Devanandan and Samartha. The CISRS catalogue cites all relevant names.

7 This journal, currently a quarterly, was launched in 1953 and numerous articles have been published in it since then.
Even though based in Bangalore in South India, CISRS has been involved in organising interreligious programmes in different parts of India.

Devanandan’s primary work was on the necessity of dialogue for the Christians in post-Independent India. He invited Christians to take initiatives to relate with Hinduism, their mother religion, from which they or their forebears converted to Christianity. Writing in 1961, Devanandan advised Indian Christians thus:

> The fact remains that when we became Christians, as a rule, we decided to opt out of Hindu society. Therefore, to recover our lost position within the community and reclaim affinity, it is for us to take the initiative by establishing identity in cultural interests and social concerns, in what may be called the secular context of our national life.

In the third general assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961, Devanandan was one of the speakers in the assembly who spoke about Christian witness in India, emphasising the necessity of dialogue for Christians in India.

Another prominent theologian who was closely associated with Devanandan and CISRS was M.M. Thomas, a lay theologian from the Marthoma Church, who became the director of CISRS (1961-1976) after Devanandan. Devanandan and Thomas primarily emphasised the urgency of dialogue in the newly independent India. Maintaining that “a genuine desire to seek and find ways of effecting a real sense of national solidarity” is found among Indians in the immediate post-independent period, Devanandan wrote:

> our main concern is to work for and achieve a real sense of national solidarity, an integrated community of people bound together by lasting ties of kinship, a closely

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10 In this Assembly Devanandan delivered a speech on the theme ‘Called to Witness’, *Ecumenical Review*, 14/22, January 1962, pp.154-163.


12 Devanandan, *Christian Concern*, p.83.
welded group of men and women that work together for common ends and mutual good.\textsuperscript{13}

This was the immediate post-Independence period when Nehru’s progressive space for all religions in secular India was positively accepted, unlike her neighbour Pakistan under Islamic rule, with a renascent Hinduism growing stronger and a minority consciousness among Indian Christian community was also growing. In this context, Devanandan and Thomas thought that Christians coming together in dialogue with their neighbours from other religions for nation-building would serve the nation.\textsuperscript{14} Admonishing Christians for their lack of enthusiasm in national activities including the struggles for Indian Independence, Devanandan questions:

\begin{quote}
Is this nationalist hope of no concern to the Christian evangelist?.... To regard this aspect of our Christian mission as purely secular and unrelated to the Great Commission is to grossly underestimate the challenge of the command that we preach the good news ‘to all nations’ with the healing word of hope that will integrate and unify the world of men....\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Devanandan and Thomas believed that in secular India not only people from all religions but also from secular ideologies were expected to contribute to the welfare and the development of the nation.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore they emphasised a secular framework within which Indian Christians could work for nation-building activities. For this, according to them, ideals such as ‘common humanity’, ‘secular humanity’, and ‘community’ served a helpful basis for people of different religions coming together in dialogue and cooperation.\textsuperscript{17} Such ideals indicate that as all people share the same humanity, people of different religions and secular faiths can come together for working for ‘humanisation.’\textsuperscript{18} Of course, the ideal of community or humanity derived from the belief that Jesus Christ was the foundation of this community, the

\begin{thebibliography}{18}
\bibitem{13} Devanandan, \textit{Christian Concern}, p.85.
\bibitem{15} Devanandan, \textit{Christian Concern}, p.86.
\bibitem{17} Thomas, \textit{Christian Participation}, p.303.
\bibitem{18} Samarthta and Nalini Devanandan, \textit{I Will Lift Mine Eyes}, p.126; Thomas, \textit{Man and the Universe}, p.146.
\end{thebibliography}
‘new creation’ on which the community could be built.\textsuperscript{19} Pointing out this, Thomas says that

> in ‘the new humanity in Christ which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its maker’, the distinction of nature, history, culture and religion are not absolutised but transcended in the awareness of solidarity with all mankind and common participation in the new humanity in Christ.\textsuperscript{20}

This was the framework within which Devanandan and Thomas developed the idea of Christians participating with their neighbours from different religions and secular ideologies for nation-building and the other common welfare issues in society. The attention they paid to this theme is evident by the numerous researches they undertook and the reflections they made to the wider audience through CISRS.\textsuperscript{21} Clearly in post-Independence India, attempting to bring together various religious communities, undergoing different transitions, through dialogue was a really challenging task, and the work of Devanandan and Thomas, and CISRS must be related to that time, even as it has continued to be one of the dominant platforms for dialogue in the Indian context. Thomas Thangaraj, a contemporary proponent of dialogue from South India, has recently highlighted the importance of this:\textsuperscript{22}

> If we, as citizens of this country, are to be meaningfully involved in the life of this nation, we need to be in constant and continuous dialogue with each other so that our faiths may provide us with both the ethos and impetus for action.\textsuperscript{23}

K.C. Abraham,\textsuperscript{24} Michael Amaladoss\textsuperscript{25} and Felix Wilfred\textsuperscript{26} are some of the other contemporary dialogue promoters continuing this theme of inviting people of different religions to participate in dialogue for the welfare of the nation and wider society. Moreover, the dialogue for the welfare of the nation and society has acquired

\textsuperscript{19} Thomas, \textit{The Secular Ideologies}, p.198.
\textsuperscript{20} Thomas, \textit{The Secular Ideologies}, p.198.
\textsuperscript{21} See note 14
further significance in the last few decades due to the arrival of liberation theologies in India focussing on political participation and socio-economic liberation for poor which will be discussed later in this chapter.

2.2.2. Roman Catholic Efforts for Dialogue in India during the 1950s and 1960s: Meeting of the West and the East in Spirituality

While Protestant Christians’ efforts for dialogue in India in the 1950s and 1960s were predominantly found in the work of CISRS, there were various efforts taken by Roman Catholic Christians mainly centred on Christian ashrams, despite Vatican opprobrium. One of the earliest ashrams to encourage dialogue activities was Saccidananda Ashram in Tamil Nadu, also known as Eremus Sanctissimae Trinitatis (Hermitage of the Most Holy Trinity), Shantivanam (Grove of Peace), founded in 1950 by Fr. Henri Hyacinthe Joseph Marie Le Saux, or Henri le Saux, a French Benedictine monk who came to India and took an Indian name Swami Abhishiktananda because of his appreciation for the Indian life and advaitic tradition, and Fr. Jules Monchanin, another priest from France who was working in Indian villages. This ashram became a centre for contemplation and spirituality, encouraging dialogue between religions on the ground of common spiritual experience.

Abhishiktananda, influenced greatly by the advaitic traditions in India, interprets dialogue, in his case the Hindu-Christian dialogue, in terms of inner spiritual experience, or dialogue between people “for whom religion is something personal... the very centre of their being”. Maintaining that the Hindu-Christian meeting point is ‘within the cave of the heart’ (personal spiritual experience), he said that “the most

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28 Kuttianimattathil, *Practice*, p.54.
essential qualification for a fruitful dialogue is not so much an acute mind, as a contemplative disposition of the soul." He says thus:

Dialogue may begin simply with relations of mutual sympathy. It only becomes worthwhile when it is accompanied by full openness . . . not merely at the intellectual level, but with regard to [the] inner life of the Spirit. Dialogue about doctrines will be more fruitful when it is rooted in a real spiritual experience at depth and when each one understands that diversity does not mean disunity, once the Center of all has been reached.

Moreover, inviting Christians to take part in dialogue with Hindus, Abhishiktananda emphasises that they should be prepared before coming in dialogue. Maintaining that they should dialogue with “genuine representatives of Hinduism”, he warns that any “superficial acquaintance with the religious folklore of India” may not help much in dialogue. For him,

The Christian who desires to enter into contact with the Scriptures and the mystical tradition of India needs above all else an inward disposition – what the schoolmen called a habitus – of recollection and contemplation. He needs the ‘knowledge’ of those ultimate depths of the self, ‘the cave of the heart’, where the Mystery revealed itself to the awareness of rishis…. At any other level religious dialogue with India will necessarily remain superficial and unfruitful.

Some other Roman Catholic thinkers in India who held similar perspectives on dialogue were J. A. Cuttat, a Swiss Ambassador to India who interpreted West-East dialogue in terms of spiritual experience. Cuttat was concerned with the dialogue of the West and East and said that, “East and West should meet like two spiritual persons.” Murray Rogers, associated with Abhishiktananda on dialogue activities, also follow a similar approach to dialogue which is centred on spiritual experiences of the partners who need to have inner dialogue before having external dialogue. This direction in dialogue continued in the works of Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk who came to India in 1955 and spent the rest of his life here. Influenced by Shantivanam, he founded an ashram in Kerala in 1958, and later became the Acharya

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34 Abhishiktananda, Hindu-Christian, p.6.
37 Cuttat, The Spiritual, p.45.
39 Griffiths, Christ in India.
of Saccidananda Ashram. Having been convinced that dialogue between the western Christianity and eastern religions was urgent and that it was possible only at the level of spirituality, Griffiths says:

above all the sense of the presence of god in nature and the soul, a kind of natural mysticism which is the basis of all Indian spirituality...therefore...if a genuine meeting of East and West was to take place, it must be at this deepest level of their experience and this...could best come through the monastic life.40

This approach to dialogue has continued to be significant during the 1960s and 1970s. Klaus Klostermaier, a German who spent years in India dialoguing with Hindus in North India, observed that the dialogue groups “became less and less concerned with ‘comparative religion’ or with ‘theology’ and centred more and more on spirituality.”41 Emphasising that such principle “seemed to be the only basis for a true encounter,”42 he says that the actual dialogue “could take place only at the level of spirituality, not on that of formulated theological systems.”43

As noted, the emphasis on one’s personal spiritual experience through contemplation becomes the most important aspect in this form of dialogue, and the development of ashrams in India served as good places for executing dialogue activities. This approach in early post-Independent India was further strengthened by an awareness of the need for dialogue between West and East in an increasingly multicultural world. However, such dialogue represents a very limited approach limited to those who see contemplation or meditation as the most important aspect of religious life. However it is still a significant approach to dialogue followed especially among the Roman Catholic Christians in India.

2.3. Dialogue and Ecumenical Movements

Underlying these evolving attitudes among both Roman Catholics and Protestants were two major international developments in the field of dialogue in the 1960s and 1970s – one Protestant and one Roman Catholic – which both influenced and were to an extent affected by the efforts for dialogue in India. One was within the WCC

which led to the formation of a sub-unit for dialogue in the Council, and the other was the endorsement given by Vatican II for dialogue. The efforts of the sub-unit of dialogue in WCC had a strongly Indian contribution as the first director of the sub-unit was Stanley Samartha, a prominent Indian Christian thinker who worked for much of his life in this field. Likewise, Vatican II opened ways for the Roman Catholics in India to dialogue with their religious neighbours through forming units for dialogue in local dioceses and many centres for the study of religions. What follows is a brief discussion of the initiatives of these two international organisations.

**2.3.1. Efforts for Dialogue in WCC**

WCC, whose headquarters is in Geneva, came into being in 1948 as an ecumenical organisation consisting of different Protestant and later Orthodox churches. As discussed in the previous chapter, the three major World Missionary Conferences of Edinburgh 1910, Jerusalem 1928, and Tambaram 1938 had made serious efforts for ecumenism among various churches. The concern for ecumenism continued after the World War II (1939-1945) which coincided with the end of formal European colonialism. Since 1948 WCC has been making many efforts for ecumenism through both its general assemblies, which normally gathers every seven years, and its continuous work. Dialogue within the WCC is sometimes referred to as ‘wider ecumenism’.

A concern for dialogue was often raised by the participants of the general assembly of WCC, the WCC’s Second Assembly in Evanston 1954 offering ‘a new beginning’ for dialogue. In the light of what Asian participants such as Devanandan, D.T. Niles, and M.M. Thomas put forward as the new situation in Asia where Christians have to live with the people of other religions – where “the resurgence of other faiths involved not only a revival of religions, but also attempts

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45 I have already mentioned Ariarajah’s work tracing Hindu-Christian relations within ecumenical movement; *Hindus and Christians*.


47 D.T. Niles was a Sri Lankan theologian working on Asian interpretations of Christianity and dialogue.
at nation-building and a search for community life, which the newly independent
nations badly needed in the post-colonial period”\(^{48}\) – the Evanston Report affirmed
that

The renascence of non-Christian religions and the spread of new ideologies
necessitates a new approach in our evangelizing task. In many countries especially
in Asia and parts of Africa, these religious revivals are reinforced by nationalism
and often present themselves as effective bases for social reform. It is not so much
the truth of these systems of thought and feeling which makes the appeal, but rather
the present determination to interpret and change oppressive conditions of life.
Therefore they confront us not only as reformulated creeds but also as foundations
for universal hope.\(^ {49}\)

The Evanston Assembly was followed by a meeting in Davos to discuss the theme of
Christian attitudes to non-Christian religions, which invited Christians to make a
“thorough scientific study of the non-Christian religious systems, in their classical
and modern forms,” and to undertake a “fresh study of the Bible not only to
understand what the Bible says about the non-Christian religions, but even more to
hear afresh the word of God to man, and to learn to discover the sign of the times in
the light of God’s word.”\(^ {50}\) Another meeting, held in Nagpur, India from 10-16,
October 1960, “was designed as an actual dialogue, where Hindu religious leaders
and philosophers joined Christians in an exploration of the ‘Hindu and Christian
Views of Man.’”\(^ {51}\)

In 1961, the WCC Assembly met in New Delhi, and the views of Indian Christian
theologians discussed in the previous section dominated the discussion of Christian
attitudes to non-Christian religions: most were accepted in the final report.\(^ {52}\) In
1963, there was another meeting in Mexico City on the same theme. The Mexico
Report dealt with ‘the nature of dialogue’, attempting to introduce and explain to
Christians what dialogue was, putting it at the service of Christian witness to
proclaim God’s revelation in Christ.\(^ {53}\) In fact, this view was not new either in the

\(^ {48}\) Ariarajah, Hindus, p.98.
\(^ {49}\) W.A. Visser’t Hooft, ed., The Evanston Report: The Second Assembly of the WCC, 1954, New
\(^ {50}\) Consultation on “Christianity and Non-Christian Religions”, Davos, Switzerland, July 21-25, 1955,
cited by Ariarajah, Hindus, p.100.
\(^ {51}\) Ariarajah, Hindus, p.128.
ecumenical movement or among the Indian Christian theologians who reflected on dialogue. Elsewhere Ariarajah comments:

The positions taken by [the] Asian thinkers were pushing ecumenical discussions towards a dialogue relationship with neighbours of other faiths which would not compromise the general conviction that the gospel message was relevant to the Asian societies undergoing revolutionary change.54

It was the meeting in Kandy in 1967 that for the first time proposed dialogue as an alternative attitude or approach towards non-Christian religions even though the ground had been prepared in New Delhi 1961 and Mexico 1963. Ariarajah comments that it was here that ‘dialogue [was] affirmed’.55 According to him, “the Kandy document was important because it was the first to submit ‘dialogue’ as a new basis for Christian relationships with people of other faiths to the official consideration of the Central Committee of the WCC.”56 Kenneth Cragg, later a Bishop in the Anglican Church interested in Christian-Muslim relations and ecumenism, contributed significantly to this meeting. He critiqued the more exclusive stance of Tambaram 1938, where Kraemer, building on Barth worked to limit the finality of revelation in Jesus Christ only within Christianity, on the grounds that it was against the New Testament witness.57 Cragg affirms that

The incarnation may be defined as truth undertaking whatever its comprehensibility requires.... “Behold I stand at the door and knock.” “He that hath ears to hear let him hear.” These are the patterns of the New Testament – a willingness to be credibly pondered and credibly related to men where they are, so as to enlist and elicit, not their capitulation but their embrace; to stir and invite them to inward recognition and obedience.58

Truly these are some of the strong words coming within WCC in that period which paved ways for pondering over more positive attitudes in Christian approaches to other religions. In the light of the deliberations in the meeting the statement from Kandy affirmed that:

Dialogue means a positive effort to attain a deeper understanding of the truth through mutual awareness of one another’s convictions and witness. It involves

54 Ariarajah, Hindus, p.126.
55 Ariarajah, Hindus, p.132.
56 Ariarajah, Hindus, p.138.
expectation of something happening – the opening of a new dimension of which one was not aware before. Dialogue implies a readiness to be changed as well as to influence others. Good dialogue develops when one partner speaks in such a way that the other feels drawn to speak. The outcome of dialogue is the work of the Holy Spirit.  

Continuing this trend, the WCC Assembly in Uppsala in 1968 affirmed that dialogue should be a way of life for the Christian, for:

the meeting with men of other faiths must lead to dialogue. A Christian dialogue with another implies neither denial of the uniqueness of Christ, nor of any loss to his own commitment to Christ, but rather that a genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal, relevant, and humble. In dialogue we share our common humanity, its dignity and its fallenness, and express our common concern for that humanity.

Three important meetings followed the Uppsala Assembly. The first was in Ajaltoun in 1970 which brought “together adherents of a number of religious traditions for an actual dialogue on relations between their peoples.” For Ariarajah, “this marked a new departure, for the emphasis had changed from conversation about dialogue to engagement in it.” This was followed by another meeting in Zurich in the same year (1970). This declared:

We are at a time when dialogue is inevitable, urgent, and full of opportunity. It is inevitable because everywhere in the world Christians are now living in a pluralistic society. It is urgent because all men are under common pressure in the search for justice, peace, and a hopeful future and all are faced with the challenge to live together as human beings.

The third meeting was held in Colombo in 1975. It was also attended by people belonging to other religions, and the Colombo participants observed that:

We also acknowledged real common links based on a sense of universal interdependence and responsibility of each and every person with and for all other persons; we together recognized the fundamental unity of human beings as one

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61 Ariarajah, Hindus, pp.140-141. Of course, first such meeting where more than one religion came in dialogue was held in Nagpur before 10 years.
family and committed ourselves to strive and, if necessary, to be ready to pay a price to realize the equality and dignity of all human beings.  

However, at the WCC Assembly in Nairobi 1975, in which five members belonging to other religions were invited for the first time, there was opposition to such dialogue by evangelical Christians, a stand similar to that of Tambaran 1938 against liberalism.  

As a result, a meeting was planned in Chiang Mai in 1977 which led to the emergence of the document ‘Guidelines on Dialogue’, developed under the leadership of Stanley Samartha and proposed as the guiding document for all Christians in their relationships with other religions.

Especially in the light of the debates in Tambaran 1938, and the continuing exclusive attitudes of Christians to the people of other religions within WCC, it should be acknowledged that a significant amount of energy and time had been spent to arrive at a positive affirmation of the dialogical approach to other religions. In the process, however, the objectives, nature and method of dialogue perhaps received more attention than actual dialogue itself, although a carefully set out foundation did help to answer those who were critical of the dialogical approach within WCC. But Lukas Vischer is right when he says, in the light of his critical analysis of the developments in WCC, that “difficulty lay in moving away from concrete involvement in living dialogue as the focus of theological discussions to a preoccupation with the systematic concept of dialogue and abstract theories about it.”

Moreover, there is one important point regarding the Indian/Asian role in the development of dialogue in WCC: most Indians/Asians in the WCC were high caste male Christians, with few female Dalit and other marginalised groups’ represented. This issue became one of the defining issues for the development of dialogue in India during the 1980s when the Sanskritization of Indian Christian theology came under attack by the Dalit theologians, to which we will return later in this chapter.

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67 The lack of women involvement in ecumenical dialogue programmes have been observed and studies by Diana L. Eck in her “Dialogue: A vital Concern within the Ecumenical Movement” in *The Challenge of Dialogue*, Geneva: WCC, 1989.
Nevertheless, over all, the developments in dialogue within WCC, albeit papering over divergent views, did influence churches all over the world and also in India which led to the construction of various theologies of dialogue, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

2.3.2. Vatican II and Christian Dialogue with Other Religions

Among Roman Catholics, the impact of Vatican II which was held between 1962 and 1965, where the Roman Catholic Church took new attempts for church’s relationship with other faiths, was immense. The Council created a special Secretariat in 1963 for dealing with Catholic relations with non-Christian religions. At the end of the Council, a promulgation was made in terms of “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christians”, inviting Roman Catholic Christians to be open in their attitudes to non-Christian religions, while not compromising their belief in the uniqueness of Christ. It maintained:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.... The church, therefore, has this exhortation for her sons: Prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness to Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the value of their society and culture.68

The traditional position of the Roman Catholic Church that ‘outside church there is no salvation’ is well known, a position which gave no place for the salvific value of non-Christian religions. But the Second Vatican Council Church moved from this position and highlighted the importance of those religions in the context of Christian witness and proclamation. Thus, the ‘Dogmatic Constitution of the Church’ maintained that

Those who can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Jesus Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His Will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.... Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is

looked upon by the church as preparation for the Gospel. She regards such qualities as given by him who enlightens men so that they may finally have life.69

Here the Church seems to be taking what could be called an inclusivist position, whereby Christianity was seen as a fulfilment of all other religions, prevalent in the attitudes of some Protestant missionaries such as J. N. Farquhar in the first half of the 20th century.

Further, the encyclical Ecclesiam Suam, issued by Pope Paul VI on 6 August 1964 is another important document on Roman Catholic attitudes to non-Christian religions. It said:

Indeed, honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that there is but one true religion, the religion of Christianity. It is our hope that all who seek God and adore him may come to acknowledge its truth. But we do, nevertheless, recognize and respect the moral and spiritual values of the various non-Christian religions, and we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideas of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order. For our part, we are ready to enter into discussion on these common ideals, and will not fail to provide every opportunity for such discussion, conducted with genuine mutual respect, where it would be well received.70

Here the Pope talks about common ideals and insists that the Roman Catholic Church will use every opportunity to dialogue on these with people of other religions. These Vatican II ideas were developed into significant theological reflections at the global level71 by theologians such as Karl Rahner,72 H.R. Schlette73 and Hans Küng.74

Karl Rahner had already developed his ideas on the ‘anonymous Christian’, and the Vatican II affirmation of salvific values in other religions is believed to have been

70 Ecclesiam Suam, Part III, p.112.
influenced by his theology, which he developed further in the light of Vatican’s changing attitudes to other religions. Dealing with the question of the salvation of non-Christians who have yet to experience the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Rahner believed that such religions have salvific values for their adherents, because God has a universal salvific will and will provide the means of salvation to all people at all times. Non-Christian religions serve to carry God’s revelation to their followers until they meet God’s revelation in Christ.

For H. R. Schlette, there are two histories of God’s revelation: a ‘general sacred history’ and a ‘special sacred history’ and the salvific will of God is found in both. While all religions come under ‘general sacred history’, the religion of Israel and the Church come under ‘special sacred history’. Both have value for salvation. He says: “The unity of the human race, God’s universal salvific will, the universal redemptive significance of Christ’s death and resurrection and the eschatological convergence of all sacred history... belong to the fundamental data of revelation.”

Hans Küng is another Roman Catholic thinker who has developed the idea of Christian relations to other religions and dialogue since Vatican II. Basically committed to global peace and global ethic, Küng affirms the importance of dialogue among religions and between religions and secular ideologies. Evaluating different understandings on truth claims in religion, he proposes a three-fold universal criterion for truth: the importance of the human element; the authentic or canonical element which is the essentials of each religion; and the general Christian criterion which helps to see Jesus Christ in theory and practice. For him religions which dialogue on the basis of this criterion helps global peace and ethics. He positively

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78 Schlette, *Towards a Theology*, pp.74-75.
79 Schlette, *Towards a Theology*, pp.74-75.
80 Schlette, *Towards a Theology*, p.75.
affirms that religions can learn much from each other in their common search for truth.\(^{83}\) It must be noted that these changing attitudes of the church towards non-Christian religions within Vatican II as well as during the years following were not always accepted. Indeed there was much opposition, as in the WCC. One example is the opening address at a missionary congress in Rome in November, 1988 by Josef Cardinal Tomko, prefect of the Vatican congregation for the Evangelization of the World (1985-2001) in which he accuses dialogue of leading to doctrinal confusion.\(^{84}\) He re-emphasised the traditional positions of the church regarding the other religions by affirming ‘the centrality of uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ for human salvation’, which is ‘absolute, total and final for all humankind’, and mediated only by the Church. Several criticisms were made of this perspective by Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians.\(^{85}\) Moreover the encyclical entitled *Dominus Jesus* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and authored largely by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (the present Pope) has also severely criticised dialogue, claiming that dialogue “does not replace, but rather accompanies the *missio ad gentes*” of the church.\(^{86}\) Moreover it notes that Equality, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ — who is God himself made man — in relation to the founders of the other religions. Indeed, the Church, guided by charity and respect for freedom, must be primarily committed to proclaiming to all people the truth definitively revealed by the Lord, and to announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.\(^{87}\) This document was heavily criticised in dialogue circles in India and in other parts of the world,\(^{88}\) and it has also been noted that Vatican II directions on dialogue have not


\(^{87}\) “*Dominus Iesus*”.

been fully implemented by the Vatican. Nevertheless, the official endorsement of Vatican II, along with the developments in WCC, motivated many theologians all over the world, especially in India, to reflect on and promote dialogue activities, discussed in the next section.

2.4. Towards Developing Theologies of Dialogue in India in the Context of the Plurality of Religions: Dialogue in India since 1970s

As Vatican II and developments in the WCC opened ways for Christians to take positive attitudes towards other religions, there were numerous attempts among Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians in India to construct theologies of dialogue. Some of the important trends in the process were: constructing theologies of religious plurality (or pluralism) where dialogue is necessary; clarifying and discussing the relationship between Christian mission and dialogue; discussing the place of the Bible in a pluralist context; and laying down the nature and objectives of dialogue which included the significance of the dialogical approach to other religions, the inevitability of dialogue for a pluralist society, the mutual understanding and better relationships between religions possible through dialogue, the necessity of dialogue in the context of secularisation, and the implications of the Indian/Asian socio-economic context for dialogue. These trends are discussed in the following sections.

2.4.1. Dialogue and the Plurality of Religions

It is an obvious fact that the emergence of dialogue is fundamentally related to the plurality of religions or at least the awareness of plurality, and dialogue emphasises respect for this. In the Indian context, while the awareness of plurality is considered to be a new reality, there is a strong emphasis in writing on dialogue in India on the age-old pluralist nature of India/Asia against that of the West. For instance, Felix

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90 See Kuttianimuttathil, *Practice and Theology*.

91 This attitude can be found in almost all Indian/Asian thinkers on dialogue. Samartha, *One Christ* – this attitude can be found in the entire book; Dayanandan Francis, ed. *Asian Expressions*; Amaladoss, “Another Asia is Possible” in http://latinoamericana.org/2004/textos/castellano/AmaladossOriginalEnglish.htm
Wilfred, a contemporary Roman Catholic dialogue proponent, holds that: “Pluralism has been the hallmark of Asian Life, and without it, Asia loses all hopes for its future”. Noting that pluralism is seen by many as a bête noire, he invites Asian Christians to broaden the “outlook on the issue of pluralism, or better, plurality, and see it through Asian eyes, not simply as an issue of contemporary Occidental discussion” which is a necessary understanding for any dialogical activity between religions. While people belonging to different religious traditions and identities have long existed in Asia/India, an over-emphasis on the religiosity and spirituality of India or Asia is questionable, especially given the colonial-Orientalist constructions of the ‘secular West versus mystical East’ which I will be discussing in detail in chapters 4 and 5.

Secondly, dialogue basically affirms the importance of a plurality of religions, because without that dialogue cannot proceed. What is understood as inclusivism also opens ways for dialogue, but unlike inclusivism, which believes in the final fulfilment of all religions in one religion, pluralism basically believes in the validity of multiple ways (or religions) that lead to the Reality, identified as Absolute, Mystery, Ultimate Truth and God. Pluralism is of the view that “the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of and correspondingly different responses to the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human.” Arguing that exclusivism and inclusivism are not much useful in a pluralist context as they in one way or other affirm the superiority of one religion over other religions, Samartha opines that pluralism helps to recognize God alone as Absolute and to consider all religions to be relative. The relativization of religions would liberate their respective adherents from a self-imposed obligation to defend their particular community of faith over against others, in order to be free to point the ultimacy of God.

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95 Samartha, Courage for Dialogue, p.97.
Thirdly, however, such affirmation of plurality is not the only approach in Indian dialogue circles, as there are different interpretations of plurality of religions. Against the idea that pluralism helps to construct a universal theology of religion, Raymond Panikkar has developed his radical pluralism (or radical interpretation of pluralism), where he criticises any attempt to bring all religions into one single unified system. Arguing against this principle, Panikkar affirms that:

consistent with my notions of radical relativity and pluralism, I have not adopted the view of a linear development of human thought, as if we could now encompass in one single system the multicolored human wisdom throughout the ages.

According to Panikkar, pluralism does not mean plurality of religions or a reduction of them to unity. Preferring the terms plurality and pluralistic attitude, he says that “the pluralistic attitude accepts the stance that reality may be of such a nature that nobody, no single human group to be sure, can coherently claim to exhaust the universal range of human experience.” He believes that such an understanding helps the adherents of religions to come together in what he calls a ‘dialogical dialogue’ in their search for understanding that reality. His understanding of pluralism is identified as ‘post-pluralism.’

Another contemporary Indian proponent of dialogue, K.P. Aleaz, after evaluating exclusivism, criticised for its superiority attitudes and chauvinism, inclusivism which is nothing but a ‘disguised exclusivism’, and pluralism which considers religions as ‘self-contained compartments’, proposes what he calls pluralistic inclusivism.

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96 There many works redefining pluralism in the western context as well. For example, Mark Heim, questioning the theo-centric pluralism, argues a pluralism not in terms of Ultimate Reality, but Ultimate ends such as salvation. *Salvations*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995. He identifies such a stance as post-pluralist.


In Pluralistic inclusivism, both Inclusivism and Pluralism undergo change in their previous meanings. It makes Pluralism inclusive and Inclusivism pluralistic. Pluralistic Inclusivism is an attempt to make Christian faith pluralistically inclusive, i.e., the very content of the revelation of God in Jesus to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to it as per the requirement of different places and times and it is through such pluralistic understanding of the gospel that its true inclusivism is to shine forth.  

This principle calls for a ‘relational convergence of religions’ which emphasises commitment and conversion both to Jesus as well as to the religio-cultural context of India.

Fourthly, pluralism also has faced a number of criticisms, especially by evangelical Christians in India as well as all over the world, for its relativising of religions. Responding to the criticisms, Russell Chandran says that in the pluralist model “there is no attempt to integrate the religions into one particular religion. The integrity of the separate religions is respected, while recognizing the possibility of mutual learning from one another, mutual correction and reinterpretation.” Commenting on the fear of relativism in pluralism, Michael Amaladoss, says that “if we look at pluralism not in the abstract or in the material terms but in personal terms of freedom and relationship, then we will see its richness on the one hand and on the other the need to affirm and witness to one’s own identity.” For Amaladoss, faith in Christ respect plurality and paves way for dialogue.

I am not assessing the merits and demerits of pluralism arguments, but rather indicating that the evolving dialogical approach to other religions has given rise to many theological formulations concerning plurality of religions, as well as theologies

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104 Aleaz, *Dimensions*, p.262.
opposing them. The dialogical approach to other religions has not only led to
dialogue with people from other religions, but also sharpened the dialogue between
various theologies of religions within Christianity. This idea of plurality of religions,
which is the basic context of dialogue, needs to be evaluated from the contemporary
perspectives on the western enlightenment and colonial constructions of religion and
world-religions, one of the focuses of this thesis, the discussion of which will be
undertaken in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.4.2. Dialogue and Christian Mission: Witnessing to Christ in a Multi-
religious Context

While there was a progression in the construction of various theologies of religions
and dialogue in India during the 1970s, there were also issues emerging from
perspectives opposing dialogue, crucially the question of dialogue’s relationship to
Christian mission. This is significant to dialogue in the context of criticisms posed by
evangelical Christians and by non-Christians that has led dialogue promoters to
ponder of the relationship between dialogue, mission and evangelisation.

Firstly, as I have noted earlier, positive Christian approaches to other religions within
the ecumenical movements and elsewhere have often been resisted by evangelical
Christians, as was the case in India as the dialogical approach was being developed.
The accusations of the evangelicals were that dialogue leads to ‘syncretism’ and the
dilution of Christian mission. The basic question here is that if all religions are
valid, what happens to the Christian mission and proclamation which invites people
of other religions to the Ultimate Truth that is only revealed by Jesus Christ?
Arguing that dialogical approach betrays Christian mission, an Indian Christian
coming from evangelical tradition says that that “evangelicals, who share a deep
concern for mission and evangelization cannot ignore this attempt to incarcerate
mission.” Summarising the general evangelical stand not only in India but
throughout the world, Timothy C. Tennent says that among evangelical Christians,

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110 These perspectives are found in the resources mentioned in note 26 in Introduction.
111 George David, “Unitive Pluralism and the Challenge of Mission to Hindus” in Bage, Many Other
Ways?, p.60.
Dialogue is discouraged because non-Christian religions are dismissed out-of-hand as examples of human blindness and the fruit of unbelief. Sometimes non-Christian religions are regarded as the direct work of Satan. The result has been to avoid any serious dialogue lest Christians unwittingly place the gospel on equal footing with other religions.\textsuperscript{112}

If the primary concern in mission is to bring the non-Christians to Christian truth, anything other than this is the dilution of the gospel. On the other hand, precisely these attitudes have been critiqued in dialogue. Criticising Christian missionary activities which focus on conversion and the supremacy of Christianity from the perspectives of dialogue, Samartha says that

the ‘missiology of conquest’ that leads to the statistical expansion of the Christian community and the diminishing of other communities should be given up. The political implications of horizontal conversations should be recognized and only vertical conversions to God accepted as legitimate.\textsuperscript{113}

Analysing the exchanges between the evangelicals and the dialogue promoters, Israel Selvanayagam discusses the contradictions, connections, clarifications and corrections necessary for both the groups, and proposes for a combination between them.\textsuperscript{114} For him,

The notion of dialogue need not compromise the Christian’s conviction that the Gospel has universal relevance. Rather, it can deepen faith, purifying it of false claims and enhancing its communication. Likewise, commitment to the Gospel in the form of witness and sharing helps dialogue avoid becoming monologue or sterile talk.\textsuperscript{115}

Paulose Mar Gregorios (also Paul Verghese), a theologian from the Orthodox Church involved with WCC programmes, maintains that there is a relationship between dialogue and evangelisation. He thus says:

Dialogue and Evangelisation are both tasks of the Church. Dialogue is not specifically mentioned in the New Testament. But it too is a charisma of the Holy Spirit for our time. The Evangelist does the work of evangelisation in the name of Christ as a member of the body of Christ. The Christian engaging in dialogue with people of other religions also does so in the name of Christ and as a member of the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{114} Selvanayagam, \textit{Evangelism and Inter-faith Dialogue}, Tiruvalla: CSS, 1993
\textsuperscript{115} Selvanayagam, \textit{Evangelism}, p.36.
In addition to these, there are a number of works where deconstruction and reconstruction of evangelism and mission is suited to a pluralist context. Arguing that verbal proclamation alone cannot be part of evangelism, Thomas Thangaraj, in a recent article, says that “our exclusive claims about our tradition are an expression of violence and a way of violating the other.” He proposes evangelism without proselytism.\footnote{Thangaraj, *Christian Witness*, p.11.}

The second is the criticism coming from non-Christians, especially Hindus, who were afraid of dialogue initiatives by Christians, lest it be another way of converting non-Christians. Murray Rogers makes public a letter written to him by his Hindu friend Sivendra Prakash which contains the fear of conversion and criticism for dialogue.\footnote{Thangaraj, *Christian Witness*, p.10.} Prakash asks Rogers:

> Have you already forgotten that what you call the ‘inter-faith dialogue’ is quite a new feature in your understanding and practising of Christianity?.... To allure us to dialogue you keep telling us that we have to learn from each other.... The main obstacles to real dialogue are on the one hand the feeling of superiority and on the other the fear of losing one’s own identity. We may even say that the former is generally the result of the latter.\footnote{Rogers, “Hindu-Christian Dialogue Postponed” in *Dialogue between Men*, pp.21-31.}

Regarding the issue of using dialogue as a method to change others’ religion, Samartha has criticised those who have attempted to use dialogue to convert non-Christians.\footnote{Rogers, “Hindu-Christian”, pp.22-26.} Warning against any such understanding, Gregorios says that:

> Whatever theological or other reasons we as Christians may have for engaging in dialogue with the people of other faiths, we should be explicit and honest about them. If we are engaging in dialogue with the secret intention of converting them, as many religious people in Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism suspect, then our partner is bound to be wary and our dialogue inauthentic.\footnote{Samartha, “Christian Concern for Dialogue in India” in *Christian Concern for Dialogue*, p.2.}

Such issues and criticisms will continue to be part of theological thinking in India. However, from my observation, what is significant here is that even though evangelical Christianity in India has criticised dialogue, they have also, unwittingly, provided a platform for dialogue to sharpen itself. What is generally proposed in the context of debates between pluralists who emphasise the dialogue between religions

\footnote{Gregorios, *Religion and Dialogue*, p.156.}
and those who oppose it on the basis of Christian mission is a Christ-centred dialogue which seeks for loyalty to Christ and openness to other religions.  

2.4.3. The Bible, Non-Christian Scriptures and Hermeneutics in Dialogue

Another major trend in dialogue in India deals with the place of the Bible in dialogue. The context where this issue becomes crucial is two-fold: one is the context of the plurality of religions with scriptures of different religions. The second is the context where much criticism against dialogue has centred on the Bible – arguing that dialogue is not biblical.

The major question with regard to the context of the plurality of scriptures is this: if the Bible is important for the salvation of even non-Christians, what is the place of other scriptures? Given the many scriptures used by followers, can anyone insist on the supremacy of one scripture? How should Christians treat other scriptures? The dialogue promoters have attempted to reflect on these issues. Firstly, in dialogue, there is an affirmation of the plurality of scriptures. Thus Samartha says:

The presence of scriptures of other faiths creates a situation for Christians in Asia that is fundamentally different from that of Christians in the West. Surely, the hermeneutical tools necessary in a multi-religious situation cannot be the same as those developed in a mono-scriptural context. Further, in a multi-religious society the criteria derived on the basis of one particular scripture cannot be used to pass negative judgements on other scriptures regarded as equally authoritative by other faiths.

Amalorpavadoss, a Roman Catholic thinker from India who has creatively contributed to the areas of inculturation and dialogue, has attempted to establish the importance of the non-Biblical scriptures. As the founder-director of the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) in Bangalore, he got people of different religions to study scriptures together. His contention is that in the context of multiple scriptures, the task of Christianity is to contribute to the non-biblical

124 Selvanayagam, A Second Call, pp.172-188.
scriptures, rather than making negative judgements against them.\textsuperscript{127} He maintains that

the Church in India is destined by Divine Providence to contribute as its specific share to the theology of the religious traditions of mankind, more specifically to that of non-Biblical Scriptures.\textsuperscript{128}

Arguing that Christians who are engaged in liberation struggles in Asia/India “are discovering that the Word of God is found in scriptures and traditions of other religions as well as their own,”\textsuperscript{129} Amalorpavadoss says that Christians in India

benefit from the Indian scriptures for a deeper understanding of the biblical word and the Hindus benefit by the biblical word to re-interpret their scriptures and to discover the unknown riches and facets.\textsuperscript{130}

Gregorios also has made similar points. Maintaining that “the Bible is an important element in the operation of the Spirit”, he invites Christians in India to be open to the Spirit of God in their attitudes to Scriptures in the multi-religious context.\textsuperscript{131} In addition to the plurality of written scriptures, the importance of speaking the text in the Indian context is also highlighted in dialogue.\textsuperscript{132} Commenting on this Samartha says that “in cultures such as the Hindu and the Buddhist, even though scriptures were written very early, it was the recital and hearing of the Scriptures that operated as authority among people.”\textsuperscript{133} Thus the fact that a biblical hermeneutics in Asia/India must always take into consideration the presence of other religious scriptures is persistent, and respect for all the scriptures is repeatedly emphasised in dialogue.

Secondly, against the question that dialogue is not biblical, there are attempts from dialogical perspectives to show that the Bible has a lot to offer dialogue,\textsuperscript{134} as shown

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Amalorpavadoss, \textit{Research Seminar}, p.8.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Amalorpavadoss, \textit{Research Seminar}, p.8.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Amalorpavadoss, “The Bible”, p.328.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Samartha, \textit{One Christ}, pp.73-75.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Samartha, \textit{One Christ}, p.74.
\end{itemize}
by the dialogue between Israelites and the rest of the people in the Old Testament, between Jesus and others in the New Testament and the pluralistic context in which biblical Christianity was evolving. On the other hand, generally considered conservative texts such as John 14 and similar passages from the Bible are interpreted and reflected in such a way that they become relevant for the pluralistic context.\textsuperscript{135} One consequence of this has been that almost every dialogue meetings in India in the past few decades have witnessed the use of multiple scriptures for meditation and discussion. Not only do those in dialogue learn from each other’s scriptures, but reading from different scriptures is a significant element in formal interreligious gatherings and worship.\textsuperscript{136}

2.4.4. The Nature and Objectives of Dialogue

One of the most important contributions of writing on dialogue in India over the last three or four decades has been laying down the context, nature and objectives of dialogue. This is done to help those already participating in dialogue activities, and to encourage others. In this section I will discuss some of the important features to provide a basic survey of the trends, discussed further in chapters 5-8 where some features of dialogue are evaluated.

2.4.4.1. The Inevitability of Dialogue in a Multi-religious Context

One of the important features of dialogue in Indian Christianity, as well globally, is to emphasise the inevitability of dialogue for Christians, spoken of from at least two perspectives. Firstly, the inevitable nature of dialogical approach to other religions is emphasised against the context of religious plurality. Samartha holds that dialogue in the context of pluralism is inevitable and it cannot be an optional activity.\textsuperscript{137} He argues that people of faith who deliberately reject relationships and chose to remain


\textsuperscript{136} I observed this personally in a number of dialogue meetings during my involvement with dialogue. The reports published about various meetings also include information on using multiple scriptures.

isolated impoverish the community.\(^{138}\) In such context, dialogue is interpreted as imperative and urgent\(^ {139}\) and Christians are advised to be prepared to face it.\(^ {140}\)

The other drive for dialogue comes from affirming that dialoguing with neighbours of other religions is a basic Christian responsibility. The understanding here is that Christians are not isolated from their neighbours from different religions, and to be Christian means to be dialogical. This is one of the reasons the Christian understanding of Trinity is often brought into focus when talking about dialogue.\(^ {141}\) Basing his understanding of dialogue on Trinity, Panikkar says that “the Trinity may be considered as a junction where the authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet.”\(^ {142}\) This means that for Christians the relationship within the Trinity points to the dialogue and relationship that they should have with their neighbours.\(^ {143}\) Not only the movement within Trinity, but also God’s relationship to the world set the foundation for Christian dialogue with other religions. Paul Verghese, (later Paulose Mar Gregorios) writes: “The Christian understanding of creation as an act of grace and of God’s love as extending to the whole of mankind is already an adequate basis on which to engage in dialogue with them, in love and openness without fear.”\(^ {144}\) For him the motivation for dialogue comes from the love of Christ, who

loves not only all men, but also all that is created. I am united to Christ in baptism and Chrismation. My mind is the mind of Christ. Therefore my love is non-exclusive and open to the whole creation.... I as a member of that body have to express that love and compassion in faithfulness, integrity and openness with sympathetic understanding. This is sufficient and compelling reason for me to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths. It is love in Christ that sends me to dialogue.\(^ {145}\)

Ariarajah says that Christian affirmation of dialogue is carried out “not at the expense of our faith in Jesus Christ”, as is sometimes interpreted.\(^ {146}\) “On the other hand”, he holds, “it is an expression of our faith in Jesus Christ.”\(^ {147}\) He believes that

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141 Panikkar, *Trinity and World Religions*.
142 Panikkar, *Trinity*, p.42.
143 Panikkar, *Trinity*, p.43.
144 Verghese, “Christ and All Men” in *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, p.162
146 Ariarajah, *Dialogue*, p.22.
147 Ariarajah, *Dialogue*, p.22.
it is our vision and experience of the humanity of Christ “that drives us to seek and live in community.”

2.4.4.2. Dialogical Approach to Other Religions is a Better Model

The dialogical approach to religions evolved to offer alternatives to the earlier approaches to other faiths, generally branded as exclusivism and inclusivism. Thus, even though there are differing opinions about the nature of plurality or the differences between religions and or the common bases of dialogue such as God, Christ, Trinity, salvation and similar themes, there is basically an affirmation that the dialogue model is a better model to approach religions. Arguing that exclusive claims “make it difficult, if not impossible, for persons belonging to different religious traditions to live together in harmony and to cooperate for common purposes in society”, Samartha says that

Dialogue stands for an attempt on the part of Christians in a post-colonial and pluralistic society to build up new relationships with their neighbours of other faiths. It gives them call to discard the old, negative and triumphalistic attitude which have resulted in negative consequences. Essentially, dialogue is a mood, spirit and attitude in relationship.

He further says that “at a time when people of different cultures and religions are being drawn together for common purposes in the global community as never before, interreligious dialogue is an important means through which resources of religions can enhance the quality of life.” Richard Taylor, associated with CISRS, argues that “religious imperialism certainly must die for dialogue to live.”

2.4.4.3. Dialogue Leads to Mutual Understanding of Religions

One primary purpose of dialogue often talked about in dialogue circles is the necessity for the mutual understanding of religions both for their own existence and for the harmonious lives of their followers, one basic dialogical belief being that

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through dialogue a follower of religion not only understands the religion of his/her neighbours, but also understands his/her own religion. Thus, for Francis Vineeth, a Roman Catholic proponent of dialogue, “a theology of religions which acknowledges other religions as valid sources of god-experience, as it transcends its own limitations, is also ready to perfect itself by the help of the other.” This is generally identified as complementarity of religions, and is possible only through genuine dialogues between religions. For Klostermaier, dialogue “is an attempt to understand peoples of other faiths and ideologies. It is an attempt to understand them not as people opposed to us or competing with us. It is an attempt to understand them as partners with us in a pilgrimage.” Real dialogue, he says, challenges both partners. Arguing against the notion that each religion is self-sufficient for its adherents, Gregorios says that “experience has shown that when one sets out to learn deeply from other religions, one’s understanding of one’s own religion is transformed and deepened.” Panikkar identifies this process as mutual fecundation of religions though dialogue.

2.4.4.4. Dialogue for Building Relationships with the Neighbours from other Religions

The mutual understanding of religions in dialogue is basically to build better relationships between people of different religions. A report from a dialogue meeting arranged by CISRS affirms that,

dialogue is based on the acceptance of our neighbour as a person, as our brother and God’s Child. Even as it arises from this recognition of our common humanness, it contributes to the enrichment, on both sides, of our awareness of this common humanity. It deepens our sensitivity and promotes understanding and a sense of unity.”

Especially in the context of mutual mistrust and conflicts between different religious adherents, it is believed that dialogue will help create and maintain better relationships.

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154 Ariarajah, *Dialogue*, p.15
156 Panikkar, *Trinity*, p.43.
relationships, and where this is vital for life, building relationships between adherents of different religions becomes more important.

Insisting on the “universal inter-dependence and responsibility of each and every person with and for all other persons” Ariarajah says, “dialogue urges us to hold fast to these links. It urges to affirm the fundamental unity of human beings as members of the same human family.” Moreover, it “gives the partners a greater knowledge of each other and of each other’s religious traditions, and thus helps them to overcome prejudices, misinformation and negative attitudes. This in turn leads to a greater acceptance of each other with their religious traditions.” Thus creating better relationships with fellow human beings from different religions plays a central role in dialogue.

2.4.4.5. Dialogue and the Reality of Secularisation

Regarding the relationship between dialogue and secularism or secularisation in the Indian context, there are basically two perspectives. Firstly, while there are positive views appreciating secularism in the Indian context, in which all religions are to be respected, there is generally a negative attitude to secularisation which aims to annihilate religions as in the western context, a point made in Jerusalem 1928 by William Hocking. Even though this perspective is often challenged in the Indian context, where secularism is interpreted not as anti-religious but as multi-religious, there is a general trend in dialogue circles to talk about the ‘role of religions in the secular society.’ In this context, the importance of religions is affirmed, and how it functions within a secular context is discussed.

‘Religious dialogue with secularism’ is also discussed in dialogue circles. M.M. Thomas was an advocate for this approach and invited Christians to participate in the “struggles of secularism and secular men for an authentic understanding of man as he

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158 Ariarajah, Dialogue, p.22.
160 See page 44 in Chapter 1.
is confronted with the radical demand for meaningful personal human existence.”

In such context, he maintains, the Gospel of Christ has relevance and in order to create an awareness of it, the Church should enter into dialogue with secular people and ideologies.

However there are also criticisms of this perspective. Discussing ‘religious dialogue with secularism’, Paul Verghese says that while “the dialogue really needed is between Christians and non-Christians about our common task in the world”, maintaining that “dialogue between two separate organised entities called the Church on the one side and the world on the other is not what is needed,” for “Christians are just as much part of the world as non-Christians.”

2.4.4.6. Asian/Indian Social, Economic and Political Context as the Location of Dialogue

Initially only the religio-cultural climate of India/Asia was emphasised in dialogue, but more recently the socio-economic context within Asia/India for dialogue has been emphasised, for religion alone cannot be sufficient for dialogue in this context. Felix Wilfred argues that when approaches to dialogue are considered from a western perspective, there are limitations, but if the location is moved, then the socio-economic context becomes important. According to him, changing the location means changing the fundamental question about dialogue. “The question has to shift from how can Christianity relate to other religions to what is the place of Christianity itself in a religiously pluralistic Asian world,” he says. For, he thinks that “the first question is Christianity-centred, and with that question we cannot have a genuine dialogue with other religions.”

As long as the point of departure does not change, we will be concentrating on such questions as salvation in other religions, because we have spiritually and

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162 Thomas, Salvation, p.45.
163 Thomas, Salvation, p.45.
theologically transported ourselves to the perspective of European and North
American Christianity and its history with all its discussions concerning \textit{vera et falsa religio}. For us, the point of departure for dialogue is the concrete socio-
political and historical context of Asia.\footnote{Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping”, p.70.}

Wilfred also stresses that this will address the role of religion and religions coming
together for the welfare of the nation and community. He says that “In a pluralistic
and multi-religious society, the religions need to enter into dialogue for providing a
common moral foundation to the political and social life.”\footnote{Wilfred, “Dialogue Gasping”, p.72.} In such context, Wilfred
affirms, we need a politically-based dialogue, where religions actively taking part in
secular affairs rather than keep themselves away from them,\footnote{Wilfred, “Inter-religious Dialogue”, pp.187-202.} because “people of
one religion alone cannot find solution to the problems of this country. Therefore,
there should be inter-religious cooperation in the fields of development, peace and
nation-building.”\footnote{“A Summary of Group Discussions and Suggestions” in \textit{The Multi-faith Context}, p.42.}

Pointing out that poverty and religiosity are two realities of Asia/India, K.C.
Abraham, a contemporary Indian Christian thinker involved in dialogue, says that:

“The national situation is complex, but the problem of poverty, amounting to
destitution and misery for millions and the communal and/or religious conflict that
threatens national unity are particularly urgent and deserve special emphasis when
we consider the question of dialogue.”\footnote{Abraham, “Dialogue in the Context”, p.48; also “Inter-faith Dialogue for Humanization” in
\textit{Religion and Society}, 46/1-2, March-June 1999, pp.65-76.}

His suggestion is that when all the spiritual sources from different religious traditions
which lead towards human wholeness are brought together in dialogue, these evils
can be done away with.\footnote{Abraham, “Dialogue in the Context”, p.63.} Francis Vineeth also holds similar perspectives:

India is a land of great world-religions, cultural wealth, and at the same time a
country of miserable poverty. Hence our dialogue must be with all the three aspects
of our being. Dialogue with our cultural traditions takes us to the reality of
inculturation. Dialogue with the other living religions is what we now call inter-
religious dialogue,... dialogue with the poor of our country calls us for a theology
of liberation. Evangelization is now to be understood in the form of this three-fold
dialogue.\footnote{Vineeth, “Theology of Religions”, pp.248-249.}
Thus we can note that since the 1970s the importance of dialogue has been taken to different levels in India, yet always offering a new way to approach other religions, replacing exclusive models. This approach has developed theological paradigms which help people cooperate with each other. One of the limitations with most of these developments was the obvious fact that these discussions were mostly confined to elites and targeted elites in religious spheres, an aspect to be discussed and analysed in Chapter 8. Now I shall discuss the challenges brought to dialogue from liberation theologies especially in relation to the dominant Hindu traditions in India, which has provided yet another platform for it to be sharpened and contextualised in the Indian society.

2.5. Interreligious Dialogue and Liberation Theologies in India: Challenging Sanskritization of Theology and Proposing Dialogue for the Welfare of Poor and Downtrodden

Since the 1980s, dialogue, particularly Hindu-Christian, has come under criticism from liberation theologies in India. The challenges liberation theologies brought were two-fold. Firstly they attacked the Sanskritization of Indian Christian theology including theologies of dialogue linked to the dominant Hindu traditions. Secondly, liberation theologies have also offered liberation themes to be incorporated in dialogue, some of which, as will be shown, has been achieved.\(^{176}\)

A student of Indian Christian theology knows well that traditional Indian theology interpreted Christianity in India largely through the dominant Hindu Brahmanic traditions involving Vedas, Vedanthas, Upanisads.\(^{177}\) Most of the theologians being converts from high caste Hindu traditions, this was understandable. While such theologies had their advantages in the nineteenth and early part of twentieth century, this was unacceptable by the later part of the twentieth century, one reason being the increasing awareness of Sanskritization popularised by the Indian sociologist


\(^{177}\) Boyd, An Introduction.
M.N. Srinivas. The original definition offered for Sanskritization by him was that it “is the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of a high... caste”.\textsuperscript{178} Generally this refers to the process by which anything adapts to the Sanskrit principles. In the theological circles in India, Sanskritization of theology meant adapting to the dominant Hindu Brahmanic ways of life. Arguing that Sanskritised Indian Christian theology has neglected the millions of Dalits and their experiences, Dalit theology insisted on new ways of theologising where the experiences of the oppressed people became the subject of theologising rather than the theories and concepts drawn from the Hindu traditions. Criticising the Sanskritization of the Indian Christian theology and pointing out the fact that Indian Christian theology has failed to take note of what was happening on the Dalit front,\textsuperscript{179} Arvind Nirmal, one of the pioneers of Dalit theology, says that a Dalit theology represents a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian Theology of the Brahminic tradition. The Brahminic tradition in the classical Indian Christian Theology needs to be challenged by the merging Dalit Theology. This also means that a Christian Dalit Theology will be a counter theology.\textsuperscript{180}

In its criticisms of the Sanskritization of theology in India, Dalit theology has been supported by the growing Dalit movements in India\textsuperscript{181} especially the influence of B.R. Ambedkar,\textsuperscript{182} who worked on Dalit development in India, and liberation theologies which were originally popular in Latin America and then moved worldwide.

Dalit theology’s criticisms have also extended to dialogue in India. A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel is one Indian thinker who has reflected on Dalit religion in the context of dialogue.\textsuperscript{183} Critically studying the Hindu-Christian dialogue activities, he

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Nirmal, \textit{Heuristic Explorations}, p. 144; see also Walter Fernandes, “A Socio-Historical Perspective for Liberation Theology in India” in \textit{Leave the Temple}, pp.9-34.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
maintains that “it does not make much sense to think of Hindu-Christian dialogue in terms of classical Hindu philosophical systems as far as the general popular religious experience is concerned” which involves the experience of Dalits and other oppressed. Franklyn Balasundaram, James Massey and Sathinathan Clarke broadly share this view.

Secondly, building on the above criticisms, liberation theologies have also posed the challenge to dialogue of dealing with the socio-economic and political realities that are responsible for the livelihood of millions of poor and downtrodden in India. As a result dialogue had to redefine itself, incorporating the socio-economic concerns involving the poor and downtrodden. This led some theologians in India to work for a liberative theology of religions or liberative theology of dialogue in India. S. Arokiasamy, a Roman Catholic theologian in India working on a liberation theology of religion says:

“In a situation of poverty largely imposed and a pluralism of religions and humanistic ideologies which need to be critically understood, engagement in and commitment to liberation will be an inter-human and inter-religious project.”

For Amaladoss, “interreligious dialogue must descend from the level of experts to that of the ordinary people, the poor, who are struggling together for liberation and fulfilment. It will be shown more in symbols and gestures and common activity rather than in abstract discussions. It will be the dialogue of life and struggles.”

Moreover, Wilfred holds that “we cannot today meaningfully enter into a discourse of praxis of liberating dialogue without taking into serious account the colossal fact of the ideological critique of Indian religious traditions, especially Hinduism, on the part of the marginalized, especially the Dalits.” Samuel Rayan, another Roman

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189 Arokiasamy, “Theology of Religions from Liberation Perspective” in Religious Pluralism, p.301.
190 See also Michael Amalados, “Liberation as an Interreligious Project” in Leave the Temple, pp. 158-174; and Amalados “Liberation as Interreligious”, in Leave the Temple, p.166.
191 Wilfred Cited in Knitter, One Earth Many Religions, p.163.
Catholic theologian in India, has also challenged what he calls ‘socially neutral’ dialogue. According to him, “dialogue is not authentic unless it leads to reinterpretation or rejection of all oppressive aspects of the religious heritage of both partners.”

Emphasising the relationship between liberation theology and dialogue, Dominic Veliath proposes that theology of religions should learn from theology of liberation concerning the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy. In similar vein, Ignatius Puthiadam says that

a genuine theology of religions will arise in any religion only if the religious community earnestly enters into the religious experience of other religious communities and at the same time in all earnestness immerse itself into the poverty and the culture of the people through dialogical and liberative activity.

Thus liberation theologies, by challenging the Sanskritisation involved in dialogue in India, have helped dialogue to rethink and redefine its boundaries and enlarge its horizons to include liberation themes in dialogue. In this context it should be also noted that some Indian Christian thinkers focusing on Dalits have developed dialogue with religions such as Buddhism and Sikhism which are also critical of dominant Hindu Brahmanical traditions.

2.6. The Significance of Dialogue in the Contemporary Context in India

In contemporary India, especially over the last two decades, dialogue has become significant due to an increase in ‘religious conflicts,’ resulting in dialogue for peace and reconciliation. The idea of this existed earlier, but only rose to prominence after India witnessed what is generally described as Hindu-Muslim violence in the 1990s due to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodya, after the somewhat earlier ‘Hindu-Sikh violence’. More major violent events have occurred since the 1990s.

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‘Hindu-Christian violence’ in 1998 and ‘Hindu-Muslim violence’ in 2002, both in Gujarat, and ‘Hindu-Christian violence’ in Kandhamal in Orissa in 2008 are some of the major violent events.

In responding to this context of violence in India, dialogue works basically in two ways. The first one is to encourage more and more people to come in dialogue for peace and reconciliation to help solve the problems between them. Communal harmony is emphasised as one of the most important necessities for the time.196 The underlying idea is that religions or misunderstandings among religious adherents play a major role in today’s communal violence in Indian society, necessitating a proper understanding of religion.197 In such contexts, one of the foremost objectives of dialogue is to contain the conflicts and violence among people, dialogue and cooperation between people of different religions becoming necessary for peacemaking. Commenting on the importance of conflict resolution in dialogue, Amaladoss says that a real conflict resolution will have to be done in three phases: a restoration of justice and reconciliation, a solution to the problems that gave rise to the conflict and healing of memories. The efforts at conflict resolution will have to be supported by continuing efforts to promote community through dialogue.198

Thus, in the context of conflicts, tensions, and violence, dialogue has to work for peace building among communities and as a conflict resolution principle. Andreas D’Souza is a recent director of the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) in the city of Hyderabad in South India, started in 1930 for the purpose of training Christian missionaries to work among Muslims, and since the 1980s promoting dialogue.199 He has worked on a ‘theology of relationship’ which insists on the necessity of dialogue to create peace and reconciliation among people who are divided in the name of religious conflicts.200 He says:

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196 Robinson, “From Apartheid”, pp.82-96.
in order to promote interfaith dialogue what we need is not convergence, that is, unity in beliefs and practices but an openness to building relationships, restoring kinships or bonds with all people no matter who they are and to what particular religion they belong.\textsuperscript{201}

Pointing out the various factors involved in conflicts among people, he says, that “in a theology of relationship leading towards reconciliation I need to transcend the boundaries often imposed not by religion but by human greed for power, wealth and renown.”\textsuperscript{202} Emphasis on non-violence gets importance in this approach to dialogue.\textsuperscript{203} While institutions such as HMI and CISRS continue their dialogue activities in this direction, increasingly there are proposals to take dialogue to the grassroots where the violence and its consequences are more felt.\textsuperscript{204}

The other perspective in dialogue is to challenge the religious fundamentalism and political tactics which underlie religious conflicts.\textsuperscript{205} While the fundamentalism of each religion is critiqued, Hindu nationalism, linked not only to the majority religious community but also to the strong political representation by the political party BJP, gets more treatment in the Indian context.\textsuperscript{206} There is basically a differentiation between Hindu and Hindutva, and while dialogue is encouraged with Hinduism, Hindutva is denounced. Warning against the temptation to identify Hindutva with Hindu tradition, Wilfred says that one should “distinguish between Hindutva as an ideology and Hinduism as practiced and lived by the overwhelmingly majority of the people.”\textsuperscript{207} Moreover, M.T. Cherian, who has recently done research on this theme, proposes a public dialogue in order to combat communal violence. For him, dialogue does not need to depend only on religion. He writes, “It is possible to establish a peaceful society through dialogue not necessarily on the basis of religion but on the basis of the day-to-day living situation of the common public in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{201} D’Souza, “Theology of Relationship” in \textit{The Forum In-Focus}, No. 14, 2002-2003, p.5.
\item \textsuperscript{202} D’Souza, “Theology of Relationship”, p.7.
\item \textsuperscript{203} A work on dialogue from Gandhian approach has been done during the 1990s. A. Pushparajan, \textit{From Conversion to Fellowship: The Hindu-Christian Encounter in the Gandhian Perspective}, Allahabad: St. Paul Press, 1990.
\item \textsuperscript{204} Dayanandan Francis, \textit{Reflections on Inter-faith Themes}, Delhi: ISPCK, 2007, especially Chapter 5: “Dialogue with the Hindus at the Grassroot Level.”
\item \textsuperscript{205} Gnana Robinson, “Why is Fundamentalism a Problem Today?” in \textit{Fundamentalism and Secularism}, pp. 9-15.
\item \textsuperscript{206} Wilfred, “Our Neighbours”, p.81.
\item \textsuperscript{207} Wilfred, “Our Neighbours”, p.81.
\end{itemize}
In my opinion models of dialogue which do not contain just theological discourses, but relate to the context of everyday lives, are increasingly needed, which is the theme for Chapter 9.

The influence of the dialogical approach in the current context can be noted from the fact that there is increasing interest in religious plurality in various quarters including Pentecostals in India, generally dubbed exclusivists. Studying the works of Samartha, Rayan and Ariarajah, Geomon K. George, an Indian Pentecostal Christian, argues that Indian Pentecostals should not shy away from the question of religious pluralism, unlike in the past, and he invites them rather to face the question squarely. Terming his model ‘Pneumatological Inclusivism,’ the basis for a Pentecostal approach to religious plurality and dialogue in the Spirit, he says:

Pneumatological inclusivism recognises the Spirit and logos outside the Church creating, renewing, and sustaining the activity of God in the world. Thus the question is not whether the Spirit is present among the people of other faiths, but how one discerns the Spirit of God in the religious traditions of other people.

This is but one example of the significance of dialogue and the awareness of religious plurality in contemporary Indian Christian thought.

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter has not offered an in depth discussion but a bird’s eye view of some major trends of dialogue in India over the last six decades. I have shown the multiple trends and perspectives in dialogue and, against the differing contexts in India, indicated how dialogue has evolved to become one of the dominant approaches today encouraging Christians to have positive attitudes to other religions. Having outlined these trends, the next four chapters will discuss some limitations of dialogue which I have outlined in my hypothesis in the Introduction. However before doing it, I shall discuss dialogue activities in Kanyakumari district, along with the background of the district, to show how these trends in dialogue have been put into practice.

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209 George, Religious Pluralism: Challenges for Pentecostalism in India, Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2006, p.233.
Chapter 3
The Background of Kanyakumari District and the Dialogue Practice in the District

3.1. Introduction

Having set the theoretical background of this research by discussing the development of dialogue in contemporary India in the last chapter, this chapter sets the background of my field research. I selected Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu, South India where people from more than one religion, especially Hindus, Christians and Muslims, live, and conducted the field research there from January to July 2008. My field research was primarily to study the dialogue activities in the district for the past four or five decades which are the practical manifestations of the trends in dialogue that I have discussed in the previous chapter. For studying how people belonging to different religions at the grassroots maintain relationships among themselves, I selected a village, Gramam – where Hindus, Christians and Muslims live – representing the general nature of life in the district. I investigated the notion of religious conflicts by studying the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ in the district in 1982 which often cited as the context of dialogue in the district: this will be presented as a case study in Chapter 7. This chapter provides a brief outline of the dialogue activities in the district, after providing the general background of the district based on my field study and my experience of living in the district for more than thirty years and my involvement with dialogue activities for more than a decade.

3.2. Kanyakumari District: Its People and Background

3.2.1. Geographical Location

Kanyakumari district, which is one of the 31 districts in Tamil Nadu, is the southernmost district in India. It is also called ‘Kanniyanakumari’ which is the proper transliteration of the term in Tamil. The district is 1,672 sq. km. and occupies 1.29%

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1 http://www.tn.gov.in/districts.htm, viewed, 26-01-2009. Tamil Nadu is one of the 28 States in India. For details see http://india.gov.in/knowindia/state_uts.php.
of the area of Tamil Nadu.² Kanyakumari is the smallest district in Tamil Nadu in terms of area, next to Chennai which is a district city and the capital of Tamil Nadu.³ The district is bounded by three ocean – the Bay of Bengal to the east, the Indian Ocean to the south, and the Arabian Sea to the west – with Kerala State to the west and Tirunelveli to the north. The district has four taluks,⁴ Agasteeswaram (also Agasteeswarem), Thovlali, Kalkulam and Vilavancode. The capital of the district is Nagercoil (also Nagerkovil) which is in the Taluk of Agasteeswaram.

Kanyakumari also refers to a particular place in Kanyakumari district. This is a small town, and in terms of administrative subdivisions, it is a panchayat town.⁵ It is a tourist spot as well as a pilgrim place particularly since waves from Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal come together at one point, echoing the merging Ganga, Jamuna and the mythical Saraswati rivers in North India at the town of Sangamam near Allahabad. The sun-rise in the morning and sun-set in the evening can be seen from here, and the water from this place, as in Sangamam, is considered to be holy by the Hindus, who come from all over India to Kanyakumari. There is a memorial place for Vivekananda⁶ on a rock in the sea, reached by ferry, a memorial to Gandhi (Gandhi Mandabam), a 133 feet statue of Tiruvalluar, a famous Tamil Poet, and a memorial to Kamaraj, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Kanyakumari is also called Cape Comorin.⁷

### 3.2.2. Historical Background of Kanyakumari District

Discussing the overall background of Kanyakumari district is a critical task as there are differing views, usually determined by the caste or religious identity of the historian.⁸ But understanding Kanyakumari’s past is crucial for understanding and

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² [http://www.kanyakumari.tn.nic.in/, viewed, 26-01-2009.](http://www.kanyakumari.tn.nic.in/)
³ [http://www.chennai.tn.nic.in/chndistprof.htm#loc, viewed, 26-01-2009.](http://www.chennai.tn.nic.in/chndistprof.htm#loc)
⁴ A taluk is a subdivision of a district.
⁵ A panchayat refers to a rural or urban local government administrative body.
⁸ For example, C.M. Agur, from Sambava caste community, which is a Schedule Caste community, was one of the first locals to write the church history of the area, *Church History of Travancore*, Madras, 1903. He traced the origin of Christianity in Travancore to one Vethamanikkam from his community. This was not questioned for almost one hundred years, but recent writings show the
analysing the conflicts within which local dialogue activities take place. What is now Kanyakumari district and the southern part of Kerala were together known as the State of Travancore from 18th century to the mid 20th century.9 During the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., this region was called Chera Nadu,10 as it was under the rule of Chera kings.11 Later the region was under the rule of Ayis,12 Pandyas, Cholas, Nayaks and Venad13 Kings. Travancore was ruled by kings even after the Independence of India in 1947. When it joined the Indian Union in 1949,14 it was merged with Cochin, which was the northern part of today’s Kerala, and became the State of Travancore-Cochin. However people in the southern part of Travancore, today’s Kanyakumari, wanted to join Tamil Nadu, since the majority of people in this region were Tamil-speaking. But the State of Travancore-Cochin objected, in part because it depended on this region for rice.15 Agitation began among Tamils in the region, and finally in 1956, on the recommendation of the State Reorganisation Act, 1956 (Act XXXVII of 1956), this region joined Tamil Nadu in 1 November 1956, and became a separate district.16

9 Peter, Malayali, p.1.
11 Chera, Chozha and Pandiya were three ancient Dynasties in Tamil Nadu. Sitaram Gurumoorthy, Kanniyakumari Maavatta Tholliyal Kaiyedu (The Archaeological Handbook for Kanyakumari District), Chennai: Department of Archaeology of GoTN, 2008, p.34. Also, Sukumaran, Cherar.
12 The ‘Ayis’ dates back to 250 B.C. Gopalakrishnan, Gazetteers, p.54.
13 The Venad dynasty dates back to 12th c. A.D. Gopalakrishnan, Gazetteers, p.71. Later as Venad was under attack from Vijayanagar Dynasty (16 c. A.D.) and still later by the Nawab of Arcot (A.D. 1740), the area consisting of present Kanyakumari district also came under invasion and attack by these kingdoms.
14 Peter, Malayali, p.132.
15 Peter, Malayali, pp.35-36.
3.2.3. People, Society and Social Life: Caste Structure

How slavery and the caste system first entered South India is still a contested area of research. There is no evidence for caste here in early Tamil Literature.\(^{17}\) The roots of caste and slavery in South India are traced to “the conquest of southern India by the Aryans and the consequent fusion between them and the inhabitants of the land” which caused “the birth of the Caste System and the institution of slavery which is closely allied with the former.”\(^{18}\) The initial evidence for caste appeared during the South Indian rule of cholas until the 12 century AD, and it has survived until today,\(^ {19}\) albeit weakened due to modernisation and its consequences. This argument is also extended to Kanyakumari district. It is said that

[t]he caste system in the society has weakened to a great extent especially after independence because of growth of education and improvements in transport and communication. The rigid social divisions in terms of caste noticed and dwelt at length by the British historians are no longer as significant as they were in those days.\(^ {20}\)

Nevertheless, this argument with regard to society in India in general and in the Kanyakumari district in particular is disputed and attempts are made by historians, sociologists and anthropologists to show that caste is still a continuing reality.\(^ {21}\) Moreover day-to-day realities among people are also evidences that caste remains an inevitable feature in government policies, particularly for education and

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\(^ {18}\) Manickam, *Slavery*, p.15.

\(^ {19}\) Basham, *The Wonder*, p.151.

\(^ {20}\) Gopalakrishnan, *Gazetteers*, p.117.

\(^ {21}\) Recent local writing shows that both historical and contemporary life is based on caste differences; see note 8 above. Writing on the social, cultural and historical contexts of the district, Ivey & Peter and Sukumaran challenge the no-caste notion in the district, Peter, *Malayali*, pp.xiii-xvii, seeing past and present tensions between Tamils in Kanyakumari and Malayalis (people living in Kerala) as caste conflicts between Nairs and Nadars in the region: this will be discussed in Chapter 7). See also Sukumaran, *Kumari Sirpi Nesamonyum Thenkumari Thamizh Makkalum (Kumari Sirpi Nesamony and the Tamil People of South Kanyakumari)*, Nagercoil: Sandini Publishers, 2004; *Cherar; Kumariyai Meeton Marshall Nesamony (Marshal Nesamony, the Saviour of Kanyakumari)*, Nagercoil: Shanthini Publishers, 2007. The prevalence of caste as a basis of discord is commonly held by those opposed to Hindu nationalists: *C. Chokkalingam, Matham, Panbaadu: Sila Maruthedhalhal (Religion and Culture: Some Researches)*, Nagercoil: Thinai Publishers, 2000.
belief in the irrelevance of caste is held by Hindu nationalists who stress religious divisions and some government offices.\textsuperscript{23}

The following table shows the population in Kanyakumari district by caste community in the present context.\textsuperscript{24}

Table 1: Population in Kanyakumari District by Caste

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste Community</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schedule Castes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribes</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Backward Communities</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backward Communities</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Communities (Forward Communities)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Numbers</td>
<td></td>
<td>16,76,034</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scheduled Castes include castes like Pariahs (also Parayas), Pallars and Sambavas who are spread throughout the district.\textsuperscript{25} Another scheduled caste community, the Paravas, live in the coastal area and are involved in fishing and pearl-fishing.\textsuperscript{26} Kanis are the main Tribal group in the district in the Western Ghats.\textsuperscript{27} Most Backward Communities (MBC) such as Mukkuvas live along the coastal lines and are involved in fishing: almost all are Roman Catholic.\textsuperscript{28} Among Backward Communities, Nadars are the majority community in the region, in terms of number, and they follow

\textsuperscript{22} For instance, governments in India still ask for caste details for education and employment.
\textsuperscript{24} Interview, Sukumaran, Nagercoil, 03-07-2008. Sukumaran is a social scientist and he writes on social and historical issues in the district. The details are from: Letter to Mr. Sukumaran from the District Collector, Kanyakumari District, Letter No.: A4/60819/07/, dated 19.09.2007.
\textsuperscript{25} Gopalakrishnan, Gazetteers, p.118.
\textsuperscript{26} Gopalakrishnan, Gazetteers, p.117.
\textsuperscript{27} Gopalakrishnan, Gazetteers, pp.120-121
Hinduism and Christianity. Other Communities include castes such as Vellalas, Nairs, Krishnavagaiyars who are also called Kuruppu, Kerala Mudalis and Brahmins. These are ‘people with caste’ and most are caste Hindus.

### 3.2.4. Education, Employment and Economic Background

In Tamil Nadu, Kanyakumari district had the highest level of literacy (88.11\%) in 2001. There was a Jain education system from 8th - 12th c AD described on stone tablets. Oral traditions talk about the education of non-Brahmins in the region from 17th to 19th century. Education became common for all irrespective of caste only after the London Missionary Society came to this region and to Travancore in the 19th century. In 1836, Malayalam became the mandatory language in the schools in Travancore. The LMS missionaries also helped women to participate in education. Today many schools and colleges in the district belong to Christian institutions such as Roman Catholic and CSI churches: there are also many government schools and colleges. Tamil is the primary language, Malayalam being spoken in the western parts of the district bordering Kerala.

Agriculture is the primary activity in the district, producing coconut, paddy, rubber, pepper, banana and many other fruits, tapioca and cashew. Among these, paddy and rubber are the primary cash crops. There are also various agricultural research

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29 Gopalakrishnan, *Gazetteers*, p.117. For a general study of Tamil Nadu which also includes information about Nadars in Kanyakumari region see Robert Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu*, University of California Press, 1969.

30 Gopalakrishnan, *Gazetteers*, pp.117-118


40 [http://www.kanyakumari.tn.nic.in/agriculture.htm](http://www.kanyakumari.tn.nic.in/agriculture.htm), viewed, 17-11-2009

stations and laboratories. The many educational institutions in the district provide a source of employment for people. And, since many schools and colleges which receive government aid are either in the hands of churches – mainly Roman Catholic Church and CSI – or caste Hindus’, each employs people from the respective communities. One of my Hindu interviewees in Gramam said this generated ill feelings among Hindus from Nadar and other Schedule Castes, being neither Christian nor caste-Hindu, and is a source of tensions. Small business and shop keeping also offers employment opportunities.

3.2.5. Religions and Cults in Kanyakumari District

The following table shows the contemporary population by religious affiliation:

Table 2: Population in Kanyakumari district by Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>51.27</td>
<td>8,59,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>44.47</td>
<td>7,45,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>70,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jains</td>
<td>0.0046</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>0.0018</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>0.0016</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.0069</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>0.0425</td>
<td>714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Numbers</td>
<td></td>
<td>16,76,034</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are the three major religions professed in Kanyakumari district. ‘Hindus’ follow Saivite and Vaishnavite

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42 http://www.kanyakumari.tn.nic.in/agriculture.htm, viewed, 17-11-2009
43 Interview, Vishnu.
44 Interview, C. Rajamony, Nagercoil, 10-07-2008
traditions and many other folk traditions. The early Ai rulers of this region were mostly Vaishnavite and hence this district had a strong Vaishnavaite influence from early times. This political inclination supported the growth of Vaishnavism, expressed in many oral traditions and Vaishnavite temples. The district was also influenced by Saivite traditions, after the incursion of Cholas to southern Travancore in the early period, many Jain temples becoming Saivite under the later Chola kings. Early attempts to convert the upper caste people to Christianity in the southern-most parts of India during the 16th century, were challenged by some rulers such as Naikkars, who extended the awareness of Saivism among the common people with eight maths (temples) for Lord Siva, two being in today’s Kanyakumari district. In spite of their affinity to Vaishnavite traditions, the Travancore kings maintained good relationships with Saiva temples. There are 64 popular Siva temples found in the district, and twelve Sivalayams (temple of Siva), with special worship on the day of Sivarathri. There are also temples for Muruga, son of Siva, mostly in the hills and mountains.

Folk deities are associated with Saivite traditions, the male folk deity, Sudalaimadan, being the image of Siva. There are also many temples for goddesses, goddess worship being an important aspect of religious life here. Muttharamman, a popular female folk deity, is seen as Parvathi, Siva’s wife, and received varam (approval) from Siva enabling her to be worshipped by people. The images of weapons and thiruneeru (a flour based material distributed to devotees during pooja and used on the skin and on the forehead during worship) in the folk temples are associated with

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46 Perumal, Thenkumariyin, p.194.
47 Perumal, Thenkumariyin, p.194.
49 Perumal, Thenkumariyin, pp.201-212.
50 Perumal, Thenkumariyin, p.201.
51 Narcheesan, Kumari, pp.44-45.
54 Padmanabhan, Temples in Kanyakumari District, Nagercoil, 1980.
55 Perumal, Thenkumariyin p.206. Sivarathiri means the great night of Siva.
57 Gopalakrishnan, Gazettes, pp.118-120.
Saivite traditions. Moreover, the very name of the district – Kanyakumari – is the name of a female deity: ‘virgin daughter’ or ‘virgin girl’. The Kanyakumari Amman temple located in Kanyakumari, close to the sea, represents Parvathi, Siva’s wife. The Mandaikadu temple, located in the area where the 1982 clashes started, was built to worship a female seer who worshipped there, and was the first national temple of the Travancore monarch in 1805. There are many other mother goddesses who are worshipped in the district, but Mutharamman is the most popular, usually called the ‘village deity’. When the Hindu Nadars converted to Protestantism in the 19th century, they made a vow in Mutharamman temples that they would not return to their mother religion. There are special Kodai (festival) in these temples once a year or every three years.

The Ayyavazhi (‘the way of the father’) movement is another tradition in the district which is often associated with Hinduism. This cult was founded by a man named Muthukutti, now called by his followers Ayya Vaikundar, and born in 1809 in Travancore in the oppressed Nadar caste. He became a leader of the people, challenging the caste hierarchy as well as teaching people spiritual principles. Those who follow him today are called Ayyavazhi Bahkthas, the temples of this cult being ‘pathi’. The central pathi is in Swamithoppu, where Muthukutti was buried. This cult is very popular among Nadar castes, and other people irrespective of caste also participate in it. Even though non-Ayyavazhi people identify them as Hindus,

68 Peter, *Samaya*, p.139.
most Ayyavazhi people prefer to be known by their own name, rather than as Hindus.\textsuperscript{69}

European Christianity came to Travancore during the 15\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} centuries, Syrian or Thomas Christians living in Southern Travancore since the second century.\textsuperscript{70} The Portuguese arrived in South India at the end of the 15th century, and some attempted to convert the Syrian Christians in Kerala into Roman Catholics. When that failed they turned their attention to the Mukkuvas who were living in the coastal areas from Cochin to today’s Kanyakumari district.\textsuperscript{71} Their conversion to Christianity, however, was not good news to Syrian Christians who considered themselves superior.\textsuperscript{72} At this time, there was another fishing community, Paravas, living in the eastern and western coasts of today’s Tamil Nadu and Kerala, who also wanted to become Christians and gain Portuguese protection from troublesome Muslims.\textsuperscript{73} 85 Parava leaders went to Cochin and were baptised, Roman Catholic Christianity thus starting in Kanyakumari.\textsuperscript{74} The Roman Catholic missionary Francis Xavier then came to Travancore, leading to mass conversions among the coastal Mukkuvas of Travancore, virtually all of whom are Roman Catholic.\textsuperscript{75} Later inland people converted to Roman Catholic Christianity, including castes such as Nadars and Vellalas.\textsuperscript{76} Thus until the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Roman Catholic Christianity was the only Christianity which functioned in this region other than Orthodox Church for the small Keralian elite in the area.\textsuperscript{77} The Roman Catholic Churches in the district came under Kottar Diocese (Kottar is a semi-urban centre which has been the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Missionaries since Francis Xavier) from 1930, when the diocese split off from Kollam (now in Kerala) Diocese. Today there are about 500,000 members in this diocese.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{69} Interview, Parvathi, a resident of Gramam and a follower of the Ayya Vazhi, 23-06-2008.
\textsuperscript{70} Narcheesan, \textit{Kumari}, p.29.
\textsuperscript{71} Narcheesan, \textit{Kumari}, p.29.
\textsuperscript{72} Narcheesan, \textit{Kumari}, p.30.
\textsuperscript{73} Perumal, \textit{Thenkumariyin}, p.252.
\textsuperscript{74} Narcheesan, \textit{Kumari}, p.30. By the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, it is believed, there were about 80,000 Catholics were living in 50 different places in South Travancore.
\textsuperscript{75} Gopalakrishnan, \textit{Gazetteers}, pp.121-123.
\textsuperscript{76} Narcheesan, \textit{Kumari}, pp.62-65.
\textsuperscript{77} Gopalakrishnan, \textit{Gazetteers}, p.121.
\textsuperscript{78} Narcheesan, \textit{Kumari}, p.9.
In South Travancore, Protestant Christianity was introduced among an outcaste community called Sambavas. The first Protestant convert in Travancore was Vethamanikkam who invited Ringel Taube, an LMS missionary, working in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu to come to Travancore as the area was controlled by the East India Company, Taube had to get permission from Colonel Macaulay which was granted. Taube then established the first Protestant Churches in the region. In the light of this incident, Agur, a local twentieth century church historian says that but for brave interference of that one Company man, no missionary could have come to Travancore. Taube started his work in a village called Mylaudy which is in east Kanyakumari. He gave equal importance to church building and educating the local people. LMS missionaries Charles Mead, Charles Malt and James Russell continued Taube’s work in Travancore. Even though initially the Sambavars were the focus of missionary work of LMS missionaries, later Nadars, also at the bottom of society, converted to Christianity in large numbers due to oppression and suffering they were facing from the ‘high caste’ people. Slowly the Sambavars and other castes felt that they were sidelined within the church, and so when the Salvation Army came to the region, the Sambavars and other outcastes embraced it. Today there are about 300 Salvation Army churches in the district with 50,000 members. Later American Lutheran Church missionaries worked among the low caste people such as Sambavas. There are now a few Lutheran churches, and their seminary – Concordia Theological Seminary – in the district.

79 Joy Gnandason, Oru Marakkappatta Vara laru (A Forgotten History), Madurai, 1998, p.50; But as I mentioned earlier there are now disputes about this. See foot note no. 8.
80 Narcheesan, Kumari, p.97.
81 Peter, Samaya, p.81.
82 Agur, Church History. For a study of relationship between missionaries as colonial administrators in the wider missionary context, see Andrew Porter, Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.
83 Peter, Samaya, pp.83-85.
84 Peter, Samaya Thondargalum, pp.75-127.
86 Narcheesan, Kumari, p.118.
87 Narcheesan, Kumari, pp.118-119.
89 In the initial days of dialogue in this district, this Seminary has provided space for conducting dialogue meetings. Interview, Rajamony.
Churches established by the LMS missionaries were known as LMS churches, becoming part of the Church of South India when it was formed in 1947 as ‘CSI South Travancore Diocese’.\(^{90}\) After Kanyakumari district was formed in 1956, the CSI South Travancore Diocese split into CSI South Kerala Diocese and CSI Kanyakumari Diocese in 1959.\(^{91}\) Today there are about 500 churches and 300,000 members in the CSI Kanyakumari Diocese.\(^{92}\) In addition to this, there are also many Pentecostal Christians living in the district,\(^{93}\) belonging to different Pentecostal groups such as Indian Pentecostal Church, Assemblies of God, Ceylon Pentecostal church. Commonly Pentecostals are often termed ‘fringe groups’ by the members of the mainline churches because they are thought to represent very fundamentalist Christianity with no interest in dialogue, exclusivist views and insistence on the superiority of Christianity.\(^{94}\)

The arrival and growth of Islam in Travancore is a less researched field, but there are many oral traditions existing today regarding Islam in Travancore,\(^{95}\) which arrived long ago. According to Samuel Mateer, a missionary historian during the colonial times, 62,639 Muslims lived in Travancore in 1861.\(^{96}\) Arabs came to the coastal area of today’s Kerala as merchants from about 712 A.D.,\(^{97}\) Shi’as and Sunnis settling and propagating their faith in Travancore some hundred years later.\(^{98}\) The Muslims in this region are called Mappillai, Tulukkan and Matthen. The term Mappillai has emerged due to Arabs marrying women from Kerala, Tullukkan refers to those who have come from Turkey, and Matthen refers to a male from Mecca.\(^{99}\) Colochel, Kottar, and Thengapatanam are a few villages in today’s Kanyakumari district where

\(^{90}\) Narcheesan, *Kumari*, p.135.  
\(^{91}\) Narcheesan, *Kumari*, p.138.  
\(^{93}\) Narcheesan, *Kumari*, p.186.  
\(^{94}\) I have seen this common practice in the district. In my interviews, Samuel Dhasan, a Christian layman involved in dialogue, was critical of Pentecostal attitudes to dialogue. For him, because Pentecostals affirm the superiority of Christianity and continue their conversion activities, the other religious communities view all Christians in the district with suspicion. Interview, Dhasan, Kottaram, 26-06-2008.  
\(^{95}\) Perumal, *Thenkumariyin*, p.73.  
\(^{97}\) Gopalakrishnan, *Gazetteers*, p.123.  
\(^{98}\) Perumal, *Thenkumariyin*, p.274.  
Muslims are believed to be living since 8th c. AD, forming many Mohallas. Some of the mosques in the district are more than 700 years old and witness to the Muslim contribution to Indian arts and culture. Currently, there are two Muslim colleges offering education to people. Muslims are involved in trading activities, and are the third major religious community in the district.

It is believed that Buddhism came to Kanyakumari in the time following King Ashoka, one of the Ai kings who ruled this region, Vikramadithya Varagunan (AD 885-925) possibly being a Buddhist, while also favouring Jainism. There are Buddhist elements in the Mandaikadu Bhagavathi Amman temple. The Bhakthas who come to Mandaikadu from Kerala used to say ‘Amma Saranam, Devi Saranam’, which is similar to the ‘Sangam Saranam, Dharmam Saranam’ of Buddhism. One deity in the temple is believed to be Buddha; the folk deity ‘Sastha’ is assumed by local people to be an image of Buddha.

Jains also came to South India over two millennia ago, their traditions being popular in until the end of the Venad kings. From 4th-10th Century A.D. Jains used to come to pilgrimage sites in the region. The Nagaraja temple in Nagercoil was a Jain temple until the 16th A.D., although it and many others became Saivite during the Chola period. Archaeological works undertaken by the Tamil Nadu government has unearthed the significance of Jainism in early South India, especially in

101 Hashima, Pettagam, p.195.
102 Perumal, Thenkumariyin, p.278.
103 Gopalakrishnan, Gazetteers of India, pp. 1005-1007; 1018.
104 Interview, Salaam.
105 Perumal, Thenkumariyin, p.239.
106 Perumal, Thenkumariyin, p.240.
107 Thambi, Varalatril, p.12, Also, Perumal, Thenkumariyin, p.241
108 Thambi, Varalatril, p.9.
Kanyakumari district, leading to renewed interest in Jainism among dialogue activists in the region.

In today’s context, even though Buddhism and Jainism have almost disappeared in the district, as the Table 2 above shows, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are vibrant. As Kanyakumari district is very small, daily interactions between members are inevitable. Because of this multi-religious nature of the district, this district is often stated as a model district for others. I will return to discuss this point in Chapters 7 and 8, where I will discuss the ambiguities found in dialogue circles.

3.2.6. Political Background

Kanyakumari district has seven State constituencies: Kanyakumari, Nagercoil, Colochel, Padmanabhapuram, Thiruvattar, Vilavancode and Killiyoor. While the later six constituencies constitute the Parliamentary constituency called Nagercoil, the Kanyakumari State constituency came under Tiruchendoor, in nearby Tuticorin, until the 2004 Parliament elections. Since 2009, the Kanyakumari Lok Sabha constituency represents all state constituencies. The Indian National Congress has won the Nagercoil seat 14 out of 15 times between 1957 and 2009, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) winning in 1999. The Tiruchendoor Lok Sabha usually goes to the Congress party, and in 2009, it went to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)

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112 Gurumoorthy, Kanyakumari Mavatta Tholliyal; Kanyakumari Mavatta Kalvettukal (Kanyakumari District Inscriptions), Chennai: GoTN Archaeology Department, 2008.
113 Interview, Rajamony.
114 This is common in the district, and often mentioned by dialogue activists and government official or political elites in big public meetings on communal harmony: almost every informant referred to it as does writing on dialogue focusing Kanyakumari district. For example, see Jegat Kaspar, Intha Man Mathaveriyan Vellum (This Land will Do Away with Religious Extremism), Kanyakumari: 1995, p.31. In this text the author wonders how this district, known for communal harmony, has become a place for religious clashes, and he is optimistic that the district will eliminate extremism. Also, Maria Vincent, Uravadal Vazhi Uravai Valarppom (Let Us Improve Our Relationships through Dialogue), Nagercoil: Nanjil, 2000.
led by the Indian National Congress. In the Tamil Nadu State Assembly elections Dravida Munnetta Kazhagam (DMK) and Anna Dravida Munnetta Kazhagam (ADMK) are the two major political parties, others including the Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist) and BJP. Kanyakumari district is one of the few areas contested by the BJP since its inception, and the first seat won by BJP in 1996 was Padmanabhapuram in Kanyakumari district. In the most recent elections conducted in six legislative assembly Constituencies in the district, 2011, ADMK won 2 seats, the UPA (DMK and INC being allies) winning 6.

As the religious identities of people are almost equally divided between Hindu and Christian in the district, political parties have been attempting to make use of those identities in their electoral competition. In this, context BJP’s arrival, with its focus on Hindutva ideologies, have aggravated the tensions between political parties in the district. It is generally observed that Muslims, Christians and communists join to vote against BJP. Voting pattern in the district does not just follow religious identities, various other issues such as caste, region, and other issues playing a role. Nevertheless, religious identities are used in campaigns, especially by the BJP, whether they work out in the end or not, a process thought to aggravate tensions between people of different religions in the district. In short, Kanyakumari district has long been a region of many different faith traditions and different caste communities, and there is and perhaps has always been the potential for certain groups, such as BJP, to use diversity for political ends.

121 ECI, General Elections to the Legislative assembly of Tamil Nadu, 1967-2011.
125 Sukumaran, Kumari, p.175.
126 Interview, Ponneelan, a popular Novelist, Nagercoil, 05-07-2008.
127 One of my interviewees from the BJP political sphere mentioned this to me in his accusations against Christians and Muslims. Interview, Velan.
128 Recently there was an interesting article criticising the claim that people vote only according to religious affinities. Shahid Siddiqui, “Believe Me, Muslims are Not a Herd”, in The Hindu, 05-02-2012.
129 Kaspar, Intha Man, pp.43-45.
130 Interview, Salaam; M. Ahmad Khan, Nagercoil, 03-07-2008; and, Tobias.
3.3. Gramam and Its Background

For my field research among the grassroots I selected a multi-religious village Gramam, in eastern Kanyakumari, midway between Kanyakumari and Nagercoil. The field work’s aim was three-fold: to study their understanding of religion(s) and religious identities and how they use their identities in relating to and negotiating with each other; to study and understand their attitudes to religious conflicts, and especially about how they faced and responded to the Mandaikadu conflicts; and to study the ways in which they maintain relationships, including interreligious relationships. I visited other villages also but Gramam was my central focus.

Gramam represents a typical village of the district, with Hindus, Christians and Muslims distributed among 130 families or 600 people. It is surrounded by villages which are similarly multi-religious, though with fewer Muslims. One of its neighbouring villages is Swamithoppu (or Swamithope) which is the head quarters of a cult within Hinduism, Ayya Vazhi, discussed earlier. The Ayya Vazhi temple is a pilgrimage site for South Indian followers, and almost Swamithoppu’s inhabitants and members.

Many Gramam Hindus also follow this tradition, going to Swamithoppu every Sunday morning and during the three eleven day festivals in January, June and September, and on the founders birthday, 4th March. Other Gramam Hindus follow Amman Vazhi (the way of the mother), focussing especially on the already discussed Mutharamman as well as other folk deities such as Sudalai Madan, one of the mostly worshiped-and-feared male deities. Twice annually a Thiruvizha (auspicious celebration) is observed in this temple – during May and November. Most Gramam Hindus attend each other’s festivals. All the Gramam Christians are Protestant, most being CSI and some Pentecostal who go to the nearby village for

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131 Interview, Balan, Panchayat President, Gramam, 05-06-2008.
132 Interview, Harun, Gramam, 08-07-2008. Harun, a Muslim in his fifties now, has been living here from his birth, and he is running a small business.
133 Patrick, Religion and Subalterns.
134 Interview, Vishnu.
135 Interview, Murugan, Gramam, 15-06-2008.
136 Interview, Ishvara, Gramam, 02-06-2008.
137 Interview, Murugan.
138 Interview, Murugan.
There is also a mosque or Palli (meaning temple, school, and rest). The distance between temple, mosque and church is hardly 200 metres. Like many other villages in Kanyakumari district, Gramam is not segregated on the basis of religion or caste, houses being generally scattered so that most people have neighbours belonging to other religions. That said, houses around each worship centre are predominantly of adherents.

Muslims are believed to have moved here about 150 years ago from other parts of the district, and from the nearby districts of Tirunelveli, Tuticorin and Madurai, for better employment opportunities, according to oral traditions prevailing among Muslims in Gramam. Currently around 175 Muslims are living in this village, most with no formal education, and few of them beyond primary level. All three tea-shops found in this village are run by them, and they are also involved in basket and mat making. Four Muslim men are currently working in Gulf countries as masons.

About 200 Christians live in Gramam, more than 90% of them being CSI attending the local CSI church. They were converted in the mid-19th century by the early LMS missionaries, and the church is believed to have established in 1855. Local oral traditions indicate that Gramam has had some associations with the first Protestant missionary in the region, Ringel Taube, who worked in the surrounding villages and established churches. The remaining 10% attend the Pentecostal Church in a nearby village. Some Christians in the village are educated, a few of them have worked as primary school teachers and as clerks in other departments of

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139 Interview with Samuel, a retired primary school teacher, Gramam, 08-07-2008.
140 This is from my observation of Gramam.
141 My observations.
142 Interview, Harun.
143 Interview, Harun.
144 Interview, Harun.
145 Interview, Solomon, Gramam, 01-06-2008. Solomon is a member of the CSI Church and a retired teacher, has worked on the history of this church.
146 Interview, Solomon.
147 Interview, Solomon.
the government. The education level among Gramam Christians is better than that of Hindus and Muslims.\textsuperscript{148}

Except those linked to government work, mainly as primary teachers, most villagers are farmers and masons, with some carpenters. The traditional occupation for people in this village has been palmera-climbing, the job of Nadars.\textsuperscript{149} Local youth are more involved in automobile and mechanic works, and some who have got good education are in the process of getting into the engineering and computer field.\textsuperscript{150} There is a fish and vegetable market everyday between 9 and 11 am except on Sunday, fish being brought from nearby fishing villages. The market provides space, especially for women, for daily interaction and exchange of knowledge.\textsuperscript{151}

\textbf{3.4. A Brief Outline of the Practice of Dialogue in Kanyakumari District}

In the last chapter I discussed some major trends and developments found in dialogue in India. In the following section, using the data collected through my field research among dialogue activists in the Kanyakumari district, I will discuss how dialogue is practised there. I have discussed the method of data collection among the dialogue promoters, the criteria to choose them, and the nature of the respondents such as their age group, education and status in detail in the Introduction of this thesis and also in Appendix 4.\textsuperscript{152} My purpose in this section is to show the development of dialogue in the district, the agencies, organisations and major thinkers involved, and to outline the programmes undertaken to further dialogue. For this purpose I make use of published works such as books, articles, brochures, information and notices about dialogue programmes, unpublished materials such as theses and reports, interviews with dialogue activists and my observations from my experience of participating in dialogue for many years. While I present only background information here, the collected data through field research will be presented in detail and analysed in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8.

\textsuperscript{148} My observation.
\textsuperscript{149} Palmera climbing to bring palm juice, both for making jaggery – used for coffee, and in place of sugar – and turning the juice into alcoholic toddy is the traditional work of Nadars in Kanyakumari and surrounding districts. See Hardgrave, \textit{Nadars of Tamilnad}.
\textsuperscript{150} Interview, Harun.
\textsuperscript{151} My observations.
\textsuperscript{152} See pages 19-21 in Introduction.
3.4.1. The Context of Dialogue in the District

There are different opinions found among dialogue activists on origin of dialogue in the district. For some, especially Roman Catholics, dialogue has been part of the community here since the 1950s for developing common spirituality and mutual understanding.\(^{153}\) For others it is attributed to the influence of international ecumenical efforts through Vatican II and WCC which provided encouragement for initiating dialogue activities. Roman Catholics hold that Vatican II was instrumental in the progression of dialogue activities in the district:\(^{154}\) Protestants cite the work of CISRS, Bangalore, the influence of developments within WCC and the activities of the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS), Madurai, which is around 200 kilometres from Kanyakumari. All these laid the ground for Christian involvement in local dialogue since the 1970s.\(^{155}\)

However, the predominant view on the emergence of dialogue in the district is related to the occurrence of the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ between Hindus and Christians in 1982.\(^{156}\) Abdul Salaam, a Muslim dialogue activist, said that Mandaikadu\(^{157}\) was the real context in which the absence of dialogue and relationship between religious communities was seriously felt and efforts were needed to heal the wounds inflicted by the clashes. Generally, the people in the district were relating to each other as brothers and sisters, but Mandaikadu was a black mark because it broke all those relationships. Mutual suspicion started to grow among people, and all of a sudden everyone started to look at each other with mistrust and hate.\(^{158}\)

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153 Interview, Tobias; Panivanban Vincent, Kayakumari, 24-06-2008. Vincent is a Catholic priest and involved in dialogue activities.
154 Interview, Jayaraj, Kanyakumari, 06-06-2008. Jayaraj is a Roman Catholic priest and currently the Secretary of the Dialogue Commission in the district.
155 Interview, Rajamony; J. Solomon, London, 06-10-2007. J. Solomon is a presbyter of the CSI Kanyakumari Diocese, associated with CISRS and dialogue organizations in Kanyakumari district, and now working in the UK for promoting dialogue in schools. Israel Selvanayagam, noted in Chapter 2, also hails from this district and has been actively engaged in dialogue in the district, in TTS, in the general Indian context and international circles: interviewed in Birmingham, 05-10-2007.
156 Some dialogue activists in the district who share this perspective are Salaam; Khan; Gnana Robinson, President of CIRSJA which was founded in the context of Mandaikadu conflicts; S. Shenbaga Perumal, a Hindu lay person involved in dialogue, working as a teacher in a school, hails from a village near Mandaikadu; Dhasan; Kasthoori Chokkalingam, a Hindu lay woman, retired professor; and Arthur J. Harris. Interviews, Salaam; Khan; Perumal, Mandaikadu, 13-07-2008; Dhasan; Chokkalingam, Kottaram, 28-06-2008; and Harris, Marthandam, 10-07-2008.
157 Sometimes in the context of dialogue, ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ are referred to as just ‘Mandaikadu’.
158 Interview, Salaam.
In such a context, the importance of dialogue was felt and for P. Nagalingam, a dialogue activist from the Hindu community, a retired principal in a local college, “now dialogue and communal harmony have become the existential necessity for the people belonging to different religions living in the district.”

Even those who hold the view that dialogue was functioning even before Mandaikadu affirm that with Mandaikadu the objectives of dialogue changed. Tobias says:

Dialogue in Kanyakumari district in the pre-Mandaikadu period was concentrating much on the themes of common spirituality and meditation. However, after the occurrence of Mandaikadu conflicts in 1982, the main objectives in dialogue are to work for peace and reconciliation between conflicting religious communities. It does not mean that the earlier themes of spirituality and contemplation have been given up, rather they serve as one of the means in dialogue for working for peace and reconciliation.

3.4.2. Agencies and Organisations Involved in Dialogue

The dialogue activities in Kanyakumari district are carried out by various agencies and organisations, mostly consisting of members from different religions. The Roman Catholic Church in Kanyakumari district is involved in dialogue activities in two ways. Firstly, the Church set up a Dialogue Commission in 1975 with a full time secretary. On one hand this was a response to the changed approach of Vatican II to other religions, and on the other to the specifically multi-religious nature of the district. For the last 35 years, the Dialogue Commission has actively engaged in dialogue activities under the leadership of Antony Tobias, Panivanban Vincent and Jayaraj, all of them priests in local Churches. Actual dialogue meetings where people from different religions come together for dialoguing, seminars and consultations on dialogue; one to three day residential training sessions in dialogue; and awareness programmes for grassroot people, are some of the primary areas of dialogue activities undertaken by this Dialogue Commission.

The other way the Roman Catholic Church has been involved in dialogue activities aiming for communal harmony is to encourage rural and urban churches throughout

159 Interview, P. Nagalingam, Nagercoil, 12-07-2008. Nagalingam is a Hindu dialogue activist, retired Principal of a local college.
160 Interview, Tobias.
161 Interviews, Tobias; Panivanban Vincent.
162 Interview, Tobias.
163 Interview, Tobias.
the district to set aside one day for communal harmony celebrations during their annual festival which lasts for ten to twelve days in July-August each year.\(^{164}\) Even though not mandatory, Tobias affirmed many local churches in different parts of the district follow this direction.\(^{165}\) This communal harmony day sees different religious people in the region invited to come and give talk about their religions or common religious themes, which are sometimes followed by discussions. These meetings are generally conducted in the open space in front of the churches\(^{166}\) and take place during the evenings.\(^{167}\)

CSI Kanyakumari Diocese, the major Protestant denomination in the region, has also taken steps for dialogue, since the 1970s.\(^{168}\) It was given a special emphasis by C. Selvamony who was the second Bishop of the diocese from 1973-1979.\(^{169}\) During his bishopric he introduced dialogue as one of the major parts of Church ministry in the diocese, and appointed a presbyter to this ministry under his leadership.\(^{170}\) As a result, Multi-Religious Education by Extension in Tamil (MEET) was introduced by the Diocese to educate people, especially youth in villages. C. Rajamony and J. Solomon have worked as the presbyters in charge of this ministry. Even though its programmes did not continue effectively after the Bishop’s Selvamony’s leaving, in Rajamony’s opinion, it was beneficial and created awareness about dialogue among young presbyters in the diocese.\(^{171}\) Currently Rajamony, now retired, is involved in organising dialogue programmes through MEET in cooperation with interested young presbyters from the diocese.\(^{172}\)

Among Muslims in the district there are various organisations involved in social and dialogue activities based on Islam. Two such organisations which are Islamiya Kalachara Kazhagam (Islamic Cultural Organisation) based in Nagercoil, and

\(^{164}\) Interview, Tobias.  
\(^{165}\) Interview, Tobias.  
\(^{166}\) In Kanyakumari district, as in many parts of the India, there is much open space available in front of the churches to conduct public meetings, conventions and any other church related programmes.  
\(^{167}\) Interviews, Tobias. I have also personally attended these meetings in my village.  
\(^{168}\) Interview, Rajamony.  
\(^{171}\) Interview, Rajamony.  
\(^{172}\) Interview, Rajamony.
Rahmaniya Sangam (Rahmaniya Society). The Islamic Cultural Organisation is headed by Ahmadkhan, an active dialogue activist. It organises celebration of different religious festivals and national days such as Independence Day and Republic Day and conducts seminars, consultations and public meetings on communal harmony and related themes.\(^{173}\) Rahmaniya Society, works more in rural places to create awareness about communal harmony at the grassroots, along with other social concerns such as education to poor people. Abdul Salaam, another dialogue activist from the Muslim community in the district, heads this organisation.\(^{174}\)

The NGO Centre for Interfaith Relations, Studies and Joint Action (CIRSJA), started as the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) in 1985, has been involved in interreligious activities for the last 25 years.\(^{175}\) Started after the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’, it has worked to bring communal harmony between the conflicting communities. Based on the assumption that religious misunderstanding of people is the cause of religious clashes, it has attempted to educate people to understand different religions.\(^{176}\) While its work was mainly concentrated in the district in its early years, since 2000 CIRSJA has been involved in dialogue programmes at national level in different states, called ‘State-wide Conventions on Communal Harmony.’\(^{177}\) A Programme committee consisting of Hindus, Muslims and Christians in the region looks after the dialogue programme in the district.\(^{178}\) My work in dialogue was primarily through this organisation from 1998.

Thiruvarutperavai, another NGO, was founded immediately after the Mandaikadu riots in 1982. The idea for such a move was due to the visit of Kundrakudi Adigal, a highly revered Hindu Sadhu in Tamil Nadu who was the Acharya of the Kundrakudi Ashram in Ramanathapuram near Madurai, and well-known for his ideas on religious harmony.\(^{179}\) He visited the district in order to talk to the affected people and

\(^{173}\) Interview, Khan.
\(^{174}\) Interview, Salaam.
\(^{175}\) As I have mentioned in the Introduction, my own BD thesis studied the contributions of this organisations in interfaith relations in the district.
\(^{176}\) Robinson, “From Apartheid”, pp.82-96.
\(^{177}\) CIRSJA, Annual Report, 2002.
\(^{178}\) Interview, Dhasan.
\(^{179}\) Narcheesan, p.174.
encourage religious leaders to take steps for harmony and peace. After his visit to the affected areas accompanied by the local team of religious representatives committed to communal harmony, he suggested to start an organisation for continuing the activities for harmony and peace. As a result, Thiruvaharutperavai (literally meaning ‘the Council of Revered Grace), was formed in 1982, and it has continued its work for the last 28 years. Its primary programmes include conducting occasional dialogue meetings and celebrating religious festivals. Dialogue activists from different religions have given the leadership to this organisation, currently led by Maria Vincent, a Roman Catholic priest from the district.

There are a number of NGOs in the district whose primary work is not on dialogue and communal harmony, but they are occasionally involved in such programmes. Notable ones are the Palmera Workers Development Society (PWDS), founded by Bishop Samuel Amirtham a former Principal of TTS known for contextual theologising, and now led by Arthur J. Harris, associated with CIRSJA; Rural Development Movement (RDM) associated with Israel Selvanayagam; People’s Association for Social Action (PASA) led by Gnana Robinson and Samuel Dhasan who are also involved in dialogue work through CIRSJA; Centre for Rural Employment and Education for Development (CREED) with Gnana Robinson and Israel Selvanayagam. Many of these organisations are based in towns but work mainly in rural places.

Government officials such as the District Collector, Superintendent of Police, District Court Judges and other administrative and Police officials of the district also contribute to interreligious programmes by addressing participants on communal harmony. This is done mostly in public meetings on themes related to communal harmony, and not in actual dialogue meetings. Ministers in the government – both state and central government MLAs and MPs – also participate in such programmes

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180 Interview, Khan.
181 Interview, Perumal.
182 Interview, Maria Vincent, Thuckalay, 09-07-2008.
183 Interview, Harris. Harris is the current Vice President of PWDS.
184 Interview, Selvanayagam.
185 Interview, Dhasan.
186 Interview, J. Christopher, Azhagiamandapam, 10-06-2008; Christopher is the current Secretary of CREED; also Interview, Selvanayagam.
and speak about communal harmony. One of the obvious reasons for such encouragement from the government is for maintaining the law and order in the district, and they normally acknowledge the contribution of dialogue programmes towards that purpose.

3.4.3. Some Major Dialogue Activists in the District

Even many adherents from different religions are involved in dialogue activities in Kanyakumari, some are well-known locally, nationally and internationally. Bishop Selvamony is considered the pioneer of dialogue in the diocese by contemporary CSI dialogue activists. He was involved in dialogue activities of TTS Madurai, and directed the dialogue programmes of CIRSJA. Later dialogue activists in the district such as Bishop Samuel Amirtham, Gnana Robinosn, Israel Selvanayagam, C. Rajamnoy and J. Solomon have been much influenced by Bishop Selvamony’s involvement in dialogue activities. Bishop Samuel Amirtham, Bishop of CSI South Kerala Diocese (1990-1997), the neighbour Diocese to CSI Kanyakumari Diocese, former Principal of TTS, and Associate Director, and then Director of the WCC’s Programme for Theological Education, is known for his contextualisation of the gospel, trialled in TTS, with an emphasis on the need for active dialogue in the multi-religious context. As I mentioned earlier, an NGO in Kanyakumari District, Palmera Workers Development Society (PWDS), founded by him, included dialogue as one its concerns. Gnana Robinson has been instrumental in founding Peace Trust to work for communal harmony through its unit CIRSJA after the Mandaikadu

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188 I have personally witnessed to such acknowledgement many times from government officials such as District Collector, and politicians and ministers.


190 Interview, Dhasan.

191 Interviews, Rajamony; Dhasan; Selvanayagam; Solomon.

192 England and Others, Asian Christian Theologies, pp.289-290. Even though I have met him earlier and have discussed about dialogue and contextual theologies, he was too ill to be interviewed for this research.

193 Interview, Harris.

conflicts. As the Principal of TTS Madurai and then UTC Bangalore, he has repeatedly highlighted the significance of interreligious understanding for a harmonious living in society and written extensively on this topic.\textsuperscript{195}

Israel Selvanayagam,\textsuperscript{196} one of the major contemporary theologians of dialogue in Protestant Christianity in South India, comes from this district. Influenced by Bishop Selvamony and Bishop Samuel Amirtham,\textsuperscript{197} he has actively contributed to the dialogical approach to religions in TTS. His dialogue activities in the district are primarily through the NGOs such as RDP and CREED, and he has been involving in interfaith work both in the national and international circles, and in the UK since 1998.\textsuperscript{198} Rajamony, a retired presbyter of the CSI Kanyakumari diocese, has been involved in dialogue for more than 40 years, associated with CISRS since late 1960s, and dialogue activities in TTS and UTC. Influenced greatly by Bishop Selvamony and Bishop Amirtham, as he happily mentioned several times during my interview with him, he has worked through MEET to conduct dialogue meetings and awareness-for-dialogue programmes in different parts of the district,\textsuperscript{199} and published on this topic.\textsuperscript{200}

Among other notable Protestant Christian dialogue activists are Arthur J. Harris who is a retired Professor of Physics and former Principal of local college, involved with the dialogue activities of CIRSJA and PWDS, and Samul Dhasan, a retired Tamil Professor, associated with CIRSJA and PASA.\textsuperscript{201} Dhasan has also his NGO, \textit{Kanal Mankkum Pookal} (literally meaning, the flowers that give the fragrance of fire), which is basically a literature society which occasionally arranges dialogue programmes focusing on how the ideas of communal harmony, peace and non-


\textsuperscript{196} England and Others, \textit{Asian Christian Theologies}, p.358. I have discussed his theology of dialogue in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{197} One of his recent books was on Bishop Samuel Amirtham’s contribution to contextual theologising. \textit{Samuel Amirtham’s Living Theology}, Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2007.

\textsuperscript{198} Interview, Selvanayagam.

\textsuperscript{199} Interview, Rajamony.

\textsuperscript{200} Rajamony, \textit{Samaya}; “Dialogue in Kanyakumari”.

\textsuperscript{201} Interview, Harris.
violence are found in Tamil literature. He is very much critical of some CSI fundamentalist attitudes towards people of other religions.

Among Roman Catholics, Antony Tobias served as the first Secretary of the Dialogue Commission in the district. Contemplation and common spirituality are for him the major themes dialogue can support. He thinks that this will provide a better platform for dialogue whereas adding socio-economic issues to dialogue may lead to division and conflict. He also talks about the awareness programmes for people at the grassroots. Jayaraj and Panivanban Vincent are also Catholic Priests involved in dialogue, and like Tobias base dialogue on ‘common spirituality.’ Currently Jayaraj is the secretary of the Dialogue Commission, and arranges dialogue programmes in his ashram Thozhamai Illam (House of Friendship), and Panivanban Vincent is involved in dialogue activities through his ashram Anmeega Thottam (Spiritual Garden). Maria Vincent is currently working as a catholic priest and the secretary of Thiruvarutperavai and he is very much concerned with taking dialogue to the grassroots by arranging awareness programmes for Roman Catholic Christians in rural places.

Among Muslims M. Ahmadkhan, who is the President of the programme committee of CIRSJA, and the President of the Islamic Cultural organisation is well-respected for his communal harmony activities. He is a lawyer, and heads several Muslim and other NGOs committed to social justice, equality, education and communal harmony. When the Kundrakudi Adigal was visiting the affected places after Mandaikadu conflicts he was part of the multi-religious group from the district that accompanied him. Abdul Salaam is another dialogue activist from Muslim community associated with CIRSJA and Rahmaniya Society involved in communal activities in

203 Among all my interviewees involved in dialogue, Dhasan was very critical of the fundamentalist attitudes of evangelical Christians especially people from Pentecostal tradition. He did not spare the mainline churches, insisting most CSI pastors have similar attitudes, and he was concerned to arrange awareness programmes for them, Interview, Dhasan.
204 Interview, Tobias.
205 This issue will be further discussed in Chapter 8.
206 Interview, Jayaraj.
207 Interview, Panivanban Vincent.
208 Interview, Maria Vincent.
209 Interview, Khan.
rural areas.\textsuperscript{210} Among Hindus is P. Nagalingam a retired college Principal who has actively participated in dialogue activities through CIRSJA and Thiruvarutperavai.\textsuperscript{211} Kasthoori Chokkalingam is a retired professor and she also has actively participated in dialogue through CIRSJA.\textsuperscript{212} Shenbaga Perumal who lives near Mandaikadu has also taken part in dialogue activities through different organisations.\textsuperscript{213}

\section*{3.4.4. Dialogue Programmes}

Interreligious programmes, carried out in several ways by dialogue organisations, can be generally divided into two categories: continuing, short term and occasional programmes. Continuing programmes are the \textit{raison d'etre}, of interreligious organisations and short term programmes are run for a limited period to promote dialogue. In addition, occasional dialogue programmes are arranged in connection with festivals or other celebrations. In terms of their execution, both long term and short term programmes are of two types: bringing people into a central place or going out to them. The former is held usually in the capital of the district, Nagercoil, or semi urban places such as Kanyakumari which is some 20 kilometres from Nagercoil or Marthandam which is around 35 kilometres from Nagercoil.\textsuperscript{214} Many interreligious organisations are also located in one of these places. For instance, head offices of both CSI and Roman Catholic Churches – and so their respective departments for dialogue – are located in Nagercoil, CIRSJA in Kanyakumari, and PWDS in Marthandam. The second type of executing the programmes is to go and visit villages and arrange awareness programmes, training them and celebrating festivals. I shall discuss some of the dialogue programmes below.

\subsection*{3.4.4.1. Dialogue Meetings}

Actual dialogue meetings are arranged regularly such as once or twice a month. As the day or date for coming together in dialogue for each month (such as the last Saturday) is fixed, reminders are sent by the organisers to the regular participants.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{210} Interview, Salaam.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Interview, Nagalingam.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Interview, Chokkalingam.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Interview, Perumal.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Almost all my interviewees involved in dialogue mentioned these places as the location of their regular dialogue programmes.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
closer to the programme date. An attitude of openness to other religions is firmly expected from the participants. Tobias said that “we invite people who are open-minded about other religions. It is a necessary criterion for dialogue, so dialogue is just meant for them.”

For Panivanban Vincent,

the participants should be willing to learn from other religions, and should not come with the attitude of superiority of their religion attitude. And they should appreciate the multi-religious context and be willing to work for peace and harmony in the context of religious conflicts.

Mostly attending are males over 40, with few women and youth. “The absence of youth and women are often felt, but the development is not satisfactory,” Panivanban Vincent said. Even though education is not a primary criterion, most of the dialogue participants are educated peoples such as pastors, teachers, lecturers – some retired – and some working in government and private sectors. (See Appendix IV).

In the dialogue meetings the participants are expected to talk about their respective religions, and to actively participate in discussions. Often in these meetings common themes are approached from different religious view-points by the respective religious adherents who would have done some research and reflection on the theme, which is followed by discussions. Some of the themes discussed in the dialogue meetings are communal harmony, spirituality, common community, salvation, revelation of God, justice, peace, nation-building, religion and women, religion and poverty, science and religion, scriptures, non-violence, unity, humanism in religion, and religion and politics. The participants of dialogue believe that discussing these helps them to attain knowledge about religions and leads towards mutual understanding of each other. Some of the places where dialogue meetings have taken place regularly were Concordia Theological Seminary, Scott Christian College, S.L.B. School, Pon Jesley School Roman Catholic Bishop’s House, all in

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215 Interview, Tobias.
216 Interview, Panivanban Vincent.
217 Interview, Nagalingam.
218 Interview, Panivanban Vincent.
219 Interview, Dhasan.
220 Interview, Rajamony.
221 Interview, Perumal.
222 Interview, Tobias.
223 I have put together here the themes mentioned by my interviewees involved in dialogue.
224 Interview, Tobias.
Nagercoil, Nesamony Memorial Christian College in Marthandam College, and Anmeega Thottam, Thozhamai Illam, CIRSJA and YMCA Campus in Kanyakumari. Auditoriums and halls are also hired for this purpose.

Occasional dialogue meetings are also arranged, which may conclude with public meetings on the theme of communal harmony. Such meetings are usually attended by people from other districts and even other states. Nationally and internationally recognised scholars are invited to talk about the themes related to dialogue and peace, followed by discussion. Unlike the regular dialogue meetings, occasional dialogue meetings last for from one day to three days. Interreligious worship each morning is part of the programme.

3.4.4.2. Awareness Programmes for Dialogue

There are also awareness programmes about dialogue arranged for various groups of people. Firstly, awareness programmes for school students and college youth are prominent, meetings being arranged in schools and colleges. Interested teachers are consulted and through them arrangements are made. The teachings of different religions on themes such as peace, justice, unity and harmony are brought out for students. At college level, students are encouraged to think about how their respective disciplines (mainly in Humanities and Social Sciences) can help the cause of communal harmony and unity among people. Some other forms of awareness programmes include inviting students to participate in competitions such as essay, slogan and poetry writing, and creating music and songs related to the communal harmony theme. This finds a good response from students, many of whom

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225 Interviews, Rajamony; Tobias; Jayaraj; Harris.
226 Auditoriums and halls in lodges are also hired for dialogue meetings, sometimes freely given by the owners as this involves community welfare work, Interview, Dhasan.
227 Interview, Dhasan. CIRSJA has arranged some such meetings. CIRSJA, Annual Report, 2000, 2001, 2002.
228 Interview, Tobias.
229 Interview, Tobias.
230 Interview, Harris.
231 Interview, Dhasan. He said while as a Professor, he arranged such programmes in Scott Christian College, Nagercoil and Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam.
participate, and prizes are distributed to the winners. Though most competitions are for local students in the district, sometimes they are extended to the state level.\footnote{Interview, Nagalingam.}

Secondly, awareness meetings are arranged for people in villages and for this self-help groups in rural places are made use of.\footnote{Self-help groups are increasingly popular in India, helping rural women to gather regularly and also to manage their finances by saving, and extend loans for small business. Such gatherings are made use of for creating awareness about dialogue and harmony. Interviews, Maria Vincent; Tobias.} Workers of the dialogue organisations go to different villages usually in the evening 4-6 pm, some meetings having half-day or one-day programmes.\footnote{Interview, Christopher.} The common point emphasised in these meetings is that for a harmonious living in the district people should have deep faith in their own religions, should learn to respect other religions, and should not consider their religions to be superior to other religions. Interested and efficient people who would further popularise the ideal of dialogue are identified and invited to regular dialogue meetings.\footnote{Interview, Tobias.} Local level youth groups are also then formed to continue awareness activities in the area\footnote{Interview, Rajamony.}

Thirdly, awareness programmes are arranged aiming at the wider public audience in the district. These are primarily communal harmony processions and peace rallies on foot or bicycle,\footnote{CIRSJA, Thiruvarutperavai and the Dialogue Commission in the district arrange such programmes from time to time in which political personalities such as central and state ministers and MLS and MPs have participated. Many of these programmes are centred on Nagercoil. Interviews, Dhasan; Nagalingam; and Tobias.} attended by the workers and members of interreligious organisations. Sometimes local school and college students are also involved in such processions and rallies.\footnote{Interview, Dhasan.} Communal harmony slogans are prepared and recited as the rally moves.\footnote{CIRSJA has prepared a list of slogans for this purposes and circulated it among interreligious organisations in the district; also Interview, Dhasan.} These processions end in public meetings where the wider audience is addressed by dialogue activists and other political and government dignitaries regarding the importance of peace and harmony in society.\footnote{Interview, Nagalingam.} Games and
Sports are also used to create awareness, and various athletics including Marathon race are conducted, especially before public meetings on this theme.\(^\text{241}\)

### 3.4.4.3. Training Programmes for Dialogue

Training programmes such as two-three day conferences and seminars or one-day workshops are conducted for people interested in dialogue.\(^\text{242}\) Such events are a little different from regular dialogue meetings, as scholars of religion and dialogue come and give talks or read papers, which the participants then discuss. Here the focus is more on how to dialogue, and on the objectives and nature of dialogue. Hence unlike the actual dialogue meetings they serve more to train participants. However they also serve as actual dialogue programmes because people from different religions attend.\(^\text{243}\) Tobias, who has organised many, feels residential programmes are more productive than the regular dialogue meetings because participants experience ‘living together’.\(^\text{244}\) Moreover, in these programmes interreligious worship is arranged for the participants demonstrating the importance of dialogue.\(^\text{245}\)

Moreover, reflective assignments are given to the participants in these meetings, and they are asked to go to nearby villages to talk to the people from other religions and give a report when they come back. On the basis of their experience further suggestions are offered by the organisers about how the participants should approach people of other religions dialogically.\(^\text{246}\) The feedback session is intended to help all participants. Tobias said participants find the exercise very helpful in improving their dialogical skills.\(^\text{247}\) Training for pastors is also arranged. However Dhasan is concerned that dialogue is largely unwelcome among Protestants, though well-received among Catholics.\(^\text{248}\)

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\(^{241}\) Interview, Salaam.
\(^{242}\) Interviews, Tobias; and Rajamony.
\(^{243}\) Interview, Tobias.
\(^{244}\) Interview, Tobias.
\(^{245}\) Interview, Panivanban Vincen.
\(^{246}\) Interview, Tobias.
\(^{247}\) Interview, Tobias.
\(^{248}\) Interviews, Dhasan; and Tobias.
3.4.4.4. Multi-religious Celebration of Festivals

Celebrating different religious festivals as a multi-religious group is an important aspect of dialogue programmes in Kanyakumari district, executed in various ways depending upon the scope and interest of each organisation. Diwali, primarily celebrated by Hindus, Ramzan celebrated by Muslims and Christmas by Christians are some festivals of interest to local dialogue activists. Sometimes each festival is celebrated individually, and sometimes they are celebrated together as most fall between October and January. They take place in urban and rural centres. Festivals in Nagercoil tend to be rather elitist, dialogue organisers being invited as well as government officials and political personalities. Three people representing Hinduism, Christianity and Islam talk about the respective festivals, sometimes approaching all festivals from one religious perspective. Sometimes these celebrations are followed by a shared dinner.

The celebrations of festivals as multi-religious groups also are conducted in villages, usually sponsored by local dialogue organisations. A village in the district is selected – sometimes this is called ‘adopted’ – by the interreligious groups for this event. Mixed-faith sites are preferred and the interreligious groups, with the help of the local village leaders, do the preparations, and invite local politicians and District Administration officials. The main part of the programme contains speeches on festivals and communal harmony, although in villages discussions do not follow speeches. The multi-religious celebration of festivals is seen as one of the most fruitful ways of making grassroots people aware of dialogue. One of my interviewees, Kasthooori Chokkalingam, a Hindu dialogue activist opined that “this is the only effective way through which we can take dialogue to the ‘ordinary’ people at the grassroots.”

249 I discuss this topic only briefly here, elaborating the elite nature of dialogue in Chapter 8.
250 CIRSJA has initially celebrated these festivals individually with other multi-religious groups, but in the recent times it celebrates all three together in December or January. Interview, Dhasan.
251 Interview, Nagalingam.
252 Robinson, “From Apartheid”, p.92.
253 Interview, Dhasan.
254 Interview, Rajamony.
255 Interview, Chokkalingam.
The multi-religious celebration of festivals in villages is central to the Dialogue Commission of the local Roman Catholic Church. I mentioned earlier that they celebrate ‘Thiruvizha’ (literally, an auspicious event) for 10 to 12 days in July-August every year, and that they are encouraged by the Dialogue Commission to allot one day to celebrate communal harmony. Tobias mentioned that after such meetings people in the villages have very positive feedback. Thiruvaratperavai is involved in arranging this programme in different villages each year. In addition to this, regular interreligious groups also come together to celebrate national days such as Indian Independence day and Republic day. Pongal, a harvest festival which is celebrated, irrespective of religious affiliation, in Tamil Nadu in January every year is also included among dialogue organisations.

3.5. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter as well as the previous two chapters has contributed to both the theoretical and field work nature of the research. In the previous two chapters I gave the theoretical background for my discussions. In this chapter I have provided the background of my field research by discussing the socio-political and religious background of Kanyakumari district and Gramam, the efforts taken by various agents of dialogue. Based on these, Part II will critically discuss how ideas on religion(s), world-religions and religion-secular distinctions have been developed and incorporated in dialogical activities in India and specifically in Kanyakumari district; how the notion of ‘religious’ conflicts is uncritically accepted and posed as the context of dialogue; and how elite dialogue has neglected the actual everyday inter-community relations among people at the grassroots which must be taken seriously in dialogue if dialogue can truly contribute to peace and harmony in society.

256 Interview, Tobias.
257 Interview, Tobias.
258 Interview, Maria Vincent.
259 Interview, Chokkalingam.
Part II

The Concept and Practice of Interreligious Dialogue in India: An Interrogation

Having set the theoretical and field research background in Part I, the concept and practice of dialogue in India is interrogated using a postcolonial and subaltern framework in Part II. This section has six chapters. It starts with critiquing the idea of religion, world-religions and the plurality of religions which is basic to dialogue. Chapter 4 discusses how religion has come to be a separate category, being differentiated from its opposite secular in the West during the Enlightenment period, and promoted to other parts of the world, especially to India through European colonialism, constructing Hinduism and creating fixed religious identities for people in India. Chapter 5 discusses how these trends – religion-secular distinctions, the world-religion categories where each religion is considered as a unified whole, the colonial invention of Hinduism and the creation of fixed religious identities for people in India – have been uncritically accepted in dialogue in India. Chapter 6 analyses the notion of religious conflicts in dialogue where misunderstanding of religions and the political use of religion is often cited as reasons for conflicts among adherents of different religions, and argues for understanding the multiple factors involved in conflicts, including naming them religious. Chapter 7 further elaborates this point by undertaking a case study of clashes in Kanyakumari in 1982, which are known as religious conflicts. Chapter 8 discusses the elite nature of dialogue, and using the data collected in Gramam, discusses the ways in which people at the grassroots relate with each other and the challenges they pose to dialogue. Chapter 9 summarises and highlights the major arguments of the thesis and attempts to work on a tentative model incorporating insights from people at the grassroots: the multiple identities and multiple religious identities prevalent among them which play crucial roles in their relationship to each other, their understanding of religious conflicts and the way they relate to each other in their everyday lives. Such a foundation would enable dialogue to serve the creation of peace, harmony and better relationships among people in society.
Chapter 4

Constructions of Religion, Religions and Religious Identities in India

4.1. Introduction

As I have discussed thus far, the concept and practice of dialogue has become a strong force in contemporary India. In Chapter 2, while discussing the major trends in dialogue in the past 60 years in India, I discussed the importance given to the plurality of religions in dialogue leading to various theological discussions related to it. Such awareness within a context of exclusivist attitudes to religions has helped to formulate a dialogical approach to other religions. While the plurality of religions should be appreciated for it leads to a dialogical approach to other religions, necessary for the contemporary context both in India and in the globe, my point is that in order for dialogue to be more effective, it must move beyond that. As I see it, dialogue has rightly emphasised plurality of religions in the context of assertion of superiority by any one religion, but what needs evaluation is the plurality of religions in dialogue. In other words, the issue is not questioning plurality, but rather the concept of religion and plural religions in dialogue.

In this regard, questions such as where the idea of religion and religions comes from, and how religion and its opposite secular, world-religions and religious identities are treated in the concept and practice of dialogue in India need to be raised.\(^1\) My argument in this chapter is that the idea of religion and its supposed opposite ‘secular’, the use of world-religion categories, and identifying people in India primarily through their religious affiliation is a product of western colonialism. This made a rigid distinction between the true religion of Christianity and the false non-Christian religions for most of its history, constructing religion-secular distinctions during the European enlightenment period and interpreting the lives of people in

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\(^1\) Regarding the trends in dialogue in India outlined in Chapter 2, my observation is that what is lacking in dialogue is a postcolonial approach to religion and plurality of religions, which helps to unearth the western constructions of today’s world-religions between which dialogue is necessary. Of course, the west is critiqued in dialogue, but not for constructing the category world-religions. It is rather in the context of the ‘age-long’ Asian plurality of religions against the secular west, which, in my view, again reiterates the notion of the western construction of world-religions and religion-secular distinctions. See pages 66-67, Chapter 2.
their colonies in this manner. Local elites in colonies such as India have further appropriated them uncritically and have heavily used them in their writings and activities. While this chapter discusses the western colonial constructions of the idea of religion(s) and religious identities using a postcolonial theoretical framework, the next chapter critiques how dialogue in contemporary India has uncritically accepted these western and elite constructions and appropriated them, in the light of the living situations among the ordinary people in India – the non-elites among whom the ‘world-religions’ have little meaning as fixed categories and who have lived in the past as well as live in the present context beyond such fixed religious identities.

4.2. Western Colonial Constructions of Religion and Religions

4.2.1. Postcolonial Framework

Postcolonialism or postcolonial theory offers a theoretical framework to study the societies which have been colonised in the past. This postcolonial framework is not one-dimensional and there are different viewpoints within it. Those who are using it are broadly divided between two groups: one places postcolonialism as the period after colonialism and the other argues that postcolonialism “is best used to designate the totality of practices, in all their rich diversity, which characterise the societies of the post-colonial world from the moment of colonisation to the present day, since colonialism does not cease with the mere fact of political independence and continues in a neo-colonial mode to be active in many societies.” I use postcolonialism in this latter sense, arguing that colonialism and colonial forms of knowledge continue to impact the people in once-colonised countries although ‘official’ colonialism has ended and that postcolonialism is useful in critiquing the ongoing influence of Western colonial forms of life and activities on once-colonies and working on ways to overcome them. As Young says, postcolonialism is

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primarily involved in shifting “the dominant ways in which the relations between
western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed.”

Thus the materials under consideration in postcolonialism are those produced both in
the West and in the colonised countries during the time of colonialism and those
produced even today which carry the influence of colonialism. The anthropological
theories, used to legitimize colonialism and imperialism and portray “the peoples of
the colonized world as inferior, childlike, or feminine, incapable of looking after
themselves (despite having done so perfectly well for millennia) and requiring the
paternal rule of the west for their own best interests,” are a significant subject of
postcolonial criticism. A common focus is thus how colonial administrators, Oriental
scholars and Western Christian missionaries viewed the people and their life in the
colonised territories, constructing theories and producing images about them for
home consumption in the West.

Two important aspects of colonialism that concern the postcolonial framework are
knowledge and power which were foundational for imperial authority over colonies.
Knowing the other was crucial for imperial domination, as it became a mode by
which the colonised people “were increasingly persuaded to know themselves: that
is, as subordinate to Europe.” This knowledge which was produced by Westerners
about the colonised territories is the primary factor that is being evaluated and
critiqued in postcolonialism, because of its association with power and imperialism.
Therefore postcolonialism “involves a conceptual reorientation towards the
perspectives of knowledge, as well as needs, developed outside the west.”
Moreover, it

seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledges into the power structures of
the west as well as the non-west. It seeks to change the way people think, the way

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Press, 2003, p.2
5 Young, *Postcolonialism*, p.2.
6 Edward Said talks about this in his book *Orientalism*, 1978, referring to Arthur James Balfour’s
speech on Britain's presence in Egypt in the House of Commons, on June 13 1910, p.32.
7 Ashcroft and others, “General Introduction” in *The Post-Colonial Studies*, p.1
8 Young, *Postcolonialism*, p.6
they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world.9

In this way, postcolonialism not only critiques the continuing western forms of knowledge and power, but also proposes alternatives to them.

There are two contentious areas when considering how imperial knowledge production in the colonial context in India helped imperial domination. The first is the agencies involved in perceiving, defining and interpreting people in India and the other is the lenses through which these agencies interpreted them. While the former is about western colonialists, Orientalists and European missionaries involving in framing the lives of colonised people and their cultures through producing several kinds of theories, the latter is about looking at the bases of those theories in the West.

One such lens used in understanding and interpreting people in India was the notion of religion developed in the Christian West, shaped by the European Enlightenment and passed on to India through colonialism. A postcolonial framework helps to identify the trends and nuances involved in this process and to discuss this aspect and deconstruct the notion of religion(s) and fixed religious identities in order to construct how the realities are and have been among common people in India. While the postcolonial framework primarily critiques the West for its constructions of religion, for the past few decades it also has incorporated subaltern approaches which not only critique the colonial elites but also the elites in India who have contributed to the forms of power and control of people in India.

4.2.2. Christian West and the Creation of Religion

In critically studying the notions of religion(s) and religions as now understood, there are two important dimensions. The first is that what is understood to be religion in the modern context in relation to ‘major world-religions’ is rooted in the Christian West which was developed in the Hellenistic context. In other words, what is referred to as ‘religion’ when one speaks about, say, Hinduism is basically a western Christian idea of ‘religion’. The second aspect is to do with the construction of religion as a separate category in society. This notion basically came into being

9 Young, Postcolonialism, p.7
during the European Enlightenment when ‘religion’ was separated from other categories such as ‘politics’. That this notion of religion is a modern myth created during the European Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is one of the arguments of the scholars who are investigating the power relations associated with this phenomenon. They have shown that the idea of religion as a distinct category, as understood in the post-Enlightenment period, was not found in the pre-modern era.¹⁰

As the modern conception of religion(s) is different from the understanding of religion in the pre-modern era, many are engaged in finding out how it prevailed at that time. Richard King, Balagangadhara and others show how religion and religions were understood in the times of the Romans. Balagangadhara, contrasts ‘religion’ as understood in the pre-Christian era with the Christian understanding of it. He quotes from Cicero, the Roman philosopher of two millennia ago, who defines religion in his context:

> For religion has been distinguished from superstition not only by philosophers but by our own ancestors. Persons who spent whole days in prayer and sacrifice...were termed ‘superstitious’.... Those on the other hand who carefully reviewed and so to speak retraced all the lore of the ritual were called ‘religious’ from relegere (to re-trace or re-read), like ‘elegant’ from eligere (to select), ‘diligent’ from diligere (to care for), ‘intelligent’ from intellegere (to understand); for all these words contain the same sense of ‘picking out’ (legere) that is present in ‘religions’.¹¹

Thus religion as interpreted by Cicero in the pre-Christian context refers to the condition that one should follow the rituals of one’s ancestors. On the contrary, staying with prayer and sacrifice were considered to be superstitious or irreligious. Commenting on the definition of religion offered by Cicero, King says:

> This understanding of the term seems to have gained provenance in the ‘pagan’ Roman empire and religio virtually synonymous with traditio. As such it represented the teachings of one’s ancestors and was essentially not open to


question. Primarily *religio* involved performing ancient ritual practices and paying homage to the gods.... If *religio* is primarily about continuing the tradition of one’s ancestors, the term clearly denotes an inherently pluralistic context. There can never be one *religio* since there are a variety of different social and ethnic groups with traditions and histories of their own.”

The idea that religion meant worshipping a supernatural power or God or that it was occupied with the questions of truth and falsity was unknown to Romans, according to the definition provided by Cicero. However, this understanding of *religio* came under attack within the early Christian context. In order to distinguish the Christian ‘truth’ with the false pagan religions, Lactantius, an early Christian theologian who lived in the third century A.D., attempted to offer a different meaning for *religio*. Balagangadhara quotes from him:

> We are fastened and bound to God by this bond of piety, whence religion itself takes its name. The word is not as Cicero interpreted it from ‘rereading’, ‘or ‘choosing again’ (*relegendo*).…. For if superstition and religion are engaged in worshipping the same gods, there is slight or rather no difference... because religion is a worship of the true; superstition of the false. And it is important, really, why you worship, not how you worship, or what you pray for…We have said that the name of religion is taken from the bond of piety, because God has bound and fastened man to Himself by piety.... They are superstitious who worship many and false gods; but we, who supplicate the one true God, are religious.

Thus the meaning of religion changed from following one’s ancestors’ traditions or rituals to worshipping the ‘true’ God in the early Christian context. It has now come to denote the relationship between God and man. This change in definition was necessary for Christianity to gain a dominant place in relation to other Roman ‘pagan’ traditions. As King argues, “The Christian transformation of *religio* functioned not only to capture authority for Christians in Roman society but also to exclude certain groups from equal consideration. Those who did not bow down to the Almighty and Supreme Deity, worshipping other gods, were now ‘alterized’ as pagan (*paganus*: village idiot) and superstitious.” This notion became strengthened as Christianity received state recognition during the period of Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. Moreover, “the redefining of *religio* also served to establish

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12 King, *Orientalism*, pp.35-36.
14 King, *Orientalism*, pp.36-37.
the monotheistic exclusivism of Christianity as the normative paradigm for understanding what a religion is.”

There is no doubt that this understanding of religion, primarily based on Christian theology in the West, is predominant in modern times when referring to ‘religion’ in general and to many of the ‘world-religions’ in particular. This Christianized version of religion “strongly emphasizes theistic belief... exclusivity and a fundamental dualism between the human world and the transcendent world of the divine to which one ‘binds’ (religare) oneself.” Moreover, the Christianized model of religion also assumes that doctrine is the fundamental essence of religion and stresses the importance of the written scriptures and their correct interpretation. The Roman idea of religion as following the customs or traditions of one’s ancestors, or as ceremony, was replaced by the Christian insistence on attitude and belief based on doctrines. This has led to the condition where “the emphasis on the significance of inner conviction was eventually matched, and even perhaps overshadowed, by a long process of objectification” in which “the notion of religion as something expressed objectively in written creeds, doctrine, or stated belief.”

This shows the continuity between religion as perceived and interpreted today and as has been done in early Christian developments in the West. In both the modern conceptions of religion and the Christian understanding of religio, “a great deal of emphasis upon a faithful adherence to doctrine as indicative of religious allegiance, upon sacred texts as of central importance to religious communities and to questions of truth and falsity as of paramount importance to the religious adherent or ‘believer’” is found. This model of religion developed in the Western Christian context has replaced the Roman idea of religion where the question of truth and falsity in religion was not a primary issue. But the tendency to interpret world-religions along the lines of truth and falsity has largely been a result of the influence of Western Christianity through colonialism. But before discussing how the West

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applied this understanding of religion to interpret non-Western and non-Christian religions, another trend in the western construction of religion should be noted: the construction of religion-secular distinctions during the Enlightenment.

4.2.3. Religion-Secular in European Enlightenment

While ‘religion’, defined in the Western Christian context, came to mean worshipping the true God of Christianity as against the remaining traditions which were superstitious, in the European Enlightenment context, interest in religion concerned its location in human life. In deciding this, it was not the ‘religionists’ who played primary roles but rather those who are termed ‘secular intellectuals’ of the Enlightenment. Thus Timothy Fitzgerald argues:

Even some historians seem comfortable with the idea that religion somehow can always be identified in ancient, medieval or modern history, in any society speaking any language.... But this sits awkwardly with the observation that, for much of the period leading up to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and arguably for long after, the English term ‘religion’ stood for Christian Truth, usually Protestant Truth, as revealed in the Bible. And during much of the same period, ‘politics’ was not conceived as an independent domain separated from religion, and therefore in that modern sense was not articulated.20

Not only theologians and religious leaders but also academic scholars in religious studies and other disciplines have taken for granted that religion as now understood has existed for a long period. True, religion and religious systems did exist as inner convictions and expressions of those convictions in the ancient period, but not as a category in relation to ‘secular’ or ‘politics’. In fact, that religion is a part of society is a very recent and modern concept, the basic nature of society being equated with its secular nature while religion is merely one category, often a private one, in secular society. Commenting on the distinction brought by the European Enlightenment between Religion and Secular, Peter Harrison says:

That there exist in the world such entities such as ‘the religions’ is an uncontroversial claim.... However... the concepts ‘religion’ and ‘the religions’, as we presently understand them, emerged quite late in Western thought, during the Enlightenment. Between them, these two notions provided a new framework for classifying particular aspects of human life.... Whereas in the Middle Ages the concern of the Christian West had been with faith – a ‘dynamic of the heart’ – in

the seventeenth century attention shifted to the impersonal and objective ‘religion’. Increasingly this term came to be an outsider’s description of a dubious theological enterprise. Along with ‘religion’ came the plural ‘religions’ – ‘the Protestant Religion’, ‘the Catholic Religion’, ‘Mahometanism’, ‘heathen Religion’ and so on.\(^1\)

Analysing the works of seventeenth and eighteenth century European philosophers such as John Locke and Penn, Fitzgerald shows that idea of religion-secular appeared only in this context when empirical science became dominant in society. He argues that there have been basically two dominant perceptions of religion through the last few centuries:

One is of encompassing religion, where nothing properly exists outside religion since it represents Truth, which is all-embracing. In this model, ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ are embedded, and all ‘facts’ are subordinated to Christian redemptive values that give them meaning. This model of religion is hierarchical, and all things that exist have their proper place and function within the teleological whole. Individual persons exist in so far as they find their proper subordinate place in this context of hierarchical relationships. That which opposes it is pagan superstition and belongs in Hell.\(^2\)

This model of religion existed in pre-modern Europe where Christianity was equated with religion. Certainly Christianity was hierarchical in that, first, it contrasted the true religion in Christianity with the false religion of superstitions and heresies, and secondly, as Fitzgerald observes, it infused every aspect in society with Christian values. But with the emergence of Enlightenment and the popularisation of its ideals, religion became a separate category. Fitzgerald notes:

The second concept of religion, which ... is hegemonic today, cuts across the first, or stands it on its head. The idea of religion as a private soteriological belief essentially separated from politics, or the idea of religious societies having essentially different purposes and characteristics from political societies, has become institutionalized in Western liberal democracies and exported through the processes of colonization to many societies where no such distinction was conceivable in the local language. This idea of religion was powerfully articulated... in the seventeenth century, and was developed and transformed into a conception of secular, rational, political ‘man’, especially through the American constitutional process, which produced the most powerful charter for representing this political essence. At the same time, and as an integral part of this discourse, a notion of the secular as the non-religious, the natural, the rational, was generated as the superior ground from which to observe and order the world.\(^3\)

\(^{22}\) Fitzgerald, “Encompassing Religion”, pp.234-235  
Thus the distinction between sacred and secular was created in order to acquire a higher place for the secular and to push religion to the margins. Nevertheless, even though the ‘secular’ intellectuals of the European Enlightenment are responsible for this distinction, one cannot deny the role played by ‘religionists’ also. On the one hand, some of them, point out how religions are taken seriously by people in spite of secularism or secularization. One does not need to cite detailed evidence for this, for it has been a clear pattern over the past few centuries. On the other hand, there are ‘religionists’ claiming a higher ground of authority when they speak from a secular position. Here the secular nature is viewed as superior to the religious. For instance, studying the attitudes to religion and secular among the Roman Catholics in West Mexico, Trevor Stack points out that secular knowledge is considered as a higher ground for even talking about religious devotion. He argues that influenced by the hegemony of the secular, “people in west Mexico had become used to the idea that there was a secular ‘outside’ to religion.” He further says that “those educated in church seminary schools were in a strong position to produce and gain authority from secular knowledge.... Secular knowledge was something that clerics (and those with clerical education) could do well and benefit from.” When these clerics became narrators in their church, they “were able to claim a special kind of ‘higher ground’, one that lay ‘outside’ the world of their narrative subjects, and from which they could look in on their narrative subjects”.

In the Indian context, it is quite normal among Christians (and Muslims) that they would appeal to the secular nature of India and the Secular Constitution of India when it comes to responding to the attacks on religious minorities, while the same in other contexts would emphasise ‘religions against secularism and secularisation’, or at least ‘religions in the context of secular ideologies’. While I am not critical of their right to appeal to the Constitution during the times of violence, nevertheless, such patterns indicate the ambiguities found between challenging secularism and appealing to the Secular Constitution, and revitalising religion-secular distinctions. In

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24 Stack “A higher ground: the secular knowledge of objects of religious devotion” in Religion and the Secular, pp.47-69.
25 Stack “A higher ground”, p.57.
26 Stack “A higher ground”, p.59.
27 Stack “A higher ground”, p.59.
28 This will be elaborated in Chapter 5.
my opinion, the issue at stake both in the secular claim of superiority over religion and in the religious claim of superiority over the secular, or claiming a higher ground for secular in both, is that the religion-secular distinction is simply accepted without question.

4.2.4. Colonialism and the Creation of Religion and Religions for the Colonies

How did Western and Western Christian assumptions behind religion and religions became such powerful categories in the non-European world? It is here that European colonialism and the forms of knowledge it generated in its colonies become significant. The major medium through which the modern myth of religion became popular lies in the Western colonial efforts to understand and interpret or ‘know’ the colonised people and their lives. For understanding this, discussing how the colonial administrators, Western Orientalists, missionaries, travellers and settlers understood the lives and practices of colonised people, and interpreted them to the West becomes important.

Western Orientalists are a major group of people involved in perceiving and interpreting the lives of people in India along the lines of religion. Those who critique Orientalism have done remarkable studies revisiting and critiquing the vast number of materials produced by the Orientalist scholars during colonialism. What is pointed out in these studies is that often what the Orientalists were doing was applying Western frameworks, which they thought superior to the available cultural forms of the colonised, to interpret colonised. One such factor was religion. The religion framework, already constructed in the West, helped them to apply their notions of religion to the cultures and traditions in colonised. Richard King investigates how the Western Christian notions of religion were applied to ‘religions’ in India. It is also well discussed by Edward Said in his classic work Orientalism. Said mainly looks at the Middle Eastern context, but other scholars such as Wilhelm Halbfass and Ronald Inden have critiqued how Orientalists and Indologists were

29 King, Orientalism, Chapters 4-6.
31 Inden, “Orientalist Constructions of India” in Modern Asian Studies, 20/3, 1986, pp.401-446
instrumental in promoting Western analytical frameworks to interpret people in the colonised Indian subcontinent.

One of the major aspects in the Orientalist discourse is that it presents its knowledge of Orientals as not only different from but also superior to the knowledge Orientals have of themselves. While the Orientalist knowledge of the Orientals was claimed to be rational, scientific and objective, ‘Oriental’ knowledge was considered to be irrational, un-scientific, and subjective – therefore inferior to that of the Orientalist. As Inden notes, Orientalist knowledge is privileged in relation to that of the Orientals and it invariably places itself in a relationship of intellectual dominance over that of the easterners. It has appropriated the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the Orientals themselves. But that is not all. Once his special knowledge enabled the Orientalist and his countrymen to gain trade concessions, conquer, colonize, rule, and punish in the East.32

Thus what is predominant in Orientalism is not just knowledge about Orientals, but the power relations within which that knowledge is expressed and used.

The other group which was involved in promoting the Western conception of religion to the colonies are the Western Christian missionaries. In their efforts to propagate Christian gospel to ‘non-Christians’ they viewed those traditions through Christian lenses.33 Regarding the role of Christian missionaries in Empire, there are broadly two perspectives. First, Christian missionaries worked together with other colonialists such as colonial administrators and Orientalists supporting colonialism. Second missionaries and colonialists had different agendas in that while the former were involved in saving souls, the latter were involved in establishing imperial dominance over colonies.34 Works such as Orientalism of Edward Said are critiqued for failing to make the difference between the purposes of Colonialists and missionaries.35 Nevertheless it is true that the imperial ethos and rule did influence the missionaries in their activities. The influence of Orientalist scholars and

32 Inden, “Orientalist Constructions”, p.408
33 For example see Oddie, Imagined Hinduism.
34 Porter, Religion Versus Empire?
35 Oddie, “‘Orientalism’ and British Protestant Missionary Constructions of India in the 19th Century” in South Asia, 17/2, 1994 pp.27-42; Andrew Porter, Religion versus Empire?
colonialists can be found in much missionary interpretation of the colonised people and their ‘religions’. For example Oddie argues just how much Christian missionaries in India during the colonial period viewed and interpreted Hinduism through the lens set up by Orientalists, European travellers and colonial administrators.\(^{36}\)

Another agency which played a crucial role in constructing religion and religious identities for people in colonies is comparative religion developed in the West in the 19\(^{th}\) century. I noted in the first chapter that the ‘Comparative Study of Religion’ is considered as one of the formative factors of dialogue. But a critical look at it within a postcolonial framework shows that this has been one of the most active agencies in constructing religion and religions. While the Western Orientalists, travellers and settlers, missionaries, and colonial administrators were producing their knowledge through perceiving and interpreting the people in India and their life and traditions, the comparative religionists in Europe made efforts to organise them in order to provide a platform for the comparative study of religion. They constructed each religion as a single entity comprising many traditions coalesced into a religious whole identified with one label. This helped them to place each religion against the other before comparing them. While critically studying how the imperial comparative religionists helped to imagine religion for people in colonial Southern Africa, David Chidester observes that

> theorists of an imperial comparative religion, in developing a ‘secular’ science of religion, were engaged in distinguishing between the real and the imagined, distinguishing between the ‘reality’ of empire and the ‘imaginary’ world of people subjected to the military force, economic exploitation and social dislocation of colonization.... In the process, imperial theorists defined their imaginary world under the rubric ‘religion’ as a “disease of language”, as “primordial stupidity” or as “primitive survivals” from human prehistory that should have long ago disappeared in the advance of modernity.\(^ {37}\)

The works of comparative religionists in India based on similar attitudes mentioned above also saw the people in India through the lens of religion and interpreted as ‘pre-modern’ and ‘child-like.’ Thus they had no problem in presenting the lives of


people in India in terms of pre-modern but yet clearly separated religious systems in order to be compared and contrasted with the modernised and secularised Christianity.

4.2.5. Construction of Hinduism in India

Thus Orientalists in the colonised countries, Christian missionaries and comparative religionists in Europe were all involved in promoting Western idea of religion into the other parts of the globe. With regard to India, they were involved in constructing Hinduism which they perceived and interpreted as the religion of people of India. It is important to clarify how this was done, as it impinges on the colonial construction of all religions in India and thus on current dialogue.

Broadly speaking two major aspects were involved in constructing Hinduism. One was applying the Christian idea of ‘religion’ to perceive and interpret Hinduism. The other aspect is that only a few traditions from India were taken to be ‘Hinduism’, and these selected traditions came to represent the whole traditions in India. These were Brahmanical traditions which attracted the incomers. As a result what happened was not only that just a few Brahmanical traditions were interpreted as Hinduism, but that this Hinduism came to refer to the traditions of most of the people in India, feeding the idea that ‘Hinduism’ is the default tradition. Thus Richard King says that “the notion of a Hindu religion... was initially invented by Western Orientalists basing their observations upon a Judaeo-Christian understanding of religion. The specific nature of this ‘Hinduism’, however, was the product of an interaction between the Western Orientalist and the Brahmanical Pundit.”

Many scholars who have argued for the invention of Hinduism have shown that the term ‘Hinduism’ to refer to a religion or ‘Hindu’ to refer to a religious identity, is a recent phenomenon which was absent in the pre-colonial era. Of course the term ‘Hindu’ was found but that referred to people in that geographical area. It has been often shown that “the term ‘Hindoo’ is the Persian variant of the Sanskrit sindhu, referring to the Indus river, and as such was used by the Persians to denote the people

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38 King, Orientalism, p.90.
of that region.”

39 The term Hindu thus had nothing to do with religion. The indigenous use of this term by Hindus themselves could be found in the 15th and 16th centuries, but this “usage was derivative of Persian Muslim influences and did not represent anything more than a distinction between ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ and foreign (mleccha).”

40 It did not have specifically religious connotations until western Orientalists and comparative religionists developed this trend in the colonial period. King thus notes that:

‘Hindu’ in fact only came into provenance amongst Westerners in the 18th century. Previously the predominant Christian perspective amongst the Europeans classified Indian religion under the all-inclusive rubric of Heathenism. On this view there were four major religious groups, Jews, Christians, Mahometans (i.e. Muslims) and heathens. Members of the last category were widely considered to be children of the Devil, and the Indian Heathens were but one particular sect alongside the Africans and the Americans (who even today are referred to as American ‘Indians’ in an attempt to draw a parallel between the indigenous populations of India and the pre-colonial populations of the Americas)... as Western knowledge and interest in India increased, the term ‘Hindu’ eventually gained greater prominence as a culturally and geographically more specific term.

41 Initially referred to as pagans or heathens, the people in India soon became ‘Hindus’ – and their religion, Hinduism – as the Western Orientalists, missionaries and comparative religionists continued to apply the western notion of religion to ‘religions’ in India. As a result, Hinduism in its current meaning emerged in the colonial context. King thus says:

The term ‘Hinduism’ seems first to have made an appearance in the early nineteenth century, and gradually gained provenance in the decades thereafter... However, it is not until the nineteenth century proper that the term ‘Hinduism’ became used as a signifier of a unified, all-embracing and independent religious entity in both Western and Indian circles. The Oxford English Dictionary traces ‘Hindoosim’ to an 1829 reference in the Bengalee (volume 45), and also refers to an 1858 usage by the German Indologist Max Muller.

42 Another feature that is significant in interpreting religion in India and constructing Hinduism in terms of the western conception of religion was bias towards scriptural traditions; textualisation. Western literary bias, a significant feature of the European Enlightenment, also played its role in constructing Hinduism. Western

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39 King, Orientalism, p.98.
40 King, Orientalism, p.99.
41 King, Orientalism, pp.99-100.
42 King, Orientalism, p.100.
presuppositions about the role of sacred texts in ‘religion’ predisposed Orientalists to focus on such texts as the essential foundation for understanding the Hindu people as a whole.\textsuperscript{43}

Protestant emphasis upon the text as the locus of religion placed a particular emphasis upon the literary aspects of Indian culture in the work of Orientalists.... Many of the early European translators of Indian texts were also Christian missionaries, who, in their translations and critical editions of Indian works, effectively constructed uniform texts and a homogenized written canon through the imposition of Western philological standards and presuppositions onto Indian materials. Thus the oral and ‘popular’ aspect of Indian religious tradition was either ignored or decried as evidence of the degradation of contemporary Hindu religion into superstitious practices that bore little or no relation to ‘their own’ texts.\textsuperscript{44}

The colonial construction of Hinduism along the lines of Western categories has given rise to many consequences in the present context. Clearly the current political affairs and the efforts of Hindu nationalists show how this category has created dangers for people in formerly colonised countries. Talal Asad is right when he says in relation to his Islamic context that: “while religion is integral to modern Western history, there are dangers in employing such a normalizing concept when translating Islamic traditions.”\textsuperscript{45} The western colonial construction of Hinduism has indeed raised many problems in the political power structures in India, and it is important to note how this concept continues to influence dialogue.

4.2.6. Colonialism and Religious Identities

Western colonial construction of religion is not simply a construct of concept or theory, but is also political. We already noted that a self-awareness of identity was raised among people in India in terms of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hindu’ identity. Thus, the notion of religion helped to construct identities based on religion for people in the colonies. In constructing religious identities, another factor played a crucial role: the colonial administration of the British government in India. Supported by the findings of the Western Orientalists, (some of whom were administrators) the colonial administration was also involved in producing religious identities for people in India. This was mostly done in the process of recording events in India and in conducting

\textsuperscript{43} King, Orientalism, p.101
\textsuperscript{44} King, Orientalism, p.101
the census. As Friedhelm Hardy says: “It would appear that there is an intrinsic connection between the ‘Hinduism’ that is being constructed in the political arena and the ‘Hinduism’ of academic study”.  

It should be noted that not only the Orientalists and Indologists were involved in constructing the categories of religions. They did it conceptually and mostly within academic fields. However, the colonial administrators strongly influenced the making of fixed identities for the people whom they governed, and it should be remembered that all permanent members of the Indian Civil Service had to learn regional languages and traditions, which would in many areas weigh their understanding heavily in the direction of elite Hindu ideas. The census taken during the colonial period is important in this regard. British government introduced census taking in India in the 1870s, and since then ‘religion’ has been a predominant factor along with caste to refer to people’s identity. All British censuses compacted Hindus, Christians and Muslims into three separate homogenous communities. In this regard, Peter Gottschalk observes: “The British used religion as a primary criterion for the categorization not only of time but also of society. The decadal Census of India, initiated in 1872, sought to delineate South Asian societies principally via categories of caste and religion.”

Thus in various ways the colonial administrators in India were categorising people along the lines of their religious identities. Religions were created and presented to the public, identities being constructed within each frame. It has often been said by historians in India that the colonial census taking and categorisation of people in terms of religion is responsible for many of the Hindu-Muslim conflicts in Indian society. In fact the record of events by the British colonial government also illustrates how the notion of ‘religious conflict’ or communalism was invented by colonialists in India. Gyanendra Pandey, a Subaltern historian, has done a significant

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47 Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, p.27
study showing how communalism was constructed in North India. Studying the colonial construction of communalism, Pandey observes:

By the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant strand in colonialist historiography was representing religious bigotry and conflict between people of different religious persuasions as one of the more distinctive features of Indian society, past and present – a mark of the Indian section of the ‘Orient’. This particular reading of Indian history was distinguished not only by its periodization in terms of the European experience (‘ancient’, ‘medieval’, ‘modern’), nor simply by its use of communal – more specifically, religious – categories to differentiate these periods of Indian history.... The historical reconstruction was characterized also by an emptying out of all history...from the political experience of the people, and the identification of religion, or the religious community, as the moving force of all Indian politics.48

He maintains that by 1920s the British government in India “drew up elaborate lists of Hindu-Muslim riots that had occurred in the country in the recent past.... The record of Hindu-Muslim strife was also extended further back, to the beginnings of colonial rule...”49 Focussing on colonial interpretations of ‘Hindu-Muslim’ riots in Banaras, Pandey quotes from the District Gazetteer of Banaras about an incident in 1809:

The only disturbance of the public peace [in Banaras during the first half of the nineteenth century] occurred in 1809 and the following year, when the city experienced one of those convulsions which had so frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Mussalman sections of population.50

Pandey observes that this particular reference to Banaras became the yardstick for the whole of India when in 1920s and 1930s an assessment of its constitutional and political condition was undertaken. History books reiterated the theme. A memorandum was prepared to be submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission of 1928 and it referred to the “grave Banares riots’ of 1809 as evidence of the usual state of Hindu-Muslim coexistence, describing them as ‘one of those convulsions which had frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Muslim sections of the population.’” 51 Commenting on this Pandey says:

50 Cited in Pandey, The Construction, p.27.
51 Pandey, The Construction, p.28.
This particular description is of course lifted straight from the account contained in the Banares Gazetteer of 1907, quoted above. Notice that scarcely a word is altered in the text: and yet the change of contexts completely transforms the statement. What applied to a particular city – the experience of ‘convulsions’ in the past and the ‘religious antagonism’ of the local Hindus and Muslims – now applies to the country as a whole. Banares becomes the essence of India, the history of Banares the history of India.\(^\text{52}\)

Thus we can note that categorising people in India in terms of their religious belonging has been relatively a new phenomenon associated with Western colonialism in India, leading to what have become ‘religious conflicts’ in India. This continues to have a powerful effect among Indians. Whether ‘religious conflict’ has anything to do with understanding or misunderstanding of religions or not, talking up religious identity to maintain political power and dominance has been a hallmark of politics in India – colonial or contemporary. The issue of religious conflict is significant for dialogue as well and I will discuss in Chapter 6 how ‘religious conflicts’ in general and the ‘political use of religion in conflicts’ in particular is dealt with in dialogue in India.

4.3. The Role of Indian Elites in Constructing Religion and Religious Identities in India

While studying western colonial constructions of religion in India, one aspect that is important but often neglected in scholarship is the role played by elites in India in appropriating colonial notions in their thought and deliberations to their advantage. Sometimes an over-emphasis on the role played by the West leads to the neglect of the Indian role in creating religion and religious identity in India. In other words, the role of Indian elites is played down as part of over-emphasising the Western role. Writers who favour this view blame the West as the sole reason for constructing religion and fixed religious identity for people in India, totally ignoring any local contribution. This is the case for the construction of religion and related categories, but can also be applied to most of the Western forms of knowledge and systems that were exercised in perceiving and interpreting the situation in India.

\(^{52}\) Pandey, *The Construction*, p.28.
Some scholars and researchers who focus on the Indian context argue that while Western constructions of religious identities based on western Enlightenment ideals cannot be ignored, nevertheless they alone cannot be held responsible for all the constructions of religion and religious identities in India. Such scholars argue that an emphasis on religion, religious performance and religious identities did exist in pre-colonial or pre-modern India, and was usefully exploited by the Western colonialists. Challenging the notion that “self-identification, exclusion, and tensions among religious groups on the Subcontinent derived solely from the colonial encounter”, Gottschalk observes that these arguments, “ignore evidence from a variety of sources that demonstrates that Western imperialism only aggravated and gave modern shape to religious discrimination that existed long before.” Thus the pre-colonial situation with regard to the existence and construction of religion and religious identities in India remains a contested area. But one should not, however, play down the role played by Indian elites during the colonial period. While the Western Orientalists, missionaries, travellers and settlers, and colonial administrators were doubtless involved in creating fixed religious identities for people in India, the elites in India accepted and appropriated the argument in order to work out strategies for their own ends. Below I discuss two such elite groups: first the ‘Hindu elites’ and then Indian Christian theologians.

4.3.1. Hindu Elites

Hindu elites or those who are generally termed as Hindu reformers appropriated the colonial construction of religion – Hinduism in the Indian context – for many reasons. Basically it provided them with a Hindu identity which they mostly accepted enthusiastically, for it helped them in the process of their self-identification in the context of their struggle against outsiders – the Western colonialists. Further, elites


54 Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, p.19
such as Rammohun Roy, K.C. Sen, Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan were involved in comparative study of religions – usually comparing Hinduism with Christianity and sometimes with Islam. The use of Hinduism and Hindu identity in their deliberations helped them mainly on two accounts. First, it consolidated Indians under one identity, and secondly, it linked Hinduism with the struggle for Indian independence against the British rule. While the former aspect helped them to encourage non-Christians and non-Muslims in India to come under one Hindu identity, the latter provided them with a Hindu nationalist framework in their fight against the British. One can see both of these elements in the writings and activities of the elites mentioned earlier and organisations such as Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Deobandi with which they were associated. Commenting on the activities of people like Vivekanand and M.K. Gandhi, Richard King observes thus: “Orientalist notions of India as ‘other worldly’ and ‘mystical’ were embraced and praised as India’s special gift to humankind. Thus the very discourse that succeeded in alienating, subordinating and controlling India was used by Vivekananda as a religious clarion call for the Indian people to unite under the banner of a universalistic and all-embracing Hinduism.”55 One can note, looking back from the present context, how these trends have helped the Hindu extremists to work for a homogenised Hindu identity in which they attempt to include Dalits and Tribals as well as work on a Hindu national identity which excludes those who do not share the parameters set by the exponents of Hindutva: ‘one nation’, ‘one religion’, ‘one culture’ and ‘one language’.

More importantly, the role played by the Hindu elites in constructing religions and religious identities has to be looked at in terms of what was the nature of the Hinduism that they advocated and represented. It has been often pointed out that one of the reasons for the selection of Brahmanical traditions by the Western Orientalists was the influence exerted on them by the elite Brahmins in India. Thus King says of the elite Brahmins who influenced the Western Orientalists.

The high social, economic and, to some degree, political status of the brahmana castes has, no doubt, contributed to the elision between brahmanical forms of religion and ‘Hinduism’. This is most notable, for instance, in the tendency to

55 King, *Orientalism*, p.93
emphasize Vedic and brahmanical texts and beliefs as central and foundational to
the ‘essence’ of Hinduism, and in the modern association of ‘Hindu doctrine’ with
various brahmanical schools of the Vedanta....

Quoting C. A. Bayly, King notes “the extent to which the administrative and
academic demand for the literary and ritual expertise of the Brahmins placed them in
a position of direct contact and involvement with their imperial rulers, a factor that
should not go unnoticed in attempting to explain why Western Orientalists tended to
associate brahmanical literature and ideology with Hindu religion in toto”.  

This is a crucial aspect, because while there were a number of traditions, known as
religious, among people in India, only a few of them were selected to be ‘the Hindu
religious system’. It included mostly the traditions deriving from Vedas, Vedantas
and Upanisads to which the upper caste people such as Brahmins belonged. Among
them, one may note, the advaita tradition was more prominent than others. We can
see this mainly in the expositions of people such as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan.
Not only were these dominant traditions selected to represent Hinduism, but also
they were posed as the whole of Hinduism under which all other traditions in India
are to take shelter. These are some of the ways through which the Hindu elites
appropriated the Western colonial constructions of religions and religious identities.
By doing so on the one hand they attempted to create one Hindu identity
incorporating all Indians and on the other worked out a Hinduism based solely on
dominant traditions, completely ignoring and downplaying all other traditions.

4.3.2. The Role of Indian Christian Theologians

The other group that uncritically accepted and appropriated the western constructions
of religion, religion and religious identities for people in India are some of the upper-
caste Christians who are now termed the pioneers of Indian Christian thinking or
indigenous Christianity. They talked about Christianity in relation to Brahmanic
Hinduism and took for granted that Hinduism (or the only version they accepted) was
one single and uniform entity. They were mostly concerned with the Christian
missionaries’ attack on Hinduism, in response to which they emphasized what they

56 King, Orientalism, p.102.
57 King, Orientalism, p.103; also, Bayly, Indian Society.
claimed to be the positive aspects of Hinduism, with no critical approach whatsoever to the notion of Hinduism as the religion of India. In responding to the criticism made against Hinduism by Christian missionaries, Indian Christian theologians, like their Hindu counterparts, affirmed an Indian/Asian religious superiority over Western Christianity and this process did not allow them to see the problems with the ‘creation’ of religions in India.

We already noted in Chapter 1, discussing the antecedents of dialogue, that Indian Christian thinkers (as well as some missionaries) emphasised indigenisation, attempting to relate Christianity to India through inculturation and indianisation of Christianity. Like the Hindu elites, they also undertook comparative study of Hinduism and Christianity. But most importantly, it should be noted, the form of Hinduism they selected was the dominant traditions of elite Hindus. Even though the terms suggested that they were attempting to relate Christianity to India or to interpret and embed Christianity in Indian traditions, what they were actually doing was a Hinduization of Christianity – a Hinduism based on dominant upper caste traditions. In this regard, Advaita was one of the traditions that played significant role in interpreting Christianity to India. As already discussed, Brahamabandhab Upadhyaya in the 19th century together with theologians such as Chenchiah and Chakkarai who were associated with the Madras Rethinking Group all interpreted Hinduism for converted Christians in India as the mother religion in the process of contributing to or (as they thought) enabling the inculturation of Christianity in India.

4.4. Conclusion

The idea of discrete religion and religions and religious identities was constructed during the colonial period, imported to India by various Europeans, and appropriated uncritically and heavily used by Indian elites during the same period. This chapter has shown that many acclaimed antecedents of dialogue discussed in chapter 1, such as comparative religion and the Indian Christian efforts for inculturation, were and

58 For a discussion on this, see Aleaz, Christian Thought through Advaita Vedanta, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996.
59 Chapter 1, pp.46-47.
are far more important as the location for the construction of religion(s) and religious identities – with their negative connotations – than they were formative factors of dialogue. The influence of the western constructions of religions and religious identities and the continuing Indian appropriation of them are still evident today, different constituencies in India using these categories uncritically or at least pragmatically. One such constituency is found in the dialogue movement in contemporary India. How the dialogue promoters in India, when they are concerned with dialogue activities in the context of the plurality of religions have uncritically appropriated and used these categories in their works, is discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5

Religion, Religions and Religious Identities and Interreligious Dialogue

5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed how the idea of religion, world-religions and religious identities were created in the Enlightenment period in Europe and transferred to colonial India. These constructions are still appropriated and used in the discourses of those who study India, particularly the religious identities of and religious (or communal) conflicts among Indians. Commenting on the Indian appropriation of the western colonial constructions of religion and religious identities, Peter Gottschalk observes that “unfortunately, professional scholars of South Asian civilization, the very sources who should most challenge such impressions, often reinforce them through their work.”

In this chapter, I explore further the notion that theologians and religious leaders engaged in dialogue with the affirmation on plurality of religions are one such group, uncritically working with colonial inventions of religions and religious identity in their deliberations. There are various aspects in dialogue related to the western and elite constructions of religion that need a critical look, but in this chapter I discuss three of them: first, the invitation to either cooperation between religions against secularism and secularisation or dialogue with secular ideologies – both of which maintain the religion-secular distinctions; second, the notion of world-religion categories and, leading on from that, the third aspect: identifying people or fixing identities for them primarily in terms of religion. Critiquing these aspects from a subaltern approach, I have attempted to throw some light on ordinary people’s ways of constructing their identities and the place of religion and religious identities among them.

1 Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, p.13.
5.2. The Subaltern Studies Approach

Elite descriptions of ‘their’ society and consequent bias have been critically appraised ‘from below’ for quite some time now. The core subaltern view is that such elite approaches ignore, undermine or control lived realities among the non-elites, the ordinary people. Within the field of Religion and Theology in Christianity, this ‘from below’ approach has been applied in many ways. One of the important developments in the 1970s was the rise of liberation theologies in Latin America which spread to other parts of the world. This was a ‘from below’ approach to theologising, which critiqued systematic theology preoccupied with philosophy and doctrines, and emphasised the importance of lay and often marginalised people’s theologising. In India, Dalit and Tribal peoples have critiqued the dominant traditions for ignoring them, Dalit theology (as noted in Chapter 2) opposing elite Indian Christian theology’s preoccupation with the dominant modes of Hinduism.

One of the prominent ‘from below’ approaches in India has been the works of the Subaltern Studies Collective since the 1980s. The Subaltern Studies method generally refers to the writings of a group of scholars, mostly from India, about South Asian society since the 1980s concerning Indian nationalism and historiography and the contributions of the submerged classes to that evolution. There were 10 volumes under the title ‘Subaltern Studies’ between 1982 and 1998, and many more in similar vein. While there is no single method directing the writings of the scholars in the Subaltern Studies Collective, there is a core uniting all their writings: the rejection of any elite humanities writing which ignores subaltern reality.

Ranajit Guha, the editor of the first six volumes of Subaltern Studies, and one of the influential scholars who figured out the basic assumptions behind the Subaltern Studies, explicited the methodology in the first volume. The term ‘subaltern’ in Subaltern Studies, means ‘inferior rank’, taken from Antonio Gramsci’s writing on the working class. Guha and his Collective use the term for “the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class,

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caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.”

Clarifying the terms elite and subaltern, Guha explains: “the term ‘elite’ has been used in this statement to signify dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous.” And, “the terms ‘people’ and ‘subaltern classes’ have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those who we have described as the ‘elite’.”

Using a Subaltern Studies approach to study dialogue in India helps to identify and discuss some of the elite aspects of dialogue which have uncritically appropriated religious-secular distinctions, world-religion categories, and fixed homogenised religious identities for people in India. It also helps to understand and appreciate the ways ordinary people construct and maintain multiple identities for themselves and others.

5.3. Religion, Religions, Religious Identities and Dialogue

5.3.1. Dialogue and Religion-Secular Distinctions

Generally, there are two basic trends in maintaining religion-secular distinctions in the contemporary society: either secularists make religion into something inferior and irrational, which should be privatised beyond the public domain, or religionists maintain a firm distinction between religion and secularism in their discourse, considering secularism to be a threat to religion which they then defend over secularism. It is in the latter camp that many of the dialogue activities and personnel belong. ‘Taking religions seriously’, ‘affirming religious importance’ and or ‘bringing together different religions in dialogue in order to save their future’ are some frequently heard slogans in the dialogue discourse.

Broadly speaking there are three major perspectives in dialogue with regard to secularism which lead them to maintain distinctions between religion and secularism: the idea that secularism is anti-religion in that it is an enemy of religion; that secularism or secular ideology is another kind of religion; and that secularism or a secular framework offers a higher ground of authority in the dealings of human beings. These major perspectives are spread in the writings in dialogue in India and,

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as I discuss below, all these three perspectives basically maintain the religion-secular
distinction: the basic assumption that ‘religion or secularism’ is a valid dichotomy is
not challenged.

I have already noted that Jerusalem 1928 supported the view that secularism was the
common enemy of all religions, and W.E. Hocking\(^5\) suggesting all religions unite
against this common enemy, an idea also present in the WPR 1893 which is seen as
foundational for contemporary dialogue. WPR 1893 had stressed repeatedly that
religion is a separate entity, especially in relation to the secular world or secular
society. Its fifth objective was: “To indicate the impregnable foundations of Theism,
and the reasons for man’s faith in Immortality, and thus to unite and strengthen the
forces which are adverse to a materialistic philosophy of the universe”, or, from the
sixth objective:

To secure from leading scholars, representing the Brahman, Buddhist, Confucian,
Parsee, Mohammedan, Jewish and other Faiths, and from representatives of various
Churches of Christendom, full and accurate statements of the spiritual and other
effects of the Religions which they hold upon the Literature, Art, Commerce,
Government, Domestics, and Social life of the peoples among whom these Faiths
have prevailed.\(^6\)

In all these ‘religion’ has been taken as a separate category in life. Even though the
term ‘secular’ is absent, one can nevertheless conclude that Religion is put forth as a
separate category from secularism which is ‘a materialistic philosophy of the
universe’. In fact this separation runs through the deliberations in the Parliament, and
indeed Barrows, in his preface to the proceedings, says, “Religion is the greatest fact
of History”.\(^7\)

One can find similar attitudes in dialogue in India today. The idea that religion is an
alternative to secularism, that religion is superior to secularism and that religion is
more enduring than secularism are reiterated in Indian dialogue circles. The general
premise is that religions have something to contribute to the well-being of society
despite the common assumption that they are obstacles to human development in

\(^5\) Report of the Jerusalem Meeting, p.369. Also see Hocking, Rethinking Missions: A Laymen’s


\(^7\) Barrows, WPR, vol. I, p.vii.
Talking about the role of religions and dialogue in secular society in the late 1960s, Herbert Jai Singh says that religions are claiming universality of relevance, scientific rationality and personal and social salvific qualities for daily living. They claim to bring peace and love to a world perpetually living under the shadow of thermo-nuclear war. They promise mental peace to modern man whose nerves are perpetually on edge. In every faith there is a growing interest in the life of this world... under the influence of religious aspiration, there has been a new heightening of social consciousness.  

Singh says that it is this context which sets the stage for dialogue. In fact this idea of the role of religions in secular society, or a ‘secular society’, is important for dialogue. The basic assumption is that religion and society are seen as separate entities, and while society is characterised by its secular nature, religion is just a tiny part of that society.

Against the often strident claim of secular ideologies that religions have no positive role to play, the dialogue promoters stress, equally stridently, the importance of religion for human beings. Thus Samartha holds that “since religions have endured in history for a much longer period than any secular ideology, the possibility that religions might still offer resources to recover the sense of wholeness of life should at least be explored seriously instead of being rudely rejected as of no consequence.” The necessity of dialogue becomes important in such a context in order to protect religion(s) from secular assault, the future of religions being hopefully protected if different religions come together in the service of humanity. K.L. Seshagiri Rao, a Hindu dialogue activist, says: “The future usefulness of any religious tradition... depends on its ability to cooperate with other traditions.”

Raimundo Panikkar also expresses similar attitude when he talks about Hindu-Christian dialogue: “in such dialogue lies the future of religions.” In this regard the

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9 Singh, “Preparation for Dialogue”, p.43.
10 I have discussed this in Chapter 2, see pages 78-79.
religious nature of peace, with the emphasis that religions working in dialogue have a great peace potential for peace, is a common theme.

Talking about the future of dialogue in the context of secularism, Samartha maintains that secularism... banishes the sacred from all life, and therefore rejects inter-religious dialogue as a hindrance to human progress. One of the contributions of inter-religious dialogue is critically to recover the religious dimension of human life at a time when there is a retreat of the secular and a return of the sacred into the arena of history.  

He articulates the importance and urgency of dialogue, claiming that “while it is true that organized religions have often failed to provide answers to the problems of justice, the same judgement is true in the case of contemporary secular ideologies as well” and that “there is today a growing uneasiness about the adequacy of the secular way of life and an increasing sensitivity to the transcendent dimension of life.”

Samartha also talks about the aspirations of people to live together, setting aside religion and the secular: “The separation of life into the sacred and secular is being questioned today by many people. They are deeply aware of the wholeness of life. Religious insights, particularly those that hold together humanity, nature and God in a cosmic unity may be important here.” Nevertheless he still demands that religion be considered along with secular to make people whole, rather than questioning the separation itself.

The second aspect with regard to the attitudes towards secularism in dialogue is the talk about dialogue between religions and secular ideologies. In this sense, secularism or secular ideologies are seen to play as positive a role for humans as religion. Devanandan and M.M. Thomas were two Indian Christian thinkers who linked dialogue with secularism. Devanandan was critical of the general Christian attitudes to secularism and secularisation in the West. Challenging the Jerusalem 1928 report on secularism, Devanandan held that this should not be the situation in an independent India. He maintained that “the position seems to have shifted since

14 Samartha, Between Two Cultures, p.168  
15 Samartha, One Christ, p.42.  
16 Samartha, One Christ, p.43.  
17 Samartha, One Christ, p.43.
Jerusalem (1928), when missionary thinking was inclined to hold secularism was the common enemy of all religion. Today the antithesis between what is described as religious and what is regarded as secular has no longer the same validity.  

He was convinced that in the Indian context, secularism could be a corrective when religion becomes other-worldly and pietistic. This he related both to Christianity and Hinduism – inviting Christians to work with other religious and secular traditions for the sake of common humanity and inviting Hindus to “effect a synthesis between the traditional worldview and contemporary secularism.”

In similar vein, M.M. Thomas also said that

Christianity, renascent religions, and secular faiths, are all involved in the struggle of man for the true meaning of his personal social existence.... [T]he relation between Christian faith and other living religions and secular faiths is passing to a new stage, because they not only co-exist in the same society but also cooperate to build a secular society and culture. It is within such co-existence and cooperation that we can best enter into dialogue at the deepest level on the nature and destiny of man and on the nature of ultimate truth.

Many Indian Christians developed their ideas of dialogue in relation to secularism from the pioneer works of Devanandan and Thomas. Thus while some consider secularism as anti-religious, others interpret it as another ideology or quasi religion with which world-religions should dialogue for the common good.

Thirdly, sometimes, there is also a higher place attributed to secularism among the dialogue promoters in India. In the previous chapter I noted Trevor Stack’s study of such a trend in West Mexico. In the Indian context, M.M. Thomas, even though he does not perceive that religion and secular are antagonistic, nevertheless talks about the dialogue between religions and secular ideologies while appealing to the secular constitution of India when attacks were carried out on Christians. The secular democratic framework on which Indian polity is based is often put forward as a

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21 For example see, M.M. Thomas, The Secular Ideologies; Man and the Universe.
22 Stack “A higher ground”, pp.47-69.
solution to religious extremism, based on Nehru’s vision of a secular India in which secularism is not anti-religion, but rather respects all religions equally.\textsuperscript{25}

Studying the use of secularism in dialogue, it is clear that there are ambiguities in the way it is maintained: as anti-religion, as another kind of religion, and as a higher ground of authority. Of course it depends upon the context: invitation to religions to come together is extended to insist that they are the important aspect in society in the context of secularisation; the necessity of the dialogue of religions with secular ideologies is emphasised in the context of working for the welfare of human beings; appeal to the secular nature of the society/nation is made in the context of the domination of religious majorities against the religious minorities. Nevertheless, in all three perspectives the notions of religion-secular distinctions are maintained. Thus the topic of secularism, secularisation or secular ideologies in dialogue shows dialogue constructing religion(s) on the one hand and maintaining religious-secular distinctions on the other hand. In doing so it continues to exercise the western enlightenment constructions of religion, and fails to critique the power structures within which these distinctions were created and maintained.

5.3.2. Dialogue and World-Religions Categories

The existence of dialogue presupposes many world-religions, between which it takes place, such as ‘Hindu-Christian dialogue’, ‘Christian-Muslim dialogue’, ‘Buddhist-Christian dialogue’, and ‘Jewish-Christian dialogue’ and so on. In all these, the religions involved are considered to be single homogenised systems which are differentiated from each other. Seldom does dialogue question this notion of ‘world-religions.’ Faith and beliefs are distinguished,\textsuperscript{26} and ‘unorganised and organised’ religions are differentiated,\textsuperscript{27} faith seen as inherent in all human beings with beliefs or religions as established systems. For instance Panikkar defines faith as “the connection with the beyond” however one chooses to envision it, which

\textsuperscript{25} Thomas, \textit{Salvation}, p.45.
\textsuperscript{26} Panikkar, \textit{The Intrareligious Dialogue}, pp.1-23.
\textsuperscript{27} Samartha, \textit{One Christ}, p.42.
may lend itself more or less to ideation, but no set of words, no expression, can ever exhaust it. And yet it needs to be embodied in ideas and formulas – so much so that faith incapable of expressing itself at all would not be human faith. Such expressions we have called beliefs, in accordance with what tradition has always felt.28

Thus the distinction between faith and beliefs is understood in terms of inner conviction and outer expressions of those convictions, a view maintained by Panikkar and others. Religion and religions may also be distinguished in terms of one governing essence (religion) and many formulations of that essence (religions). In this regard, Hindu thinkers such as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan have attempted to construct a universal religion – religion behind religions. On the other hand, comparative religion which underlies the construction of world-religion categories is considered to be both an antecedent of dialogue in the colonial period, and the basic platform on which dialogue between religions can take place. An interest in religious beliefs, doctrines and performance is seen as the crucial element for fruitful dialogue.

Moreover, because dialogue primarily deals with Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam as world-religions, it seldom acknowledges on the one hand the different traditions within each world-religion and on the other hand traditions that ignore such apparent boundaries. There are usually internal differences in beliefs, doctrines, attitudes within each world-religion, for each has its cultures, sects and denominations, with unique traditions and beliefs which do not always conform to generic or elite orthodoxy. Moreover, syntheses of religious traditions are attempted or unconsciously practised by religious adherents, but these are ignored because dialogue is based on world-religion categories. Popular religions or traditions among marginalised people such as Dalit or Tribal which criss-cross the artificial categories of dialogue are usually ignored for which these traditions have challenged dialogue, as discussed in Chapter 2.

5.3.3. Hinduism in Dialogue in India

I concentrate on Hinduism in the discourse of dialogue because Hinduism has been represented as the religion of India and Christian attempts to relate to Hinduism in the Indian context is more frequent than to any other religions. This is also because modern discourse uses this 'religion of India' constructed by Western colonial elites and Indian elites in the colonial period. Firstly, dialogue takes the dominant traditions within Hinduism to be the Hindu religion – the religion of all Indians except Christians, Muslims and Jews – any dialogue with Hinduism being with high caste or Brahmanical traditions, a mode much challenged by liberation theologies in India, particularly Dalit. The dialogue promoters themselves realise the problem, but continue because these traditions are believed to be ‘classical’ and authoritative, indeed synonymous with ‘Hinduism:’ the masses are ignored. This is exactly what western Orientalists did during the colonial period – not only inventing and creating Hinduism, but constructing it both in terms of their own European biases as well as focussing on available ‘high texts.’ These attitudes are found in the works of Abhishiktananda, Samartha, Panikkar and many others, who take the Vedas and Vedanthas, especially Advaita Vedantha, as the most authoritative tradition in Hinduism, and therefore the basis for dialogue.

Secondly, dialogue consciously or unconsciously treats Hinduism as a single religion. Of course many traditions within Hinduism are talked about – multiple deities and various kinds of rituals and worship – but when it comes to interreligious dialogue, Hindu-Christian or Hindu-Muslim dialogue is between two clearly defined essentialised entities. Consider Klostermaier on Hinduism:

Hinduism is organizing itself; it is articulating its own essentials, it is modernizing and it is carried by a great many people with strong faith. It would not be surprising to find Hinduism the dominant religion of the 21st century. It would be a religion that doctrinally is less clear-cut than mainstream Christianity, politically less determined than Islam, ethically less heroic than Buddhism... it would address people at a level that has not been plumbed for a long time by other religions or prevailing ideologies... Hinduism by virtue of its lack of ideology and its reliance

29 Samartha, Between Two Cultures, p.168.
30 Abhishiktananda, Hindu-Christian.
31 Samartha, The Hindu Response.
32 Panikkar, Trinity.
on institution, will appear to be much more plausible than those religions whose doctrinal positions petrified a thousand years ago or whose social structures remain governed by tribal mores.  

Hinduism is interpreted as a religion, similar definitions and interpretations of Hinduism being the norm in dialogue. The problem is not only for Hinduism, but all religions presented as one homogenous and generalised unit in discussion with another. Moreover, treating Hinduism as one religion embracing everything other than foreign religious elements in India has enabled Hindu nationalists to homogenise the identities of marginalised people such as Dalits and Tribals and exercise power over them. In my opinion, dialogue unwittingly contributes to Hindutva’s because it does not critique of the notion of ‘one Hinduism’ – the Hinduism that is essential to talk about dialogue.

Thirdly, the ‘Hindu renaissance’ has played a major role in dialogue. Devanandan emphasised this again and again, arguing that resurgent Hinduism is important for dialogue. But what is this resurgent Hindu renaissance? It appears little more than the use of western colonial constructs of Hinduism which helped elites in India to self-identify and Hindus to consolidate. Uncritical of the factors behind and the context of the power structures involved in the ‘Hindu reformation’, dialogue has interpreted renascent Hinduism as the crucial valued partner in dialogue with other religions, as Devanandan has done.

Fourthly, with regard to Hinduism, Hindu tolerance is often cited as a principle to be emulated against aggressive Islam or Christianity. The notion of Hindu tolerance has been popularised by elites such as Vivekananda, and Christian dialogue accepted it. However, the endorsement of ideas such as ‘Hinduism is known for its tolerance’ or ‘Hinduism accommodates everything’ has many problems. The idea that Hinduism is known for its tolerance or ahimsa and non-violence is now challenged. Romila Thapar observes that “ahimsa as an absolute value is characteristic of certain

34 Devanandan, Christian Concern.
Sramanic sects and less so of Brahmanism,“36 on which today’s Hinduism has been constructed. She further says that this “notion appears in the *Upanisads*, but it was the Buddhists and Jains who first made it foundational to their teaching.”37

Finally, there are also ambiguities for dialogue activists regarding Hinduism in the context of Hindutva. Some would say that they are different – the first being the partner in dialogue, the latter an extremist deviation in Hinduism.38 While Hinduism is accommodated in dialogue, the Hindutva in India is critiqued within the framework of the secular polity of India. Of course Hindutva ideologists may not accept this – but dialogue holds this ambiguity, as was clear in Kanyakumari district. The dialogue promoters in Kanyakumari are associated with the Vivekananda Kendra in Kanyakumari district, which popularises Vivekananda’s ideals such as religious harmony, yet these ‘ideals’ have been closely associated with the rise of Hindutva ideology in the contemporary period. One of my interviewees, a Roman Catholic priest in Kanyakumari, said: “The religious tensions in Kanyakumari district have begun to rise after Vivekananda Kendra was founded in the district.”39 Nevertheless he said that he is invited occasionally (more often earlier) to Vivekananda Kendra to teach Christianity, citing this as Hindu-Christian dialogue. This illustrates the ambiguities among dialogue activists.

My purpose in this section is not to criticise those who follow many traditions which are identified as ‘Hindu’ But to critique how ‘Hinduism’ has been appropriated uncritically in the discourse of dialogue, and how this can be an oppressing reality, given that the power of colonialism, Orientalism and Indian dominant traditions are involved in imagining such a category. Moreover, as noted above, this issue is not confined to Hinduism, for other world-religions such as Christianity and Islam have also been constructed.

37 Thapar, “Imagined Religious”, p.344.
38 Wilfred, “Our Neighbours”, p.81
39 Interview, Panivanban Vincent, Kanyakumari, 24-07-2008.
5.3.4. Dialogue and Religious Identities

Another problem is the fixed identities constructed for people assuming an identity between the tradition and actual belief. Believing and belonging are two basic aspects of religious identity, yet normally dialogue assumes a congruence between religious identity and religious belief, often using the phrase ‘believing community’ or ‘community of believers’, based on a supposed shared set of beliefs and doctrines. Herbert Jai Singh, for example, assigns a clear religious identity to his neighbours in his book *My Neighbours* (Men of different Faiths). He speaks of them as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, Christian, discussing the doctrines and beliefs of their religions.\(^{40}\) Similarly Wesley Ariarajah speaks of his neighbours in terms primarily of religious identity.\(^{41}\) Commenting on defining Christian identity in a multi-religious world, Samartha says that

> the intra-Christian and inter-religious debates need to be constantly related to each other for the sake of mutual criticism and mutual enrichment. While the former is very necessary in order for Christians to sharpen their profile and define their identity in a religiously plural world, the distinctiveness of a religious community cannot be truly defined without reference to other communities of faith.\(^{42}\)

Indeed almost all dialogue promoters who talk about the primacy of religious identities of people actually interact, chat and cooperate with many other people who have different kinds of identities. Yet when it comes to the discourse of dialogue, they switch primarily to religious identity.

One of the issues that have to be looked at with regard to the primacy given to religious identity in dialogue is that because of it, dialogue in India has attempted to construct an Indian or Asian identity based on religions which had their ancient origin in that continent, as opposed to Christianity which, it is claimed, was developed in western culture.\(^{43}\) I have discussed this issue in Chapter 2, and in this regard Samartha says that: “Asia is the birthplace and home of many religions and cultures, some of which originated earlier than Christianity.”\(^{44}\) This construction of

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\(^{40}\) Singh, *My Neighbours*.


\(^{42}\) Samartha, *Between Two Cultures*, p.145.

\(^{43}\) Pages, 166-167.

\(^{44}\) Samartha, *Between Two Cultures*, p. 174.
Indian religious identity or Asian religious identity as against ‘western religion’ or indeed irreligion is evidence of Indian dialogue activists appropriating the Western Orientalist construction of India (and Asia).

This naming of people along fixed religious identities leads to several consequences. Three of them are worth mentioning here. Firstly talking about and using fixed religious identities of people in dialogue often down-plays the intra-religious identities of people. Secondly, the identities that cross religious boundaries among ordinary people are ignored. Thirdly the ability of individuals to construct multiple identities for themselves and to use them consistently in their dealings with other individuals is underestimated. While dialogue has failed to affirm these aspects with regard to religious identity, people at the grassroots consistently maintain a bundle of identities which move beyond religious identities, which are but one of several options, as I shall now discuss.

5.4. Beyond Religious Identity at the Grassroots

How do ordinary people negotiate fixed religious identities based on world-religion categories? Do they challenge western colonial as well as Indian elite constructions of religions and religious identities in general and their appropriation by dialogue in India in particular? One of the significant features with regard to religious identity among people at the grassroots – mostly in village India – is that they cross religious boundaries in constructing their own as well as others’ identities. In spite of the informal evidence available that common people do not relate with each other primarily in terms of religious identity, those who talk about them conclude that they are divided by religions. Ethnographic studies treating the negotiation of religious identity are either lacking or ignored by dialogue. Even the Subaltern Studies Collective that has worked on several aspects of non-elite contributions for nationalism have rarely questioned the world-religion categories or identities based on those categories for people in India. In this regard Peter Gottschalk has done a remarkable study on how people in village India relate with each other beyond religious identity which are sustained by multiple identity narratives. He has proposed multiple group identities among Hindus and Muslims in India by focussing on multiple identity narratives in a village, Arampur, in Bihar, and challenges those
who continue to define and interpret the identities of Indians primarily in terms of religion.\textsuperscript{45}

5.4.1. A Multiple Identity Approach

Gottschalk talks about four perspectives that are currently found with regard to the scholarly study of religious identity in India\textsuperscript{46}: the singular identity approach by which the scholars imagine “discrete and singular realms of religious life detached from broader patterns of social, economic, or ritual interrelation” and describe “the ritual lives of Hindus and Muslims... as neatly contained within exclusive spheres of temple and mosque”\textsuperscript{47}; the conflict approach that studies religious identities in the context of communal conflicts; the historical approach that looks at the historical constructions religious identity; and the composite identity approach where “some scholars consider religious identity as one element among others within a particular group’s larger sense of identity.”\textsuperscript{48} Critiquing these approaches Gottschalk argues for a case of multiple group identities. He maintains:

those who do focus on a specific group and explore the various facets of their identity often say little about the possibility of multiple identities among individual members, some of which may not be shared by all in the group.... The narratives that they relate about their homeland, their families, and themselves reflect the variety of group identities that form their personal identity like the atoms of a molecule. Like molecules, individuals adapt to changing environments by changing their internal arrangement, allowing them to bond with one set of molecules at one moment and another set at another moment without ever losing their internal consistency.\textsuperscript{49}

Thus ordinary people live with multiple group identities that help them to relate with each other in various contexts. Commenting on the academic and elite downplaying of multiple identities in favour of discrete units, Gottschalk says that

Perceiving the importance of religion in Indian society, many scholars erroneously conclude that this society can be described solely in terms of religious identity. Attempting to do so, these scholars overlook the nature of any individual as a conglomerate of various identities and fail to see the interests around which these identities form. By emphasizing only religious identity, scholars rarefy religions,

\textsuperscript{45} Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu.
\textsuperscript{46} Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, pp.35-38.
\textsuperscript{47} Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, p.35.
\textsuperscript{48} Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, p.35.
\textsuperscript{49} Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, P.39.
removing them from the social milieu in which they develop.... A study of group identity in India demonstrates how religious interests inform and are informed by other concerns in Indian constructions of society, and how narratives told by Indians can reflect these interests.50

In the Indian context today, a critical study of how people construct religious identities is especially important because conflicts between ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’ are often associated with their religious identities that divide them. Gottschalk continues:

This pattern reveals a weakness in the notion of communal identity because the term implies that Hindus and Muslims identify only with a community of other Hindus and Muslims. Although some Indians may embrace and propagate such an identity, few Indians live with such a singular self-understanding. Overreliance on the communal notion is akin to examining identity with a very narrow view — recognizing the importance of one aspect of an individual’s identity but ignoring many other possible social bonds.... However... many Hindus and Muslims do not live within discrete and distinct religious worlds but practice faith lives that obscure clear identity boundaries.51

Against these perspectives that make religious identity the primary marker of the identities of people in India, Gottschalk invites scholars to study the multiple identities that are prevalent among people, without disregarding the role of religious identity. Nevertheless, he concludes that despite the maintenance of religious identities among people, they “have interacted and continue to interrelate in private and public arenas – even those identified as “religious” by participants – sharing identities beyond their religious ones.”52 Gottschalk identifies this as a multiple identity approach. Commenting on multiple identities he thus says:

Scholars who rely on a singular identity model commonly describe groups and individuals by Hindu or Muslim affiliations first, by regional location or caste second, and then by other qualifications. Thus, they ignore the identities that Hindus and Muslims may share despite their differing religious identities, such as those based on living in a shared neighbourhood, village, state, or nation. And, they also miss the possibility of shared religious identities, such as those that result from the melange of devotional traditions, including Sufism and bhakti, that have influenced one another in north India at various times.53

A multiple identity approach to how people maintain identities when they relate with each other can bring home many insights challenging the dominance of religious

50 Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, p.4.
51 Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, p.39.
52 Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, pp.33-34.
53 Gottschalk, Beyond Hindu, pp.36-37.
identity. First, the intra-religious identities constructed and maintained among people who do not always accept identities based on world-religion categories and rather formulate identities in terms of particular local or personal traditions within a religion system. Second, the maintenance of multiple identities where religious identity is one of several identities and maintenance of multiple identities in terms of caste, language, region, occupation and so on. I shall discuss these aspects in Kanyakumari district, but shall first briefly note the long background of multiple identities in the pre-colonial and colonial period, despite elite constructions to the contrary.

5.4.2. Religion and Identity in the Pre-colonial and Colonial Period

Attempting to set out multiple identities – intra-religious identities, and group identities beyond religious identities – among the common people in earlier times is difficult because the sources predominantly represent elite perspectives on religion and religious identity. Commenting on this, Gottschalk observes that:

> the history of South Asian religious identities and community interrelations suffers for lack of historiographic sources for the period preceding European imperialism. The sources available generally describe large, elite institutions rather than local, popular expressions. For this reason, most scholars attempting to explore pre-colonial and early colonial religiosity commonly turn to the records of governments... or organizations... and attempt the difficult task of discerning broader religious sentiments.\(^{54}\)

This observation can be extended to religion and religious identity of people in the colonial context. However a deconstruction of these sources by critically studying them as well as studying the oral traditions and narratives found among people in India can be used to reconstruct how ordinary people in India may have used these identities.

Jews and Christians have lived in India since just before and just after the beginning of the Common Era, and appear to have co-existed with Hindus.\(^{55}\) There are some attempts to study this in dialogue, even though the primary purpose is to show that

\(^{54}\) Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu*, p.18.

dialogue has a long history. Nevertheless those studies provide some insights on the life of people. The fact that the Synod of Diamper in 1599 forbade many of the customs and practices of Syrian Christians and that it considered those customs as pagan indicates that Christians interacted with their neighbours and used many of their traditions. Commenting on this A.M. Mundadan says that “these prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the Synod are a witness to the communal harmony and cordial relations that existed between Christians and Hindus.” Some of the customs the Syrian Christians followed included building churches after the fashion of the local Hindu temples, using royal umbrellas (muthukuda), musical instruments, torches in their processions, which were also used in Hindu possession, imitating the Hindu prasad in the offerings of eatables, money, fowls, sweets and following the Hindu marriage custom of tying a thali (chain or yellow thread) around the neck of the bride by the bridegroom and administrating the temple properties by a yogam (assembly). These suggest that Christians and their neighbours related to and learnt from each other.

Even though colonial and post-colonial historiography reads fixed religious identities into the pre-colonial period, contemporary scholars have argued that there is evidence of people who lived beyond religious identities. Poet Kabir, born into a Muslim weaver’s family in Varanasi in the 16th century, is cited as one example. In the context of conflicts between Turks and Hindus, it is believed, he attempted to provide a nameless devotionalism through his Bhakti poetry which moved beyond Hindu and Islamic beliefs, attracting both Hindu and Muslim followers. Gottschalk observes that “among the numerous precolonial religious institutions in South Asia, the Kabir Panth and other nirgun bhakti groups were more likely to foster inclusive devotional practices through their imageless devotions.” Another example is Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the first guru of Sikhism, who is, according to Gottschalk, “assumed to have favoured a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism...and, like Kabir,
promoted a devotional identity that transcended those of Muslim and Hindu. Of course these ideas are not without criticisms, but in the context of current Hindu-Muslim violence in India, these studies become significant. Thus they affirm that people living in the pre-colonial period are believed to have related to local practices rather than supra-local labels, readily incorporating more than one religious identity in a ‘nameless devotionalism’, as the followers of Kabir did, or a nameless practice.

Similar attitudes with regard to religious identities are found among Bauls, a group of mystic minstrels living in Bengal. Jeanne Openshaw, who has worked on these people, says that “Bauls define themselves in opposition to those they judge to be ‘orthodox’, Hindu or Muslim.” This group of people, who are known for their music and enigmatic songs, wish to identify themselves as being in barttaman, which is opposed to anuman. While barttaman refers to “an ideal of self-dependence based on one’s own knowledge”, anuman refers to “others’ knowledge or conjecture” and “is epitomised by Hindu or Muslim ‘orthopraxy’ or ‘orthodoxy’, which is in turn legitimised by scripture and religious authorities.” Against the state of being in anuman, Bauls adopt an approach of “rejection and equalising,, rejecting all paths classified as anuman, and equalising all persons in terms of their humanity, that is, as human beings (manus).” For them “all conventional distinctions drawn between person and person are denied validity” and they “favour an ideology of non-discrimination, or of non-dualism (advaita), a term apparently appropriated and substantially transformed from its more idealist, orthodox sense”. Like the followers of Kabir, Bauls also bring challenges to the notion of fixed religious identities such as ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ for people in India.

There is also clear evidence of multiple intra-religious identity, constructed and used in terms of specific religious traditions within Hinduism, evidence which

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63 Openshaw, “The Web”, p.298  
64 Openshaw, “The Web”, p.297  
65 Openshaw, “The Web”, p.303  
66 Openshaw, “The Web”, p.304
challenges the Hindutva idea of one Hinduism. Arguing against the notion that Hinduism is a single religion, Romila Thapar, a historian on ancient India, says the indigenous view of religion in India holds that there were two religious groups, “Brahmanism and Sramanism with clear distinction between them. They are organizationally separate, had different sets of beliefs and rituals, and often disagreed on social norms.”

While Brahmanism was the dominant tradition followed by upper castes, Sramanism was popular among marginalised people. She also points out that there have been internal differences, with some conflict, between different religious traditions such as Saivism and Jainism, Saivism and Buddhism and Saivism and Vaisnavism, where Saivism was a dominant tradition that persecuted others.

Commenting on this she says that “what is significant about this persecution is that it involved not all the Saivas but particular segments of sects among them. The persecution was not a jehad or a holy war or a crusade in which all Hindu sects saw it as their duty to support the attack or to wage war against the Buddhists or Jains.”

Arguing for a multiple identities in the pre-colonial India, Thapar says that “identities were, in contrast to the modern nation-state, segmented identities. The notion of community was not absent but there were multiple communities identified by locality, language, caste, occupation and sect. What appears to have been absent was the notion of a uniform, religious community readily identified as Hindu.”

She concludes that “if the history of religions in India is seen as the articulation not only of ideas and rituals but also the perceptions and motivations of social groups, the perspectives which would follow might be different from those with which we are familiar.”

5.4.3. Intra-religious Identities in Kanyakumari District

People very often use intra-religious identities rather than religious identities based on world-religion categories. Against the agencies that try to put them into fixed religious identities – such as Hindus, Muslims and Christians – they consciously or unconsciously maintain a mixed palette of religious identities in constructing

67 Thapar, “Imagined Religious”, p.336
68 Thapar, “Imagined Religious”, p.344
69 Thapar, “Imagined Religious”, p.345
70 Thapar, “Imagined Religious”, p.347
71 Thapar, “Imagined Religious”, p.356
themselves. A specific identity, such as Christian or Hindu, comes to the fore only when vested interests groups, usually religious leaders and politicians, dominate the masses as part of their power politics.

One way multiple identities can be observed is how people address each other in terms of their religious belonging. Usually one can note that denomination in Christianity, cults and traditions in Hinduism and sects in Islam are given importance in constructing self identity and the identities of others. The language that they use in this context gets significance. For example in Kanyakumari district, when the CSI Christians address themselves or others refer to them, a Tamil word CSI kararagal is used. The term karargal does not have a specific meaning when it stands alone, but linked to the term CSI it means ‘CSI people’ or people belonging to CSI, the word Christian being set aside: indeed in Kanyakumari district, particularly in Gramam, I never came across the use of CSI Christians, or Pentecostal Christians, or Catholic Christians among people in Kanyakumari other than in formal contexts or by elites for a purpose. I could juxtapose my interactions with the people in villages with my interviews with dialogue activists who quite often used terms such as Hindus, Christians and Muslims.

This is also true with the Hindus in the district. There are Saivite, Vaisihnavite, Ayyavazhi (literally means ‘the way of the father’) and Ammanvazhi (the way of the mother) people in the district. Even though some Christians and Muslims sometimes use the term Hindus to refer to them, most ‘Hindus’ in the area address themselves as Ayyavazhkarakaragal or Ammanvazhikaragal. They do not normally construct their identities in terms of Hinduism. “Some do identify us as Hindus but we prefer to be known as Ayyavazhi Makkal” said one Ayyavazhi follower: Makkal in Tamil means people. In the same way, the term ‘Muslim’ is also not popular in villages in Kanyakumari district. They are addressed as ‘Thulukkans,’ believed to be a distorted form of ‘Turks’, and referred to as people living close to the ‘Palli’, a common word in Tamil referring to ‘school,’ ‘rest’, and to the mosque.

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72 Interview, Parvathi, Gramam 08-07-2008
During my field work I was fascinated to note that even a state level BJP leader from Kanyakumari whom I interviewed, when talking about Hindus in the district, used the terms such as Vaishnavite, Saivite, Ayyavazhi people and Ammanvazhi people. He seldom used the term Hindu. He said “in the same house, I am a Siva Bhkatha and my sister is Vaishnavist, who follows Ayya vazhi – but we are related.” Here he on the one hand identifies himself and his family members not primarily in terms of ‘Hindu’, and on the other hand suggests that his family identity stands above the religious identities. However when I moved on to discuss about the religious conflicts in general and Mandaikadu conflicts, suddenly he started to use the terms such as Hindu, Christian and Muslim. Responding to my question whether he thinks about what happened in Mandaikadu in 1982 were conflicts between fisher-folk and Nadars (and thus a caste problem), he refuted it and said: “What happened in Mandaikadu and subsequently in the district was a religious conflict. It was a Christian attack on Hindus in which many Hindus were affected.” This suggests that even people with extremist religious ideologies, such as Hindutva, in their everyday life seldom utilise religious identity to refer to themselves or others. But when it comes to power and ideology they switch codes, illustrating a core point in the constructions of religion as categories: the struggle for power.

The custom of posting wall posters in public places during religious festivals is common in Kanyakumari district, and this can indicate how religious identities function. This is a crucial factor, because when conflicts that are projected as religious appear in the district, wall posters by ‘religious adherents’ condemning each other are pasted in public places in huge numbers. This was also true during the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ in 1982. One of my Hindu interviewees (a dialogue activist who requested confidentiality on several issues during the interview) informed me that within a week of the clash between fisher-folk and inland people (mostly Nadars) in Mandaikadu village, a poster was circulating in the district which contained names of six religious leaders, including the local RSS leader, and which carried the message that ‘we severely condemn the Christians who attacked Hindus in Mandaikadu’. He said that “this wording was very unfortunate because it

73 Interview, Velan.
74 Interview, Velan.
aimed to consolidate the Hindus in the district to fight against Christians following a clash which was not religious, and which ended in furthering of conflicts in the district for during the months followed.”

However this trend is not usually found in the everyday activities among people. It is important to note that during festivals in Amman temples or Ayyavazhi temples or in the conventions arranged by Christian churches, or in the celebrations among Muslims, one can rarely see terms such as Hindu, Christian and Muslim used in the wall posters. However, when religious mobilisation is attempted following conflicts between two groups of people, these terms appear on wall posters. The agencies or individuals involved in these difference contexts may be different, but the events indicate how and when religious identities based on world-religion categories appear.

Thus it is interesting to note that people’s identities, in the religious sphere, as they express, are not based on strict Hindu-Muslim-Christian identities. They have denominational or cult based or sect based identities which are still religious. My purpose in this section is not primarily to show that ordinary people are divided within each religion, nor to argue that they do not use religious identities at all, but rather to argue that most of the time, when referring to religion or religious identity, it is to a very specific sector within their ‘religion,’ rather than a homogenised term: ordinary people construct their identities beyond world-religion categories and other group identities.

5.4.4. Crossing Religious Boundaries and Multiple Group Identities

One of the features of identity construction among people at the grassroots is that they construct their self-identities based less if at all on believing, unlike dialogue activists assume, but on action, a flexible orthopraxy being more relevant than orthodoxy. Identities are constructed in terms of belonging to groups – groups of different kinds and not exclusively religious. There are many people who, in

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75 Confidentiality requested.
76 The relationship between believing and belonging are studied from different approaches in the contemporary context, especially in sociology of religion. Grace Davie, studying religion in Britain, has argued that while there was strong sense of believing in religion among people, the sense of
various activities in their every-day lives, identify themselves as Hindus or Christians or Muslims not primarily in terms of doctrines – perhaps because some may know such ideas exist – but with a clear claim to a group identity. This does not mean that they never have religious belief or faith: they may do, but that is not the only factor in identity construction. The sense of belonging to a religious group, rather than believing deeply in the tenets of the religion, informs their identity, and belonging in terms of a variety of group identifiers is basic to this structuring of daily life.\textsuperscript{77} I already noted above how the term karargal is used to refer to their identity which implies the meaning ‘people’ or ‘belonging to’. Similarly, I could find three terms being used that distinguish between believing and belonging. The first one is visuvasikkiren or nambugiren (I believe), second is pinpattruguren, (I follow), and the third one is sertnthavar (I belong to). While talking about their religious affiliation during the interviews, people in Gramam mostly used the term sertnthavar, and sometimes, pinpattrugiren. Not once did they use the terms visuvasikkiren or nambugiren, when talking about their religious identity.\textsuperscript{78} Naturally these two terms are also part of their life, but only in relation to their respective worship places. My point is not to insist that believing in religion is entirely separated from belonging to

\textsuperscript{77} As I have observed, in the grassroot context, the ‘belonging’ is not strictly related to religious observance. It is more about their self-understanding of affiliation to a group and how they interpret their group identity. In this regard Abby Day has done an interesting study among young people and has come up with the idea of ‘believing in belonging’, where belief is no longer confined to creeds and doctrines. Her finding is that young people shift “the meaning of belief to describe affective relationships in which they feel they belong to. Such a shift necessitates a relocation of the transcendent to the everyday and social.” “Believing in belonging: An ethnography of young people’s constructions of belief” in Culture and Religion 10/3, November 2009, p.263; also see her recent book Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Similar perspectives can be extended to understand people’s identities at the grassroots.

\textsuperscript{78} Interviews, Samuel; Parvathi; Harun.
it, but in maintaining identity in everyday lives, the latter becomes significant in the daily lives of people at the grassroots.

This construction of identity beyond a fixed religious label can be discerned through many of the oral traditions that exist among people. In Kanyakumari district, Hindus and Christians are present in almost in equal percentage and there are oral traditions and narratives that help them to maintain identities that are beyond religious. One narrative that is popular especially in Kanyakumari district, especially in coastal village, is that Virgin Mary and Amman are sisters. While the Virgin Mary refers to Roman Catholic Christians, Amman refers to the female deity popular in the district, especially among Nadars. This narrative maintains that because Mary and Amman are sisters their followers – sons and daughters – cannot be enemies, but only brothers and sisters. This narrative also has been appropriated in the Mandaikadu region, where is said that Kadal Vazhi Vantha Kannalamma Malai Vazhi Vantha Madaikattu Amma (Mary who came through the sea and Amman who came through the mountains). The message is: we are sons and sisters and why should we fight with each other. Even when the use of such oral traditions may indicate that religion has been a factor behind ‘religious conflicts’ in the district, they nevertheless help the people to construct their identities beyond religion.

In a village called Pooviyur, about 2 km away from Gramam, there is an Amman temple with many deities, one being Vellaikarasamy (literally, ‘white god’). The tradition is that when one of the Christian missionaries was working among people here in the 19th century, there was a severe famine during which the missionary helped many people. While some people embraced Christianity, others revered him and worshipped him within their temple. Telling and sharing these kinds of stories helps the people live together and have respect for each other. It also should be noted that, while on the one hand such oral traditions are helping people to maintain their identities beyond religion, on the other hand, in the present context, the religious extremists, particularly the Hindutva forces, try to play down these stories resisting any that cross-cut their insistence on a Hindu-Christian divide in the district.

79 Interview, Brahma, Gramam, 29-06-2008.
The existence of multiple identities based on varied group interests can challenge the fixed religious identities constructed and appropriated in elite discourses. Caste, region, language, family status, occupation, gender, neighbour, friendship and many other factors play a role for people constructing group identities according to context and need. Moreover one should note that values play an important role when people construct and maintain multiple identities. One of my interviewees in Gramam observed: “When a person comes before you nobody sees him/her in terms of religion. It also applies to you. As long as you are good, nobody bothers about your religion or any of your other identities. When there are good things, nobody looks at religious identity.” Thus in the everyday living context, religious identities are less important than reputation, goodness, love and so on. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, religious identities at the grassroots may have little to do with belief. One of my interviewees noted: “The ordinary people ignore many issues, saying that God came to save all the people and worship any God. The problem only occurs when those who know about religion spoil the people. We do not speak about religion. When suffering comes we just look for any God to help us.” Here it does not mean that people do not believe, but such beliefs are secondary when it comes to identity making. Another person observed, “personal conflicts arise first, only then comes the issue of religious difference and identity. This may be true with an affair or marriage or with any other matter. When their parents are positive, there are no problems. But when conflicts arise then the religious identity is used to separate the man and woman”. Thus we can note that people do not assign a primary place for religious identities when it comes to day-to-day activities in life. “No one will talk about religions and religious identity until problems come,” he commented. This observation notes that problems between people are not created by religion or by

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80 Interview, Narayana, Gramam, 08-07-2008
81 Interview, Vishnu. Emphasis is mine.
82 Interview, Narayana. This understanding was prevailing among many of my interviewees in Gramam. This became more evident when they spoke in the focus-group interview I had arranged (08-07-08) about how they responded to the Mandaikadu conflicts. They were talking between themselves about how they thought Mandaikadu conflicts were between fisher-folk people and inland people on the issue of teasing women; and how they stood together to protect ‘their village’ (the identity they had constructed for themselves in the context of the clashes), when news came that the nearby fisher-folk village people were planning to come and attack them on a night in early March 1982. This clearly indicates how identities are constructed differently even during conflicts. This approach of grassroots people to ‘religious clashes’ will be elaborated further in Chapter 8.
83 Interview, Narayana.
having different religious identity, but these can be used by appealing to religious identity if necessary.

The interaction of multiple identities in a human being or among human beings is a common factor that has often been ignored at the cost of emphasising religious identities, especially by those naming such identities for their own purposes. Dialogue activists may have many friends with whom they relate on the basis of many identities, but still they interpret other (and often lower-placed) individuals as functioning primarily within one religious identity. Among the people at the grassroots in Kanyakumari district the word ‘neighbour’ refers to people with whom they are in harmony irrespective of religion. One of my interviewees declared “When some problems occur for people whom I know, I go to help them, as a friend. My friends also do the same to me. Neither religious difference, nor any other differences, hinder such friendship.”

During my field work I observed that my interviewees in villages seldom used the term Muslim, Hindu, Christian when they responded to my questions. It was I who, given the research frame, used the terms such as ‘Hindu’, ‘Christian’ and ‘Muslim’ – despite being uncomfortable about using terms they seldom used. They mostly used personal names even when referring to interpersonal conflicts. Indeed one Hindu respondent (dialogue activist) challenged me by saying that it is those researchers and elite scholars who investigate religious conflicts who are responsible for them. He said:

People live in peace. But mostly researchers like you come and ask questions about the past and that becomes a reviving of the wounds of the people. People seldom identify themselves as Hindus or Muslims or Christians, but when you reiterate these words, it leads towards tensions.

He may be exaggerating, or even wrong, when he accuses researchers of being responsible for kindling religious conflicts among people: but he may have a point. Yet he failed to be self-critical, not accepting that locally-based dialogue activists popularise these terms more than does the occasional researcher. More importantly, as a dialogue activist he too used these terms and in my interview constantly

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84 Interview, Murugan.
85 Interview, Balarasu, Nagercoil, 02-07-2008.
referred to religious conflicts while placing dialogue as a solution to religious conflicts. Nevertheless, I observed that common people in the district seldom use these terms which refer to fixed religious identities. People used terms such as way and marga, rather than boundary-making discrete religion.

5.5. Conclusion

In spite of all the power structures involved in the notion of religion(s) and religious identity as noted in the last chapter, little has been done in dialogue to critique the notions of religions and other related categories. On the contrary these notions are generously popularised to promote dialogue between religions instead of challenging and critiquing the myth of these categories and the associated Western rational bias. Moreover, dialogue follows the same principle regarding religious identities. On the one hand homogenised religious identities are endorsed – such as Hindus, Muslims and Christians – as if there are no internal, denominational or sect based differences between them. When placed in dialogue, the illusion created is that each religion is a single entity, and the question of intra-religious dialogue is seldom raised. In the Hindu case, there are many people classed as Hindus who reject that label. What does dialogue with Hindus mean, or with Christians where certain groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses exclude themselves and are so excluded by their ‘brethren’? These are complex issues which are avoided in dialogue. Instead of understanding the grassroot experience with regard to religion, world-religion categories and religious identities, dialogue continues to engage in uncritically accepting these notions. Not only does dialogue fail to critique these modern colonial myths, but it popularises them through elite dialogue discourses within the context of ‘religious’ conflicts in post-Independent India, constructing elaborate theologies, models and methods of dialogue which are all influenced by the notions of religion and religions and religious identity. How this has affected the notion of ‘religious conflicts’ prevalent in contemporary dialogue discourse in India is discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 6

Religious Conflicts and Interreligious Dialogue in India

6.1. Introduction

In the last two chapters I discussed issues that need critical attention for dialogue in the context of plurality of religions – namely the religion-secular distinctions, world-religion categories and fixed religious identities – noting that dialogue has to move beyond a simple affirmation of the plurality of religions to critique the power structures associated with the idea of religion and its plural religions, if it is to serve effectively in building better relationships among people whose identities include religious identities among other. In this chapter I deal with another issue – religious conflicts – in the context of which dialogue is carried out to ease tensions and conflicts between people based on my discussion related to it in Chapter 2 and 3. My argument in this chapter is that while there are a number of issues and roles involved in actual conflicts between people, stressing a conflict’s religious nature can feed overall anger, which does not achieve better relationships.

In relation to the Indian context, some clarifications are necessary about the term ‘religious’ and ‘communal’ conflicts. The other terms used for conflicts in these contexts are violence, clashes, riots and the milder ‘tensions’. Communal conflict is generally defined as conflicts between communities, based on religion, caste, ethnicity, or language. Although communal conflict in India literally refers to conflict between such communities, religious conflict and communal conflict are often used synonymously, implying that religious conflicts are or express communal conflicts in India and South Asia. Also, broadly speaking, though it may not be the case always, while the term communal conflicts is generally used in the fields of sociology, anthropology and history, the term religious conflicts is used in the field of theological and religious studies.

In this chapter I look critically at two aspects regarding religious conflicts. First, the general assumption that many conflicts, if not all, in the world today are religious conflicts in that religion in one way or the other is the cause of the conflicts, either
religion as a belief system or religion as an identity. Either or both, in this view, can start or stoke an erupting conflict, or conflicts between adherents of different religions occur due to their particular religious identities.\(^1\) The second assumption is the claim commoner in dialogue that religion is an *instrumental* rather than a causative factor in religious conflicts. The dialogue activists who belong to this camp believe that it is the use and misuse of religion in the hands of powerful elites that lead to conflicts between masses belonging to different religions.\(^2\) Politicians aspiring for political power and control are singled out as major culprits in manipulating religion to create conflicts among people. While this political explanation of religious conflicts helps to understand the complex power structures involved in religious conflicts, it has limitations because it categorises religion and politics as separate systems. It may well be true that politicians, in their search for power and control on the masses, try to exploit all the available opportunities. However, whether what they do can be called *religious* conflicts or not, and whether the conflicts created or produced are *between* people with fixed religious identities are important questions to be raised. Moreover, why should one use a ‘religious’ framework to understand and explain multi-dimensional conflicts which are commonly performances of aspiring for and expressing power of different kinds? Here my argument is that it is not the political or other *use of religion*, but it is the very *naming* and *interpreting* of any conflict as religious which needs attention.

### 6.2. Religion as the Cause of Religious Conflicts

The notion that religions are the cause of conflicts is based on at least two basic assumptions. First, it is assumed that religions are basically prone to violence and thus they create conflicts among people. Those who hold this view believe that religions instigate their adherents to kill each other.\(^3\) The idea here is that religions,

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\(^1\) Many of my interviewees from dialogue circles in Kanyakumari fall into this camp for whom conflicts between religions in the district is the necessary context for dialogue between religions.


particularly religious texts, incite followers to engage in violence. Building on this notion, some dialogue promoters think that conflicts between religions seem to be generated because of some religious texts, especially when they are misinterpreted. For example, if biblical texts such as John 14.6 and Acts 4.12, (salvation comes only through Jesus Christ) are taken literally, they imply the superiority of one religion over the other and thus lead to tensions between religious adherents. This is also the same case with the concept of Jihad in Islam. Second, dialogue may claim that while religion and religions contain ‘good’ things, the lack of proper understanding of these teachings by the rioting followers cause conflicts. Such misunderstanding can apparently be corrected by teaching as part of dialogue. I shall discuss these two aspects below.

6.2.1. ‘Religions Prone to Violence’

The ‘religions-prone-to-violence’ mantra is normally proclaimed by secularists, who assert that secular ideologies based on reason and rationality do not kill people or, if so, that such violence or killing is justifiable. Yet while rejecting part of that secularist argument, and pointing out secular violence, religionists nevertheless accept the notion that religions are prone to violence. For instance, Samartha differentiates established religions from ‘Religions’ and maintains that established religions have the nature to divide people. He maintains that

established religions have often divided people and nations and given rise to tensions and conflicts. They have held scientific progress, resisted social change, and have often added religious fuel to military conflagrations making reconciliation more difficult. Of all the wounds human beings inflict on each other, religious wounds are the most difficult to heal.

According to him, the term “Religions” here refers not to “the established institutions of religion or systems of belief or boundaried social groups with their sense of

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4 Juergensmeyer, Terror, p.81.
5 Interviews, Dhasan; Salaam.
6 Interviews, Dhasan; Rajamony; Harris. In such context, dialogue promoters are involved in offering different interpretations of such exclusivist texts. See pages 75-78 in Chapter 1.
7 Interview, Salaam.
8 Robinson, “From Apartheid”, pp.82-96.
9 Samartha, One Christ, p.42.
separation from others, but the spiritual resources within religions”.\textsuperscript{10} It is the established religions (or world-religions) that create barriers, preventing better relationships between people. Hence Samartha concludes that “established religions with their conflicting claims” are “barriers to community rather than bearers of peace.”\textsuperscript{11}

This perspective is also maintained among the dialogue activists in Kanyakumari district. Nagalingam, a dialogue activist from Hindu community, maintained that “religions have both potentials to instigate violence between religious followers as well as resources for working out peace and harmony among people.”\textsuperscript{12} His conclusion is that it is up to the followers to choose. Abdul Salaam, a Muslim dialogue activist, felt that religion has divided the people in a district which was otherwise peaceful,\textsuperscript{13} referring to the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’. In such observations the fundamentalist and exclusivist people in both Christianity and Hinduism were accused of instigating their adherents to fight each other.\textsuperscript{14}

The notion that religions are prone to violence does have its critics, who see it as a modern myth invented especially by the West in the context of its relationship with the East, particularly the Middle East and Islam. This has been effectively argued by William Cavanaugh, who has analysed recent religious violence discourses prominent in the West.\textsuperscript{15} Criticising the notion that religions are prone to violence, Cavanaugh argues that religious violence is a myth exercised by the ‘secular’ West against the ‘religious’ Middle-East. Scrutinising the works of scholars like Mark Juergensmeyer\textsuperscript{16} and Charles Kimball\textsuperscript{17} who have argued that religions make their adherents become violent and murderous, Cavanaugh argues that religious violence is a discourse of the secular west intended to divide bad ‘terrorising Islamic violence’

\textsuperscript{10} Samartha, One Christ, p.42.
\textsuperscript{11} Samartha, Courage for Dialogue, p.121.
\textsuperscript{12} Interview, Nagalingam.
\textsuperscript{13} Interview, Salaam.
\textsuperscript{14} Interview, Dhasan.
\textsuperscript{15} Cavanaugh, “Colonialism and the myth of religious violence” in Religion and the Secular, pp.241-262.
\textsuperscript{17} Kimball, When Religion Becomes Evil.
from good secular Western violence (the war on terror) working for peace. Cavanaugh’s conclusion is that ‘religious violence’ is used by the West to dominate the East.\textsuperscript{18}

Violence in South Asia is argued not on the basis of secularist versus religionist, but supposedly rather between different religious adherents. Nevertheless, Cavanaugh’s analysis is useful, because the point he makes strongly is that religious violence exists only in the discourse of those who want to exercise power and domination over others: it is a myth, not a reality. This is true in the Indian context and in Kanyakumari district, where those who maintain the religious violence myth are people with vested interests who want to exercise power and domination over others at many levels. Moreover many complex socio-economic factors involved in conflicts between people are easily played down when one uncritically accepts the notion that religions are prone to violence.

Another way of regarding ‘religious violence,’ is based on identity. People belonging to different religions fight with each other because the identity of the ‘other’ is considered to be a threat to one’s own. Thus when identities are constructed on the basis of religion and then opposed to each other, some see religious conflicts arise. Talking about the Indian context, for example, Michael Amaladoss maintains that “communalism based on religion has been a problem from the beginning.... Hindu-Muslim riots have become a recurrent feature in some areas in India.”\textsuperscript{19} And, for Samartha,

throughout history the diversities of ... religion have led to serious conflicts between people. There are indeed “demonic” possibilities within the structures of plurality. Different religious communities within particular countries in the world have clashes with each other resulting in immense human suffering.... The Hindu-Buddhist-Jain conflicts during the earlier period in India’s history, later on, the Hindu-Muslim clashes which unfortunately recur even at present, and now the Hindu-Sikh tensions are examples.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus one often talks about the problem in Kashmir between India and Pakistan as Hindu-Muslim conflicts; the Sri Lankan-Tamil ethnic conflicts as Buddhist-Hindu-

\textsuperscript{18} Cavanaugh, “Colonialism”, p.241
\textsuperscript{19} Amaladoss, “Liberation as Interreligious”, pp.158-159.
\textsuperscript{20} Samartha, One Christ, p.7.
Muslim-Christian conflicts; the American occupation of Iraq and the West’s dealings in the Middle East as a Christian-Muslim conflict; the Israeli-Palestine problems as a Jewish-Muslim conflict.

All these accounts ignore not only the different power structures that are responsible for conflicts between human beings in the particular regions and elsewhere, but also many identities of the people involved in conflicts. The issue at stake again is the question of fixed religious identities which are believed to be behind religious conflicts. How people in India have been ascribed fixed religious identities during the colonial period has been discussed in previous chapters. The notion that the conflicts are between religious communities or between people with fixed religious identities is one of the fundamental reasons behind attempts for dialogue to work for better relationships between these religious communities. In other words, the existing context is perceived as religiously divided, which then allows dialogue between religions as the solution to overcome these religious divisions.

6.2.2. Misunderstanding of Religions as the cause of Religious Conflicts

One of the causes of religious conflicts, according to some dialogue promoters, is the misunderstanding prevalent among religious adherents about their own as well as their neighbours’ religions. The assumption here is that all religions are different ways to one God, teaching their adherents to be in peace and harmony with others, and that when people fail to understand these basic truths of religions, religious clashes occur between them. In such situations, it is believed, dialogue can bring together people of different religions to work for a better understanding of religions among people, minimising conflict and creating peace.

Such approach sees religions as normally or inherently good, so where they are (or are thought to be) a source of or adjunct to violence, the reason must lie in the failure of followers to understand. Gnana Robinson, who is associated with CIRSJA, an organisation involved in interreligious activities in Kanyakumari district, believes that misunderstanding between people of religious adherents leads to religious

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21 Interviews, Tobias; Nagalingam; Salaam.
conflicts and propose that proper understanding should be created through
dialogue.\textsuperscript{22} He says:

\begin{quote}
It is a sad fact that in India, as well as in several other parts of the world, “Religion” has become the ground for hostilities and divisions.... any religion which contributes to hostility and destruction among people is not worthy to be called religion.... many of those who subscribe to hate campaigns on the basis of religion, either do not understand their own faiths as well as the faiths of their neighbours or they use religion just for the sake of personal and political ends, having no faith commitment to that religion.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Religious misunderstanding is then often related to religious exclusivism and fundamentalism. The misunderstanding that religions cause conflicts is based on the following assumptions. Religions can engender better relationships between people but misinterpretation of these resources lead to the emergence of religious conflicts; religious conflicts occur because of claiming one’s religious superiority over other religions; ridiculing and criticising the religious beliefs, symbols, rituals and practices of other religions occurs due to the lack of proper understanding of religions by adherents.\textsuperscript{24} These are just some misunderstandings between religions which interreligious workers believe cause conflicts.

This attitude can be found among dialogue promoters in Kanyakumari also. Claiming that the causes for conflicts lie not in religion, but in followers who fail to understand the existence and purpose of religion, Tobias said: “religion can only unite people. It cannot divide. If it divides, then it cannot be religion”.\textsuperscript{25}

Religions help people to unite and struggle for common life issues. Humanism (the exact translation of the Tamil term is ‘caring for humans’) is the basic philosophy of all religions. Therefore, if all religions do the same job – making human – then there is the only possibility that religions have to cooperate with each other. There is no possibility that they should conflict with each other.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus religion cannot damage relationships between religious people. But the problem occurs “when this basic aim of religions to unite human beings is forgotten and distorted, giving rise to religious conflicts”.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, for Tobias, “when Hindus

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] Robinson, “From Apartheid”, pp.82-96.
\item[23] Robinson, “India, the Great Nation, Whose Pride is at Stake” in \textit{Unite to Serve}, p.6.
\item[24] Interview, Dhasan.
\item[25] Interview, Tobias.
\item[26] Interview, Tobias.
\item[27] Interview, Tobias.
\end{footnotes}
understand Christianity and Christians understand Hinduism and both understand Islam, then the resulting fact will be that humans are equal." But on the contrary, if conflicts continue and humanity does not become one, it will perish. Hence for future survival, proper relationship between religions is necessary and should be effected through dialogue.

Yet it is my contention that religious misunderstanding as the cause of religious conflicts represents a very narrow understanding of conflicts between people. On the one hand it limits the problem to belief systems in religions, an elite view often held by ritual practitioners, and on the other it fails to understand different issues related to conflicts between people. It simply accepts the notion religions-prone-to-violence with a slight modification that misunderstanding causes it. Socio-economic factors, other forms of domination and inequality in society and the beneficiaries of the clashes between people, their tactics, methods and purposes in dividing people in the name of religion, are seldom paid attention in this perspective of religious conflicts.

Against the conventional understanding in dialogue that religions cause or are used in conflicts among people, many anthropological and sociological studies in India have brought out complex issues in understanding religious conflicts. One of the prominent explanations of these studies is that the power interests based on socio-economic factors lead to religious conflicts. For instance a group of scholars have undertaken a study of the communal riots in Post-Independence India and have come to the conclusion that behind many of the conflicts which are termed religious are socio-economic factors and political power issues. Asghar Ali Engineer, one of the leading scholars of Islam in India and a dialogue activist, has undertaken a number of case studies of communal or religious clashes in India which are generally considered and projected as Hindu-Muslim riots. His primary finding is that while religion plays a role in these conflicts, mostly the socio-economic growth of people is behind the occurrence of these conflicts. The same is true with Kanyakumari

28 Interview, Tobias.
29 Interview, Tobias.
31 In his edited book Communal Riots in Post-Independence India, Engineer has provided case studies of six major communal conflicts in India.
district and some of the socio-economic and political factors involved in these religious conflicts are discussed in the next chapter in my case study of the 1982 clashes.

Such tracing out and arguing for the socio-economic factors is a useful perspective for understanding religious conflicts. Dialogue is increasingly incorporating these perspectives, yet it still holds to the notion of religion-and-violence and to divisions based on religious identities. But why should socio-economic factors lead to or be seen as ‘religious’ instead of ‘socio-economic’ conflicts? Why should only the religious identity of people be labelled and the many other factors interests and identities be ignored? Who is involved in the process, or who is orchestrating it? Before discussing these questions, let me pick up on the idea of the political preference for religion as a source of conflict.

6.3. Religion as an Instrument in Religious Conflicts: the Political Use of Religion

As I mentioned earlier, while some dialogue activists maintain that misunderstanding of religions causes conflicts between people, others emphasise the instrumental nature of religious conflicts. For the latter, misunderstanding by followers can readily be exploited by power-seeking elites in society. Here the instrumental nature of religion in religious conflicts is emphasised. Commenting on religious conflicts, Amaladoss maintains that

in the multi-religious context of today, religious fundamentalists are not that violent. They may be aggressive proselytters in the field of religion. But they do not normally indulge in violence. Violent behaviour results when religious emotions are used to promote economic and political goals. Religion then becomes communalistic. Leaders of communal movements may themselves be non-believers or at least non-practising. But they (ab)use the religious emotions of the masses in a coldly calculating, rational manner.

This suggests that religious fundamentalism (or misunderstanding of religions) is less a cause of ‘religious’ conflicts than is the political manipulation of religions, a view opposed by some dialogue activists and many secularists.

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32 I have discussed the incorporation of socio-economic issues in dialogue in Chapter 2.
33 Amaladoss, “Dialogue as Conflict Resolution.”
Moreover, the emphasis on the instrumental nature of religion in religious conflicts is often set against those (mainly ‘secularists’) who accuse religions of breeding communalism in India. In such contexts, Samartha says that

One must be careful not to blame religions alone for these troubles. Studies by sociologists, political scientists, economists and theologians bring out the fact that to single out “religions” as the only cause of these conflicts is to over-simplify a highly complex matter. It is pointed out that all too often these are secular riots in which religions are cunningly used for political or economic purposes.\(^{34}\)

Commenting on the instrumental nature of religions in religious conflicts, Samartha maintains that,

Studies on recent communal clashes... have brought out the point that religions are ‘not the causative factor but the instrumental factor in such clashes.... It is made to appear as the causative factor’. Economic and political factors, and the question of power relations between different groups and political parties, play a large role in these riots. Therefore to call them religious or communal riots is quite wrong.\(^{35}\)

Vested political interests predominate in India where religion is instrumentalised, for power-seeking politicians use, misuse, exploit and manipulate religions to attain and maintain power. For dialogue activists, “the increasing politicization of religions is a disturbing feature of contemporary Indian life.... [It] threatens the secular character of the State, hinders the process of national integration, gives rise to anxiety, fear, tension, and conflicts in society, and has global implications as well....”\(^{36}\) In India, political parties associated with the ideologies of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism who try to mobilise ‘Hindus’ for gaining and maintaining political power in the state and central governments are especially likely to use this strategy.

The political use of religion is primarily understood to mean politicians who mobilise people, creating or producing conflicts between people of different religions and inciting different religious communities to fight each other. Politicians’ use of ‘religious’ symbols and ‘religious’ emotions of people are often cited as examples of their manipulation of religion. Hindutva organisations who misuse religious symbols such as Ram and temples for Ram, Ganesa and cow slaughter are referred to here.

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\(^{34}\) Samartha, *One Christ*, p.57.


In such context a dialogue activist maintains that “at a time when because of historical reasons, because of economic and political power politics, religion is used as a means to obtain and hold on to power and money, patient dialogue is the way open to us to break down communalism, fanaticism and violence.”\(^37\) This patient dialogue is to be built on the peace potentialities that are available within religions for maintaining peace, harmony and reconciliation, which are “seldom brought out ... except after the event. It is because of the recurrence of these riots, which fly out as sparks from within a volcano, that inter-religious dialogues are even more important in our country to reduce tensions, resolve conflicts and tame political passions \textit{before} conflagrations set in.”\(^38\) For a dialogue activist in Kanyakumari, “religion and politics join together to create religious conflicts. This has become the order of the day. Of course, all social institutions are politicised. But due to emotional and sentimental reasons, religion stands at the top”.\(^39\) Of course comment on the political use of religion as religious conflicts is not an issue confined to dialogue alone. Many social scientists and others also share this view. Before critiquing some of the limitations of the political use of religion for religious conflicts, I shall offer perspectives by scholars other than the dialogue promoters.

Paul Brass, in his work on \textit{The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India}, argues against the general notion that communal riots are spontaneous furies of mobs. “The whole political order in post-Independence north India and many, if not most of its leading as well as local actors... have become implicated in the persistence of Hindu-Muslim riots. These riots have had concrete benefits for particular political organizations as well as larger political users.”\(^40\) The primary beneficiaries of these riots, for Brass, are the organisations under the umbrella \textit{Sangh Parivar} which exercises the ideology of Hindu nationalism, and are involved in the task of mobilising people for politics within their Hindu religious identity. Several analysts of communal violence in India have taken this approach, insisting that the political establishment, particularly the Hindu nationalist

\(^{38}\) Samartha, “Inter-Religious Relationships”, pp.131-132
\(^{39}\) Interview, Nagalingam.
organisations, is responsible for the recent conflicts in India. This has helped them to contextualise particular communal violence incidents both within the wider context in India and in the local context where the communal violence has occurred.

Steven Wilkinson offers another perspective to study communal violence including religious violence. Studying Hindu-Muslim violence in India, he argues that electoral competition is the factor which decides whether communal violence should occur or not. He says that:

> At the local level... individuals have many ethnic and nonethnic identities with which they might identify politically. The challenge for politicians is to try to ensure that the identity that favours their party is the one that is most salient in the minds of a majority of voters.... [P]arties that represents elites within ethnic groups will often – especially in the most competitive seats – use polarizing antiminority events in an effort to encourage members of their wider ethnic category to identify with their party and the “majority” identity.... These antiminority events... are designed to spark a minority countermobilization (preferably a violent countermobilization that can be portrayed as threatening to the majority) that will polarize the majority ethnic group behind the political party that has the strongest antiminority identity. When mobilised ethnic groups confront each other, each convinced that the other is threatening, ethnic violence is probable outcome.\(^{41}\)

In addition to the point that the politicians exploit the identity that favours their vote bank, Wilkinson also raises an important question as to why violence breaks out in some cities and towns and not in others. This helps to understand “the variation in patterns of violence within states.”\(^{42}\) His argument is that it is the political elites who decide that whether there should be a communal clash in a particular place and in a particular time, depending on their political calculations. They produce it only when it helps consolidating their vote bank.

However, the idea of the political and other use of religion held in dialogue has limitations in understanding and interpreting Indian ‘religious’ conflicts. Firstly, the phrase ‘political use (or misuse or manipulation or exploitation) of religion’ is very ambiguous and does not explain specifically the process through which political use of religion is taking place. Often what dialogue means by ‘use of religion’ is not clear, or not differentiated from what a social scientist might mean. Secondly, ‘using


\(^{42}\) Wilkinson, *Votes*, p.5
religion to fight’ is a questionable phrase, for it assumes that religion is one of two separate categories, and the other is politics, and that both influence each other. In arguing for political manipulation of religions, dialogue not only accepts boundaries between religion and politics, but evades secular accusations that religions breed communalism and conflicts by insisting religion plays only an instrumental and not a causative role. My point here is not to argue that religions also cause conflicts, but rather to say that the boundaries between these systems are not as clear as often portrayed by many people including those who are engaged in dialogue.

Thirdly, the political explanations for communal conflict or religious conflict indicate that the actual conflict that happens is between two communities which the politicians wish to see fighting for their own tactical purpose. It indicates that the political elites and their supporters just instigate conflict between people using religion, and that they stay away during the ensuing conflict between what could be seen as their victims or puppets. Yet one of the groups involved in fighting does support the organising political party and thus has agency. It is a conflict between a mob which is involved in the mobilisation of people identifying with the majority religious identity and the people of the ‘other’ religious identity, or it is an attack by the former on the latter. For example, in what is called Hindu-Muslim conflict where religious mobilisation for politics is undertaken by the Hindutva forces, the conflict is either between the mob that support the Hindutva parties and the Muslims who retaliate to their conflict, or simply, it is violence exercised by the former on the latter. Hence the conflict is not between two communities with equally powerful identities whether religious or otherwise. The attacks on Sikhs following the assassination of Indra Gandhi in 1984, attack on Christians in Dangs in Gujarat in 1998 and attacks on Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 (Gujarat pogrom), attack on Christians in Kandhamal, Orissa in 2008 are some examples of this. But in the studies of communal conflicts by dialogue activists and others, the phrases such as the endurance of ‘Hindu-Muslim conflict’, and ‘Hindu-Christian conflict’ are used uncritically to give the impression that actually conflict has happened between people of these communities and that the communities are equally resourced in political and legal terms.
Some of the recent studies on religious conflicts in India critique the notion that conflicts occur between two religious communities, suggesting they are also within groups. One of the frameworks within which this is critiqued is the majority vs minority conflicts. In this perspective, communal conflict in India is understood as anti-minority violence. Many scholars who study communal conflicts in India take this perspective. Ravinder Kaur, critiquing the notion that the communities involved in communal violence in India are “evenly matched groups partaking in a ritualised outbreak of violence that tends to threaten the otherwise ‘peaceful co-existence’ of different religious communities in India”, argues that “the episodes of violence in the last two decades... challenge this widespread notion of two inimical religious groups engaged in reciprocal violence.”

For her, the violence is mostly anti-minority. She finds two problems with a collective approach to communal violence which ignores internal division.

One, communal conflict is presented as an action-reaction phenomenon where each community fuels the conflict further. The eruption of violence is somehow always linked to a kind of provocation from other side. Thus, Muslims and Hindus, somehow, become equal partners in the instigation of violence or at least in the creation of a potentially inflammable situation.... Two, the term ‘communal’ seems to have acquired a meaning that has far outgrown its literal one, that is, something shared by a community. Its noun-based derivative ‘communalism’ now denotes hatred for the ‘other’ community in an almost ahistorical and decontextualised mode. The role of state institutions, political organisations and media, in instances of conflict, remains unreflected and detached from the idea of two inimical communities opposed to each other. The very concept of community itself within ‘communal’ seems to have a fixed, timeless and an unchallenged characteristic to it. It implies the existence of a pre-fabricated entity of community that is essential to actualise the inter-community violence. The mobilisation aspect, or the role of the organisations in constructing a community around popularly recognised symbols, is thus completely overlooked.

Thus the identities of the communities involved in conflicts are not equal, according to Kaur. In such a context where the politically motivated group or the politically constructed community attacks a community with a discernable and different ‘religious identity’, the events that result are not conflicts between religious communities. However, the political manipulation which leads groups to fight and

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44 Kaur, “Mythology”, pp.25-26
the political will to ignore economic and equity division overlooks and simplifies this reality.

Fourthly, the idea of the political use of religion often indicates that conflicts actually exist between religious communities because of the negative use of religion in the hands of politicians. Here the question that has to be raised in relation to the idea of the political use of religion is whether politicians actually produce any religious conflicts, when an actual incident of violence takes place between groups of people. It is true that politicians may produce and aspire to produce violence and conflicts among people in order to mobilise one or a few sections of people who would be expected to support them for power, but they may not actually produce religious conflicts between two communities with different religious identities fighting each other. In other words, when it is said that politicians instigate conflicts between people and as a result conflicts occur, the fundamental question is whether the conflict is between people acting on the basis of their different religious identities, or whether many other identities of people such as region, caste, ethnicity, family and others are also involved. Even though people aspiring for political power try to interpret these conflicts as religious, as I will argue in the next chapter in the case study of the 1982 clashes in the Kanyakumari district, in an actual conflict many identities of people are involved and many socio-economic and even personal issues are behind the melée. One needs to move beyond the notion ‘political use of religion’ which is ambiguous, which views politics and religion as entirely two separate categories, and which holds that what finally occurs is a religious conflict, to understand how any conflict can be named as religious (whether the religious identities are realised or not realised in those conflicts), for capturing and maintaining political power.

6.4. Naming and Interpreting of Conflicts as Religious

As we have noted, religious conflicts that politicians try to create are neither religious conflicts nor conflicts between religious communities, despite claims by the dialogue promoters and others who support the view that political manipulation of religions leads to conflicts between people with different religious identities. If religious misunderstanding does not lead to religious conflicts, and if the political
manipulation of religions does not lead to the actual conflicts between people with different religious identities, then where do the origins of religious conflict lie? Of course conflicts happen between people with many identities self-constructed as well as imposed. But how do they become religious conflicts, or become named as such, and for whose benefit might this be?

My argument is that religious conflicts exist primarily in the discourses of political elites as well as others who need such a discourse for maintaining power at different levels. In the context of political power aspirations, naming conflicts as religious helps religious mobilisation for strengthening the votes. Similar processes are also found at different levels including personal problems between people where religious identities are added to strengthen one’s cause. As we will see in Chapter 8 where the grassroot relationships between people are discussed, such naming and interpreting of conflicts as religious is possible not only among elites, but also among ordinary people.

This leads to the issue of the importance of naming, interpreting and projecting conflicts as religious for certain power interests. This aspect is seldom discussed in studies on communal conflicts or religious conflicts in contemporary India. Scrutinising the act and process of naming any conflicts as religious conflicts is important, because it is this discourse that helps those who seek to strengthen and extend their power over others. Here the very naming of a particular incident of violence between people on one aspect of multiple identities serves to further the tension between people and maintain the namers’ power. My argument is that it is not the misunderstanding of religion or the political use of religion that are solely responsible for religious conflicts. Rather, it is naming conflicts among individuals and groups, who live with multiple identities, as religious for vested interests that is crucial. The dialogue promoters seldom recognises this when talking about either religions causing conflicts or religious people being instruments in the hands of politicians in creating conflicts.

Some scholars studying communal conflicts have noted this aspect of the discourse. Paul Brass discusses naming and interpreting communal violence within the framework of blame displacement after the actual communal violence incident has
taken place. He sees three phases in the process of communal riots: preparation or rehearsal, activation or enactment, and explanation or interpretation. The third phase is to do with the communal discourse, in which the incident of communal violence is named to control its meaning. Brass identifies this mainly with ‘blame displacement’, and says that in addition to politicians, many other elites in society are also implicated. For me, however, naming and controlling the meaning of violence concerns not just blame displacement, but is a much more calculating act. Naming an incident of violence – violence between one political mob and a distinctly ‘other’ or the political mob’s attack on the latter – as violence between communities with assumedly parallel community identities is intentional and carefully planned. In political circles the resulting discourses help politicians much more than the actual conflicts. Therefore it may not be correct to say that the political use of religion create conflicts, but rather that in maintaining the discourse of religious conflicts in the present context, politicians, among many power-mongers, play a major role. Especially in the Indian context, the Hindutva forces and their political allies who spend much of their efforts in mobilising Hindus for their vote bank maintain this discourse. How and why conflicts are named as religious is discussed below.

Firstly, it is true that politicians are involved in conflicts and they produce conflicts with the support of the mob (or politically constructed community) that favours them. But these are not religious conflicts, because, as I have already discussed, the conflicts are not between two inimical groups with parallel identities each representing one coherent and cohesive religious identity. But it is in their naming and interpreting of these conflicts as religious that actually ‘religious’ conflicts exist. Thus religious conflict is not a reality, but it is an illusion, a myth within a carefully constructed discourse.

Secondly politicians aiming for more political power can interpret any conflict between groups of people in society as religious. When two or more people fight for different reasons they have multiple identities and different reasons. There are conflicts between friends, conflicts in family, in occupation, in a village and so on. But building on the already available religious conflicts discourse, politicians can pick up the religious identities of the people involved in conflicts, a process which
helps maintain their powers. There are many examples in India, and Kanyakumari is no exception. In fact, as I have noted earlier, in the very discourse of ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’, Hindutva politicians play a major and continuing role in such naming.

Recently in Kanyakumari district, there were efforts by the district administration to pipe drinking water from an inland village called Vellimalai to a nearby fisher-folk village called Kadiapattanam, which is on the coastal area. While the Hindu Nadars and caste Hindus are the major group of people in Vellimalai, the Roman Catholic fisher-folk Christians live in Kadiapattanam. The people in Vellimalai agitated, fearing that they may run short of drinking water in the future. But within hours of protest by the people in Vellimalai, BJP and other Hindutva politicians in the district gathered in the village to insist that the district administration was favouring Christians against the Hindus who will lose their resources.45 Similarly in 2008 June there was a land dispute between a CSI Church in a village called Pillayarpuram and people who happened to be Hindus in the village. The problem became serious when Hindus wanted to use the land. When the church stopped it, immediately BJP and other Hindutva politicians from that and adjacent districts gathered, ending in a clash between them and police. But in the discourse of the BJP politicians in the following days, the land dispute was sidelined, and the incident interpreted as a conflict between Hindus and Christians as representatives of their ‘religions’.46 Such a pattern is common, multiple reasons for conflict being interpreted as religious for Hindutva reasons.

Thirdly, even when there are no conflicts between people with different religious identities, politicians maintain the discourse that there are such conflicts, which exist purely in their discourse. People may live together irrespective of their differences, but still the politicians insist they live in conflict. Yet as will be discussed in Chapter 8, people live together despite various conflicts.

Fourthly, not only politicians maintain this discourse, but many other groups with vested interests. The idea of political manipulation often implies that only politicians are involved in such activities or that they are the primary culprits. But this is not the

45 *Daily Thanthi* (a Tamil newspaper), 31-05-2008.
46 *Dinakaran* (a Tamil Newspaper), 10-06-2009.
case always. Confining to politicians using religions leaves out or ignores the role played by many other groups in society who also for their vested interests with power, control and domination on others at various levels in society (not entirely in the political arena) name conflicts as religious. But interestingly to interpret or project a particular conflict even in a local village context, one does not need to be a politician. Even ordinary people with vested interests can name and project personal conflicts as religious in order to appeal for more support. Thus the myth of religious conflicts is used for formal political power and equally for localised political power, however limited that may seem, to control others. So it is not the use of religion in conflicts which is in question, but it is the utility of naming a conflict as religious enabling power accumulation and controlling others.

Similarly, the dialogue promoters, by overemphasising the role played by politicians, seldom talk about the role played by established religious leaders such as bishops, gurus, Imams, etc. At times, these groups are also involved in mobilising people in terms of their religious identities for various reasons. This is true with the 1982 conflicts in the district – both with Hindu and Christian leaders – where religious leaders attempted to mobilise people along religious identity which gave religious colour to the conflicts. In these conflicts, one of my interviewees said that a wall poster from some of the Hindu religious leaders used terms such as Hindu and Christian, and a bishop organising a funeral procession of the Christians who were killed in police shooting appealed for firm religious identity. Dialogue activists simplify or ignore this reality and mostly blame politicians.

However, grassroot people accuse not only politicians for maintaining religious conflicts, but also religious elites, some villagers maintaining that both politicians and religious leaders attempt to interpret conflicts as religious for selfish reasons. This dimension is missing in elite perception of religious conflicts as they rarely criticise how the religious leaders and others name conflicts as religious for their vested interests. Moreover, while the phrase ‘religious conflicts’ is popular among

47 Interview, Perumal.
48 Interview, Confidentiality requested. The informant was a dialogue activist but did not want to affirm it openly.
49 Interview, Parvathi.
dialogue activists to talk about the necessity of dialogue, the people at the grassroots quickly interpret the conflicts in terms of their multiple dimensions. The trend among them is that there are several reasons for conflicts, and it is mostly personal conflicts that become religious conflicts.\(^{50}\)

Fifthly, dialogue activists talk about the political use of religion as a reason for conflicts and miss out other factors beneficial to politicians such as caste, region, language and even personal conflicts, depending upon the context. Dialogue activists seldom talk about these other spheres, attributing great importance to the ‘political use of religion’. However, people at the grassroots are more aware of the abilities of politicians to use any available possibilities,\(^ {51}\) and this seems a crucial difference between dialogue activists and grassroot people. Thus what is called religious conflict is mostly a clash between political mobs and their ‘others’, or a political mob’s attacks on the latter, or politicians (and also religious leaders) naming and interpreting existing as well as non-existing tensions between people as religious clashes. Therefore, whether religious conflict happens or not, whether any conflicts that happen between in society are religious conflicts or not, politicians need the ‘religious conflict discourse’ for political ends. In other words, my argument is that those scholars and analysts of religious conflict who rightly point out the fact that political power aspirations are behind religious conflict in the ‘political use of religion’ often fail to understand that religious conflict can be a myth existing only in the discourse of political elites who continue to score points by maintaining and exercising it.

Political elites think that such interpretation will keep the situation tense based on the simple divide and rule policy. However even when the Hindutva organisations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) try to maintain their discourse on religious conflicts, interpret it as religious and use it for mobilisation of people, one can find that socio-economic issues and identities, and not primarily religious identities, are kept to the fore even among its members. The following narrative illustrates this.

One of my interviewees was sharing an interesting experience he had regarding how

\(^{50}\) Interview, Parvathi. I will elaborate the grassroot attitudes to conflicts in Chapter 8.

\(^{51}\) Focus-group Interview, Mohammed.
RSS, which works for religious mobilisation of Hindus, is viewed by its members. He is a school teacher, two of whose colleagues from different parts of the district were RSS members. He explained:

these two colleagues have different caste identities – one from a Pillai [Pillai is a high caste community in Kanyakumari and people in this caste community are referred to as Other Communities (OC) or Forward Class/Community (FC) according to the Indian government regulations] and the other from Nadar community [Nadar community is referred to as Backward Class (BC)]. I met them separately and asked them why they have joined an organisation which is known for extremism and dividing people on the basis of religion. The colleague from Pillai community said to me that their community in the past owned good amount of lands in the district, but now most of them have been bought by people from Nadar community and they are slowly dominating them. In order to check their domination he needed an organisation to stand and hence he had joined the RSS. The colleague from Nadar community said that people from Pillai community used to oppress them in the past, not allowing them to freely move, and gave them a lot of troubles. Now the Nadar community has grown up in socio-economic status, but still the people from Pillai community try to look down upon them and to dominate them. To challenge their domination he needed a platform and hence he had joined the RSS.52

This illustrates that even when a political organisation tries to mobilise Hindus against other religious communities, maintains the notion that people are divided on the basis of religious identities, and interprets conflict between people as religious, nevertheless the struggles between its own members are more socio-economic and not primarily of religion. Yet the platform they have chosen to fight each other is provided by a system which propagating religious distinctions. Thus even though socio-economic issues on the one hand and religious identity on the hand are interlinked in the above case, nevertheless, the primary reason for involvement is socio-economic, even though that of the organisation, in public discourse, is religious difference. The simple acceptance of the political use of religion in creating religious conflicts seldom brings out these perspectives.

My idea in arguing that there is no religious conflict is not to protect ‘religion’ or ‘world-religions’ from being the causes of conflicts. In fact, as discussed in the previous chapter, I question the very separation and categorisation. Rather in the Indian context I argue that the continuing discourse on religious conflict – whether it creates religious conflicts or not – gives the political elites as well as others seeking

52 Interview, C. Chokkalingam, Nagercoil, 04-07-2008.
power the chance to attribute created conflict to religion. Rather than understanding these conflicts through religious identity, or for that matter any other single identity of human life such as caste, region, ethnicity, etc., one must see them linked not only to political power but also power in other areas.

6.5. Conclusion

The dialogue promoters believe that religions, or misunderstanding of religions, and the political use of religion are responsible for the occurrence of religious conflicts today. This perspective has ignored various factors which are involved in the clashes between people as communities. In this chapter, I have been primarily concerned with the various factors found in what are considered to be religious conflicts: not misunderstanding of religions but rather various socio-economic factors, and not political use of religion but rather the naming of conflicts as religious by political elites as well as others who have vested interests of power. Thus we do not have religious conflicts, but religious conflict discourses and a constructed mythology of conflict. By continuously propagating this myth, the dialogue promoters, who think that they are bridging warring religious communities and making peace and harmony between adherents of different religions, may in fact be furthering the existence of this myth, exploited by people for their own power ambitions. The same trend is found among the dialogue activists in Kanyakumari district who have uncritically accepted the naming of conflicts between people in the district in 1982 as religious by the political elites. How different factors are involved in those conflicts, and how they became ‘religious’ conflicts are discussed in the next chapter by undertaking a case study of them.
Chapter 7

‘Mandaikadu Conflicts’ in Kanyakumari District: A Case Study

7.1. Introduction

In the last chapter I analysed two major claims in dialogue in India: that religions or misunderstanding of religions by religious adherents and the political use of religion is the primary reason for those conflicts. In evaluating these claims I made two points. Firstly, various socio-economic factors – not just misunderstanding of religions – as well as multiple identities of people – not just their religious identities – are part of what are claimed to be religious conflicts. Secondly, that the naming and interpreting of conflicts as religious by people with vested interests in society, especially people with vested interests for power, is a more significant element than the political use of religion which basically indicates that politics and religion are two separate categories.

In this chapter I support this argument by undertaking a case study of conflicts that took place in Kanyakumari district in 1982 which dialogue activists and many others generally term ‘Mandaikadu conflicts or ‘Mandaikadu Hindu-Christian conflicts.’ The dialogue activists in the district insist that these conflicts happened between Hindus and Christians in the district because of their misunderstanding of each other’s religion. I argue that these conflicts were primarily between people with different caste identities, but a week after these conflicts started on 1 March 1982 until now, they have been named as religious conflicts. My argument is that they did not occur primarily due to misunderstanding of religions nor were they between people with fixed religious identities. On the contrary, the actual incidents of violence involved different identities of people and many socio-political issues all of which have been consistently subsumed under religious conflicts.

Of course, the conflicts I analyse in this chapter happened more than 25 years ago, and one may question the rationale of doing a case study of it today. Also it is true that some people in the district prefer to forget those ‘bad times’ or risk disturbing a
fragile peace. Moreover, from the field research perspective as well, doing a case study of conflicts between people that happened long back is problematic, given the paucity of firsthand sources. Nevertheless, doing a case study of these conflicts is necessary even after a long time, because they have not been forgotten, and are revived almost daily by forces with vested interests. Portraying these conflicts as Hindu-Christian has been a systematic effort of politicians and supporters of Hindu nationalist organisations to mobilise Hindus for political purposes. What I will be attempting in this case study is to show that dialogue activists, for various reasons, simply accept these clashes as religious in their dialogue activities, and that they seldom acknowledge the multiple issues behind these ‘religious’ clashes.

7.2. 1982 Conflicts in Kanyakumari District: A Case Study

The case that I present below is not a complete coverage of Kanyakumari District in 1982. As with any dramatic event, different accounts of the incidents of 1982 are maintained by different people, which is mostly coloured with their own interests. What is presented first here is the story generally narrated by those who believe that what happened in 1982 were ‘religious conflicts’. One such group which provides this version of 1982 conflicts are dialogue activists. Others include politicians, the government officials and the Hindutva forces in the region. What the dialogue activists say about these clashes form the subject of my case. In the next chapter, where I discuss the grassroot perspectives on dialogue and relationships between people, I shall set out the story from below of those who did not see these conflicts as religious. Here I provide some of the basic details about the events.

Mandaikadu is a small village in Kanyakumari district where people with Hindu and Christian identities live. The village is about 20 km away from Nagercoil, the capital of the district. The village is on the coast, the sea forming the southern border of the village. Fisher-folk Christians, who are members of the Roman Catholic Church, live in the coastal area and Hindus of different castes live in the northern part of the

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1 One of my interviewees, Hindu dialogue activist, said that he had produced a small booklet (mentioned earlier, Varalaatril) on the history of Mandaikadu and its temple, but avoided mentioning the conflicts lest it create tensions among people. Interview, Perumal.
2 I could still collect data for this research, but these were mainly from secondary sources.
3 All my 29 interviewees from dialogue group mentioned that dialogue activities in Kanyakumari have to be primarily understood in the context of Mandaikadu conflicts.
village. In the northern part, there is a temple belonging to Hindus which is known as *Mandaikadu Bagavathi Amman Temple*. The deity worshipped in the temple is Bagavathi Amman, a female deity. Every year in March, there is a festival in the temple which lasts for ten days. Devotees in the local village as well as nearby village attend the festival, and it is also participated in from many devotees from the nearby state of Kerala. Normally, it is claimed that the devotees who come to attend the festival go to bathe in the sea – for which they need to cross the fisher-folk area – as part of their worship in the temple. During the festival in 1982, there were quarrels between the fisher-folk Christians and Hindus which ended in police killing 6 people from the fisher-folk community on 1 March 1982. The tensions extended in the district, and two more people were killed from the fisher-folk community in another village, Manakudi, on 15 March 1982. The circumstances around these incidents are generally known as ‘Mandaikadu conflicts.’

7.2.1. The Sources

The sources of this case are the people and documents who insist that the 1982 conflicts in Kanyakumari District were religious conflicts, meaning that those conflicts were caused by a misunderstanding or a manipulation of religions. These perspectives on the 1982 conflicts were gained during interviews with the dialogue promoters which I undertook during my field research in the district in 2008. In addition to personal interviews, I have also utilised some texts written largely as part of the rationale for dialogue in the district.

There are also some other writings regarding the 1982 conflicts which I will be using in the case analysis section. These include the Venugopal Commission report, which was set up by the Tamil Nadu state government in order to probe the police killings during conflicts. This is the only publicly available official document about the conflicts, which also locates the 1982 conflicts in the ‘religious conflicts’ framework. I also conducted interviews with a local politician who continue to project ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’, and with historians and social scientists in the district who

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4 The number of people who were killed varies as different groups claim different numbers. But the number provided here is as per the Government Record. GoTN, *Venugopal*, p.7. There are claims that many people went missing.
are critical of that projection. A few writers have analysed these conflicts in order to find the causes of conflicts⁵ and some critique the notion of Mandaikadu conflicts as religious by analysing them within the framework of caste inequality.⁶ I am making use of all these sources in my case analysis.

7.2.2. The Case: Dialogue Activists’ Version of ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’

The case that I present below is the version of Mandaikadu conflicts that is prevalent among the dialogue activists in India, collected through my interviews and collated to make their view clear. After presenting the case I will analyse it – the dialogue activists’ version of Mandaikadu conflicts – in the light of various factors in the overall context in the district.

7.2.2.1. The ‘Pre-Mandaikadu’ Situation in Kanyakumari District

Dialogue promoters generally hold that Kanyakumari District was known for its peace and communal harmony until 1982, when conflicts broke out between Hindus and Christians in Mandaikadu. This they call the pre-Mandaikadu situation and, just as there is B.C. and A.D., some respondents said there should be Pre-Mandaikadu and Post-Mandiakadu to mark the fact that the district was peaceful in the former period, while the situation deteriorated in the latter period due to the Mandaikadu conflicts.⁷ Most interreligious people see the earlier period as one of communal harmony when different religious people – mostly Hindus, Christians and Muslims – lived peacefully as neighbours.

7.2.2.2. The Role of Christian Conservatives and the Mandaikadu conflicts

One of the major factors that led to Mandaikadu conflicts in the District, according to the Christian participants in dialogue activities, was the evangelical activities that were undertaken by the extremist or fundamentalist Christians in the district.⁸ These Christians, some clergy and lay people from the mainline churches in the region – the Church of South India, the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church – and

⁵ Matthew, “Hindu Christian Communalism.”
⁶ Sukumaran, Kumari, pp.174-182
⁷ Interview, Salaam.
⁸ Interview, Dhasan.
many from the Pentecostal churches were hostile to their religious neighbours, particularly Hindus. Being convinced of the superiority of Christianity over other religions, these so-called ‘fundamentalist’ Christians ridiculed and condemned the religious activities of local Hindus, abhorring their deities, and preaching against other religions, their beliefs and practices.\(^9\) Moverover they arranged for public conventions and continued to attack other religions, distributed tracts with messages such as ‘Christianity is the true religion’, and ‘Jesus Christ is the only saviour.’\(^10\) Not only did they distribute these tracts in public places, but they also went to Hindu temples and other Hindu religious places to distribute tracts and preach against Hinduism.\(^11\) They used to organise conventions in Mandaikadu during the festival in Mandaikadu Bagavathi Amman temple in March every year. The Travancore Government stopped this in the 1940s, but this resulted every Church arranging an annual convention,\(^12\) at which Hindus were referred to as ‘heathens’, ‘devil worshippers’ and ‘children of the devil.’ According the Christian dialogue activists, the Christian conservatives did these things due to their misguided belief that Christianity was the only true religion.\(^13\)

These exclusivist attitudes of evangelical Christians led to strong reactions from the Hindus in some places in the district, with verbal or physical opposition in some places, especially by Hindus belonging to Hindu extremist organisations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindu Front. There were some incidents where the extremist Christians and the extremist Hindus were fighting with each other.\(^14\) This kept the situation in the District tense and ultimately led to the Mandaikadu conflicts.

**7.2.2.3. Pre-1982 Situation in Mandaikadu Village**

In spite of the Christian fundamentalist attitudes to Hinduism and Hindu reactions to them in Mandaikadu, the situation in Mandaikadu village, according to some advocates of dialogue, was one of peace and harmony until the Mandaikadu

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\(^9\) Interviews, Rajamony; Dhasan.
\(^10\) Robinson, “From Apartheid”, pp.90-91
\(^11\) Interview, Rajamony.
\(^12\) Interview, Rajamony.
\(^13\) Interview, Rajamony; Dhasan; Harris; also Robinson, “From Apartheid”, pp.90-91.
\(^14\) Interview, Tobias.
conflicts. During the Mandaikadu temple festival, both Christians in Mandaikadu and the nearby villages, and Muslims living around, used to contribute money and items for the festival. The Hindus in turn, during the festival, used to decorate the Shrine near the temple which belonged to the Roman Catholic Christians, giving offerings there on their way to their sea-bath. Thus in Mandaikadu Christians and Hindus were living together and celebrating festivals together.

**7.2.2.4. Mandaikadu Incident**

But unlike earlier times, because of the religious tensions prevalent among Hindus and Christians in the district this time in 1982, Hindus and Christians were divided in Mandaikadu when the festival in the Mandaikadu Bagavathi Amman temple began in March 1982. Because of the already existing religious tensions in the district due to the Hindu and Christian exclusivist attitudes, the Hindus and Christians in Mandaikadu were involved in fighting with each other. The Christians were not happy with the celebration in the festival, because for the first time, there were many outsiders at the temple festival belonging to the Hindu extremist organisations such as RSS, VHP and Hindu Front. The already tense situation in the district led both parties to confront each other during the festival. The Hindus were using loudspeakers, some directed at the Shrine. In retaliation, the Christians directed loudspeakers from the shrine towards the temple, increasing the tension. The Hindu devotees, as in every year, came to take a bath in the sea, but were stopped by the Christians, further increasing tensions. When it was reported that the Christians attacked and molested the Hindu women who came to bathe in the sea, tensions were erupting, the police were called and in order to stop the mob violence they fired, and as a result six Christians were killed in Mandaikadu.

**7.2.2.5. The Spread of Mandaikadu conflicts**

The news about the violence between Hindus and Christians in Mandaikadu spread to other parts of district, furthering violence between Christians and Hindus. Those

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15 Interviews, Dhasan; Maria Vincent.
16 Interviews, Tobias; Salaam.
17 Interview, Dhasan.
18 Interview, Dhasan.
19 Interview, Perumal.
Hindus and Muslims who had been living in peace and harmony for many years now started to fight each other. The ‘religious’ violence escalated and many places where Christians were living were attacked by Hindus and vice versa.\(^{20}\) Two more Christians were killed in Manakudi, another village in the district, by police when they were gathering to attack Hindus. Thus the religious conflicts persisted in the district for months, according to the ‘religion and violence’ interpreters, and divided the ‘whole district’ on the basis of religion.\(^{21}\)

**7.2.2.6. The Post-Mandaikadu conflicts Situation**

According to the dialogue promoters, some reputed religious leaders and lay people in society, interested in religious harmony and peace, tried to stop the conflicts between Hindus and Christians. They joined together and went to visit the people in the affected areas as an interreligious group, which impressed the Hindus and Christians who were involved in conflicts. When they talked to the people about the need for religious harmony, it made a great impact on the people.\(^{22}\) However religious tensions still persist in the district and the situation is still tense, with people afraid that religious conflicts such as ‘Mandaikadu’ can occur again.\(^{23}\) This, say the dialogue activists, can be ameliorated or even resolved through dialogue teaching people to understand their religion properly and cease to fight in the name of religion.\(^{24}\)

**7.2.3. Case Analysis: Situating the Case in its Context**

**7.2.3.1. Problems with the Narrative**

However, in the light of materials and different perspectives available about the district, which I will elaborate below, I must start with saying that the narrative presented by the dialogue promoters about Mandaikadu events lacks many points, and has contradictions. Moreover, the narrative does not contextualise what happened in Mandaikadu village, or does so inappropriately or insufficiently. The only contextualisation they offer is that of religious misunderstanding promoted by

\(^{20}\) Interviews, Salaam; Tobias; Panivanban Vincent.
\(^{21}\) Interview, Salaam.
\(^{22}\) Interview, Khan.
\(^{23}\) Interviews, Salaam; Nagalingam; Chokkalingam.
\(^{24}\) Interviews, Nagalingam; Dhasan; Rajamony; Salaam
the evangelising activities of the ‘fundamentalist’ Christians and their attack on Hinduism.

One of the major contradictions in the narrative is the interreligious dialogue proponents’ claim for the peaceful situation in the district before the 1982 conflicts. The repeated claim is that Kanyakumari district was a ‘peace park’ before Mandaikadu conflicts. Nevertheless, even while affirming that it was a ‘peace park’, Christian dialogue activists point to the efforts of Christian conservatives which shamed Hinduism and Hindus, and thus induced reactions from the Hindus even before 1982. It should be noted that, in the history of Christianity in India, the efforts for Christian proselytisation of other religion’s members by some Christians, and the demeaning of other religions and their beliefs, go back to the arrival of western colonial Christianity to India: these were not new developments of the 1980s. However, according to the promoters of dialogue, these efforts by Christians play a major role in instigating religious violence in the district. This view – that Christian conservatives are the root causes of Hindu-Christian violence – is said in the context of being self-critic by the Christian participants in dialogue who are termed ‘Christian liberals’. At the outset it seems that ‘Christian liberals’ took the blame for religious violence on themselves or people belonging to their religion. However, they blamed only the ‘Christian fanatics’—the fanatic ‘other’ within Christianity, people who understand neither Christianity nor other religions properly, and whose misunderstanding of religions led to religious violence in the district. This is an act of de-contextualisation of the situation in the district by the people promoting dialogue who want to conclude that religious misunderstanding causes religious violence and can be rectified only by dialogue activities. What is ignored, in my opinion, is the fact that the call for conversion has existed among some Christians for centuries, and dialogue activists fail to ask why only at this time it has led to ‘religious’ conflicts between Hindus and Christians in the district.

25 Interviews, Salaam; Nagalingam
26 Interviews, Rajamony; Dhasan; Harris.
27 Interview, Dhasan.
28 Interviews, Tobias; Rajamony; Dhasan; Harris.
In the narrative of the dialogue promoters, Mandaikadu village is the central sparking point for the religious violence over the past 25 years. Nevertheless, in spite of this powerful projection of Mandaikadu conflicts as the context of dialogue, little appears in the narrative about what happened in Mandaikadu, what were the local factors that led to conflicts between people in Mandaikadu and how it spread to other parts of the district. These questions are important because they shed light on the process of conflicts between people in 1982. In other words, while hurrying to conclude that what happened in Mandaikadu was a religious clash between Hindus and Christians, the dialogue promoters either play down the different identities that were involved in the conflicts or fail to note that in what they call religious violence there were identities of people involved which were other than religious identities.

Let me elaborate this. When I asked about the caste identities that were involved in these conflicts, there was a hesitation among the dialogue activists from the Nadar community to admit openly that Nadar Christians were also involved in attacking the fisher-folk Christians. Such acknowledgement does not help in seeing the conflict as a Hindu-Christian conflict. On the other hand, asking for confidentiality, one dialogue activist from fisher-folk community told me that “there were some Nadar Christians also involved in attacking fisher-folk community in some parts of the district, however, it would not be advisable to talk about this as it would affect the relationships between Nadar Christians and fisher-folk Christians in the district.”

This indicates clearly that there is awareness, at least among some dialogue activists, about the caste identity in the conflicts but it is not openly admitted because the issue then becomes intra-Christian conflicts where ‘interreligious’ dialogue may not have much role to play.

7.2.3.2. Caste Identities Involved in ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’

In Mandaikadu, people who were involved in conflicts had many identities including predominantly caste and religious (Table 1). On the one side were fisher-folk people who were Roman Catholic Christians from a caste community called Mukkuva and

29 Interview, Dhasan.
30 As I have been using the real names of my interviewees from the dialogue group, I am not giving the name of the person here as confidentiality was asked for.
on the other side people with multiple caste and Hindu religious identities. According to the caste gradations, the fisher-folk people, mostly confined to the coastal area in the district, come under Most Backward Caste (MBC). The non-fisher-folk in the Mandaikadu village includes Nadars who belong to Backward Caste (BC), and Nairs, Pillai and Krishnavagaiyar belong to Forward Caste (FC). The latter among Hindus are also called caste Hindus. Nadars are the majority people in Mandaikadu as they are in Kanyakumari district.

Table 3: Identities of Groups Involved in Conflict in Mandaikadu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coastal</td>
<td>Inland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisher-folk</td>
<td>Non-fisher-folk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic (Denomination)*</td>
<td>Amman Vazhi (Sect)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian*</td>
<td>Hindu*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukkuvas</td>
<td>Nadars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nairs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Krishna Vagai</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pillai (Vellalas)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chettiyar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Most Backward Class/Caste/Community</td>
<td>Backward Class/Caste/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Communities (also known as Forward Castes)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* indicates the identities that were not in conflict during the actual conflicts

In Mandaikadu village what happened during the Hindu festival in 1982 was a clash between the fisher and non-fisher people. Of course the actual conflicts occurred in relation to the festival in the Hindu temple, but when they spread to the other parts of

31 Interview, Rajamony.
the district, they did so as tension between fisher and non-fisher, coastal and inland people, specifically between Mukkuvas and Nadars (Table 2). It did not spread even as conflicts between fisher-folk Christians and non-fisher-folk Hindus. There were many inland villages – where Hindus, Christians and Muslims of non-fisher-folk communities lived – which either attacked the coastal villages in retaliation, or were gathering together to protect the inland villages if the fisher-folk people come to attack. The same was true for fisher-folk who were either attacking non-fisher villages or were protecting their villages from the attacks of non-fisher-folk. The rumours were primarily about fisher-folk attacking non-fisher people, or vice versa. Gramam village, where I did field research regarding the grassroot people’s living together in spite of religious differences, was one such village where Hindus, Muslims and Christians were preparing to face attacks from fisher-folk in the nearby village of Manakudi, as there were rumours of attack. Moreover, an inland village called Samathanapuram, where most of the people were Christians belonging to CSI, was attacked by Kovalam, a nearby coastal village, in which it is claimed three people were killed, two Christians and one Hindu. These developments suggest that caste identities played a greater role in these conflicts than religious.

It is also significant that some participants in dialogue activities in the district admitted to me that ‘some’ of the non-fisher-folk Christians – mainly Nadar Christians belonging to the Protestant Church as well as to the Roman Catholic Church in which the fisher-folk Christians are also members – kept quiet when the inland villages attacked the coastal ones. These problems continued for several days and as a result the fisher-folk were prevented by the non-fishers from selling fish in the inland fish markets. One of the local political leaders from BJP party, for whom the Mandaikadu conflicts were Hindu-Christian religious conflicts, admitted

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32 The Venugopal Commission Report contains many incidents violence which were between fisher-folk Christians and non-fisher-folk Hindus where the fisher-folk were targets as fisher-folk, and not as Christians. GoTN, Venugopal, pp.83-140.
33 Interview, Mohammed.
34 Interview, Jacob.
35 Interviews, Rajamony; Tobias.
that inland Christians and Hindus jointly attacked the fisher-folk, adding that these Christians later joined with coastal Christians to attack Hindus.\textsuperscript{36}

Table 4: Identities of Groups Involved in Conflict outside Mandaikadu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coastal</td>
<td>Inland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisher-folk</td>
<td>Non-fisher-folk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic*</td>
<td>Roman Catholic, Protestant (CSI, LMS, Lutheran, Salvation Army, Pentecostals, etc)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian*</td>
<td>Hindu (Multiple Sects within)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muslim (Sunnis, Shias, Sufis)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian (Multiple Denominations within)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukkuvas</td>
<td>Nadars</td>
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<td>Schedule Castes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other Communities (also known as Forward Castes)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* indicates the identities that were not in conflict during the actual conflicts

Moreover, maintaining caste difference and caste inequality is stronger than religious divisions in many parts of India. The religious identities of people may be attacked, or people attacked for belonging to a particular religion, but such identity is usually seen as an ‘extra’ identity, caste identities always retaining crucial to the ordering of rank. This is still true in Kanyakumari district. The general stereotypes among some

\textsuperscript{36} Interview, Velan.
inland people about fisher-folk, which I often heard in my childhood, are that ‘the fisher-folk lack the sixth sense’, ‘illiterate’, ‘drunkards’, ‘always fighting with others’, and ‘not knowing how to be in peace with others’. Among people in the grassroots who do not have knowledge of dialogue, for example in Gramam, as I will show in the next chapter, the 1982 conflicts were seen as an inland versus coastal occupational problem and that is still the case.

Thus the Mandaikadu incident was initially between people who had fisher-folk Christian identity and non-fisher-folk people who had inland Hindu identity, and it spread to other parts of the district as a fisher-folk versus non-fisher-folk problem, irrespective of tradition. It did not spread as a Hindu-Christian problem. This goes against the narrative provided in by the dialogue activists, and raises the question: what made these primarily caste based conflicts into religious conflicts, or what made them spoken about as such? How did the turn occur? Who were the agents and beneficiaries in suggesting these conflicts were religious? How and why did this narrative come to dominate in the district for about these 25 years? This leads to the wider political context in India as well as in Kanyakumari district, where the Hindu nationalists forces, with its political representation in the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), started emerging powerfully. One of their primary goals was to mobilise people with Hindu identity for political purposes. Before that another factor which plays a primary role in shaping this discourse must be discussed: the Venugopal Commission report.

7.2.3.3. Venugopal Commission Report and the Religious Conflicts

The Venugopal commission was set up by the Tamil Nadu state government to probe into the police killings of fisher-folk Christians during the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts between Hindus and Christians’. But it already started the enquiry with the outcome of religious tensions in mind, setting out incidents of so-called religious tensions in the district for the previous year as indicative of the potential for religious violence between Hindus and Christians, and readily concluded that what happened in March 1982 were religious conflicts between Hindus and Christians. It blamed the conversion activities by the Christians and the extremist attitudes of the Hindu organisations such as RSS for claiming that they were guardians of Hinduism. It said
nothing about the Hindutva forces’ mobilisation of religion for political ends, unlike the Liberhan Commission Report, which concluded that religious mobilisation for politics was one of the reasons for the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodya in 1992.\textsuperscript{37} Despite providing detailed accounts of incidents where the ‘Hindus’ were even searching for ‘fisher-folk’ people to attack, it still maintains that the problem was one of religious clashes.\textsuperscript{38} While this projection – that what happened were religious conflicts due to hostility to each other’s religions – has benefited the Hindutva forces and their tactics in religious mobilisation for politics, it has been uncritically accepted by the dialogue promoters who continuously propagate that there is religious violence to show that dialogue is the solution for a context which is marked by religious misunderstanding, differences and hostilities.\textsuperscript{39}

7.2.3.4. The Rise of Hindutva and the Religious Mobilisation for Politics in Kanyakumari District

Electoral constituencies in India, where religious minorities in India such as Muslims and Christians can be a major force in deciding the victory of a political candidate, have been paid special attention by the Hindutva forces since their emergence. These have successfully mobilised support for their political parties – in South India, it is BJP – by producing what they term religious violence. Kanyakumari district, with its many Christians, became a target of these Hindutva forces from the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{40} BJP contested for the first time in Kanyakumari district in Nagercoil – one of the seven constituencies for Tamil Nadu State Assembly – in the 1980 Tamil Nadu State Assembly elections. It lost the elections, and within two years Kanyakumari district witnessed ‘religious conflicts.’\textsuperscript{41}

Some of the participants in dialogue talk about the role of the Hindu extremist organisations such as RSS and Hindu Front in the Mandaikadu conflicts.\textsuperscript{42} However, these organisations and their members are mostly understood by the dialogue people

\textsuperscript{38} GoTN, \textit{Venugopal}, pp.103-105.
\textsuperscript{39} Robinson, “From Apartheid”, pp.85-93; Interviews; Salaam; Dhasan; Nagalingam.
\textsuperscript{40} ECI, \textit{Statistical Report on General Election, 1980 to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu}, New Delhi: Elections Commission of India, n.d.
\textsuperscript{41} Interview, C. Chokkalingam.
\textsuperscript{42} Interviews, Tobias; Dhasan; Harris; Panivanban Vincent
as extremists Hindus who have failed to understand the core teaching of their religion, which is ‘tolerance’ towards other religions.\footnote{Interviews, Dhasan; Panivanban Vincent.} Also, these organisations and their members are viewed in parallel to the Christian conservatives who are involved in denigrating other religions. Sometimes they are termed ‘not-true-Hindus’, just as the Christian conservatives are called ‘not-true-Christians’ on the assumption that they have understood neither their own nor other’s religions properly.\footnote{Interview, Jayaraj.} In all these, only the extremist ‘religious’ side of the Hindutva is highlighted: how they have used the discourse of ‘religious conflicts’ for their advancement in the district is not brought out.\footnote{Interview, Dhasan; Rajamony. In my opinion, an acknowledgment that ‘religious conflicts’ are not real but only remain in the discourse of especially Hindutva forces, does not help dialogue which invite people to live together in the context of ‘religious’ conflicts. I will elaborate how this discourse has helped for Hindutva in the next section.}

In fact the Hindutva forces first entered the Kanyakumari district in the 1960s, when there were attempts to establish the Vivekananda Kendra in Kanyakumari. When it erected a memorial for Vivekananda in the Indian Ocean about 400 metres from the sea shore, and started a ferry, they faced opposition from local fisher-folk people because it affected their livelihood.\footnote{GoTN, Venugopal, p.3} Later these problems were retrospectively presented as Hindu-Christian problems, or Christian opposition to Hindu religious life.\footnote{Interview, C. Chokkalingam.} However local Hindutva forces tried to mobilise people from the 1980s, after which ‘religious conflicts’ started to occur. Employing almost all tactics that Hindutva had used earlier against Muslims particularly in northern and western parts of India, in Kanyakumari district the Hindutva forces were involved in constructing stereotypes of Christians and Muslims, both being seen as foreigners who are unpatriotic to India. They organised processions and public meetings in which Christians and Muslims were the constant targets of derogation and attack. The Hindutva groups also used the recently published 1981 census to argue that Christian numbers were growing which would affect the Hindus.\footnote{GoTN, Venugopal, pp.19-21.}
It is in such a context that the Mandaikadu conflicts occurred. The triggering incident for the conflicts was between fisher-folk Christians and Hindus. Nevertheless, in spite of the presence of the Hindutva, and its use of ‘religious conflicts’ which to yield fruits for its religious mobilisation of Hindus for politics, the conflicts spread as caste based conflicts rather than religious. However, later the tactics of Hindutva forces took root when it published pamphlets which blamed ‘Christians’ for their attacks on ‘Hindus’.\footnote{Interview, Perumal.} Since then caste identities have been underplayed in the projection, with religious identities highlighted as the cause of conflict. Even though this aspect of Hindutva is not critiqued in dialogue circles, there are others who have studied the conflicts from social, political point of view irrespective of their religious affiliation.\footnote{One such study to critique the Hindutva is done by a school teacher, not a dialogue activist, in the district. C. Chokkalingam, \textit{Matham, Panbaadu}.}

\subsection*{7.2.3.5. The Usefulness of the ‘Religious Violence’ Discourse for Political Benefits}

A critical look at the political history of the district in post-Independence India, particularly the political developments of BJP and its supporting organisations in the district, helps us to understand how the discourse of ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ has helped the BJP to gain political power. Just before these conflicts, the BJP contested elections in Nagercoil, the capital of the district and one of the seven State Assembly constituencies in the district. The BJP candidate got 693 votes which is less than 1\% of the total votes.\footnote{ECI, \textit{General Election, 1980}, p.280} However, after the Mandaikadu conflicts in 1982, which strengthened religious mobilisation efforts of BJP, it opted to move from Nagercoil to another constituency in the district, Colocahel, for the 1984 State Assembly elections. Mandaikadu area comes under this constituency, and the BJP’s move explains what it expected from the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’. This time again, the candidate who contested in Nagercoil contested for BJP, and received 32,996 votes, 38.64\% of the total votes,\footnote{ECI, \textit{General Election, 1984}, p.291} losing the election by just 0.69\%. In fact, as in 1980 elections, BJP lost all the Tamil Nadu seats they contested in the 1984 elections, but its share of the vote in Kanyakumari district jumped from less than 1\% votes in 1980...
to 38.64%, a greater increase than elsewhere in the state. It is a reasonable assumption that the discourse of the Mandaikadu ‘religious conflicts’ might have helped them. In 1989 elections, it contested five constituencies in the district – Kanyakumari, Nagercoil, Padmanabhapuram, Vilavancode and Killiyoor. And although again unsuccessful, it secured a good number of votes. In 1991 elections, it contested all seven constituencies in the district and finished in third place. The 1996 State Assembly Elections was a milestone in the history of BJP in Tamil Nadu and in Kanyakumari district as it won a seat for the first time in Tamil Nadu in the Padmanabapuram constituency after contesting in all seven constituencies in the district. Similarly the Lok Sabha Elections also indicate the gradual growth of BJP and other Hindutva parties in the district. It first contested in the district (in the Nagercoil Constituency which comprises of all State Assembly constituencies in the district except the Kanyakumari constituency which comes under the nearby Tiruchendoor Lok Sabha constituency) in 1989 and secured 7.12% of votes, 18.82% in 1991, 30.25 in 1996, 45.08% in 1998. It secured 50.21% votes in 1999 and won the seat for the first time in Kanyakumari district.

Of course, BJP did not make this progress only because of the situation in the district. Rather the wider national context of Hindu nationalist propaganda for one Hindu nation, one Hindu religion, and one Hindu culture, and the many tactics used by BJP for religious mobilisation for politics at the national level, helped the progress of BJP. Its stereotypes against religious minorities especially Muslims at the national level at that time helped the BJP in the district to stereotype the Christians along the same lines. Nevertheless, the projection of the Mandaikadu conflicts discourse has been a significant aspect in the BJP’s political campaign since 1982, and a factor which contributed to the BJP growth in the district. In their campaigns, these religious conflicts are projected to their Hindu voters as the efforts of Christians (as well as Muslims) in the district to dominate the Hindus, destroy

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54 ECI, General Election, 1991, pp.319-321
55 Since the 2009 Lok Sabha elections all the seven State Assembly constituencies in the district have been merged into the Kanyakumari Lok Sabha constituency.
56 Interview, C. Chokkalingam.
Hinduism, and deprive Hindus of all their rights. Thus the BJP and its supporters have continued to hang onto this myth until today in their politics and propaganda.

7.2.3.6. Approaching Mandaikadu conflicts from the Problems Related to the Formation of Kanyakumari District in 1956

Even though the Hindu nationalist forces in the district continue to propagate the ‘reality’ of Mandaikadu conflicts, and the dialogue proponents in the district have also accepted the notion, a caste-based analysis has been used in looking at Mandaikadu conflicts by some local social scientists and historians. They acknowledge that what happened in 1982 was seen as religious conflicts, and maintain that the conflicts occurred primarily because of the Hindutva forces in the district. However, pointing out the fact that most of the people associated with the Hindu nationalism in the region are Hindus from high castes such as Nair, Pillai, and Krishnavagaiyar, these analysts locate the conflicts in the wider historical context of the formation of the Kanyakumari district. When the states were reorganised in Independent India, people in the south-east parts of Southern Travancore (now Kanyakumari), who were mostly Tamil-speaking people, opted to join Tamil Nadu, rather than Kerala where Malayalam is the main language. Struggles started between the Tamil and the Malayalam-speaking people. However it was not just a linguistic problem, as the majority of the Tamil-speaking people who opted to join Tamil Nadu were Nadars (Backward Caste), and the majority of the Keralaites who opposed this move were from Nair caste (Forward/high caste). Nair-Nadar problems have a long history, as the Nair domination over Nadars and the reactions from Nadars have existed in the region for centuries. Thus the issue of joining Tamil Nadu became yet another struggle between Nadars and Nairs, and it was also political. Nadars held together irrespective of religions (almost half of the Nadars have converted to Christianity in the district, and the remainder remain Hindu) and so the Nairs tried divide-and-rule tactics to split up the Nadars into their different religious identities. This was not successful and the Kanyakumari district was formed for Tamil-speaking

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57 Sukumaran, Kumari Sipi, pp.174-182
58 Peter, Malayali. The whole books is concerned with this issue.
people. However the tensions between Nairs and Nadars continued even after the formation of Kanyakumari district.

Those who argue for this background locate the Mandaikadu conflicts within this context. Their idea is that even though religious conflicts were organised and expected by the Hindutva forces in the district in which most are caste Hindus, especially Nairs, they expected conflicts to happen between Hindu Nadars and Christian Nadars, because the Nairs want Nadars to be divided religiously. But because of the circumstances, the conflicts occurred between fisher-folk Christians and Hindus. Nevertheless, within a short time this fact had disappeared, and the ‘real’ tension were ascribed to Hindu and Christian Nadars. The problem with this approach to ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’ is that in spite of pointing out the fact of caste domination rather than the religious differences of people, still these analysts identify the 1982 conflicts as religious conflicts. The organisational aspects, and the political tactics of the Hindutva forces, are not paid proper attention.

7.3. Mandaikadu Conflicts and Interreligious Dialogue

In my view, dialogue is not responsible for the 1982 conflicts in the Kanyakumari district. It may not also be responsible for inventing the notion of religious conflicts in the district. However in my opinion, as the above study has shown, it has uncritically accepted the myth of religious conflicts which is used by Hindutva forces in the region, and continues to construct, maintain and propagate it. In other words, the dialogue activists who should rather critique the notion of religious conflicts and fixed religious identities of people in order to create peace and harmony in society, uncritically accept and appropriate the discourse and concretise it through their writings and activities. This might further damage relationships rather than create peace and harmony.

My argument in this and the previous chapter is that the idea of religious violence is a myth existing only in the discourse of people who play off the religious identities

59 Sukumaran, Kumari, p.175.
60 As mentioned earlier, all my 29 interviewees from dialogue circle emphasise that dialogue in the district is necessary in the context of ‘religious’ conflicts, which in my opinion and as I have shown thus far, is a myth that exist only in the discourses for power.
of people to fulfil their vested interests for power. But people fight with each other neither because they misunderstood religions, nor because their opponents believe in or belong to other religions. It is true what we call religious elements are present here, but basically there are complex factors such as aspirations for political power and different kinds of mobilisations for it, socio-economic factors including caste inequalities and even personal factors. But all these factors are made to culminate in religious conflicts mainly to benefit the political elites. On the contrary, the sharing of common religious space, as mentioned by Susan Bayly, who nevertheless places the conflicts in 1982 within the framework of ‘religious fundamentalism,’ is still present among most the ordinary people in the district. The naming and projecting of conflicts between people as religious conflicts benefits those who attempt to maintain power in the political arena.

While religious conflicts have a long history across the world, the notion that most of the conflicts in the world are religious conflicts is a discourse which is developed to achieve certain purposes for many people, yielding fruits for those who hold to it. Interreligious proponents and other scholars often submit the evidence of religious fundamentalism for these ‘religious conflicts’. Religious fundamentalism, which is claimed to underscore a belief in one’s religious superiority over other religions, and attacking other religions and their beliefs, are not new things but nor do they inevitably produce ‘religious’ conflicts. For example, in modern India, religious fundamentalism began when colonial Christianity came and attacked the religions of the local people, who retaliated. However what we witness as religious conflicts are new developments which are associated with nationalism and political power in India.

Perhaps one of the problems with the dialogue activists, in the light of the fact that most of them are Christians, is that religious differences, and therefore, religious conflicts and conflicts between people, enable them to articulate theologically about dialogue. In other words, in order to build up a theological rationale for dialogue, religion is necessary. Religious differences are emphasised in discourse, to maintain the base for religious dialogue. These theological articulations – their nature and

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61 Bayly “Christians and Competing”.
methods – accept and uphold belief in ‘religious violence.’ One of the statements often heard in the context of what is perceived as religious violence is that one is fighting with other religious people to protect his or her religion. However this statement has to be critically appraised, not only because what religion is still a contested area, but also because the statement itself is ambiguous. How does one fight to protect his or her religion? Just because the names of the religions or religious symbols are used by a few people in attacking others, does it mean that they are fighting for their religion? A fighter may conceivably fighting for his religion, but very clearly fights for herself! And the most explicit and implicit aspect involved here is actually power of many kinds. One fights in the name of religion to attain or maintain power: this cannot be identified or interpreted as ‘religious violence.’

Moreover, while ‘religious violence’ is primarily executed and participated in by those who use religions for political reasons and other socio-economic reasons, the reminder that there have been religious conflicts or there is the possibility of religious conflicts create tensions, fear and apprehension about other religions’ among ordinary people who otherwise may not fear the presence of others. In other words, it is the projection that there are religious conflicts or that there has been religious violence in the past, which creates fear and hate about others.

7.4. Conclusion

While criticising the discourse of religious conflicts in Kanyakumari district, and pointing out the caste and other factors involved, my intention is not to support that conflicts based on caste are justifiable whereas religions are not! Belonging to Nadar community in the district, I am convinced that any conflict between Nadar community and others is not going to be helpful to anyone, other than aggravating hate on each other. But my point is that in the current climate in India, and globe, the religious conflicts discourse yield more power to the power-mongers at broader levels. The unfortunate development in the projection of religious conflict is that this myth has been uncritically accepted and propagated by the promoters of dialogue who try to put forth dialogue as a solution for such contexts. By doing this, whether they are successful in creating dialogue between ‘hostile religious groups’ or not, they certainly help the political elites maintain this myth. The worst aspect is that
even those dialogue promoters who rightly point out the existence of different factors in what are termed religious conflicts, nevertheless still continue to talk about the actual happening of ‘religious’ conflicts, as they do with the ‘Mandaikadu conflicts’, rather than critiquing the ‘religious conflicts discourse’ in the hands of those who aspire for power at any costs.
Chapter 8

Elite Interreligious Dialogue and Grassroots Relationships between People with Different Religious Identities

8.1. Introduction

In Chapter 2, I discussed the various developments in dialogue in India over the last six decades which have helped dialogue to become one of the significant aspects in religious life and theological reflection. I also noted that, in the process, the importance and inevitability of dialogue has been emphasised again and again, and the nature, method and objectives of dialogue also have been set by the theologians involved in dialogue. However, one of the serious limitations of dialogue has been that it has remained, and still remains, an elite endeavour. This is not a new issue and dialogue has been repeatedly critique for this, including by those who are engaged in it. However in my observation, primarily this has been addressed as ‘taking dialogue to the grassroots,’ which is still, in my opinion, an elite perspective. What is needed, if dialogue is to serve better, is to learn from how ordinary people live their everyday lives amidst tensions, rather than teaching them how to dialogue.

This chapter therefore evaluates the elite nature of dialogue and its ignoring of people at the grassroots, who are all too often seen as passive listeners. I shall critique this against the everyday relationships among people. In so doing, I shall compare and contrast the elite nature of dialogue with the actual relationships among people at the grassroots with different religious identities, in the light of the insights received from Gramam where Hindus, Muslims and Christians live. My primary argument is that while dialogue works well in the theological field to construct better models to approach other religions, ordinary people’s handling of conflicts and

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1 See pages 78-84 in Chapter 1.
2 See Mays, *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots*. One of the authors succinctly put the core question: “How can interreligious dialogue move from the halls off academia to the grass roots where we contend it needs to be in the twenty-first century?” Maria Hornung, “Conclusion: Making Dialogue Real”, p.97. However, in my opinion, even such works are limited because they talk about ‘dialogue moving from elite to grassroots’ rather than ‘dialogue learning from grass roots’.
tensions, and their everyday relationships amid obvious tensions, contributes more than dialogue activities to maintain peace and harmony in society.

Let me define elite and non-elite in relation to my research. Those who espouse formal dialogue programmes for peace and harmony in society are elites, including those religious leaders, pastors, and theologians who are educated and have experience of the programmes. Non-elites are people who have a particular religious identity, and other identities, but have not participated in dialogue programmes, are not highly educated or ordained, and are often female, living in villages. Moreover they are usually invited to take part in dialogue. Such an invitation ‘from on high’ stems not so much from a negative attitude to their interreligious grasp, but from ignorance about their lived lives and potential contribution.

8.2. Elite Features in Dialogue: Dialogue as an Elite Work
8.2.1. The Imperative of Dialogue

One of the aspects that differentiate the formal dialogue from the informal grassroots that include interreligious relations is the imperious top-down element of formal dialogue. While there are interreligious interactions between people of different religions going on in their everyday lives at many levels, the assumption in such invitations to dialogue is that people are divided along religions and that there are no effective or proper relationships among them: this totally ignores the existing everyday interreligious relations. For many dialogue activists what is going on between people in everyday living is apparently not enough to create peace and harmony. Herbert Jai Singh, writing on dialogue in late 1960s, points to the fact that the modern world has provided fast accessibility between people, and says that in such situation “there can be little doubt that men and women are constantly conversing across national, cultural and religious boundaries. This by no means is dialogue, but it has given rise to a situation which favours and promotes dialogue.”

For instance, Wesley Ariarajah cites some suggestions given by a regional formal dialogue meeting in Rajpur in India in 1981, which discussed “how the future of

3 Interview, Tobias.
Hindu-Christian relations could be built at local levels so that the dialogue would relate to daily life.” The suggestions were: (1) Talking together, to which his response is: “We need to discuss with one another the problems we share in common in our communities”; (2) Working together, which he answers with: “One of the most profitable and powerful forms of dialogue is working together with our neighbours in concrete projects of social action.... Such active and socially-conscious dialogue may especially serve to attract the energies and engage the commitments of young people who have drifted away from their religious traditions”; (3) Living together – to which he says; “We hear how Hindus and Christians live together in cities, towns and villages.... However, living together should not be merely an accident of geography which places us in proximity to but not in relation to our neighbours. Our living together should be intentional – that we intend to create a community in which we all participate”; and (4) Celebrating together – the fourth suggestion which he responds to thus:

On national or regional holidays, Hindus and Christians might join together in their programs and celebrations. During appropriate religious festivals, Hindus and Christians might invite one another to visit, taking advantage of these occasions to become educated about and appreciative of the traditions of the other. On a more daily level, Hindus and Christians might arrange for mutual visits in temples, churches, ashrams, and homes. In all these cases, Christians and Hindus should prepare for such visits through programs of education and reflect on such visits in discussion.

In all the four points, in one or other way we see that somewhat directive language is associated with dialogue. Commenting on the above suggestions Ariarajah maintains:

Behind these suggestions lies the conviction... that community, harmony, relationships, and so forth, do not happen automatically; that they cannot be taken for granted; that relationships have to be built, fostered, preserved and celebrated.

These are the suggestions from Hindus and Christians involved in dialogue in different parts of India who were gathered under the auspices of WCC in Rajpur, in

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the northern part of India. Ariarajah has picked up from these suggestions provided by the participants to show that dialogue can be achieved primarily, if not only, through all people willingly participating in dialogue activities. While talking about the future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue, Ariarajah suggests that it depends “very much on persons who are willing actually to “work at it” by creating opportunities that become occasions of dialogue.” It is towards this dialogue that all people are invited to take part in order to create peace and harmony in society. In this regard often the phrase ‘dialogue at the grassroots’ refers to the efforts taken by dialogue activists to take dialogue to the grassroots, rather than to learn from the everyday living relationships among the people at the grassroots. What is not paid attention to are the practical aspects that are found among people belonging to different religions who co-exist in many parts of the world. In fact this directive and even supercilious language is typical of many contemporary dialogue activists in India.

8.2.2. Prerequisites of Dialogue

Another feature of elite dialogue in contemporary India is that often there is an articulation of the ‘prerequisites’ of dialogue, which neatly excludes people actually living interreligiously. Dialogue is assigned a special status and not all are considered qualified to undertake it. Thus Raimundo Panikkar maintains that “Dialogue is more than a casual or merely well-intentioned conversation. ... [it] demands both a deep experience of one’s own tradition and a sufficient knowledge of the other one.” While referring to the authors who wrote about dialogue in the book Hindu-Christian Dialogue, he says that “we cannot, and should not, engage in dialogue if we are not spiritually, intellectually, and humanly equipped for it.” He further says:

Dialogue... has to be duo-logue. There have to be two logoi, two languages encountering each other, so as to overcome the danger of a double monologue. One has to know the language of the other, even if one has to learn it precisely from the

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10 When I asked my dialogue interviewees about what they think about dialogue in grassroots, none of them talking about ‘learning from grassroots’, rather they enthusiastically narrated about their dialogue programmes for grassroots.
12 Panikkar, “Foreword”, p.xii.
other, and often in the very exercise of dialogue. Dialogue engages the intellect, the *logos*.\(^\text{13}\)

This emphasis on the intellectual prerequisites for dialogue is one of the important elite features of dialogue in India. As dialogue is believed to be an organised formal act rather than voluntary and informal one, this emphasis is often made. Having a good knowledge of one’s own religion and other religions, showing ‘openness’ of mind, being willing to learn from other religions, ‘to feel one’ with the dialogue partner and to change through dialogue are often cited as the important qualifications. Here one can see how the normal and ordinary activities of everyday life at the grass-roots are set aside in favour of highly conceptualised and essentialized ‘dialogue’. Visiting religious places of one’s neighbours and entering their holy places are also expressed as qualifications for dialogue. For example, consider how Panikkar looks at himself as eligible for participating in dialogue:

I have duly performed Hindu ceremonies (at Guruvayur, one of the most orthodox Hindu temples, for instance) and celebrated the Christian mysteries (in Shillong Cathedral, one of the most “orthodox” Roman Catholic churches, for example). I have been dialoguing in Europe, America, and India; sitting in ashrams, gurukuls, universities, and bishops’ houses; living in presbyteries and temples. Karma-*bhakti* and *jnana-yoga* are not unknown or foreign to me; the Vedas and the Bible are holy books for me and I have spent long years in practice, study, and meditation of both....\(^\text{14}\)

The visiting of many places is one of the aspect believed to be important for genuine dialogue, despite such visiting being common practice in villages. For example, Klostermaier who spent a few years in a Vrindaban, a Hindu holy place in North India, emphasises the importance of being in India in order to participate in Hindu-Christian dialogue.\(^\text{15}\) The list for the prerequisites for dialogue can go on, but what is important to note here is that how people at the grassroots, in spite of conflicts, relate with each other in their multi-religious contexts fulfilling a number of Ariarajah’s points as they maintain at least a reasonable level internal peace and harmony, perfection not being of this world.

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\(^{13}\) Panikkar, “Foreword”, p.xiii.

\(^{14}\) Panikkar, “Foreword”, p. xi.

8.2.3. Interreligious Dialogue and Written Scriptures

The use of scriptures in dialogue is another feature that indicates the elite nature of dialogue. It should be mentioned that all the formal dialogues are in one way or other based on written texts, on which all the comparative studies which arise in discussions depend. The issue of the plurality of texts is discussed in dialogue, but these include only the written and formally accepted scriptures, excluding performed or oral texts. Dialogue activists who talk about the role of scriptures talk about the plurality of religious scriptures in a multi-religious context, or how the reading and exegesis of scriptures are different for different religious adherents. In these contexts, what is considered to be knowledge of other religions is mostly the knowledge of the scriptures in other religions. Further in the contemporary dialogue, ‘reading from multiple scriptures’ has become a symbol of routine dialogical relationship between the participants from different religions, often accompanied by interreligious worship using the various scriptures to indicate that dialogue activists accept the authority of multiple scriptures.

8.2.4. Discussion of Theological Concepts and Interreligious Dialogue

One of the central aspects of dialogue is theological and doctrinal issues – which is one important reason for why such dialogue fails to appeal to people at the grassroots. What often happens is that educated lay and religious leaders participate in formal dialogue. One major theological issue that has dominated and still dominates most of the discussion in dialogue is the search for Truth or the Ultimate Truth. As discussed in chapter 2, defending plurality of religions and dialogue in the context of mission against those who opposed to pluralism dialogue has produced theological reflections on many concepts such as God, Christ, Trinity and Salvation. However, this aspect of dialogue fails to represent the faith perspectives of the people at the grassroots levels for whom such issues are of little importance – as is

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16 Samartha, One Christ, pp.66-86.
18 My observations during my personal involvement in dialogue; also Interviews, Tobias; Rajamony; Panivanban Vincent; Maria Vincent; Jayaraj. All these interviewees enthusiastically pointed out the importance of this in dialogue.
19 One example is Samartha’s essay on “Ganga and Galilee”, pp.142-17.
indeed the case in many other religious groups. As already discussed, grassroots understanding of faith is more related to their daily life where they have to live with people of other religions, and to their culture, society and other aspects of life than doctrines or beliefs. While studying the importance of lived religion against the religion informed by doctrines and creeds in Borneo and South Australia, Elizabeth Koepping says that

Ritual specialists or teachers in particular tradition, represented...by pastors and priests...and imams and missionaries... may regard enculturated non-doctrinal attributes as largely or totally irrelevant to the practice of a religion, the constructed doctrinal whole of which for them will ideally be expressed, in belief and action by individual adherents. Lay people. However, many consider the social identity and praxis aspects of ‘religion’ central to their lives, doctrines being not particularly important.\(^{20}\)

For her, ordinary people “identify themselves by the food they eat or reject, the friends they mix with and marry, and crucially the way they conduct, and conduct themselves at, funeral.”\(^{21}\) Similar aspects may be found in different parts of the world with regard to lived religion.

Moreover, religious experience of a very specific kind is often emphasised in dialogue. This approach to dialogue is generally known as the ‘contemplative approach’, the proponents of which are often critical of the science of religion or comparative religion because it cannot deal with religious experience.\(^{22}\) And in the Indian context, again, this kind of approach to dialogue concentrates on the dominant modes of Hinduism where mysticism is one of the vital religious experiences.\(^{23}\) The emphasis on mystical or at least ‘interior’ religious experience illustrates that ‘dialogue’ is confined to those very few people who consider contemplation or meditation crucial aspects of religious life.

### 8.2.5. Interreligious Dialogue, Relativism and Syncretism

The question of syncretism and relativism is another issue with which many dialogue activists are involved in the context of responding to the criticism from evangelical

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21 Koepping, *Food, Friends*, p.4.
23 For instance Abhishiktananda bases Hindu-Christian dialogue on Advaita; *Hindu-Christian Meeting*. 

opposition to dialogue. This issue comes up again and again: are there limitations to the relationship that is sought in a dialogue meeting? Doctrinal discussions on topics cited earlier tend – certainly for Christians – to be controlled by anxiety lest those taking a clearly exclusivist position accuse discussants of compromise which they would see as dangerous, even sinful. In such a context, the dialogue promoters spend much time in establishing theological and scriptural legitimacy for dialogue and arguing whether dialogue is a mission or not. Even though socio-economic and political factors in India commonly require relations with people of other religions as they live them, any need for theological legitimacy leads to dialogue between essentialised blocks.

8.2.6. Common Platforms for Interreligious Dialogue

One of the issues with which dialogue activists are often involved is the question of the starting point for dialogue. There have been many efforts in this direction from the dialogue activists. ‘Where should one start in dialogue with one’s dialogue partner?’ is the primary question. This obsession with common platforms and starting points for dialogue also has been typical of elite dialogue in India. As mentioned, these range from commonalities of religions, theocentricism, christocentrism, soteriology, religious experience, religious potentials for social justice and peace to modernity, ethics, nation-building and communal harmony. Dialogue activists explicate much on common themes and platforms for dialogue but fail to look at the many common aspects in everyday life of ordinary people which help to maintain relationships among them.

8.2.7. Interreligious Dialogue and Reaching Grassroots

As I have mentioned earlier, one way the elite nature of dialogue is visible is its ‘emphasis to reach grassroots’ or ‘taking dialogue to grassroots.’ In this regard, celebrating religious festivals in villages is considered as one fruitful way of reaching grassroots people with the purpose of giving them awareness about dialogue. Some of my dialogue interviewees expressed their opinion that this is the only way through

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24 I have discussed this in pages 70-72 in Chapter 2.
which they can take dialogue to the ‘ordinary’ people. A village in the district is selected by the interreligious groups for this event. Mostly a village in which people belonging to all religions of the region – Hindus, Muslims and Christians – is selected and the elite interreligious groups, with the help of the local village leaders, do the preparations. Inviting local politicians and officials from the District Administration. The main part of the programme contains speeches on festivals from the perspective of all religions, but without further discussion.

An important issue about the dialogic celebrating of festivals in villages is site selection. Multi-religious villages are usually selected on the assumption that unity and solidarity needs to be demonstrated. While villagers have to live together in reasonable multi-faith amity, dissention is assumed by the organising elite. As discussed in Chapter 3, scholars or religious leaders interested in dialogue are invited to speak about the meaning of the particular festival(s) from different religious viewpoints. Much often government dignitaries and political leaders are invited for these celebrations. Because of the nature and participants of these programmes, the village people who come to attend these programmes seldom see them as interreligious programmes rather as political meetings.

In addition to reaching people through celebrations of religious festivals, the interreligious groups also endeavour to train villagers, gathering them together and addressing about dialogue. They are taught to have deep faith in their own religions, to respect other religions, and not to consider their religions to be superior but rather believe that God’s revelation is found in all religions. Interreligious training is aimed at students in schools and colleges as well. This indicates that there is a nature of dominance in dialogue, which has to be critiqued in the light of non-elite interreligious relationships at the grassroots to which I now turn.

25 Interviews, Chokkalingam; Tobias.
26 My experience and observations.
27 Interviews, Salaam; Dhasan; Harris; Nagalingam. During my involvement, I have witnessed to such proposals in the planning meetings.
28 My observations.
29 This I could observe when I undertook follow-up programmes in a village called Soorangudi in the district where multi-religious celebration of festivals took place during 1998-1999.
30 Interviews, Tobias; Maria Vincent.
31 Interviews, Tobias; Maria Vincent.
32 I have discussed this in detail under dialogue programs in Chapter 3.
8.3. Grassroot Relationships among People with Different Religious Identities in Gramam

This section sets out Gramam villagers’ views about interreligious and inter-group relationships, gleaned from visiting, observing and interviewing them, as described in the research methodology in the Introduction and Chapter 3. I conducted many interviews in Gramam in which some of my interviewees provided me with some good information, while some gave very short interviews giving some general details.33 In addition to this I also conducted two focus-group interviews one on 23 June 2008 and the other on 08 July 2008.

The first focus group was attended by 5 men – Moses, in his 40s, working as a mechanic, and Isaac, a young man working in an internet centre in Nagercoil, both Christians; Murugan, a retired transport driver from Hindu community who lives close to the CSI church; and Ahmad, in his 50s and running a small tea shop in Gramam, and Hameed, late 20s, a mason, both Muslims. The second focus-group interview was attended by 8 people – three Christians: Samuel a retired primary school teacher, who has worked in the school in Gramam, in his late 60s, Abraham, a retired tea estate worker in western Tamil Nadu, and Joseph in his late 30s doing carpentry work in the Gramam; three Hindus: Narayana, in his 40s, working in a private cashew nut factory in the region; Parvathi, a housewife in her 50s, doing handicraft works such as making baskets and Saraswathi, a housewife in her 50s, from the Hindu community; two Muslims: Harun who runs a small business of making and selling mats, in his 50s and Mohammed, in his 40s, running a provision store in the nearby village.

I had prepared a set of questions for them (Appendix 3) which they discussed in the interviews, after I explained the purpose of the research. I had fifteen questions on three areas – five questions each on their attitudes to religion, religious identities and other identities; on their perceptions of religious conflicts and on how they approach them; and five questions on their knowledge and understanding of dialogue and their different ways of maintaining relationship with each other. After giving the

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33 The questions I prepared for the interviews are in Appendix 2.
questions, I facilitated the discussion and collected the information that surfaced in the exchanges between them. In the following sections I am making use of that information, along with the information I collected from people there through individual interviews.

8.3.1. Ordinary People’s Knowledge of Interreligious Dialogue

Few people in Gramam know what dialogue is. Some have heard about it, but there has been no formal interreligious programme in Gramam.\(^34\) In fact none of my interviewees in Gramam knew the Tamil term for interreligious dialogue: ‘Palsamaya Uraiyaadal’, ‘multi-religious conversation.’ People do speak to each other, converse with each other, but any concept such as dialogue is foreign to them. It is interesting to note that there was a CSI pastor working in the local CSI church who was one of the dialogue promoters. While he, as he said to me, was doing some interreligious work there, his flock did not quite see that. Some of the non-Christians said that they were very happy with this pastor who was unlike the previous pastors of that church because he was very good with all people irrespective of religions, and prayed for all people.\(^35\) Nevertheless they did not see him as a dialogue man, perhaps because dialogue has not been a special thing for them.\(^36\)

As I discussed in the beginning of this chapter elite dialogue often claims that knowledge of religions is important for the adherents of different religions, and that dialogue, and only that, is a place where mutual understanding between people of different religions, the prerequisite of dialogue, is created. Yet this has little impact on people at the grassroots, because their experience seems to be different from the elite religious/interreligious experience. The use of language in dialogue is very selective, everyday terms are made into concepts. For example, ‘multi-religious friends’ is a common term, but the same image in dialogue is used as ‘partners in dialogue’. The common and ordinary term and phrases are being conceptualised and essentialised in dialogue. This has no application for or influence on interreligious relationships among people at the grassroots.

\(^34\) Focus-group Interview, Samuel.
\(^35\) Focus-group Interview, Murugan.
\(^36\) Focus-group Interview, Samuel.
8.3.2. Grassroots Perceptions of Religious Conflicts

People at the grassroots do not see that problems lie in religions, for conflict has many sources and dimensions. One Hindu woman said that “there is nothing called religious conflicts”. She held that “conflicts exist in different context in different ways. Even in a family two brothers are fighting, and families fight with their neighbours. One does not need religion at all to fight with another person.” This is the way most of the people at the grassroots look at conflicts in society. As mentioned earlier, for people in Gramam, ‘conflict comes first, religion comes only after that’. They are convinced that most of what are known to be ‘religious clashes’ are personal problems related to socio-economic well being, or problems due to selfishness or political manipulation or manipulation by people with vested interests for power. In order to aggravate the personal problems religious or other identities are used. For example, a dialogue activist may say that religious superiority or a theological issue is a problem, but grassroots people source problems differently: selfishness, jealousy, politics, economic issues and other factors. One of my interviewees said: “My idea is that selfishness is the reason. Conflicts between people occur basically due to selfishness and jealousy. These are personal problems between individuals. But these problems are often labelled and projected as religious in order to get wider support from others who share the same religious identity.”

Another important issue is that they are also aware of the process by which any small conflict can become a religious clash. They think that conflicts between individuals have to be stopped at the initial stage, lest it becomes a communal conflict, and mostly as a local community they make efforts for that. One of the elements that

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37 Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
38 Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
39 Focus-group Interview, Mohammed.
40 Focus-group Interview, Samuel.
41 Focus-group Interview, Mohammed.
42 Focus-group Interview, Harun.
43 Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
44 Focus-group Interview, Samuel.
45 Focus-group Interview, Mohammed.
can covert a conflict between two or some individuals into communal conflicts is third person involvement.\textsuperscript{46} One woman interviewee said thus:

the third person involvement can create even conflicts between mother and son. A third person will go and talk one thing to the son and the other thing to the mother, thus create problems. Until and unless there is an involvement of third person, even if you are enemies, you wouldn’t come to fighting in the street.\textsuperscript{47}

One of the major group of people who are referred to as the ‘third persons’ in the context of religious conflicts are politicians, religious leaders and people with personal vested interests.\textsuperscript{48} People believe that politicians misuse religions for vote politics which lead to tensions and conflicts among people. For a Muslim man,

All people are good. But there are people to instigate. They are political and religious heads. They will kindle the ‘feeling’ of people to fight with each other. Few individuals will do this kindling act for their selfish reasons. Even the people who do not want to fight, are kindled by such activities.\textsuperscript{49}

A prominent discussant on third-party involvement, already cited above, explained further that:

when politicians and religious heads instigate, many people ignore what they say. But some, for many reasons, will follow these people: a group which is alcoholic, and has no work, go for making problems. People with families, works to do, have and look for some prestige in society, and have the awareness that they should see the faces of the same people next day, will not go for conflicts. And the same politicians who have instigated these people to fight would come for solving it.\textsuperscript{50}

The people in Gramam said that when problems occur between Hindus and Muslims or Hindus and Christians or Muslims and Christians in other parts of the district or elsewhere in India, they believe that the problems are happening somewhere for some personal reasons which have been religiously coloured.\textsuperscript{51} A Muslim man, responding to my question of the impact of ‘religious’ conflicts outside their village, said thus:

During Babar Masijid problems, even though this raised concerns among Muslims in Gramam, we never thought the nearby Hindus as enemies. It was considered as a clash occurred somewhere between some Hindus and some Muslims. The same

\textsuperscript{46} Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.  
\textsuperscript{47} Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.  
\textsuperscript{48} Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.  
\textsuperscript{49} Focus-group Interview, Harun.  
\textsuperscript{50} Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.  
\textsuperscript{51} Focus-group Interview, Mohammed.
way here no Hindu supported the demolition of the Babri Masjid issue. When Godra train burning took place and the clashes were going on in Gujarat, the Hindus here did not consider us as their enemies.\textsuperscript{52}

Grassroot people’s understanding of and attitudes to conflicts does not mean that there are no conflicts among them where religion is implicated. In fact there are some cases where religious identities of people are harnessed to maintain conflicts by those with vested interests. Two incidents can be mentioned here:

Christian poor couple was betrayed by a church-going rich Christian couple when the former’s house collapsed in rain and he applied for government help. The Christian couple informed the government officials that he (the poor person) has a lot of wealth and saw that the poor person does not get help from government. When another person who happened to be Muslim saw this and asked the couple about this, he was told thus: ‘it is between us Christians. You, Muslim, do not have anything to do with this’ \textsuperscript{53}

This incident is very important, because religious belonging is used in a context of another problem, to aggravate it by adding one more platform for division or difference.

There was a dispute between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman about a neem tree which was on the border of their lands. The dispute was about to whom it belongs, but in the course of dispute, it became a quarrel. Then the Hindu man threatened the woman saying that he would complain to the police that this women belongs to ‘Al-Umma Muslim terrorist group’. Like the above incident, it is also a problem which is nothing to do with religion or religious identity, but for personal reasons the difference in religious identity is misused.\textsuperscript{54}

These are but two incidents which show that most of the time what we call a Hindu-Muslim or Hindu-Christian or Christian-Muslim problem is actually a personal problem which for strategic reasons has religious identity deliberately added. In order to activate the quarrel, there is a tendency to look for more weapons, and it is primarily religious difference or identity or belongingness which is used as a tool to negate a person, even though religious identity per se plays little role in conflicts. In other words, where a person is ostensibly attacked for not believing in a religion and for not belonging to a religion, the underlying reason is usually to do with economic

\textsuperscript{52} Focus-group Interview, Mohammed.  
\textsuperscript{53} Focus-group Interview, Harun.  
\textsuperscript{54} Interview, Fatima. Fatima narrated who in her 50s is a house wife from Muslim community, and she narrated this that happened to one of her relatives in the village.
well being, social dignity or status, religion being used as an instrument to aggravate the conflict.  

Regarding the 1982 clashes in the district, many people in Gramam maintained that they never saw it as a religious problem at all, but one between coastal people and inland people. This is contrary to what most of the dialogue promoters as well as politicians and religious heads in the district believe. One Muslim man from Gramam said: “The fear was that the fisher-folk people may come against us and if they come we should escape, protect ourselves together. Protecting all the people in the village was a major thing, and all Hindus, Muslims and Christians were together.” Thus, for Gramam people, the 1982 clashes were in no way religious clashes between Christians and Hindus, and they have seen it and faced it through their ‘village’ identity. They continue to see that as a problem between fisher-folk who lived in the coastal area and people who lived inlands. Compare this with how dialogue projects these clashes to be religious!

8.3.3. Naming and (Religious) Identity

I discussed in Chapter 5 how people in Kanyakumari district maintain multiple group identities and intra-religious identities as against the claim of dialogue activists that they are divided along the lines of fixed religious identities. This is also same with people in Gramam village. The fixed religious terms based on world-religion categories such as Hindus, Muslims and Christians are seldom used by people in Gramam to refer to each other in the everyday context of their life. As I mentioned earlier, it was me who used these terms quite often for the sake of my questions in the interviews with them: they did not. During the interviews they used the names of people whom they were talking about (even in the context where I did not know who that person was) rather than mentioning their religious (or for that matter any other) identity. When they talked about the conflicts they had with others, they rarely referred to religious identity. Particularly when the Muslim woman was explaining to me about the conflict regarding the neem tree, I noticed that not even once did she...

55 Focus-group Interview, Mohammed.
56 As I observed, all the focus-group interviewees looked at the conflict from this perspective.
57 Focus-group Interview, Harun.
mention the term ‘Hindu’ to refer to her opponent, using his name only.\textsuperscript{58} Of course one can argue that one’s religious identity can often be discerned through names, and this is true, yet names of people with other religious identities rarely referred to their religious identities. Elite dialogue activists tend to assume all villagers will be categorised by religious identity and base deliberations on that.

8.3.4. Relativism: Experiential and Not Theological

When people in Gramam talk about religions, they most often say that ‘all religions are the same’, and ‘God is one’. They ignore many religious doctrinal issues, saying that God came to save all the people and worship any God. They say: when suffering comes we just look for any God to help us. One Hindu woman said, “our children used to go to functions in mosque and church, participate in them, eat whatever they give, and ‘worship their God remembering our God’”.\textsuperscript{59} In the same way Muslims and Christians also participate in many of the religious festivals of each other and of Hindus, without learning about the festival. This kind of interaction and relativism at the grassroots is different from so-called relativism at the elite level, Christian theologians of dialogue being particularly nervous of relativism, as is evident in many aspects of their writings. Rural relativism is neither doctrinal nor structured, but social, seeing all religions as equally and almost interchangeably valid.

Yet dialogue discusses doctrines in institutional religions, and seems almost committed to doctrinisation. This is because, of course, it mostly works within religious institutions and hence the endorsement of religious authority is often sought for dialogue. Whenever religious conservatives object to dialogue, the proponents attempt both to defend dialogue as well as reaffirm their own religious doctrines. As a result, much material is produced which can be termed ‘dialogue on dialogue’, further essentialising what is already distant from people.

8.3.5. Interreligious Relationships as Spontaneous

Interreligious relationships among people in Gramam are spontaneous. They do not need any agency or a ‘common platform’ to relate with their neighbours from other

\textsuperscript{58} Interview, Fatima.
\textsuperscript{59} Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
religions, nor is prior knowledge of religions expected. Multiplicity is just part of everyday life. Their relationships are spontaneous simply because they co-exist and relate with each other in variety of informal ways. For them there is no such thing as ‘starting-points for dialogue’. Moreover the locations of interreligious relationships, unlike dialogue, are not selected beforehand. People meet in their houses, on their way, on roads, in tea shops and in many such places. Thus their spontaneous interreligious relationships are bound to the unpreplanned location of their meeting. One of my interviewees said that “We meet each other in our village every day. Irrespective of religions people help each other. Even for ordinary necessities we are dependent on each other.” They use terms such as anna (brother) and akka (sister) to address each other irrespective of religions. These are Tamil family words used in the context of familial relationships.

On the other hand, dialogue is mostly occupied with commonalities, starting points and common platforms. Theological concepts are often discussed and concepts such as Theocentrism, Christocentrism, uniqueness, commonalities and differences between religions dominate the agenda, in a carefully selected site. All this does not invalidate dialogue, but does make it of scant value as a ‘teaching tool’ for people using multiple identities at the grassroots to relate with each other.

8.3.6. Solidarity with Each Other

For people at the grassroots, tension in the name of religions is one of many crises in which they help each other. They may not strictly differentiate one crisis from the other, but helping each other during the crisis is important for them, for in daily life they are dependent on each other. The people in Gramam narrated many incidents in which their neighbours irrespective of religions rushed to help. Once, there was fire in the mosque. Immediately the people who came to offer help were Hindus, who also helped Muslims to rebuild it. People support each other irrespective of religions during times of crisis. When Ayyavazhi people needed a path to their

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60 This was expressed and discussed by the interviewees in the focus-group when I asked them about their ways of relating.
61 Discussion in focus-group interviews.
62 Focus-group Interview, Harun.
63 Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
64 Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
temple, most Christians in Gramam offered their land for use.\textsuperscript{65} If celebrations in religious worship places clash, there is a possibility of problems due to loud speakers. This is commonly avoided by discussing programmes beforehand to avoid clashes.\textsuperscript{66}

One Hindu man said that he regularly used to give a lift to the local pastor and Imam. He believed that people from all religions see this and witness to this and this will increase confidence in them.\textsuperscript{67} But in the dialogue circles people say that it is (just) the coming together of leaders and people from other faiths which will increase confidence among people belonging to different religions.\textsuperscript{68} However, dialogue mostly happens within four walls, but everyday life allows constant witness to these relationships.

8.3.7. Celebrating Festivals Together

While the promoters of dialogue think they have to go to villages to invite them to celebrate religious festivals together, villagers have long done that. The cooking of special food (meat) and making variety of sweets by all religious people is an important way of expressing solidarity with their religious neighbours celebrating a particular festival. In other words, when a particular religious festival is celebrated, mostly village people do not look at it merely as a festival of others, but for the community, and therefore make all the special foods, sweets and let off fireworks to share. That their own children should not be deprived of these special items on those days when their neighbours celebrate festivals is one reason, but it is also seen as solidarity among people in terms of religious relationships.\textsuperscript{69} This is normal, voluntary, but is also seen as special. This poses a challenge to formal dialogue festival programmes arranged by elites, which in Kanyakumari is a very recent phenomenon particularly after 1982 clashes.

In addition to celebrating their religious neighbours’ festivals, people also participate in the religious festivals and other celebrations of their neighbours. For church day in

\textsuperscript{65} Focus-group Interview, Harun.
\textsuperscript{66} Focus-group Interview, Narayana.
\textsuperscript{67} Focus-group Interview, Narayana.
\textsuperscript{68} Interviews, Khan; Tobias.
\textsuperscript{69} Focus-group Interview, Saraswathi.
the CSI church (annual celebration to remember the day the church was founded) in Gramam all religious people gather in the church.\textsuperscript{70} When Muslims celebrate their 12 days festival in their \textit{palli} (mosque), Christians and Hindus from this village participate. When there is an eleven day \textit{Thiruvizha} (festival) thrice in a year and other celebrations in the Ayyavazhi temple in Swamithoppu, the nearby village, most of the Christians and Muslims attend, participating in celebrations in the temple premises but not worship inside the temple.\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{8.3.8. Use of Oral Traditions, Proverbs}

The interreligious relationships of villagers are sustained through many oral traditions which include long stories or short proverbs about relationships between people, some of which were discussed in Chapter 5. Of course, religious scriptures are used in worship, but have little importance in everyday interreligious relationships. They often recollect their memories of past relationships in Gramam between people belonging to different religions, which helps them resist the influence of people with personal vested interests who wish to change memories of the past to stress deep-seated religious conflicts.\textsuperscript{72}

On the other hand we can see that dialogue is obsessed with textualisation. Use of religious scriptures in different ways dominates the elite dialogue.\textsuperscript{73} The importance of acquiring knowledge about other religions is often emphasised in dialogue. In such contexts what are mostly referred to are the scriptures of different religions. Dialogue proponents fail to note that the ordinary people are also ‘learning’ Hindu practices, concepts, and beliefs as they live. There is also a lot of knowledge about people of other religions among the grassroots. Another way the religious scriptures are used in dialogue is when different religious scriptures are placed side by side and texts are read from different scriptures. It symbolises the notion that the many scriptures exert authority on the participants of dialogue.

\textsuperscript{70} Focus-group Interview Samuel, Parvathi.
\textsuperscript{71} Focus-group Interview, Harun; Moses; Mohammed.
\textsuperscript{72} Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
\textsuperscript{73} See pages 73-74 in Chapter 2.
8.3.9. Solving Communal Tensions

Talking about ordinary, natural and familiar interreligious relationships among people in villages does not mean that there are no conflicts and tensions evoking religious identity: I have already referred to a few such tensions in Gramam. However, what is important is how people solve these tensions lest they become major incidents, and they do this by using simple everyday methods. One of the ways the problems between people with different religious identities get solved or is not allowed to become a big ‘religious’ conflict is that the person who is responsible for the problem is rebuked by a person from the same religion. This is common. For example, in the neem tree incident, mentioned earlier, it was another Hindu man who came and rebuked the man who abused and threatened the woman using her religious identity. In this way problems are defused before they become major religious conflicts.

I was fascinated to listen to an incident in Gramam in which a communal tension was solved before it became a conflict. A song was sung by an outside singer in a function among Muslims, who had arranged for an orchestra in connection with their celebrations. Christians and Hindus in the village had also contributed to it, and therefore gathered there with Muslims. During the orchestra, the singer sang a song in which the Muslim asks ‘who said we are foreigners?’ The singer sang this song twice. On the next day it was alleged by the Hindu youth that Muslim youth gave extra money to the singer to sing that song for the second time. When there was about to be a confrontation, one of the Muslim men approached a Hindu man who was considered to be moderate and asked him to tell the Hindu youth that he (the Hindu man) liked that song sung by the Muslim singer so he had asked the singer to sing it again. When the Hindu man came and told this to the Hindu youth, the problem was solved and the Hindu youth who had gathered dispersed. Ethically, one may question this untruth, but the people were happy that the problem was solved!

This incident indicates that the people in villages continue to live in local communities where they try to resolve problems for themselves. However, a political

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74 Focus-group Interview, Parvathi.
75 Interview, Narayana.
elite or a person with vested interests for power in such a situation will try to protect his or her power, never taking the blame on himself or herself let it jeopardise their loyalty to the wider group and make them vulnerable. In fact if political elites come across such a situation, they will all too often exploit the situation for their own purposes of attaining and maintaining power. This shows the difference between political elites and the local people who solve the problems because they think that the loss ultimately has to be borne by them.

Talking about the conflicts between people and the ways by which people in traditional communities in India handled them, Madhu Kishwar says thus:

What distinguishes ethnic hostilities in India from those of Europe is that, left on their own, our traditional communities have worked out eminently feasible norms for co-existence, including evolving common cultural symbols and spaces, and in sharing each other's rituals and festivities.76

However it should be added, in my view, that the traditional communities did this in spite of the problems they had among themselves, for example due to caste inequalities. She further says:

Most traditional micro-societies ... worked out rules of co-existence through a consensual process. Decisions were made on the basis of customary practices which kept evolving over time to meet with changing situations. Those who possessed the patience and skills to conciliate or manipulate local groups to elicit consensus among them about mutually agreed upon course of action were the most effective and sought-after leaders. The diverse communities inhabiting the Indian subcontinent were able to evolve fairly sophisticated and workable norms for co-existence because, unlike in Europe, there was no central religious authority mobilising sections of the population under its umbrella against those professing different faith. Moreover, local communities remained largely independent of the political rulers at the top, just as the secular and the religious domains remained somewhat independent of one another. Therefore, local differences in almost all cases had to be settled locally without help or interference from outside political or religious authorities. The local people understood that failure to work out such ground rules leads directly to basic insecurity for all concerned. Hostilities and attacks on others at a local level have to be carried out at personal risk and expense.77

In my view, it is true even today in many village communities in India. The problems reach a different level when outsiders with intentions for power enter and exploit it.

77 Kishwar, Religion, pp.XV-XV.
In the political culture today, that outsiders enter in order to exploit the situation for their own purposes of attaining power is an everyday activity of parties interested in dividing communities in order to attain and maintain political power. The practical intervention of dialogue activists in contexts of tension, and their practical efforts to contain them may also contribute to the maintenance of elite power not local empowerment. Yet dialogue activists meet together to discuss conflicts, and often claim that such coming together helps people who are taking part in conflicts.78 The situation is far more complex, and intrusion – however well-meaning – into a locally-managed situation is easily detrimental.

8.4. Conclusion: The Limitations of the Current Elite Dialogues

Thus we note that dialogue as practised today has many limitations when compared to the living experiences of grassroots people. It has an understanding of religions, religious identity and religious violence which have been influenced by colonial forms of knowledge. It has uncritically accepted these categories, which it has further popularised through its discourses. The actualities of interreligious relationships are conceptualised, essentialized and idealised, and in the process a lot of energy is spent on defining and defending dialogue. Defending dialogue becomes crucial and is associated with doctrinal issues, with anxieties about syncretism and relativism being directed against interreligious dialogue. It seeks for common platforms and starting points and also delineates prerequisites for dialogue in a very particular way to include knowledge of religions, inner experience and spirituality. In its approach, discussion of theological, philosophical and ontological concepts and doctrinal issues become the central activity. The use of religious scriptures in dialogue also sets limitations for a dialogue preoccupied with textualisation.

In their articulation of religious conflicts, dialogue proponents often ignore the different socio-economic and political factors along with power structures which underlie many conflicts, seeing conflicts between people through a religious lens held by elite power-holders. Moreover, dialogue activists often talk about grassroots dialogue meaning ‘taking dialogue to the grassroots’. The patronising assumption is

78 Interview, Khan.
that interreligious awareness is lacking among such people and that it is the responsibility of dialogue activists to educate ‘these people’ about it. What is ignored and subjugated in this process is the existence of various kinds of relationships among people at the grassroots in their daily lives.

In opposition to the claim by dialogue proponents that the grassroots people need an awareness of dialogue to enable relatedness, we have seen among people in Gramam that they already relate well one with another. Without knowing what dialogue is, and without being influenced by elite forms of dialogue, the people at the grassroots exhibit knowledge of their religious neighbours, learn from each other, contribute to each other and live in solidarity. The issues of syncretism and relativism do not affect them – but this does not mean that they do not have any faith traditions. Rather it indicates that people at the grassroots do not primarily understand their identity and their neighbours’ identity in terms of exclusivist religion. They participate in and celebrate different festivals and interact with each other in their everyday life. Thus they maintain spontaneous living interreligious relationships in their everyday lives.

My purpose in this chapter is not to romanticise the experiences of the people at grassroots to argue that they live in perfect peace and harmony. Rather, they do have everyday conflicts between them, but they also have resources to resolve them. One such resource is that they do not look at conflicts between them primarily in terms of religion. This is in fact a significant difference from how dialogue proponents look at and interpret ‘religious conflicts’. These realities among people at the grassroots pose challenges to elite dialogue and point out its limitations. This means that it is not only grassroots people who should learn from the dialogue activists, but rather dialogue activists who should learn from the interreligious village relationships if dialogue is to address conflicts in society and promote peace and harmony among people through empowerment. Most importantly if a religious framework continues to be used to interpret most, if not all, of the conflicts in society, any attempts by dialogue to create better relationships may not bring the desired results. For these reasons dialogue has to move beyond these limitations and work for new approaches to serve its purpose. In the next chapter I shall present some tentative suggestions which may be useful for dialogue to serve society better.
Chapter 9

Re-visioning Interreligious Dialogue in India

9.1. Introduction

This thesis began with the hypothesis that dialogue in India – which was primarily developed to broaden Christian approaches to other religions and to encourage harmonious relationships between different religious adherents – has some limitations, in spite of the fact that a dialogical approach has clearly offered a better alternative to exclusivist models in India. I identified three limitations of dialogue. The first is the uncritical acceptance of religion as a separate category and related aspects such as secular-religion distinctions and the world-religion categories. The second involves the notion that people are primarily divided in terms of religion and that religious conflicts occur due to this division, religion being cause or instrument in ‘religious conflicts.’ The third limitation is the elite nature of dialogue which pays little attention to, or considers irrelevant, everyday relationships involving multiple identities among people at the grassroots, despite dialogue activists’ wish ‘to take dialogue to grassroots’. Using a postcolonial and subaltern theoretical framework, I have discussed and critiqued these appoints by discussing current literature and activity of dialogue activists in India and by observing and interviewing people at the grassroots. In this chapter I summarise the major observations and arguments of the thesis, and present some tentative suggestions for dialogue to be more effective in creating and maintaining peace, harmony and better relationships among people in society.

9.2. Major Findings and Observations

9.2.1. The Uncritical Acceptance of Religion and World-religion Categories in Dialogue

The fundamental aspect that is crucial for the concept and practice of dialogue is the idea of plurality of religions. As is obvious, where dialogue occurs, it does so in a context of many religions, such as Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism,
Buddhism and Jainism. Questions such as the differences between them are discussed both within as well as outside dialogue circles, but in what way, if at all, they are actually different on the ground is seldom paid attention to. This is primarily, I suggest, because each religion is presented as a unified whole and the daily reality for those identified with a particular tradition is assumed to follow from such elite assumptions of difference. Yet even this begs the question of why and how religion is counted as a separate category from other ‘systems’ such as ‘secular’ or ‘politics’ or ‘science.’ As discussed, the mere plurality of religions or the multi-religious nature of the context is often enthusiastically used as a starting point for undertaking dialogue activities.

But as argued in the 4th chapter, recent scholarship shows that the idea of religion as a separate category and the consequent ‘world religions’ are recent constructions which took place in the European enlightenment. Originally, the idea that religion is basically about worshipping God became prominent during the time when Christianity started to attain state status in the West in the 4th century AD, challenging the previous Roman idea that religion was just about following the customs and traditions of one’s ancestors. This new idea of religion also differentiated true religion as worshipping the one true God and pagan or false religions as superstitious beliefs. While this categorisation of true versus pagan religion was maintained in the West for many centuries, another dichotomy emerged during the European Enlightenment period when, with the advent of scientific reasoning and the experimental method, religion was separated from science, the latter being public and secular, and religion pushed to the margins as irrational, superstitious and private. These categories were then exported to other parts of the world, with very different understanding of religions and cultures, through European colonialism. Officials and other writers saw much of the colonised world as religious (and backward) while considering itself as secular and superior.

This transportation of the idea of religion and religions to the other parts worked itself out differently in different colonised contexts. For India, or Asia in general, the

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1 Interestingly during my research, when someone knew that my research is on interreligious dialogue, the immediate question placed before me was: ‘which two religions?’ Dialogue is strongly related to such an understanding of world religion categories.
idea of East or Orient was invented and then identified with a religion, or religious practices, judged inferior. Colonial administrators, missionaries, travellers and settlers and Western Orientalists were involved in constructing these categories and Indian elites simply accepted these rather uncritically. One of the major outcomes of this process was the colonialist’s and the local elite’s constructing and then identifying of Hinduism as the Indian religion. Despite the fact that this Hinduism actually contains and represents only the dominant Brahmanic traditions, it has come to define the ‘religion’ of the vast section of people in India, with ascribed identities based on that construct. This process has seldom been critiqued in dialogue in general, and certainly not in India, where the assumption of congruence between overall religious identity and the everyday life of the follower has been based on the masses’ replication of the given system.

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 5, there are ambiguities in dialogue which oscillate between posing secularism, secular nature, and secular constitution as the major characteristic of India, which respects all religions, and posing religions as an important, if not the most important, aspect in the nation, outweighing secularism. As such, there is an appeal to secularism to oppose attacks on ‘religious’ minorities, and indeed the contribution of religion to secular society is stressed. There is also a tendency, not only in dialogue circles, to differentiate Western secularism from Indian secularism, the former being irreligious and the latter multi or plural religious. Yet both maintain the religion-secular distinction. Also, since dialogue accepts religion as a category, it also readily accepts the world-religion categories, including the colonial view of Hinduism as one religion. Accordingly, much Christian-Hindu dialogue has concerned the intellectual and Brahmanic traditions. Further, dialogue seldom pays attention to the multiple identities of people, over-emphasising their religious identities – dialogue is always between Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Jews and so on rather than between tailors, farmers and teachers who also happen to be Muslim or Christian. The multiple nature of an individual’s identity and its impact on relationships with others’

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such identities is largely ignored. These realities suggest that dialogue in India has just accepted European Enlightenment and colonial assumptions.

9.2.2. The Idea of Conflicts Between Religions in Interreligious Dialogue

Since the notion that people have fixed religious identities is accepted in dialogue, the notion that they are also divided (or relate) primarily in terms of religions and religious identities is simply accepted as a base-line from which to overcome conflict. The understanding of religious conflict in dialogue is basically two-fold, causal and instrumental: religions cause conflicts and religions are used in conflicts. In the first, the lack of proper understanding of religions is said to lead people to conflict with each other. The notion that religions are prone to violence – often proclaimed by secularists – is accepted even in dialogue circles perhaps because it suggests the solution. In the second, religion is assumed to be used by power-aspired elites for promoting conflicts among people. In explaining such instrumental causes of religious conflicts, dialogue in India normally holds that it is primarily politicians who use religion to create conflicts between people.

Yet, as pointed out in Chapter 6, both of these understandings have shortcomings. The idea that religions cause conflicts bypasses other issues – socio-economic and cultural – which may also be responsible. The idea of politicians using religions to evoke conflicts also has shortcomings because it helps to maintain the religion-politics distinction and it still creates the view that two inimical groups of religious people are fighting through their own will or that of politicians. But in reality, during the occurrences of large scale communal clashes, it is always one politically motivated mob, or a mob that is interested in power, that attacks the other. Moreover any conflicts can be interpreted as religious not only by people aspiring for political power but for power of any kind, including ‘religious,’ that helps them maintain domination and control over others. But in both understandings in dialogue about religious conflicts – causal and instrumental – the easier and less contentious notion that people are divided in terms of religion is uncritically accepted. Moreover, dialogue says little about how any people with power interests can make any conflict ‘religious’ by naming and interpreting it as such: it may be too hot a topic to handle. Dialogue activists focus on religion’s place in healing conflict in part because that is
their strength, and including clearly relevant issues in other areas may weaken their stance. Yet therein lies a potential problem, not only in ignoring the many other issues and reasons for conflicts among people, but in furthering the notion that religion is a separate category.

The case study undertaken in Kanyakumari district about the ‘Mandaikadu religious clashes’ has argued that conflicts occur among people due to many reasons which are primarily involved with general issues and not specific identities. But when the power interested elites enter into it and name and interpret them as religious, that can further tensions among people with different religious identities. Thus the issue of teasing in Mandaikadu and the consequent conflicts which had mainly to do with caste ended as religious conflicts when the power interested groups so named them. The Hindutva parties in the region are the prime perpetrators of this naming and interpreting process, expecting that will help then secure the votes of Hindus – even if not in each election. Unfortunately the dialogue activists in the region, who strip conflicts of individual meaning in putting them into the generic context of religious fundamentalism and misunderstanding, actually help these power interested groups to perpetrate such naming, as socio-economic issues such as caste, economic and even personal issues behind these conflicts get little attention. Dialogue, in its endeavour to create better relationships among people, often ends up in promoting the myth of conflicts between religions.

9.2.3. The Elite Nature of Dialogue and the Treatment of Relationships among People at the Grassroots

The other important aspect this thesis has dealt with is the elite nature of dialogue in India. As presented in Chapter 3 and 8, the location, process, method and the content of dialogue are basically concerned with elites who are interested in developing dialogue. The nature of the interaction, such as the process of conceptualisation and theologisation of dialogue, demands participants have an elite education. Dialogue – which simply means conversation – is loaded with many essentialised characteristics. One of the reasons for such conceptualisation and theologisation has been to protect dialogue from those who insist that dialogue promotes syncretism and relativism and betrays the fundamentals of religions. This leads dialogue proponents to spell out
prerequisites for participating in dialogue, the qualities necessary to be a ‘partner in
dialogue,’ and many such ideas. The emphasis on the teaching nature of dialogue, its
urgency and necessity, are also often described, as are ‘starting points and common
platforms’ for maintaining dialogue, such as theological concepts like
Christocentrism and theocentrism. True, sometimes the poor and marginalised are
posed as a starting point in dialogue, yet only as subjects of discussion, not
discussants. Questions such as the nature of actual dialogue between a Hindu
landlord and a poor Christian or a rich Christian and a marginalised Muslim are
neither starting point nor platform.

Not only are the people at the margins or the grassroots sometimes the subjects of
discussion in dialogue, they become the targets for dialogue since the source of
‘religious conflict events’ is usually sought among ordinary people. It is argued in
dialogue circles, among many others, that religions easily affect such people,
characterised in true colonial fashion as sentimental and emotional and therefore
easily liable to ‘indulge in’ religious conflicts. The outcome of this attitude among
dialogue activists is that ‘these people’ have to be educated about dialogue by
professional dialogists through dialogue activities, awareness programmes, training
for dialogue and the like. The need for dialogue to reach the grassroots is discussed,
especially through celebrating religious festivals in villages, in order to educate the
assumedly ignorant villagers and entice them to participate, even though already this
is part of life among people who in their own ways relate and negotiate with each
other. Such living relationships are usually ignored in dialogue, even though clear
skills to mitigate or eliminate conflicts in the everyday lives are evidenced among the
grassroots.

9.3. Re-visioning Interreligious Dialogue: Towards Fostering ‘Inter-community
Relations based on Multiple Identities and Everyday Living Experiences’

These issues which have been discussed in this thesis and summarised above indicate
that if dialogue is to serve more than being an alternative Christian theological
approach to other religions but actively work for tension and conflict reduction, it has
to move beyond its present forms. In other words, dialogue as a Christian theological
approach to other religions works well, but that may not be adequate for all
situations. While discussing the developments in dialogue in India I noted that one of the major changes occurred in dialogue in India since the 1980s was the incorporation of socio-economic issues in dialogue. In my opinion this was one of the crucial shifts in dialogue. In this regard, the challenges liberation theologies and movements brought to dialogue was significant and it has helped to move from discussing dialogue within a western location where theologisation and conceptualisation was significant to the Asian and other non-western contexts where various socio-economic factors were emphasised in dialogue, even though clearly with theological flavour and foundations. In my opinion 21st century may be the time for another shift in dialogue. This would not only deal with plurality of religions and socio-economic issues from religious or theological foundations, but would also be fully aware about and base dialogue processes on the multiple identities functioning among people and their various issues. Crucially there needs to be an acceptance of, based on learning from not talking about, the lived realities of ordinary people. At present such people are at best theorised about from the point of view of dialogue activists, and that that means usually elite people. Such theorising in a rank-ordered society naturally replicates assumptions about ‘their’ childishness, lack of potential, of agency, intelligence and so on. That all, elite and villager, live with multiple identities does not enter the picture.

In such context, ‘inter-community relations based on multiple identities and everyday experiences’ may be an option to help people to maintain harmonious relationships, similarly the focus of dialogue, and it does not compromise the importance of a collectivity inhabiting the same space that is essential for any such relationships. While there are different terms such as ‘community’, ‘group’ and ‘society’ to talk about the collectivity of people, the term community may serve better in the context of relationships. Moreover community is not static, as long as it is defined by relationships, and there are always multiple relationships among people. If community is built on relationships, there is always a place for ‘communities of communities’ (not just a universal community). Inter-community relations invites the dialogue activists to widen their horizons in terms of the foundations or systems involved. Religion thus becomes one interwoven part of community working for harmonious relationships, along with other such parts, all or none of which can
emphasise relationships. A crucial shift is necessary to understand that people do not always function as ‘religious’ people, but in that or any other identity which determines the way they live, relate and negotiate with their neighbours. Hence all possible identities need to be taken seriously for good relationships between people. I shall discuss below some crucial aspects necessary for ‘inter-community relations’ based on the resources available for relationship work among ordinary villagers, which I have discussed in Chapter 5 and 8 and I shall also draw insights on similar or related issues researched, reflected and theorised in different contexts using sociological (including social psychology) and anthropological approaches which, in my opinion, offer comparatively better frameworks to understand everyday living and experiences.

9.3.1. Comprehending Plurality of Relations and Identities

As I have repeatedly pointed out in this thesis, dialogue is emphasised in the context of a plurality of religions, or at least an awareness of them, itself helped by dialogue. This approach is justifiable, and in my opinion, the claim of superiority of one religion over other religions – be it through exclusivism or inclusivism – needs a critique, and the critique has been offered in the dialogical approach. As I have mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, as a growing theological student I too appreciated, and continue to appreciate the importance of the dialogical approach amid a plurality of religions to counteract people belonging to one religion vociferously claiming that only their religion holds the truth which all others must embrace, other paths being false and to be condemned.

However, looking at this from a wider context where religion or religious identity is only one aspect of life, what I appreciate primarily is the plurality of religions, and not the plurality of religions. In other words, it is the plurality that is helpful when one perspective alone is ascertained as being insensitive to others. But the question whether everything what we call religion is actually that is a problem which I have analysed in this thesis. In this context, I propose that an appropriate task for dialogue activists will be to move from plurality of religions to plurality of relations and identities. In this regard, how people at the grassroots look at religion, religions and religious identities within their overall identities, which I have discussed in Chapter
5, can help dialogue activists move from a focus on plurality of religions to one of relations and identities.

“Why do you call us Hindus? We are not Hindus, we are Ayya Vazhi makkaal [people]” this was the reaction I received from one of my interviewees, which was also the attitude of many of my interviewees in Gramam, when I used the phrase ‘you Hindus’ in my interview with her.³ For me, generally, this statement summarises the whole aspect of the identities involved among grassroots people. The direct challenge is that a self-understanding of a person or group of people may radically differ from how the non-members of the group view them. As a Christian resident in the district for over thirty years, I have most often witnessed Christians viewed the Ayya Vazhi (and also Amman Vazhi) people as Hindus, and I have also done that. But this field research helped me to go to them and understand their sense of their identity. This means that when exposed to the expression of the self-understanding of the particular individual or group involved, in this case an Ayya Vazhi follower, the observer needs to understand how specific identities are constructed not in terms of where they fall short of the ‘proper’ world-religion identity, but how this specific person or persons constructs their particular identity at that time. At least four aspects seem to be involved in identity construction – how I view myself, how I view others, how others view me and how others view themselves in a specific time, place and context. Any construction of identities moves between at least these four aspects and hence identities are not static and singular but fluid and multiple. This indicates that the identities among grassroots are not based on world-religion categories or any one single category, and religious identities are only possible identity, all of which are formed and conditioned by several factors and concerns. The multiple identities I came across among villagers through my research cluster into three or more types.

First, the multiple identities among people can be viewed through intra-religious relations, or different identities within a religion. As I have pointed out regarding Kanyakumari district, people do not always use their religious identities to define the whole of their life and attitudes, and people belonging to each religion – Hinduism,

³ Interview, Parvathi.
Christianity, and Islam – have different denominational, cult-based, sect-oriented identities within them. Accordingly the specific and small denomination is usually cited as the identifier for Christians in Kanyakumari district such as CSI, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, Lutheran, Pentecostal and many of the Hindus would not prefer the term Hinduism in their daily context – using rather ‘the way of the Father’, ‘the way of the Mother.’

Secondly there are multiple religious identities or identities crossing a single religion. These are not dual or multiple membership to religions, but through their everyday life, people often cross fixed religious identities. Visiting, attending and eating in the worship places; using multiple scriptures (ignoring what others might call syncretism or relativism) and oral traditions along with other resources such as film songs, stories and the like – thus making their own hermeneutics – to refer to the welfare of human beings; sharing a house with family members with different religious identities: all these are examples of the irrelevance or at least the continual crossing of so-called fixed religious identities.

The idea of multiple religious belonging and some of the issues related to it, has been conceptualised in a book that appeared in the last decade: Many Mansions? Talking about the western context, Catherine Cornille, the editor of this volume, says that “Individuals who no longer feel compelled to accept every single aspect of the tradition without question come to adopt a more piecemeal approach to doctrine, symbols, and practices governed by personal judgement and taste. From here, it is only a small step to the exploration and selective appropriation of elements of beliefs and practice of other religions.”4 She interprets multiple religious belonging in terms of three dimensions: “focussing on the ultimate religious experience that lies at the base of all traditions”5; “remaining faithful to the symbolic framework of one tradition while adopting the hermeneutical framework of another”6; and “acknowledging the complementarity of religions.”7 On the basis of these, the

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5 Cornille, “Introduction”, p.5.
6 Cornille, “Introduction”, p.5
contributors to this volume, some of them are also dialogue proponents, look at the reality of multiple religious belonging.

At the grassroots level also these dimensions may be found, but not at the level of theology or conceptualisation, and it is indeed doubtful whether Corneille’s ‘remaining faithful to one tradition’ exists as more than a pious hope in the wider context. People in Gramam construct their own hermeneutics of multiple religious belonging which may not be confined to single religions in terms of either symbol or framework. For example, when I visited Hindu homes, I could see deities of different religions in their worship rooms. A 10 day Muslim *Kodi Yettruthal* (flag hoisting) in the district has been taken from *Ayya Vazhi* tradition which has such ceremony.\(^8\) Christians and Muslims offer rice or money to and accept the *namam* (*or* *thiruneeru*)\(^9\) from Ayya Vazhi and Amman Vazhi worshippers when they come home after festivals in the temple. These are some symbols that bear the witness for multiple religious belonging at the grassroots. The tradition that Muthukutti, the founder of Ayya Vazhi tradition, was a sexton in the nearby CSI church is a popular tradition prevalent in Gramam and in the district, indicating that Christians and Ayya Vazhi are related and therefore implying a degree of amity. I have discussed similar oral traditions in the district in Chapter 8.

These traditions do not concern singular religious identity, but they reveal how multiple religious identities are exercised. After all, in a single family there are multiple religious belonging. In my own family, six of us go to church and three go to temple, and the symbolic materials from each religion (such as the Bible, *or* *pooja* materials) are placed in our house which are seen, touched and used by each other. As I discussed in detail in Chapter 5, these multiple religious identities also have been researched by Peter Gottschalk who has worked on and theorised multiple religious identities in a North Indian village and who argues that for people in villages crossing their respective religious identities is so normal that not to do so would seem unusual.\(^10\)

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8 Interview, Harun.
9 See page 96.
10 Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim.*
Third, people live with other identities as well as crossing just religious identities. Caste, education, gender, profession, occupation, age, friendship and many other identities also are used in everyday life. This is not to say that they do not use religious identities at all – they do, depending upon contexts – but their normal way of life is not influenced by fixed religious identities, but rather multiple identities, on which Amartya Sen has worked in his acclaimed work *Identity and Violence.*

Pointing to people’s multiple identities, he says:

> While religious categories have received much airing in recent years, they cannot be presumed to obliterate other distinctions, and even less can they be seen as the only relevant system of classifying people across the globe.

Criticising the act of categorising people into boxes such as ‘Hindu Civilization,’ ‘Islamic Civilization’ and calling it a reductionist view, Sen says that this overlooks first, the extent of *internal* diversities within these civilizational categories, and second, the reach of influence of *interactions* – intellectual as well as material – that go right across the regional borders of so-called civilizations.

Noting that he as an individual has a number of identities at the same time, Sen speaks about the importance of the context for exercising our identities and how people move between choosing one or other identity. He says thus:

> Belonging to each one of the membership groups can be quite important, depending on the particular context. When they compete for attention and priority over each other... the person has to decide on the relative importance to attach to the respective identities, which will, again, depend on the exact context. There are two distinct issues here. First, the recognition that identities are robustly plural, and that the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others. Second, a person has to make choices – explicitly or by implication – about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to the divergent loyalties and priorities that may compete for precedence.

Thus Sen raises a strong voice for multiple identities and also the fact that we constantly make choices “about priorities to be attached to our different affiliations and associations.” This issue of people choosing their identities has also been studied by others in different contexts. In the context of social and economic life in

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Albert O. Hirschmann has investigated the issue of people moving from involvement in one thing to another. Concerning with why people move between public involvement and individual improvement especially in the western societies, he says that “my topic can be considered a special case of a more general problem: how to account for preference change, not just from private-oriented to public-oriented activity and vice versa, but quite generally from commodity A to Commodity B or from activity A to activity B.” Calling these preference changes ‘shifting involvements’, he points out the importance of understanding “people’s critical appraisals of their own experiences and choices as important determinants of new and different choices.” For him, “in this manner, human perception, self-perception, and interpretation should be accorded their proper weight in the unfolding of events.” According to him, shifting involvements of people appear mainly due to personal disappointment which goes up and down. This idea of shifting involvements also can be extended to talk about the identities in relationships between people who do not just function in the static identities attributed to them but change due to many reasons, one of which is personal benefit.

How people of different religions should be or are relating with each other is a proper concern for those involved in dialogue, but it is only one of many. People relate with each other within and between their religions in their own way, and not by following the models set by theologians and religious leaders, and they also relate to each other in their own ways according to context. These realities suggest that dialogue should move towards fostering inter-community relations between people from where they actually are without placing abstract theologising terms on them. It also needs awareness that multiple identities are usual for all people, a religious or theological platform alone being sufficient for none. Moreover, and this may be more relevant in rural than elite urban contexts, religion should not be seen as a separate part in life, but has to be understood holistically, mingled with all aspects of life. Singling out

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religion as a separate good thing in an otherwise bad society, (or as others do, a bad thing in a good secular society) will not help here.

In this regard, the popular phrase in dialogue of ‘commitment and openness’ also needs a different understanding. The issue is less about being committed to one’s own religion and open to other religions, even if that is what anxious conservatives insist on, and more about being committed to caring for peace and harmonious relationships in a tense society on which one’s own welfare is also dependant, and openness to accept multiple identities, one of which is broadly speaking religious, in journeying towards the core of the problem.

9.3.2. Understanding Real-Life Conflicts

Another aspect of my proposed model is the necessity to move beyond accepting religious conflicts to understanding conflicts in the real-life contexts. My purpose in this thesis has never been to critique the intention behind dialogue activists for trying to reduce tensions and conflicts among people: these must be lessened to avoid communal conflicts. My own involvement in dialogue was influenced from this perspective. But my observations have been that in dialogue conflicts are misunderstood or misrepresented, relating religion to conflict in one or other way as it accepts either religion-prone-to-violence or religion-as-instrument-for-violence or religious-potential-for-overcoming-violence. My critique lies here and my purpose is to see how dialogue activists can understand and address conflicts.

“Conflicts comes first, and then comes religion”\(^{21}\) was the response from one of interviewees from Gramam, which no one in the focus-group interview denied but rather used it in their ongoing discussion. As discussed in Chapter 8, villagers approach conflict in society differently from dialogue activists. Especially with the Mandaikadu clashes, people in Gramam never saw it as Hindu-Christian, and all Hindus, Christians and Muslims stood together to protect the village when the fisherfolk people came to attack. They root the prime cause of conflicts not only people in who seek political power but also other kinds of domination over others, and in personal issues among people, including religious leaders who exploit tense

\(^{21}\) Focus-group Interview, Mohammad.
situations for their advantage. More importantly they do not simply accept that conflicts are religious, as I have recorded above. This understanding is very important, given the efforts of many, including dialogue activists, to find the causes of conflicts in single established structures or imagined communities based on religion, caste, regional, language, and others. Moreover, and often in elite academic circles, the understanding of personal issues and jealousy behind conflicts between people are taken as simplistic and narrow explanations of conflicts: the causes of conflicts are sought in established structures. But villagers are aware of and talk about the multiple factors involved in what are called conflicts.

The issue of understanding conflicts using available structures in the conventional understanding has been critiqued in the contemporary context, as the world is increasingly witnessing to genocides, pogroms and mass killings. Insights from these studies based on sociological, anthropological and psychological approaches have relevance to interpret religious conflicts and they are based on experiences of people who look conflicts beyond any established structure. I have already discussed William Cavanaugh who has critiqued Mark Juergensmeyer and Charles Kimball for their religion-prone-to-violence approach. Questioning this approach and calling it a myth, he says that it is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from “secular” features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence. Religion must therefore be tamed by restricting its access to public power. The secular nation-state then appears as natural, corresponding to a universal and timeless truth about the inherent dangers of religion.... The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject. This myth can be and is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of practices and groups labeled religious, while underwriting the nation-state’s monopoly on its citizens’ willingness to sacrifice and kill.

Moreover, James Waller, an American Social Psychologist has done an outstanding study on how ordinary people are involved in violence. Emphasising that instead of seeking explanations for genocides in terms of community identities based on

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22 One of my interviewees, asking for confidentiality, said that during the Mandaikadu clashes, the then Bishop of the Kottar diocese arranged for a procession carrying the bodies of six fisher-folk Christians who were killed in the police firing, which also increased tensions in the district.

culture, society, nation, ideology, historical prejudice and ethnicity, he says that we need to “understand the ordinariness of extraordinary evil”\(^\text{24}\) and that we cannot simply blame politicians because there are many ordinary people involved.\(^\text{25}\)

Affirming that ordinary people are transformed into perpetrators of violence, he says that there are always multiple issues behind this. He says: “Indeed, the multiplicity of variables that lead an ordinary person to commit genocide and mass killing is difficult to pin down. It is impossible to establish general “laws” that apply to all individuals in all contexts and at all times.”\(^\text{26}\) He further argues that “the process [of violence] is far too complex to be reduced to one factor alone, such as the nature of the collective; the influence of an extraordinary language; psychopathology; a common, homogenous extraordinary personality; or the elaborate creation of a divided self.”\(^\text{27}\) Believing that they each may have their share, he argues that “it is not that all of the existing theories are completely wrong; rather each of them is incomplete.”\(^\text{28}\) For him the incomplete part is to do with missing out the ordinariness of mass killing. As a psychologist, of course, he bases his understanding within human nature where the ultimate influence to kill should be found – which reveals that “we are all capable of committing evil”,\(^\text{29}\) but lists three proximate influences namely, cultural construction of worldview where collective values, authority orientation and social dominance are responsible, psychological construction of the ‘Other’ where us-them thinking, moral disengagement, and blaming the victims involved for the violence meted out to them, and social construction of cruelty where professional socialisation, group identification and binding factors of the group are responsible.\(^\text{30}\) While I am not elaborating these aspects here, my point is to say that this challenges conflicts through structures, and this conforms to the ultimate understanding of conflict among people, even though in discourses it differs.\(^\text{31}\)


\(^{25}\) Waller, Becoming Evil, p.8. Studying Holocaust, he makes this finding.

\(^{26}\) Waller, Becoming Evil, p.137.

\(^{27}\) Waller, Becoming Evil, pp.137-138.

\(^{28}\) Waller, Becoming Evil, p.138. Emphasis original.

\(^{29}\) Waller, Becoming Evil, p.171. Emphasis original.

\(^{30}\) Waller, Becoming Evil, p.138; Chapters 6-8.

\(^{31}\) See also an article by Waller, “The Ordinariness of Extraordinary Evil: the Making of Perpetrators of Genocide and Mass Killing” in Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives, edited By Olaf Jensen, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 145-164; also in the
Another recent work *Genocides by the Oppressed*\(^{32}\) also challenges any fixed notions of conflicts. Pointing out the popular participation in genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda, the authors say that “It is at this level of popular involvement that the element of subaltern genocide is most powerfully evident.”\(^{33}\) Even though all these works are from different contexts, and many of their findings will be debated, my point is that they all insist on one point: conflict is complex and it cannot be confined to any singular collectivity or single reason. With regard to my thesis, they bring challenges for understanding conflict through the one lens of religion and religious identities.

Dialogue has to move beyond religious conflicts to understand the real-life conflicts in their multiple causes, processes, and means. One cannot speak of religion-prone-to-violence or religion-as-instrument-in-violence, or even say that religion is not violent and secular is or vice versa. If in dialogue the approach to conflict is misguided – either as religion responsible for conflict or religion not responsible, but secularism is responsible – it can lead to the opposite of its purpose. Hence seeing or at least thinking about the multiple factors behind conflicts is important. They may range from personal envy, jealousy, revenge attitude to caste or professional or any other difference. In such context, what is needed is a ‘context-specific-participatory-approach’ whereby the dialogue activists should understand the nature of conflicts through participation – listening to and understanding how the grassroots view a particular conflict – and should help people to address the conflicts, bearing in mind that it is not always feasible for dialogists, especially in rural areas, to challenge power holders openly even when their actions underlie the problem.

9.3.3. **Incorporating Grassroot Insights in Dialogue**

Dialogical approach to religions has influenced many people in the past few decades to accept dialogue as a good thing, imperative and urgent – the overwhelming number of the literature produced is evidence for this. No doubt, as often admitted by

\[^{32}\text{Nicholas A. Robins and Adam Jones, ed., } Genocides by the Oppressed, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.}\]
\[^{33}\text{Adam Jones and Nicholas A. Robins, “Introduction: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice” in } Genocides by the Oppressed, p.6.}\]
many religious adherents, dialogue has helped them to understand religions in a better way. Dialogue as intellectual exercise also helps to develop theoretical and theological reflections on the topic. However, how far the theories, theologies and the concepts around it appeal to people at the bottom of society drives the critique of the elite nature of dialogue. Of particular concern is how the elite dialogue proponents perceive and theorise the world outside dialogue, especially the assumption that many parts of society, especially the poor, lack dialogue which dialogists can provide. That dialogue continues among elite theologians and religious leaders is not a problem: taking it as a pre-packaged gift to villagers is. The insights grassroots people offer should be utilised to further the ultimate objective of dialogue – to promote better relationships in society. In other words dialogue is there not primarily to *give* something to the grassroots, but also to learn from them incorporating that learning in further dialogue. There should be a shift from ‘how to dialogue’ to ‘how do we relate’ and ‘why should we relate.’

This, however, would need the acceptance by dialogists and other leaders that villagers are equally people of knowledge and capacity. “We meet each other on the road, in markets, and almost everyday,”34 and interviewee said. The same person said that he did not know anything about dialogue while affirming that his pastor worked well among Hindus and Muslims in the village which also brought him problems from superiors within his denomination! As I have shown, relating and negotiating, including at the level of religious identity, is part of everyday life among people. Helping and meeting each other is done daily, and this improves relationships and curtails conflict. In a formal dialogue programme such meetings would not be called dialogue, but they help in achieving what is fundamentally the purpose of dialogue: peace, harmony and better relationships in society. In such a context, those engaged in dialogue should come down – different from the elite saying ‘dialogue should be taken to’ – to listen and learn and then help those people to encourage what they do, and not consider such ‘coming down’ as insignificant or a trivial first step.

The scanty perceptions of everyday grassroot realities and relationships as well as problems and the emphasis on ‘taking dialogue to the grassroots’ stem from issues of

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34 Samuel, Interview.
theorisation and conceptualisation about grassroot realities. The problems arise when such theorisations take place sophisticatedly ignoring multiple and complex factors associated with everyday relationships among people that cannot be put into neatly framed categories. For this, the issues of theorisation and living which are studied as part of subaltern studies are helpful. Studying history from subaltern perspective, Gyanendra Pandey has worked on the issue of un-archived histories. Commenting on the archive which is an important part of history writing, he says that “the very process of archiving is accompanied by a process of “un-archiving”: rendering many aspects of social, cultural, political relations in the past and the present as incidental, chaotic, trivial, inconsequential, and therefore unhistorical.” The archive also has boundaries and one of the boundaries is to keep away “the ordinary, the everyday, the ever-present, yet trivialised or trifling: conditions, practices, relationships, expectations and agendas so common as to not even to be noticed.” Nevertheless he emphasises the importance for examining “signs, traces, evidence of human activities and relationships – the body as a register of events; inchoate dreams; gestures, pauses, gut-reactions; feelings of ecstasy, humiliation, pain – that cannot easily be articulated or read, let alone archived, but that nevertheless, call out for attention.” Pandey’s observations and remarks have relevance for talking about grassroot relationships in the context of dialogue. Seen as ambiguous, inchoate and scrappy by too many elite dialogue activists, everyday realities need to be taken into consideration when action programmes are devised by outsiders.

In a very fascinating study, M.S.S. Pandian argues for how theorists should write ordinary lives – he focuses on Dalits in his essay. For me, some of the suggestions he makes for his fellow social scientists can be helpful for elite dialogue activists who are also involved in theorising and conceptualising those grassroot realities important for carrying out dialogue. Pandian starts his essay citing Gopal Guru who says that

Social science discourse in India is being closely disciplined by self-appointed juries who sit in the apex court and decide what the correct practice according the canons is. These juries decide what is theory and what is trash... [This] apex court...keeps ruling out subaltern objections as absurd and idiosyncratic at worst and emotional, descriptive-empirical and polemical at best.\(^{40}\)

Noting that the issues Guru and similar thinkers raise are the questions of “the privilege of theory over the empirical in social sciences and the consequent problem of hierarchies of knowledge within social science practices”\(^{41}\) Pandian says that it is time to recognise that the domain of theory-making or the wider field of social sciences is constrained by its own ground rules which often come in the way of producing morally and politically enabling knowledge(s) about dalits and other subaltern groups. Instead, those narrative forms...[such] as ‘raw empiricism’ or what the gate-keepers of social science theory describe as emotional, descriptive-empirical and polemical”, can in most instances enable such knowledges.\(^{42}\)

He argues that narratives available among the subaltern people (such as Dalits, grassroots) could be

a compensation for and/or a challenge to the deficiencies of dominant modes of theory-making in the social sciences. Not bound by the evidentiary rules of social science, the privileged notion of teleological time, and claims to objectivity and authorial neutrality, these narrative forms can produce enabling descriptions of life-worlds and facilitate the re-imagination of the political.\(^{43}\)

Pandian goes on establishing his points by studying two Dalit texts in Tamil which bring out the situation of being Dalit and experiencing untouchability. Such texts from the casteless, rather than writings on caste and castelessness, speak louder than that of, for example, the eminent sociologist M.N. Srinivas, who offered a Sanskritized understanding of caste, through an act of what Pandian calls a ‘multiple distancing.’\(^{44}\) He finds at least two such multiple distancing in Srinivas – one is distancing himself from the language of affect which does not have place in social science because “this violates the criteria of neutrality and objectivity”\(^{45}\) and the

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\(^{41}\) Pandian, “Writing”, p.96.

\(^{42}\) Pandian, “Writing”, p.97.

\(^{43}\) Pandian, “Writing”, p.97.

\(^{44}\) Pandian, “Writing”, p.103.

\(^{45}\) Pandian, “Writing”, p.105.
other is “the practice of the differentiating the so-called ‘real’ from ‘appearances’.” Pandian continues:

That is, what is being studied needs to be made sense of and explained. *There is no space for incomprehension or astonishment in social science practice.* This is perhaps why in Srinivas’s theorisation, caste has to be dealt with not on its own terms but reduced to other variants such as efficiency and development. Significantly this is precisely the moment in his theorisation at which the everyday and the ordinary are shown the door.

Pandian concludes that “thus theory, as an act of multiple distancing, and the dalit texts, that capture the world of the everyday, of affect and incomprehension, differ radically in their intensions and methods.” Using Stanley Tambiah’s distinction between the ‘discourse of causality’, “which is framed in terms of distancing, neutrality, experimentation, and the language of analytic reason” and “stresses the rationality of instrumental action and the language of cognition”, and ‘the discourse of participation’ which “can be framed in term of sympathetic immediacy, performative speech acts, and ritual action... [and] emphasizes sensory and affective communication and the language of emotion”, Pandian says that “while social science practices and theory-making belong to the discourse of causality, the dalit texts belong to the ‘discourse of participation.’” Citing Bruno Latour who says that for some, “the ozone hole above our heads, the moral law in our hearts, the autonomous text, may each be of interest, but only separately” and that “that a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, soul and moral law – this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly,” Pandian opines that “what remains uncanny, unthinkable and unseemly for theory and social sciences is precisely what is possible” for subaltern texts as “they can weave together ‘heavens,

50 Tambiah, *Magic*, p.108
51 Pandian, “Writing”, p.106.
industry, texts, soul and moral law’ and produce an ethical and political appeal that theory, as it is practiced, simply cannot.”53

These may illustrate why those multiple realities found among ordinary people which cannot be put into obvious frames are ignored, or patronisingly called ‘simple faith’ in dialogue circles.54 As already mentioned, when saying to a dialogue activist involved in Kanyakumari district that I was going to Gramam to research dialogue, the immediate answer was ‘Why are you going to them? What do those people know about dialogue?’ The underlying notion was that they know nothing and must be taught. I too have pointed out that Gramam people had little if any knowledge of dialogue, but I have shown how they live it. Those engaged in dialogue can learn from them how relating and negotiating with people of other faiths is an everyday activity not primarily informed by religious affiliation. Dialogue has to move beyond imparting knowledge to common people to learn from them of their actual living experiences, moving with the experiences of the ordinary people and incorporating their insights into the process and ultimate objective of dialogue, that of ameliorating conflict, empowered the marginalised to withstand manipulation, and striving for harmonious relationships.

Yet there are both grave difficulties and limitations in these proposals. Firstly, there are necessary ambiguities in these proposals and few fixed answers, for changing situations demand flexibility. But the alternative, using concrete structures to define relationships, is inadequate. What would be the place of religion in a model that calls for inter-community relations rather than interreligious dialogue? It has a place, but as it has been understood and interpreted by the varied people on the ground, not just the elites – and this does not mean talking of ‘folk religion,’ or the ‘religion of the ignorant’ but working with people’s perception and praxis as it is. Second, the authors, whom I have used in this chapter to draw insights to support my proposals, are obviously elites – as am I – who attempt to understand relationship issues in rural areas. But I am conscious of the fact that their insights challenge conventional understanding of social life, in which each element of life is compartmentalised, and

54 One of the Christian dialogue activists used to say this during my involvement. Since I couldn’t meet him with regard to this research, I withhold the name.
insist on the significance of the ordinary and interlinked nature of everyday life. More importantly they are theorists, but they theorise realities not on the basis of the ground rules of their discipline or perspective, imposing theories onto the subaltern, but examine and learn from grassroots realities and thereby challenge the ground rules of their disciplines. There is still the issue of who is decoding and deciding what those marginalised realities are, and to that extent elite control is still almost inevitably being exercised. But it is a start if the rural farmer and fisherman is assumed to have valuable knowledge and capacity and agency, without which dialogue for harmony is liable to be superficial, irrelevant, or an unintentional exercise of yet more power. Thirdly I am not saying that theology or theologies of dialogue do not have relevance at all. They have helped greatly with the various theological issues that arise in the context of dialogue, and continue to influence elites and the theologically educated. Fourthly, what seems to be the case in Kanyakumari may be also true of the lives of other people, even those elites who reflect and express those concerns. Nevertheless, my assumption is that elite discourses have their own ground rules, as Pandian mentions above, which commonly avoid bringing everyday life issues, such as survival, into public discourse.

I must admit that this was true for me as well. Indeed this research has been a very personal challenge. I initially struggled to put into theories and writing the everyday experiences I witnessed in the district and my observations of them, wondering whether they were really worth putting to paper. Finally I realise how important it is to observe and interpret everyday religious experiences as they are lived, rather than the ground rules set by any theory or discipline. I do not claim to have achieved this fully, for there is much, on several levels, which I do not fully grasp yet, and indeed much of my own experience in the field which will hopefully become clearer over time. But dialogue with the people from the bottom not delivered to them from those at the top is my succinct conclusion.

**9.4. Suggestions for Further Research**

This thesis is primarily confined to the context in India and also to Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Basically the Christian efforts for dialogue are the subject of
this research. The developments for dialogue within other religions may be comparatively less, but research may be undertaken about how dialogue works in different religions. Also the limitations of dialogue can be studied in another context using ethnographic field work. The formation of religious identities (and other community identities) can be studied using an interdisciplinary approach, the crucial focus of which should be how these operate in the hands of those who use it for their own power aspirations. The context where I have done field research involves Hindus and Christians almost in similar percentage. Perhaps studying how dialogue and related efforts for peace and harmony work in other contexts such as Orissa, where Christians are in a minority, and where there has been violence recently, or North Eastern part of India where Hindus are minorities in some states may also yield important results. How an approach to local harmony through fostering inter-community relations on the basis of fundamental multiple identities and every living experiences would impact on dialogue preparation, process and outcome is a key issue, and one I shall pursue.

9.5. Conclusion

This chapter has summarised the major arguments of the thesis and offered some tentative proposals for those engaged in dialogue in India to further their valuable work of creating better relationships in society. The call is to move from noting the plurality of religions to comprehending the plurality of relations and identities in society, to move further from uncritically accepting religious conflicts to understanding the real-life conflicts among people, and to move further from ‘taking dialogue to the grassroots’ to incorporate grassroots insights in dialogue. In a context where the relationships between people are based on a number of identities, and where the everyday living experiences of ordinary people must be taken seriously, accepting and working from the fact that inter-community relations are based on multiple identities and everyday living experiences may help the pursuit of harmonious relationships in a peaceful society, the basic purpose of dialogue.
Conclusion

This research has attempted to offer an evaluation of dialogue in contemporary India. Dialogical approaches to religions commonly exist in the context of exclusivist attitudes to faiths other than the dialogist’s own, and there is often anxiety lest its concerns are compromised in the wider context of society. Basic aspects of dialogue such as religion(s) and world-religions need to be reassessed from postcolonial and subaltern perspectives. Categorising people primarily through religion and religious identities, which has been much influenced by the West and the European colonialism, must be critiqued in the light of the reality of multiple identities operating among people. Dialogue struggles to create better understanding and relationships between religious adherents in the context of religious conflicts. However, in certain cases at least, the notion of ‘religious conflicts’ can be shown to be a myth, given the multiple factors involved in conflicts, including caste and poverty. Dialogue therefore needs to understand conflicts in their actual context. Moreover, much of the nature and process of dialogue is elitist, dialogue often being presented as a top-down process done by elite people to people at the grassroots. This can be challenged in the light of the everyday experiences of people at the grassroots who relate to their neighbours through multiple identities, and have established ways of avoiding and ameliorating conflict which, however, are less effective when those seeking to establish or maintain power enter the fray.

While the basic concerns addressed in dialogue, creating better relationships among people in society, need to be continued, dialogue needs to re-vision its ways and methods. First, while the emphasis on plurality of religions is helpful for dialogical approach to other religions, in the light of the multiple identities of people, dialogue should emphasise the plurality of relations and identities. This will have a greater appeal especially at the grassroots level. Secondly, seeing conflicts as being about real life not just religion can perhaps help dialogists to understand different factors involved in conflicts among people, enabling them to use dialogue more effectively to address them. Thirdly, in the context of ongoing relationships among people in their everyday living on the basis of various identities, dialogue activists should learn of and incorporate ordinary everyday experiences of people to develop the scope of
dialogue. This can be done through ‘inter-community relations based on multiple identities and everyday living experiences:’ such relations neither deny a place for religion, nor exclude the concerns of dialogue. Rather it invites dialogue activists to widen their horizons to accommodate and utilise multiple resource elements available in society, in addition to religion as it is lived, to work for a better and more peaceful society.
Appendix I

Research Questions

To the Promoters/Organisers/Participants of Interreligious Dialogue Programmes in Kanyakumari District

1. What is your understanding of religion(s) especially in the context of the plurality of religions?

2. What is your understanding of interreligious dialogue?

3. What is the necessity of interreligious dialogue according to you? And what do you want to achieve through interreligious dialogue (the purpose)?

4. What kind of interreligious dialogue programmes do you conduct or you are/were involved? What are/were the types and nature of your dialogue programmes?

5. Who are the participants in your dialogue programmes? For whom are your programmes aimed? What are/were the localities of your dialogue programmes?

6. What are/were the main subjects/themes/topics in your dialogue programmes?

7. Do you think visiting religious places of others will create communal harmony? How? And how do you understand and use interreligious worship in your dialogue programmes?

8. How do you deal with other forms of plurality (denominations within a religion, different cults, different sects, etc) in your dialogue programmes? Or how, in your dialogue programmes, the differences within a particular religion come to occur?

9. How, in your dialogue programmes, divisions and differences other than religious, e.g., socio-economic, come to play roles?

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55 A printed copy of these questions was given to the interviewees at the start of the interviews.
10. How do you deal with the question of identity (religious and otherwise) in interreligious dialogue?

11. Could you please provide some historical information about the interreligious relationship in Kanyakumari district for the past four or five decades?

12. Could you please provide some information regarding the communal conflicts in Kanyakumari district?

13. What are your views/comments on Mandaikadu conflicts?

14. What are the other conflicts known to you that happened in Kanyakumari before and after Mandaikadu conflicts?

15. How do you deal with religious conflicts within your dialogue programmes as well as where they occur and where their impacts and effects are found?

16. Have you interfered with any actual practical religious conflict/crisis? How? What is the usefulness of interreligious dialogue in promoting peace in such conflicts? And, have you talked to extremists to solve conflicts?

17. What are the responses of religious extremists to dialogue?

18. Do extremists come for your dialogue programmes? What is the nature and level of their participation in your dialogue programmes?

19. Do you think that factors other than religion help in promoting communalism? If so, what are they? How are those factors dealt with in your interreligious dialogue programmes?

20. Do you think that coming together in common platforms in religions can help overcoming communalism? If so, how? And how about distinctive features of/differences between religions?

21. What is the role of grass root people (people in villages who necessarily do not have religious education, who are not lay leaders and who are economically not very sound) in your programmes?
22. Do you take any efforts for the grass root people to come to attend your programmes? What is the level and nature of their participation in your programmes?

23. Do you do anything specifically (for example, separate programmes) for promoting interreligious dialogue among grass roots? What are they? How are they different from your normal programmes?

24. Do you realise that there is difference between an elite level interreligious programmes and grass root interreligious living every day? If so please give some details.

25. Do you think that interreligious living is taking place even where there is no interreligious dialogue? If so, where and how? And, how does it impact your interreligious dialogue programmes?

26. Have you learned anything from the people at the grass root level for your interreligious dialogue? If yes, what are they and how?

27. How do your dialogue programmes reach/impact grassroot people who might not have attended your programmes?

28. Do you have follow-up programmes after you conduct a programme in a place? After you conduct programmes, do those people themselves spontaneously come together in dialogue? If so, how, and what do they do for living together/coming together?

29. How do you evaluate the usefulness and the success of your interreligious dialogue programmes in the context of growing communalism today in spite of the attempts to combat it?

30. The limitations of dialogue, if any; and how can those limitations can be overcome? Or, what do you think about the future of interreligious dialogue?
Appendix II

Research Questions to People in Gramam

1. What is your understanding of religion, its nature and its purpose?

2. How long are you a member of this religion? Are you a convert?

3. How do you relate with your neighbours from other religions?

4. What do you know about interreligious dialogue?

5. Have you participated in any interreligious dialogue programmes conducted by interreligious organisations?

6. Has any interreligious organisation worked in your place? If so, what kind of work? Who took the initiative?

7. Has Mandaikadu clashes or any other religious tensions at the district, state, national and international levels affected your relationship with your neighbours from other religions? If so, in what ways?

8. Can you name some of the clashes between religions at the district, state, national and international levels?

9. Do you feel that you are different in terms of religious life, worship, when you meet with your neighbours from other religions?

10. How many times per day you meet with your neighbours from other religions? Where all?

11. For what all purposes you meet? (Purposes of natural meetings as well)

12. How do you approach when your neighbours from other religions celebrate their religious festivals?

13. How do you react to the processions of your religious neighbours?
14. How do you react and approach when your religious neighbours worship in their respective worship places – churches, mosques and temples, or in their homes?

15. When you meet together what are the subjects in your discussions (whatever may be)?

16. What is the nature of your religious life, worship, celebration, etc.?

17. How do you react when a person from your own religion clashes with a person from other religions?

18. How do you react with your neighbour from other religions when a tension has occurred between your religion and your neighbour’s religion in the district, state and nation?

19. Do you go to your neighbours’ religious places? If so, how often, why and where?

20. How do you involve or participate in the religious places of your neighbours? What are your feelings when you go?

21. How often do you go to your neighbours’ house?

22. Do you think that you all are one irrespective of religions and other divisions? If so why and how?

23. Does nationalism do anything with you in relating with your neighbours from other faiths?

24. How do you relate with your neighbour? For what reasons do you come together?

25. Do you always look at your neighbour in terms of religious identity? If yes, why? If not what are the other forms of identities that you use to look at your neighbour?
26. How do your neighbours and you react when some tensions based on religion happen between you or the impact of the same elsewhere come on you?

27. What are the symbols, principles, aspects, etc. do you think that unite you all irrespective of religious divisions?

28. Did Mandaikadu riots affect you? If so, in what ways? How did you help each other during that crisis or during other crises? How do you solve the tensions when they occur?

29. When some conflicts arise, and when you come to know that some extremists are behind them from any religion, do you and talk to them in order to solve the issue?

30. Are your neighbours helpful to you? How do you help each other?
Appendix III

Questions for Discussion in Focus-Groups at Gramam

1. What is religion? What role religions play in your life?

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having many religions, and multi-religious context?

3. What is religious identity? Is it more important than other identities?

4. What is the place of religious identity in relating with others? How does it serve? Does going to one’s religious places help in relationship between people?

5. What are the other identities involved when Gramam people relate with each other?

6. What are religious conflicts? Why do they occur?

7. How do the Gramam people respond to Mandaikadu conflicts in 1982 or any other conflicts?

8. What are the causes of violence and tensions among people?

9. Is there any religious tension in Gramam? How people deal with them when any tensions occur?

10. What you will do when conflicts between people or groups occur?

11. What is the level of knowledge of interreligious dialogue in Gramam?

12. What are the meeting places of people in Gramam? How often do people meet? Where all do they come together?

13. What is the need of relating with their neighbours from other religions?

14. To what extent people participate in others’ religious activities?

15. How can the relationships between people be improved and strengthened?
Appendix IV

Information about My Interviewees in Kanyakumari District

In the Introduction I have discussed about my interviews that I conducted as a part of the field research. I have used the data collected throughout the thesis, and especially in Chapters 3 and 8. In this Appendix I give the general information about all my interviewees in Kanyakumari district. I had interviewees from dialogue activists, from Gramam and from those who were able give information about the socio-economic, political and historical background of the district. While I give the real names of the dialogue activists, many of who have published works related to religious harmony, which I have mentioned/discussed in the thesis, I have given pseudonyms for my interviewees in Gramam – the names of Hindu gods and goddesses for Hindu Interviewees, biblical names for Christians and common Muslim names for the Muslims – and for the one political leader I interviewed. The details I provide are from the period when I interviewed them in 2007 and 2008.

A. Information about My Interviewees from the Dialogue Groups in Kanyakumari District

a. Dialogue Activists from Protestant Christianity
1. Rev. C. Rajamony, age 65, Retired CSI Presbyter, worked in Kanyakumari Diocese, specialised in religious studies for his postgraduate, worked with CISRS, CIRSJA and MEET.
2. Rev. Dr. A. R. Chelliah, Presbyter in CSI Kanyakumari Diocese, age 53, specialised in Missiology.
3. Rev. Dr. Israel Selvanayagam, CSI Presbyter, age 56, internationally known for his dialogue activities.
4. Rev. Dr. Joshua Sironmani, Principal of Concordia Theological Seminary, specialised in Religion in his doctoral studies, age 59.
5. Rev. J. Solomon, CSI Presbyter, worked in Kanyakumari Diocese, associated with CISRS, CIRSJA and MEET in Kanyakumari, now involved in dialogue activities in the United Kingdom.
6. Dr. Samuel Dhasan, a retired Tamil Professor, age 74, involved in dialogue activities through CIRSJA – secretary of the Programme Committee – PASA and his NGO, *Kanal Manakkum Pookkal* (flowers that give fragrance of fire).

7. Prof. Arthur J. Harris, a retired Physics Professor, age 75, involved in dialogue activities through CIRSJA and PWDS.

b. **Dialogue Activists from Roman Catholic Church**

8. Fr. Antony Tobias, retired Roman Catholic priest continuing dialogue activities through the Dialogue Commission of the Roman Catholic Church, has served as its first Secretary in the 1970s, age 72.

9. Fr. Jayaraj, Roman Catholic Priest, age 66, the current secretary of the Dialogue Commission of the Roman Catholic Church, leads the ashram Thozhamai Illam (House of Friendship) in Kanyakumari for dialogue activities.

10. Fr. Maria Vincent, Roman Catholic Priest, age 44, currently the Secretary of Thiruvarutperavai.

11. Fr. Panivanban Vincent, Roman Catholic Priest, age 68, the former secretary of the Dialogue Commission of the Roman Catholic Church, leads the ashram Anmeega Thottam (Spiritual Garden) in Kanyakumari for dialogue activities.

12. Mr. Pillai, age 65, a Roman Catholic lay person, retired teacher.

c. **Dialogue Activists from Hindu Tradition**

13. Dr. S. Padmanabhan, a retired Professor, researching about Tamil culture and temples, age 70.

14. Mr. Jaya Sekhar, Teacher, age 54, involved in social and dialogue activities.

15. Mr. K. Pachaimal, a retired Tamil teacher, age 60.

16. Mr. Murugarasu, age 38s, running a TV cable company in villages in and around Gramam.

17. Mr. N. Balarasu, a teacher (voluntarily retired) age 48, Gandhian, involved in peace and dialogue activities.

18. Mr. Narayanadhas, age 38, works in an NGO – Shanthom Catholic Centre in Kanyakumari.

19. Mr. P. Parthasarathy, age 32, involved in business activities.
20. Mr. S. Shenbaga Perumal, in his early 50s, working as a school teacher, actively involved in dialogue activities, live near Mandaikadu.  
21. Mrs. Thilagavathi, working as a social worker in NGOs in the district, involved in dialogue activities.  
22. Prof. B. Kasthoori Chokkalingam, retired Maths Professor, she involves in dialogue activities through CIRSJA. 
23. Prof. P. Nagalingam, retired Professor and former Principal of the S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, Vice President of the Programme Committee of CIRSJA, involved in dialogue activities through various organisation, age 59. 

d. Muslim Dialogue Activists  
24. Mr. Abdul Rahman, age 45, working in the government sector.  
25. Mr. Abdul Salaam, age 49, working in government sector, secretary of Rahmaniya Society, Vice President of CIRSJA Programme Committee, actively involved in dialogue activities in the district.  
26. Mr. Ahmad Khan, Lawyer, Notary Public, age 68, President of the CIRSJA Programme Committee, Islamic Cultural Organisations, work through Thiruvarutperavai.  
27. Mr. S. Rasool, age 39, working in government sector as a teacher.  
28. Mr. Shahul Hameed, running a business (printing press) and involved in dialogue, in age 52.  
29. Prof. K. Mohammad Faruk, retired Principal, involved in communal harmony activities.

B. Information about My Interviewees in Gramam  
1. Aisha, in her 60s, a Muslim woman, housewife.  
2. Abraham, age 72, worked in a tea estate company in the western parts of Tamil Nadu, CSI member.  
3. Ahmad, Muslim, age 41, runs a teashop in Gramam.  
4. Amman, a young Hindu woman in her 30s, follows Amman Vazhi tradition, and a housewife.  
5. Fareeda, a Muslim widow, in her 50s.
6. Brahma, age 33, a Hindu young man follows Ayya Vazhi tradition, works in a textile company. He has passed undergraduate degree, and he has also visited foreign countries in Asia such as Singapore and Malaysia.

7. Salma, a Muslim woman in her 60s and housewife.

8. Daniel, age 32, CSI church member, works in a telephone company. He has completed diploma courses after schooling and he travels all over Tamil Nadu as part of his work.

9. David, age 63, CSI church member, a retired driver from government transport.

10. Devi, a young Hindu woman in her 30s, follows Amman Vazhi tradition, and works in a nearby handicraft company, and has done undergraduate studies.

11. Eve, in her 40s, CSI Church member, housewife.

12. Fatima, a Muslim woman in her 50s, housewife, and Noorjahan’s mother.

13. Ganabathi, a Hindu man, age 63, follows Amman Vazhi tradition, and works as a mason in building work.

14. Hameed, a Muslim young man, age 29, works as a mason in building work.

15. Harun, Muslim, age 57, runs a small business of making and selling mats.

16. Indra, age 35, a Hindu man, follows Ayya Vazhi tradition, and works as a car driver locally; has an undergraduate degree.

17. Isaac, age 30, CSI, church member works in an internet centre in Nagercoil, a postgraduate in computer science.

18. Ishwar, age 38 following Amman Vazhi tradition, works in a private bank in Nagercoil, has done diploma courses after his schooling.

19. Jacob, CSI church member, works in the Police Department as Constable.

20. Joseph, age 38, CSI Church member, doing carpentry work.

21. Kabir, age 32, a Muslim young man, working in an Ice factory in the district.

22. Krishna, a young Hindu man, age 33, following Ayya Vazhi tradition, runs a real estate business, an undergraduate

23. Martha, originally CSI member, but goes to Pentecostal churches and also attends 7th Day Adventist Church in Nagercoil.

24. Mary, in her late 30s, a CSI member, works as a nurse in a hospital.

25. Miriam, a young woman, CSI church member, housewife.

26. Mohammad, age 48, runs a provision store in the nearby village.
27. Moses, age 44, CSI church member, working as a mechanic.
28. Mumtaj, a Muslim woman in her 50s, housewife (she is Harun’s wife).
29. Murugan, a retired driver worked in government transport, follows Ayya Vazhi tradition.
30. Narayana, age 39, follows Ayya Vazhi tradition, works in an NGO as a social worker.
31. Noorjahan, a young Muslim woman, housewife, and Fatimas’ daughter
32. Parvathi, a Hindu woman in her 50s, follows Ayya Vazhi tradition, and a housewife.
33. Rebecca, local CSI church member, retired as teacher in primary school, has worked in the school in Gramam as well.
34. Samuel, age 70, retired primary school teacher, has worked in the school in Gramam, CSI member, and organist in the CSI church in Gramam.
35. Saraswathi, a Hindu woman in her 50s, follows Ayya Vazhi tradition, and a housewife.
36. Sita, a young Hindu woman in her 30s, follows Amman Vazhi tradition, working in a cashew nut company
37. Siva, in his 60s, a farmer, follows Amman Vazhi tradition.
38. Solomon, a retired teacher, has worked on the history of CSI Church in Gramam.
39. Valli, a Hindu woman in her 50s, follows Amman Vazhi tradition, and a housewife
40. Vishnu, age 45, follows Ayya Vazhi tradition, and working as a teacher in a government school in Nagercoil.

C. Information about Other Interviewees
1. Dr. Jonathan Gnandhasan, a resident of Kanyakumari district, living in Geneva along with her wife Dr. Aruna Gnanadhasn, working in WCC. Being the son of the first bishop of CSI Kanyakumari Diocese, I.R.H. Gnanadhasn, he has been involved in various activities in the district. I took an interview with him on phone from the UK.
2. Dr. M. Immanuel, has written about the history of Nadars in Tamil Nadu and in Kanyakumari. I have mentioned his works in my thesis.

3. Dr. Peter, a social scientist in the region he is very much critical of caste domination in the district. I have discussed his works in my thesis.

4. Mr. C. Chokkalingam, in his 50s, a school teacher, Hindu, critical of Hindutva ideologies.

5. Mr. K. Sukumaran, a social scientist, who writes on various socio-economic issues. He has also written books on the history of people in the region which I have mentioned in the thesis.

6. Mr. Ponneelan, in his 60s, a Novel writer, and the winner of Sahitya Academy award for his novel.

7. Mr. Velan (pseudonym) is a district level BJP politician.
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