



Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Conflicts Globally

Analysis, Research and Resolution



ISSN 2373-6615 (Print); ISSN 2373-6631 (Online)

**Hope for Solidarity:
Perceptions of Hindu-Christian Relations among Indian Christians in North America**

Autumn L. Mathias
Social Sciences Division, Elms College, Chicopee, MA

Abstract

Incidents of anti-Christian violence have become more prevalent in India, alongside the growing influence of the Hindu nationalist movement and the Bharatiya Janata Party's obtainment of power in the central government in May 2014. Many individuals, both within India and the diaspora, have engaged in transnational human rights activism directed at this and related issues. However, limited research has focused on the transnational activism of the Indian Christian community in the United States and Canada. This paper is one component of a qualitative study aimed at examining the responses of Indian Christians in diaspora to religious persecution, as well as participants' understandings of the causes and potential solutions to intergroup conflict within the global Indian community. Particularly, this paper focuses on the intersectional complexity of borders and boundaries that exist between Indian Christians and Hindus in the diaspora. Analysis drawn from forty-seven in-depth interviews of individuals residing in the United States and Canada and participant observation of six events reveals that these translucent boundaries are bridged by participants' memories and their positionality across transnational socio-spiritual fields. Despite existing tensions as evidenced by some personal experiences of discrimination and hostility, interviewees communicated an overarching hope for solidarity that could transcend communal conflicts and violence. More specifically, many participants recognized that the violation of Christians' rights is not the only significant human rights issue, and they sought to ameliorate the suffering of others regardless of identity. Therefore, I argue that memories of communal harmony in the homeland, host country experiences, and mutual respect for religious salience catalyze hope for solidarity across interfaith boundaries. These points highlight the need for further research on the importance of ideologies and practices connected to religious faith as catalysts for solidarity and subsequent collective action in diverse national and cultural contexts.

Keywords: interfaith solidarity, religious salience, memory, positionality, Indian Christians, diaspora, Hindu-Christian relations

Introduction

Although numerous studies have examined both the motivations and tactics of long-distance supporters of Hindu nationalist organizations (such as the BJP, RSS, and VHP¹), very little attention has been paid to the anti-Hindutva lobby in the West, which includes a prominent network of diverse Indian organizations in North America known as the “Coalition Against Genocide” (Kurien, 2007). In particular, even less social science research has been focused on the Indian Christian diaspora. Just as Hindu-Muslim violence in India was nationalized following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by members of the Sangh Parivaar, Hindu-Christian conflicts have followed a similar pattern in contemporary India (see also Bauman 2013, 2015). In his ethnographic work, Bauman (2015) points out that Pentecostals in India are particularly targeted due to their aggressive evangelistic methods, although a number of large-scale incidents of violent persecution have involved adherents to other denominations, such as Roman Catholicism. “Freedom of Religion” acts in several Indian states have been a precipitating factor for the targeting of Christians. These acts are essentially anti-conversion bills that characterize the “right to convert” as illegal and attempts to convert an individual through “force, fraud, or inducement” as illegal, although “what qualified as ‘force’ was left purposefully ambiguous (Coleman, 2008, p. 262). In relation, members of marginalized groups in Indian society, notably the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, have been portrayed as lacking agency and vulnerable to conversion (Viswanathan, 2000).

At the time this research was conducted (between 2014 and 2016), specific instances of anti-Christian violence emerged as significant in the collective memory of Indian Christians. First, U.S.-based ethnic media outlets such as *India Abroad*, *India West*, *Hinduism Today*, and *News India-Times* highlighted the responses of both individual members and diasporic coalitions to the targeting of Christian minorities along with Muslims in the 2002 Gujarat riots, as well as the burning alive of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in Odisha state (then Orissa) in 1999 (Mohanty, 1999; Mozumder, 2008). In addition, violence against Christians in the Kandhamal district of Odisha in late 2008 displaced 50,000 people and resulted in the approximately 60 deaths (Das, 2009). This spurred incidents in other Indian states, including attacks on churches in the city of Mangalore, Karnataka state, and catalyzed collective action within India and the diaspora (Carvalho, 2008; Daiji World Media Network, 2008). Other incidents discussed by members of the Indian Christian diaspora included the desecrations of churches, sexual violence against Roman Catholic nuns, and the symbolic violence of reconversion campaigns led by the VHP (Chatterji, 2015; Poddar, 2015; Singh, 2015).

Literature Review:

Key Concepts for Understanding Hope for Solidarity

The concepts of translocational positionality, transnational social fields, memory, and religious salience form the theoretical framework for my analysis of how and why diaspora

¹ Alongside the BJP, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, or World Hindu Council) are civil society organizations associated with the Hindu nationalist movement. These organizations are part of what is called the Sangh Parivaar, or “family” of organizations comprising the movement. Founded in 1925, the RSS perpetuated the notion that Hindus were of the true Aryan race, and that Christians and Muslims were “invaders” of the subcontinent (Hansen, 1999). The VHP is a transnational organization that has played a key role in instances of communal violence in India, such as the destruction of the Babri Masjid and controversial “reconversion” campaigns (Hansen, 1999; Katju, 2003; Vandavelde, 2011).

Indian Christians express a “hope for solidarity,” despite intergroup conflict across time and space. I draw upon the broader literature of diaspora politics, which embodies the philosophical transnationalism of examining the reconstitution of meanings and boundaries across borders (Khagram & Levitt, 2008). More specifically, diaspora groups and their understandings of dynamics at various levels, from the local to the global, are heterogeneous. Yet, members of diaspora groups are continually influenced by events and processes at all of these levels; their lives are inherently transnational, even if they do not have the means or the opportunity to travel very often to the homeland.

Next, I integrate both the concepts of translocational positionality (Anthias 2002, 2008, 2011, 2012) and transnational social fields (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Khagram & Levitt, 2008) in analyzing participants’ understandings of Hindu-Christian relations. In particular, a translocational lens provides nuance in understanding the often, contradictory social locations occupied by Indian Christians across time and space (Anthias, 2012), as evidenced by intersections between caste, class, religious salience (the importance of religion in everyday life), denominational affiliation, past urban/rural residence, and current geographical location. In relation, certain trans-local loyalties, such as religion and ethno-linguistic identity, can reinforce collective identities associated with homeland-focused projects and imaginations (Demmers, 2002). Kurien (2017) also analyzes the notion that religious identity is a key trans-local loyalty that influences homeland-focused activism, and that “there is little research on how religious status in the homeland [minority vs. majority] can shape immigrant political activism” (p. 123). However, Kurien (2017) does not critically examine other aspects of Indian Christians’ positionality in this study, or the role of personal faith in stimulating response.

In turn, the importance of this aspect of positionality in understanding Hindu-Christian relations can be understood *vis a vis* the concept of transnational social fields (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). This concept highlights the web of power relations inherent in the social networks of migrants, which includes actors in the homeland and host country, religious denominations, and political organizations. Thus, this impacts individual’s positionality and how they view others, for which memory plays a key role (see also Horowitz, 2001; Bhattacharyya et al., 2002; Tilly, 2003).

In a parallel sense, members of a diaspora may incorporate rights frameworks into their understandings of and responses to issues in the homeland (see also Boccagni et al., 2016). Undoubtedly, this can also be influenced by the boundary crossing properties of religion, which can “encourage or impede transnational membership” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1027). Prior research on the South Asian diaspora has emphasized the role of religion in fostering both bonding and bridging social capital within and between religious groups (Brettell, 2005; Jacobsen & Raj, 2008). Therefore, Indian Christians are situated within transnational socio-spiritual fields, where spiritual beings and the specific practices directed at those actors (e.g., prayer) along with collective memories of both positive and traumatic events in the homeland, influence their views of intergroup relations (see also Alexander, 2004; Latour, 2005; Riis & Woodhead, 2010; Taylor & Osborne, 2010).

Methodology

Participants

The majority of the data was derived from forty-seven semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either in-person, over the phone, or via Skype. I also engaged in participant observation at six events between August 2014 and November 2015. A consent form was reviewed with each interviewee, and the majority of interviews were tape recorded with the consent of participants. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Most participants (87%) were first generation immigrants and could be considered middle to upper-middle class. Three non-South Asian individuals were interviewed due to their connections with local and/or international organizations (both South Asian and/or Christian). All first-generation immigrant participants came to North America to pursue higher education and/or employment, and in some cases, a better life for their children in lieu of these push and pull factors. Eight interviewees were ordained ministers representing various denominations, and are therefore ascribed a high level of prestige. Also, the large majority of laypeople I interviewed were involved in some type of ministerial work. One participant identified as Hindu, and is the spouse of a Catholic interviewee.

Out of all 46 Christian interviewees, 17 (37%) identified as Roman Catholic; 2 (4%) identified as Orthodox; and 27 (59%) identified with a Protestant denomination. Four of my participants were converts from Hinduism, which provided a rich and nuanced perspective on the topic of Hindu-Christian relations. The majority of my participants resided in the northeastern United States (18, 38%) or eastern Canada (14, 30%). Of the remaining participants, 9 (19%) resided in the Midwest; 3 (6%) lived in the southern United States; 2 (4%) resided on the West Coast, and 1 (2%) lived in western Canada. The sample was also diverse in terms of Indian states of origin although the large majority were born and/or grew up in South India. Most participants emigrated from four Indian states: Maharashtra (12, 27%), Kerala (11, 25%), Karnataka (7, 16%), and Tamil Nadu (5, 11%). This also reflects the states of origin of a majority of Indian Christian immigrants. Interestingly, 13 (30%) of the 44 Indian participants had lived in two or more different Indian states prior to leaving India. In addition, 6 of these interviewees had also lived in another country prior to migrating to North America; these countries primarily comprised those in the Arabian Gulf. In many cases, these experiences influenced their conceptions of intergroup relations and the importance of religious freedom.

Materials and Procedure

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach. As noted by Knox and Burkard (2009), unstructured interview formats are preferable in phenomenological studies. I employed semi-structured interviews to ensure that I was gathering adequate data related to the foci of my research. In addition, I integrated a narrative inquiry approach into both data collection and analysis, which gives precedence to participants' trajectories in communicating meanings attached to identity and collective action (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Molzahn et al., 2012). Similarly, in their study of the role of spirituality in participants' experiences living with serious illnesses, Molzahn et. al. (2012) did not define key concepts such as "spirituality" and "religion" a priori for participants. Rather, they asked broader questions about participants' experiences and introduced more specific questions related to the original objectives of the study if interviewees did not mention them within their narrative stories. My emphasis on a thicker description of participants' meaning-making processes is distinct among similar studies focusing

on active segments of the South Asian diaspora, such as Cunningham's (2013) use of structured interviews in his study of the Sikh diaspora (see also Ollerenshaw & Creswell (2002) for the descriptive strengths of narrative analysis in understanding the significance of events with respect to identity development). Thus, my interview schedule was used as a guide, "a foundation on which the interview is built but one that allows creativity and flexibility to ensure that each participant's story is fully uncovered" (Knox & Burkard, 2009, p. 3).

To recruit interviewees, I employed a criterion-based sampling approach intertwined with snowball sampling. I established a sampling frame by contacting over 130 individuals, organizations, and churches through various forms of media. At first, I mainly targeted members of organizations and/or individuals mentioned in media articles who have participated in homeland-focused activism, particularly around issues of Hindu-Christian conflict and minority rights/religious freedom more broadly. For instance, along with Indian Christians who were engaged with both local and/or transnational ethno-religious organizations, I interviewed two non-South Asian individuals who work with non-diasporic, international Christian organizations focused on the issue of religious persecution. Additionally, I purposively reached out to individuals of diverse ethno-linguistic and denominational backgrounds in an effort to expand my sampling frame. In accordance with these efforts, I employed the snowball sampling technique by asking each interviewee if they knew of anyone else who would be interested in participating in the study. This technique proved effective in recruiting additional interviewees with divergent experiences and perspectives on Hindu-Christian relations across the global Asian Indian community.

Participant observation involved attendance at events that were selected according to the following criteria: location, the main purpose/topics discussed at the event, and the potentiality to build relationships and recruit interviewees. Along with interviews, participant observation is a prominent method of data collection employed in qualitative, phenomenological studies to "illuminate the lived experience and context" of participants "in as much depth as possible" (Frechette et al., 2020, p.6). The events included a one-day conference in the Northeast with Indian Christians from diverse denominational and ethno-linguistic backgrounds, two annual meetings of a national Indian Christian association, an Indian Christian college group meeting in the Northeast, a Skype meeting with the executive board of another national Indian Christian association involved in political advocacy, and a church service in the Northeast.

I utilized QSR NVivo software to organize and analyze interview transcripts and field notes associated with the six events. In coding the interview transcripts, I simultaneously allowed "categories to emerge out of the data" (Bryman, 2004, p. 542) and took a "systematic, theory-guided approach to text analysis using a category system" (Kohlbacher, 2005). Thus, I integrated the conventional, directed, and summative approaches to qualitative content analysis as elaborated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). As a result, I deduced how some of my pre-established factors/themes were present in the data; I drew out significant and/or repeatedly emphasized terms and phrases from within the texts. Some pre-established themes that were related to my research questions included aspects of identity, membership in Indian and/or Christian organizations, types of activism (e.g., petitions, protests, prayer), motivations for response to persecution, descriptions of religious faith, frequency of travel to India, definitions of human rights and human rights violations, interreligious dialogue and/or diversity, and mentions of incidents of violence against Christians that stood out most in participants' minds.

However, as previously mentioned, I integrated an approach akin to "open coding" to allow for the emergence of other significant themes. Concept mapping both within and across

interviews was also employed to understand the linkages between these themes. Along with theme analysis, I took an approach akin to narrative inquiry whereby each interview was treated as an individual case (Reissman, 2002; Ayres et al., 2003). Thus, interviews were seen as “field texts” whereby identities and actions could be understood via the linkages made by the narrator between a sequence of events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This approach is similar to the within-case analytic approach known as “immersion”, whereby the researcher conscientiously seeks to highlight individual experiences within their context in an effort to protect their significance and associated meanings (Ayres et al., 2003). Immersion is augmented by the process of intuiting, whereby the interviewer asks what the participants would want the world to know about their experience throughout within-case analysis (Ayres et al., 2003).

Also, I used techniques associated with cross-case analysis that have been used in other phenomenological and narrative inquiry studies. Ayres et al. (2003) note that safeguarding the authenticity of interviewee’s experiences in comparing and contrasting themes across cases is aided by immersion within the individual stories, akin to the process of *restorying* delineated by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002). Ayres et al. (2003) note that although cross-case analysis is not characteristic of narrative inquiry, “overreading” of each case allows themes to emerge from the text that might be contradicted at other points in the text and may or may not be illuminated in other participants’ stories. Thus, my integration of analytical techniques related to narrative inquiry enabled me to gain a more in-depth understanding of the linkages between various facets of participants’ positionality and perceptions of intergroup relations.

Findings and Discussion

Translocational Positionality and Communal Boundaries-Homeland Memories

Perceptions of boundaries between religious communities was often mediated by memories of the homeland along with experiences in the host country, both on a community-level and individual level. Participants who had grown up in Kerala, which is often seen as the birthplace of Christianity in India, exuded narratives of communal peace. Pastor William stated:

I would say about 20% of Kerala belongs to Christianity, some kind of Christianity, and in Kerala when in those days when I was growing up there, we didn’t have any problems at all as Christians. Christians and Hindus, and Muslims all lived and all of them had a very peaceful coexistence. And even though there was Christian areas and Hindu areas and Muslim areas, everyone was freely mingling, and talking, and had great friendship between all the communities belonging to different religions.

This sentiment was corroborated by Binod, a first-generation immigrant from Kerala to western Canada who is approximately thirty years younger than Pastor William. He noted that religious intolerance does not exist in Kerala, although he felt that a “wave of intolerance” was currently spreading across other parts of India.

In contrast, mixed memories of both division and cosmopolitan harmony were common for many of my respondents who grew up in cities such as Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay. Many of my interviewees described how they lived alongside Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and adherents of other minority religions peacefully. For example, I asked Roger, a ministry-minded

layperson of Keralite background, his outlook on intercommunal relations. “There is hope,” he said, “it all depends on if individuals choose to think for themselves...not their opinions based on someone else’s ideology.” He expounded on this point for a few moments, but then mentioned that people had to seek out the goodness in others. He narrated memories about his Hindu Brahmin neighbors in Mumbai, who had been kinder to him than any “Christians had ever been,”; whose behavior reminded him of the life and actions of Jesus Christ. However, others expressed memories of communal boundaries, such as Mrinali, who grew up in a Hindu family and converted to Christianity as a young adult:

So, I lived in what you would call a condominium complex, where we had 15 homes. Seven homes were Hindu, seven homes were Muslim, and one home was Zoroastrian. So, we had issues, every time we had riots, in 1991 [referring to the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992-1993] we had riots. And everybody was in fear, because you had been living with these people for 20 years, but you still didn’t trust. Nothing really happened, but that’s just the general situation of how it works. So, if you have a community, you probably find that all of the builders will sell it to a certain race. Just to avoid any kind of conflict.

Philip, who also grew up in Bombay, described the predominant Hindu-Muslim tensions in the city. This was especially evident in the workplace, where “the employers were looking at who is Hindu, who is Muslim, like that. So [Christians] were sort of in between, and we were allowed.” He noted that although Christians, mostly due to their religious education, tended to be more “tolerant” and “submissive,” the atmosphere in the city was “racial”, or racialized, in the sense that outsiders to Bombay and Maharashtra state as a whole were unwelcome and essentially seen as “misfits.” He highlighted the immense ethno-linguistic diversity of India and potential migrants to the city as precursors to “rejection.” Truly, this is an intended outcome of the regional Hindutva party that has wielded tremendous influence over political and civic life in Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena, who have in turn sought to limit the influence of non-Marathi Indians in the state. This change in the communal climate in Bombay was corroborated by Ralph, a Roman Catholic who has been married to a Hindu for over twenty years. He remembered how as a youth, he would often go to Hindu temples and Muslim mosques with his friends, but “the fear started” after the 1992-1993 riots. He related an interesting anecdote signifying how this sense of fear also exists within the Indian diaspora, and reinforces the various actors within the transnational socio-spiritual fields in which Indian Christians are situated:

The other day, I had gone to one of the Sikh temples here [in Canada], and I had kind of a tattoo on my hand-- a cross. I went with my wife there, she’s a Hindu, and when I went there she prayed and I also prayed, and I saw three or four Sikhs watching my hand, and my wife said, “You know, put your sleeves down, if you’re seen, you’ll get into trouble.” So, it’s like, there’s a kind of fear in us now, which we never had.

Religious Salience: Conflicts and Boundary Crossings

As with the issue of caste, which is beyond the scope of this paper, religious boundaries often carried over across transnational socio-spiritual fields. Rev. Dr. Nathaniel summarized the staunch theological boundaries perceived by some Indian Christians as existing between themselves and Hindus, which he sees as a barrier to human rights activism:

A lot of Christians think Hindu religion is wrong. They don't have the right God. A lot of them were there [at the meeting]. They only brought that guy, (laughs) [a guest speaker who spoke a bit forcefully against Islam in particular]. But we don't think that. There's nothing wrong with the Hindu religion, Hindu people. It is the RSS, wants to use Hindus to re-establish caste so that Brahmins can restore their upper level. It's a psychology. It's apartheid. And people won't see it. They think the Christian versus Hindu. It's not. It's never been that way.

A Protestant couple, Anish and Susannah, shared an uncomfortable exchange that they had with their daughter's Hindu classmate's family. Their daughter had shared about her Christian faith with her friend, who then checked out a Bible from the library. Following this, according to Anish and Susannah, the "parents got more heavily involved in Hinduism", and basically told them that if they (mostly referring to their daughter) would not talk about their God, then they would not talk about theirs. The Hindu family did not want Anish and Susannah's daughter to "try to convert" their daughter. As alluded to in the introduction, the issue of conversion seems to be a catalyst for distrust across transnational social fields. Interestingly, from the last example, Anish converted from Hinduism several years prior, and stated that he did not face much opposition from his family.

On the other hand, other interviewees described potentially negative or even hostile interactions with Hindus in the host country, particularly those associated with the Sangh Parivaar. Rev. Dr. Nathaniel related a narrative about a dialogue that he and some other Indian Christians had with a number of Hindus who were members of the transnational RSS, which highlighted tensions around conversion and caste:

But you cannot dialogue with the RSS. They have -- They are right. [They believe that] casteism is God made system...you cannot change that. Karma is everlasting. You cannot change karma. What is karma? Karma justifies caste. It is your karma that you belong to this caste. You cannot change it. It is karma you belong to your religion. You cannot change it. That's what they were saying...so you cannot dialogue with them...If you leave Hinduism, you leave this bondage of karma. That's liberation. After that, I'm not going back to karma. It was a disastrous meeting. And then after that we had lunch. Lunch was good. We mingled and talked about families and our -- some of the common politics, and we got along well...They would be willing to talk with you just to tell us what they think, not listen to what we think. No, discussions don't go well. I had a very personal close friend years ago who was a Gujarati Brahmin, but he was distinct. He was different. We both sat down and trashed apartheid in South Africa, and we enjoyed it. (laughs) And he didn't like the Brahminic hierarchy. He believed more in equality...So we would talk about a lot of common things. We are wonderful friends. If he didn't agree with me, he would say that, but that didn't bother our friendship.

Similar to Rev. Dr. Nathaniel's description of his relationship with this Hindu Brahmin friend as a contrast to the nature of his discussion with members of the RSS, Roger described the potentiality for both negative and positive interactions with Hindus in diaspora. He related how

Hindu friends and neighbors have been “open” and “inviting” to Christmas caroling, for instance, but have exhibited a “degree of animosity” towards evangelism.

Interestingly, then, religious salience (Paxton et al., 2014), in terms of the centrality of religious belief and associated practices, appears to be a unifying factor for Hindus and Christians across transnational socio-spiritual fields. This was validated by numerous interviewees. Binod, who grew up in Kerala, said the following: “Hindus used to come to our church, participate in our festivals, everything is going perfect.” Vivian reflected this point with her experience growing up as a Roman Catholic in rural Karnataka, where she would go to the temple with her best friend “every day for three years,” and her friend would in turn accompany her to church.

On a more macro-level, one Goan Catholic couple I interviewed also mentioned how Hindus would worship together with them during a festival:

Benny: “There is a feast in Goa it’s called Our Lady of Miracles, it happened before the feast of Hinduism and they also have a form of worship around the feast of Our Lady. So they believe that this Our Lady of Miracles is the sister of their goddess. So... the majority of Hindus come to worship. See, I get it is a funny thing what is going on in India. Things happen [and persecution in other communities in India]. So this thing no one will know what I mentioned to you just now. Hindus coming to worship Our Lady of Miracles.”

In a parallel vein, Christians have joined Hindus in the celebration of their holy festivals. For instance, two years following the violence in the Kandhamal district of Orissa, Christians joined Hindus in their Holi festivities (IANS, 2010). In addition, the Simanbadi village in the district has been hailed as “a rare picture of communal harmony,” as “the village has been celebrating a four-day community *Durga puja* (a ritual of worship to the goddess Durga) involving Hindus, Muslims and Christians, for the last 25 years” (Mohanty, 2012). On the other hand, Luke, who is originally from Kerala, described some of the tension experienced by Christians in diaspora whilst participating in an interreligious Malayalee organization. He noted that Hindus would join in Christmas celebrations, but for several Hindu festivals, Christians would back away because they felt that they were compromising their faith. In addition, some Christians might shy away from participating in festivals because they will “get flack from their church and their religious leaders.” He indicated that interreligious events have become further complicated as some Hindu leaders have voiced “their support for the [current] government in a biased way.” Nevertheless, an overall respect for religious faith still exists.

Thus, respect for others’ right to worship and for divergent religious rituals was a key theme that can underlie a sense of hope for interreligious solidarity. This was not only a figment of memory for many participants, but also a way of life in diaspora. For instance, Ralph described the manifestation of religious salience with his Hindu wife and his in-laws:

My wife’s family, they come to church, I go to the Temple, but we never have sat together and said oh, you are praying like this, we never thought. Whenever there’s a praying time we pray... We pray to the same God for our well-being, the well-being of our family.

Prayer is also a mechanism, as cited by Ralph in the above quote, to puncture and cut across boundaries. For instance, Beryl, a Goan Catholic immigrant to Canada who discussed alongside her husband the participation of Hindus in Christian festivals, noted that “even my neighbors, even though they are Hindus, when they have a problem they will come and say, ‘Please pray for us.’ And many times, he shared with us about our religion you know...And even some of our Muslim friends, they’re very supportive of our religion; they see how happy we are.” However, the most poignant story about prayer emerged from one participant’s discussion of his relationship with his Hindu Brahmin parents after he converted to Christianity. Jagadish described the hostility that he faced from members of his family, even after his mother was diagnosed with a serious illness. He resisted threatening statements by his family members, and delineated how prayer led to the end of the persecution:

When my mom was [diagnosed and given a short time to live], it was my father, who called my pastor, and said, ‘Would you ask [Jagadish] to pray, because we’ve heard that when he prays, God answers prayers...And we prayed that night, my pastor and I prayed all night, until about six in the morning, when I felt the peace from God...Well, to cut a long story short, my mom is alive today [several years later]...and she knows that she was healed miraculously by the Lord Jesus. And ever since that day, the persecution has stopped.

Jagadish went on to discuss how another family member converted to Christianity but did not share this with other close relatives. Thus, there is a duality that characterizes Hindu-Christian relations across transnational social fields. There is a sense of fear and distrust, but also an underlying sense of mutual respect for faith and the centrality of religious salience.

Conclusion: Catalysts for Solidarity

In reflecting on Hindu-Christian relations, dual relationships exist between emotions such as fear and distrust, and a mutual respect for the centrality of religious salience. Homeland memories of interfaith unity and respect also play a role in individual understandings of translocational positionality, therefore illuminating the significance of “faith”, or the importance of religious practices in everyday life, as a separate identity category from nominal religious affiliation (see Weber, 2015). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), approximately 80% of Indians surveyed stated that religion was very important in their lives, as opposed to a little over 50% of Americans. Undoubtedly, this focus on religion translates across transnational social fields.

Roof and Perkins (1975), grappled with Gordon Allport’s notion that heightened religious salience can influence positive attitudes towards outgroups, especially since other studies of their time had revealed the negative impact of variables associated with fundamentalist ideologies and the propensity for individuals to conform to these within their denominations. Following numerous studies including various measures of religious salience, Paxton, Reith, and Glanville (2014) applied a composite measure in a cross-national analysis of 15 Western European nations. Overall, they found that religious salience and prayer had a positive impact on volunteering, but did not address potential links between religious salience and interreligious solidarity.

Undoubtedly, a weakness of the literature on religious salience and intrinsic religiosity in general is its largely quantitative emphasis. One notable exception is Einolf’s (2011) analysis of

88 in-depth narrative interviews from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, which revealed a connection between internal religiosity and helping others. My research provides a unique case example which upholds Allport's classic conceptualization of religious salience as essentially a "border crossing" mechanism. It also qualifies the importance of both private and public displays of religiosity for both Protestants and Catholics, including connections to wider religious and socio-political networks. Additionally, it reveals how religious salience can catalyze interreligious political and non-political action. Interestingly, however, my Roman Catholic interviewees were more likely to mention common participation in religious festivals with Hindus as a border crossing mechanism, although prayer was perceived as a bridge regardless of denominational affiliation. This finding raises questions for further research, and whether or not different religious practices can catalyze unity between other religious groups.

In addition to religious salience, ideals associated with religious freedom, and experiences which made individuals more aware of the importance of religious freedom superseded divisions. For instance, personal experiences of discrimination were significant, whether or not they were directed at religious identity. Overall, in understanding the identification and intergroup experiences of diaspora Indian Christians, the power of the Indian state is interpreted as significant across transnational social fields. In this sense, it is also a unifying factor for action. As previously noted, interreligious organizations across the transnational South Asian community have mobilized against anti-minority violence and Hindutva ideology (Kurien 2007). At a meeting I attended in Fall 2014, a Gujarati Catholic man was honored for his adherence to the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. Specifically, at a United Nations protest in 2000, he brought a large group of Hindus who wanted to stand for religious freedom alongside their Christian brethren. Future research on Hindu-Christian relations could build upon some of the limitations of this project by examining similar past and current events in more depth. Additional participant observation and narrative interviews with a larger, more diverse sample should be directed at the nuanced connections between religious beliefs, values, and the mechanisms for mobilizing interreligious coalitions across transnational social fields.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the funding received via the Hong Liu Asian Studies Research Award at Northeastern University, which supported my travel to conduct interviews and attend events for this research. Through this grant and departmental funding from Northeastern University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology, I was also able to purchase the QSR NVivo software that was used for data analysis. In addition, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my doctoral dissertation committee, along with the faculty, staff, and former graduate student colleagues at Northeastern University, and my colleagues at Elms College for their support during the completion of this research.

References

- Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, & P. Sztopka (Eds.), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 1-30). University of California Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.003.0001>

- Anthias, F. (2002). Where do I belong? Narrating collective identity and translocational positionality. *Ethnicities*, 2(4), 491-514. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968020020040301>
- Anthias, F. (2008). Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality: An intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging. *Translocations: Migration and Social Change*, 4(1), 5-20. <https://repository.uel.ac.uk/item/8656x>
- Anthias, F. (2011). Intersections and translocations: New paradigms for thinking about cultural diversity and social identities. *European Educational Research Journal* 10(2), 204-217. <https://doi.org/10.2304/eej.2011.10.2.204>
- Anthias, F. (2012). Transnational mobilities, migration research and intersectionality: Towards a translocational frame. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 2(2), 102-110. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2478/v10202-011-0032-y>
- Ayres, L., Kavanaugh, K., & Knafel, K. A. (2003). Within-case and across-case approaches to qualitative data analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(6), 871-883. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732303013006008>
- Bauman, C. M. (2013). Hindu-Christian conflict in India: Globalization, conversion, and the coterminous castes and tribes. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 72(3), 633-653. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0021911813000569>
- Bauman, C. M. (2015). *Pentecostals, proselytization, and anti-Christian violence in contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.
- Bhattacharyya, G., Gabriel, J., & Small, S. (2002). *Race and power: Global racism in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.
- Boccagni, P., Lafleur, J. M., & Levitt, P. (2016). Transnational politics as cultural circulation: Toward a conceptual understanding of migrant political participation on the move. *Mobilities*, 11(3), 444-463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2014.1000023>
- Brettell, C. B. (2005). Voluntary organizations, social capital, and the social incorporation of Asian Indian immigrants in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78(4) 853-883. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2005.0052>
- Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Carvalho, N. (2008, September 15). *Karnataka: 20 churches attacked, Christians accuse police of inaction*. AsiaNews. <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Karnataka:-20-churches-attacked,-Christians-accuse-police-of-inaction-13221.html>
- Chatterji, R. (2015, May 26). *Ghar Wapsi to beef ban: How life has changed since Modi became prime minister*. Firstpost. <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/ghar-wapsi-to-beef-ban-how-life-has-changed-since-modi-became-prime-minister-2244780.html>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2004). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Coleman, J. (2008). Authoring (in)authenticity, regulating religious tolerance: The implications of anti-conversion legislation for Indian secularism. *Cultural Dynamics*, 20(3), 245-277. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0921374008096311>
- Cunningham, C. P. (2013). *Diasporas, ethnic conflict, and traumatic events* (Publication no. 3559221) [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:1836>
- Daijiworld Media Network. (2008, September 14). *Mangalore: Attacks on Christian prayer centres, institutions around South Kanara*. Daijiworld.com. http://www.daijiworld.com/news/news_disp.asp?n_id=51155
- Das, S. (2009). The present church scenario in Orissa with special reference to Kandhmal.

- International Congregational Journal*, 8(1), 111-123.
https://searchworks.stanford.edu/articles/aph__42097269
- Demmers, J. (2002). Diaspora and conflict: Locality, long-distance nationalism, and delocalization of conflict dynamics. *Javnost - The Public*, 9(1), 85-96.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2002.11008795>
- Einolf, C. J. (2011). The link between religion and helping others: The role of values, ideas, and language. *Sociology of Religion*, 72(4), 435-455. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srr017>
- Frechette, J., Bitzas, V., Aubry, M., Kilpatrick, K., & Lavoie-Tremblay, M. (2020). Capturing lived experience: Methodological considerations for interpretive phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1-20.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920907254>
- Hansen, T. B. (1999). *The saffron wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India*. Oxford University Press.
- Horowitz, D. (2001). *The deadly ethnic riot*. University of California Press.
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Jacobsen, K. A., & Raj, S. J. (2008). Introduction: Making an invisible diaspora visible. In K. A. Jacobsen, & S. J. Raj (Eds.), *South Asian Christian Diaspora: Invisible Diaspora in Europe and North America* (pp. 1-16). Ashgate Publishing.
- Jovchelovitch, S., & Bauer, M. W. (2000). Narrative interviewing. In M. W. Bauer, & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound: A practical handbook for social research* (pp. 57-74). Sage Publications.
- Khagram, S., & Levitt, P. (2008). Constructing transnational studies. In L. Pries (Ed.), *Rethinking Transnationalism: The Meso-link of organisations* (pp. 33-51). Routledge.
- Knox, S., & Burkard, A. W. (2009). Qualitative research interviews. *Psychotherapy Research*, 19(4-5), 566-575. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503300802702105>
- Kohlbacher, F. (2006). The use of qualitative content analysis in case study research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 7(1), 1-30.
<https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-7.1.75>
- Kurien, P. A. (2007). Who speaks for Indian Americans? Religion, ethnicity, and political formation. *American Quarterly*, 59(3), 759-783. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2007.0059>
- Kurien, P.A. (2017). Majority versus minority religious status and diasporic nationalism: Indian American advocacy organizations. *Nations and Nationalism*, 23(1), 109-128.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12255>
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. G. (2004). Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 1002-1039.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x>
- Mohanty, H. (2012, October 23). Durga puja brings together Hindu, Muslim, and Christian in Kandhamal. *The Times of India*.
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/Durga-Puja-brings-together-Hindu-Muslim-Christian-in-Kandhamal/articleshow/16924361.cms?>
- Mohanty, M. P. (1999, June 1). India's Christian challenge. *Hinduism Today*, p. 16.

- <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/magazine/june-1999/1999-06-india-s-christian-challenge/>
- Molzahn, A., Shields, L., Bruce, A., Stajduhar, K., Makaroff, K. S., Beuthin, R., & Shermak, S. (2012). People living with serious illness: stories of spirituality. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 21(15-16), 2347-2356. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2012.04196.x>
- Mozumder, S. G. (2008, October 24). Christian groups protest Orissa violence outside United Nations. *India Abroad*, p. A15
- Ollerenshaw, J. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2002). Narrative research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(3), 329-347. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004008003008>
- Paxton, P., Reith, N. E., & Glanville, J. L. (2014). Volunteering and the dimensions of religiosity: A cross-national analysis. *Review of Religious Research*, 56(4), 597-625. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-014-0169-y>
- Pew Research Center. (2015, December 21). Generally, poorer nations tend to be religious; wealthy less so, except for U.S. In *Americans are in the middle of the pack globally when it comes to importance of religion*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/12/23/americans-are-in-the-middle-of-the-pack-globally-when-it-comes-to-importance-of-religion/>
- Poddar, A. (2015, March 15). *71-year old nun gang raped in West Bengal, Minister blames Ghar Wapsi*. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/71-year-old-nun-gang-raped-in-west-bengal-minister-blames-ghar-wapsi/articleshow/46570004.cms>
- Reissman, C. K. (2002). Analysis of personal narratives. In J. F. Gubrium, & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method* (pp. 695-710). Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412973588>
- Riis, O., & Woodhead, L. (2010). *A sociology of religious emotion*. Oxford University Press.
- Roof, W. C., & Perkins, R. B. (1975). On conceptualizing salience in religious commitment. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14(2), 111-128. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1384735>
- Singh, J. (2015). India's right turn. *World Policy Journal*, 32(2), 93-103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0740277515591547>
- Taylor, D. M., & Osborne, E. (2010). When I know who "we" are, I can be "me": The primary role of cultural identity clarity for psychological well-being. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 47(1), 93-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461510364569>
- Tilly, C. (2003). *The politics of collective violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vandavelde, I. (2011). Reconversion to Hinduism: A Hindu nationalist reaction against conversion to Christianity and Islam. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 34(1), 31-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2011.549083>
- Viswanathan, G. (2000). Literacy and conversion in the discourse of Hindu nationalism. *Race & Class*, 42(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639600128967983>
- Weber, B. M. (2015). Gender, race, religion, faith? Rethinking intersectionality in German feminisms. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 22(1), 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506814552084>