



An Invisible Community? South Asian Christians in the UK

Eleanor Nesbitt

Introduction

Parents in a Catholic school in the north of England recently complained to the head about an influx of 'Muslim' pupils into the school. The 'Muslims' in question were in fact Catholics from South India.

Appropriately, in view of such instances, *Invisible Diaspora* is the title of a new publication that draws together studies of South Asian Christians in Europe and North America, edited by Knut Jacobsen and S. J. Raj (2007). The Christians concerned are doubly invisible: firstly, because the majority of Christians in Europe and North America are either white (of European background) or black (of African and African-Caribbean background); secondly, as most South Asians are Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, many people – whatever their own ethnicity – are unaware of the presence of Christians from Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan backgrounds in countries such as Britain. Ignorance of the fact that there are Christian communities in South Asia itself is probably widespread. Indeed, it is likely that most people in Britain would react with surprise to the information that the Christian faith was established in South India nearly two thousand years ago, centuries before the first Christian missionaries reached many European countries (let alone the American continent), and to statistics showing that Christians in India alone outnumber Sikhs worldwide.

Barton captures the widespread unawareness, in the white majority and among other South Asians, of even the possibility of being both South Asian and Christian:

To many British, 'Asian Christian' is a contradiction in terms. People generally believe that Asians could have any religion other than Christianity. (2005: 59)

This ignorance is felt particularly by Punjabi Christians, as a result of the UK's substantially larger Sikh, Hindu and Muslim Punjabi communities. Thus Easton's fieldwork in Wolverhampton disclosed that:

There are also difficulties with other Asians who expect solidarity from people of the same heritage: Indians think you're letting them down... The things people say, it's horrible. Like 'Oh, what are you worshipping a white God for?' (2000: 32)

This is the background to some Christians voicing regret and frustration that local and central Government grants are available for non-Christians for building community centres but not for South Asian Christian communities.

My chapter in Jacobsen and Raj's volume (Nesbitt 2007) aims to share something of the diversity of South Asian communities in the UK and of their history, including the trends currently underway as they cope with their visibility as members of an ethnic minority and, at the same time, their recurrent experiences of marginalisation in multi-faith Britain, because of such widespread unawareness of the existence of South Asians who are Christian. My hope is that the present (rather briefer) article encourages greater acknowledgement of South Asian Christians in our teaching about Christianity, as well as alertness to the heritages and experiences of South Asian Christians in our schools.

Diversity

It is of course misleading to talk about South Asian Christians as if they make up a single community. Quite apart from the diversity of economic background and educational experience, their families have come from different parts of the sub-continent (and so have distinct languages as well as traditions of diet, dress and celebration), and they are associated with a range of Christian denominations, some well-known in the UK and others specifically rooted in India.

My chapter (Nesbitt 2007) focuses on three major groupings: (a) South Indian Christians from the state of Kerala whose Christian heritage dates back to the first century CE and is believed to have begun with the preaching of the apostle, Thomas (If you have read Arundhati Roy's best-selling novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), you will already have come across members of a Keralite Christian community.); (b) Goan Christians whose forbears were converted to Roman Catholicism by the Portuguese from the time of Vasco da Gama's arrival on the west coast of India in 1498; (c) Christians from Punjab, a state divided in 1947 between India and the newly created country of Pakistan, whose families were converted in many instances as a result of missionary activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Any such three-way categorisation must not, however, be allowed to obscure the much greater degree of actual diversity. There are South Asian Christians whose conversion to the faith occurred only after settling in the UK. There are Christians from many other parts of the sub-continent – the theologian, Mukti Barton is from Bengal, for example. So too are the characters in Alison Mukherjee's novel, *Nirmal Babu's Bride* (2002). (If you have difficulty in obtaining a copy, do contact me!) At the same time, awareness of this diversity must not overshadow the unities of Christian belief and of experience in the UK.

Settlement in the UK

The first South Asian Christian community in the UK was Goan: this was because, after the Portuguese acquired Goa in 1510, it became a favourite seaport for the East India Company. Subsequently, in the second half of the twentieth century, Goans arrived in Britain from, for example, Kenya and Pakistan. 98% of Goans in the UK are Roman Catholic, even though in Goa itself the percentage of Catholics is probably less than 27% and declining.

Nineteenth century history features twin aspects of the South Asian experience in relation to Christianity at the hands of the British – conversion of people from other faiths to Christianity and racial prejudice at the hands of white Christians. Two individuals' life stories illustrate these aspects. The more famous of them, 'Queen Victoria's maharajah',

Duleep Singh, was the deposed heir of Ranjit Singh, the Sikh maharaja of Punjab (Campbell 2000). The young Duleep Singh was persuaded to espouse the Christian faith formally and was brought to Britain in 1854. However, disillusioned with his treatment, he was subsequently to reclaim his Sikh faith. The second of these nineteenth century figures, Shapurji Edalji, a Parsi (Zoroastrian) from Bombay, converted to Christianity and in due course was appointed vicar of a parish in Staffordshire. The grave miscarriage of justice which he and his family suffered, as a result of his being a 'Hindoo parson', is the subject of a recent publication featuring Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's intervention (Weaver 2006). The twentieth century saw the immigration and settlement of South Asians in much more substantial numbers. Christians from the north Indian state of Punjab migrated along with the much larger number of Sikhs and Hindus during the 1950s and 1960s and settled particularly in Southall, Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Coventry and Oxford. Most were from a hereditary community that had suffered extreme discrimination for centuries, and it was the hope of escaping disadvantage that had predisposed members of this oppressed caste to accept Christianity when missionary activity got underway in Punjab in the late nineteenth century. The descendants of these converts have gravitated to the same urban areas as their non-Christian relatives, who in many cases identify themselves as Valmikiis, the focus of Leslie (2003) and Nesbitt (1994).

The settlement in the UK of Christians from South India and Sri Lanka came later than the Punjabi migration and these Christians are most concentrated and longest established in London. Here there are members of the Syro Malabar rite Catholic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Mar Thoma Church, Paramula Church and Orthodox Syrian Church – denominational groupings conveying something of the traumas and tangles of the South Indian church's nearly 2000 year history (Wikipedia 2006a and b). Then, in the 1990s, the prolonged conflict in Sri Lanka caused many Tamils, both Hindu and Christian, to emigrate to the UK.

Cultural continuities

Despite their distinctive faith, South Asian Christians have greater social, cultural and linguistic affinity with other South Asians from their region than they have with other Christians. In the case of Punjabi Christian families, overlaps with other Punjabis include home cuisine, older women's dress, patterns of gift exchange and the dominant role of fathers and elder brothers. Easton reported also their awareness of caste-based differences among fellow Punjabis.

Similarly, Christians from Kerala share with their fellow Malayalees in celebrating the festival of Onam. St Thomas's Day (Dukrana) too is of course a major celebration, and a visit to <http://www.cliftondiocese.com/Articles/415/> (accessed 13 March 2007) offers a glimpse of Bristol's Syro Malabar (St Thomas Catholic) procession and of the community more generally.

Some masses in the Clifton diocese are conducted in Keralites' mother-tongue, Malayalam but, as far as language is concerned among South Asian Christians more widely, the scene in the UK is complex. My own fieldwork in 1990 among Punjabi Christians in Coventry disclosed the fact that children in Punjabi families were using their mother-tongue, Punjabi, in the home to a greater extent than their Greek or Ukrainian counterparts were using their mother-tongues, but the Punjabi children were literate in neither Punjabi nor the related languages of Hindi and Urdu (which senior relatives used in worship) and none attended

classes in any of these languages. By contrast Greek and Ukrainian congregations were running language classes. To quote one Punjabi parent:

We don't see a need for Punjabi because we can read the Bible in English as well as Punjabi. We don't bother what language they do it in as long as they praise the Lord one way or the other.

For South Asian Christians the fact that (unlike the situation for, say, Sikhs and many Muslims) there is no link between the script of their families' first language and the script of their sacred text lessens motivation to set up classes (Nesbitt 1995).

Nevertheless, for Christians who have been brought up in South Asia, mother-tongue is a factor, together with a sense of shared values and experience, in the formation of Christian groupings. So a family may worship periodically with other Keralites or Punjabis from farther afield as well as with a local (English-medium) congregation of the same or similar denomination to one that they belonged to in the Indian subcontinent. As with other faith communities a variety of dynamics are at work. South Asian Christians are integrating – some with 'mainstream' congregations and others with secular, non-observant British society. At the same time, others are forming distinct congregations, in many cases holding services in their mother-tongue in a local Anglican, Catholic or Methodist church. Some South Asian congregations have their own premises. Sadly, one reason for forming separate congregations has been the sense of marginalisation and rejection that Barton articulates (2005).

Distinguished individuals

Nonetheless, in mainstream churches as well as in the arts, medical and caring professions, business and both local and national politics, the UK's South Asian Christians have been making their mark. Church leaders include (from a largely Shi'a Muslim family in Pakistan) Michael Nazir Ali, Bishop of the Anglican diocese of Rochester, and (from a Sikh family in Kenya) the Reverend Indarjit Bhogal, who was in 2000 appointed president of the Methodist Conference. Meanwhile, the artist Caroline Jariwala's fusion of Christian faith and Gujarati Hindu heritage is a refreshing resource for teachers, as a visit to <http://www.carolinejariwala.com> will confirm.

Need for research

Clearly in Britain the Christian community as a whole, and individual denominations and local congregations, are being enriched by the presence of clergy and 'lay' people of South Asian background. At the same time their communities remain largely absent from scholarly discussion and from professional representation (by religious educationists and, in higher education, teachers of South Asian studies) of Christian diversity and of ethnic minorities in the UK. Studies by Jeffery (1976) and myself (Nesbitt 2004, 35-49) provide clues to the experiences and heritage of Christians from, respectively, Pakistan and the Indian state of Punjab, and these need to be supplemented by research among Goan and Tamil Catholics, and among Keralites in different 'St Thomas' churches.

Easton (2000) exemplifies the contribution to current knowledge that one small-scale study by a full-time teacher can make. In the absence of externally funded studies perhaps a

reader of this article will feel encouraged to conduct a small-scale empirical study of a local South Asian Christian community. Each piece of the jigsaw will lessen the invisibility.

Bibliography

- Barton, M. (2005) *Rejection, Resistance and Resurrection: Speaking out on Racism in the Church*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd
- Campbell, C. (2000) *The Maharajah's Box*, London: HarperCollins
- Easton, B. (2000) 'Worshipping a White God': A Study of the Religious Experience of Young Asian Christians, unpublished MA in Religious Education dissertation, Institute of Education, University of Warwick
- Jacobsen, K. A. and Raj, S. J. (eds) (2007) *Invisible Diaspora: The South Asian Christian Diaspora in Europe and North America*, Aldershot: Ashgate
- Jeffery, P. (1976) *Migrants and Refugees: Muslim and Christian Pakistani Families in Bristol*, London: Cambridge University Press
- Leslie, J. (2003) *Authority and Meaning in Indian Religions: Hinduism and the Case of Valmiki*, Aldershot: Ashgate
- Mukherjee, A. (2002) *Nirmal Babu's Bride*, New Delhi: Indialog
- Nesbitt, E. (1994) 'Valmikis in Coventry: The Revival and Reconstruction of a Community' in R. Ballard (ed.) *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*, London: Hurst, 221-40
- Nesbitt, E. (1995) 'Punjabis in Britain: Cultural History and Cultural Choices', *South Asia Research*, 15 (2) 221-40
- Nesbitt, E. (2004) *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and Religious Approaches*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press
- Nesbitt, E. (2007) 'South Asian Christians in the UK' in Jacobsen and Raj [see above]
- Roy, A. (1997) *The God of Small Things*, London: Flamingo
- Weaver, G. (2006) *Conan Doyle and the Parson's Son: The George Edalji Case*, London: Vanguard
- Wikipedia (2006a) 'Syrian Malabar Nasrani' available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_Malabar_Nasrani (accessed 22 May 2006)
- Wikipedia (2006b) 'St Thomas Christians' available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Thomas_Christians (accessed 22 May 2006)

Eleanor Nesbitt is Professor of Religions and Education, University of Warwick. Her publications include *Sikhism A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2005), *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and Religious Approaches* (Sussex Academic Press 2004) and *Interfaith Pilgrims* (Quaker Books 2003). Her current research looks at the identity formation of children in 'mixed-faith' families. She is a member of the Shap Working Party.

A note about copyright

Requests for use or re-publication of this article should be made (via Shap if necessary) to the writer, who retains copyright. If re-published in part or full elsewhere, the article's publication in *World Religions in Education 2007* should be acknowledged.

The transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer, not of the Shap Working Party.