

Volume 2, Issue 1 (May 2025)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion and Public Life



BOOK REVIEW

Christian Contribution to Modern India

(Volume 1) by Joshua Kalapati, Select Academic Publishing, Oxford, 2024. 502 pp

Review by Canon Dr Chris Sugden ¹

Keywords: Christian India, Missionary legacy, Indian Christianity, Colonial mission, Christian reformers, Faith and nationhood

In this first volume of a series to examine the Christian contribution to modern India from various perspectives Dr Kalapati, who taught at Madras Christian College for thirty years, brings together seventy five biographies of Christians, both Indians and expatriates, who arguably have made significant contributions to what India is today.

Over seventy five years after Indian independence in 1947 there is still a lively debate on the interrelationship between the British Raj, Christian mission and Indian nationhood. In his view “to swallow the rhetoric that everything colonial is toxic is silly”. Kalapati brings to the debate carefully researched biographies in 4-5 pages each of Christians, both indigenous and from western mission organisations, beginning with a summary of their contribution, then a record of their career and Christian commitment, their education and publications concluding with sources for further study. They were members of many denominations, Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Nonconformist churches. They had a generous engagement with Hindu religion and traditions. Many were friends with Gandhi in the independence movement, and it was C.F. Andrews who persuaded him to come back to India from South Africa.

This study is of further interest beyond this debate – it provides a mountaintop view of the nature of Christian ‘mission’ in India which in the last two hundred years particularly involved the establishment of educational and medical institutions. These institutions, and one hundred and sixty four schools and colleges are listed in an appendix, “shaped the minds of countless Hindus at the forefront of the independence movement”.

Until 1813 the East India Company prohibited any Christian missionary work as it would conflict with their commercial interests. After this was changed in the renewal of their charter, a deliberate policy was adopted, in Macaulay’s Minute on Education,

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to create through education in English, a class to be interpreters between the English 'rulers' and the 'millions' whom they governed, who would be Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect. So many in this volume following education in the missionary schools did their postgraduate studies in Great Britain, or the USA.

Kalapati in his foreword summarises the contribution of the Raj to India: it "gave India the idea of a nation by establishing a central rule and administration, laid the foundation for its democracy, law and order, and civil services, introduced English language, facilitated modern education and health care, fostered science, engineering and technology, established railways, postal system, and other industrial complexes, built iconic buildings, gathered census data, introduced cricket, cinema, recorded music, carried out bold social reforms, protected temples, and so on" (p xix-xx). He also notes that there were colonialists who were corrupt, racist, violent and exhibited cultural superiority. He insists that scholars should distinguish between "the benign British and the belligerent British".

Many of those included in this volume worked to address what they saw as social evils – the effect on 'untouchables' of the caste system which discriminated against them and held them down in menial jobs, the seclusion of women in a patriarchal society where many boys were brought up as spoiled despots, Hindu men compensated for centuries of lost power by tyrannising their families and the Hindu extended family could not survive without women slaving in it. The custom of 'sati', where women immolated themselves on their husband's funeral pyre was outlawed by a Christian Governor-General in 1829. It was this continued 'oppression' that motivated Churchill in the first half of the twentieth century to urge that India continue within the British Empire (documented in *Gandhi and Churchill* by Arthur Herman Bantam, 2009).

At the same time, many of the same people were also linguists, learning and producing dictionaries of many Indian languages. As India progressed to nationhood they advocated the rights of all minorities rather than separate electorates for Christians as they urged a strong identification with the national culture. Tribal communities were empowered and Anglo-Indians urged to find their place as nationals of India.

In response the 'masses' embraced Christianity because it offered them dignity, education and a livelihood.

This volume is particularly valuable in going into the details of the lives and contributions of Christians over two centuries, mainly in the Southern States of India, Maharashtra and West Bengal,

This reviewer noted one error, in describing Roger Bannister, who broke the four minute mile record, as being at Cambridge, rather than Oxford University, and a few typos.

To cite (Harvard):

Sugden, C. (2025). *Review of Christian Contribution to Modern India (Volume 1)* by Joshua Kalapati. Select Academic Publishing, Oxford, 2024, 502 pp including an index. *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(1), pp. 123–125.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.