



WHO IS A 'CHRISTIAN' IN INDIA? NOTES FROM THE FIELD AND THE ARCHIVES

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Join via Zoom: <https://zoom.us/j/8702568249?omn=99057715796>

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"We are APKs: *Athi Purathana Katholika Kudumbam* [Exceedingly Ancient Catholic Family!]" ~ A Syrian Christian Family Historian

"They (crypto-Christians) secretly adopt the Christian faith, observing its customs and traditions in a concealed manner. Their true religion is often revealed only during funerals" ~Amit Gorkhe, member of Maharashtra's Upper House.

How do Indian Christians 'identify' themselves? How does the state (and its many arms) mark out Indian Christian individuals and communities? How do their neighbours name them? Have these identifications changed over the years? Is there a peculiar majoritarian, nationalist anxiety that drives such identifications? How does caste and class inflect such self-portraits and identity works? Based on my engagements with community archives and legal debates, I will attempt to answer these questions. I will present four case studies from contemporary Kerala (Syrian Christian, Knanaya Catholic), erstwhile Bombay/Maharashtra (East Indian Catholics) and Tamil Nadu (Dalit Christian) to argue that the Christian identity has been (and continues to be) a historically contingent exercise in hyphenation both within and without. Drawing from the conceptual framework of 'religion as observed', I will illustrate how, when and why do Christians, their 'non-Christian' neighbours and the state problematise the everyday practice of being and becoming a 'Christian'. I will join scholars like Imtiaz Ahmad, to underline that a 'pure' realm of religion is impossible to obtain in material or cultural terms. However, a legally-cushioned illusion of neatly differentiated religious identities inform dominant approaches to understand Christians (or for that matter Muslims or Hindus). This, to my mind, is politically perilous, ahistorical and sociologically erroneous. My discussion on the case studies will highlight the trouble with religion as a reified category of analysis.



Dr. Nidhin Donald is a trained sociologist with a keen interest in community archives and family histories. After completing his doctoral research from Jawaharlal Nehru University (2016-2021), he had worked as an Institute Postdoctoral Fellow at Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay (2022-23), Swiss Government Excellence Fellow at the University of Lucerne (2023-24) and Moturi Postdoctoral Fellow at Krea University, India (2024-25). Currently, Dr Donald is an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the Faculty of Theology, Humboldt University of Berlin.

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