

September 2016

In Continuity with the Past: Indigenous Environmentalism and Indian Christian Visions of Flora

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc>

 James Ponniah
Part of the [Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons](#), [Asian History Commons](#), [Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, Chennai, India](#), [jamesponniah@gmail.com](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Environmental Education Commons](#), [Environmental Health and Protection Commons](#), [Esthetics Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Other Anthropology Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Regional Sociology Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), [Rural Sociology Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [Sociology of Culture Commons](#), [Sociology of Religion Commons](#), [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Sustainability Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ponniah, James (2016) "In Continuity with the Past: Indigenous Environmentalism and Indian Christian Visions of Flora," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2. p.35-54.

DOI: 10.32436/2475-6423.1002

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol1/iss1/2>

JAMES PONNIAH

In Continuity with the Past: Indigenous Environmentalism and Indian Christian Visions of Flora

Introduction

Contemporary discourses on ecology and religion are Janus-faced. On the one hand, environmentalists indict religions like Christianity for promoting worldviews that generate “species arrogance”¹ among humans who have no qualms about exploiting nature. Such a view would perhaps explore solutions to ecological crises outside the domain of religion. On the other hand, “concern for the well-being of the earth’s ecosystem and for the proper place of human beings in that system.... has become a religion for many people, a matter of ultimate and vital concern.”² This approach subscribes to a solution framework developed in religious terms. There are still others who hold that the role of religion in addressing ecological issues is not only imperative but also inevitable.

Is the environmentalists’ verdict on Christianity’s key role in the destruction of environment true at all times and in all places? For instance, is it true of Indian Christianity, which spread largely in colonial times and struggled to make converts fully “Christian?” This struggle may seem to be symptomatic of two conflicting worldviews: the European Christian worldview and the indigenous native worldview.³ But in the final analysis, colonialist contact proved to be a blessing in disguise as it led to the emergence of creative synthesis of the two worldviews through the agency of the local people. This synthetic form of Christianity can be viewed as a potential site of study for the exploration of Indian

¹David Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1995), xvii.

²Ibid., xix.

³Felix Wilfred, “Christianity in Hindu Polytheistic Structural Mould,” *Archives De Sciences Sociales des Religions* 43 (1998): 67-84.

Christian environmental beliefs and practices. The first two parts of the article attempt to look at Christian environmentalism from two such native forms of Indian Christianity: Tamil Christianity and Tribal Christianity, in which the idea of continuity is most prominent. Continuing with the theme of conformity to the local culture—though of the elite—the third part of the article investigates how Christian Ashrams function as dynamic centers for ecological praxis. The last part of the article considers how contemporary Indian Christian communities can respond to the ecological challenges confronting them.

Tamil Christianity

Christianity in Tamilnadu, especially in Southern Tamilnadu whose ethnographic data is discussed here, was implanted during the colonial period—though it cannot be denied that Christianity had a small presence in the pre-colonial period, especially in and around the coastal city of Madras. Popular Christian traditions discussed in this article belong mostly to Ramnad and Sivagangai districts⁴ which received Catholic Christianity thanks to the work of famous Jesuit missionaries such as De Nobili, John De Britto and Beschi whose contributions to the Tamil region left a lasting legacy in Tamil culture and literature.⁵ While the pioneering work of De Nobili among the Brahmin Tamils was “one of rationalization erasing paganism as an irrational accretion,” it is important to note that “their project with non-Brahmans [sic] was one of substitution—that is, the redirection of popular Tamil religiosity to Christian ends, replacing “demonic paganism with Catholic devotions.”⁶ The low-caste non-Brahminic converts who were subjected to this scheme appropriated it as a cultural device to continue their native ethos. While the Brahminic model of rationalization rested on an inbuilt dichotomy between rational and irrational, as well as the sacred and profane, the project of substitution (or accommodation) made it possible for the non-Brahmins to preserve their former holistic, non-dichotomous, non-discursive perspectives and practices. It is the continuation of this latter outlook that made it possible for the subaltern to Christianize their former cultural practices and continue the native ethos and ideas in a manner that can be describes as pro-ecological. In the following pages, we will focus on some of these practices, beliefs and ideas.

The texture of rural life-world in Tamilnadu—as elsewhere in India—is totally dependent upon the rhythm of agricultural activities in the village. While a successful completion of the agricultural cycle brings prosperity to villagers, its failure causes misery. Accordingly, farmers remain extremely vigilant to ensure the efficacy of their agricultural activities. It is in this context that the farmers’

⁴ Since the author hails from this region, some data furnished in this section are part of his life-world while others were observed and collected at different intervals over a long period of time.

⁵ Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 345.

⁶ David Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 10.

various beliefs and practices regarding crops, plants and trees obtain legitimacy. From the very beginning, farmers relied upon religion, be it Christianity or Hinduism, to tap supernatural powers to ensure protection of their crops and to assure themselves of success. For instance, the Catholics of Tamilnadu—like the Oraons, Santals, and Goan Catholics—bring to the local church baskets of paddy/corn to be blessed by the priest during Mass. Catholic farmers then take the blessed paddy/corn and mix it with the seeds to be sown. In Tamilnadu, some part of the paddy is given to the church as an offering—an act that Tamil Catholics perform to ensure success for their work and the safety of their crops. There are also numerous occasions, such as inauguration of a new business, a marriage anniversary, and birthdays, during which Tamil Catholics make what Narayanan calls “ecological offerings” such as offerings of flowers, coconuts, cereals, paddy and coconut palms and saplings.⁷ These offerings to God signify the mediating role that trees and plants can play in the dynamic of relationship between Tamil Christians and their God.

Since good rainfall is crucial to the existence of the flora and fauna of villages in tropical Tamilnadu, rural Catholics become especially concerned when the monsoon is delayed. For example, in the districts of Ramnad and Sivagangai, I have observed a host of rituals performed for rainfall. Performance of the ritual called *maḷicōrukācutal*,⁸ the cooking of rain rice, is one example. After collecting rice from every house, the villagers prepare a common meal, have it blessed by a priest or catechist, and share the meal with everyone irrespective of caste and creed. In some villages, *poṅkal* (new rice prepared with milk and sugar) is cooked in front of the church, and offered to God at Mass and then served to all. T. Lalitha, based on her research in the region, observes that “[t]he ritual cooking of *poMkal* (sic) is a symbol of prosperity and thus by this very act they [i.e. Tamil Catholics] anticipate prosperity which is ensured through rain.”⁹ Additionally, in some villages, young girls choose three places (representing the lands to be cultivated) in the village for drawing *kōlam* (a chalk design on the ground). Then they go round the village begging for cooked food from house to house, reciting the Catholic Christian prayers of Our Father and Hail Mary. Upon returning, they sit around the *kōlam* they had drawn and pray to God for rain as follows: “*vaanattai nampiyallo, koolattai poTTuvaitein'* (believing in the sky, we have prepared our land for cultivation) and *koolam kalayalaie oru kola mazai peialaie* (the *koolam* has not lost its original form, because the sky has not showered

⁷ Vasudha Narayanan, “Religious Vows at the Shrine of Sahul Hamid,” in *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*, ed. Selva J. Raj & William P. Harman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 72.

⁸ Transliteration of Tamil words follows the Tamil Lexicon style. All Tamil words, except the names of people and places, are transliterated. Quotations from other works are given as found in the original texts, not transliterated.

⁹ T. Lalitha, *Religion and Society: Indigenisation of Roman Catholicism in South India* (Ph. D. diss., University of Goa, 2002), 154.

rain).”¹⁰ Similarly, in the district of Chengelpet, Catholic farmers faced with drought ask the priest to celebrate Mass in an open space near the village water tank which is drying up, and pray for a good rain so that the tank gets sufficient water for irrigation, thus saving the crops.

Though rituals for rain might vary from village to village, the most common aspect is a prayer to Mother Mary: “*variyoor ciriyoor varumai niiMka mancu vaiamma, mazai poziya caiyamma; mazai taravenTum taaye eMkal, vaRumai teirvaye amma* (have a heart for the poor and the needy and pour down rain; give us rain, and free us from poverty),”¹¹ This prayer illustrates villagers’ spontaneous association of Mother Mary with mother earth, which they want to be made fertile with rain so that plants and vegetation can grow and bear good yields. In attempting to bring this about, Tamil Catholics, especially the women as we have seen above, choose not the churches but the open grounds for the performance of their religio-cultural functions, thereby producing new sacred landscapes by extending the sacred beyond the church premises to include the ordinary and mundane locations of the village.

Christian care for nature is further evidenced by the measures villagers take to safeguard the crops, plants, and trees from pests. Catholics of the Sivangangai and Ramnad districts preserve the flowers used for decorating *tūmpa* (bier of the statue of dead Jesus) on Good Friday so that they can use these flower petals at the time of sowing to protect the crops from insects and other threats. The Catholics of Suranam village preserve the flowers used for the decoration of *saparam* (special palanquin to carry the statue of Saints in procession) or the mango leaves tied to flag pole of St. James’ Church, dry them up and mix them with manure or pesticide for the good of the crop.¹² In other places in the district, Catholics collect the mango leaves tied to the flag masts in the churches and “mix them with seeds to be sown for obtaining good yield.”¹³ A couple of decades ago a French missionary, who worked in this region, was famous for controlling pests. When people approached him with a pest problem, he would write on a palm leaf in Latin “*Scio Cui Credidi*,” which means “I know (in) whom I have faith,” and ask the people to plant a cross in the field along with the palm leaf.¹⁴ Even now, the practice continues as a preventive measure against insects.

Anxiety about the success of agricultural activity persists among the Christians in many forms. For instance, after the sowing of the seed, Catholic farmers in some villages consult Hindu ritual specialists during the feast of the village deity. They usually approach the *cāmiyāṭi* (the folk shaman), when he is possessed by the deity taken in procession on the streets, and seek his advice for the ensuring a good crop. Though the official Catholic Church does not approve

¹⁰ Ibid., 156.

¹¹ Ibid., 157.

¹² Sahayam, interview with author, June 23, 2014.

¹³ Lalitha, 88.

¹⁴ Ibid., 158.

of these practices, many among the clergy ignore or overlook such apparent contradictions especially when parishioners are faced with a crisis. Villagers' anxiety about protecting the agricultural produce continues even after the harvest. For instance, before storing crop yields in the granary, the Catholics of Tamilnadu, just like the farmers of Goa,¹⁵ bring to the church a basket of paddy or grains and offer it to God in thanksgiving for the good crop but take back a handful of the grains/paddy, which is then blessed by the priest with holy water, and put it in the granary to seek God's protection against the attack of insects.

A. Sivasubramaniyam also notes another ecological ritual prevalent among the Catholics of Tirunelveli District.¹⁶ It is a custom among the Catholic farmers of this region to grow grains in a mud-filled basket made of Palmyra leaves for eight days and bring the basket, popularly known as *mulaipāri* (basket of sprouts), to the church for the Christmas vigil Mass. Once the Birth of Jesus is proclaimed with the "Gloria" hymn, women and children take *mulaipāri* to the middle of the Church and offer it to the newborn Child Jesus in front of the crib. These sprouts are sustained by water and manure until the crib is dismantled, after which the sprouts are scattered in the fields to ensure a good harvest for the season. *Mulaipāri* thus has a double function: human beings offer it as a gift to the Christian God and receive the same back as God's gift to ensure the wellbeing of the crops. Accordingly, the reciprocated gift of *mulaipāri* acquires the characteristics of *prasātam*.¹⁷ Louis Dumont, who refers to *mulaipāri* as "Adonis garden," also takes cognizance of how women who perform this ritual need to observe chastity and keep themselves physically clean.¹⁸ This practice, which is present among Catholics, is also indicative of the holistic vision which Christians have inherited from the rural Tamil worldview, in which the divine, nature, and human beings are inter-related and interconnected: each aspect cares for, and contributes to, the well-being of the other aspects. Such a framework of interconnectedness underlines this Catholic practice of *mulaipāri* and serves as another concrete Christian environmental practice. Sivasubramaniyam notes that while Hindus undertake such a ritual in honour of a deity whose birthday falls in this month, Catholics perform this on the occasion of Jesus' birthday.¹⁹ The ritual of *kummi* (dancing in circles) is performed around *mulaipāri* by Catholic women, just as by Hindus, seeking God's help for protection and prosperity in agriculture. In fact, the same songs and lyrics are retained by Catholics, the only difference being that invocations are made not to the Hindu deities but to Catholic divinities. For instance, the Hindu invocation "*muunaa naaL muntumuLai, amma*

¹⁵ Mouzinho, interview with author, June 26, 2014.

¹⁶ A. Sivasubrahmaniyam, *Manthiram Cadangulal* (Chennai: New Century Book House, 1988), 79-86.

¹⁷ C.J. Fuller, "Sacrifice in the South India Temple," in *Religion and Society in South India*, ed. V. Sudarsen et al. (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1987), 27.

¹⁸ Louis Dumont, *A South Indian Sub caste: Social Organisation and Religion of the Paramalai Kallar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 429.

¹⁹ Sivasubrahmaniyam, 79-86.

pattirakaalimuLai”(the sprouts are offered to goddess Pathirakali) is replaced by “*muunRanaattu munTum muLai namma tiviya paalanmuaLi*” (the sprouts are offered to baby Jesus).²⁰ Thus mulaipāri, which is apparently a Hindu practice, serves as a good example of the cultural continuity that exists among Tamil Catholics and their Hindu neighbors.

Consistent with the decorative style of Hindu temples, the entrance doors of many Catholic churches in Tamilnadu are adorned with plantain trees and mango leaves during major festivals. It is also a very common custom among the Catholics of Tamilnadu that the entrance of the *pantal* (a makeshift thatch-roofed enclosed veranda put up in front of the house) made for the marriage is flanked on either side by prosperous plantain trees with bunches of fresh bananas as symbols of fertility. The Catholic Nadars of Southern Tirunelveli district, like their Hindu counterparts, soon after betrothal perform a ritual called *paṇaṅkalnāṭutal* (installation of palm-tree poles) to mark the beginning of an auspicious period of marriage season but Christianize it by drawing the sign of the cross on the top.²¹ This indicates that Tamil Catholics, just like the tribes of Chotanagpur, not only associate human fertility with the fertility of plants but also ensure the former by the real presence of the latter. This idea of “like produces like” stems from the holistic framework that Catholics have inherited from their native culture and it continues to inform their celebrations of life-cycle rituals.

This agriculture-related set of Christianized rituals illustrates an agency that is exercised not only in adopting and adapting native beliefs and practices to ensure the wellbeing of the vegetation but also in developing a holistic Indian Christian vision wherein humans, trees, plants, animals and gods all constitute one cosmic family. This holistic cosmic vision is well articulated in the celebration of harvest festival like *Poṅkal* by ordinary Catholics in Tamilnadu. This Tamil Catholic holistic vision is also evident in the observance of an indigenous category of auspicious or inauspicious time, which is considered when sowing, ploughing and harvesting. Tamil Catholics also believe that the movements of planets can have positive or negative impact on the wellbeing of plants. For instance, just like their Hindu brethren, Catholics also consider the Tamil month of *citrai* as an auspicious time to begin ploughing and *āṭi* for sowing.

Tamil Catholics prefer certain trees/plants to others in their sacred spaces. This choice is also congruent with indigenous Tamil culture. For instance, coconut saplings are uniquely important offerings in the church. Tamils call coconut saplings as “*tennam pillai*,” an expression that regards coconut plants as analogous to children: villagers care for and nurture coconut saplings as “their own children.” Unlike other saplings, coconut saplings require constant care and attention; the coconut tree has to be consistently pruned so that it can grow stronger and faster. The coconut tree once matured will become a good asset in

²⁰ Lalitha, 72.

²¹ A. Sivasubramaniam, interview with author, August 25, 2014.

the future, just like good children are for the parents.²² These associations underline a reciprocal relationship between coconut saplings and human beings. It is these ideas that perhaps make Tamils (Tamil Catholics in our context) offer coconut saplings as a substitute or surrogate for children. When a child is sick, the parents make a vow that they would offer a sapling when the child gets well. In Kanyakumari District, Catholics also buy back from the church these saplings because they are believed to possess God's special blessings and protection. The coconut tree is so dear to the Tamils that they prefer not to cut the coconut trees raised in their own backyards. Just like Hindus, Tamil Christians also consider the plantain tree auspicious, a symbol of fertility, and use it in the life-cycle rituals.

In a similar vein, Catholics of Tamilnadu regard certain members and aspects of plant life very significant and auspicious. Some cultural events necessarily involve the use of plant world such as turmeric, paddy (un-husked rice) and betel leaves. For instance, turmeric occupies a prominent place in most of the rituals including life-cycle rituals. As Lalitha observes, turmeric "can even replace *taali* as the marriage emblem."²³ We came across a woman wearing a piece of turmeric in place of *taali*, as she had offered her *taali* in the shrine of Vailankanni."²⁴ Turmeric water is also used in the performance of a ritual called *ārati* in which an oil lamp is waved in front of a person or persons to "to honour individuals and to avert the evil eye" (ibid). Turmeric paste is also applied on the eyes of the dead to avert the evil spirit that might afflict the dead.

Paddy or rice remains as one of the most preferred grains of the plant-world among the Tamils, and Tamil Hindus regard it as Lakshmi (goddess of wealth). Just like Hindus, Catholics also use paddy in the life-cycle rituals like marriage (wherein the participants of marriage ceremony shower grains of rice on the newly married couple) and death (wherein Catholics place a portion of paddy near the dead body). Rice is also used in the *tāmpūlam*, a plate that is exchanged between the families of the future bride and bridegroom during their betrothal. Further, *vethilaipakku* (betel leaf and areca nut) is also given away at the start and the end of the marriage. Betel leaf is considered to be auspicious because it is believed to produce positive vibrations that can facilitate good relationships between human beings. For this reason, Tamils, at the time of extending an invitation for an important function like marriage, invariably place *vethilaipakku* along with the invitation card on a plate. In Sakkankudiruppu, near Tuticorin, Catholic Christians until recently used to distribute *vethilaipakku* to all Christian families in the village on a particular day which they believe to be the day of wedding anniversary of Mary and Joseph, parents of Jesus. This custom was eventually dismissed as "pagan" by the clergy and was discontinued a few years ago.²⁵ In the district of Kanyakumari, *verilai* (betel leaf) is also distributed among

²² A. Sivasubramaniam, interview with author, August 28, 2014.

²³ *Tali* is a pendant, in place of ring, that serves as a symbol of marriage in Tamil culture.

²⁴ Lalitha, 186.

²⁵ A. Sivasubramaniam, interview with author, August 28, 2014.

Catholic fishermen after a funeral in the cremation ground and those present at the funeral wipe their palms with betel leaf and thereby remove the impurity acquired through contact with the dead. This practice is prevalent among the non-Christian fishermen too.²⁶

The Catholics of Tamilnadu also believe that certain trees, especially the ones in the shrines, are sacred, because they possess both exorcizing power to drive out evil spirit from possessed people and curative power to restore wholeness and wellbeing. For instance, Tamil Catholics in the district of Sivagangai and Ramnad bring their possessed relatives to these special shrines, make them perform various rituals and prayers prescribed by the catechist, and consume the leaves of sacred trees that are considered to have special curative powers. The leaves of the margosa tree at Andavoorani, the mango tree at Muthupattinam, and the *manjanathi* tree at Valaiampatti are believed to possess special powers to cure the possessed. Similar types of beliefs also exist among Hindus, thus pointing, once again, to the cultural continuity between Christians and Hindus regarding ecological beliefs and practices.

Tamil Catholics, who had inherited a holistic native world-view, strongly believe that religion infuses every aspect of village life. Religion encompasses their every activity, be it economic, social and cultural. They seek the blessings of their Christian God in sowing, ploughing, harvesting. But the early Catholic foreign missionaries who worked with the dualistic perspective of sacred and profane, holy and unholy, distinguished between religious and non-religious or secular activities (be it social, cultural or economic) of the people. Hence these missionaries cared least for what people did outside the church premises, such as in the fields and at home. However, Tamil Catholics, shaped by an indigenous holistic worldview, ensured that religion would be present in their socio-economic and cultural domains. Accordingly, they approached the catechists, instead of the clergy, to Christianize some of their key agricultural activities such as sowing seeds, ploughing and harvesting:

One of the strategies employed by the Catholics to get religious recognition to the native socio-cultural rituals is by soliciting the services of kooyilpiLLai who occupies a middle ground in the ritual hierarchy. He is lower than the parish priest and therefore is eligible to perform non-official rituals on occasions that do not fall within the prescribed sacred category.... The native rituals are legitimately Christianised when the kooyilpiLLai officiates at the rituals.²⁷

Thus, in inventing their own ways of ignoring the indifference of the clergy Tamil Catholics circumvented the restrictions imposed by the Christian missionaries,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lalitha, 308.

thereby charting out new paths not only to continue the past but also to care for the plants and animals.

Ambivalent Attitude toward Trees?

The Tamil Catholics, like their counterparts in Hinduism, seem to have embraced both positive and negative perceptions concerning trees. On the one hand, according to the Tamil religious worldview, the tree in the temple is not only “the vital link between the shrine and the transcendent worlds below and above,”²⁸ but also an interface between chaotic *kāṭu* (uncultivated land or wilderness) and the ordered village. Additionally, as David Shulman argues, the tree localizes and fixes divine power into a material object.

Hence, the image of the tree depicted in the shrine of Vailankanni is not only a description about a belief in the past, but a vibrant symbol that connects the significance of a tree with a localization of Mary’s power that (a) mediates between heaven and earth, and (b) protects the ordered village and its life-world.



Figure 1. Our Lady of Vailankanni
(http://vailankannishrine.net/shrine_miracles.aspx).

On the other hand, both for Christians and Hindus, the wilderness (*kāṭu*), and trees in it are dangerous, because the evil spirits inhabit this space and reside in the trees. Because of this fear, Tamil Catholics sacrifice chickens during house-warming ceremony, to ensure that evil spirits, which may live in the wooden objects of the house such as doors and windows, are contained. While educated people may look at this folk practice as superstitious and oppressive, it does instill a strong sense of reverence toward nature and thus protects the environment from being destroyed by human whims and fancies. Is this not a better attitude than one that looks at nature as merely a beautiful object of enjoyment? While the latter attitude can easily result in the exploitation and commodification of nature, the former perspective can actively ensure the protection of nature.

²⁸ Lalitha, 247.

Tribal Christianity of Jharkhand

The population of the state of Jharkhand, created in 2000, is 4.1% Tribal Christian. The Tribal Christians in the state belong to the Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Santhal and Ho tribes. Christianity has been in the Jharkhand for many generations: 1845 saw the arrival of Lutheran Missionaries from Germany, followed by Jesuit missionaries in 1869. The Tribal Christians of this area are part of a larger entity called “Tribal Christians of Chotanagpur” who inhabit other regions of Chotanagpur plateau in “north-eastern Chhattisgarh state (mainly in Jashpur, Raigarh and Ambikapur region), northern Orissa (Sambalpur, Rourkela and Sundergarh regions) and the western part of the West Bengal state (the regions of Purulia, Dinajpur and Raniganj).”²⁹ The Christianity of this region, like that of Tamilnadu, is culturally vibrant and rich. When Christianity arrived, converts managed to face and resolve conflicts between the new faiths preached to them and the old culture they found themselves in. The outcome was that they became Christians religiously but socially, culturally and ethnically they remained as Tribal people. We now consider some of the ways through which Christians maintained their “tribalness” and expressed a pro-ecological ethos.³⁰

Continuation of the *Karam* Festival as Identity Marker

The most popular tree among the tribes of India is *karam* (*Adina cordifolia*), which is also considered to be a sacred tree in most Indian tribal communities. Celebration of the Karam festival exists as a singular identity marker for the tribal communities who live in different parts of India, especially in the big cities like Mumbai, and Delhi.³¹ On the occasion of the Karam festival, the 11th day of the lunar month of August-September, three green branches of this tree are cut and brought either to the village *akhra* (dance ground) or to the church premises at sunset, accompanied by the singing and dancing of young men and women of the village. Catholic girls who have recently been engaged sit around the branches to listen to the karam myth, which is followed by more singing and dancing that lasts the entire night to honour the karam branches.³² The next morning before

²⁹ Jose Kalapura, “Margins of Faith: Dalits and Tribal Christians in Eastern India,” in *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, eds. Rowena Robinson & Marianus Kujur (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010), 85.

³⁰ Thanks to Dr. Agapit Tirky who shared many of the ideas relevant to this section through telephone and emails between July 1 and 10, 2014.

³¹ It is also to be noted that the celebration of *karam* by Christians of Jharkhand was faced with opposition both from within and without. While some Christians opposed it because they were critical of the way some tribal elements incorporated into Christian worship, the *Sarna* non-Christian Tribals accuse Christians of destroying the tribal traditions and customs and who objected to the way the sacred karam branches of *Sarna* religion were handled in the Church, see Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, “Christianity and Tribal Religion in Jharkhand: Proclamation, Self-Definition and Transformation,” available: www.edinburgh2010.org/fileadmin/files/edinburgh2010/files/.../5._Niraj_Ekka.doc

³² Marianus Kujur notes that due to protests by some *Sarna* groups in Ranchi some Catholic priests do not allow this part of the Karam festival (namely bring of Karam Raja into the Church premises, narrating the story, singing and dancing around the karam tree at night) to take place.

Mass, the *Karam Raja* is installed in front of the altar. The Mass begins with a procession led by three girls “carrying a basketful of the *jawar* (maize saplings), which were to be distributed to all the participants at the end of the mass.”³³ During the Mass, special prayers are said for the wellbeing of the standing crops, cattle, and unmarried girls. During the offertory, people offer cucumber and maize saplings as gifts and as symbols of new life and prosperity. These rites and rituals of the Karam, performed both by the Christian and non-Christian tribal communities, ensure the (a) protection of the crops in the field, and (b) good family life for the young women with good husbands and healthy children in the future for the continuation of their clan and the tribe. The popularity of the Karam festival has risen substantially in the last two decades. It is celebrated in Christian schools, colleges and institutions located in different parts of India to emphasize a sense of ecological wellbeing.

Just like non-Christian tribes, the Christian tribes of Chatonagpur, particularly the Oraons and Santals, plant tall *sal* saplings in the courtyard of the house (where the wedding takes place) at nine equidistant spots to make a square structure. The tallest sapling is planted at the center to symbolize the Creator and the other saplings represent the elders of the village community. Three strands of a long single rope are tied round each sapling connecting them with one another all around, symbolizing tribal marriage as a web of relationships that starts at home with a family. For Oraons these nine *sal* poles symbolize the newlywed girl’s nine months of future pregnancy. Together with the tallest central *sal* tree, the Oraons also plant branches of the bamboo, *sidha*, *bhelwan*, mango and *mahua*.³⁴ The mango branches connote the perpetuation of Oraon descendants; the bamboo symbolizes their progeny. The branch of the *sidha* tree represents the fidelity between husband and wife. The *bhelwan* branch symbolizes the protection of husband and wife against the evil eye and, finally, the branches of *mahua* tree suggests mutual love between the bride and the bridegroom. The *sal* tree occupies a prominent position among the tribes, as their sacred grove known as *sarna* is basically a grove of *sal* trees. Non-Christian tribes believe that in that tree resides the guardian spirit/deity, which protects the trees, lands, humans and all other living beings of the village. Christian use of *sal* plants then not only illustrates the continuation of commonly shared holistic tribal perspective in which the supernatural, the natural and the human are interconnected, but also reaffirms a belief in this same continuity in the context of marriage—a life-cycle ritual that ensures the continuation of their progenies through the institution of family. In

While the priests celebrate Karam Mass in the Catholic Church as described below, they ask the tribal Christians to join the Sarna people for cultural celebrations.

³³ Marianus Kujur, “Tribal Church in the Margins: Oraons of Central India,” in *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, eds. Rowena Robinson & Marianus Kujur (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010), 43.

³⁴ Excerpts taken from the assignment submitted in March 2012 by Paul Dular Hansdak to Dr. Stephen Pampakal in partial fulfillment of B.Th Degree program in Morning Star Seminary, Barrackpore, West Bengal.

other words, family is like a sal tree that should represent and promote the understanding of interconnectedness that a sal tree embodies.

Christening is another occasion in which Santals use products of the plants. The midwife takes one cup of rice flour and sprinkles it on the four legs of the cot where the child is laid, and finally on the child. Then the midwife takes a second cup of flour and sprinkles it on the chest if the child is a boy, and on the shoulders if it is a girl. Then taking the child in her arms the midwife goes round the people announcing the name. The ceremony concludes with the eating of gruel prepared with *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) leaves, an antiseptic that stands for a long and healthy life.

Belief in Totemic Trees

Some of the major tribes in Central India are divided into a number of patrilineal clans named after totems, some of which also include plants. For instance among the Uraon tribe, the plant totems are, (a) *Bara* (banyan tree), (b) *Kujur* (a medicinal creeper), and (c) *Xess* (paddy). According to various tribal creation myths, it is the Creator Himself who divides human beings into different clans with separate totems in order to enable inter-clan marriage relationships, and to continue His creative activity by making the tribes stewards of His creation. This activity of God can continue only with the cooperation of human beings who would have to act in harmony with God and nature. It is the responsibility of each tribe to partake in this activity by specially caring for the totemic plant and to preserve the tribe's interconnectedness with nature. Through this, each tribe can contribute to and partake in the task of the Creator God.

Since totems are *eponyms* (names standing for persons to whom one's ancestors can be traced), members of a particular clan identify themselves socially with the other members of the clan and also metaphysically with the totem itself. Thus, a belief in a totem establishes existential solidarity with the totemic object and social solidarity with the human beings. These complementary visions of solidarity explain why people of the same clan cannot intermarry and also why the totem is so sacred and central to tribal life.

The fact that tribal Christians—just like their non-Christian brothers and sisters—believe that their origin derives from a particular plant, could mean that it is their supreme duty, both collectively and personally, to protect their totemic plant. This mandate to protect the totemic plant has led not only to the preservation of these sacred plants but also to identify the medicinal value of some of these plants. For instance, the totemic plant of Kujur Creeper's fruit extract is used for treating tuberculosis. In this context, it should also be noted that the tribal Catholic community imparts to the catechists, during their official training program, a special knowledge about herbal medicines with the help of experts in the field of indigenous medicines. By their deliberate and conscious attempt to acquaint the catechists with knowledge about the healing properties of

plants/herbs, the tribal Christian community wants to ensure that the inherited traditional knowledge about plants is acquired, preserved and handed over from one generation to the other with the help of catechists. In doing so, they also protect and preserve the medicinal plants and herbs which might soon face extinction in the context of de-forestation.

Production of New Religious Landscapes

Sociologist K. N. Sahay observes that the Christian Oraons of central India have continued some of their original Oraon agriculture-related festivals and rituals with some modifications.³⁵ For instance, Catholic Oraons celebrate their native festival of *Nawakhani* (eating of new crop) by offering the new grains not to the *Pachbalar* (ancestor spirits) or to *Chala Pachcho* (old lady of the grove) but to their Christian God on a particular day in the parish church for all Catholic villages. Similarly, Lutheran Oraons have modified the Sarna form of *Katni Parav* (harvest festival). While Sarna Oraons celebrate *Katni Dwar Puja* near the barns by offering different colours of chicken in the name of different spirits and deities of the village, the Christians celebrate the same festival in the church by dropping the propitiation of the deities through blood sacrifice. Either in the last week of November or in the first week of December, on a particular day the villagers carry in procession baskets containing rice and other grains as a thanksgiving offering, accompanied by music and *bhajans* (singing of a couplet by one person which the others repeat). Once the procession enters the church, people place the offerings at the altar. This is followed by regular church service with a special thanksgiving prayer. The Christian celebration of *Katni Parav* is marked by long garlands weaved with the first paddy blades which adorn the entrances of both the church and the homes.³⁶

In both these celebrations, Christians transpose their belief in a protective God from Sarna religion to Christianity. While belief in Sarna religion implies that the whole village comes under the protective power of a deity, the belief in the Christian God connotes a universal and omnipotent God whose territory encompasses the whole world. Through their new belief in a Christian God, tribal Christians produce new religious landscapes, much like the people in Tamilnadu, not only by shifting the place of worship from the barn to the church, but also by expanding their idea of divinely protected land beyond the boundaries of village to the larger territory of a parish and, indeed, to the whole world. Thus, the tribal Christians here and the rural folk in Tamilnadu make the idea of sacred a “contested category” through their indigenous rituals and practices whereby they produce and add “situational” facets of the sacred to the already existing

³⁵ K.N. Sahay, *Under the Shadow of the Cross: A Study of the Nature and Process of Christianization among the Oraon of Central India* (Calcutta: Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology, 1976).

³⁶ Ibid., 181-182.

“substantial” facets.³⁷ Similarly, as we shall see below, the founding of Christian Ashrams like *Jothiyagam*³⁸ with the special focus on “holistic wellbeing of all” can be cited as concrete instances of Christian initiatives to further the idea of sacred as a “contested category” thereby producing new religious landscapes in favor of promoting “Green India.”

Indian Christian Ashrams

Indian Christian Ashrams, inspired perhaps by “elite” but indigenous Hindu-world view, were founded³⁹ to become centers of intersection not only between Western Christian doctrines and Indian cultural practices, but also between an anthropocentric western framework and cosmotheandric⁴⁰ Indian vision, ideas and practices. This cosmotheandric vision of these ashrams is best captured not only in the very choice of location—usually a river bank or a mountain or a campus full of trees—in their religious architecture (which is mostly Hindu in its facade and interior style) and liturgical innovations, but also in their cultivation of love for nature. Their preferential option for the cosmos and concern for ecology is further evidenced by their vegetarian lifestyle, and in the very surroundings of trees, plants and flowers which the members of the ashram have deliberately created around their places of worship and living. Residents of the ashram view trees and plants as real manifestations of the divine and experience and, as Sebastian Painadath observes, “satsangs and spiritual discourses often take place under an auspicious Tree [sic] thus recognising that the Tree [sic] is the primal teacher of humanity.”⁴¹

Even a casual visitor to these ashrams will not fail to notice how these ashrams care for nature and the inmates soil their hands and feet working with the plants and trees. Moreover, some ashrams have created herbal gardens within their premises and seek to educate people about the healing properties of plants and trees, and help people to live in harmony with nature.

³⁷ The idea of sacred as “contested category,” as explained by Rodney Needham, consists of two dimensions: the “substantial” facet and “situational” facet. The “substantial” facet which is an awe-evoking, transcendental, all-pervasive ontological type needs to be distinguished from “situational” facet which is a processual product created by human practices and social interventions, see, Karen L. Mulder, “Specifying Sacred Space: The Anno Domini Experience,” *Religious Studies and Theology* 1 (2002): 27-49.

³⁸ It is an ashram run by the Franciscan sisters of the Presentation of Mary (FSPM) near Coimbatore.

³⁹ Indian Christian Ashram movement in India, though started way back seventeenth century by Robert De Nobili became a phenomena only from 1920s. For more details about Indian Christian Ashrams, see: Helen Rolsten, *Christian Ashrams A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India* (Lewiston, N.Y. : Edwin Mellen Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ See Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴¹ Sebastian Painadath, “Spiritual, Social, and Ecological Liberation—an Indian Christian Perspective,” available: http://www.fireflies.org.in/html/article_42.html.



Figure 2. Jothyagam Souvenir (collection of author).

For instance, a Christian Ashram in Coimbatore called *Jothyagam* claims itself to be a “human-divine integration” center in the midst of flora and fauna and seeks to promote holistic well-being of all by promoting eco-spirituality, naturopathy and ayurvedic centres which aim at training resource persons in vermi culture, use of natural manure, use of natural pesticide, pond eco-system, and green energy generation (i.e. scheme of identifying and growing ecologically effective local species of trees). Thus ashrams can become “eco-sensitive centers.”⁴² Some of the ashrams consider planting of trees and doing agricultural work, like cultivation and harvesting, as their major work and a crucial part of their spirituality.⁴³ It is also important to recognize that the early initiatives of Indian Christians such as N.V. Tilak and Duraiswamy to found Christian Ashrams did face conflicts with Western (foreign) missionaries since the proposed ashrams were modelled according to an indigenous cultural ethos to embody Christianity on Indian cultural soil.⁴⁴ But now, with a growing appreciation of ecological thinking and emerging efforts to promote the indigenization of Christianity, Indian Christian Ashrams have gained increasing importance because they offer new ideas and practices that constitute an eco-sensitive spirituality, which considers nature not as an object of exploitation but as a primordial home of all living beings. In fact, one of the important prayers in many ashrams is “*Sarvesām*

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Richard W. Taylor, “Christian Ashrams as a style of Mission in India,” *International Review of Mission* 68 (1979): 281-293.

⁴⁴ Ibid.



Figure 3: Tarumitra (<http://tarumitra.org/blog/>).

mangalam bhavatu—may all things enjoy wellbeing.”⁴⁵ The concrete actions of the ashram inmates to translate this prayer into everyday life can help encourage all of us to think not only about our own future but the future of the whole of cosmos.

Environmental Activism by Institutional Churches

It is clear from the above data that ordinary Christians have long been practising rituals that either directly care for plants and vegetation, or involve the use of objects, such as saplings, flowers and coconuts, either as substitutive symbols or as offerings to God. Similarly, the Indian Christian ashram movement has been proactively involving itself in promoting attitudes and perspectives that embrace nature as a constitutive element of the human self. Indian Christian environmental engagement does not stop with ashrams. In recent years, churches in India have taken a number of initiatives which can be called “Indian Christian environmental activism” to inculcate eco-sense among the people. One of the important initiatives of The Church of South India (CSI) in this regard is the formation of The Church of South India Synod Board of Ecological Concerns Committee, which proposed in 2008 a program known as “Church of South India: A Seven Year Plan to Protect the Living Planet.” The sole aim of the program was to make CSI a green Church.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Painadath.

⁴⁶ For more information, see: “Church of South India: A Seven Year Plan to Protect the Living Planet” <http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/Christian-CSI-7YP.pdf>.

Among Catholics, the initiation of the *Tarumitra* (meaning “Friends of Tree”) movement is perhaps the most important effort to primarily to involve the student community in the protection of the earth. Started by a Jesuit priest in Patna in 1988, the movement has spread far and wide into different parts of India to include over 250,000 students in over 2,000 schools and colleges (see Figure 2).

The founding of a unique bio-reserve in 1997—which has become a thick rainforest with 400 species of rare and vanishing trees—the tying of *rakhis* (amulets)⁴⁷ to the tree-brothers (see Figure 3), the introduction of an organic farm, and creating awareness among the people not to cut trees for Holy bonfires,⁴⁸ are some of the innovate schemes of Tarumitra which have the potential to leave a lasting impact on the care for plants and the trees surrounding them.

In some parts of India, local churches have also come out in the public sphere to intervene decisively to protect the flora and fauna that are facing extinction. For instance, in the run-up to elections in Goa in 1999, the Catholic Archdiocese of Goa went on record urging the voters to choose as candidates for the state assembly only those who pledge to support eco-friendly development.



Figure 4: Tree Amulet at Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune August 2014 (photograph by author).

⁴⁷ *Rakhi* is an amulet that a woman ties to a man whom she considers as her brother, and he in turn is expected to give her protective care.

⁴⁸ *Holi* is a North Indian spring festival which starts with bonfire on the eve of the previous day when people use logs of wood to burn the effigy of Holika, along with other objects that are combustible. Originally, the objects to be burnt included twigs, dried leaves and branches of trees left behind in winter. But nowadays in order to perform bonfire, people have no time to collect the wastes from forests or gardens. Instead they fell the tress to get the wood for the bonfire.

The cold-blooded murder of the religious nun, Valsa, in Dumka in the year 2011—by the mining mafia whom she criticized and fought against for depleting the flora and fauna of the region—is another concrete example of Christian advocacy of environmentalism. Catholic churches all over India also observed Environmental Justice Sunday on August 17, 2014 at the initiative of CBCI (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India). The circular sent out from CBCI headquarters in Delhi called upon the Christian faithful in India to stand up for environmental protection and raise their voices for environmental justice. In response to this, a local Christian NGO in Chennai made this an occasion to donate tree saplings to different parishes in the mainline Catholic churches and institutions like theological colleges (Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune; Vidyajothi, Delhi), and many other centers of theological education have been celebrating for the last three decades festivals like *poṇkal* that encourages gratitude for the fruits of nature, or *Karam*, which reconnects them to the sacred tree. Celebrations of such festivals not only help the Christian community in India re-align themselves culturally with Indian society but also provide an effective platform for highlighting the ecological significance of the lost traditions of the past.

Conclusion

This article, an exploration of Indian Christian environmentalism, considered both conventional practices and modern ecological initiatives. The above discussion shows that the ecological worldview of agrarian Indian Christians is neither conceptually articulated nor theologically expressed. Rather it is couched in concrete practices and belief systems, which aim at generating, maintaining, preserving and upholding a fundamental unity between God, nature and humans. From such practices then, one needs to deduce their environmental outlook/vision, which is founded on grounded relationships between the human, the cosmic and the divine. It is built on a philosophy that these different dimensions of one reality are so intrinsically and inalienably related to one another that they can sail or sink together. Indigenous world-views of the illiterate have long since translated the first option (of sailing together) into concrete actions through their cultural-religious practices. Paradoxically, the supposedly well-informed modern worldview of the educated masses could only be described as “ecologically naïve” as they opted for the second option (of sinking together) either arrogantly or unconsciously. The modern ecological initiatives that the article demonstrates in the Indian context highlight some signs of shift in the second camp from ignorance to enlightenment.

UNIVERSITY OF MADRAS
JAMESPONNIAH@GMAIL.COM

Bibliography

- Dumont, Louis. *A South Indian Sub caste: Social Organisation and Religion of the Paramalai Kallar*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Frykenberg, Eric. *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Fuller, C.J. "Sacrifice (*Bali*) in the South India Temple." In *Religion and Society in South India*, edited by V. Sudarsen et al., 22-35. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1987.
- Kalapura, Jose. "Margins of Faith: Dalits and Tribal Christians in Eastern India." In *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, edited by Rowena Robinson and Marianus Kujur, 75-96. New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010.
- Kinsley, David. *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1995.
- Kujur, Marianus. "Tribal Church in the Margins: Oraons of Central India." In *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, edited by Rowena Robinson and Marianus Kujur, 29-50. New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010.
- Lalitha, T. *Religion and Society: Indigenisation of Roman Catholicism in South India*. PhD diss., University of Goa, 2002.
- Mosse, David. *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Mulder, Karen L. "Specifying Sacred Space: The Anno Domini Experience." *Religious Studies and Theology* 21 (2002): 27-49.
- Narayanan, Vasudha. "Religious Vows at the Shrine of Sahul Hamid." In *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*, edited by Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman, 65-86. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- Painadath, Sebastian. "Spiritual, Social, and Ecological Liberation—an Indian Christian Perspective." Available: http://www.fireflies.org.in/html/article_42.html.
- Panikkar, Raimon. *The Cosmotheadric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Rolsten, Helen. *Christian Ashrams A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India*. Lewiston, N.Y. : Edwin Mellen Press, 1987.
- Sahay, K.N. *Under the Shadow of the Cross: A Study of the Nature and Process of Christianization among the Uraon of Central India*. Calcutta: Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology, 1976.
- Shulman, David D. *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Sivasubrahmaniyam, A. *Manthiram Cadangukal*. Chennai: New Century Book House, 1988.

Taylor, Richard W. "Christian Ashrams as a style of Mission in India."

International Review of Mission 271 (1979): 281-293.

Wilfred, Felix. "Christianity in Hindu Polytheistic Structural Mould." *Archives*

De Sciences Sociales des Religions 103 (1998): 67-84.