

Routledge Studies in South Asian History

**INDIA'S NONVIOLENT
FREEDOM STRUGGLE**
THE THOMAS CHRISTIANS (1599–1799)

Clara A. B. Joseph



“In her exhaustive and comprehensive study of the nonviolent struggle of Thomas Christians in India, Clara Joseph challenges the commonly held belief that India’s freedom movement excluded Christian communities. Engaging and accessible, this book explores the opposition of the Thomas Christians to the racist colonial discourse and defies the general public’s misperception of the dissenting experience of Christians of India in the period of Portuguese and Dutch colonialism in this country. Calling for a serious rethink on the very nature of Christian anti-colonial discourse and struggle, Clara Joseph throws a new light on the legacy of India’s nonviolent freedom struggle and its far-reaching implications for the minority narratives in India today.”

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“This timely, theoretically sophisticated, and empirically informed study of the Thomas Christian community exposes important but long obscured 17th and 18th century precursors to 20th century non-violent anti-colonialism movements. Dr. Joseph deftly refutes the longstanding and pernicious practice of treating Christianity and Colonialism as synonymous, and thereby opens up fresh possibilities to reconsider relationships between religion and nationalism in India.”

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India's Nonviolent Freedom Struggle

India's Nonviolent Freedom Struggle is a groundbreaking book that offers a fresh perspective on the Indian freedom struggle. It focuses on the Thomas Christians, a group of Christians in South India who waged a nonviolent struggle against European colonization during the politically volatile period of 1599–1799.

The book has three related objectives and unique characteristics. First, it offers a comprehensive study of primary sources that scholars have referenced but rarely studied in depth. Second, it argues that the Thomas Christian narratives provide a unique position to challenge prevalent estimations found in canonical and postcolonial critical discourse on the nation. Third, the book considers how an account of a nonviolent struggle by Thomas Christians further complicates received ideas of the postcolonial nation.

The book sheds light on the often-overlooked contributions of the Thomas Christians in India's nonviolent freedom struggle and challenges readers to reimagine the complex and often contentious relationship between colonizers and colonized.

A unique contribution to the study of Indian history, this book is an essential read for scholars of colonialism, anticolonial movements, and the history of India.

Clara A. B. Joseph is Professor of English and Adjunct Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary, Canada. She is the author of *The Agent in the Margin: Nayantara Sahgal's Gandhian Fiction* (2008) and *Christianity in India: The Anti-Colonial Turn* (Routledge 2019).

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India's Nonviolent Freedom Struggle

The Thomas Christians (1599–1799)

Clara A. B. Joseph

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Dedicated to:

**Mar Thoma I (d. 1670) and Mar Chandy Parampil (d. 1687),
the first two native bishops of India in the period of European
colonialism.**

“It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe’s crimes.”

—**Frantz Fanon**

“In the pursuit of Independence, the entire period of slavery was spent in struggle. No part of India or any time period remained untouched by the freedom struggle against several centuries of slavery and marked by people sacrificing themselves facing torture and making supreme sacrifice.”

—**Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India**



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Preface

About thirty years ago, when I began researching India's nonviolent freedom struggle, my primary focus was on the twentieth century and the actions of Mahatma Gandhi. However, as I delved deeper, I realized that there were other anticolonial nonviolent freedom struggles that took place in India's history. One such struggle was carried out by the Thomas Christians in South India from 1599 to 1799. This book, *India's Nonviolent Freedom Struggle: The Thomas Christians 1599–1799*, presents a detailed account of the nonviolent resistance the Thomas Christians undertook against European colonization during this politically tumultuous period.

During this time, there were several important events that marked the course of the Thomas Christians' struggle for self-rule and resistance against European colonization. Firstly, there was a significant political and cultural shift in the sixteenth century, which resulted in the recruitment of Thomas Christian soldiers for the (Portuguese) *Padroado* and *Estado*. Secondly, in the seventeenth century, the first schism occurred in the context of the struggle between the Portuguese and the Dutch in India. Finally, in the eighteenth century, the Thomas Christian Church was subjected to racialization. I think that through the study of these past events, we can gain a better understanding of the colonial and anti-Christian discourse that has been prevalent in India and other parts of the world in recent centuries. My previous work, *Christianity in India: The Anti-colonial Turn* (2019), provides a foundation for the analysis presented in this book.

I am making the claim in this book that the methods and strategies that the Thomas Christians deployed to gain autonomy from European colonization in the early modern period were nonviolent. How and why would this community—a community armed to the hilt even within church precincts, a community sought after by indigenous and foreign rulers for military and trade support, and a community ambitious and arrogant—choose nonviolence as one of its most effective strategies of the freedom struggle in the early modern period? This was the core question that troubled my study.

I believe this book offers essential insights on this topic. For me, one of the most striking revelations was the discovery of hidden links between Portuguese military and trade ambitions and the imposition of celibacy on the clergy of the Thomas Christians. Despite this ecclesiastical imposition, the community chose to resist the colonizing power through nonviolent means such as persuasion, migration, and refusal to cooperate, all aimed at maintaining their autonomy. Another noteworthy

discovery was an entire monastery of the Thomas Christians that coopted nonviolent methods of resistance to colonialism and took the lead in the freedom struggle. Although some of the responses of the Thomas Christians can be perceived as harsh, the community consistently chose to resist colonial injustices by suffering rather than inflicting violence on the perpetrators. By the eighteenth century, the community envisioned the “nation” as a larger and more encompassing entity that necessarily challenged foreign domination, further emphasizing their commitment to nonviolence.

As a scholar, I have utilized discourse analysis and microhistory tools to examine sources and events, conducting thorough analyses to better understand the complex relationships between genre and politics. Through my research, I have argued that these sources offer an alternative perspective on the freedom struggle, challenging the prevailing critical discourse on the nation. My book aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on the nation by studying the Thomas Christian narratives and complicating and challenging existing conceptualizations of the nation. Ultimately, my work seeks to provide a more accurate representation of the genealogy of scholarship on the freedom struggle, firmly linking the birth of this discipline with Eastern Christianity.

I present this book to the general reader and scholars in Colonial Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Early Modern Studies, India Studies, and Studies in the History of Christianity.

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1 Introduction

The Nonviolent Freedom Struggle

Defining Colonialism

On 22 January 1545, Francis Xavier wrote a letter from Cochin, India, to Master Simon Rodriguez, a fellow Jesuit residing in Portugal, with this stark message:

Do not allow any of your friends to be sent to India with the charge of looking after the finances and affairs of the [Portuguese] King. ... There is here a power, which I may call irresistible, to thrust men, headlong into the abyss, when the seductions of gain, and the easy opportunities of plunder, their appetite for greed will have been sharpened by having tasted it, and there will be a whole torrent of bad examples and evil customs to overwhelm and sweep them away. Robbery is so public and common that it hurts no one's character, and is hardly counted a fault: people scarcely hesitate to think that, what is done with impunity, it cannot be bad to do. Everywhere, and at all times, it is rapine, hoarding, and robbery. No one thinks of making restitution of what he has once taken. The devices by which men steal, the various pre-texts under which it is done, who can count? I never cease wondering at the number of new inflexions, which, in addition to all the usual forms, have been added, in this new lingo of avarice, to the conjugation of that illomened [*sic*] verb "to rob."

(Coleridge 1872, 278)

Those looking for a sensible definition of colonialism should find it in this letter. And those who ever wondered if India indeed was colonized in the early sixteenth century under the Portuguese may have their doubts cleared.

It is important to acknowledge that the concept of colonialism, as we understand it today, did not exist in the sixteenth century. As Jose Pedro Paiva (Professor, University of Coimbra) pointed out in a private communication, Francis Xavier never used the term in his writing. However, this does not negate the fact that he observed and described the practices and effects of colonialism in his letters. Despite the limitations of historical terminology, it is evident that Xavier speaks as a first-hand witness and offers a theoretical framework for understanding these phenomena.

Accordingly, European colonialism in the mid-sixteenth century in South India is understood based on its four fundamentals: power, theft, injustice, and discourse.

2 Introduction

Xavier defines the structure of power as “irresistible” and facilitating the plunder of native populations for profit. Conventions and models overpower morals so that one of the Seven Deadly Sins—greed—reigns supreme in the colonizer. Power and greed mate to produce injustice; its *modus operandi* is invasion: break-ins and burglary. But the colonizers are immune to consequences for they are licensed to rob. The result? “*Everywhere, and at all times, it is rapine, hoarding, and robbery*” (italics added), with no compensation for the robbed. Unfairness rules supreme when and where the colonizer governs. Ironically, the colonizer defends his honour in the very act of pilfering, and he does it through strategies, diplomacies, ruses, schemes, methods, plans, stratagems, in short, just about any means. These are the devices and pretexts to commit crime.

“Pre-texts” is a key word that is loaded with linguistic and discursive possibilities with material consequences. The signs and their meanings—such as, that to rob is to rob—are not transparent. Hence, the pretext thrives as so many words and statements, so that Xavier is stupefied by “the number of new inflexions” and “this new lingo of avarice” that get added to the root, the Medieval Latin word, *raubo*—to rob. Colonial discourse does a very good job of re-presenting and representing crime as commission. Therefore, as Michel Foucault stated in his inaugural lecture at the College de France on 2 December 1970, “We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things” (Foucault 1971, 22). Foucault observes that those in power positions impose their power-based knowledge (beliefs, disciplines, conventions) on to those outside it so that the imposed knowledge soon becomes naturalized as a (violent) tradition. According to Edward Said, such colonial discursive texts “create” the reality that they signify (*Orientalism* 1979, 94). Xavier himself defines colonialism as a process of material invasion, an invasion of land, labour, goods, culture, customs, language, and liberty, and that, satanically, destroys the colonizer’s soul in the chasm of pretexts.

This book shows what it meant for a community of Christians of India—the Thomas Christians—to live in that world and why they needed to fight against colonization and fight for freedom. These Christians claimed apostolic heritage through St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. They staunchly held onto the tradition that their ancestors were baptized by the apostle when he arrived on the shores of India in C.E. 52. Their aspirations, texts, and performances respond to both canonical and marginal disciplines studying colonialism as a strictly European Christian outcome, as well as to studies on the freedom struggle and the Indian nation that, in the main, exclude this community.

The Thomas Christians

Scholars have raised doubts about the apostolic heritage of the Thomas Christians, and even the probability that, if at all, the apostles arrived in India, such an India was elsewhere. In my essay, “The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas and Empire” (Joseph 2020), I review related scholarship and highlight problems that can be linked to colonial discourse. The doubts raised about Doubting Thomas converting the ancestors of the Thomas Christians and about the geographic location of

that event are chiefly associated with interpretations of the apocryphal Acts of Thomas. George Huxley (1983), Lourens P. Van den Bosch (2001), and Nathanael J. Andrade (2018) are some of those who reduce the history of the Thomas Christians to the third-century apocryphal text. In fact, some of them hold the view that since the living tradition of the Thomas Christians antedates this source, the tradition never existed. In contrast, Xavier Koodapuzha (2018), among others, concludes that the Thomas Christian heritage was not derived from the apocryphal text.

Some scholars, notably Huxley, are willing to concede a link between St. Thomas and India but prefer to see India as referring to any place but India. Their concession is based on the narrative, in the Acts of Thomas, that “India fell by lot and division to Judas Thomas the Apostle” and that Jesus insisted Thomas head right there in spite of the apostle’s objection: “Whithersoever you will, our Lord, send me; only to India I will not go” (Klijn 2003, 17). In the *Quest for the Historical Thomas Apostle of India: A Re-reading of the Evidence*, George Nedungatt (2008) takes Van den Bosch to task for his arcane stance that since there can be found no documents from the time of St. Thomas, there is no proof that the apostle went to India. As Jan Vansina (2017) points out, it is a methodological blunder in historiography to omit oral and performative texts. Besides citing the living tradition of the Thomas Christians in India, their socio-cultural and historical sources, Nedungatt (2008) refers to Church Fathers such as Origen, who presumably antedated the Acts of Thomas and yet acknowledged that Thomas was assigned Parthia. The “multifocus Indian tradition” that Nedungatt points to includes the following: Taxila (in present-day Pakistan) as the capital of Gundaphar’s Parthia, Gundaphar being the historical king of Parthia referenced in the Acts of Thomas and for whom the apostle worked as a carpenter and mason; Udayapur, in central India, which carries an eleventh-century engraving mentioning a church; Mylapore (in present-day Tamil Nadu) where the tomb of St. Thomas received pilgrims; and Malabar (present-day Kerala) where Thomas Christians and their tradition have survived for two millennia (405). Nedungatt, thus, substantiates the historical presence of these Christians in the subcontinent. Today, they number nine million (D’Lima 2014, 700).

Hardliners in India often accuse Indian Christians of being supporters of European colonization. Recent atrocities have been committed against Indian Christians—both Thomas Christians and Christians outside this community—based on this erroneous assumption. A number of the native missionaries are Thomas Christians, as these function within Catholic and non-Catholic institutions across India. For the most part, they work alongside non-Thomas Christians, and they serve Thomas Christians and those outside the Thomas Christian community. Given this reality, a focused study of Thomas Christians within colonialism at the confluence of European colonizations (viz. the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danish, the French, and the British) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can provide a much-needed understanding of an important trajectory of India’s freedom struggle.

The Freedom Struggle

Douglas M. Peers (2006) recognizes the contested nature of imperial history when he writes, “The events of 1857–8 in India ... [are] known variously as a mutiny, a revolt, a rebellion and the first war of independence” (63). Despite this observation, contemporary historians posit that India’s freedom struggle began in the nineteenth century. In arriving at this consensus, they agree with numerous sources and writers. In India, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s (1909) declaration of “the events of 1857-8” as “the Indian War of Independence” (n.p.) influenced scholars and the public. Thus, for Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1959), the incidents were the “first Indian war of independence.” A key contention of Savarkar’s book is that Hindus and Muslims (and some hesitant Sikhs) fought for the freedom of India; in this narrative, Christians remain alien as colonizers or their supporters. In the twenty-first century, it is not unusual to come across statements accusing Christians and Muslims of forced conversion and of, thus, endangering national security.

The Times of India (2022, November 14), for instance, titled a related report, “Forced religious conversion: SC says Centre must step in to stop practice as it affects security of nation.” The article refers to the move by the Supreme Court as a response to Odisha’s (formerly, Orissa’s) Freedom of Religion Act of 1967 and Madhya Pradesh’s Freedom of Religion Act of 2021. On the other hand, Raphael Cheenath, a Thomas Christian who headed the diocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, in Odisha as its archbishop, repeatedly complained about how Christians in his diocese were subject to ostracism and other forms of abuse in the years following the murder of many Christians and arson in the district of Kandhamal in 2008 (Digal 2010, March 9). On 6 December 2021, St. Joseph’s School in Ganj Basoda, Madhya Pradesh, was attacked by a mob after a YouTube channel misinterpreted a First Communion and Confirmation ceremony of eight Catholic children as a conversion ceremony. The school—run by a Thomas Christian order, the Malabar Missionary Brothers—sustained damage, and allegedly, the police who were alerted did not help (Johari and Iyer 2022, February 2).

Similar events are bolstered by the view that Indian Christians did not fight for freedom from European colonization. According to Indiafacts.org contributor, Rakesh Krishnan Simha (2015, May 18), “Their Abrahamic compass is fixed due west and there’s little hope Christians will suddenly become nationalist.” In his introduction to a special issue on “Christianity in India,” Deepra Dandekar summarizes the point: “Christians are ‘othered’ as a monocultural category of anti-nationals, who assisted colonials and rejected Indian culture by adopting Western morality” (Dandekar 2019, ii). And in response to the insinuation that Christians are not nationalists, other scholars suggest that Christians “too” participated in the freedom struggle. The edition of collected essays titled *They Too Fought for India’s Freedom: The Role of Minorities* discusses the contributions of Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, and Sindhis in the freedom struggle against the British (Engineer 2005), while inadvertently underscoring the apologetic stance minority populations are pressurized to adopt. Yet others published long lists of names of Indian Christians who had participated in the struggle against the British in

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (for instance, Pinto 2017 and Snaitang and Menachery 2011). Such data, however, reference the anticolonial struggles and freedom movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

In contrast, the period 1599–1799 is crucial for this study on the freedom struggle. The latter period is marked by a political and cultural “shift,” including the first schism, rarely addressed in studies on the colonial period. Furthermore, unlike the previous two centuries, which I studied in *Christianity in India: The Anti-Colonial Turn* (2019), the end of the sixteenth century and the ensuing two centuries saw incursions by other colonial powers, namely, the Dutch, the Danish, the French, the British, and even the Swedes.

However, these historical changes did not mark the demise of Portuguese colonial rule in South India. The political transitions instead manifested in unprecedented political, social, cultural, and religious transformations, which took on specific patterns and directions in the Thomas Christian community. By the mid-seventeenth century, the community had split irrevocably so that most of the following decades and the eighteenth century were spent in attempts at reconciliation. These efforts are historic, not because they brought about the desired unity of the community (they remain split), but because they reveal intense interactions between the colonizers and the colonized, and how the Thomas Christians became a critical determining factor in the struggle between the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, many of the ecclesiastical and social decisions of the sixteenth century pushed the community into a sea change, a central part of which included innovative forms of nonviolent resistance against colonialism. The period and its peculiarities, as related to the Thomas Christians’ freedom fight, signify, in sum, a major paradigm shift.

An Antecedent to Gandhian Nonviolence

The Thomas Christians were never bound by a Christian or other pacifism. Traditionally, even their priests took up armour and fought in the battles of their native rulers, something the Portuguese archbishop and statesman, Alexis de Meneses, would eventually resent and curtail. But the fighters themselves were bound by the rules of the ancient martial art of kalaripayattu that, in the words of Phillip Zarilli (1998), was “ritually, ethically, spiritually and socially circumscribed” (235). Technically, thus, faith and fairness constrained the Thomas Christians on the battlefield. Their Eastern Christian tradition, a tradition of endurance often caused by its existence within non-Christian majority populations, has led scholars such as John McGuckin (2004, December 29) to remark, “if it knows anything, the Eastern church knows how to endure.” McGuckin also criticizes occidental scholarship for ignoring the tradition and history of the Eastern church and thus distorting scholarship: “The common histories of Christianity, even to this day, seem to pretend that its eastern forms (the Syrians, Byzantines, Armenians, Copts, Nubians, Indians, Ethiopians, or Cappadocians) never existed, or at least were never important enough to merit mention; or that western Europe is a normal and normative vantage point for considering the story” (n.p.). Importantly, the Eastern church was not devoid of warrior saints.

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On the one hand, we come across narratives of Thomas Christians serving their rulers in the capacity of soldiers. On the other hand, the Thomas Christians obeyed their archdeacon and bishop in resorting to nonviolent ways of representing anticolonial resistance. The Coonen Cross Oath of 1653 is a case in point where crowds of Thomas Christians, at the moment of intense communal and personal trauma, chose non-cooperation over subjection to colonial injustice. This, however, is not by far the only incident in their history. The numerous cases of civil disobedience that this community engaged in against colonial power—and that too at a time when the option of military resistance was within easy reach—would indicate that in the history of India's resistance to European colonialism, the Thomas Christians' nonviolent resistance provides an important antecedent to the more widely known freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi's program of nonviolence was far from pacifist. Yet, the model of nonviolence Gandhi developed—Satyagraha—required the person exercising it, that is, the Satyagrahi, to conscientiously examine the pros and cons of its execution mindful of the fact that it was being exercised against one's "lover" (Gandhi 1924, 225). It was a philosophy of resistance to injustice developed by Gandhi, and Gandhi communicates its nuances in a letter that he wrote in 1924 to George Joseph, a Thomas Christian. Upon receiving "the call of the Mahatma" in 1920, Joseph had given up his job as a barrister, made a bonfire of the family's made-in-England clothes, replaced them with regionally hand-loomed plain-weave cotton (i.e., khaddar or khadi), and left Madurai along with his wife Susannah and their youngest child for Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad (Joseph 2003, 102–103). The communication of 1924 concerned Joseph's role in the event known in history as the Vaikom Satyagraha, the nonviolent strike demanding entry rights for the so-called lower-caste Hindus—labelled at the time as Untouchable or Depressed, later, Harijan, and then, in its current usage, Dalit, and officially, the Scheduled Caste—to the roads around the Sri Vaikom Mahadeva Temple in Vaikom in the Kingdom of Travancore.

Upon receiving news that Joseph was invited to lead the movement and that he was considering taking that on, Gandhi wrote to him dissuading him on the grounds that he was a non-Hindu and that casteism was a religious matter to be expiated by Hindus (Joseph 2003, 172). Gandhi (1924) also expressed surprise at hearing from his trusted friend, Mr. Andrews, that the Thomas Christians practised casteism (321). Before the letter could reach him, however, Joseph undertook his leadership role in the Satyagraha and was promptly arrested by the Travancore government. Thereupon, it seems that Joseph telegraphed Gandhi for permission to fast in jail. In his reply to Joseph on 12 April 1924, Gandhi traces the subtleties of Satyagraha:

Fasting in satyagraha has well-defined limits. You cannot fast against a tyrant, for it will be as a piece of violence done to him. ... Fasting can only be resorted to against a lover, not to extort rights but to reform him, as when a son fasts for a parent who drinks. My fast at Bombay, and then at Bardoli,

was of that character. I fasted to reform those who loved me. But I will not fast to reform, say General Dyer who not only does not love me, but who regards himself as my enemy.

(Gandhi 1924, 225)

In both Bombay and Bardoli, Gandhi fasted to prevent the initiative by the British to create a separate electorate for the “Untouchable” or “Depressed” classes. Gandhi saw his program as directed against the division of his nation; but others such as Babasaheb Ambedkar interpreted it as a blatant instance of Gandhi and his political party, the Congress, failing their most vulnerable subjects. Gandhi rather saw the fasting as directed not at tyrants, such as Reginald Dyer—the brigadier-general who ordered the massacre of an unarmed crowd in Amritsar on 13 April 1919—but at those he believed held hearts that could be changed by love and sacrifice. In his letter to Joseph, Gandhi proceeds to direct him to “wait in deputation on the Dewan and the Maharaja” (Gandhi 1924, 225) (since Travancore was an independent kingdom), to organize “a monster petition by the orthodox Hindus who may be well-disposed,” (225–226) to visit those who opposed, to support the movement in numerous ways (without taking on the leadership, of course), and to safeguard the movement from violence and thus a premature end.

Joseph obeyed Gandhi, but his later alienation from Gandhi and the Congress suggests that he fundamentally disagreed with Gandhi’s proposition that casteism was a purely religious affair. Gandhi respected the Hindu structure of castes, and on 1 May 1924 he wrote in the journal *Young India*, “I personally believe in [Hindu] *Varnashrama* though it is true that I have my own meaning for it. Anyway, anti-untouchability movement does not aim at inter-dining or inter-marrying” (Gandhi 1924, 325). In contrast, Joseph’s reflection on the subject is interesting: “the true social unit in India is the caste and the Syrian Christians [Thomas Christians] have survived these many hundred years, because they organised themselves into a caste” (Joseph 2003, 122). As a Thomas Christian, who traditionally benefited from the inequity inherent in the caste system, Joseph understood caste as basically a social issue. He was conscious of the harmful impact of casteism and was sensitive to the communities around him that were legally discriminated against; it was this social foundation that he aimed to dismantle through the Vaikom Satyagraha.

Joseph’s stance, as personal or modern as it might appear, reflects in some ways Thomas Christian social history wherein that community had close communication and interactions with people of different faiths. The social basis of their privilege, conversely, was propped up by their organizing into a caste. In the early modern period, the period that this book focuses on, the freedom struggle of the Thomas Christians relied on the close relationship with other religious groups and the caste system as a social category. Ambedkar’s position in the twentieth century would confirm the importance of such an understanding of caste. Gandhi’s philosophy of Satyagraha did not fully accord with the Thomas Christian perspective, but both sources could claim to have adopted modes of nonviolent resistance to colonization.

Colonial Studies: Christians versus Colonizers

The field of colonial studies, whether canonical or postcolonial, has been self-critical and thus always open to revisions (McClintock 1994; Said 1993; Jones 2017). A major criticism has been the tendency among scholars to study colonialism as a monolithic reality across countries (Howe 2008). Secondly, as Aijaz Ahmad, Terry Eagleton, and Benita Parry have observed, the field has been hijacked by an emphasis on epistemology to the detriment of a study of material realities. Two recent trends of scholarship attempt to respond to these shortcomings. First, John C.B. Webster (2008), in “Writing a Social History of Christianity in India,” criticized the tendency of scholars to treat Christianity in India as an extension of Western history simply because that may be the case in certain ex-colonies. Webster reflects the “new perspective” of the Church History Association of India, namely that Indian church history should be studied in the context of Indian history. Replacing the East–West binary, a new model that focuses on specifics of the internal has arisen—a perspective that revisits the cultural, political, economic, and religious networks promoted by New Imperial Histories (Howe 2008). And second, in his “Preface to the Anniversary Edition” of *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Robert J.C. Young (2016) emphasizes the need to move from endless theorizing to analyzing the revolutions of the freedom struggle that shook the foundations of Western imperialism and sustain their relevance for the twenty-first century. According to Pala K.M. Mathew (2004), this goal can be achieved by reviewing the interactions of Indian Christians with more recent forms of colonialism (also Ponnumuthan et al. 2004). These two directions concurrently pave the way for innovative areas of investigation and obliquely expose certain blind spots addressed in this project.

Colonial studies focused on the East–West binary for decades. While researchers started exploring directions that distanced themselves from orientalist views (Tracy 1990; Bosma et al. 2013; Young 2015), until very recently, scholars continued to direct their attention to the divide. The revisions recorded in colonial studies in the last forty years have not been visible in the study of colonialism and Thomas Christians, and very little attention has been paid to the Thomas Christians’ role in the Freedom Struggle. Robert Frykenberg (2008) and Ines G. Zupanov (2005) have made preliminary observations on the relationship between the colonization of India and the presence of Christians in general. The most notable contribution to a comprehensive understanding of some of the reactions of Christians to colonialism is R.S. Sugirtharajah’s *Jesus in Asia* (2018). A more inclusive approach to the history of Thomas Christians can be found in the several works of scholars such as Pius Malekandathil, George Menachery, Paul Pallath, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. A book that has been highly successful in the area of Christianity in South India is Corinne G. Dempsey’s *Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India* (2001). The book references the precolonial and colonial periods; however, its primary focus is on Hindu–Christian cultural interactions in the contemporary period. Chandra Mallampalli’s *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863–1937 Contending with Marginality* (2004) makes

a strong case for the role of nationalist politics in defining Indian Christians as homogenous. The focus of Mallampalli's book is the period of British colonialism and, therefore, ignores the foundational texts of the period of Portuguese colonization. Finally, Sonja Thomas (2018) provides an insightful analysis of the recent history of the Thomas Christians through the lens of gender and minority rights, offering new perspectives in the field of colonial studies. I build on these new directions of inquiry to elucidate the determinative relationship between Portuguese colonizers and Thomas Christians.

Therefore, this book explores the growth and evolution of colonial studies, including letters, travelogues, essays, and theoretical works, against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between Western and Eastern Christians. It highlights the significance of postcolonial institutions and their cultural impact on comprehending colonialism among Christians, broadening the traditional view of colonization as simply a conflict between Christian colonizers and non-Christian colonized. The goal is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the roots of colonial studies and its connection to Eastern Christianity. Additionally, this project sheds light on the current challenges, objectives, and limitations in the study of colonialism and the history of Indian Christians and provides insight into the contemporary socio-cultural landscape. Finally, it shares in the development of effective theoretical approaches in the field.

Overview and Arguments

This book aims to destabilize prevalent colonial and postcolonial narratives of the freedom struggle as occurring exclusively between non-Christian natives and Christian colonizers. Typically, studies on the colonial period assume that the struggle between the colonizers and the colonized was also between Christians and non-Christians, where the Christians are European and the non-Christians are the native populations (Viswanathan 1998; Singh 2001; Fischer-Tiné and Mann 2004). In those cases where segments of the native population are recognized as Christians, they are presented as converts of the colonial period who have imbibed European notions of life and liberty (O'Malley 1941; Laird 1972; Zastoupil 2010). The scholarship hence discusses (a) communities of converts who, Caliban-like, take a revisionist approach to the English Bible and challenge the colonial powers (Bhabha 1985; Kent 1999; Glover 2018) or (b) initiatives taken by colonial missionaries who led the converted masses through an anti-oppression campaign (O'Connor 1990; Bellenoit 2007; Partenheimer 2016). The directions that the scholarship has taken are crucial for an understanding of Indian Christianity. All the same, the literature rarely approaches the freedom struggle of communities that claim precolonial and Eastern Christian heritage. In the instance of the Thomas Christians, they fought not only the European state but also the European church. This project is thus directed to a significant gap in the scholarly literature on colonial studies. The history, culture, publications, and performances of the Thomas Christians of India challenge both canonical and marginal—Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies (Guha 1982; Prakash 1994; Williams 2016)—disciplines

that focus on the study of colonialism based on the understanding of colonialism as Christian and Christianity as Western.

This book endeavours to provide a thorough examination of the literary, cultural, and historical material on and by the Thomas Christians. Its examination intends to shed light on the anticolonial struggle of Indian Christians and to integrate their stories into the comprehensive narrative of India's freedom struggle. In doing so, the book seeks to challenge prevailing assumptions and biases within both canonical and postcolonial narratives of colonization and resistance. Furthermore, the book hopes to revisit the widely held notion that the colonization of India was necessarily a Christianizing process and to advance a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of those who were colonized. By providing a more detailed analysis of the experiences of the Thomas Christians, the book aims to contribute to a more multifaceted and diverse understanding of the complex history of colonization and resistance in India. Lastly, the book aims to broaden the scope of Indian historiography by giving proper recognition to the events in South India, where European colonization began. These themes are an extension of my ongoing research and previous work in the field, and the book hopes to contribute to a more complete understanding of the role of Christianity in the freedom struggle in India.

More specifically, this book addresses the following questions:

- Why is the period from 1599 to 1799 significant for the study of the freedom struggle in India?
- Did and could Christians in India challenge colonialism during the period of the civilizing mission, which often involved Christianization by colonizers?
- To what extent is religious history or church history also national history?
- What are the implications of the fact that postcolonial theory consistently ignores the resistance to colonialism by native Christians?
- Given the significant role that early modern struggles played in the later colonial and postcolonial periods, how do we reconcile the freedom struggle with the nationalist movements of more recent centuries?
- How is nonviolence a critical term in the study of the freedom struggle in India?

This chapter serves as an introduction to the topic of the Thomas Christians and their experience of colonization in the early modern period. It explores the identity of the Thomas Christians and their mode of nonviolent resistance to colonization. The following chapters will delve further into the specifics of their struggle for independence and self-determination.

Grand narratives of decolonization often overlook the history of anticolonial resistance by Christians. Chapter 2 challenges the assumption in Postcolonial Studies that resistance to colonialism by orthodox Christians is impossible and non-existent by examining Western and Indian sources from the sixteenth century. These sources reveal that ecclesiastical policies at the time, which continue to shape the lives and lifestyles of Thomas Christians, were colonial and Machiavellian. The chapter argues that these sources and their enduring influences should be re-evaluated in the context of the unity of church and state during the early modern period.

One significant area of influence discussed in the chapter is the discipline of clerical celibacy, which is shown to be connected to the use of Thomas Christians by colonizers as traders and soldiers. The chapter highlights an archive of nonviolent anticolonial resistance by the Thomas Christians.

Chapter 3 examines the role of the Thomas Christians in resisting Portuguese colonization in the seventeenth century. By using nonviolent resistance tactics, such as seeking new markets and ordaining bishops without Europe's approval, the Thomas Christians were able to push back against colonial rule. The chapter investigates the involvement of the Portuguese colonial administration, the Dutch, a Thomas Christian monastery, and the Thomas Christians' assembly (*yogam*), in related key events and decisions. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes the Coonen Cross Oath of 1653 from a postcolonial perspective as part of a freedom struggle characterized by nonviolence and directed against colonial structures. It challenges the widely held belief that the freedom struggle in India took place in the mid-nineteenth century and without the involvement of Indian Christian communities. Instead, it argues that not just the Coonen Cross Oath but a series of critical events reshape our understanding of the timing and representation of India's freedom struggle. The chapter also considers the relationship between early modern conceptions of community and modern understandings of the nation. By acknowledging the colonial aspect of the synod and the ensuing rebellions, the chapter argues that we can more fully grasp history as both church history *and* national history. Moreover, it proposes that by re-examining the label of "heretic" applied to the Thomas Christians in colonial India, we can have a more thorough comprehension of their role as freedom fighters and reconsider the history of the anticolonial struggle and the freedom movement in India.

Chapter 4 offers an in-depth analysis of the Thomas Christians' efforts toward national unity and independence during the colonial period in eighteenth-century India. Through the lens of *The Varthamanappusthakam*, India's first modern travelogue, which documents the experiences and responses of the Thomas Christians, the chapter explores the importance of self-defence, cultural critique, and writing as tools of resistance against colonial invasion and the power of minority voices in resisting violence and oppression. In addition, the chapter investigates the motivations of the Thomas Christians to resist and seek change, as well as the factors that influenced their decision to resolve a schism in the pursuit of autonomy. This chapter explores instances of inappropriate behaviour by Padroado and Propaganda Fide representatives toward the native population as recorded in *The Varthamanappusthakam* and how these incidents were used to challenge commonly held beliefs about colonization and to restore unity within the Thomas Christian community. Finally, the chapter examines the transformation of casteist discourse to classist discourse in the colonial context. Overall, this chapter provides an intense and nuanced understanding of the Thomas Christians' nonviolent struggle for independence and self-determination during a critical period in history.

The final chapter of the book argues that national unity is not a commonly cited reason for including minority narratives in India today, due to the complex power

dynamics at play. During the early modern period, leaders within the Thomas Christian community, including archdeacons, bishops, and laypeople, sought autonomy in response to the colonization efforts of Western figures and institutions. Despite their anticolonial efforts, the unity between church and state during colonialism and the freedom struggles of the time have been overlooked in historical accounts. This distorted view of colonial history has allowed corporations and Indian administrators to benefit from the public's misperception of current events.

The chapter contends that the persistence of the colonial discourse of the "civilizing/Christianizing mission" leads to a misinterpretation of anti-development movements led by Thomas Christians as attempts at religious conversion. The final section of the book looks at recent instances where Thomas Christian leaders have been affected, including some who were killed, due to this distorted view. The chapter also examines how the discourse of promoting the colonizers' "civilizing" and "Christianizing" goals, which primarily served the purpose of economic colonization in the early modern and colonial periods, continues to be used in the context of globalization and development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The chapter thus highlights the book's contemporary relevance.

The study of history requires a careful examination of historical sources and an understanding of how narratives are used to make meaning in historical texts. In this project, I propose to employ literary analysis and critique as a practical methodology to examine the narratives presented in historiographical texts. While historiography is the study of historical methods and the different ways of writing history, it has been difficult to separate fact from fiction in the narration of history, leading to a crisis in the field. According to Richard J. Evans, the narrative turn in historiography resulted in a crisis, which can perhaps be solved by influences from "neighbouring disciplines ... [such as] ... literary criticism and linguistic analysis" (2001, 7). The Thomas Christians and their nonviolent freedom struggle is a subject that requires such analysis. The emplotted (White 1978, 48) freedom struggle of India draws from a universalized history of European Christian colonization that has required the suppression of events relating to Eastern Christians. This silencing is to the extent that Christians of India not only have been unfairly left out of accounts of the freedom struggle but, in representations of the postcolonial world, have been re-defined and inserted as traitors to their nation. As such, this project will use microhistory and discourse analysis to uncover the nuances and complexities of the nonviolent freedom struggle of the Thomas Christians in the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, offering new insights into a neglected and misunderstood chapter of Indian history.

This book will be of interest to researchers, scholars, and graduate students in the field of South Asian Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Religious Studies, Literary and Cultural Studies, Race Studies, History of Christianity, Indian History, and Subaltern Studies. It would also appeal to journals in the field of Renaissance/Early Modern Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Religious Studies, Christianity, South Asia, and Translation Studies. Additionally, the book would appeal to Christian institutions (colleges, seminaries, libraries, etc.) and departments of Religious Studies and World Christianity. It is also relevant to those studying Christianity in China,

Africa, and specifically Ethiopia—that is, regions that claim precolonial Christian heritage or that had similar forms of interactions between the West and native Christians. Moreover, the subject of this book is pertinent to regions in North America and Europe, which have a history of Christian missions and colonialism, and once-colonized regions, such as Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The book aims to contribute to the burgeoning field of World Christianity and Postcolonial Studies, with the potential to spark responses from canonical areas of study, such as Global Early Modern Studies and Modern Studies, as well as marginal areas—for instance, Subaltern Studies and Coastal and Littoral Studies.

I welcome the reader to this study of colonialism and the freedom struggle of the Thomas Christians of India.

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