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Q4(c)

Critically examine Indigenisation of Christianity in India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine Indigenisation of Christianity in India
- Keep the answer to a 15-mark length of about 200 words

Revision summary

Indigenisation means Indian language, rite, and social form inside the church.

Kerala **Syrian Christians** were indigenous before colonial missions.

De Nobili used Sanskrit dress and left caste in place.

Naga and Santal churches show tribal indigenisation from below.

Caste in congregations is the main failure of the project.

Introduction

Indigenisation of Christianity is the effort to root church life in Indian language, rite, caste reality, and tribal custom. It is both a missionary method and a convert demand.

Body**Historical paths**

- Syrian Christian communities on the Kerala coast were Indian in kinship and Malayalam long before colonial missions.
- **Roberto de Nobili** at Madurai adopted Brahman dress and Sanskrit debate to plant a high-caste church, an early inculturation that left Dalit converts aside.
- Nineteenth-century Protestant missions in the North-East and among **Santals** used local speech and schools. **Naga** churches later became a nationalist as well as a faith form.

What indigenisation looks like

- Ashram experiments, Indian music, and festival calendars try to shed a purely European parish look.
- Tribal churches keep clan and village council beside the pastor, which is indigenisation from below, not only from Rome or Canterbury.

Critique

- Caste inside Indian churches shows incomplete indigenisation of equality. **Dalit Christians** often sit in a second pew.

- Hindu critics treat indigenisation as camouflage for conversion. Anthropologists treat it as syncretism, comparable to other Indian sects.
- State politics after anti-conversion laws squeeze public rite, so indigenisation becomes a legal performance as well as a cultural one.
- **Comparison with Ambedkar's Navayana is limited:** that was an exit from Hindu caste, not a Christian path, but both show religion recast for Indian rank.

Flow diagram

Christianity in India -> Syrian Kerala
Christianity in India -> Nobili inculturation
Christianity in India -> Naga Santal churches
Christianity in India -> Caste in pew

Conclusion

- **Indian Christianity is already plural:** Syrian, tribal, and caste-marked. Indigenisation succeeds in language and festival, and it fails where caste still grades the pew.

Facts & figures

Roberto de Nobili

Seventeenth-century Jesuit at Madurai who adopted Brahmanical style to win elite converts.

Syrian Christians

Kerala community with old Indian kinship and liturgy, a pre-colonial indigenous Christianity.

Naga churches

Baptist and other congregations that became central to Naga public life and identity.

Dalit Christians

Converts who often remain ranked inside the church, exposing the caste limit of indigenisation.