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The Future Terrain of Indian Christian Theologies: Interdisciplinary Approach

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Indian Christianity cannot be understood as a single entity due to the country's immense diversity. Likewise, theological research in India defies identification with a single stream. Linguistic, cultural, and denominational legacies shape theological expressions across different regions, such as the South, North, and Northeast, each engaged with distinct sociocultural contexts. Indian Christian theologies are deeply embedded in these varied cultural and religious landscapes. In addition to religious and cultural plurality, caste dynamics and socio-economic justice are pivotal concerns within Indian theological discourse.

This article critically examines the various strands of Indian Christian theologies,[1] highlighting their limitations in addressing lived realities. While some theologies emphasize contextual concerns, they often fall short of engaging lived experiences due to a lack of theological methods

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[1] In this article, the term *Indian Christian theology* refers to the theology generated by Brahmin converts and elites attempting to find a convergence between Christianity and Hinduism. By contrast, *Indian Christian theologies* is a broader term encompassing the full spectrum of theological traditions that have emerged across India's diverse regions and social groups.

that incorporate rigorous, scientific engagement with people. This gap necessitates borrowing methodological tools from the social sciences.

The article argues for the necessity of integrating lived realities and lived experiences into theologizing by engaging with the social sciences. However, offering specific social-scientific methodological pathways is beyond its scope. Theological subdisciplines have long interacted with philosophy, history, and anthropology; therefore, this article advocates for deeper engagement with the broader field of social sciences. By incorporating lived experience as a key source for theological reflection, this approach fosters the development of theologies that are not only more relevant to the Indian church and society but also resonate with the specific contexts and experiences of diverse communities.

Present Realities of Indian Christian Theologies

Indian Christian Theology

Indian Christian theology initially focused on engaging Hinduism, articulating Christian doctrines in Hindu terms, and creating dialogues at elite levels. Inculturation of the gospel within Indian categories was a key strategy adopted by European missionaries like Roberto de Nobili.[2] Hindu converts to Christianity interpreted Christ through the lens of Hindu philosophy. Brahmabandhav Upadhyay,[3] Nehemiah Goreh,[4] and Lal Behari Dey[5] used categories of Hinduism to express their understanding of Jesus,

[2] de' Nobili, "Roberto de' Nobili on Indian Customs," ed. Savarimuthu Rajamanickam (Palayamkottai: De Nobili Research Institute, 1972); *Soosai Arokiasamy, Dharma, Hindu and Christian according to Roberto de Nobili: Analysis of Its Meaning and Its Use in Hinduism and Christianity*, Documenta Missionalia 19 (Rome: Gregorian Biblical Book Shop, 1986).

[3] Upadhyay, *The Infinite and the Finite* (Trichinopoly: Rev Joseph, 1918).

[4] Nehemiah Nilakantha Sastri Goreh, *The Theology of Nehemiah Goreh*, Confessing the Faith in India, No. 3 (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1969).

[5] Sunand Sumithra, *Christian Theologies from an Indian Perspective* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1990), 81–84.

while Sadhu Sundar Singh[6] and A. J. Appasamy[7] integrated *bakthi* tradition into their theology. Vengal Chakkarai[8] and Pandipeddi Chenchiah[9] systematically explored Christian doctrines in relation to Hinduism, contributing to the Rethinking Christianity project in the 1930s, which sought to critique Eurocentric theology and develop an authentically Indian alternative.[10] Swami Abhishiktananda, a French Catholic priest, claimed that Christianity was the fulfilment of Hinduism.[11] These theologians used Hindu philosophies like *advaita*, *dvaita*, and *bhakti* to articulate their theology.[12]

However, Evangelical and Pentecostal scholars became wary of this approach, concerned that it might lead to syncretism rather than making the gospel relevant to Indian culture. Sunand Sumithra critiqued Indian Christian theology, arguing for the centrality of the Bible in contextualizing theology and emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit.[13] Geomon George, from a Pentecostal perspective, argued that Indian Christian theology failed to engage the spirituality of the masses, focusing instead on the spirituality of caste Hindus.[14] He claims that Indian Christian theologians were influenced by a Western paradigm of Christianity that was overly

[6] Singh, *Visions of Sadhu Sundar Singh of India* (Lawton: Trumpet Press, 2012); Singh, *At the Master's Feet* (1922; repr. Summit: Start Publishing, 2012).

[7] Appasamy, *The Christian Bhakti of A. J. Appasamy: A Collection of His Writings*, ed. T. Dayanandan Francis (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1992); Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A Study in the Mysticism of the Johannine Writings* (London: Macmillan, 1927).

[8] Chakkarai, *The Cross and Indian Thought*, Indian Studies (Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1932); Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, Indian Studies (Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1930).

[9] Chenchiah, *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World and Indian View of Dr. H. Kraemer's Presentation* (Madras: Available at the Guardian Office, 1938).

[10] G. V. Job et al., *Rethinking Christianity in India* (Madras: Hogarth Press, 1939).

[11] Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point, within the Cave of the Heart* (1969; repr. Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997).

[12] Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1989).

[13] Sumithra, *Christian Theologies*.

[14] In academic writings, scholars use the term *caste Hindus* to refer to three castes—Brahmins (priests), Kashtriyas (rulers), and Vaishyas (merchants)—in Hindu caste hierarchy who claim to be twice born and are often referred to as *high caste* or *upper caste*.

rationalized and philosophical, neglecting encounters of spiritual power.[15] As a result, Indian Christian theology in Hindu philosophical categories failed to address the form of Hinduism practiced by the majority in India.

Interreligious Dialogue

Indian Christian theology shifted its focus from making Christianity relevant to Hinduism toward interreligious dialogue. Raimon Panikkar emphasized dialogue and interreligious sharing, using a *cosmotheandric* approach where religious experience, rather than intellectual exchange, was central, potentially transforming both individuals and religions.[16] Stanley J. Samartha argued it is not religions that engage in dialogue, but people, and warned against limiting dialogue to academic settings.[17] M. M. Thomas proposed the concept of Koinonia, envisioning a unity where the church transcends religious borders and is present among all religious communities.[18] Although Thomas's idea of humanisation and Koinonia as an ecumenical community was compelling, it remained largely aspirational. Theologians of dialogue focused on philosophical and theological reflections, often neglecting the lived reality of dialoguing among people of different faiths.

Dalit Theology

With the rise of the liberation paradigm, Indian theologians viewed Indian Christian theology as a product of the elite, dominant Brahmanical tradition. This perspective sharply contrasted with the reality of the Indian church, which is predominantly composed of Dalits (60–75%) and tribal communities. Dalit theology focuses on caste-based oppression, which

[15] Geomon K. George, "Twentieth Century South Asian Christian Theological Engagement with Religious Pluralism: Its Challenges for Pentecostalism in India" (PhD diss., Univ. of Edinburgh, 2004).

[16] Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998).

[17] Samartha, *Faith in the Midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977); Samartha, ed., *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals: A Continuing Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974).

[18] M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1971); M. M. Thomas, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism: A Collection of Addresses to Ecumenical Gatherings* (1947–1975) (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1978).

strips individuals of their identity, dignity, equality, personal and political rights, and socio-economic justice. It portrays God as a liberator, with Jesus depicted as a Dalit whose suffering offers hope and liberation to the oppressed Dalit community.[19]

Arvind P. Nirmal was a pioneer of Dalit theology and instrumental in the emergence of Dalit studies in India.[20] Other notable Dalit theologians include James Massey, who produced influential works shaping Dalit theology;[21] Antony Raj, a Jesuit priest and activist whose research exposed caste practices within the Catholic Church;[22] and Maria Arul Raja, who has made significant contributions, including his work on the multivolume Dalit commentaries published by Centre for Dalit Studies.[23]

Despite the paradigm shift brought about by Dalit theology, it has faced criticism for remaining largely within academic circles and failing to effect tangible liberation for Dalits on the ground. Peniel Rajkumar, in his work, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities,* emphasizes this shortcoming: "The growing influence of Dalit theology was incompatible with the praxis of the Indian Church, which was passive in its attitude towards the oppression of the Dalits both within and outside the Church. It was recognized that the reasons for this lacuna between Dalit theology and the Church's praxis lay with the content of

[19] A. Maria Arul Raja, *Jesus the Dalit: Liberation Theology by Victims of Untouchability and Indian Version of Apartheid* (Hyderabad: Volunteer Centre, 1996).

[20] See Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute for the Department of Dalit Theology, 1990), especially Nirmal's chapter, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," 139–44.

[21] Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995); Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997); Massey, "The Role of the Churches in the Whole Dalit Issue," *Religion and Society* 41, no. 1 (1994): 44–50.

[22] Raj, *Discrimination against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu* (Madurai, India: IDEAS, 1992).

[23] Raja, *Jesus the Dalit*; Raja, "Dalit Theological Methodologies: Breaking New Grounds," in *Revisiting and Resignifying Methodology for Dalit Theology*, ed. James Massey and Indukur John Mohan Razu (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies and United Theological College, Bangalore, 2008), 70–92; Raja, "Dalit Christianity in India: Problems, Challenges and Hopes," in *Church on Pilgrimage: Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, ed. Kuncheria Pathil (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2016), 361–82.

Dalit theology, which does not offer adequate scope for engagement in praxis."[24] Moreover, non-Dalits within the church have often been unsupportive of Dalit causes, and the church has failed to eradicate caste discrimination within its own institutions.[25] Nevertheless, the emergence of the Dalit Christian movement, which protests caste discrimination within the church and advocates for Dalit Christians' rights, particularly against state discrimination, is a positive outcome of Dalit theology.

Although Dalit theology aims to emancipate Dalits by emphasizing contextual realities and praxis, it has largely confined itself to theoretical propositions, remaining more of an academic project than a catalyst for praxis because it failed to engage the Dalits in constructing Dalit theology. Despite its emphasis on praxis, it is yet to create the space needed for the real-world liberation of Dalit communities.

Tribal Theology

The Christian presence among tribal communities in central and northeast India is significant, but these communities are ethnically distinct. Tribal Christians observed that Indian Christian theology was overly focused on Hindu philosophy, while Dalit theology primarily addressed caste-based oppression. Both "failed to perceive tribals' human dignity and poverty in relation to in the context of their alienation."[26] Neither Indian Christian theology nor liberation theology adequately addressed the cultural realities of tribal Christians in India.

Nirmal Minz, the pioneer of tribal theology in India, drew parallels between tribal realities and biblical narratives.[27] Renthy Keitzar saw a par-

[24] Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 177.

[25] S. M. Michael, "Dalit Encounter with Christianity: Change and Continuity," in *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, ed. Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur (New Delhi: Sage, 2010), 51–74.

[26] Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology*, Contact Zone Explorations in Intercultural Theology (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2011), 140.

[27] Minz, *Rise Up, My People, and Claim the Promise: The Gospel Among the Tribes of India* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997); Minz, *Pearls of Indigenous Wisdom: Selected Essays from Lifetime Contributions by Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz, an Adivasi Intellectual*, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Sonjharia Minz (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute and Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore, 2007).

allel between tribal cultures and the ancient Hebrews, allowing tribal people to interpret the Bible without the influence of Western or Indian philosophical frameworks.[28] Wati Longchar integrated a tribal worldview that prioritizes creation and land, contrasting with modern utilitarian views of nature.[29] K. Thanzauva, another notable figure in northeast India, argued that theology should lead to social transformation, highlighting the communitarian culture of tribal Christians as a key aspect of tribal theology.[30] While Indian tribal theology adopted tribal worldviews and culture in its theological reflections, it fell short of fully engaging with the indigenous elements and lived realities of tribal Christians in its reflection.

Indian Womanist Theology

The struggle for women's rights in India can be traced back to Savithribai Phule (1831–1897), India's first female teacher, who established the first school for girls in Pune. Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922), a Brahmin convert to Christianity, spearheaded the movement for women's emancipation. Indian feminist historian Uma Chakravarthi notes that Ramabai "mounted a scathing critique of Brahmanical patriarchy at a time when even contemporary male reformers were shying away from confronting its structures."[31] Although Ramabai planted the seeds of Indian feminist theology, it took several years to bear fruit.

It was not until 1976 that the Church of South India (CSI) ordained its first woman priest, Rev. Nirmala Vasanthakumar. Rev. E. Pushpa Lalitha became the first woman bishop of the CSI only in 2013. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, a medical scientist and founding member of the Indian Women's Theological Forum, significantly contributed to women's empowerment

[28] Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message: Introducing a Contextual Christian Theology for North East India* (Assam, India: Christian Literature Society, 1995); Keitzar, *Triumph of Faith in Nagaland* (Kohima, India: Nagaland Baptist Church Council, 1987).

[29] Longchar and Larry E. Davis, eds., *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Context and Perspective* (Jorhat, India: Tribal Study Centre, Eastern Theological College, 1999); Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat, India: Eastern Theological College, 1995).

[30] Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2004); Thanzauva, *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective* (Jorhat, India: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989).

[31] Chakravarthi, "Censored History," *Sabrang India*, Sabrang, 30 November 2000, https://www.sabrangindia.in/censored-history.

in the Indian Catholic Church.[32] Similarly, Virginia Saldanha, a Catholic feminist theologian, played key leadership roles in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), producing influential works on women's issues and justice.[33]

Despite these advances, Aruna Gnanadason observed, "Most male liberation theologians in India have not made a serious attempt to recognise the systematic discrimination against women.. . . The structural violence against women, patriarchal institutions and negative attitudes to women have not been adequately analysed theologically, nor have they been recognised as 'sins' against half the population of India."[34] Echoing the same concern, feminist scholar and activist Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar highlights that Dalits and women are "the most marginalized in the Indian context"[35] and insists that women's experiences should be the primary source of womanist theology. However, despite the clear call for incorporating women's experiences into theological reflections, feminist theology in India largely remained a theoretical exercise.

Subaltern Theology

Subaltern theology emerged as the collective voice of marginalized communities in India, including women, Dalits, tribal, and other oppressed groups. These communities, each grappling with identity and body politics within their own contexts, often found their theological reflections fragmented. To address this, scholars sought common ground, leading to the development of subaltern theology. Sathianathan Clarke notes, "subaltern is the most suitable term to gather together various groupings in India

[32] Gajiwala, Raynah Braganza Passanha, and Varghese Theckanath, eds., *Gender Relations in the Church: A Call to Wholeness and Equal Discipleship* (Pune: Streevani, 2012).

[33] Saldanha, Varghese Theckanath, and Julie George, eds., *Women as Equal Disciples: Unfinished Task of the Church* (Pune: Streevani, 2016); Saldanha and Metti Amirtham, eds., *The 21st Century Woman Still Claiming Her Space: Asian Feminist Theological Perspectives* (Delhi: Media House, 2018).

[34] Gnanadason, "Towards an Indian Feminist Theology," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (1989; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 121.

[35] Anderson-Rajkumar, "Turning the Body Inside Out: Contours of Womanist Theology," in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, ed. **S**athianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 202.

through which theologians can commit themselves to reflectively view and critically re-view notions of God, world and the human beings and their inter-relationships."[36] Subaltern theology aims to foster solidarity among the oppressed, encouraging these groups to transcend their ethnic or gender identities. Clarke advocates the term *subaltern* "as an interpretive posture and as a category of interpreters,"[37] to preserve the unique identities of marginalized communities while promoting collective participation in God's liberative mission. Philip Peacock advocates for a fluid Dalit identity that "allows for the assemblage of alliances among all afflicted,"[38] embracing all victims in a shared struggle for liberation.

Subaltern theology focuses on constructing theology "from below." Felix Wilfred describes it as follows: "A method and orientation that should characterize the efforts of theologizing in every local situation with concrete issues at hand. It is not so much a system whose contents and parts get elaborated. Any theology that views the reality and experience of the victims in the light of the Gospel would qualify itself to be a subaltern theology. The victims themselves will be the foremost and primary agents and point of reference."[39] This perspective is further explored in *Borders and Margins*, an edited volume by Dexter Maben, which amplifies various marginalized voices in India.[40] Thus, subaltern theology could bring all marginal voices under its umbrella.

Following this trend, theologians have developed "Christologies of particularities," understanding Jesus through specific cultural and marginalized lenses. L. H. Lalpekhlua crafted a Christology for Mizo culture,[41]

[36] Clarke, "Subalterns, Identity Politics and Christian Theology in India," in *Christian Theology in Asia*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 278.

[37] Clarke, 274.

[38] Peacock, "'Now We Will Have the Dalit Perspective': Dissecting the Politics of Identity," *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no.1 (January 2020): 120, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12493.

[39] Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 106.

[40] Maben, ed., *Borders and Margins: Re-Visioning Ministry and Mission* (Tiruvalla, India: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2015).

[41] Lalpekhlua, *Contextual Christology: A Tribal Perspective* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007).

while Yangkahao Vashum built one reflecting the Naga experience.[42] Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar uses the body as an epistemological tool in feminist Christology.[43] The quest to understand Jesus from the perspective of marginalized groups continues to grow. While subaltern theology is rooted locally and driven by victims of oppression, it has often failed to fully engage with the lived experiences of the subaltern. For subaltern theology to succeed, it must address issues of identity, dignity, human rights, and justice, grounding itself firmly in the lived experiences of the marginalized.

Postcolonial Theology

Postcolonial studies are closely linked to subaltern studies, which naturally evolved into postcolonial analysis. The postcolonial approach challenges dominant theories and discourses, both Western and local, that sustain the power of the elite. As Robert J. C. Young notes, postcolonialism "disturbs the order of the world. It threatens privilege and power. It refuses to acknowledge the superiority of western cultures."[44] Or, in the case of India, the dominant communities in local cultures. "Its radical agenda is to demand equality and well-being for all human beings on this earth."[45] Postcolonialism seeks to dismantle colonial narratives and perspectives on colonized cultures and histories.

In India, postcolonial theology challenges Western forms of Christianity while deconstructing dominant discourses to liberate the marginalized. It not only produces knowledge from below but also aims at societal transformation. Indian biblical scholars have embraced postcolonial hermeneutics, which involves re-reading and reinterpreting texts and realities from the perspective of the marginalized. According to R. S. Sugirtharajah, a Sri Lanka-born theologian, postcolonial biblical interpretation asks fresh questions about the text and context from the perspective of authors and readers living at the margins of imperial regimes.[46]

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[42] Vashum, *Christology in Context: A Tribal-Indigenous Appraisal of North East India* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017).

[43] Anderson-Rajkumar, "Politicising the Body: A Feminist Christology," *Asia Journal of Theology* 18, no. 1 (2004): 106.

[44] Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 7.

[45] Young, 7.

[46] Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 2.

Scholars of biblical studies in India have begun to read biblical texts from the position of the marginalized and from a postcolonial perspective. Scholars like David Joy[47] and Roji T. George[48] have contributed significantly to this field. Roji T. George, a postcolonial New Testament scholar, argues for adopting "Transcultural Hybrid Biblical Hermeneutic" to read the biblical text from the Indian realities. In this approach, he claims, "interpretation is performed within the Indian cultural pre-understanding, the real life experiences of the masses in India, and the Indic hermeneutical traditions."[49] By doing so, he argues, this method would unearth the real meaning of the text as well as find a meaning from the interpreter's context, opening the way for multiple layers of meaning.

However, when theologians assume the role of representing the marginalized, postcolonial theology risks being confined to academia. Direct engagement with marginalized communities is crucial to bringing their lived experiences and perspectives into theological reflection, enriching the discourse with authentic insights from below.

Public Theology

Indian theology naturally extends into the public sphere, addressing issues like marginality, identity, globalization, economic justice, eco-justice, and citizenship. It approaches public matters through the lens of the oppressed.[50] Gnana Patrick appeals public theology must respond to "concerns of democracy, public sphere, civil society, and public life. Biblically speaking, it is the minority—a prophetic minority, which has exercised the deepest impact in the history of the biblical people. Serving as

[47] Joy, *Hermeneutics: Foundations and New Trends: A Postcolonial Reading of John 4* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2012); Joy, *Mark and Its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context* (London: Equinox, 2008).

[48] George, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," in *Approaches to the New Testament: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, ed. Arren Bennet Lawrence (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2018), 368–85; George, "Towards a Hermeneutics of (Dis)Ability," in *Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies*, ed. Anjeline Okala and A. Wati Longchar (Hualien, Taiwan: Yushan Theological College and Seminary, 2019).

[49] George, "Engaging Biblical Text in Indic Hermeneutical Traditions," *Doon Theological Journal* 18, no. 2 (2021): 14.

[50] Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2010), 45–55.

an effective catalyst goes beyond any numerical strength."[51] Indian public theology is increasingly shifting its focus from the church to broader societal and political arenas.

Theologians are now tackling socio-political issues, globalization, and ecological concerns. Asongla Pongen, for instance, addressed gender-based violence in public debates, suggesting how Christian education could respond.[52] M. J. Thomas explored the negative impact of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) on farmers, arguing that SEZs strip farmers of their land and livelihoods.[53] Other public theology themes include solidarity,[54] child-related issues,[55] migrants,[56] human trafficking,[57] inclusivism,[58] ecology,[59] and so on. Without engaging the lived experiences of the marginalized, public theology risks remaining an academic exercise.

Indian Christian theologies have long grappled with religious pluralism, caste discrimination, and the marginalization of various communities. These theologies aim to transform oppressed communities by adopting a liberation-focused reflection from below. The call for theologians to use the experiences and indigenous resources of women, Dalits, and tribal people

[51] Patrick, *Public Theology: Indian Concerns, Perspectives, and Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), xii.

[52] Pongen, *Challenges and Issues of Gender-Based Violence: A Christian Education Perspective* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020).

[53] M. J. Thomas, *A Theological Response to Special Economic Zones and Livelihood in India* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2015).

[54] Hrangthan Chhungi, Raj Bharath Patta, and P. Mohan Larbeer, eds., *Building Theologies of Solidarity: Interfacing Feminist Theology with Dalit Theology and Tribal/Adivasi Theologies* (Nagpur, India: SCMI, 2012); Viju Wilson, *Theology of Solidarity: A Study on the Theology of James Massey* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2019).

[55] Rohan P. Gideon, *Child Labour in India: Challenges for Theological Thinking and Christian Ministry in India* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011).

[56] Songram Basumatary, ed., *Migration in Perspectives: Towards Theology of Migration from the Margins* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2018).

[57] Sangtemkala, ed., *Christian Response to Human Trafficking: Biblical, Theological, Ethical, Ministerial, NGOs, and Legal Perspectives* (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020).

[58] Felix Wilfred, *Theology for an Inclusive World* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2018).

[59] R. L. Sarkar, *The Bible, Ecology, and Environment* (Delhi: Published for the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society by Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2000).

as theological sources is strong in their writings. However, despite their emphasis on praxis, these theologies often remain confined to academia, distant from the real-life experiences of the people they seek to liberate.

Lived Experience as a Source

While Indian Christian theologies emphasize motifs of "from below" and the promotion of liberation, they have yet to fully achieve their goal of making theology relevant to the communities they aim to represent and transform them. To reach these objectives, a deeper engagement with lived realities is essential. In this section, I argue for considering lived experience as a source of Indian Christian theologies to more effectively address lived realities, which requires an interdisciplinary lens. I will also highlight some Indian scholars who have pioneered this approach, demonstrating that Indian Christian theologies are indeed moving in this direction.

Indian Christian theologies need to engage with lived realities to remain relevant to the Indian church and society. But what does researching lived reality entail? It involves exploring the lived experiences of people. Lived experience can be defined as "personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people."[60] This type of experience encompasses ordinary aspects of people's lives.

In various parts of the world, religious studies and theology have increasingly turned to the study of lived religion and lived experience.[61] Researching lived experience shifts the methodological paradigm to

[60] *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, s.v. "Lived Experience," accessed 13 July 2020, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100109997?rskey=NM4Ei8&result=2.

[61] Elizabeth Whinfrey-Koepping, *Food, Friends and Funerals: On Lived Religion* (Berlin: LIT, 2008); Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010); Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002); Ann Christie, *Ordinary Christology: Who Do You Say I Am? Answers from the Pews* (London: Routledge, 2012).

constructivism in knowledge creation.[62] Constructivism requires researchers to clarify whose perspective is being studied and to scrutinize the choice of methodology, as each approach carries its own ideological and political implications. It challenges dominant versions of reality to offer alternative perspectives.[63]

To make Indian Christian theologies more relevant to the sociocultural context, theological research must engage lived experience both as *sources* and *topics* for reflection. Several theologians have ventured into studying the lived experiences of people to develop a more relevant theology, and their work will be briefly discussed here.

Dialogue theologians often operate under the assumption that religious boundaries are fixed and must be respected in dialogue. However, in his study, Muthuraj Swamy challenges this view and observes that "everyday relationships among ordinary people at the grassroots are spontaneous, ordinary and familiar."[64] Swamy argues ordinary people excel in this task because they do not adhere to rigid identities, like those often maintained by dialogue elitists.

Michael Amaladoss advocates for dialogue within lived reality and recommends research that explores the construction of personal and social identity, multiple forms of belonging, and popular religiosity among common people. This approach facilitates the exploration of hybrid religious movements and innovative practices within religious traditions.[65]

[62] For more information on methodological approaches for studying lived experiences and lived reality, please consult the following works: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, and Jeff Astley, eds., *Empirical Theology in Texts and Tables: Qualitative, Quantitative and Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2016); Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015); Joshua Iyadurai, *Social Research Methods: For Students and Scholars of Theology and Religious Studies* (Chennai: Marina Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion, 2023).

[63] Kenneth J. Gergen, "Social Construction and Theology: The Dance Begins," in *Social Constructionism and Theology*, ed. C. A. M. Hermans et al., Empirical Studies in Theology vol. 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 3–22.

[64] Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue: Plurality, Conflict and Elitism in Hindu-Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 15.

[65] Amaladoss, *Interreligious Encounters: Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Jonathan Y. Tan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

As noted earlier, contextual theologians have often positioned themselves as patrons of marginalized and oppressed communities while being distant from their lived realities. Anderson H. M. Jeremiah aptly emphasizes that "the complex socio-religious landscape in which Dalits actually live is glossed over in favor of broad categories unrelated to the actual lived realities."[66] For Dalit theology to achieve effective praxis, it must focus on researching real-life issues and lived experiences of Dalits in collaboration with social scientists.[67]

Anderson Jeremiah examines the lived religion of Dalit Christians, highlighting how they construct their identities and use them as tools to challenge caste discrimination.[68] Similarly, Epratha Sarathy conducted a field study on the sense of inferiority among urban-employed Dalits.[69] Ashok Kumar Mocherla, a sociologist, studied the lived experiences of the Mala community and demonstrated conversion as an agency of liberation.[70] These studies have brought the lived realities of Dalits into the academic discourse, making their theologies more relevant to their living contexts.

Scholars from northeast India, in their effort to rediscover tribal heritage, are increasingly using lived reality as a model for theological reflection. They seek to unearth and utilize indigenous cultural, linguistic, and religious resources that are often undermined by Western knowledge paradigms. Indigenous spirituality, tribal religions, and local stories are being explored as theological resources. In her book *As One: Telling Stories for*

[66] Jeremiah, "Belonging and Being: Unpacking Dalit Christian Identity," in *Rethinking Social Exclusion in India: Castes, Communities and the State*, ed. Minoru Mio and Abhijit Dasgupta, Routledge New Horizons in South Asian Studies (New York: Routledge, 2018), 73. https://books.google.co.in/books?id=tRIwDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[67] Jesudas M. Athyal, "The Changing Face of the Indian Society. . . and the New Challenges for Dalit Theology" (paper presentation, International Consultation on Dalit Theology and A Theology of the Oppressed, Chennai, 13–15 November 2004). https://jmathyal.tripod.com/id1.html.

[68] Jeremiah, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars of South India: 'Lived' Religion*, Bloomsbury Advances in Religious Studies (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012); Jeremiah, "Belonging and Being."

[69] Sarathy, *Inferiority Complex among the Urban Employed Dalits, Men and Women: Implications for Pastoral Care and Counselling, Christian Heritage Rediscovered* vol. 63 (New Delhi: Christian World Imprint, 2019).

[70] Mocherla, *Dalit Christians in South India: Caste, Ideology and Lived Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

Inclusive Worship,[71] Marlene Ch. Marak proposes story telling as a methodological tool to challenge patriarchal discrimination against women. Bendanglemla Longkumer uses *Arasentsur* (Naga's traditional healer) as a model to develop indigenous Christology.[72] Tloyen Nongsiej uses cultural elements of the Khasi in developing a cultural theology,[73] while Paolen Haokip advocates for the inclusion of Kuki music in Christian worship.[74] Ethnic identity is central to tribal theology. Songram Basumatary addresses inter-ethnic conflict and the dilemma of preserving versus blending ethnic identities in *Ethnicity and Tribal Theology*.[75] Jangkholam Haokip explores the Kuki people's struggle for identity and justice in Manipur,[76] while S. Hayong examines how tribal resources could offer better solutions than globalization for tribal issues.[77] Tribal theology is advancing by leveraging indigenous resources and integrating lived realities into theological reflection.

Among feminist theologians, two emerging scholars have made significant strides by focusing on the lived experiences of women in their construction of feminist theology. Metti Amirtham conducted a study on women's self-perceptions of their bodies, revealing how some women reclaim their autonomy while others remain constrained by patriarchal conditioning.[78] Kochurani Abraham examined women from the Catholic Syrian Christian community, which keeps its Brahmanical heritage. Her research investigated the paradoxical experiences of these women with caste, religion, and gender by collecting their personal stories. She argues,

[71] Marak, *As One: Telling Stories for Inclusive Worship* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprint, 2019).

[72] Longkumer, *Christ, the Healer: Exploring Indigenous People's Spirituality* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2018).

[73] Nongsiej, *Khasi Cultural Theology* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002).

[74] Paolen Haokip, *Christian Music: Contemporary and Traditional, for a Meaningful Worship of the Kukis* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2016).

[75] Basumatary, *Ethnicity and Tribal Theology: Problems and Prospects for Peaceful Co-Existence in Northeast India* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014).

[76] Jangkholam Haokip, *Can God Save My Village?: A Theological Study of Identity among the Tribal People of North-East India with a Special Reference to the Kukis of Manipur* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2014).

[77] Hayong, *Tribal People and Globalization: A Theological Perspective* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2018).

[78] Amirtham, *Women in India: Negotiating Body, Reclaiming Agency* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2011).

"Women are challenged to critically revisit the sites that mark their growth and identity formation and, in doing so, women can name and reclaim their powers. Critical revisiting of their submerged past could equip them with power to subvert the very system that subjugates them. . . . This serves to generate knowledge born of experience, which has a transformative value for women's lives."[79] Future research in feminist theology should continue this approach, bringing narrative data into academic discourse for theological reflection. Narrative data from lived experience not only serves as a source for feminist theology but also has transformative effects on women involved in the study. Such an approach promises to be relevant to Indian realities and can drive meaningful transformation.

Researching lived experience requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the social world, which is complex and perceived differently by various individuals. The interpretative tools used to understand this reality can vary. To study lived experiences, a qualitative research strategy is employed, focusing on interpretative approaches that situate these experiences within real-life contexts.[80] For theologians to explore lived experiences effectively, they must incorporate tools from the social sciences. Consequently, studying lived experiences often involves navigating interdisciplinary terrain.

Interdisciplinary Approach across Disciplines

The complexity of the real world, characterized by culturally and religiously diverse societies and globalized environments, necessitates crossing disciplinary boundaries for a better understanding. Addressing complex problems requires insights from multiple disciplines. Myra Strober identifies two reasons for the growing interest in interdisciplinary research: first, "finding effective solutions to complex problems requires collaboration by faculty from multiple disciplines; second, that faculty interchange across disciplines promotes creativity and hence increases the pace at which knowledge can move forward."[81] Many complex problems

[79] Kochurani Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy: Intersectionalities, Negotiations, Subversions* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 18.

[80] Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage, 2009).

[81] Strober, *Interdisciplinary Conversations: Challenging Habits of Thought* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2011), 6.

that threaten humanity require researchers to study them from different perspectives by using an interdisciplinary approach.

Interdisciplinary research does not oppose specialization but seeks to integrate specialized knowledge for a holistic understanding. In their textbook on interdisciplinary research, Allen Repko and Rick Szostak explain, "We need specializations, but we also need interdisciplinarity to broaden our understanding of complex problems."[82] The interdisciplinary approach aims to integrate discipline-specific knowledge for a holistic understanding. With integration, researchers avoid the temptation to dominate with their discipline-specific perspective, while being willing to consider insights from other disciplines. Repko and Szostak argue, "Integration is the cognitive process of critically evaluating disciplinary insights and creating common ground among them to construct a more comprehensive understanding. The understanding is the product or result of the integrative process."[83] Therefore, integration involves critically evaluating and combining disciplinary perspectives to create a comprehensive understanding without rejecting one's own discipline.

This approach fosters innovation by encouraging scholars to think creatively and explore new ideas. In his article exploring aspects of interdisciplinary studies, David J. Sill argues, "By its very nature, creativity violates the present order in creating new order."[84] With an interdisciplinary approach, scholars can move beyond their disciplinary order to create something new. Strober argues, "interdisciplinarity enhances creativity, collaboration also increases the possibility that solutions will be innovative."[85] By posing new questions, adopting diverse methodologies, and acknowledging the limitations of one's own discipline, interdisciplinary research paves the way for novel solutions to human problems and new ways of knowing.

Interdisciplinary Approach in Theology

When theology engages lived experience, it steps into the social world, which requires an interdisciplinary approach to interact with social

[82] Allen F. Repko and Rick Szostak, *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 11.

[83] Repko and Szostak, 21.

[84] Sill, "Integrative Thinking, Synthesis, and Creativity in Interdisciplinary Studies," *The Journal of General Education* 50, no. 4 (2001): 295.

[85] Strober, *Interdisciplinary Conversations*, 11.

sciences. Some may question why theology should engage with social sciences, given that its focus is on the study of God. Unlike other disciplines that analyse variables, theology deals with God, who is not subject to empirical analysis. This is true; however, theology draws on scripture, which recorded God's revelation within historical and lived contexts of faith communities. God interacted with these communities across various aspects of life—political, economic, social, cultural, and religious. Therefore, theology reflects on the human experience of the faith community in order to understand God.

Contemporary theology aims to understand God through contemporary human experiences related to Him. As such, Douglas F. Ottati argued, "the Christian understanding of God directs our attention to a wide range of human experience to determine whether and how the presence of this sovereign power may be discerned and made intelligible. Mundane experience counts in theological inquiry because it may question or enrich this perception of God."[86] Given that daily experiences are integral to theological inquiry, theology benefits from partnering with social sciences, which study human experiences and communities. To understand God, theology must examine human experiences.

How can theology engage with disciplines that do not accept its premises—such as the existence of God, His revelation, and His relationship with humanity and the world? John Milbank argues social sciences are grounded in secular reason that conflicts with the foundational assumptions of theology. Social sciences often ignore God and provide sociological explanations for phenomena traditionally understood in theological terms.[87] If theology were to adapt to these secular perspectives, it risks compromising its own disciplinary integrity.

Alternatively, Milbank advocates for restoring theology as a *meta-discourse* in postmodern terms, suggesting that theology should be viewed as a social science in its own right.[88] He contends that dialogue with social sciences is unfeasible because of their secular assumptions, and instead, theology should establish itself as a social science based on theological

[86] Ottati, "Christian Theology and Other Disciplines," *The Journal of Religion* 64, no. 2 (1984): 181.

[87] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

[88] Milbank, 383.

foundations. However, this position is problematic. Without engaging social sciences, theology cannot fully integrate its perspectives within the broader social science framework to make a claim that theology is social science.

Therefore, engaging with social sciences is essential for establishing theology as a robust field of inquiry. Robin Gill's trilogy on sociological theology extensively explores the relationship between theology and sociology and underscores the need for their integration.[89] Gill cautions that if theology ignores sociology, it risks becoming increasingly "irrelevant, unintelligible and sectarian if it wholly disavows its social context."[90] This observation is relevant for Indian Christian theologies that have isolated themselves from the real world.

Gill further argues that theology is influenced by its social context, with its development being shaped by societal factors.[91] For example, liberal theology emerged in Europe in response to rationalism, and liberation theology developed in South America in response to poverty. Similarly, various contextual theologies in Asia and Africa have been shaped by their social environments. However, Gill also asserts that theology not only reflects society but can also influence it. He provides evidence that church members in the West contribute to advancing social capital.[92] Thus, theology is shaped by society and vice versa. Unless theological scholars adopt an interdisciplinary approach, theology risks remaining detached from the lived experiences of people and the broader societal context in which God is active through Christ.

Engaging with the social sciences through an interdisciplinary approach offers many opportunities for theology. Douglas Ottati highlights that today's intellectual environment, characterized by interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collaboration, allows Christian theologians to envision God, the world, and ourselves in new and collaborative ways. He identifies two key requirements for theology to engage effectively with other

[89] Gill, *Theology in a Social Context: Sociological Theology*, vol. 1 (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012); Gill, *Theology Shaped by Society: Sociological Theology*, vol. 2 (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012); Gill, *Society Shaped by Theology: Sociological Theology*, vol. 3 (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013).

[90] Gill, *Theology in a Social Context*, 87.

[91] Gill, *Theology Shaped by Society*.

[92] Gill, *Society Shaped by Theology*.

disciplines: integrity and intelligibility.[93] According to Douglas Ottati, "'integrity' indicates a concern to communicate faith in a manner true to the distinctive features of the community's framework of understanding" and "'intelligibility' signals a concern to present faith in a manner accessible to its hearers, one that makes sense of their experience."[94] In an interdisciplinary approach, Ottati calls for being true to theological commitment and being open to engage other sciences in their terms.

In this process, he further suggests, "the Christian theologian must respect the integrity of evidence brought to attention by other perspectives. It is his responsibility to weigh this evidence as far as possible in its own terms, to check it against evidence offered by other interpretations, and to evaluate it in light of his theocentric vision."[95] Each discipline encompasses multiple perspectives, which must be critically examined both within their own contexts and from a theological standpoint to facilitate meaningful interaction between theology and social sciences.

Furthermore, no theory or perspective is permanent; all are subject to revision or rejection as new theories and perspectives emerge. A theological interdisciplinary approach must acknowledge this assumption. Similarly, a "Christian theological framework does not have an unchallenged access to a comprehensive 'theory of everything' that displaces all other approaches and interpretative vocabularies. It too is incomplete and subject to malformations; otherwise, there is no genuine motive for multidisciplinary discussions and comparative inquires."[96] Therefore, theology must also recognize that its framework does not possess an unassailable meta theory, and this lack underscores the importance of multidisciplinary discussions and comparative inquiries as theologians strive to improve the understanding of God and reduce misinterpretations about Him.

Engaging lived experience as data and incorporating social science theories into theological reflection has been relatively rare. However, there is a growing trend of interdisciplinary studies emerging as a new dimension

[93] Ottati, "Conclusion: A Collaborative Manner of Theological Reflection," in *Theology as Interdisciplinary Inquiry: Learning with and from the Natural and Human Sciences*, ed. Robin W. Lovin and Joshua Mauldin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 136.

[94] Ottati, "Christian Theology," 173.

[95] Ottati, 176–7.

[96] Ottati, "Collaborative Manner," 141.

in Indian Christian theologies. For instance, Joshua Iyadurai used psychology to develop a step model of transformative religious experience, offering insights into the process of religious conversion from a multireligious context in India.[97] Similarly, Shaibu Abraham's recent study on Pentecostal Christology involved collecting perceptions from Pentecostal believers through qualitative research.[98] Vikas Ram conducted a phenomenological study on resilience among persecuted Christians in north India, integrating theories from psychology.[99] In a theoretical study, Jobby John examined globalization and sustainable agriculture by engaging theories from ecology and economics.[100]

The rise of interdisciplinary approaches in Indian theology presents a significant opportunity to address issues impacting marginalized communities, producing theology that resonates with the lived realities of these groups. This approach is also particularly well-suited for evangelical and Pentecostal theologies, which are deeply interested in exploring God within the everyday experiences of Christians. By adopting social scientific methods, theologians can study how believers perceive God in their daily lives, making this approach ideal for investigating spiritual practices and ordinary experiences across different faith traditions of Indian Christianity.

An interdisciplinary approach is well-suited for theological research across all Indian Christian theologies. This method allows for a more nuanced study of issues related to marginalized and oppressed communities, public theology, lived religion across diverse faith traditions of Indian Christianity, and incorporating tribal resources into theological reflection. By integrating insights from multiple disciplines, this approach ensures that theology not only resonates with the people but also engages with broader social realities beyond ecclesial boundaries. Ultimately, interdisciplinary

[97] Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

[98] Shaibu Abraham, *Pentecostal Christology: Empirical Approach in Indian Context*, Christian Heritage Rediscovered vol. 82 (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2019).

[99] Ram, "Perseverance in the Midst of Persecution: An IPA Study on How the First-Generation Followers of Christ in Chhattisgarh State Manifest Spiritual Resilience in the Face of Persecution" (PhD diss., South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, 2020).

[100] Jobby John, *Globalisation and Sustainable Agriculture: A Christian Ethical Response* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011).

theology has the potential to ground theological reflection within the community and address pressing public issues with relevance, depth, and transformative power.