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Re-imagining the Indian church : bishop V.S. Azariah's (1874-1945) vision and its relevance to the Church of South India (CSI) today

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**Re-imagining the Indian Church: Bishop V.S. Azariah's
(1874-1945) Vision and Its Relevance to the Church of South
India (CSI) Today**

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Thesis presented as part of the requirements for the degree of
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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1. Background of Study | 1 |
| 2. Statement of the Problem | 3 |
| 3. Research Gap, Research Question and Thesis | 4 |
| 4. Aim of the Research | 5 |
| 5. Methodology | 5 |
| 6. Difficulties and Demarcation of the Research | 5 |
| Chapter One: Bishop V. S Azariah and His Mission | 7 |
| 1.0. Introduction | 7 |
| 1.1. Early life | 7 |
| 1.2. Community Transformation | 9 |
| 1.3. Nation Building | 10 |
| 1.4. Azariah and Ecumenism | 11 |
| 1.5. Conclusion | 12 |
| Chapter Two: The Vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah | 13 |
| 2.0. Introduction | 13 |
| 2.1. United Church | 13 |
| 2. 2. Casteless Church | 14 |
| 2.3. Independent Church and Indigenous Church | 17 |
| 2.4. Witnessing Church | 19 |
| 2.5. Conclusion | 20 |
| Chapter Three: Church of South India (CSI) Today | 21 |
| 3.0. Introduction | 21 |
| 3.1. Towards One Church in India | 21 |
| 3.2. Dalit and Adivasi Concern | 25 |
| 3.3. Indigenous Church in Progress | 27 |
| 3.3.1. Self-Governance and Challenges | 27 |
| 3.3.2 Indianized Church | 28 |
| 3.4. Mission and Evangelism | 30 |
| 3.5. Conclusion | 32 |
| Chapter Four: Re-Imagining the Church of South India | 34 |
| 4.0. Introduction | 34 |
| 4.1. Wider Unity | 34 |
| 4.2. Inclusive Church | 36 |
| 4.3. The Genuine Indian Church | 37 |
| 4.3.1. Leadership | 37 |
| 4.3.2. In the Life and Ministry of the CSI | 38 |
| 4.4. Diaconal and Dialogical Church | 39 |
| 4.5. Conclusion | 41 |
| Conclusion | 42 |
| Appendix | 44 |
| Bibliography | 45 |
| Books | 45 |
| Journal Articles | 48 |
| Websites | 49 |

Introduction

1. Background of Study

India is a land of rich diversity in terms of religion, culture, and ethnicity. It is home to six major world religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism, along with numerous religious sects. Christianity in India traces its origins to the 1st century AD with the arrival of the Apostle Thomas. According to ancient tradition and the St. Thomas Christian community in Kerala, he landed on the Malabar Coast in 52 AD and established Christian communities there.¹ In the centuries that followed, Christianity in India developed through contact with Eastern churches, especially from Persia. These early communities became known as Syriac or Orthodox churches, maintaining their Eastern liturgical and theological traditions. They formed what is known today as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and related Eastern denominations.²

During the 15th century, the arrival of Portuguese explorers and traders brought Roman Catholic missionaries to India. The Portuguese, through the Padroado system, supported missionary efforts along the western and southern coasts. Prominent among these missionaries was St. Francis Xavier, who arrived in Goa in 1542 and played a vital role in spreading Roman Catholicism.³

In the 18th century, following the Evangelical Revival and Pietist movements in Europe, various Protestant missionary societies began their work in India. The first Protestant missionary was Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, a Danish Lutheran sent by the Danish-Halle Mission. He arrived at Tranquebar on the Tamil Nadu coast in 1706, marking the beginning of Protestant mission work in India.⁴ Later, the Baptist Missionary Society, led by William Carey, began work in Serampore, near Calcutta, in 1793, extending Protestant mission work into North India. From the 19th century onwards, missionary activities also spread to the Northeast region of India, where

¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 26f.

² A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: Volume I: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1984), 34f.

³ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 111f.

⁴ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: 1707 - 1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 28.

many indigenous communities embraced Christianity, particularly through the work of Baptist, Presbyterian, and Anglican missions.⁵

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Protestant missionary activity expanded significantly in South India. Various mission societies established their own churches, leading to the emergence of multiple denominations such as Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists. By the early 20th century, denominational divisions had become so common that it was not unusual for members of the same family to belong to different churches. This fragmentation was seen as a negative witness to non-Christians in India. Consequently, voices began to emerge, calling for a united and indigenous Church that would reflect the oneness of the body of Christ within the Indian context.

Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah (1874–1945) was a pioneering figure in the Indian ecumenical movement and the first Indian bishop of the Anglican Church in India. In the early 20th century, when Western missionary movements were heavily influencing the Indian church with their denominational divisions rooted in their European origins, Bishop Azariah sought to redefine the church's identity by fostering unity among the various Christian denominations. He dreamed of one united church in India, led by Indians and shaped by local cultures and traditions. He believed the Church should reflect Indian ways of worship and mission and, more importantly, should serve people at the grassroots without any form of segregation. Bishop Azariah strongly felt that the Church had a role to play in building the nation by offering selfless service to the needy and downtrodden. His lifelong dedication to this vision laid the groundwork for the formation of the Church of South India (CSI), which was formed through the historic union of Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist traditions in 1947, two years after his death.

Today, as the largest Protestant church in India, the CSI stands like a flourishing banyan tree, with 25 dioceses spread across South India and Sri Lanka. For nearly 80 years, it has grown in many ways through its ministry and service. However, the CSI also faces significant challenges and internal issues. The church, which was originally known as a united church and was called to bring together various Christian denominations in India, has now become just one among the many denominations in the country. The church actively engages in Dalit and Adivasi

⁵ C. B. Firth, *Introduction to Indian Church History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2013), 264.

solidarity in Indian society, yet it continues to struggle with caste-based discrimination within itself. While it is active in mission and social welfare, there is a pressing need for the church to engage more deeply in inter-religious collaboration, considering the rapidly changing political landscape in India. Stanley J. Samartha (1920–2001), an Indian theologian, criticized the CSI for often turning inward, expending too much energy on internal disputes rather than focusing on sharing the gospel with those outside the church. He pointed out that internal power struggles and strict adherence to episcopal authority have hindered its mission.⁶

Hence, to be an effective witness in a land of such diversity, the church needs to strengthen its ecumenical dialogue. It must be deeply rooted in Indian soil through its liturgy, worship, and architecture, embracing the rich cultural, spiritual, and social heritage of the land. It should strive to become a church of equity, where justice, inclusion, and dignity are upheld for all, especially the marginalized. Furthermore, it must be a church of diakonia and dialogue, actively serving people through compassionate action and engaging in meaningful conversation with various faith traditions in India.

This study seeks to critically examine the life and mission of the CSI and to analyze the extent to which it aligns with the original vision of Bishop Azariah. As we approach the 80th anniversary of the Church of South India, it is crucial to evaluate how much of his vision has been realized and fulfilled in the life and mission of the CSI, which owes much of its foundation to Bishop Azariah's efforts, and to consider what remains to be done.

2. Statement of the Problem

The Church of South India (CSI), founded in 1947 as a pioneering ecumenical union, emerged from the vision of leaders like Bishop V.S. Azariah, who dreamed of a united, indigenous, casteless church rooted in Indian culture and committed to social justice. His vision included not only ecclesial unity but also the indigenization of leadership, worship, and mission, especially in serving the marginalized and breaking caste hierarchies within the Christian community.

However, nearly eight decades after its formation, the CSI finds itself at a crossroads. While it continues to be the largest Protestant Church in India and plays

⁶ Stanley J. Samartha, "Vision and reality: personal reflections on the Church of South India, 1947-97." *The Ecumenical Review*, 49, no. 4 (1997), 488.

an active role in mission, education, and social service, it faces increasing criticism for internal power struggles, caste-based discrimination, and a lack of deeper engagement in new approaches to mission. Though the Church has made commendable efforts in some areas, there is growing concern about whether it has remained faithful to the foundational vision of Bishop Azariah or has drifted into institutionalism and denominationalism.

This research seeks to address the problem of this apparent divergence by examining the original vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah and assessing how far the CSI has aligned with or deviated from his ideals. It questions the integrity of the Church's witness in contemporary India, especially in terms of unity, justice, cultural rootedness, and service. The central problem this thesis aims to investigate is: to what extent has the Church of South India realized the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah in its life, mission, and identity?

3. Research Gap, Research Question and Thesis

Various studies have been published on Bishop V.S. Azariah, his contribution to the Indian church, and his role in the ecumenical movement. A few studies have been published on the history of the Church of South India and its mission. However, no attempts have been done to study it together and to see to what extent the South Indian Church is in line with the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah. This research sheds some light on this. The research question is as follows:

What are the visions of Bishop V.S. Azariah for his church?

To what extent does the Church of South India align with the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah today?

Is Bishop V.S. Azariah's vision relevant to the Church of South India today, nearly a century after his time?

What practical and theological steps can be taken by the CSI to renew and realign its mission with the foundational vision of Bishop Azariah in contemporary India?

The underlying thesis lies in the analysis of the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah and a critical assessment of how far the Church of South India has come in realizing the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah.

4. Aim of the Research

- To highlight the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah and to provide a critical assessment of how far the Church of South India aligns with the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah.
- To identify the areas where the CSI has fallen short of his vision, particularly in terms of church unity, caste equality, and full cultural integration.
- Based on the findings, this study will offer recommendations on how the CSI can continue moving toward Bishop V.S. Azariah's vision of a united, casteless, and truly Indian church.

5. Methodology

This study deals with the vision and mission of Bishop V. S Azariah and its relevance to the Church of South India (CSI) today. It will be a historical analysis of the life and work of Bishop V.S. Azariah. The researcher will employ the historical method to critically examine the writings of Azariah as primary sources and other writings about him as secondary sources, to understand his effort to achieve the vision of an Indigenous church rooted in Indian culture and self-governance in the context of Western missionary paternalism and colonial influences.

Additionally, the researcher will investigate the annual reports and committee minutes to evaluate the current mission of the Church of South India. He will also gather information from online sources, journal articles, pamphlets, newspaper reports, etc., to assess the contemporary status of the church in society.

Based on the analysis and findings, the researcher will employ the ecclesiastical method to offer some recommendations to continue the vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah in the life and mission of the Church of South India

6. Difficulties and Demarcation of the Research

This study, while acknowledging the presence of numerous Christian denominations in India, deliberately focuses on the Church of South India (CSI) to assess the realization of Bishop V.S. Azariah's vision. The study does not attempt to generalize its findings to other churches in India, as the focus remains on the CSI's history, mission, and social engagement, specifically evaluating how Bishop V.S. Azariah's

dream of an indigenous, united, and socially engaged Indian church has been realized within this particular context.

Chapter One: Bishop V. S Azariah and His Mission

1.0. Introduction

Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah (1874–1945) was a pioneering leader in the Indian ecumenical movement and the first Indian bishop of the Anglican Church in India. When Western missionary efforts deeply influenced the Indian Church, bringing with them divisions based on their European backgrounds, Azariah worked to reshape the Indian Church's identity. He envisioned a united Church in India, led by Indians and rooted in local culture and traditions. He believed the Indian Church should reflect Indian styles of worship and mission and, most importantly, reach out to people at the grassroots without any discrimination. Azariah firmly believed that the Indian Church had a vital role in nation-building through humble service to the poor and marginalized. As a visionary, he laid the groundwork for the formation of the Church of South India (CSI). This chapter seeks to explore his life, mission, and key contributions to the mission in both India and the wider world.

1.1. Early life

Tirunelveli, one of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu in India, stands as a beacon in the landscape of Indian church history, illuminating the path of early missionary endeavors. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) initiated Protestant mission work in Tirunelveli in the late 18th century. In 1825, the SPCK handed over its mission activities to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). Subsequently, the Church Mission Society (CMS) began its work in Tirunelveli in the early decades of the 19th century, leading to a significant mass conversion movement in the 1830s and 1840s.⁷ The Nadars, who constituted the majority in the district and were then considered out-castes in society, responded positively to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and became Christians in large numbers. In the 1840s, this mass conversion from the Nadar community led to the formation of a unique identity for Tirunelveli Christians.⁸ Thomas Vedanayagam, a young man from

⁷ Susan B. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 27.

⁸ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 28.

a traditional Hindu background, was among those who converted during this historical context and became an ordained presbyter in the CMS.

Thomas Vedanayagam had two children from his first wife. After her death, he married Hellen. Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah (hereafter Azariah) was born to Hellen and Thomas Vedanayagam at Vellalanvilai, a small village in the then Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu in India, on 17th August 1874⁹ Hellen was a prayerful woman with a deep Christian commitment. She greatly influenced Azariah, and when Azariah was very small, his mother dedicated him to ministry. Azariah's parents believed that the birth of their child was an answer to their prayers. This led them to dedicate Azariah to God's service.¹⁰

Azariah began his primary education at the CMS mission school in his native village Vellalanvilai.¹¹ In those days, it was common in village-level primary schools across South India for children to sit on the floor and learn to write letters by writing them with their fingers on the sand. Azariah, too, experienced this traditional method of early learning.¹² Then he entered middle school at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) boarding school at Meignanapuram on the 1st of January 1885. Following this, he joined CMS College for higher studies.¹³

Azariah's formative years as a student at Madras Christian College played a crucial role in shaping his ecumenical leadership. After completing his higher studies at the CMS College in Tirunelveli, Azariah joined Madras Christian College, which became the alma mater of his life.¹⁴ During this time, he became involved with the Young Man Christian Association (YMCA) and the Student Volunteer Movement,¹⁵ legendary figures like K.T. Paul, S.K. Datta, B.C. Sarkar, and Augustine Baran were also products of the SCM-YMCA movements during the same period.¹⁶

Azariah began his ministry as a YMCA evangelist at the age of 19 in 1893. By 1895, he had become the secretary of the YMCA in South India, and he was the first

⁹ D.A. Christudhas, *Azariah Attiyatchar* (Thirunelveli: Indian Missionary Society, 1974), 3.

¹⁰ A. R. Chellaiah, *Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah: A life in Indigenisation* (Delhi, ISPCK, 2016), 2.

¹¹ Christudhas, *Azariah Attiyatchar*, 11.

¹² P. B. Emmet, *Apostle of India* (London: S. C. M., 1949), 7.

¹³ J. Z. Hodge, *Bishop Azariah od Dornakal* (Madras: C. L. S., 1946), 11

¹⁴ Chellaiah, *Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah*, 3f.

¹⁵ which later became Student Christian Movement

¹⁶ Chellaiah, *Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah*, 5.

Indian secretary in the organization's history.¹⁷ For over fourteen years, he worked tirelessly in both national and international capacities. This broadened his contacts with international ecumenical leaders such as John R. Mott, J.H. Oldham, and Sherwood Eddy, and significantly expanded his global missionary vision.¹⁸ He became a pioneer in the developing pan-Asian student missionary movement by founding the Indian Missionary Society (IMS) in 1903 and the National Missionary Society in 1905, inspired by the missionary effort of Tamil Christians in Ceylon.¹⁹

In 1909, during a missionary convention at Memorial Hall in Madras, Azariah delivered a speech emphasizing the importance of missionary service. After his address, a student in the front row whispered, "Why doesn't he go as a missionary?" Azariah perceived this as a divine calling and decided to offer himself for missionary work. In April of that year, the Indian Missionary Society (IMS) accepted his offer and appointed him as the superintending missionary for the Dornakal field.²⁰ To strengthen his position in the field, the IMS Executive Committee requested Bishop Henry Whitehead of Madras to send Azariah to Dornakal as an ordained Anglican priest. Bishop Whitehead agreed and provided Azariah with private theological instruction at his residence in Ootacamund. After several months of intensive study, Azariah was ordained as a deacon on June 29, commissioned to begin his work in Dornakal in July, and ordained as a priest on December 5 of the same year.²¹

1.2. Community Transformation

Azariah moved to Dornakal, a small village with a railway depot in the Warangal district of southeastern Hyderabad state in 1909. Dornakal was surrounded by jungle and tracts of dry land without roads.²² Here he lived in a tent, unprotected, uncovered in a dangerous place and began the work of evangelizing non-Christian Telugu villagers and supervising new Christian congregations. Azariah travelled by foot, bicycle, bullock cart, with his food and Bible tracts hanging in a bag suspended from the handlebars, Azariah visited many families in their simple houses, talked to small

¹⁷ Chellaiah, *Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah*, 5.

¹⁸ Chellaiah, *Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah*, 14.

¹⁹ Carol Graham, 'The Legacy of V. S. Azariah.' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 9, no. 1 (1985), 17.

²⁰ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 95.

²¹ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 97.

²² Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 98.

groups of men sitting in the shade of trees, preached to the crowd gathered in the evenings to hear him, and on Sundays performed priestly duties.²³

His village preaching often attacked four demons: disease, debt, drink, and dirt. He was known as a lovely and respectful father to his church, he brought nearly two lakh people from lower castes and marginalized people into the fold of Christ. After working as a pastor for three years, the new diocese of dornakal was formed, and he was consecrated as a first Indian Anglican Bishop on December 29, 1912.²⁴

Azariah in his missionary work mostly focused on village education. He built a school for girls, and later, his name was given. In 1924, the Dornakal diocese was covered by eight English pastors, and fifty-three Indian pastors. Azariah's vision of touching the grassroots of Indian society resulted in training two hundred and fifty Indian clergy members and more than two thousand village teachers. He also established clinics, a cooperative society, and the printing press in 1935. He felt that the mission work should bring out unity, so he played a significant role in uniting protestant Christians. He served as the chairman of the National Christian Council of India, Burma, and Ceylon. From 1912 to 1945, he served as bishop until his death.²⁵

1.3. Nation Building

Azariah was not only a religious leader but also a social reformer who advocated for the rights and upliftment of the oppressed classes and the integration of Indian identity within the Christian faith. He worked tirelessly for the upliftment of marginalized communities, including Dalits and tribals, believing that social equality was integral to the nationalist movement. His efforts in education, healthcare, and social justice were seen as a part of the broader struggle against colonial oppression. He said that his patriotism was in serving the poor, downtrodden and least privileged people.²⁶ In this regard, he differed with Mahatma Gandhi, who is known as the Father of Nation in India.

Susan Billington Harper, a writer and historian, was the first scholar to describe his fragile relationship with Mahatma Gandhi. Azariah had a complex relationship with Mahatma Gandhi and became both an ally and a leading foe of

²³ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 99.

²⁴ Carol Graham, 'The Legacy of V. S. Azariah', 17.

²⁵ Carol Graham, 'The Legacy of V. S. Azariah', 18.

²⁶ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 25.

Mahatma Gandhi during battles of communal representation and religious freedom. As an Indian nationalist, Azariah believed Hinduism inherently represented repressive and grounded in a destructive caste system. On the other hand, Gandhi saw conversions to Christianity as a threat and privately called him the "Enemy Number One" of post-colonial Indians. She writes that Azariah lived in an ever-lengthening shadow cast by the Mahatma across the Indian subcontinent. This shadow seemed to dim the light of Azariah's life and work, growing stronger as the British slowly withdrew. She further states that Azariah could never escape Gandhi's harsh criticism of both his Christian mission and his connection to British rule. These criticisms brought sadness to Azariah's final years in Dornakal and made people forget the importance of his contributions.²⁷

1.4. Azariah and Ecumenism

Azariah was an avid ecumenist and one of the first to see the importance, indeed the necessity of the united church to mission and evangelism. His career with the YMCA introduced the ecumenical world to him. He became a good friend of then prominent ecumenical leaders like John R. Mott. He was one of the mission leaders to attend the world missionary conference in 1910 from India. His talk "give us friends", a passionate plea for greater freedom has become a classic: "The Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the self-denying labour of the missionary body..... You have given your goods to feed the poor, your bodies to be burned... We also ask for love. Give us friends."²⁸ This indeed became an historic call especially in the backdrop of Indian independence movements and the growing foreign missions lacking Indian natives. He further spoke about the need for indigenization in Indian church. He impressed the attendees by advocating that missionaries adopt a more Asian view of life.²⁹

Azariah also strongly resisted Christian denominationalism. He argued that a unified church would be a more genuine expression of a native Indian Christianity,

²⁷ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 25.

²⁸ V. S. Azariah, "The Problem of Cooperation Between the Foreign and Native Missionaries," in *World Missionary Conference, 1910: The History and Records of the Conference Together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 315.

²⁹ Azariah, "The Problem of Cooperation Between the Foreign and Native Missionaries," 306f.

which was divided. In fact, Azariah was greatly instrumental in the unity of Protestant denominations in South India, which later led to the formation the CSI.

1.5. Conclusion

Azariah was a successful minister of the gospel of Christ at the grassroots level as well as the international level. His mission transformed a community. He was not just a church leader, but also a social reformer who stood up for the rights and dignity of the marginalized. Azariah had a strong passion for Christian unity and firmly opposed divisions among churches. He played a key role in bringing together various Protestant groups in South India, which eventually led to the creation of the Church of South India.

Chapter Two: The Vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah

2.0. Introduction

Azariah, as a devoted missionary, worked at the grassroots level among the marginalized and downtrodden people in India for over 40 years. Through his long and committed service, he came to understand the Indian land, culture, and social realities deeply. His experiences shaped a strong vision for an Indian Church that would meet the real needs of Indian society. He believed the Indian Church should be united and rooted in the local context to serve as a true witness to the Gospel of Christ. Azariah dedicated his entire life to working for this mission. This chapter offers an analysis of his dream and vision for the Indian Church.

2.1. United Church

The first and foremost vision of Bishop V.S. Azariah for the Indian Church was the formation of a united church in India, envisioned at a time when denominationalism was deeply prevalent and often divisive. Azariah believed that the divisions among churches in India were a consequence of Western missionary movements. He viewed these divisions as Western constructs that stood in clear contradiction to the Gospel. Hence, he envisioned one church, the Church of India for whole nation. At Lausanne in 1927, the first World conference on Faith and Order, he spoke eloquently of the scandal of christian disunity in his sermon on “*The Necessity of Christian Unity for the Missionary Enterprise of the Church*”. he addressed that:

We must have one Church. We want a Church of India, a Church which can be our spiritual home, a Church where the Indian religious genius can find natural expression, a living branch of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, a Church which, being a visible symbol of unity in that divided land, will draw all men to our blessed Lord.³⁰

Divisions within the Church as a sin is a theme that resonates throughout his teachings and writings. At the same Conference in Lausanne, Azariah said: "Unity may be theoretically a desirable ideal in Europe and America, but it is vital to the life of the

³⁰ Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 228.

Church in the mission field. The divisions of Christendom are sin and scandal in non-Christian lands, unlike Christian countries.”³¹

In 1919, Azariah himself initiated and organized the *Tranquebar Conference* as an attempt for the unification of churches in India. It issued a manifesto which declared: “We believe that the challenge of the present hour... and the present critical situation in India itself, call us to mourn past divisions and turn to our Lord Jesus Christ to seek in Him the unity of the body expressed in one visible Church.”³²

While advocating for the unification of churches in India, Azariah often recalled Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s criticism of Christianity. Ambedkar, a key leader of the Dalit community and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, recognized that casteism was deeply rooted in Hinduism and identified it as a primary cause of Dalit oppression. Though he was born a Hindu, Ambedkar firmly declared that he would not die as one. Determined to leave the religion that perpetuated caste discrimination, he resolved to convert to another faith along with his fellow oppressed people. During this time, Azariah sought an interview with Ambedkar and asked why he didn’t consider converting to Christianity? In response, Ambedkar raised concerns about the sectarian divisions within Christianity, he said “ I am well aware of all that the Christian Church has done for the outcaste of Hindu society. But at present we Harijans are one community all over the India and our strength is in our unity. Can you in the christian church offers us any unity comparable to that? Have you one body that we can join as one people?” Azariah felt profoundly ashamed because he could not affirm either of these conditions, which left him feeling disgraced.³³ Hence he tirelessly worked for the church unity and ultimately, envisioned a Church that is united in its devotion to Christ and its mission in the world. He believed that such unity, grounded in authentic repentance and mutual love, will reflect the true nature of the Body of Christ and bring glory to God.

2. 2. Casteless Church

Indian society has long been divided by the caste system, leaving a deep and lasting impact on the lives of its people. Unfortunately, the Church in India was not immune to this social evil. The caste system in Indian society is based on a form of social

³¹ Norman E. Thomas, *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, 228.

³² C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2013), 243,

³³ Coral Graham, *Azariah of Dornakal*, (London: SCM Press, 1946), 101.

stratification that finds its roots in ancient religious texts, particularly the *Purusha Sukta* of the *Rig Veda*. According to this hymn, human society was created from the cosmic being Purusha, whose body was sacrificed to form the four main varnas or castes.

The Brahmins, considered the priests and scholars, were said to have come from Purusha's mouth, symbolizing their role in teaching and performing religious rituals. The Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers, emerged from his arms, reflecting their duty to protect and govern. The Vaishyas, responsible for trade, agriculture, and commerce, came from his thighs, symbolizing their role in sustaining the economy. The Shudras, who served the other three castes, were said to have come from Purusha's feet, indicating their place at the bottom of the hierarchy. This mythological explanation provided a divine justification for a rigid social order and reinforced the idea that each caste had a fixed role and level of purity. Those who fell outside this four-fold division, later called Dalits or "untouchables," were excluded entirely and subjected to severe discrimination and oppression.³⁴ This group of people have been variously known as harijans (Children of Hari [God] Mahatma Gandhi); avarnas (casteless); panchamas (fifth caste); chandalas (worst of the earth); Prot-estant Hindus (Ambedkar); depressed class (British colonial days); scheduled caste (Indian Constitution).³⁵

From early on, Azariah strongly opposed caste discrimination, both within society and within the church. After his high-school studies in Megnanapuram, Azariah went to Church Missionary College for his First in Arts study, Tinnevely in 1892. Witnessing caste divisions among his fellow students, Azariah founded the "Christian Brotherhood Association" to fight against the caste spirit among the students and to inspire spiritual renewal.³⁶ Thus, he began his lifelong struggle against caste discrimination during his student days and carried it forward throughout his pastoral ministry.

Throughout his tenure in Dornakal, Azariah argued for the complete repudiation of caste loyalties in order to achieve a successful "new brotherhood" that would be inclusive rather than exclusive. Azariah expressed it, "the religion of

³⁴ Arvind Sharma, "The Purusha Sukta: Its Relation to the Caste System," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (October 1978): 294–303.

³⁵ Arvind P. Nirmal, "Toward a Christian Dalit Theology," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 27.

³⁶ Chellaiah, *Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah*, .

Christ ... always bursts its boundaries ... and refuses to be confined to any one race, class or caste.”³⁷ He further stated that the Christian community should not be considered just another static communal group, but something dynamic and different that included all races, all tongues, and all castes. “Our status is not to be a caste among the many Hindu castes. The moment a person is baptized, he is no longer a Mala, a Madiga or a Sudra, but all are one in Christ Jesus,” Azariah wrote, echoing the vast majority of missionaries who, from the mid nineteenth century, had formed a consensus of opposition to the caste system.³⁸ The struggle against caste feeling was, therefore, one of the central struggles of his ministry in Dornakal, and a constant theme in diocesan records.

The social goals most frequently articulated by Azariah were to lessen the age-old animosities between Malas and Madigas³⁹ and to soften the negative feelings of “Sudras” towards “untouchables.” His sermons, writings, and informal teachings were uncompromising in their denunciation of caste as a system of social organization. He used Telugu Christian lyrics to popularize his call for Christians to destroy caste feelings. Converts of different caste backgrounds were required to attend the same chapels, to drink from the same communion cup, to send children to the same schools, where they could receive training in occupations reserved traditionally for their own, or for rival castes and to eat together at public celebrations such as marriages, harvest festivals, and other community festivals.⁴⁰ Azariah frequently enjoined his diocese to pray against “the spirit of faction” caused by caste quarrels and land pride.⁴¹

Azariah wanted this new society to resist the pressure experienced by other religions in India to adopt the prevailing social order by participating in India's established system of caste relations.⁴² However, the beliefs and policies behind his Christianization of the Dornakal Diocese had complex social results that did not altogether fulfil his dream.

³⁷ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*... 82.

³⁸ V.S. Azariah, *India and the Christian Movement*...

³⁹ The Malas and Madigas are two major Dalit communities predominantly found in the South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, regions where Bishop V.S. Azariah carried out his ecclesiastical and missionary work. Both groups have historically faced severe social discrimination, economic marginalization, and caste-based oppression under the hierarchical caste system. The Madigas have historically been more economically and socially marginalized than the Malas. Although both groups are classified under Scheduled Castes (SC), there has been tension between them in homogenizing caste identities.

⁴⁰ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 251,252

⁴¹ Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 247,248.

⁴² Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, 244,245.

2.3. Independent Church and Indigenous Church

Azariah's radical contribution to Indian mission history lies in his passionate advocacy of indigenization. The term *indigenization* was coined in the mid twentieth century and the earlier terms were assimilation, adaptation and accommodation. This idea of indigenization popularized by an American missiologist Melvin L. Hedges who defined it as: "A native church has been planted and finds within itself the ability to govern itself, support itself and reproduce itself. It also included the process of indigenizing the forms of worship, patterns of administration and other practices both in the mission field and church life like music, rituals, symbols etc."⁴³ This indicates the mission and ministry of the Church in every form should be adopted to the country, to its culture and religious traditions. This helps us to understand Azariah's concept of Indegenization.

Azariah firmly believed that the church in India should be shaped by its local context, rather than being molded solely by Western models. A landmark moment in this vision was the founding of the Indian Missionary Society of Tirunelveli in 1903, followed by the establishment of the National Missionary Society in 1904, both deeply inspired by the missionary movement of Tamil Christians in Ceylon. These initiatives embodied the powerful refrain: "An Indian mission with Indian money and Indian leadership." Azariah believed that indigenization became a call to the Indian church. The Indian church intended in making their administration by three self-formulas that is self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. It was very much accepted by the local church administration because indigenization gave importance to the local culture and indigenous leadership.⁴⁴

In his mission methods and vision for the life of the Indian church, Azariah stressed the importance of rooting Christianity in local traditions. He encouraged the use of indigenous forms of liturgy, music, and drama to create an authentically Indian expression of Christian faith. According to him, without a deep understanding of the local culture, the Gospel would fail to take root in Indian soil.⁴⁵

He emphasized self-support as the basic thrust of indigenization of the native Church. For this he started with the women and asked them, whenever they cooked, in

⁴³ Melvin L. Hodges, *On the Mission Field: The Indigenous Church* (Chicago Press: Moody Press, 1953), 15.

⁴⁴ Chellaiah, *Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah*, 5,6.

⁴⁵ Graham, *Azariah of Dornakal*, 98.

putting the grain into the pot to put aside one handful for God. At the time, the gift would hardly be noticed, but over weeks and months, it would amount to quite a large sum. This was very practical and very Indian. The method was adopted in many places and the sight of the women coming once a month to church with their bags or baskets of grain is a familiar one in hundreds of Indian villages.⁴⁶

In Andhra Pradesh, where Azariah served both as a missionary and later as a bishop, he closely engaged with the local culture, integrating the Gospel with the way of life of the people. He emphasized that the Indian church, particularly in Andhra, must embody all the valuable and enduring elements of Andhra's tradition, temperament, and religious spirit.⁴⁷ Azariah recognized that this direction was vital for the identity of the Indian church, as it aligned with the cultural aspirations of the emerging Indian nation. Furthermore, Azariah believed that adopting local cultural practices had two significant effects: Firstly, it maintained a healthy balance between Western and Indian traditions. Secondly, it could help overcome the deep divisions of caste and social hierarchy. Therefore, he stressed that cultural adaptation should be seriously considered and that local cultural values should be fully embraced and reflected in all aspects of church life and mission.⁴⁸

Azariah also recognized that the Western appearance of church buildings and services often hindered effective evangelism among Indians. Deeply Indian in his outlook, he sought to reflect indigenous identity even in church architecture. While many Christians in Tirunelveli, including Azariah's own father, initially built churches in semi-Gothic styles, Azariah envisioned a different approach. As early as 1912, he proposed building a cathedral for the Diocese of Dornakal that would adopt an Eastern architectural style, making all Christians feel spiritually at home, irrespective of their religious background or ethnic identity. This vision materialized when Azariah built the Epiphany Cathedral in Dornakal, designed in Indo-Saracenic style.⁴⁹

In the Epiphany Church, one can see the emergence of a confident indigenous church willing to draw freely from elite Hindu and Muslim architectural idioms. The boundary walls resembled those of Hindu temples (*Shivalayams*) with orange stripes,

⁴⁶ V.S. Azariah, *Christian Giving* (London: United Society for the Christian Literature Lutterworth Press, 1962), 22,23.

⁴⁷ V.S. Azariah, "Dornakal Diocese: Its Life and Oppartunities," *Dornakal Diocese Missions*, Vol 9, No 1 (Junuary 1932), 12.

⁴⁸ V.S. Azariah, "*Dornakal Diocese: Its Life and Oppartunities*", 12,13.

⁴⁹ Henry Whitehead and V.S. Azariah, *Christ in the Indian Villeges* (NewDelhi: ISPCK, 1930), 34.

the domes reflected the influence of Islamic mosques, and the altar design was reminiscent of Anglican church altars. The interior decorations, featuring carved motifs of plantain leaves and lotus flowers, further showcased Indian artistic traditions. The building as a whole embodied a beautiful fusion of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim architectural elements. Its dignity and spaciousness created a distinct atmosphere, markedly different from the Gothic churches built in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁰

Through his contributions in mission strategy, worship, and architecture, Azariah paved the way for an Indian Christianity that was both authentically Christian and authentically Indian.

2.4. Witnessing Church

Bishop Azariah felt that evangelism was the essence of the Church and mission. Therefore, the church had to take responsibility to train its members for evangelism. At the time of baptism, new converts were made to confess their missionary role in an Indian style. Commenting on Azariah's understanding of mission and evangelism, Stephen Neil, a mission historian, commented that, "It was Azariah's custom, at the baptism of adults who were coming in thousands in his 'mass movement area, and whose confirmation would follow immediately or at a very short interval on their baptism, to cause the candidates each to lay his hand solemnly in Indian fashion on his head and to say with Paul, 'Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.'" It was the bishop's aim that every Christian in his diocese, however simple, should be a missionary. He had notable success in the achievement of this aim.⁵¹ The Church, therefore, Azariah believed, needed to direct the new converts to the responsibility of grassroots lay evangelism, the key to local Church growth.

The word *evangelism* and *witness* are considered as the two sides of the same coin. According to Azariah, "Every communicant a witness" ought to be the watchword in all Churches. The witness of the Christian life was considered as one of the chief factors of the church expansion and evangelism.⁵² Azariah felt that, the Indian Church couldn't be built up apart from the life of its individual members.

⁵⁰ Harpar, "Hope for Out Caste" <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/hope-for-outcastes>.

⁵¹ Stephen Neil, *The Church and Christian Union* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 211.

⁵² V.S. Azariah, *India and the Christian Movement* (Madras, CLS, 1936), 102.

Azariah strongly stressed that, "The witness of the life of the Christian community thence forward becomes an important factor in further expansion."⁵³ Azariah gave serious consideration to the moral life of the Christian community. His approach was contextual and indigenous. He believed that mission was a witness to the gospel through lifestyle, behavior, customs, and culture.

2.5. Conclusion

As a missionary, priest, and later the first Indian bishop in the Anglican Church of India, Azariah had a great vision for the Indian Church. When the Church was divided under many denominations, he envisioned one united Church in India. He also dreamed of a Church free from Western paternalism and truly rooted in Indian soil. At a time when Indian society was divided by caste inequalities, he dreamed of a Church that would reflect the love of Christ, regardless of caste differences. His dedication to unity, social justice, and cultural integration set a precedent for future ecumenical work. His legacy continues to inspire efforts towards greater understanding and cooperation among different Christian traditions, making him a pivotal figure in the history of ecumenism.

⁵³ V.S. Azariah, *India and the Christian Movement*, 90.

Chapter Three: Church of South India (CSI) Today

3.0. Introduction

The Church of South India (CSI) is the largest united Protestant Church in India. A unique church was born out of the blending of the Episcopal and non-Episcopal traditions, as a gift of God to the people of India and as a visible sign of ecclesiastical unity for the universal Church. This union marked a significant milestone in the history of the Indian Church and the global ecumenical movement. Today the CSI is flourishing with 25 dioceses spread throughout South India and Sri Lanka, and some churches overseas. With 15 departments, it is witnessing Christ in a land of religious pluralism. This chapter discusses the founding of the CSI and analyzes its current ministry to understand how it aligns with Azariah's vision.

3.1. Towards One Church in India

3.1.1. Formation of CSI

When the CSI was officially formed, it was recognized as a landmark moment in the Church Union movement. Historian David Carter points out that CSI was a really solid achievement to be celebrated in the early decades of ecumenical movements.⁵⁴ The CSI became a model for future ecumenical efforts around the world and is now the largest Protestant church in India.

This union brought together four different Christian traditions: Anglican, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Methodist. These churches had been established in India by missionaries from Europe, America, and Australia, starting from the early 1700s.⁵⁵ The Anglican Church came through the work of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), both connected to the Church of England. Congregational churches were planted by missionaries from the London Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). The Presbyterian Church was founded through the efforts of the Church of Scotland, the Dutch Reformed Church in

⁵⁴ David Carter, "The Ecumenical Movement in Its Early Years," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 49, no. 3 (July 1998): 466.

⁵⁵ Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The movement towards union 1900-1947* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954), 339.

America, and the Basel Mission from Switzerland and Germany, with links to Presbyterian churches in England and Australia. The Methodist Church in India was established by the Methodist Missionary Society of Great Britain.⁵⁶

In the late 19th century, as Indian nationalism grew, Indian Christians also began to seek self-reliance and independence. They realized that the divisions among Indian churches were largely caused by foreign missionary organizations and not by Indian Christians themselves. However, faced with the need for greater unity and effective mission work, the churches became more aware of the problem of disunity.⁵⁷ This led to new efforts toward cooperation. In 1901, Presbyterian missions in South India, including the United Free Church of Scotland, the American Arcot Mission, and the Basel Mission formed a Federal Union.⁵⁸ In 1904, Congregational churches from the London Missionary Society and the American Board in South India and Jaffna also united. Then in 1908, the Presbyterian and Congregational churches joined to form the South India United Church (SIUC).⁵⁹ Their theory was: “the best way to unite is to unite.”⁶⁰

After the International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, there was even more motivation for unity among churches. One result in India was the creation of the National Missionary Council in 1914.⁶¹ This Council helped organize regional Christian councils, which promoted cooperative evangelistic outreach. In the Madras region, churches working together in mission began to question why they remained divided, especially when they all preached the same Gospel.

This led to an informal meeting at Tranquebar, organized by Azariah and Rev. V. Santiago. Ministers from the Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, and SIUC churches attended and called for church union. A Joint Committee was formed to start the process. The Lutherans chose not to continue, so only the Anglicans, Methodists, and SIUC participated in the negotiations.⁶²

One of the key early agreements was to use the Lambeth Quadrilateral as the foundation for union. This included:

⁵⁶ Sundkler, *Church of South India*, 19f

⁵⁷ Sundkler, *Church of South India*, 30.

⁵⁸ Rajaiah D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action* (Madras: CLS, 1972), .5.

⁵⁹ Rajaiah D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action*, 5.

⁶⁰ Sundkler, *Church of South India*, 41.

⁶¹ Later known as the National Christian Council of Churches, K.Baago, *A History of the National Christian Council of India* (Nagpur: The National Christian Council, 1964), 15.

⁶² Rajaiah D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action*, 5.

The Bible (Old and New Testaments) as the ultimate guide for faith and salvation;
The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as expressions of Christian belief;
The two sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion;
A ministry including bishops in the historic episcopate.⁶³

The first three points were accepted without issue. But the fourth, the idea of maintaining the historic episcopate, was challenging. The Anglican Church had this tradition, but the others did not. Eventually, they agreed that all ministers already ordained in any of the churches would be accepted in the united church, and from then on, all new ordinations would be done by bishops.⁶⁴

It took nearly 20 years to reach this agreement. After that, each church had to officially approve the plan. The Methodists agreed in 1941, the Anglican Church's General Council gave approval in 1945 for its dioceses in South India to join, and the SIUC accepted in 1946. These approvals led to the historic inauguration of the Church of South India on September 27, 1947.⁶⁵

3.1.2. Towards Greater Unity

In its journey of faith over the years, CSI has shown remarkable development in the vision and praxis of unity. The whole church came to understand that it can claim to be the people of God in India only by recognizing and accepting all the members of the believing community as the people of God in India. It is only then the church can claim to be the body of Christ in this world. This theological vision of unity kept the church moving to wider horizons of ecumenism all through its life. Therefore, CSI wholeheartedly initiated negotiations with the Methodist conference of churches in Southern Asia, the Lutheran Church and with the Church of North India and the Mar Thoma Church.⁶⁶

The first synod of CSI, which met at Madurai in 1948, called upon all the churches in India to enter into unity discussions. The Lutheran and Baptist churches responded to this call for wider unity positively, and expressed their readiness to send their official representatives for the unity discussion. It was an attempt at organic

⁶³ C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, 243.

⁶⁴ Rajaiah D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action*, 5,6.

⁶⁵ Rajaiah D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action*, 6.

⁶⁶ M.P. Joseph, "Mission and Ministry of the Church of South India," in *United to Be Unite: History of the Church of South India 1947–1997*, ed. J. W. Cladstone (Chennai: The Church of South India, 1997), 107.

unity similar to the formation of CSI. However, the Baptist Church later withdrew, citing its inability to pursue organic unity in the near future. While the Lutheran Church continued discussions, they did not lead to full union due to various challenges. Nevertheless, the dialogue resulted in significant improvements in relationships and doctrinal understanding.⁶⁷

When the Church of North India (CNI) was formed in 1970, a new effort toward church union began. The Church of South India (CSI) warmly welcomed discussions with CNI and the Mar Thoma Church (MTC) to promote wider ecumenism. Both churches accepted the proposal, leading to the formation of a Joint Theological Commission.⁶⁸ This is significant not only because an ancient church in India entered into union negotiations but also because this was a shift from denominations to churches. At the first meeting of the Joint Council in Nagpur in 1978, it was noted that the three churches had been led to adopt a new and unique model, different from the earlier models of "conciliar" or "organic" unity, namely "organic oneness".⁶⁹ A constitution was approved at the second meeting of the Joint Council in 1981. Its preamble makes its aim clear:

The Joint Council of the CNI, CSI and the MTC has been constituted as a visible organ for common action by the three churches, which recognize themselves as belonging to the one church of Jesus Christ in India, even while remaining as autonomous churches, each keeping its own identity of traditions and organizational structure.⁷⁰

However, the dialogue remains an ongoing process, the three churches have not been able to agree on a suggested common name, namely, the Church of Christ in India, but have preferred to retain the name the Joint Council. Here it is worth noting Samartha's comment that "there is a significant difference between being a member of a church and belonging to a council. Moreover, it is not easy to spell out what is unique in the model of organic oneness as different from organic unity, particularly when these terms are translated into Indian languages, as they must be if they are to be of any help to people in any congregation."⁷¹

⁶⁷ M.P. Joseph, "Mission and Ministry of the Church of South India," 108.

⁶⁸ M.P. Joseph, "Mission and Ministry of the Church of South India," 109-110.

⁶⁹ Samartha, "Vision and reality," 488.

⁷⁰ Church of South India, *Constitution as approved by the Joint Commission 1981* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1981), 4.

⁷¹ Samartha, "Vision and reality", 488.

These records show that this vision of unity, wider unity and growing together in unity has run like a thread through the life and thought of the CSI. But attention is needed regarding the serious drawbacks of the CSI. Over time, the CSI has become one of the denominations of many denominations in India. The spirituality of the CSI is described as “a nominal, inherited, communal religion without any personal commitment.”⁷² Additionally at all levels of administration, there is insufficient appreciation of the truth. The disputes over the election of the leadership of the synod have necessitated the intervention of the state judiciary. The absence of stable leadership has stalled further ecumenical dialogue and negotiations with other Christian denominations. David Chellappa, the editor of *South India Churchman*, wrote that “the CSI had left Egypt but had not yet reached Canaan.”⁷³ However, it is the time for the CSI to join hands together with other denominations and march towards the promised land of Canaan.

3.2. Dalit and Adivasi Concern

The CSI is predominantly a Dalit church. It has more than 4.5 million members today, with two-thirds of them being Dalits, so-called “untouchables” or “casteless”. CSI has always been at the forefront in standing with the Dalit people and fighting for their issues. One of its departments *Dalit and Adivasi Concern* fights against modern slavery and stands for human rights, condemning all forms of modern slavery as violations of human dignity.⁷⁴ It works with the vision to bring Dalit and Adivasi issues into the centre stage of discourse through advocacy and campaigns by affirming cultural and theological aspects. The department will specifically mainstream these concerns by integrating them into the activities of various departments of the CSI Synod.⁷⁵ It aims to express solidarity with the communities of faith that are victimized by untouchability and caste violence and empower them to overcome caste discrimination and marginalization.

From 1950 onwards along with the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), the CSI has waged a

⁷² Samartha, "Vision and reality", 488.

⁷³ David Chelleppa, *South India Churchman* Special number on the synod madras (1950), 1

⁷⁴ Church of South India, *Dalit and Adivasi Concerns*,
<https://dalitandadivasiconcerns.csi1947.com/aim/604c580bdd0efce167751c7c>.

⁷⁵ Church of South India, *Dalit and Adivasi Concerns*,
<https://dalitandadivasiconcerns.csi1947.com/aim/604c580bdd0efce167751c7c>.

relentless battle against “Presidential Order” which deprived the Christian and non-Hindu minorities of educational concessions and employment reservation extended to other Dalits.⁷⁶ The church has employed all peaceful and constitutional means to secure the privileges for the Christians

However, the Indian church is not free from the evil of the casteism even today. It has both visible and invisible influence on the Indian church. No church denomination is an exception to that. Although the CSI actively fights against casteism in society outside, it still struggles to eliminate casteism within itself. In ecclesiastical settings, caste influences the selection of candidates for priesthood, the appointment of pastors to parishes, and the allocation of key administrative and financial positions. Among our laity, caste plays a part in the running and control of parish and diocesan associations and bodies in parish activities and in the formation of apostolic groups.⁷⁷

Another significant occasion when casteism plays a vital role is during elections to various committees and councils of the Church at different levels. People often compete for positions by forming groups based on caste or region, making casteism a particularly crucial and divisive factor in the process. These quarrelsome factions and divisions undoubtedly undermine unity within the Indian church. On many occasions, such factional conflicts bring the entire work of the parish or even the diocese to a virtual standstill.⁷⁸ This deeply troubling pattern must change.

Due to the pervasive and deep-rooted nature of the caste system, it is always very hard to uproot caste from the churches. However, these socio-political dynamics within church communities are often influenced by the demographic composition. In regions where a particular caste constitutes the majority, it tends to exert dominance over others. For instance, in dioceses where Dalits form the majority, individuals from other caste backgrounds may experience limitations in accessing full participation and rights within the church structure. Conversely, in non-Dalit-majority churches, Dalit

⁷⁶ The Presidential Order known as Constitution [Scheduled Castes] order 1950 limits the Scheduled Caste Status only to such untouchable people who profess Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism. The order excludes Dalit Muslim and Dalit Christian from the ambit of Scheduled caste status. This exclusion deprives them of reservation benefits in education, employment, and various other welfare provisions accorded to Dalits. *The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950*, Government of India, Ministry of Law, [https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/CONSTITUTION%20\(SC\)%20ORDER%201950%20dated%2010081950.pdf](https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/CONSTITUTION%20(SC)%20ORDER%201950%20dated%2010081950.pdf).

⁷⁷ Leslie J. Almeida, “*The Indian Church and the Invincible Virus of Casteism*,” in *Caste Culture in Indian Church*, ed. L. Raj Sebastia and O. F. Xavier Raj (New Delhi: ISI, 1993), 32.

⁷⁸ K. M. George, *Church of South India: Life in Union (1947–1997)* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 257.

Christians frequently encounter systemic discrimination and are treated as subordinate members of the community. These patterns reflect broader societal hierarchies and underscore the persistent influence of caste structures within ecclesiastical settings.

3.3. Indigenous Church in Progress

Ever since its inception, indigenization has been one of the main concerns of the CSI. The early leaders of the CSI stated, "The Church of South India desires, therefore, conserving all that is of spiritual value in its heritage, to express under India conditions and in Indian forms, the spirit, the thought and the life of the Church Universal."⁷⁹ There is no doubt that efforts have been made in this direction, however, much more remains to be accomplished.

3.3.1. Self-Governance and Challenges

One of the earliest signs of the CSI's rising Indianness is the rise of Indian leadership within the organisation. In the early days itself many emphasised that both Indian and non-Indians should give priority to Indian leaders and help them by offering true loyalty and cooperation. Later, the Synod in 1952 recommended that "no foreigner be appointed to any position of responsibility in the church unless it has been found after a complete search throughout the church that a competent Indian was not available."⁸⁰ It is fair to state that the church has been able to maintain this principle in Church leadership over the years.

The CSI is highly independent in its administration and mission. It has completely achieved autonomy in fostering strong Indian leadership. It is organized into 25 dioceses, each under the spiritual supervision of a bishop, the church as a whole is governed by a synod, which elects a moderator every 3 years.⁸¹ Each diocese has its own council and administrative setup, reflecting the church's commitment to self-governance and contextual ministry. Although independent in governance, the CSI is not isolated. It is in full communion with other global churches, including the Anglican Communion, World Methodist Council, and World Communion of Reformed Churches. This means it is ecumenical but still autonomous. The CSI

⁷⁹ George, *Church of South India*, 252.

⁸⁰ George, *Church of South India*, 253.

⁸¹ Church of South India, "History" <https://csi1947.com/about/history>.

maintains these global relationships without falling back into paternalistic dependencies.⁸²

The autonomy granted to the CSI is not being effectively exercised in its current context. The administrative challenges faced by the CSI today highlight the consequences of this mismanagement. The church is undergoing a period of significant instability, particularly in its governance structures. A recent ruling by the High Court of Madras invalidated the election of key leadership positions, raising concerns about the legitimacy of ecclesiastical authority.

At present, two external judges have been appointed to oversee the administration of the CSI, reflecting a crisis in self-governance.⁸³ Additionally, nine out of the twenty-four dioceses are functioning without a bishop, with neighboring bishops assuming temporary responsibilities. Many diocesan disputes remain unresolved in the courts, delaying any meaningful resolution to the governance crisis. This situation has persisted for several years, underscoring the urgent need for administrative reforms and a renewed commitment to upholding the CSI's integrity and autonomy.

3.3.2 Indianized Church

Bishop V.S. Azariah envisioned the Church of South India not only as an administratively Indian institution but as one that fully embodied Indian culture in its ministry, worship, and overall life. Over the past 80 years, the CSI has made significant strides toward this vision, gradually integrating cultural elements into its liturgical practices. It has developed its own distinct liturgical system while continually incorporating various cultural expressions into its teachings, approaches, and festivals. Use of classical music, drama, and folklore, has become a part of evangelism⁸⁴

However, many urban churches continue to adhere to Western liturgical forms and worship styles. Even after more than a century of Indian Christianity, many

⁸² Franklyn J. Balasunderam, "Mission and Ministry of the Church of South India," in *United to Be Unite: History of the Church of South India 1947–1997*, ed. J. W. Cladstone (Chennai: The Church of South India, 1997), 93–94.

⁸³ "Madras High Court Appoints a Committee of Administrators for CSI and CSI Trust Association," *The Hindu*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/madras-high-court-appoints-committee-of-administrators-for-csi/article67892356.ece>.

⁸⁴ Franklyn J. Balasunderam, "Mission and Ministry of the Church of South India," in *United to Be Unite: History of the Church of South India 1947–1997*, ed. J. W. Cladstone (Chennai: The Church of South India, 1997), 93–94.

churches still rely on the same translated versions of the Book of Common Prayer and the traditional Western hymnal. Although several Indian Christian theologians and songwriters have composed music that reflects Indian theology and cultural context, such contributions have seldom been incorporated into regular church worship. The use of indigenous liturgies has largely been confined to seminaries and Christian ashrams.⁸⁵ Traditionally, the only musical instrument permitted in worship was the organ, while only a few traditions such as Catholic, Pentecostal, and Charismatic churches have experimented with indigenous instruments like the *Parai* and *Nathaswaram*.⁸⁶

One of the reasons for this is the deep-rooted attachment to Western forms of Christianity among Indian churches. Many congregants have grown up with Western-style liturgy and consider it part of their spiritual identity. As Marva Dawn, a theologian from the United States puts it, they often fall into "the idolatry of 'the way we've always done it before.'"⁸⁷ Consequently, many Christians tend to value the inherited Western church tradition more than the cultural heritage of their own land. This mindset creates resistance to change and prevents meaningful engagement with India's rich cultural resources for worship. Therefore, while indigenization is vital, it must be approached thoughtfully, with theological clarity and cultural sensitivity.

Another important area where the Church of South India (CSI) should strive for greater indigenization is in its church architecture. While the CSI emerged as a bold expression of Indian Christian unity and autonomy, its architectural identity has largely remained rooted in Western, particularly Gothic, styles. Many CSI churches, especially those built during the colonial period, feature tall steeples, pointed arches, stained glass windows, and cruciform layouts with all the hallmarks of European ecclesiastical design.⁸⁸ These structures, though grand and historically significant, often reflect a colonial legacy rather than the cultural and spiritual expressions of the Indian people. Only a few churches within the CSI have experimented with

⁸⁵ Jacob Joseph, "Indigenous Christian Worship in India," *Global Forum on Art & Faith Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014), 24.

⁸⁶ Parai is one of the oldest traditional drums, used in folk rituals and festivals, especially by Dalit communities. Played with sticks and Nathaswaram is a traditional double-reed wind instrument, widely used in temples and weddings. Considered one of the loudest non-brass acoustic instruments. D.S. Amalorpavadass, *Towards Indigenisation in the Liturgy* (Bangalore: 1971), 26-5

⁸⁷ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 23.

⁸⁸ Jacob Joseph, "Indigenous Christian Worship in India," *Global Forum on Art & Faith Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014)

indigenous architectural forms, drawing inspiration from Indian temple motifs, local materials, or vernacular styles that resonate with the communities they serve. For the church to truly be indigenous, its architecture too must embody local identity. Such architectural indigenization would symbolize a deeper integration of faith with culture, making the church truly a "tent among the people."

3.4. Mission and Evangelism

Mission and evangelism have been integrally linked in the consciousness of the CSI from the very beginning. There is an underlying premise that unity is not an end in itself but is for the purpose of mission and evangelism. Leaders such as Azariah advocated for church unification in order to carry out effective evangelism. This was the same in the early years of CSI. The first synod said, "We solemnly reaffirm the statement contained in the constitution on the evangelistic calling of the church to preach the gospel and build up the body of Christ and ever to be mindful of the missionary calling of the church."⁸⁹ This concern for mission and evangelism is carefully elaborated in a well-argued statement of two pages in the first synod. The proceedings of every diocesan council and synod in subsequent years include reports on evangelism, often without much discussion. Samartha criticizes that it is hard to find new ideas or fresh insights regarding mission and evangelism in succeeding synod deliberations.⁹⁰

The Abel committee, which was appointed by the synod to examine the life of the CSI after thirty years makes strong criticisms on this matter, and points to certain reasons why mission and evangelism receive so little attention: "Bishops and presbyters are too busy with administration and property development projects to have any time for evangelism. Committees and councils of the parishes, dioceses and synods spend more time on property and other disputes than evangelism."⁹¹

Among the reasons for this, the committee draws attention to outdated approaches to evangelism, lack of unity, irrelevant methods and the domination of institutions on the priorities of the church. They report that

⁸⁹ Church of South India, *Proceedings of the First Synod*, March 1948 (Madurai: Church of South India, 1948), 7.

⁹⁰ Samartha, "Vision and Reality, 486f.

⁹¹ *The Church of South India After Thirty Years: Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Church of South India Synod to Study the Life and Work of the Church* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1978), 19.

The institutions and grandiose property development/projects have overshadowed the evangelistic task of the church. They take away all the finance, resources and manpower of the church leaving little time for evangelism. Further, they have also made the church appear to be a huge business organization rather than the body of Christ committed to the preaching of the gospel.⁹²

Even many decades after this report was written, there are no signs that the situation has improved. The situation has worsened today due to internal politics, allegations against leaders, and the legal actions against the synod.

Although each diocese in the CSI has its own mission and missionary work such as Parakal, Nirmal, the Wynad mission, Kamareddy Home Mission, and hundreds of CSI men and women are working as missionaries in different parts of India through these missions and other independent mission agencies and such agencies. Still, the CSI Synod, which boasts so much of its missionary tradition, has done practically nothing in this vital concern of the church.⁹³ Individual CSI theologians have made considerable contributions to the theological thinking of the church, and although initiatives for mission such as VELCOM - Vision for Equipping the Local Congregation for Mission, Mission festivals and capacity-building program have been taken from time to time, the CSI, with its fifty years' experience of living in the powerfully pluralist society of South India, has yet to make any significantly new or distinctively Indian contribution to ecumenical debates on unity and mission, and on the connection between the two within the consciousness of the church in the world.

However, over the years, the concept of mission and evangelism has significantly evolved, particularly in the 21st century. Samartha states that the distinction between evangelism, which is the communication of the good news of Jesus Christ, and mission, which is a broader concept that includes service to society via acts of compassion and justice.⁹⁴ In today's context, mission is increasingly seen as a holistic and inclusive activity that encompasses not only spiritual proclamation but also social justice, ecological care, peace building, and advocacy for the marginalized.

The CSI has made significant progress in embracing this holistic approach to mission. It has taken strong steps in advocating for the welfare of women, children, and

⁹² *Church of South India After Thirty Years*, 20.

⁹³ George, *Church of South India*, 194.

⁹⁴ Samartha, "Vision and reality", 487.

marginalized communities. Notably, the CSI was the first church in India's ecclesiastical history to appoint a woman as bishop and has ordained many women as priests.⁹⁵ This achievement goes beyond the vision and concerns of Azariah's time.

The contribution of the CSI to ecological concerns is also commendable, reflecting a deep commitment to environmental stewardship rooted in faith. Through its Department of Ecological Concerns, the CSI has launched various tree plantation and afforestation programs, promoted sustainable agriculture, and encouraged eco-friendly practices in worship and daily life. The church has observed special Sundays like "CSI Eco Sunday" to raise awareness among congregations about climate change and environmental justice. Moreover, it has partnered with schools, colleges, and community organizations to conduct clean-up drives, environmental education campaigns, and plastic-free initiatives.⁹⁶

While the Church of South India (CSI) is visibly active in advocacy for social justice, its commitment to other forms of evangelism, such as inter-religious dialogue and witness through proclamation, appears significantly underdeveloped or ignored in recent times. M.J. Joseph comments that "The absence of a formal structure or program for interfaith dialogue has created a vacuum in the CSI's wider evangelical witness. While the church speaks loudly for justice, it is relatively silent in dialoguing with India's major faiths."⁹⁷ To be faithful to its holistic mission, CSI must seek a balanced approach that integrates social action, evangelism, and interfaith dialogue.

3.5. Conclusion

As a servant of God, the Church of South India is fulfilling its mission faithfully in a land rich with diverse religions. Although the journey toward church unity continues and efforts to uplift the marginalized Dalit communities are ongoing, many meaningful activities are creating greater awareness and inspiring people. However, the Church also faces several challenges. While it is called to be a unifying body that brings together different churches, it is struggling in this role. Caste remains a deep-rooted issue, and escaping its grip entirely is still not possible, which is the reality of India. The Indianization of the Church also remains a challenge. Though the

⁹⁵ "South India Has First Woman Bishop," *Church Times*, October 4, 2013, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/4-october/news/world/south-india-has-first-woman-bishop>.

⁹⁶ Church of South India, "Ecological Concerns", <https://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/>

⁹⁷ M. J. Joseph, "Church and Society Today", *Indian Theological Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (2023), 42

understanding of mission has evolved over time, the Church of South India has yet to find a fresh and relevant approach.

Chapter Four: Re-Imagining the Church of South India

4.0. Introduction

In a world that is constantly changing and often marked by brokenness, inequality, and division, the church has a vital role in offering hope, healing, and reconciliation. This chapter seeks to explore how the Church of South India(CSI) can continue to grow and respond faithfully to its calling in today's context. It reflects on how the Church can embody and carry forward the vision of Azariah, a vision of unity, social justice, and an Indian Church rooted in its own soil, culture, and struggles. By addressing contemporary challenges such as caste discrimination, social injustice, ecological crisis, and interfaith tensions, the Church has the opportunity to serve as a beacon of hope and transformation.

4.1. Wider Unity

Azariah strongly believed in the importance of church unity. The union of various Christian traditions in the Indian subcontinent was always a primary concern for Azariah. For him, unity was not just a theological idea, but a necessary witness in the Indian context, where people of many religions live together. He dreamed of one united church that would overcome divisions of caste, race, and denomination. He worked toward organic unity, which means a full and visible unity not just cooperation or fellowship, but churches coming together as one body.

The CSI has been recognized as a united church from its formation, serving as a cohesive force that works for the wider unity. As Samartha points out, the vision of a "wider union" of churches in South India was eventually extended to include the entire country, with an occasional references to the greater unity of humanity.⁹⁸ This was one of the primary expectations of the CSI in the early decades and this goal has such a strong hold on the CSI that its very first synod (1948) calls for "wider unity". The resolution states:

Fully persuaded as we are that such union is the will of God, and conscious that that will cannot be fulfilled until all the separated members are gathered into one body, we, met together in the first synod of the church, issue this call

⁹⁸ Samartha, "Vision and reality", 485.

to all other churches in South India to consider with us the possibility of a wider union...⁹⁹

In its early years, the CSI made rapid progress toward realizing this vision.

Despite its rapid initial success, the vision for wider union has waned over time. The union discussion with the Lutheran Church has not been fruitful. At one point, its conversations with the Mar Thoma Church and the North Indian Church slowed significantly. This can also be understood as an effort to continue the conversation with a focus on organic unity. In fact, Bishop Azariah also worked towards such unity. However, a major question remains as to whether this vision is still relevant or practical in today's context. The CSI must now explore new dimensions in its pursuit of ecclesiastical unity.

However, after more than eighty years, this dream of organic unity has become more difficult. Many churches today are more focused on preserving their individual identities, traditions, and governance. They fear that merging into a larger united church may dilute their uniqueness. As a result, organic unity, once seen as achievable, is now seen as a challenge.

During the last decade, serious questions have been raised about the nature of unity. Whether organic unity which envisions churches coming together to form a single ecclesial body with unified structures and ministries is the only and right model of unity that the churches should seek has been a matter of study with deep concern by those in the Faith and Order and others in various parts of the world. The concept of organic union gradually began to lose hold on many churches in varying degrees.

Conciliarity is not merely an alternative to "organic union," rather it offers a broader understanding of church unity. The unity of the church should not be understood merely as a kind of administrative and structural unity. Conciliar fellowship is unity in diversity, where churches maintain their distinct identities but are united through mutual recognition and shared decision-making processes. The unity of the Church has from the beginning, existed at the very heart of diversity. Diversity is an essential aspect of true unity. Unity cannot be equated with uniformity which is alien to the nature of the church. Conciliar fellowship maintains a healthy and creative balance between unity and diversity, affirms and safeguards diversity

⁹⁹ Church of South India, *Proceedings of the First Synod*, 5.

without weakening unity, and enhances unity without endangering diversity.¹⁰⁰ CSI is called to maintain this unity with every Church in India.

In recent decades, the Ecumenical Movement began to widen from the motif and endeavor of uniting the churches or inter-church co-operation to a large vision and reality of the larger humanity, to the idea of the whole human world. The “whole inhabited earth” is one of the many households of faith. The earth is inhabited by people of different races, languages, religions and cultures, and they all belong to one human community. With his outlook, CSI needs step forward towards wider ecumenism.

4.2. Inclusive Church

The caste issue has been a deeply rooted and difficult challenge for the Indian Church. Azariah consistently taught that the Church should be a unique community, different from other religious communities in India, by rejecting caste divisions. He believed that the Church must not follow the caste system as other religions did, but should reflect the new identity found in Christ.

Although Azariah worked hard to overcome caste barriers, he could not fully achieve this in his time. The inner feelings of caste superiority and discrimination continued to exist within the Church. He spoke and wrote about the need to overcome inward caste feelings and reminded Christians that they are a new creation in Christ, where all are equal.

The CSI brought together Christians of many castes into one united community. Bengt G. M. Sundkler a Swedish-Tanzanian Church historian, rightly comments, “The Anglican Nadar in Tinnevely, or the Baptist Madiga in Ongole, or the Wesleyan Mela in Medak were all, in their province, convinced that their church was the best of all churches... but it did bring people from Medak and Ongole and Tinnevely together in a way which had been unknown hitherto...”¹⁰¹ But it is true that these communities are careful to maintain caste boundaries by ensuring that leadership positions and the related privileges within their local churches were reserved exclusively for members of their own caste.

Since the caste system is intertwined with Indian culture, the Church faces many challenges in dealing with it. However, as a called-out community of God, a

¹⁰⁰ Aram Keshishian, *Conciliar Fellowship: A Common Goal* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), 69.

¹⁰¹ Sundkler, *Church of South India*, 41.

Church without caste inequalities is called to stand as a witness to this world. According to the Abel Committee Report, in response to issues of casteism and corruption within the church, it was strongly recommended that the Synod establish regional vigilance commissions in each diocese.¹⁰² However, such committees have not yet been formed. It is essential that these vigilance committees be constituted and function fairly and impartially, ensuring accountability and justice within the church.

Above all, everyone should strive to live with the mind of Christ. There is a need for more teaching and awareness on what it means to follow Christ faithfully. All members of the church must commit themselves to being true disciples of Jesus. Only when people truly desire in their hearts to live as His disciples can they begin to love one another, letting go of divisions and inequalities. It is then that the church can function as the true Body of Christ on earth, bearing witness to His love, justice, and unity.

4.3. The Genuine Indian Church

4.3.1. Leadership

Azariah envisioned a church that would be free from Western paternalism and guided by Indian leadership. In the Church of South India today, foreign leadership no longer exists, and the church is led by local leaders, which reflects part of his vision being fulfilled.

When the CSI celebrates autonomy and Indian leadership, it must also be mindful of leadership challenges and internal issues. CSI, the largest Protestant church in India, has been deeply affected by problems related to elections and financial corruption. A significant amount of church funds is being spent on court cases, which has further shaken people's faith. It is a cause of agony that the CSI has not attained the maturity to ensure a decent way of electing its leaders, starting from its bishops.¹⁰³ As a result, many ordinary members have lost trust in the church and its leadership.

True autonomy is not just about having Indian leadership; it also calls for responsible, transparent, and accountable leadership. To restore trust and integrity, church elections must be conducted openly and smoothly. When differences of opinion arise, the church should address them internally with grace and goodwill.

¹⁰² *Church of South India After Thirty Years*, 79.

¹⁰³ Samartha, "Vision and Reality" 486.

Leaders must adopt the model of servant leadership, following the example of Christ in humility and service. Kenotic leadership, a Christ-centered model of leadership rooted in the concept of kenosis, meaning "self-emptying," has become the need of the hour. This approach emphasizes humility, self-sacrifice, and servanthood, encouraging leaders to set aside personal privileges and status to serve the needs of others.

4.3.2. In the Life and Ministry of the CSI

Bishop V.S. Azariah strongly advocated for indigenization in Christian mission. He believed that for evangelism to be effective in India, it must be shaped by the local context. In his mission methods and vision for the life of the Church, Azariah emphasized the importance of rooting Christianity in Indian culture and traditions. He supported the use of indigenous forms of worship, including local music, drama, and liturgy, as a way to express the Christian faith in a manner that Indian people could relate to. Although the CSI has incorporated indigenization in various forms into its life and ministry, it still faces several ongoing challenges in fully achieving this vision.

CSI struggles to create awareness and have an impact regarding indigenization in the minds and lives of its members. There is a lack of theological clarity on the difference between cultural forms and religious content. Many Christians are not equipped to discern that indigenization does not mean adopting Hindu doctrines, but rather reclaiming Indian cultural expressions that are neutral or can be reinterpreted in light of the Gospel.¹⁰⁴ For example, lighting a lamp can symbolize Christ as the light of the world, not necessarily a Hindu ritual. Therefore, while indigenization is vital, it must be approached thoughtfully, with theological clarity and cultural sensitivity.

In terms of architecture, many CSI churches were built during the colonial period and feature European architectural elements such as steeples, pointed arches, and cruciform layouts, reflecting a colonial legacy rather than Indian cultural expression. As new church buildings are planned, there should be a deliberate effort to incorporate elements of Indian culture into their design. Bishops, clergy and building committees, involved in church construction should consider this as part of the church's ongoing commitment to indigenization.

¹⁰⁴ D. S. Amalorpavadass, *Theological Education for Ministry and Mission in India Today* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre [NBCLC], 1973), 27f.

4.4. Diaconal and Dialogical Church

For Bishop V.S. Azariah, evangelism was at the heart of the Church's mission. He believed that every baptized believer had a responsibility to be a witness to the gospel. Evangelism was not only the duty of ordained ministers or missionaries, but of all Christians. Azariah encouraged Indian Christians to actively share their faith and take part in winning India for Christ.

However, after more than eighty years, the context in India has changed significantly. The political and social landscape is very different today. The rise of Hindutva ideology and increasing religious intolerance have created serious challenges for open evangelism. In this changing environment, the Church of South India must reflect on its approach to mission. While the call to share the gospel remains, the methods may need to be reimagined to be contextually relevant, respectful, and rooted in dialogue and service.

India's pluralistic society, which is unlikely to be overtaken by secularism, offers a rich and relevant context for "re-visioning" mission. At the grassroots level, some Christians still see mission only as proclamation, while others, especially those with a theological background view liberation as its core. Therefore, it is essential to educate the church in a holistic approach to mission—one that includes proclamation, service, justice, dialogue, and care for creation so that the mission of the church may truly reflect the fullness of the Gospel in today's world.

Over the past five decades, attitudes have changed, and new ways of mission are emerging. The World Council of Churches(WCC) document *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (TTL) offers a transformative understanding of mission and evangelism, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church's mission in today's world. The document states, Mission is the movement of the Spirit of God, who empowers the church to witness to the reign of God and to participate in God's mission of love to the world.¹⁰⁵ This definition underscores that mission is not merely about the expansion of the church but about participating in God's transformative work in the world, guided by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰⁵ World Council of Churches, "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes" (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), 7f.

It further states that the evangelism is sharing the good news of God's reign, which Jesus proclaimed, lived out, and inaugurated in his death and resurrection.¹⁰⁶ This means evangelism is not just about gaining converts or increasing church membership. Instead, it is a witness to the reign of God, marked by love, justice, peace, and transformation. TTL further emphasizes that, evangelism must be relational, respectful, and contextual, avoiding manipulation or coercion.¹⁰⁷ It is an invitation to life in abundance, not just a message about the afterlife. Evangelism should challenge systems of injustice and embody the values of the Kingdom of God.¹⁰⁸

The CSI is in a fortunate position to make a significant contribution to the ongoing debate. As a diaconal church, the CSI has the potential to engage in meaningful and transformative mission in today's context. While the CSI has long contributed to the nation through its educational institutions and various social service initiatives, the current context calls for a renewed commitment and the exploration of new and creative ways to serve the nation. It is essential for the CSI to move beyond traditional forms of service, adapting its mission to address emerging social, economic, and ecological challenges. By doing so, the CSI can reaffirm its identity as a church that is deeply rooted in service and become widely recognized for its holistic witness in society.

As Samartha points out, dialogue with people of other faiths is one of the ways through which new relations can be initiated in a pluralist society.¹⁰⁹ Dialogue is an attitude towards other people. It regards them not as objects of Christian mission, but as partners in community. However, dialogue remains the venture of theological and church leaders. Although the ordinary Christians live in dialogue they are often unaware of it. As a result, they may fear dialogue or see it as a compromise of faith. Therefore they should be educated and encouraged to engage in meaningful dialogue with their neighbour.

CSI should actively collaborate with people of other faiths in serving the nation, particularly in addressing the challenges faced by religious minorities, the difficulties arising from natural disasters, and other pressing social issues. CSI must grow to become an example of working together with others, focusing on collective

¹⁰⁶ World Council of Churches, "Together Towards Life", 31.

¹⁰⁷ World Council of Churches, "Together Towards Life", 32.

¹⁰⁸ World Council of Churches, "Together Towards Life", 28.

¹⁰⁹ Samartha "Vision and Reality" 486.

solutions rather than being consumed by internal struggles. This spirit of interfaith cooperation and unity will enable the CSI to contribute meaningfully to the well-being of society and strengthen its witness as a church committed to peace, justice, and service.

4.5. Conclusion

The CSI, which was formed as a uniting church in the Indian context, must continue to uphold and live out its model of unity, which remains relevant today. It should encourage and teach its members to live with the mind of Christ. Church leaders must set an example by following Christ's model of servant leadership, marked by humility and self-emptying. The process of indigenization should be carried out with theological clarity, and the Church must educate its members about its meaning and importance. Above all, CSI should constantly explore new approaches to mission, including interreligious dialogue and activities that promote the welfare of all creation. It must strive to maintain a healthy balance between evangelism as proclamation and the liberative aspects of mission.

Conclusion

Bishop V.S. Azariah envisioned a united Church in India that would transcend denominational divides, challenge caste discrimination, and root itself deeply in the Indian socio-cultural context. He also imagined a Church that would bear witness to Christ through both service and evangelism.

The Church of South India (CSI), born as a historic ecumenical union, has partially embodied this vision. Its formation represented a pioneering effort in ecclesial unity. However, the realization of Azariah's full vision remains limited. Further ecumenical dialogues have not resulted in successful church unions. In today's context, the Church must shift from Azariah's emphasis on structural unity to a more relevant and practical unity.

Although the CSI publicly affirms caste equality, caste-based discrimination remains embedded within its leadership structures and congregational practices. This gap between theological claims and actual practice highlights the need for a committed and sustained effort to dismantle caste hierarchies and build a truly inclusive community.

In terms of worship and mission, the CSI's engagement with Indian cultural and indigenous spiritual expressions remains inadequate. This lack of contextual adaptation limits the Church's relevance in a diverse and evolving society. One major challenge is that many ordinary church members struggle to understand the difference between genuine Indianization and the process of Hindunization. As a result, they often hesitate to support or participate in efforts to incorporate indigenous elements into worship and mission. It is therefore essential that congregations be properly educated and encouraged to appreciate and embrace authentic forms of Indianization. This would help the CSI become more rooted in the local context while remaining faithful to the Gospel.

In a multi-religious context like India, CSI has expanded its mission beyond what was possible during Bishop Azariah's time. It has made commendable progress, particularly in promoting the inclusion of women in mission, addressing ecological concerns, and engaging in social advocacy. These developments reflect a growing awareness of the Church's wider responsibilities. However, the CSI must continue to renew its commitment to ecumenical openness and collaborative mission. This includes active participation in interfaith dialogue and deeper engagement with

society. These aspects were central to Azariah's vision, which emphasized that the Church must witness to Christ in ways that respect and respond to the pluralistic and diverse ethos of India.

If the Church of South India takes seriously the call to self-examination and reform structurally, theologically, and spiritually, it has the potential to become a transformative model of a united, inclusive, and contextually grounded Indian Church. Azariah's vision remains both a historical foundation and a prophetic challenge for the Church today, calling it to greater faithfulness, justice, and relevance in its ongoing journey.

Appendix



The CSI Epiphany Cathedral in Dornakal, The Cathedral is renowned for its Indo-Saracenic architecture, a style that blends elements from Indian and Islamic traditions with Christian symbolism.



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