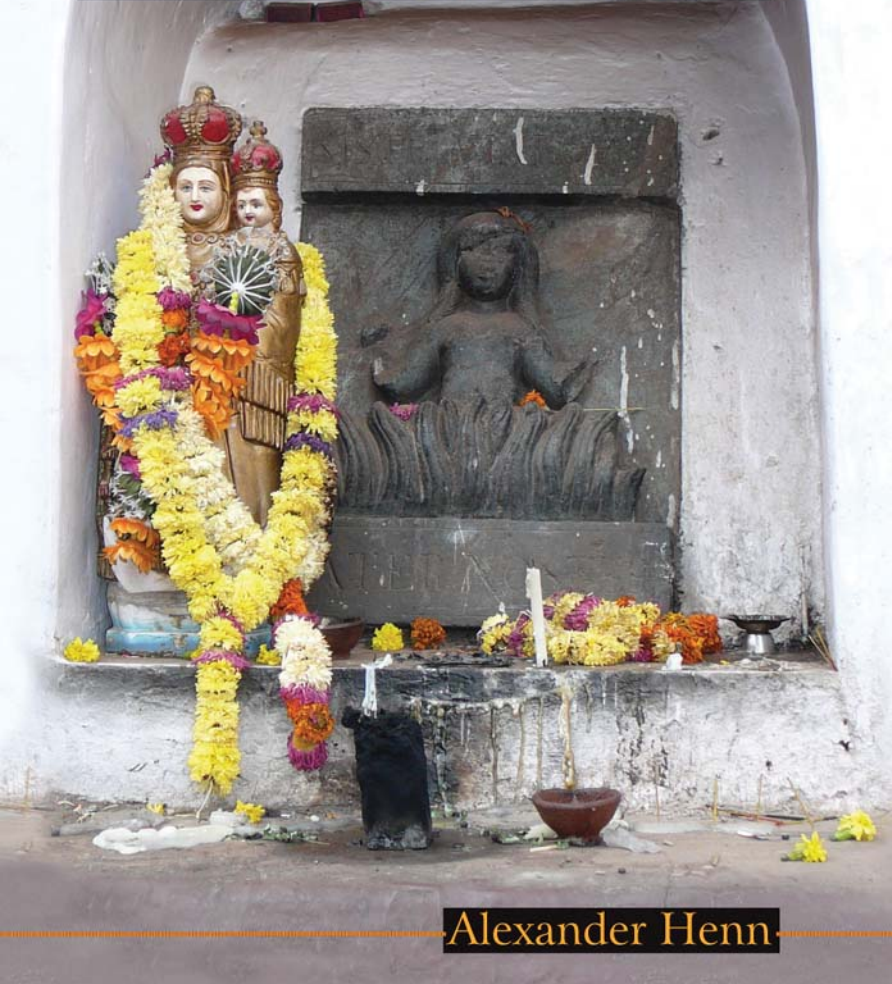


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# HINDU-CATHOLIC Encounters in Goa

RELIGION, COLONIALISM,  
AND MODERNITY



Alexander Henn

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HINDU-CATHOLIC  
ENCOUNTERS IN GOA

*Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*

Alexander Henn

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*In Memory of Rosel and Theodor*

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## Note on Transliteration

FOR READERS' CONVENIENCE the use of diacritical signs is limited in this book. In particular, all names of places, languages, Hindu gods, and festivities are given in their Anglicized form, except where phonetic specification helps to illustrate archival contexts and highlights special historical or cultural circumstances.

Some chapters of this book feature scholarship that has been published previously and subsequently reworked. Parts of chapter 2 have been published in *Transcultural Turbulences: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Flows of Images and Media*, edited by Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer (Vienna: Springer, 2011). Chapter 3 is a significantly revised and expanded version of "Jesuit Rhetorics: Translation and Conversion in Early-Modern Goa," published in *The Constitutive Interplay Between Rhetoric and Culture*, edited by Ivo Strecker, Christian Meyer, and Felix Girke (Oxford: Berghahn, 2011). Some parts of chapter 5 appeared in *Rituals in an Unstable World: Contingency—Embodiment—Hybridity*, edited by Alexander Henn and Klaus-Peter Koepping (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008). Chapter 6 is a revised version of an article first published in *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research* (2008) 32.3.

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# HINDU-CATHOLIC ENCOUNTERS IN GOA

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# Introduction

GOA IS A special place. A narrow stretch of lowlands along the Arabian Sea on India's western coast, it is the smallest of India's states. Linguistically, it belongs to the Konkan, the Konkani-speaking region that reaches from Thane in Maharashtra in the north to Mangalore in Karnataka in the south. To the east, Goa and the Konkan are separated from the Deccan highlands of Karnataka by the mountain ridge of the western Ghats. Goa's population comprises little more than 1.2 million people today of whom 65 percent are Hindus, 27 percent Christians, and 6 percent Muslims (Government of India 2011). Goa is thus thoroughly embedded into the Indian nation and yet stands out from its neighbors' culture by what conspicuously looks like "European," that is, Portuguese, features in its architecture, folklore, cuisine, and the everyday life of many of its people. The historical background for this particularity is Goa's early and long-lasting colonial domination, which subdued the region for almost half a millennium, from 1510 to 1961, under Portuguese rule and Catholic hegemony. Along with Daman and Diu, the two other enduring Portuguese enclaves further north on India's coast, Goa marks today the territory of the longest-held European colony on the South Asian subcontinent.

The export of tropical spices and exotic goods made Goa's early-modern capital, Cidade de Goa, into a rich, cosmopolitan, and well-connected city that is glorified in the historical literature as *Goa Dourada* or "Golden Goa." Its port became an important trading post in the mercantile network that connected China, Japan, the Moluccas, and India with Europe. In the mid-sixteenth century, Goa became the political and religious capital of the Estado da Índia, the Portuguese Asian empire and the Catholic archdiocese of Asia and Africa, which, by the end of the century, embraced Portuguese possessions from Cape Verde in the west to Mozambique in the south and Macao in the east. At the same time, mass conversion campaigns, conducted by missionaries of various Catholic orders and accompanied by the extensive destruction of temples and mosques, led to a massive exodus of Hindus and Muslims from Goa and a steady growth in the number of Catholics who eventually became the overwhelming majority. The adoption



of the Portuguese language, Portuguese dress and food habits, and Portuguese styles of architecture, music, arts, and sports by upper-caste converts gave Goa distinctly European features.

Religious oppression and cultural hegemony were ameliorated, if only partially, by the mid-eighteenth century, when new territorial acquisitions and political changes gradually allowed the influence of Hindus to grow. The changes divided the Portuguese colony into two geographical regions, which became known as the *Velhas Conquistas* or Old Conquests and *Novas Conquistas* or New Conquests (see figure I.1). The areas are marked to this day by notable differences in the demographic distribution, political influence, and cultural visibility of Hindus and Christians. The territories of the Old Conquests had come under Portuguese control in the initial wave of the military conquest that followed the celebrated first naval passage from Europe to India by the Portuguese captain Vasco da Gama in 1497–1499.<sup>1</sup> They comprised at first only the Islands of Goa, the four islands located in the delta of the river Mandovi, which Afonso de Albuquerque (1462–1515), the first governor of the Estado da Índia, conquered in 1510. Integrated today in the province of Tiswadi, this first stronghold of the Portuguese conquest was expanded in a second military operation in 1543, which added the provinces of Bardez and Salcete. Subdivided into two “mission fields,” one in the north that was looked after by Franciscans and one in the south that was controlled by Jesuits, the Old Conquests experienced the full onslaught of the early-modern Catholic conversion campaigns and were—albeit with significant local compromises, as recent historical research points out—transformed into a region that was, in terms of religion, predominantly Catholic and, in terms of culture, significantly Portuguese.

The territories of the New Conquests came under Portuguese control only in 1763 and 1788 through political negotiations with the weakened Adil Shah dynasty of Bijapur (Karnataka), which ruled over one of the successor states of the Muslim Bahmani sultanate that had conquered the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara in 1632.<sup>2</sup> These regions complemented the Old Conquests with seven new provinces—Ponda, Sanguem, Quepem, Canacona, Pernem, Bicholim, and Sattari—and embedded the Portuguese-Catholic core colony of the Old Conquests in a perfect semicircle into a composite Hindu-Muslim rural society and culture.<sup>3</sup> Although henceforth under Portuguese control as well, liberal tendencies in Portugal and strengthening Hindu polities in India prevented the New Conquests from being exposed to the same enforced religious conversion and iconoclastic violence that had so drastically transformed the Old Conquests in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a consequence, the incorporation of the New Conquests marked the beginning of an increase in number and influence—Hindu nationalists today like to call it a “revival”—of Hindu population and culture in Goa. Fostered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by serious economic decline and massive labor emigration of Goan Catholics, this strengthening of Hin-



Figure I.1. Map of Goa: Old and New Conquests. From Hall 1992: 14.

duism eventually also affected the Old Conquests and allowed, if only gradually and with various setbacks, Hindus and Hindu culture to again gain a foothold in Tiswadi, Bardez, and Salcete. In 1961, Goa was liberated from Portuguese rule by military intervention of the Indian army, which eventually brought a secular constitution and religious freedom and pluralism to the new Indian state.

It is the extraordinarily early beginning and long duration of Portuguese domination and Catholic hegemony that make Goa an ideal subject for a study on religion, colonialism, and modernity. Far-reaching transformations marked this extended period of foreign rule and missionary impact. These included not only the complex changes in society, technology, and the nature of knowledge to which we refer today as the transition from the medieval to the modern era. Dramatic revolutions were also shattering the contemporary Christian worldview, when Europe encountered until then largely unknown and unexpectedly rich religious cultures in Asia and America and was shaken by the religious divisions and reorientations that accompanied the Protestant Reformation and Catholic renewal at home. The domain most critically involved in these early-modern upheavals and encounters was religion. The spread of Christian doctrine—in particular as an attempt to politically contain Islam and as a theological mission to eradicate paganism—was second only to the global trade in exotic products as the motive and justification for Europe’s colonial expansion, led by Portugal and Spain. Preceding notions of race and nationality, religion was also part of the transformation of old and the emergence of new discourses and practices that marked the cultural differences at the colonial frontier and in the Christian “mission field” (Seth 2010; Anderson 1991). In fact, Christianity was the only identity and value that still unified the European nations as they competed over the colonial distribution of the world’s lands and riches vis-à-vis the Jews, Muslims, and people variously designated as gentiles, idolaters, or pagans. For this reason, religion figures prominently in postcolonial studies and theories, and is identified as a major element in the Orientalist discourses and colonial technologies that created the distances and marked the oppositions that distinguished the European Self from the Oriental Other (Said 1985; Inden 1986, 1990; Chatterji 1993; Dirks 1995; King 1999; Cohn 1996).

One of my primary aims in this book is therefore to scrutinize the encounter between Hindus and Catholics in Goa and other parts of India as a way of understanding the role that religion played in the transformation of old and the emergence of new cultural differences at the historical beginning of colonialism and modernity. In the first section of the book, I pursue this goal by looking at archival sources, predominantly travel literature, chronicles, and missionary works, that shed light on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Portuguese conquest and the beginning of Christian proselytization in India. This will include the celebrated “first contact” of Vasco da Gama (1469–1524) with Indians upon his arrival at the Malabar (Kerala) Coast in 1498, as well as the unfortunate

period in the middle of the sixteenth century when the Portuguese-Catholic regime set out on an atrocious iconoclastic campaign against Hindu and Muslim culture in Goa and other parts of India. A third chapter is dedicated to the work of Jesuit missionaries who, around the same time yet seemingly at odds with the violence surrounding them, began to actively study Indian languages and Hindu literature in order to produce Indian-language Christian texts, such as the famous *Kristapurana* composed by the English Jesuit Thomas Stephens (1549–1619), which seem to transmit a distinctly hermeneutic spirit of cultural understanding and empathy.

The rather ambiguous role that religion thus played for the transformation and emergence of cultural differences in the early-modern period continues to resonate in the encounters of Hindus and Catholics in Goa today. This comes to the fore in particular in the manifold syncretistic expressions and practices that bring Goan Hindus and Catholics together in jointly performed rituals. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Goa and the adjacent states of Maharashtra and Karnataka, I explore this intersection of Hindu and Catholic practices and expressions in contemporary popular religion in the second section of the book. An important focus of this analysis is the connection and affinity between Hindu village gods and Catholic patron saints, which illustrates the significance of the Goan *ganv*, or village, for the religious coexistence and interaction of Hindus and Catholics. Two other chapters deal with the ludic night ritual *Jagar* that simultaneously honors the Christian Trinity and an array of Hindu gods, and wayside shrines in Goa's cities that display Hindu and Catholic images side by side or under one roof. Not surprisingly, the *Jagar* ritual and the Hindu-Catholic twin-shrines attract regular worship from both Hindus and Catholics.

Arguably, the syncretistic practices today have their background in the fact that the early-modern Portuguese conquerors and Catholic missionaries did not at first have a clear idea about the religious identity of the Indian people, to whom they generally referred as *gentios* or gentiles. In fact, unlike the Orientalists of later ages, early-modern Europeans did not even view the Indians in polarized terms as the radical Other of the European or Christian Self. Instead, the Portuguese were impressed by what they considered similarities between Indians' religious expressions and their own Christian culture. Notably, some were so enthralled by the apparent resemblances that they confused gentiles and Christians on first sight. An instructive instance of this uncertainty was reported from Vasco da Gama's first voyage to India. Relying on the novel geophysical knowledge that had been established by Christopher Columbus's voyage to America not long before, Da Gama's dangerous trip around the Cape of Africa to the far shore of India was considered a journey to another unknown frontier of the globe. Nevertheless, the Portuguese captain was inclined to see the familiar in things and people he encountered when he landed at the Malabar Coast near the town of Calicut in 1498. In particular, he persistently mistook the Hindus he met there for

Christians. Hence, we can reconstruct from the report of his first voyage that Da Gama went to a Hindu temple in Calicut that he mistook for a Christian church and prayed there in front of a Hindu image that, he believed, portrayed the most Catholic figure of “Our Lady.” Modern historiography is uncertain as to what made the Portuguese captain fall prey to such a gross error. Was it just a short-lived “gaffe” triggered by the hope of finding Christian allies against the notorious Muslim enemies in the East, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2001: 26) insinuates? Or was the error instigated by old European rumors about an “Eastern Christianity,” that had lost contact with its Western origins long ago, as Charles Boxer believes ([1969] 1991: 37)? Or were still other presuppositions and considerations at stake with regard to the unexpectedly rich and sophisticated religious culture that the early-modern seafarers “discovered” in India and which revealed to some of them striking similarities with their own Christian beliefs and practices?

There are indications that, at least in some circles, the confusion between gentiles and Christians was soon resolved. At the same time, though, the curious “search for the similar” (Pearson 1987: 116) in the religion and culture of the foreign land long continued among the early-modern Europeans who traveled to India or wrote about it. Hence, the European chroniclers and missionaries of the time mention apparent similarities between the Christian Trinity and the Hindu *trimūrti*,<sup>4</sup> the Mother of God and the Devi,<sup>5</sup> Holy Water and the *thīrta*,<sup>6</sup> and other alleged affinities. The curious “similarities” triggered many debates regarding their interpretation. Was there a genuine theological affinity between gentile and Christian beliefs and practices, or were the two even related by genealogical ties? Did the “blind heathens” have prior knowledge of the Christian Truth, which they had ignored or lost? Had the influence of the “Mahometans” destroyed earlier Christian traces among the gentiles, or were even the infamous deceptions of the devil at work here? As mentioned before, modern scholars have gone in other directions and discuss, for instance, whether wishful thinking with regard to the hope of finding Christian allies against Muslims in the East played a role in the search for similarities (Subrahmanyam 2001), or ponder the role of old legends about a powerful Christian kingdom, ruled by the mysterious priest-king John, somewhere in the vast territories of the “Indies” that in contemporary perception reached from Ethiopia in the West to Cathay (China) in the East (Boxer [1969] 1991). Michael Pearson considers yet other possible circumstances and discusses whether the conspicuous interest in the apparent similarities between gentiles and Christians might have been the expression of a distinctly “liberal attitude” prevailing among some of the Portuguese explorers and Catholic missionaries (1987: 116; [1992] 2005b: 156). This theory also resonates with historians who see harbingers of modern pluralism and cultural relativism sprouting in the early-modern religious encounter at the colonial frontier in Asia (Stroumsa 2010; Rubieś 2000; Županov 2001).



Uncertainties and unintended consequences in the handling of the gentiles continued and prevailed even after the encounter between Hindus and Catholics had turned by the middle of the sixteenth century into a hostile, violent affair. By that time, the combined forces of the Portuguese-Catholic regime had started a ruthless campaign to eradicate and destroy all traces of Hindu and Muslim culture in the three Goan provinces of the Islands of Goa, Bardez, and Salcete. Public displays of Hindu symbols had been banned and performance of Hindu rites, including temple festivals, marriage ceremonies, and cremation rituals, was prohibited under serious penalty. Even harsher was the Portuguese king's command, at the instigation of the local archbishop, that all Hindu monuments and images be demolished and replaced with Catholic churches, chapels, crosses, and images. Ironically, though, precisely the iconoclastic nature of this atrocious onslaught contributed, if only indirectly, to the partial survival of the memory of what it destroyed. This became possible because, in many cases, the destruction and replacement of the Hindu monuments and images were seen by the local population as corroboration of the sacred significance of the Hindu material culture. This reconfirmation frequently took iconographic or ritual forms that helped to memorialize what had been destroyed and replaced. An example is the image of St. Anthony killing a snake in the village of Siolim (Bardez; see figure 2.1), which to this day is widely associated with the local Hindu god Vetāl, whose temple had been replaced by St. Anthony's church. The systematic replacement policy of the early-modern attack, moreover, ensured that after the late eighteenth century, when Hindus gradually started to come back to the Old Conquests areas and to build temples and shrines there again, Hindu monuments and shrines came up in close proximity to Catholic churches, chapels, and crosses. Both these effects—the remembering of Hindu material culture in its Catholic replacement and the emerging territorial proximity of Hindu and Catholic monuments and images—were particularly important in facilitating syncretistic expressions and practices.

Uncertainties with regard to the treatment of gentiles also come to the fore in clerical controversies and inconsistencies regarding missionary methods and policies. One controversy, discussed in detail in chapter 3, was triggered by the Italian Jesuit Roberto Nobili (1577–1659), who introduced a method of conversion in his mission in Madurai in Tamil Nadu that became known and notorious as *accommodatio*. This allowed converts to Catholicism, especially Brahmans, to continue with a number of significant local customs such as wearing a cotton thread and hair tuft, keeping a vegetarian diet, or applying sandal-paste symbols on the forehead as signs of high-caste ranking, even after they had become Christians. Nobili and his supporters argued that all these practices were merely social customs, but his critics countered that they had a religious meaning and thus continued pagan superstitions that were meant to be eradicated. The controversy over what became known as the “Malabar Rites” dragged on for more than a

century and involved local missionaries as well as high-ranking clerics including several popes. In its initial phase, church rulings were decided in favor of Nobili, but later attitudes turned against him, and *accommodatio* was strictly prohibited in 1703 (Županov 2001; Catholic Encyclopedia n.d.: s.v. Malabar Rites).

In Goa, similar assimilative initiatives were started earlier. One was the incorporation of certain elements of ludic religiosity, such as the Jagar night ritual—after replacing its Hindu meanings with Catholic ones—into the liturgy and entertainment of Catholic church feasts. Another form of assimilation came into practice when Jesuit missionaries, around the middle of the sixteenth century, began to study Indian languages and make artful use of literary models of Hindu *bhakti* literature<sup>7</sup> in order to produce Indian-language Christian literature, such as Bible adaptations, catechisms, and hagiographies, something that modern scholarship celebrates today as the historical initiation of intercultural translation and hermeneutics (Tulpule 1979; Van Skyhawk 1999; Falcao 2003). Like Nobili's *accommodatio* in Tamil Nadu, all these assimilative methods and initiatives in Goa met with serious clerical objections, however, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were eventually abandoned and banned, though never fully given up by local people. What becomes interesting here however is not only the clerical controversies and shift of strategies but also the apparent inconsistencies in the missionary policies in the alleged assimilations. The sources indicate that the major work of the Jesuit linguists and literary scholars began in exactly the same period in which the Portuguese-Catholic regime enforced the demolition of Hindu monuments and ordered the violent suppression of Hindu expression in Goa and other areas under its control. More disturbingly, the iconoclastic violence most likely also included the destruction of precisely those Hindu books that the missionaries were using in their production of Indian-language Christian works. Two questions thus are most puzzling: What does translation mean in a context in which the literary sources of those with whom communication and understanding is allegedly facilitated are actually destroyed? And does hermeneutics indeed capture the principles of the early-modern missionary activities in the fields of linguistics and translation if the primary goal was actually conversion, not communication, let alone dialogue?

This study shows that religion played an ambiguous role in the early-modern onset of Portuguese colonialism and Catholic mission in India, and in the encounter of Hindus and Catholics in Goa. In this sense, the material from Goa presents an intriguing discrepancy when compared with prevailing theories of Orientalism and postcolonialism. While these approaches highlight religion as a strong marker and maker of cultural difference, the material from India and Goa reveals religion to be an inherently ambiguous and intriguingly hybrid dimension of the early-modern encounter. Certainties about the role of religion in marking Orientalist polarities and constituting ideological distances between the European Self and the Oriental Other, we learn, are challenged by the un-

certainties on the part of the Portuguese regarding the religious identity of the gentiles and their relationship with the Christians. Similar ambiguities appear in the unintended consequences of the iconoclastic attack on Hindu culture, and the controversies and inconsistencies between assimilation and confrontation, hermeneutics and violence, in the proselytizing policies. Notably, these critical questions are not only raised with regard to historical and theoretical positions that see religion at the core of the Orientalist discourse and praxis. Critical questions are also emerging with regard to scholarly positions that see religion in the early-modern encounter involved in “liberal attitudes,” the beginning of intercultural “hermeneutics,” and, in general, the “emergence of modern religious pluralism.” In other words, the role of religion in the transformation of old and the emergence of new cultural differences in the early-modern colonial encounter must be conditioned and framed by questions regarding its role in the complex transformations that we conveniently summarize as the emergence of modernity.

There are strong indications that the historical circumstances that conditioned the early-modern colonial encounter still resonate in the life of Hindus and Catholics in Goa today. What becomes of particular interest in the second section of the book is therefore recent scholarship that characterizes Goa by reference to what is variously called its Luso-Indian (Thomaz 1981–1982), Indo-Portuguese (De Souza 1985; Kamat 2001), Hindu-Christian (Dias 1980), or, more generally, “composite,” “acculturated,” “hybrid,” “*métisse*,” or “syncretistic” culture (Couto 2010; Pearson 1987, [1984] 2005a; Newman 2001; Robinson 1998; Axelrod and Fuerch 1996; Chandeigne 1996; Henn 2003). Specifically, I present here my ethnographic research that scrutinizes the multitude of religious expressions and practices through which both Hindus and Catholics in Goa ritually honor and express trust in the sacred forces and principles of the respective other religious community. I describe Goan Hindus who regularly worship Saiba St. Francis Xavier, the Catholic patron saint of Goa, whose mummified body is preserved in the cathedral of Old Goa, as well as Goan Catholics who, for their part, venerate Saibini Sateri–Shanta Durga, the Goan manifestation of the goddess Durga who is worshipped in countless temples and whose iconic body is believed to embody the earth of Goa. Saiba and Saibini stand vicariously for hundreds of Catholic patron saints and Hindu village gods who are closely identified with their villages or towns and are trusted to be *jāgrit*, as Hindus say, that is, alert and responsive to their devotees’ needs and requests, or to work miracles, as Catholics assert, that is, to interfere in the mundane world in order to take care of the health and well-being of the people who invoke them. Syncretistic expressions and practices, it turns out, are widespread in Goa and can be found among Hindus and Catholics of all castes and classes in the traditional settings of the villages and in the modern environment of the cities. One can observe syncretism in intimate private contexts, such as the devotional gesture a Hindu may make when passing a Catholic wayside cross, or the devotion presented to the image of a local Hindu



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