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Indian Pentecostalism and National Identity

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ABSTRACT

This article deliberates on Indian Pentecostalism's link to the national identity, challenging the idea that it is a foreign religion. As a faith rooted in local revival movements and led by Indian voices, Pentecostalism in India has grown as an indigenous spiritual movement that holds close to it both faith and nation. It highlights how this movement, located predominantly among the marginalised people groups, has built meaningful and active communities through native leadership, social action, and a contextually expressed faith. The Pentecostal vision ideally promotes unity, dignity, and inclusion, thereby contributing to a more just and compassionate society and public life.

Key Words: Indian Pentecostalism, National Identity, Indigenous Christianity, Sociology of Religion, Social Empowerment

I. Introduction

Pentecostalism emerged from a complex historical backdrop within global Christianity, evolving through various reformations and renewals leading up to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Indian Pentecostalism emerged as a result of indigenous revival movements and the missionary efforts stemming from Western revivals. However, quite early in its stage, the national leaders of Indian Pentecostalism wanted to identify their movement as truly Indian and consciously rejected the attempts of what they perceived as foreign interference. The post-independent India, Pentecostals strived to achieve a national flavour not only in their administration, but in theology, worship styles, culture and outlook.

Yet Pentecostal Christianity is often accused of destroying the socio-cultural fabric of India. This may be partly born out of ignorance, but may also be an intentional misrepresentation by vested interests. This article attempts to understand the concept of nationalism in relation to Indian Pentecostalism broadly from a sociology of religion perspective, and analyse how Pentecostal Christianity contributes to the development of national consciousness in its faith and practices.

II. Indian Pentecostalism as an Ecclesial Movement of National Origins

There is a common perception that Indian Pentecostalism originated solely as a result of Western Pentecostal missions. However, its roots in large part lie within indigenous Christian revivalist traditions. Though missionaries emerging from Western revivals contributed to native Pentecostal developments, India had already witnessed significant Christian revivals before them. The Western enterprises benefited from and contributed to the existing spiritual ferment here. A native Christian named John Christian Arulappan led one such movement in Tirunelveli, South India, in the 1860s. It had many proto-Pentecostal characteristics, including open worship, the priesthood of all believers, Spirit empowerment for all believers regardless of social status, and a simple biblical exposition modelled after the early apostolic church. Arulappan also encouraged women's participation and promoted a communitarian lifestyle through the founding of a self-supporting village (Anderson 2022, 11).

Following Arulappan, his disciples influenced the Christian faith in Travancore (present-day Kerala), especially the Syrian Christian and CMS communities. Central Travancore saw further revivals in 1895 and 1905, marked by repentance, holiness, spiritual gifts, and glossolalia (George 2004, 30; Mathew 2007, 42). These movements, although not Pentecostal in name, prepared the spiritual ground for the indigenous Pentecostal movement, later crystallised through figures like K. E. Abraham (Pulikkottil 2002, 18).

The reform movement among the Mar Thoma Christians in Kerala was another early precursor to the Pentecostal movement. Leaders such as Abraham Malpan and Mathews Mar Athanasius spearheaded this move, promoting biblical ethos, weakening clerical monopoly and reinforcing themes such as Christ's sole mediation and the priesthood of all believers (Joy 1986, 62–63; Mathew 2007, 38). This native revivalist spirituality among the Mar Thoma Syrian Christians deeply shaped early Indian Pentecostal leaders who emerged from this tradition. They viewed Pentecostalism not as coming from outside but as a continuation of their indigenous spiritual journey (Abraham 2016, 38–44; Pulikkottil 2002, 8–9). As a result of continuity, a distinctly Indian Pentecostal identity evolved, ultimately leading to the formation of churches like the Indian Pentecostal Church of God (IPC) from among native communities.

There were other revivals across India which have played a formative role. The revival in Mukti Mission Pune in 1905, led by Pandita Ramabai, displayed Pentecostal-like manifestations. This resulted in the spread of Pentecostal spirituality to many parts of North India, although Mukti Mission itself did not embrace a Pentecostal denominational identity (Lukose 2009, 106–7). Similar revivals also occurred in Khasi Hills, Meghalaya and Sialkot, in present-day Pakistan (Anderson 2004, 36–37; S. Abraham 2024, 8).

These revivals especially had an influence among Dalits. In South India, many Dalits embraced Pentecostal faith, some even becoming pastors and evangelists within the movement. K. E. Abraham himself, despite familial opposition, practiced social equality and was ordained by Pastor Paul Ramankutty, a Dalit leader in the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission (Abraham 2016, 67–68, 161–62; Pulikkottil 2011, 215). Although they later faced discrimination from within the movement, for many Dalits, early Pentecostalism opened up a genuine avenue for living out their spirituality candidly. These expressions reflect the indigenous character of Indian Pentecostalism.

III. Constructing a National Christian Identity

Indian Pentecostalism as a distinct movement emerged during the struggle for India's independence from the British Raj was gaining momentum. The call for *Swadeshi* (indigenous) rule resonated strongly, especially among Syrian Christians of Kerala who had experienced ecclesial suppression under Portuguese colonial rule. Consequently, many Indian Pentecostals were reluctant to affiliate with Western organisations, reflecting a broader sentiment of self-reliance and independence. K. E. Abraham, an early Pentecostal leader, was a fierce nationalist who declared that foreign missionary control was "non-biblical and anti-apostolic"(Anderson, 2004, p. 127). He believed that "self-supporting churches should be led by self-sacrificing national leaders."(Hedlund, 2011, p. 185). He and his fellow workers chose to maintain independence by managing their affairs autonomously, holding church property in the names of their local churches. They aimed to remain a coordinated assembly of independent churches in the soon-to-be free nation of India (Hedlund, 2011, p. 185). Thus, the Indian Pentecostal Church of God was formed by a group of Indian Pentecostals who were concerned about the growing influence of Western missionaries on the autonomy of the church in India (Abraham, 2016, p. 159). The IPC was consciously committed to being an indigenous church, led by Indian pastors and elders from the beginning. Roger Hedlund is correct when he asserts that the IPC represents an important manifestation of Christian nationalism in India before its independence (Hedlund, 2011, p. 185). Paul Joshua calls the IPC an Indian Initiated Church formed on a "clear nationalist understanding"(Joshua, 2022, p. 88).

IV. Pentecostals as Agents of Social Change

Pentecostalism primarily emerged among the poor and socially marginalised communities and was therefore often called a religion of the poor (Pangaraj, 2019, p. 639). In India, the majority of Pentecostals come from economically and socially backward backgrounds. These Christian disciples, long victims of injustice and hopelessness, found in their faith a new identity and a sense of belonging. While it may be wrong to conclude that all their aspirations have been fulfilled as a result, for many, it was still a remarkable journey from misery to hope. The reasons for this transformation were theological and socio-economic.

Theologically, Pentecostal preaching strongly emphasised God's deliverance from sin, sickness, and curses for those who turned to Him. It also upheld unmediated access to God, regardless of one's social status or background - an empowering idea for those coming from distressing and marginalised conditions. The emphasis on Spirit baptism on all, not just a select few, served as a tool of such enabling and emotional restoration (Kelsey, 1968, p. 220). For many Pentecostal believers from underprivileged backgrounds, it was seen as a sign of God's favour, nurturing a deep sense of dignity.

Pentecostalism also became a pathway to social and psychological empowerment for ordinary people. Pentecostal transformation includes freedom from alcohol and drug addiction, smoking, violence and despair. It insists on a clean and disciplined life, viewing such bad habits and harmful addictions as hindrances to one's walk with God. Pentecostalism also promotes modesty and discourages the use of expensive adornments. These practices often translate to improved health, better economic conditions and social behaviour. They also lead to a sense of respect and self-worth among believers. According to Rebecca and Timothy Samuel Shah, Indian Evangelicals, including Pentecostals, use the spiritual capital generated within their faith for leveraging the socio-economic advancement (Samuel Shah & Samuel Shah, 2010, p. 62).

Similarly, Pentecostals emphasise values like simplicity, personal discipline and hard work, ideals that reflect Max Weber's Protestant work ethic (Weber, 2025, Part 2). These values are often integrated into everyday life, based on a deep belief that God blesses those who live righteously. This creates a hopeful attitude toward life and its demands. In the church, it is common to hear testimonies of breakthroughs, be it in health, finances or family life, inspiring others to trust God for similar transformations. Also, the Pentecostal commitment to helping the needy and sharing resources contributes positively to socio-economic change, especially among those experiencing serious deprivation.

Importantly, Pentecostalism has never been a clergy-centred faith due to its belief in the essential priesthood of all believers. It empowers ordinary men and women to participate in the life and ministry of the church. In contrast to more hierarchical Christian traditions, Pentecostalism allows ordinary people the privilege of interpreting Scripture and exhorting the church community, thereby creating a sense of self-respect among them. Pentecostal churches also frequently give leadership opportunities to lay people, even without formal theological education. This opens up space for those often excluded from influential positions in society, including women, youth and other marginalised sections, to become channels of influence within the church. It helps them to build themselves and others up in the process. Viju Wilson suggests that Indian Pentecostal women covertly challenged patriarchal social etiquette and traditions by utilising their spiritual capital and participation in Christian ministry, and became agents of social empowerment (Wilson, 2025, pp. 115–132).

While early Indian Pentecostals did not possess large budgets or run ambitious social development programmes as part of their ministry, their message and practices within their communities became powerful agents of social change. As Sarbeswar Sahoo and James Ponniah rightly observe, these grassroots efforts brought about real transformation in the lives of the people in the margins by democratising their lifeworld (Sahoo & Ponniah, 2024, Chapter 7). Sahoo also notes that the religious experiences of Pentecostal women have helped them to improve their socio-economic well-being and cope with conflicts (Sahoo, 2018, p. 90).

V. A Counter-Discourse of Identity Formation

Indian Pentecostalism presents a counter-vision of identity in place of a nationalist narrative that seeks to frame identity through a hegemonic lens. They view identity not as something shaped solely by ethnicity, language, gender, or geography, but as fashioned by the transformative experience of God through the agency of the Holy Spirit. It aims to create a new humanity in Christ that transcends divisions. The Pentecostal vision, grounded in the image of the early apostolic community as they experienced the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, celebrates linguistic and cultural diversities as divine gifts, leading to mutual edification.

Envisioning to replicate the same apostolic spirituality, Indian Pentecostalism has grown from indigenous soil shaped by vibrant revival movements. In this, the voices of the marginalised, Dalits, Adivasis, women and the poor are not silent, but prophetic, offering powerful new imaginaries of what a reformed Indian nation could be - a place of dignity, justice and shared belonging. Although there are undesirable cultural lapses that unfortunately undermine this ideal within Pentecostalism, they are not legitimised theologically. Pentecostal spirituality is and must remain an innate instrument to question such creeping tendencies of discrimination.

The Spirit-led identity compels Indian Pentecostals to go beyond the attempts to homogenise culture and faith under a dominant influence. The Pentecostal spirituality is accordingly expressed in vernacular forms of worship, contextual expressions of faith and acts of service and solidarity. It is a grassroots spirituality that is expressed contextually and does not take in top-down impositions. It puts forward an inclusive vision of nationhood, where unity is celebrated within diversity. It rejects the harmful narrative that an individual's faith and practice betray national identity. Instead, it affirms that one can follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and still fully belong to the nation and live as proud citizens of India, cordially sharing their dreams and aspirations with fellow citizens of all persuasions.

The Pentecostal faith does not wipe out the cultural roots of its adherents; it only sanctifies them. It builds faithful citizens who pray for the nation, cherish the well-being of all and hold animosity towards none, serve the needy, speak truth to power in hope and love and become responsible partners in the nation building. It envisions not a monolithic India, but a compassionate and plural gathering of citizenry that cherishes diversity and upholds the dignity of every individual as the image bearer of God.

VI. Pentecostalism and Secularism: Church-State Relations in a Democratic India

Indian secularism does not imply hostility towards religion; rather, it mandates equal treatment of all religions under the law and forbids the State from granting preferential treatment to any particular religion. The Indian constitution guarantees citizens of all religions the right to profess, practice and propagate their faith (*Constitution of India*, n.d., Article 25). But there is no special treatment for any religion under the state's patronage. In line with this principle, Pentecostal theology draws a clear distinction between religion and politics, viewing the church and the state as distinct spheres. When Pentecostalism emerged, it spread as a grassroots movement among ordinary people, not through powerful empires or state institutions. Consequently, Pentecostals have never espoused a Christian nationalism with political overtones. They embraced Christ's teaching that His Kingdom is not of this world and understood the Kingdom of God as a purely spiritual and eschatological reality, shaping their faith and practices. Pentecostalism has never relied on, nor has it been supported by, any ruling powers, including in India. Theologically, its roots trace back to the pacifist left wing of the Protestant Reformation, a stream that maintained a strict division between the state and the church, rejecting both the power politics of the Catholic Church, historically aligned with the Christendom, and the right-wing Protestant movements that were supported by local governments (Byrd II, 2008, p. 56; McGrath, 2021, pp. 5–6).

Upon Indian independence, the Indian Pentecostals thus unreservedly identified themselves with India's constitutional ideal, seeking to maintain a rigid division between the state and religious spheres. While they claimed with pride their national awareness as Indians and their membership within a democratic system, they never ventured into patronage at the political level. But they historically exercised their democratic franchise, upholding their constitutional loyalty to the governing system of the land. Therefore, the accusations against Indian Pentecostals not being loyal to the nation are devoid of substance (Sahoo, 2018, p. 9). If anything, they can be held responsible for not actively joining in party politics for the most part due to their aversion to the partisan way in which it is practised, something that may require reconsideration going forward.

VII. Spiritual Identity Integrated with National Consciousness

It can be positively maintained that Indian Pentecostals represent a spiritual identity that is also deep-rooted in national consciousness. It challenges the false binary between religious piety and patriotism. Their Pentecostal identity, stemming from an experiential spirituality, characterised by *bhakti*, charismatic practices, Scriptural orientation and restorationist ideals (Bergunder, 2008, Chapter 7; Björkander, 2024, Part 3), does not conflict with their loyalty to India. It is, on the contrary, a creative engagement, where a genuine love for the country reconciles with their fervent devotion to faith, leading

to a richer understanding of both. This is evident in their regular intercession for the peace and prosperity of the nation and creative grassroots level contributions for national development and integration. Further, they practice strict non-violence, following Christ's teaching of love even for enemies, which Mahatma Gandhi had enshrined into national consciousness through his practice of *Ahimsa*. Today, many Pentecostal communities are involved in local-level interfaith engagements and civic events, not as acts of religious syncretism, but as demonstrations of solidarity, peace, and public witness. Their participation in the nation's public life reflects a theology that recognises the Divine Spirit at work not only within the church but also in the life of the nation, calling believers to a form of patriotism that is constructive and Christ-centred.

VIII. Conclusion

Indian Pentecostalism, far from being a foreign intrusion, emerges as an authentically Indian spiritual movement born out of indigenous revivals and a strong desire for national character, even though it has received external contributions at various points of its evolution. Its practices and community life mirror a genuine reflection of its Indianness. As a movement of the people, it offers hope and empowerment to the poor, dalits, women, and other marginalised groups. Indian Pentecostals have never positioned themselves against the nation but have embraced their identity as faithful citizens who love their country while remaining true to their spiritual distinctiveness. Their stress on local leadership, assimilation with the cultural diversity of the land and social witness all point to a movement that belongs to the Indian soil. In an increasingly divided socio-political landscape, their spiritual vision of a just, diverse and compassionate India is both timely and necessary. The movement needs to remain a vibrant community to shape and be shaped by the nation to which it unreservedly belongs.

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