

Introduction

Pariah is a cruel word. For most speakers of English today, only the dimmest memory of what it once meant survives. But for its victims the memory of that cruelty has not been forgotten, in part because it is not just a memory. . . . It is a word that causes the descendants of those it once named to visibly wince. Like *nigger* it is not just a word. Like *nigger* it at once references and is itself a part of one of the most dehumanizing social orders the world has ever known.

RUPA VISWANATH, *The Pariah Problem*

They say: “You are a shameful man. Your life is worthless—you earn nothing for your family! What are you even living for?” But Christ will not desert you—he will lift you up. Christ uplifted those who were shamed, those who were pushed away. In the same way . . . he will look upon us lowly creatures. He will lift us up. . . . He will place you on the highest peak, before your enemies, before people from other castes—hallelujah! In front of those who spoke ill of you, those who tormented you, who detested you, who pushed you away, who said you were not qualified, who said you were without talent or intelligence, who said you were useless—Christ will bind their tongues! Hallelujah!

PASTOR YESUDASAN

THE WORD *PARIAH* IS USED casually by speakers of English to refer to those who are shunned by others. A socially awkward, foul-smelling, or otherwise unpleasant person might be called a “social pariah”; apartheid South Africa, North Korea, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq have all been called “pariah” states. The implication of our usage is that those we apply it to not only are

ostracized but *deserve* to be. This is due to the peculiar history by which the term entered our language: we learned it from the original Pariahs' enemies and oppressors. No Pariah sees her own child, or other loved ones, as a *pariah*. The word comes from colonial South India, a slave society that British colonizers wrested from native rulers in the eighteenth century. Where standard nationalist and postcolonial accounts have focused on the conflicting interests of the revenue-extracting colonial state and native taxpayers, this tug-of-war is better understood as a fight between two categories of exploiter over the fruits of slave labor. With respect to those called "Pariahs," the colonizer and the colonized were in fact allies. It is well known that British India depended on the cooperation of native elites from the village level on up. What is less well known is the extent to which these foreign rulers colluded with natives in the perpetuation of caste-based slavery. The British were at pains to avoid overturning the trough at which both they and native taxpayers fed. From the early eighteenth century, historian Rupa Viswanath has shown, British India hands began to portray agrarian slavery there as "a gentle form" of slavery, based on traditional rights and responsibilities from which slaves themselves benefited, and even as slavery "in name only" (2014b, 3–6). This was in order to fend off an emergent abolition movement, which threatened to ruin their racket. Though agrarian slavery may not have played an equally significant role in all parts of British India, the Madras Presidency's agricultural economy depended on slave labor. Madras was the cash cow of Britain's eastern empire; it was among the few possessions in which revenues exceeded expenditures, and surpluses generated in Madras were used to fund British operations elsewhere. Thus at a very basic, material level the British Empire depended on enslaved Dalit laborers. A history of the United States that did not take into account the institution of slavery and its continuing legacy would be ludicrous. But that is exactly the state of scholarship on colonial and postcolonial India, which either omits slavery entirely or characterizes it in the anodyne and apologetic language of British administrative discourse (2014b, 241–46).

In the colonial period *Pariah* was a name used to refer generically to all untouchable castes, but it derives specifically from the name of one such caste, the Paraiyar. This book's protagonists are from that caste, but *Paraiyar* is rarely used today, and I refer to them mainly as Dalits or, following their own self-description, simply as "the poor." Historically in Tamil country to be Dalit was simultaneously to be a hereditarily unfree agricultural laborer—in native parlance, a slave or *aṭimaiyāl*—bought and sold along with the parcels

of land to which your family was permanently attached, and treated with impunity by masters (Viswanath 2014b). Caste in India is often spoken of as a complex system comprising innumerable distinctions and subdistinctions, a mosaic of notionally ranked endogamous groups (*jātis*) vying with one another for social precedence and bound together by a shared ritual cosmology. Unlike race, which involves “‘thinking in blocks’ of large similar communities,” caste, according to this mosaic understanding, “revolves around differences in tiny details” (Dipankar Gupta, quoted in ISHR 2007, 6).

The singular division between Dalits and non-Dalits, however, is qualitatively distinct from, and irreducible to, the multiple divisions between individual castes.¹ *Jāti* distinctions among “touchable” castes imply no deep ontological or social divide and are minor by comparison. They constitute a graded system of relative prestige, in which all are accorded some measure of respect. The division between Dalits and non-Dalits, by contrast, is premised on the systematic dehumanization of the former by the latter. It is racelike not just because being a Dalit or a non-Dalit is permanent, based on blood, and seen as determining one’s physical and moral-psychological nature, and but because the characteristics ascribed to Dalits are (unlike those ascribed to individual castes above the touchability line) of an overwhelmingly and exclusively negative quality. All over India Dalits are stereotyped as lazy, stupid, licentious, dishonest, suitable only for manual labor, unclean, and repulsive.

Like caste people, Dalits also belong to numerous local *jātis*, each with its own name, but throughout India they are distinguished in native discourse from all others as *chandalas*, *panchamas*, and *avarna*, and by equivalent generic terms specific to each region (see Terminological Notes). They are also recognized everywhere as being outside the idealized fourfold structure of traditional Hindu social theory. Dalits are also commonly referred to by their local *jāti* names, which in everyday use often double as terms of abuse for any outsider. Throughout southern India, Dalits are forced to live in separate settlements at a safe distance from the villages where all others reside. To this day they are referred to as outsiders to the village proper. As late as the 1920s Tamil dictionaries defined the collective ethno-national term for Tamils, *tamiḷan*, as explicitly excluding Tamil speakers of Dalit caste (University of Madras 1929, 1367), reflecting a popular understanding that remained current in rural settings much longer (Viramma, Racine, and Racine 2000, 282 n. 3).

The scholarly literature on India focuses overwhelmingly on the lives and cultural achievements of caste people. That has been the priority. *To Be Cared*

For is about those other Indians, the ones we hear much less about. Specifically, it is about a small community of Dalits living in a slum in northern Chennai. It is about their struggles both with the world and with themselves, and how these struggles take on new meaning when women in the slum convert to Pentecostal Christianity.

THE ARGUMENT

The story this book tells begins and ends in a neighborhood I call Anbu Nagar, part of a large agglomeration of Dalit slums, Kashtappattinam, in the industrial sprawl extending northward from Chennai's old city center. The conversion movement it describes began in the early 1990s and continues to the present day. At the time of my fieldwork the majority of converts, some 85 to 90 percent, were women. For that reason, and because of the unique way slum pastors interpreted Christ's message, Christianity was locally understood not only as the religion of the poor but also more specifically as a "women's religion." The book centers on conversion, but in the first three chapters Christianity makes only a fleeting appearance, and conversion none at all. That is by design. Most anthropological studies of religion focus on ritual contexts and textual practices. Relatively few look seriously at what people do when they're not "doing" religion, or what they talk about when they're not talking about it. They tell us little if anything about people's everyday struggles, at work and at home. Fewer still have attempted to grasp the systematic connections between religion and everyday life, or to show how what goes on in the street and in the home gives meaning to religion—and not just the reverse, as commonly supposed.

Christians everywhere use the same basic text and the same toolbox of basic concepts—sin, salvation, faith, and so forth. Pentecostal Christians, furthermore, worship in quite similar ways the world over. If students of African or Latin American Pentecostalism were to visit any of Kashtappattinam's churches, they would feel immediately at home. What they would not grasp, however, is why any of it mattered to local people. They would not get, for example, why the story of Adam and Eve's fall from Eden was understood by slum dwellers as conveying the message that husbands should always listen to their wives! They would not immediately understand that when slum Christians talked about being "saved from sin," it was not typically their own sins that they had in mind but the sins of others; that the prototypical "other"

from whom they hoped to be saved was a caste person; and that “salvation” was conceived not as a spiritual state but as a worldly revolution in which caste itself was abolished. This book shows that to understand why some slum dwellers convert and others do not we must begin with the unique moral problems and cultural contradictions that structure their existence. While Christianity appears throughout the world as the solution to converts’ problems, the problems it solves are local and unique.

The first three chapters are about rejection, its opposite, and the unexpected ways the two entwine. Chapter 1, “Outsiders,” explores what, for the people of Anbu Nagar, it meant to belong. It is a chapter about the different ways insiders and outsiders are distinguished. It begins with rumors that circulated intermittently among slum dwellers that one or another local Pentecostal church was receiving “foreign money.” Foreign money is also a persistent concern in public discourse in India, mainly for the threat it is seen to pose to national autonomy. The possibility that foreign money was flowing to local pastors was also a matter of concern for slum dwellers, but not for the same reasons. Where national-level discussions of foreign money revolve around issues of autonomy, slum dwellers’ turned on a rather different ideal, that of care. Why did no one seem to care for them? That was an abiding concern for the people in Anbu Nagar, and it was linked in complex ways to the distinction between national and foreign and their own uncertain status in relation to both. This turned out to have important implications for me, a foreigner in the flesh. In this chapter I describe my own entry into the field, the nature of the relationship I formed with the people there, and what this helped me to see about their relationship to the dominant society. The third and last section of the chapter describes the physical character of the slum, which residents believed set them radically apart from nonslum neighborhoods. It focuses in particular on filth and drinking water, and the heavy symbolic freight they bore for slum dwellers as reminders of their own out-cast status.

The second chapter, “Caste, Care, and the Human,” examines how the people of Anbu Nagar and surrounding slums understood their relationship to the dominant society and to humanity as a whole. According to them, they had no caste. They were *called* Paraiyar, they readily admitted, but this was just a name that had been applied to them by others. It had no intrinsic significance; it referred to no underlying essence or truth about them. In reality, they claimed, they were simply human. Indeed, they insisted that although by living together in this slum they had become a community, in

reality they had nothing in common with one another: no special traditions, no unique outlook, no common blood. What bound them together, these slum dwellers said, was simply that they were poor—that and what they shared with all people throughout the world, their humanity.

This opens an exploration of the moral ethos of the slum, and the role within it of the twin notions of care and the human. Seeing themselves as lacking in caste—as being merely human—the inhabitants of Anbu Nagar believed they were naturally drawn to others in ways most Indians were not. For to *be human* in the world of the slum was to be instinctively concerned about those who were in need, whoever they might be, and to feel called upon to care actively for them. To be human was also to be, oneself, *worthy* of being cared for by others. Caste, by contrast, was understood by slum dwellers as the denial of common humanity, a denial they believed was unique to India. Outcasts in their own land, they imagined a special connection between themselves and all who were, in India, labeled foreign—Africans, East Asians, white Europeans. For foreigners too were envisioned as being merely human and, like their own idealized selves, freely and spontaneously caring for others. The *foreignness of belonging* in the book's subtitle refers to the dual nature of their predicament. Belonging was itself foreign to these slum dwellers' experience in the land of their birth. But they also perceived a world in which they did truly belong, and which awaited them in the form of a larger humanity that was "foreign" in the sense of existing beyond national borders.

The continuity these slum dwellers envisioned between themselves and the foreign depended on a clear-cut division between inside and outside, between themselves and the dominant nonslum society. Chapter 3, "Sharing, Caring, and Supernatural Attack," reveals the instability of this moral topology. The stylized contrast described in chapter 2 between freely sharing and humane slum dwellers and their caste oppressors is a moral discourse, not sociological reality. It was true that slum dwellers did not generally discriminate on the basis of caste and that they were indeed generous with strangers. But they did not always share freely and spontaneously with their more needy peers within the slum itself, and in two key relationships the gap between moral ideal and actual practice was systematic. One was everyday money-lending relations among slum women, where, instead of sharing freely with one another, they sought profit by charging usurious rates of interest. The other was between women and the men they were married to: husbands did not always hand over their wages to wives as they should. I refer to these two relations—among women, and between women and their husbands—as

moral fault lines because, like geological fault lines, the contradictions they embodied were largely hidden from view.

These fault lines converged on married women, exerting a pressure that was at times unbearable. Chapter 3 accounts for this pressure by tracing the movement of money within and between households and, concurrently, the circulation of rumor and innuendo about various forms of supernatural threat. Such talk had contradictory effects. While it instigated women to share generously with others and to provide material aid to those in need, the discourse on supernatural threat also atomized slum women and subtly pitted them against one another. Supernatural evil, though the opposite of care, was constitutively linked to care and was, in fact, its dark underside. Unlike the problematic relationship between slum dwellers and the dominant society, which slum churches were powerless to resolve, the internal contradictions of slum culture were susceptible to reform. How slum Christianity was able partially to resolve these tensions, and how this resolution was locally understood, are addressed in chapters 6 and 7.

Conversion is important in India, not just to converts themselves, but in a very different way to the dominant national community. On October 5, 2002, just ten months prior to my arrival in the field, the state of Tamil Nadu issued an ordinance (*avacara cattam*, literally “emergency law”) banning exactly the sort of conversions I would go on to study (see Appendix).² The law remained in effect throughout the period of my research, and it explicitly targeted conversion among three demographics: Hindu Dalits, women, and children. This grouping is significant. Throughout India the overwhelming majority of converts out of Hinduism are Dalit, and in the Indian legal and political context Dalits and women alike are frequently *minoritized*—in the sense of being treated as minors, children not fully capable of making their own decisions and therefore requiring special forms of supervision.

Reports of Christian conversion in India are met with responses ranging from tolerant disapproval among secular liberals to outrage in the Hindu nationalist camp. Religious conversion is portrayed in national discourse as an attack on Indian culture and on the nation itself. It is not even genuinely religious, in fact, because it is based on worldly motives said to be antithetical to authentic spiritual understanding. It is an inherently dangerous activity that disrupts local communities, leading inevitably to violent conflict. It destroys families. Not only does conversion lead to violence, it is itself an intrinsically violent act. It is an intrusion into the innermost core of the individual self.

While this is how national elites see conversion, it is not at all how it appears to either Hindu or Christian slum dwellers. Chapters 4 and 5 provide detailed accounts, respectively, of how differently religion is conceptualized in India's national public sphere and in the slum. Chapter 4, "Religion, Conversion, and the National Frame," examines this discourse in detail. It also shows it to be of recent historical origins. Though supposedly based on a time-immemorial Hindu cultural understanding, the key features of this discourse in fact date only to the early twentieth century. Except under certain very special circumstances, before the twentieth century Hindus were not at all bothered by Dalit conversion to Christianity. Dalit conversion was not seen as a threat to Hinduism because Dalits themselves were not regarded as Hindu. It was only in 1909, in the context of a new sense of demographic struggle among Hindu communalists in opposition to Muslims, that Dalits were first identified as a key strategic resource. Claiming Dalits as Hindus would put Hindu claims to majority status on firm footing. But the novel idea that Dalits should be embraced as fellow Hindus, and that their conversion to Christianity should be opposed, was confined for the first three decades of the century to Hindu majoritarian activists.

All this changed in the 1930s. Under the political and intellectual leadership of M. K. Gandhi, the project of integrating and retaining Dalits within the Hindu fold was reenvisioned as not merely a Hindu communal interest but a national one. It was during this decade, moreover, that all the key tropes of present-day national discourse on conversion acquired the commonsense status they enjoy today, also as a result of Gandhi's leadership. It was he who developed and popularized the argument that Dalits were spiritual minors who required special supervision; that they were easily "lured" into converting with offers of worldly benefits; that religion itself was a properly spiritual affair in which worldly interests had no legitimate place; that conversion upset local communities, leading inevitably to violent conflict. Gandhi thus presented conversion as simultaneously a threat to the nation's autonomy and to that of converts.

Having situated the historically contingent assumptions about religion and conversion that shape India's public sphere discussions and anticonversion law, the fifth chapter reveals that even today this picture of religion is not universal. Entitled "The Logic of Slum Religion," it describes how religion was lived and understood by both Christians and Hindus in Kashtappattinam, and in so doing it reveals that religious conversion in the slum meant something very different than it does in the national imagination. The chapter

directly addresses the question of why the radical religious division in the slum brought about by conversion did not result in social conflict; why, even when members of a single household embraced different faiths, family life was not disrupted; why conversion did not pose any of the problems about free will, autonomy, or cultural authenticity for slum dwellers that it did for elites. In short, the chapter shows how anticonversion laws “safeguarded” the religious autonomy of Dalits from foreign imposition precisely by imposing upon them religious norms that, as this book makes plain, were themselves entirely foreign to their own religious understanding.

According to standard models, the allegedly ever-present potential for conflict between religions in India is mitigated by widespread syncretism, in which adherents of different faiths adopt one another’s practices, thereby blurring the boundaries between one religion and another. The assumption that hard boundaries and mutually exclusive identities are productive of conflict, whereas fuzzy boundaries and multiple identities mitigate it, is questionable (cf. van der Veer 1994; G. Viswanathan 1995). In Anbu Nagar and surrounding slums, however, religious boundaries were clearly marked and vigorously policed. What is more, the practitioners of one faith, Pentecostal Christianity, forthrightly declared the gods of the other “mere stone idols” whose worship was “complete useless,” while Hindus in turn dismissed Jesus as a weak, overly demanding, and jealous god—a passive-aggressive deity whose alleged miracles were mostly imagined. Yet no one was particularly bothered by such talk, nor did they see any reason they should be.

The reason, I show, is that religion in the slum was not a matter of identity at all—neither national, ethnic, nor personal. Its focus, rather, was on the power-laden and unequal relationships between human beings and gods. Gods existed to help people, and the benefits they provided were of a fundamentally worldly and moral, but *not* spiritual, nature. Neither Christianity nor Hinduism, as practiced in the slum, emphasized any sort of otherworldly telos. Decisions about which god to worship were based on considerations of what that god could do for worshippers in this world. These decisions, moreover, were not moralized by slum dwellers. This is because morality was seen as a *universal* property that did not vary by religion. Slum dwellers did not subscribe to the secular modern understanding of religion as culture and therefore did not see different religions as comprising different “systems of values.” Christians and Hindus recognized one another’s gods as entirely moral beings, and they perceived the morality they upheld as identical. While gods did not vary morally, they did vary existentially and in their

powers—some gods were more powerful than others, and some might simply not exist. The truth of their existence and of what powers they possessed, however, was never entirely knowable. Whereas in the secular modern understanding of religion as culture gods’ “existence” is a function of the human traditions organized around their worship, slum dwellers subscribed to what I call *theological realism*: some gods existed and others did not, and nothing humans had to say about it could change this. Accordingly, when Hindu and Christian slum dwellers debated their various gods’ existential status, they did not do so in the manner of competing teams whose goal is to win the argument. Rather, they were engaged in trying to find out which gods were real and therefore worth worshipping.

Chapters 6 and 7 are about the organizational form of slum Christianity and the unique way the Christian message was interpreted by slum pastors. Chapter 6, “Pastoral Power and the Miracles of Christ,” identifies two sources of Pentecostalism’s power for slum women. First is the intensity of pastoral care. Kashtappattinam was home to a large number of independent pastors in a state of perpetual competition with one another. Those who were less attentive to the everyday needs and concerns of their mostly female flock lost followers to their more energetic and innovative rivals. A major arena of pastoral innovation was doctrinal. Of the same caste as those they served, and in most cases born and raised in the very same neighborhood, pastors shared the worldview of ordinary slum dwellers. But unlike most slum men, they possessed an intimate understanding of women’s struggles, built up over years of daily pastoral service. The long hours they spent listening to women shaped these pastors’ understanding of Christianity itself, as detailed in chapter 7.

Slum pastors did not tend only to women. They tried equally hard to win male converts, but with less success. Unlike women, whose suffering stemmed both from their caste-based subordination to the dominant nonslum society *and* from the moral fault lines that divided the slum against itself, men’s distress derived mainly from their powerlessness in relation to caste people. And this, as already noted, was not a problem slum churches were in a position to resolve. What they could directly affect were women’s conflicts with one another and with their husbands. This brings us to the second source of slum Christianity’s appeal to women. For despite appearances that both pastors and their flock silently colluded in maintaining, the real center of power in slum churches was not the pastor himself but organized networks of church women whose relationships to one another were mediated by prayer. Women’s prayer networks counteracted the harmful effects of the slum’s

moral fault lines by redistributing responsibility for women's individual problems across a network of concerned sisters. Where Hindu cosmology subtly atomized women at a moral level, pitting them against one another, women's prayer networks strengthened their sense of shared interests. Women who were exploited by other women and by their own husbands drew on this collective basis of support to assert their right to be cared for. This explains why the majority of converts were women, and also why men who converted frequently drifted away from Christianity but female converts did not.

A key argument of the book is that Christianity's success in the slum derives from its ability to mediate endogenous moral contradictions and to relieve the existential distress and interpersonal conflict that these contradictions entail. This is why religious conversion did not divide the slum community of Anbu Nagar or lead to violent conflict, as India's national public discourse predicts it should. By suturing the moral fault lines that covertly pitted slum dwellers against one another, slum Christianity integrated the slum community *as a whole and irrespective of religious affiliation*. The conversion of some residents to a different religion, instead of dividing the slum community, in fact served to unite it.

In chapter 7, "Salvation, Knowledge, and Suffering," we turn finally to the content of the slum Christian message. Unlike locally available forms of Hinduism, slum Christianity is a discursively rich tradition in which worship is congregational and intensely interactive. Converts in Anbu Nagar claimed that unlike their former gods Jesus spoke to them—he taught them, empowering them with knowledge. Yet the knowledge they received contained irreducible perplexities. The chapter identifies two distinct spatiotemporal horizons intrinsic to Pentecostal belief and practice in the slum. The first was local and concerned everyday relations and the difficulties of getting along. The temporal horizon in this case was that of homogeneous empty time (Benjamin 1968; Anderson 2006) and involved *gradual* transformation through divinely mediated human effort. The target was intraslum conflict, and the moral fault lines along which the slum ethos of care was routinely violated. Here pastors offered an alternative vision of what marriages and other conflict-prone relations could be. They also dispensed advice aimed at teaching women how to deal with conflicts and how to remake their relations with husbands and others.

The second spatiotemporal horizon evoked by slum pastors was global and was organized around a binary relationship between good and evil, poor and

rich, casteless and encasted humanity. The temporality here was that of revolutionary–messianic time (Benjamin 1968; Löwy 2005; cf. Robbins 2007). It was under this rubric that the slum’s collective subordination to the nonslum society was addressed. The promised transformation was to occur all at once, in some unspecified future, and by means of divine agency alone. Pastors offered no advice or practical suggestions in this case, because there was nothing for believers to do but wait. They did, however, provide a steady stream of evocative images hinting at what this revolution would look like. This chapter’s second epigraph—an outburst that occurred at the height of divinely inspired preaching by a slum pastor, Yesudasen—is an example.

The spatiotemporal horizons around which slum preaching swirled were not always kept distinct. Often pastors employed ambiguous language that could be plausibly understood by believers as referring to either collective or interpersonal suffering, or both simultaneously. In this way slum Pentecostal discourse spoke on several levels at once, and in doing so it made these ostensibly different forms of oppression appear as but different facets of a single underlying problem, “sin.” The fiery and often bewildering content of slum preaching blurred distinctions and made the messianic appear to erupt continuously within the everyday (cf. Robbins 2004). The promised total transformation was thus at once indefinitely deferred and already under way. The uncertainty about what was being said was not a weakness of slum Christian discourse but one of the sources of its power. It incited believers to a practice of interpretation that, because the rock bottom of some final truth could never be reached, kept them continually on their toes and spellbound. And at the limits of interpretability, meaning itself dissolved into what was called *anniya pācai*, the Tamil term for glossolalia that translates literally as “the foreign tongue.” Here we encounter the idea of a language that is at once totally incomprehensible and yet believed to be the words of one’s own heart in direct communication to God. Closer than the most intimate relationship, yet unbridgeably far, in *anniya pācai* the book’s final chapter thus ends where it began: with the irresolvable predicament, and hope, that I summarize as “the foreignness of belonging.”

A brief conclusion reviews the ground that was covered in order to reflect more explicitly on care in and beyond the discipline of anthropology: on the role of care in ethnographic research and on things that are owed but never given.