



# A Critical Appraisal Of The Religious Policy Of Portuguese In India

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## Abstract

The arrival of Portuguese explorers in India in the late 15th century marked a turning point in the country's history, bringing with it not only a new chapter of trade and colonization but also profound religious changes. One of the most significant aspects of the Portuguese presence in India was the introduction of Christianity. The Portuguese were driven by a strong desire to spread Christianity to distant lands. The Catholic Church, closely intertwined with the Portuguese monarchy, provided both moral and financial support for their religious endeavors. This zeal to convert the indigenous population often clashed with the existing religious diversity in India. While religious motivations were central, economic interests and colonial ambitions played a significant role in the Portuguese presence in India. The establishment of trading posts and control over key ports gave them an economic advantage, but these ambitions frequently conflicted with the religious practices and beliefs of the local population. The clash between European Christianity and indigenous religious beliefs was inevitable. The Portuguese viewed the local practices as pagan and idolatrous, leading to misunderstandings and tensions. The rich tapestry of Indian spirituality, with its diverse pantheon of gods and rituals, contrasted sharply with the monotheistic tenets of Christianity. This article delves into the historical context, methods of propagation, impact on indigenous beliefs, cultural exchange, and the enduring legacy of Christianity's introduction by the Portuguese.

**Key Words:** Christianity, Religion, Europeans.

## INTRODUCTION

The latter half of 15<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the growth of European colonial expansion. The arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498 marked the beginning of Portuguese dominance in India, setting the stage for religious conflicts that would shape the socio-cultural fabric of the subcontinent. The Portuguese established trading posts and fortifications along the western coast, with Goa emerging as their colonial capital. Alongside their economic interests, the Portuguese sought to spread Christianity as part of their expansionist agenda, also marked by religious conflicts stemming from the clash of European Christianity with indigenous belief systems. The Catholic Church, intertwined with the Portuguese monarchy, played a significant role in these efforts. This article provides a detailed exploration of the religious conflicts between the Portuguese and India during this period, examining the factors that contributed to these conflicts. It also tries to elicit the methods employed by the Portuguese, and the lasting legacy of these encounters.

## PORtUGUESE EXPEDITIONS

During 13<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese tried to discover new sea routes to unknown places to conduct trade relations. A new sea route was discovered by Vasco Da Gama through Cape of Good Hope and landed in Calicut on May 21<sup>st</sup> 1498. With this discovery, Portuguese in India were driven by their desire to establish trade routes and spread Christianity. Their religious policies became the most potent weapon of imperial expansion. The Portuguese influence in India during the Age of exploration brought significant religious changes that had a lasting impact on the Indian subcontinent. Over the course of several centuries, Portuguese colonialists introduced new religious practices, propagated Christianity, and clashed with existing belief systems.

## PROPAGATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Alongside their trading interests, Portuguese in India were zealous about spreading Christian religion. Missionaries such as St. Francis Xavier played a pivotal role in converting locals to Christianity. Most initial missionaries were fundamentalists who were ready to use violent means against non-Christians. They aimed to fight against Muslim infidels. Churches and Cathedrals were constructed in major port cities like Goa, which became the centre of their missionary activities. These missionaries aimed to convert the indigenous population by employing various strategies, including peaceful persuasion, engagement with local rulers, and the establishment of religious institutions. St. Francis Xavier, known for his zeal and commitment, travelled extensively across the Indian subcontinent, preaching and baptizing thousands. His influence extended from Goa to Malabar and the Coromandel Coast, where he left a lasting mark on the local Christian communities. He was the main proponent of violent inquisitions in India. The Portuguese thought themselves to be racially superior to native heathens and had to civilise them including bringing them towards the light of Christianity.

## FORCED CONVERSIONS AND IMPERIAL CONTROL

The Portuguese employed a mix of persuasive and coercive methods to convert the local population. While some conversions were voluntary, others were influenced by economic incentives, social pressures, and even political patronage. Missionaries played a central role in these efforts, using sermons, teachings, and personal interactions to spread Christianity. They aimed at aggressive propagation of the Christian faith. Legislation was enacted prohibiting Christians from employing Hindus and Hindu public worship was declared illegal. One of the most contentious issues was the Portuguese destruction of Hindu and Islamic temples, which they saw as idolatrous. Around 1000 temples were destroyed by the Portuguese in India this was the part of their policy to eradicate Hinduism and promote Christianity. This policy was not only disrespectful to the existing religious practices but also a source of deep resentment among the Indian population. The arrival of the Portuguese challenged the existing religious structures. While some conversions were voluntary, others were coerced through various means, including economic incentives and political pressure. This resulted in a complex interplay of religious identities.

## INQUISITION: A DARK CHAPTER

The establishment of the Goa Inquisition in 1560 was a particularly dark chapter in Portuguese-Indian relations. Its primary aim was to enforce catholic orthodoxy. In 1546, Francis Xavier proposed the establishment of the Goan Inquisition in a letter addressed to the Portuguese king, John III. It was established in 1560, briefly suppressed from 1774 to 1778 and continued thereafter until it was finally abolished in 1812. The Goa Inquisition stands as a controversial and troubling aspect of the Portuguese colonial history in India. Established with the aim of eradicating heresy, it led to the persecution, torture, and execution of many individuals who resisted conversion or clung to their indigenous beliefs. The Goa Inquisition remains a painful reminder of the extremes to which religious zeal and power can lead.

## FORCED CONVERSIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE

Forced conversions created social hierarchy, a three tiered social structure came into existence. This was the result of discriminatory treatment against the non- converted population in social-economic and political fields. Non- Christians were forbidden from occupying any public office, only a Christian could hold such an office, this policy limited the economic opportunities available to non- Christians and consolidated power within the Christian community. Hindus were forbidden from producing any Christian devotional objects, this policy restricted the economic activities of non- Christian artisans and craftsmen. Restrictions were put on many traditional dances, foods, and clothing. Religious ceremonies observed various stages of life were prohibited. These discriminatory policies further alienated the local population and led numerous revolts against Portuguese in India.

## CULTURAL EXCHANGE, SYNCRETISM AND SUPPRESSION

The Portuguese presence in India fostered a complex process of cultural exchange. European art, literature, and religious practices influenced Indian society, while indigenous cultural elements left their imprint on Portuguese settlements. This exchange resulted in a fusion of traditions that can be observed in various aspects of Goan culture, such as cuisine, festivals, and architecture. Despite the conflicts, there was also a degree of cultural exchange between the Portuguese and the local population. Knowledge of European art, literature, and religious practices spread through interactions with the Portuguese, leaving a lasting impact on Indian society. One of the enduring legacies of the Portuguese in India is the architectural marvels they left behind. The churches and cathedrals they constructed are a testament to their commitment to spreading Christianity. The Basilica of Bom Jesus, the Sé Cathedral, and the Church of St. Cajetan are remarkable examples of this architectural legacy. These structures not only served as places of worship but also as symbols of Portuguese influence and dominance.

They desecrated ancient Hindu shrines and replaced them with Churches, leading to the loss of many religiously significant structures and sites. Local folk practices were gradually replaced. Most native social and religious practices associated with public observance of non- catholic religious rites associated with birth, marriage and death were banned, forcing people to adopt the practices of the colonisers. Hence, religious policies of the Portuguese played a crucial role in their downfall in India. As other European powers began to establish their presence in India, the Portuguese gradually lost their dominance. The British and Dutch, among others, challenged Portuguese authority and eventually pushed them out. This marked the end of Portuguese colonialism in India. However, the impact of their introduction of Christianity persisted.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Portuguese presence in India brought about significant religious changes, introducing Christianity, constructing churches, and attempting to convert the local population. These changes were marked by conflicts, cultural exchanges, and lasting architectural legacies. The Portuguese legacy in India is a complex one, with both positive and negative impacts on the religious and cultural landscape of the subcontinent. The Portuguese brought with them religious zeal, economic ambitions, and colonial pursuits, which often clashed with the diverse religious practices of India. The methods employed, including the destruction of temples and the establishment of the Goa Inquisition, left deep scars on the social and cultural fabric of the region. However, the interactions also facilitated cultural exchange and syncretism, leaving a legacy that continues to influence Indian society to this day. The religious conflicts of this era serve as a reminder of the complexities and challenges inherent in encounters between different faiths and cultures. The introduction of Christianity by the Portuguese in India was a multifaceted phenomenon that left an indelible mark on the country's history and culture. It brought about clashes with existing religious beliefs, cultural exchange, architectural wonders, and moments of both profound spiritual transformation and painful coercion. The legacy of Christianity's introduction by the Portuguese continues to shape the religious and cultural landscape of India, serving as a reminder of the complexities and consequences of religious encounters in the age of exploration. The religious policies of the Portuguese in India were marked by intolerance and discrimination, while they did lead to the spread of Christianity in

some regions, they also caused significant harm to the local populations and lead to widespread resentment against Portuguese rule. These policies sparked political anxieties and led to conflicts with other powers, contributing to the decline of Portuguese in India.

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