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THE CONTRIBUTION OF K. T. PAUL TO THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

A Study of Christian Nationalism, Rural Reconstruction, and the Politics of Representation in Colonial India, 1900–1931

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ABSTRACT

Kanakarayan Tiruselvam Paul (1876–1931) occupies a distinctive place in the history of the Indian national movement as a Christian leader who sought to reconcile his religious identity with a deep and enduring commitment to Indian nationalism. As the first Indian-born National General Secretary of the National Council of YMCAs of India, General Secretary of the National Missionary Society, first Chairman of the National Christian Council of India, and President of the All India Conference of Indian Christians, Paul occupied a unique institutional position from which he articulated a vision of "responsible nationalism" for the Indian Christian community. This article examines Paul's contribution to the national movement along three principal axes: his indigenization of Christian institutions and his advocacy of an authentically Indian church; his pioneering rural reconstruction programme, which anticipated later community development initiatives; and his political role as a bridge between the Christian minority, the Congress-led nationalist movement, and the colonial government, culminating in his participation in the First Round Table Conference of 1930–31. The article draws on Paul's own writings, contemporary biographical accounts, and the historiography of Indian Christianity to argue that Paul's significance lies not in dramatic political action but in his sustained effort to demonstrate that Christian faith and Indian national identity were not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing — a position that shaped the political choices of Indian Christians well beyond his own lifetime.

Keywords : K. T. Paul; Indian National Movement; YMCA; National Missionary Society; National Christian Council; Rural Reconstruction; Indian Christians; Round Table Conference; Christian Nationalism; Mahatma Gandhi

1. INTRODUCTION

The historiography of the Indian national movement has, until recent decades, concentrated overwhelmingly on the Indian National Congress, its principal leaders, and the mass movements associated with Mahatma Gandhi. This emphasis, while justified by the centrality of the Congress to the freedom struggle, has tended to obscure the contributions of smaller communities and institutions that shaped the texture of Indian nationalism in less spectacular but no less significant ways. The Indian Christian community, numerically a minority but institutionally influential through its educational, medical, and social welfare networks, is one such community whose engagement with nationalism has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Kanakarayan Tiruselvam Paul, more commonly known as K. T. Paul, stands as the foremost representative of this engagement in the early twentieth century.

Paul's career spanned the most turbulent decades of the Indian freedom struggle, from the Swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905, through the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms and the Rowlatt Act agitation, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the

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Chauri Chaura tragedy, and finally the Round Table Conferences of the early 1930s, at the first of which he represented the Indian Christian community before his death in April 1931.[1]

This article seeks to reconstruct the principal dimensions of Paul's contribution to the national movement: his role in indigenizing Christian institutions in India, his pioneering rural reconstruction programme, his articulation of a theology and politics of "responsible nationalism" for Indian Christians, and his direct participation in constitutional politics through the Round Table Conference. In doing so, it argues that Paul's importance to the national movement lay less in political agitation of the Congress variety than in his sustained institutional and intellectual work to align the Indian Christian community with the aspirations of the wider Indian people, at a time when that community's loyalties were viewed with suspicion both by British administrators, who saw Indian Christians as a natural ally, and by some nationalist leaders, who doubted their commitment to Swaraj.

2. EARLY LIFE AND FORMATION

K. T. Paul was born on 24 March 1876 into a Christian family in Salem, in the Madras Presidency of British India.[2]

After completing his matriculation and intermediate studies, he joined Madras Christian College in 1892 to pursue his bachelor's degree, an institution that would remain closely associated with him for the rest of his career. His early professional life took him first into government service, from which he resigned after his marriage, and then into teaching: he served at the Coimbatore London Mission High School and subsequently as Headmaster of the Punganur Arcot Mission High School. In 1902 he enrolled at the Teachers' College in Saidapet, and the following year he returned to Madras Christian College as a tutor in the Department of History.

This early career as an educationist is significant, for it placed Paul in direct and sustained contact with the currents of nationalist thought that were reshaping Indian intellectual life in the opening years of the twentieth century — a period bracketed by the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and given new urgency by the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Swadeshi movement that followed. It was in this atmosphere that Paul's own political consciousness, and his conviction that the Christian community could not remain aloof from the national awakening, began to take shape.

3. INDIGENIZING THE INDIAN CHURCH: THE NATIONAL MISSIONARY SOCIETY AND THE NATIONAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL

Paul's earliest and most enduring institutional contribution lay in his effort to place the government, personnel, and finance of the Christian church in India in Indian hands. In December 1905, together with Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah, he helped establish the National Missionary Society (NMS) at Serampore — the first indigenous missionary society in India, organized on the explicit principle that it would rely only on Indian personnel, Indian methods, and Indian money. Azariah was elected General Secretary and Paul became Honorary Treasurer; the following year Paul became Organising Secretary, and from 1909 to 1914 he served as General Secretary of the Society.

The founding of the National Missionary Society has been read by historians as a direct ecclesiastical parallel to the Swadeshi movement then sweeping Bengal and the rest of India: just as the Swadeshi movement sought to free Indian commerce and industry from

[1]H. A. Popley, K. T. Paul: Christian Leader (Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1938).
[2]"K.T. Paul remembered," The Hindu, 17 August 2015.

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dependence on British goods, the NMS sought to free the Indian church from dependence on foreign missionary personnel and funding.[3]

As General Secretary of the NMS, Paul travelled extensively across India, visiting churches, conducting interviews, and organizing branch meetings. This work convinced him of the urgent need for unity among the many Christian denominations at work in India, and his contacts with missionaries of other denominations led him to take part in the formation of the South India United Church in 1908, a union of Presbyterian and Congregational churches that represented an early and important step toward a genuinely Indian ecclesial identity, free of the denominational divisions imported from Europe and America. In North India, Paul initiated a civic body called the Premsabha ("Council of Love"), which undertook social and religious work among poor Christians of the depressed classes.

Paul's commitment to indigenization found its fullest institutional expression in his work to transform the National Missionary Council of India, established in Calcutta in 1912, into the National Christian Council of India (NCC), an organization in which Indian churches as well as overseas missions held membership. Paul became the first Chairman of the National Christian Council of India, a position from which he continued to press for the Indianization of church leadership and structure. He was, at the time of his death, President of the Governing Council of the United Theological College, Bangalore, and convener of the South India United Church's committee on theological education, reflecting his conviction that a genuinely national church required a genuinely Indian ministry.

Paul's nationalism extended to the very architecture of church governance. He was a vocal opponent of the episcopal system of church organization inherited from the West, arguing that episcopacy was foreign to the genius of India, that the figure of the prophet rather than the priest better suited the religious temperament of the Indian people, and that if the movement toward a united church in South India fell under episcopal control it would remain permanently fettered to Western ecclesiastical forms rather than growing into an authentically Indian expression of Christianity. This argument — that even the internal structures of religious institutions ought to be Indianized in step with the political demand for self-government — placed Paul's ecclesiastical reformism in direct dialogue with the broader nationalist demand for swaraj.

4. LEADERSHIP OF THE YMCA AND THE RURAL RECONSTRUCTION PROGRAMME

Paul's most far-reaching practical contribution to Indian public life came through his leadership of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in India. In 1913 he was appointed Joint National General Secretary of the YMCA, and in 1916, with the support of Dr John R. Mott, he became the first Indian to hold the office of National General Secretary of the National Council of YMCAs of India — a landmark appointment at a time when nearly every Christian institution in India was headed by a European.

Paul's appointment as National General Secretary in 1916 is generally regarded by historians of the YMCA in India as the decisive first step in adapting the policies and programmes of the Association to the specific problems of rural Indian society, in place of the urban, literate model inherited from the industrialized West.[4]

[3]D. Arthur Jeyakumar, Christians and the National Movement: The Memoranda of 1919 and the National Movement (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1999).
[4]M. D. David, The YMCA and the Making of Modern India: A Centenary History (New Delhi: National Council of YMCAs of India, 1992).

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Until Paul's tenure, the YMCA in India had been principally an urban organization, serving the needs of educated young men in the cities. Paul redirected the Association toward the countryside, where roughly ninety per cent of India's population lived, often in conditions of acute poverty and indebtedness. He undertook intensive study tours of poverty-stricken districts to supplement existing knowledge of Indian agricultural conditions, and out of this fieldwork emerged the Rural Reconstruction Programme, for which Paul coined the term "rural reconstruction" in the early 1920s — a phrase and a programme that anticipated, by several decades, the community development schemes later adopted by the independent Government of India.

The Rural Reconstruction Programme rested on a simple diagnosis, popularized by Paul in the slogan that identified "five enemies of the villager": Debt, Drink, Disease, Darkness, and the Devil. To combat indebtedness, Paul turned to the cooperative credit legislation passed by Lord Curzon's government in 1904 and again in 1912. Finding that existing government cooperative credit banks and agricultural departments were unable to solve the underlying problem — and that caste-based social disabilities prevented many Christian and low-caste borrowers from obtaining loans from mainstream cooperative societies — Paul organized YMCA Credit Societies in four districts and, when these too were refused adequate credit, established the Madras Christian Co-operative Bank in 1916, later widely referred to as the Christian Central Cooperative Bank.

Contemporary and later accounts credit Paul's cooperative and rural credit initiatives with producing measurable results within a few years: by 1921 the rural work of the YMCA was said to have reached some forty thousand people, freeing entire communities from dependence on moneylenders and, in some recorded instances, multiplying the agricultural yields of formerly outcaste converts many times over.[5]

Beyond credit, the Rural Reconstruction Programme addressed education, health, recreation, and what Paul termed the enrichment of village social life through festivals, excursions, and facilities for inexpensive Indian sports and gymnastics. "Lighthouse" training and demonstration centres were established at Martandam and Indukurpet, among other locations, to train rural workers and demonstrate improved methods of agriculture and community organization to surrounding villages. The programme's significance for the national movement lay in its practical demonstration that self-help, self-reliance, and indigenous initiative — values at the heart of the Swadeshi and later the Gandhian constructive programme — could be mobilized for the concrete uplift of India's rural poor, independent of both foreign missionary paternalism and colonial administrative machinery.

Paul's rural work also had an important, if unintended, nationalist by-product. It offered educated young Indian Christians, increasingly caught up in the nationalist fervour of the period and asking, in Paul's own formulation, "How can I best serve India?", a concrete outlet through which to identify with the aspirations of the wider population. In this way, nationalistic zeal among Indian Christians found expression not primarily through Congress politics but through constructive rural service — a pattern of engagement that closely paralleled, and in some respects anticipated, Gandhi's own constructive programme of the 1920s and 1930s.

5. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL NATIONALISM

The place of Indian Christians within the national movement was, for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an uneasy one. The community's historic association

[5]Popley, K. T. Paul: Christian Leader, and “Portrait of K. T. Paul,” Digital Commonwealth (lantern-slide collection).

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with Western missions and, by extension, with British rule, together with the presence of separate electoral safeguards under colonial constitutional arrangements, exposed Indian Christians to the charge of being a client community of the Raj rather than genuine participants in the national struggle. Historians of Indian Christianity have generally identified K. T. Paul, together with V. S. Azariah, S. K. Datta, and V. Santiago, as forming the core leadership that worked, between roughly 1900 and 1930, to instil what has been termed "responsible nationalism" among Indian Christians, often in the face of resistance both from conservative Western missionaries and from sections of the Indian Christian community itself.

These four leaders are frequently described in the historiography as having worked to prevent the Indian Christian community from crystallizing into a self-interested communal bloc of the kind that separate electorates tended to encourage among other minority communities in late-colonial India.[6]

Paul's own political evolution illustrates the gradual radicalization that many moderate Indian public figures underwent in the years after the First World War. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919, in which troops under General Dyer fired on an unarmed crowd in Amritsar, sent shockwaves through Indian public opinion and hardened anti-British sentiment across the political spectrum. Paul and S. K. Datta jointly published an article in the YMCA periodical Young Men of India in July 1920 protesting the conduct of the British authorities in Punjab. Yet Paul did not immediately embrace Gandhi's call for Non-Cooperation; he retained, for a time, his conviction that India's future was best secured through organic links with Western Christianity and constructive engagement with British institutions, a position reinforced by the introduction of dyarchy under the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919.

The events of the early 1920s tested and ultimately transformed this position. The Rowlatt Act, widely condemned by Indian leaders as a betrayal of wartime promises of greater self-government, precipitated Gandhi's Satyagraha movement. Paul initially disagreed with Gandhi's methods, and the violence at Chauri Chaura in February 1922 — in which a mob killed a number of policemen, prompting Gandhi to suspend the Non-Cooperation Movement — appeared, in the short term, to vindicate Paul's caution. Yet Gandhi's arrest in March 1922 marked a turning point in Paul's own political engagement. Soon afterward, the Viceroy invited Paul to participate more directly in constitutional deliberation, an invitation that placed him at the interface between the colonial state and Indian nationalist opinion for the remainder of the decade.

An important marker of Paul's deepening political commitment came in March 1920, when he resigned his offices with the National Missionary Society and the YMCA specifically in order to gain the freedom to speak openly on matters of political concern — a decision that underscores the degree to which he regarded institutional neutrality as, by the early 1920s, incompatible with his sense of national obligation.

6. THE ALL INDIA CONFERENCE OF INDIAN CHRISTIANS AND THE ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE

Paul's standing within the Indian Christian community found formal political expression in 1923, when he became President of the All India Conference of Indian Christians (AICIC), the principal representative body of the community in national political life. In this capacity, and together with S. K. Datta, Paul represented Indian Christian opinion at the London Round

[6]Dictionary of Christian Biography in Asia, entry on "Indian Christians and the National Movement."

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Table Conferences convened between 1930 and 1932 to discuss constitutional reform for India.

Paul attended the First Round Table Conference, which opened in London on 12 November 1930; he died in April of the following year, before the Second Round Table Conference, at which his colleague S. K. Datta succeeded him as the principal Indian Christian representative.[7]

At the Conference, Paul's characteristic emphasis was on national unity rather than sectional advantage for the Christian community, even though he had been invited specifically as a minority representative. Contemporary accounts suggest that his careful, non-confrontational style — one commentator described his position as drawing a fine line between supporting Gandhi's nationalist aims and honouring the biblical injunction, in the Epistle to the Romans, to submit to lawful authority — earned him the respect of British interlocutors, including Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, without compromising the nationalist substance of his position.

Gandhi's own assessment of Paul, delivered in a speech at the Second Round Table Conference in September 1931, several months after Paul's death, remains the most frequently cited testimony to Paul's standing as a nationalist. Gandhi told the assembled delegates that he missed Paul's presence, and that although Paul had never formally belonged to the Congress, he had been "a nationalist to the full." This tribute, from the movement's foremost leader, offers the clearest contemporary confirmation that Paul's institutional and constructive work, though conducted largely outside the formal structures of the Congress, was recognized by nationalist leadership as a genuine and valuable contribution to the national cause.

Paul's political activity was not confined to the Round Table Conference. He maintained regular contact with senior British officials, including the Viceroy Lord Irwin, himself a devout Christian, through whom Paul pressed the concerns of both the Christian community and the wider nationalist cause. At the same time, Paul's biographers record his deep regret at what he perceived as the broader Christian community's historical aloofness from the freedom struggle — a criticism he directed as much at his own community as at the colonial authorities, and one that reflects the seriousness with which he approached the task of reconciling Christian identity with national belonging.

7. THE INDIAN STUDENT HOSTEL AND OTHER INSTITUTIONAL LEGACIES

Paul's vision extended beyond India's shores. Sensing the need for Indian students in Britain to have a home and a cultural and social centre of their own, where they could also host British fellow students and prominent British public figures, Paul was the driving force behind the founding of the YMCA Indian Student Hostel in London in 1920. The institution, an advocate of what has been described as Indo-British goodwill and understanding, reflected Paul's characteristic conviction that Indian nationalism and constructive engagement with British society were not mutually exclusive but could, and should, reinforce one another.

Paul was also active in the training of a professional cadre of Indian social and religious workers, supporting the YMCA's Training Department for Secretaries, which had begun in Calcutta in 1911 and was later relocated to Bangalore in association with the United Theological College. In every sphere of his institutional work — theological education, cooperative credit, rural welfare, and the training of professional workers — Paul pursued a

[7]Dictionary of Christian Biography in Asia, entry on "Indian Christians and the National Movement."

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consistent strategy: the substitution of foreign personnel, foreign finance, and foreign models with Indian personnel, Indian finance, and models adapted to Indian conditions.

8. ASSESSMENT: THE CHARACTER OF PAUL'S NATIONALISM

Assessing K. T. Paul's contribution to the Indian national movement requires attention to a form of nationalist engagement that differs markedly from the more familiar model of agitation, imprisonment, and mass mobilization associated with the Congress and with Gandhi's own campaigns. Paul was never imprisoned; he never led a mass movement; he did not, so far as the historical record shows, formally join the Indian National Congress. Judged solely by the criteria appropriate to Congress politics, his contribution might appear peripheral.

Yet such a judgment would misconstrue both the nature of Paul's achievement and the structural position of the community he led. As the head of institutions dependent in part on foreign missionary goodwill and finance, and as the representative of a minority community whose political loyalties were contested from multiple directions, Paul could not adopt the confrontational posture available to Congress leaders without risking the collapse of the very institutions — the National Missionary Society, the National Christian Council, and the YMCA — through which he sought to advance both Christian unity and national self-reliance. His achievement lay instead in demonstrating, through sustained institutional practice rather than political rhetoric, that indigenization, self-help, and national identity were compatible with, and indeed demanded by, authentic Christian commitment.

Three aspects of this achievement merit particular emphasis. First, Paul's insistence on Indian personnel, Indian finance, and Indian leadership in Christian institutions anticipated, in the religious sphere, the swadeshi and self-reliance principles that animated the wider national movement, and it did so at a time when such Indianization was neither expected nor welcomed by many Western missionary authorities. Second, his Rural Reconstruction Programme offered one of the earliest systematic responses to rural poverty in colonial India, combining cooperative credit, education, and social welfare in a model that prefigured the community development strategy later adopted by the government of independent India. Third, his political role as a mediating figure — trusted by British officials, respected by Congress leadership, and formally representing the Christian minority — allowed him to advance the national cause at the constitutional level in a manner not available to more overtly partisan nationalist leaders.

Gandhi's own tribute to Paul as "a nationalist to the full" should therefore be read not as a generous overstatement but as a considered recognition, by the movement's central figure, that nationalism in early twentieth-century India took multiple institutional forms, of which Paul's constructive and mediatory nationalism was one significant variant.

9. CONCLUSION

K. T. Paul's career illustrates a dimension of the Indian national movement that mass political narratives often overlook: the slow, institutional work of indigenization, rural reconstruction, and minority representation that ran alongside, and ultimately reinforced, the more visible campaigns of the Indian National Congress. Through his leadership of the National Missionary Society, the National Christian Council of India, and the YMCA, Paul dismantled, piece by piece, the foreign control of Christian institutions in India. Through the Rural Reconstruction Programme, he offered a practical model of self-help for India's impoverished rural majority that anticipated later community development policy by several decades. And through his presidency of the All India Conference of Indian Christians and his representation of the Christian community at the First Round Table Conference, he ensured

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that a minority community, often viewed with suspicion by nationalists and courted for its loyalty by the colonial state, was represented in the highest constitutional deliberations of the period by a figure of unimpeachable nationalist conviction.

Paul died on 11 April 1931, at the age of fifty-five, shortly after the conclusion of the First Round Table Conference, and before he could witness either the outcome of the constitutional negotiations to which he had contributed or India's eventual attainment of independence sixteen years later. Yet the institutions he built — the National Christian Council, the cooperative credit societies that grew into the Madras Christian Co-operative Bank, the rural training centres at Martandam and Indukurpet, and the YMCA Indian Student Hostel in London — and the model of responsible, constructive nationalism he articulated for the Indian Christian community, constitute a durable legacy. His life stands as a reminder that the Indian national movement was, in its totality, a far broader and more variegated phenomenon than the history of any single political party can capture, and that its ultimate success depended on the contributions of leaders such as K. T. Paul, who worked to ensure that no community of India stood apart from the national awakening of the twentieth century.

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