



Introduction

Race, Caste, and Conversion in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia

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This special issue began, as so many do, as a conference panel, specifically one jointly sponsored by the Religious Conversions Unit and the South Asian Religions Unit at the 2022 American Academy of Religion conference in Denver, Colorado. Under the guidance of Nidān Editor-in-Chief, Deepra Dandekar, and myself, and the collaborative efforts of six authors and as many anonymous reviewers, these initial efforts coalesced into a multi-faceted investigation of how evangelization and religious change in India impacts or is impacted by the complex dynamics of race, caste, and gender.¹ The articles are organized in chronological order. Three articles by Deepra Dandekar, Torsten Tschacher and myself, which all focus on the British colonial period, are book-ended by Arun Jones' article on the early-modern sovereign Begum Samru and Sonja Thomas' essay on missionary activity by caste-privileged Syrian Christians in contemporary north India and the United States. As has been oft-noted, *caste* is a familiar category in the study of India, a privileged lens through which scholars analyse everything from marriage, ritual, and social mobility to music, politics, and land-use change; in part because of the historical dynamics our special issue investigates, it is also a taken-for-granted organizing principle of Indian society today. *Race* is a less salient category in scholarship on India and in Indian social life; and yet, its pervasive and influential presence in British colonial discourse about India and the complex ways it interacts with *caste*, both in India and in the diaspora, makes it a fascinating and urgent object of study (Guha 2013).

Yet, tracking the complex dynamics of race and caste as they interact with both religion and gender is a daunting task, for which one needs an appropriate hermeneutic. In their own way, each of these articles illustrates the power of an intersectional approach when trying to understand social and cultural dynamics at this level of complexity. The term "intersectionality" was coined in the late 1980s by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988) to highlight the ways that black women in the United States were affected not only by discrimination on the basis of race but also by sexism. Eschewing simplistic, single-axis approaches to the analysis of power and discrimination, Crenshaw drew attention to how individuals navigate multiple and intersecting forms of privilege and discrimination. Not only has her approach deeply influenced women-of-colour feminism and critical race theory, it also converges with the concerns of subaltern feminism, which similarly seeks to expose the invisible dynamics of power by centring the perspectives of women, marginalized on the basis of caste and class, in addition to gender. Like the well-known optical illusion of the duck and the rabbit, it is difficult to hold in mind the multiple structuring dimensions of social life at once – to think about race, religion, caste, and gender together – but doing so is essential in order to maintain awareness of our social worlds' layers of structuring structures and the violence they entail. Attempts at intersectional scholarship can result in dense prose and analyses bordering on the obtuse, but that is not the case here. Mindful of *Nidān's* stature as an open-access academic journal with a global Anglophone readership, the authors and editors have tried to make these essays as

¹ Many thanks to Megan Robb and Afsar Muhammad (both of the University of Pennsylvania) whose expertise and contributions to the original panel greatly enriched our thinking on these issues.

clear and accessible as possible, so that they can be used in undergraduate classrooms while also informing on-going scholarship at the intersection of race, caste, and conversion.

In his article, Arun Jones draws attention to Begum Samru, an exceptional woman who lived at an exceptional time, when the administrative control of the Mughal empire was waning, and the British had not yet consolidated their grip on the subcontinent. He thus provides a useful “before” image of the possibilities for social mobility and self-invention in 18th-century India, before the rigid categories of British colonialism were imposed. Among other things, the relatively reduced racial segregation of the time afforded Begum Samru (born Farzana) the opportunity to ally with a European mercenary, who, like many 18th-century British and European men, lived as a Mughal, adopting the clothes, comportment, language, and customs of Indo-Persianate culture. And yet, Begum Samru stands out among Indian courtesans because she maintained her independence and in fact, even increased her wealth and influence after Walter Reinhard’s death. Jones illuminates how the Begum deftly navigated the social norms of the time, drawing upon and code-switching between Sanskritic and Persianate modes of Indian kingship to secure her power as the sovereign of the small, but prosperous kingdom of Saldhana. The Begum was no mere consort nor even a queen, Jones argues, but a King. She deployed generosity as a patron and host to exercise influence across religious and cultural boundaries, and engaged in “shrewd diplomacy and highly skilled cultural performance with a variety of different political and culture actors in her day, keeping them pleased so that she could keep her independence” (p. 21). Breaking new ground in scholarship on Begum Samru, Jones focuses on how her conversion to Catholicism helped to maintain her remarkable independence. Arguably, her baptism after the death of Reinhard was a risk, since the dominant political powers of the time did not favour Catholics, and yet Jones delineates the many ways embracing a new faith allowed her to remake herself with a flexibility and creativity not possible in previous or later eras.

In her article, Deepra Dandekar also focuses on a social boundary-defying female leader, Pandita Ramabai Dongre (1858-1922). Reading the two articles together allows one to see both striking similarities and differences in how two exceptional Indian Christian women navigated the gendered racial hierarchy of their time, on either side of a massive sea change in Indian society brought about by British colonial rule. Like Begum Samru, Ramabai faced down discrimination on the basis of both gender and race to emerge as an independent leader of her own domain – the Mukti Mission, a multi-faceted missionary and educational institution unencumbered by the denominational infrastructure that funded and administered most other missions. Like Begum Samru, Ramabai’s indomitable personality has attracted a great deal of positive scholarly and popular attention, which has regrettably flattened the complexity of her life. A celebrity in her own day, Ramabai continues to be celebrated as a proto-feminist, anti-colonial maverick in our own times. Dandekar’s article pierces the hagiographic bubble that surrounds Ramabai through a critical examination of the archive of photographs curated by Ramabai and her ardent publicists. While affirming Ramabai’s impressive legacy as a pioneering female Indian Christian convert leader, Dandekar brings a subaltern feminist sensitivity to power and hierarchy to the photographs documenting the Mukti Mission. What happens, she asks, when we shift our gaze from her commanding presence to the young female residents of Mukti, who were sometimes named but only ever superficially discussed? Attending to them reveals heretofore unexamined dimensions of Ramabai and her fierce, even autocratic hold over the institution and its residents.

In my article, I also engage with the vast corpus of material that surrounds Pandita Ramabai, but focus narrowly on the epistolary exchanges by and about her during Ramabai’s brief residence in England (1883-1886), where she converted to Anglicanism. Thus, my article and Dandekar’s are another pair usefully read together. My interest is in what these exchanges

reveal about the process of racialisation, and how that process may be catalysed by conversion, especially its perceived failure. Insofar as conversion, especially to Christianity, is meant to bring about a transformation in the subject, it is an apt site for examining what aspects of a person are construed as immutable, innate and impervious to change. Juxtaposing the vexed process of Ramabai's conversion (which was perpetually found wanting by those who saw themselves as her spiritual guardians and guides) with Bishop Robert Caldwell's writings about Nadar (then 'Shanar') converts in south India, I argue that it was precisely when the gospel supposedly failed to take hold that racializing momentum accelerated. When faced with a disappointing inability, or refusal, by Indian converts to embody Christianity the way that missionaries did, the latter often attributed the failure to the operation of innate racialised qualities, and thereby rationalised converts' discriminatory treatment within a missionary institution's often stark hierarchy. Although in the Indian context missionaries and converts were distinguished by skin tone, language, and culture, it was *caste* that emerged from this long conversation about sin and redemption, difference and sameness as the characteristic that lent an indelible essence to a person, and a community, which even a new religion could not change.

Readers will find another resonance between Dandekar's research on Ramabai and my own insofar as both of us investigate Ramabai's embrace of maternal authority to establish her autonomy in racist and sexist environments when, as a colonial subject and an Indian woman even that 'natural' authority was precariously held. In the late 19th century and well into the 20th century, there were not many roles for women that made legible and legitimate their capacity to wield great power, especially when patriarchal contempt for women's leadership was compounded by racialised colonial disdain for brown subjects. As I show in my essay, it was precisely the denial of her spiritual authority as mother over her own child, Manorama, that precipitated Ramabai's risky decision in 1885-86 to break with her English patrons, and seek out new supporters in America. Fast forward several decades, when devastating famine swept through the Western districts of British India, and Ramabai traversed the countryside rescuing impoverished and starving women and girls. At this time, Ramabai herself deployed the colonial 'maternalistic' rhetoric to integrate new members into her own community, establishing herself firmly as the head of a new family. And yet, as Dandekar asks, what about the agency or desires of the 'rescued' girls whose eyes addressed donors when their photographs were distributed far and wide to elicit support for the Mission? Moreover, what did being seen by *Ramabai*, who determined who would be recognised and who would not, mean for the girls and young women in these photographs? Dandekar sensitively explores these questions, moving the experiences of the most vulnerable members of the Mukti Mission from periphery to centre.

Readers might also put my article in conversation with Torsten Tschacher's, which advances scholarship on the racialisation of religion through a narrowly focused analysis of the racialisation of Indian Muslims in coastal south India and Ceylon. While Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst has shown how Muslims as a group were minoritised and racialised in British India with consequences for the present day (Morgenstein Fuerst 2017), Tschacher takes a more fine-grained approach to internal divisions within the Indian Muslim community between *ashraf* ('noble') Muslims who claimed lineages of descent back to Central Asia and the Middle East and *ajlaf* ('coarse') Muslims said to be descended from indigenous converts to Islam. While this categorisation had a long history in precolonial Indian discourse, in British India it created new opportunities for those Indian Muslim elites who could claim *ashraf* status. Drawing on newly salient modern discourses of racial descent, they were able to claim recognition as the authorities on true Islam vis-à-vis their *ajlaf* brethren whose indigenised or unlettered Islam was seen as badly in need of reform. In Tschacher's account, the alleged failure of converts to possess knowledge of true Islam becomes the criteria that colonial authorities and Indian elites

alike use to distinguish between two defined groups, and to rationalize reformist measures to improve the supposedly 'inferior' group. Beyond conversion, whether seen as an event or, as here, a centuries'-long process, Tschacher shows that another catalyst for classifying, categorizing and placing individuals and communities into a hierarchy on the basis of characteristics seen as permanent and innate was the introduction of political representation at the local level. When seats on legislative councils throughout the British empire were allocated on the basis of community (often religion, but also caste), the question of who 'a people' were, and who could speak on their behalf, became an increasingly urgent matter. Deftly comparing the racialised discourse surrounding and strategies employed by coastal south Indian Muslims and Ceylonese 'Moors', Tschacher reveals the intricate networks of belonging, and estrangement, crafted by actors in a dynamic political environment.

With Sonja Thomas' article, our attention shifts to the contemporary moment, to an India and a diasporic Indian community in which social boundaries on the basis of caste and race are firmly entrenched, as are the hierarchies that allow for the transmission of wealth, status, and privilege across the generations. And yet, this is also a moment – as all moments are – when privilege is contested and when the complexities of social identity mean that one may be privileged on the basis of caste, for example, in one context, but marginalised, demeaned, or discriminated against on the basis of race or religion in another. Thomas' point of departure is the surprising fact that as many as 70% of the Catholic missionaries currently working in India are Keralan priests of the Syro-Malabar rite, belying the stereotype of missionaries in India as white and foreign. Hindu right opposition to conversion and evangelisation in India today manifests in many ways: through the passage of anti-conversion laws in 12 Indian states, which are used to harass and intimidate Christians of all denominations, and through vigilante violence, which, as Chad Bauman has shown, is directed mostly at Pentecostal pastors and churches (Bauman 2020).

Circulating in India since the 1950s, anti-conversion discourse conjures up an image of a Hindu India preyed upon by foreign white missionaries, where Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi Hindus are seen as especially vulnerable. And yet, as Thomas argues, Syro-Malabar Catholic missionaries are not subject to the same suspicions. Divided into two parts, Thomas' article first engages the historical conditions behind the social distinction that Syrian Christians in Kerala enjoy as a dominant caste, examining how and why Syro-Malabar Catholics began to engage in evangelism after many decades of protecting the exclusivity of their churches from the growing Dalit Bahujan Catholic population. As Thomas shows, not only do Syrian Catholic priests constitute the majority of Catholic missionaries, especially in north India, among mostly Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi congregants, they also swell the upper ranks of the Indian Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the second part of her essay, Thomas asks, what happens, when caste-privileged Syrian Catholic priests travel outside of India and engage in missionary work in the US, aided, in many cases, by ecclesiastical connections between Indian and US bishops? As part of a 'reverse missionary' trend sparked by the diminishing number of American men entering the Catholic priesthood, many Syro-Malabar priests now minister to congregations in rural western and midwestern diocese. How do they navigate the racism that they encounter personally, as well as the legacy of colonial violence and exploitation among indigenous and Latinx congregations in north America?

As part of a larger project investigating these questions through auto-ethnography as well as field and archival research, Thomas's article raises explicitly many of the ethical concerns that the other articles in this issue engage at a historical remove. Depending on context, some aspects of our identity – those we choose, those we inherit, and those we embody whether we like it or not – are more salient than others and get caught up in webs of signification and stratification beyond our control. How do historical actors – and we ourselves in the present

day – use our agency and awareness to push back against the more oppressive aspects of these webs and weave more genuinely egalitarian, feminist, and anti-racist social worlds?

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