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Research Article

Christian Conversion and the Racialisation of Religion in Colonial India

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Building on the work of scholars like Geraldine Heng (2003, 2018), Maria Elena Martinez (2008, 2009), Katharine Kerbner (2018), and Judith Weisenfeld (2017), this article argues that religious conversion, particularly its perceived *failure*, is a key site for analysing race-making in action. Insofar as it is based on the expectation of substantial change, religious conversion brings into relief those aspects of a people or a person that are resistant to change, and thus spurs informal or formal theorizing about a fundamental or absolute essence and the qualities associated with it. In colonial India, the process of change that accompanied conversion to Protestant Christianity was hotly contested. What was mere culture, custom and tradition, and what was a necessary observable index of invisible moral and spiritual transformation? Out of a decades-long conversation about change and its limits among missionaries and converts, a racialised understanding of caste came to be seen as an aspect of the self and the community that was fundamental, absolute and essential and thus impervious to change. As I demonstrate through a close examination of texts by and about two influential Christians in India – Robert Caldwell (1814-1891) and Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) – people could and did debate the *value* ascribed to caste differences, but the fact that caste identity constituted a part of the self that could not change was increasingly asserted as axiomatic.

conversion, *race*, *caste*, *Caldwell*, *Ramabai*

Introduction

Scholars of conversion, race and Christianity in medieval Europe have long been fascinated by the story of the *King of Tars*, a 14th-century chivalric romance set during the Crusades in which the European Christian Princess of Tars marries the Muslim Sultan of Damascus. When the Sultan converts to Christianity, his skin colour miraculously changes from black to white. In *Empire of Magic*, historian of medieval Europe Geraldine Heng employs this story to argue that 'race-making' is a perennially recurring feature of culture and thus long precedes modern 'scientific' racism (Heng 2003: 230). According to modern 'scientific' race-making, which arose in the context of European colonization of Asia, Africa, Australia and the Americas, physiognomy and skin colour are associated with purported inner qualities, and that association is explained through emergent evolutionary theory. But according to the premodern race-making at work in the *King of Tars*, a theory of religion is at work that conceptualises religion as a powerful force capable of effecting dramatic and instantaneous racial transformations (Heng 2003: 234). In the study of religion, culture and society in India, 'race' is much less frequently used than 'caste' to understand social difference, stratification and hierarchy. As Arjun Appadurai notes, "caste" has functioned as a gatekeeping concept that limits anthropological (and historical) theorizing about India, defining the "quintessential and dominant" questions that guide scholarly inquiry (Appadurai 1986: 357). Increasingly, though, scholars are bringing scholarship on caste-based social stratification into conversation with scholarship on race and racialisation, propelled by anti-caste and anti-racist social justice movements in the US and India (Natrajan and Goodenough 2009, Thomas 2020, Reddy 2005,

Wilkerson 2020). Eschewing essentialist notions of race, these scholars focus less on whether 'caste' or 'race' actually refer to any inherent qualities, focusing more on *race-making* itself, the subtle everyday theorizing that people engage in when assigning fixed attributes to groups in the formation of racial hierarchies. As Heng puts it (2018: 3) in her oft-cited definition,

> "Race" is one of the primary names we have – a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological and political commitments it recognizes – that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differently to human groups. Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment. My understanding, thus, is that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content.

By turning attention towards the *process* of racialization, as a feature of human culture operative in innumerable contexts, we can begin to see that "racializing momentum …manifests unevenly and not identically, in different places and times" (Heng 2018: 4). The work of historians then becomes one of identifying those moments when racializing momentum picks up speed in order to illuminate the "dynamic field of forces within which miscellaneous instances of race-making can occur under varied local conditions" (Heng 2018: 4). Building on the work of scholars like Heng (2003, 2018), Maria Elena Martinez (2008, 2009), Katharine Kerbner (2018), and Judith Weisenfeld (2017), this article argues that religious conversion is a key site for analysing race-making in action. Insofar as it is based on the expectation of substantial change, religious conversion brings into relief those aspects of a people or a person that are resistant to change, and therefore liable to be constructed as fundamental and essential.[1]

For example, in 12th-century Europe, Jewish identity took on racial characteristics, as defined by Heng, discernible in its imperviousness to religious change. As the case of the 'Jewish pope' illustrates, Jewishness was thought to cling to converts and their descendants like "sticky residues that uneasily remain" (Heng 2018: 76). When powerful churchmen from Peter the Venerable to Bernard of Clairvaux weighed the candidacy of Anacletus II, they ultimately rejected him because his great-grandfather had been a Jew. Heng writes, "*Four generations* after a conversion, the descendent of a once-Jew was still tagged as a Jew" (Heng 2018: 77). Two centuries later, in late medieval Spain, the *limpieza de sangre* (lit. "purity of blood") requirements adopted by many institutions operationalised this understanding in policy. Used to bar converts from Judaism, and later Islam, and their descendants down to four generations from military service, universities and ecclesiastical institutions, the *limpieza de sangre* statutes were based on the assumption that the 'stain' of prior religious identity was transmitted through inheritance (Martinez 2009: 27). As Maria Elena Martinez documents, inherited, fundamental essence was sometimes designated in texts by the word *raza,* a new usage for a term previously employed in the context of animal husbandry, particularly horse breeding. When Spain colonized the New World and as New Spain was brought into the ambit of the Atlantic slave trade, the Castilian *limpieza de sangre* system was transformed to encompass (and contribute to) complex new social systems, created by intermarriage, conversion, and slavery. Known as the *sistema de castas*, this more elaborate system specified the various group

[1] Conversion is certainly not the only site for race-making, and perhaps not even the most important one. In their influential study, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2014) make a strong case that the state plays an outsized role, particularly in modernity, in constructing, regulating and giving weight to racial categories through policy and state practices.

identities recognized and regulated by the state, as illustrated in the famous genre of the *casta* paintings (Martinez 2008: chapter 9). Some varieties of *raza* came to be seen as more fundamental, essential, and unalterable than others. The religion of Muslim, Jewish, and later native American converts, may have been a stain that could be eventually washed away through decades of pious Christian conduct, but the singular weight of blackness for people of African descent constituted a *raza* that could never be shed (Martinez 2009: 30-31).[2] Many more examples could illustrate how religious conversion, or more precisely its *failure*, serves as a key site for race-making.

This article examines this pattern more closely in the context of colonial India, where British and American Protestant missionaries exhibited a curious ambivalence towards converts fuelled by the desire to see massive personal, social and spiritual transformation while also positing the existence of qualities deemed essential, absolute, and fundamental to that person or people that would make complete change impossible. This purportedly fundamental essence that refused or resisted change was theorized by historical actors in different ways. Sometimes people assigned it to an ancestral inheritance transmitted through lineage; at other times, it was ascribed to religion, understood less as a malleable form of culture, and more as a force that effected or resisted change. And yet, like Christians before them in medieval Europe and Mexico, Protestant missionaries in India did hold out the hope that – over time and with diligent effort – fundamental change was possible. The project of evangelization, after all, makes little sense without such a premise and promise. Still, while they actively sought the conversion of Indians to Christianity, they were rarely satisfied with the extent, depth, or genuineness of that conversion. In the gap between how English and American Protestants embodied Christianity, and how Indian converts did so, enormous pressure was exerted on the latter to conform to what the former assumed to be theologically correct, socially respectable, and culturally superior.

This is where the second part of Heng's definition of race-making becomes relevant. For race-making is not just about ascribing particular personality or character traits and intellectual, emotional or moral dispositions to people according to their purported 'race'; it is also about the unequal "distribution of positions and powers" so as to create and maintain a racial hierarchy. In the realm of religious conversion, so long as the "sticky residue" attached to supposedly inferior racialised identities is thought to adhere to the self, access to power, privilege and status can and will be withheld. In their more expansive moments, British and American Protestant missionaries in India upheld a vision of conversion as a liberating experience that allowed one to shed the constraints of culture, history and family, permitting the individual to float free as a saved soul enjoying communion with other saved souls. But it is difficult to imagine *any* historical context in which that utopian vision would be realised. Certainly, in 19th- and 20th-century India, conversion to Protestant Christianity was thoroughly entangled with power relations among, within and between communities. Thus, the process of change was hotly contested. What aspects of a person – dress, demeanour, diet, speech, marriage customs, moral character traits – could and should change upon conversion? And what aspects need not change? What was mere culture, custom and tradition, and what was a necessary observable index of invisible moral and spiritual transformation? These questions were debated with intense emotional investment on all sides.

[2] Portuguese travellers and colonizers in 16th century India were the first to use the word *casta* to describe similar social patterns they observed in India, thus setting in motion centuries of efforts to understand, regulate, stamp out or defend the dynamic social processes popularly, and erroneously, call 'the caste system'. There is no 'caste system', just as there is no such thing as 'race'. To call it such obscures the many ways in which knowledge and power have produced this social system over time (Dirks 2001).

Out of this long conversation about change and its limits a racialized understanding of caste came to be seen as an aspect of the self and the community that was fundamental, absolute, and essential and thus impervious to change. People could and did debate the *value* ascribed to racial and caste differences, but the fact that were aspects of or layers of the self that could not change was increasingly asserted as axiomatic. The lives of two influential Christians in India – Robert Caldwell (1814-1891) and Pandita Ramabai (neé Ramabai Dongre [1858-1922]) – offer excellent vantage points on this set of issues. Their lives and careers in India took shape at a moment of hardening social boundaries under British colonialism. Colonial ethnology (itself informed by generations of missionary ethnographers) sought to understand and explain social differences based on race, religion, and caste, institutionalising those understandings in new educational, professional, and economic structures (Dirks 2001, Gottschalk 2012, Viswanathan 1998). Far from passively adapting to this discourse, Indians whose aspirations compelled them to navigate those social structures, and whose voices thus are preserved in the colonial archive, actively engaged with those categories themselves, and sought through their own writings and collective action to change their valence.

In order to contextualize the ways that race-making operated in texts by and about Caldwell and Ramabai, I first offer a brief overview of Protestant missionary views and practices on caste and conversion. In the span of 200 years, these views changed from tolerance to a fierce commitment to eliminate caste-observances among 'Native Christians', and a conviction that 'caste' represented the greatest obstacle to true Christianisation, which stubbornly eluded and yet invited elimination. In the second section, I turn to the works of Robert Caldwell. In order to explain why his evangelistic efforts in Tirunelveli, a district in the then Madras Presidency, bore so little fruit, Caldwell, I argue, developed a complex theory of caste-based racialised essence in conversation with both Christian cosmologies and emerging 'scientific' views of race. In the third section, I analyse a trove of letters between Pandita Ramabai and various interlocutors in England over the course of her conversion process, which took place amidst extraordinary pressures and in a context in which racialisation processes in the realm of religion, caste, ethnicity, language, and so forth had created a deeply hierarchical society, not only in British India but in the imperial centre, England, as well. The letters shed light on how Ramabai and her Anglican mentors navigated a complex racial formation structured not only by race, but also by gender- and age-based privilege and sectarian bias. In this fraught context, one clearly sees the racializing momentum accelerate at moments when the conversion process falters (from Ramabai's Anglican mentors' point of view, that is). In response to her tenacious refusal to assimilate to a 'proper' Christian faith, Ramabai's mentors conjured theories of her essential 'Hindoo' and 'Brahman' nature. As I argue, race-making is not a one-sided affair, where subjugated people submit to the theorising of another. Rather, what the failure of conversion reveals, at least in this 19th-century Protestant context, is a dynamic of thrust and parry, resulting in a co-created discourse that construes 'caste' as an absolute, fundamental essence that does not change with religious conversion.

Protestant Missionary Views on Race, Caste and Religion

Ramabai and Caldwell's discourse about conversion, caste, and race emerged in the context of decades of debate among missionaries and Indian Christians over the compatibility of caste and Christianity.[3] As Dennis Hudson has shown, the first generation of Protestant missionaries in South India – German Lutheran Pietists sent to the European trading outpost Tranquebar in 1706 by the Danish Halle Mission – did not seek to change caste observances among Christian converts (Hudson 2000). Within the framework of Pietism, conversion was seen as an

[3] Since this is a huge area of research, I cannot be comprehensive, but I would like to discuss a few ways in which this debate was raised within Protestant missions in South India, the region I know best.

individual spiritual awakening that need not disrupt the traditional order of society Thus, many aspects of Tamil culture were retained including caste observances in commensality and marriage.[4] Even the physical churches built by German Lutherans were organized to maintain physical separation of castes so that dominant caste Vellalans were not exposed to the supposed ritual pollution of historically marginalized castes (Hudson 2000: 130). Church seating arrangements were organized according to caste, with the Vellalans sitting in front on mats, while the low-status members of the artisan castes sat in the rear on the bare floor. Accordingly, the Vellalans in front took part in communion first, and thus avoided the supposedly polluting saliva (lit. *eccil*) of the artisan castes.

The continuation of caste observances among Indian Christians was met with consternation by the second generation of Anglican missionaries who took over these same churches in the 1820s. In a letter issued in 1833 to the Anglican churches in India and Ceylon, the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta, Daniel Wilson (a member of the evangelical Clapham Sect in England, known for their reforming zeal) sought to put an end to caste observances within congregations of converts to Christianity, arguing that such adherence led to 'backsliding' into Hinduism. He wrote, "The distinction of castes must be abandoned, decidedly, immediately, finally; and those who profess to belong to Christ must give this proof of their having really put off…the old, and having really put on the new man, in Jesus Christ" (cited in Hoole 2003: 43). When the letter was read aloud from pulpits in Madras, Trichinopoly, and Tanjore, this directive met with significant resistance; many Indian Christians, including catechists and schoolteachers, left the Anglican church (Hoole 2003: 43). But by and large what came to be known as the 'Wilson line' was held by missionaries, and 'caste' emerged in Protestant missionary discourse as the great social evil afflicting Indian society (Dirks 2001: 131). In 1848, Protestants from across all denominations (except the Leipzig Mission) ratified a consensus document crafted at the Madras Missionary Conference that condemned the maintenance of caste differences through eating and marriage, dictating that "only those who broke caste by eating food prepared by a pariah should be entitled to baptism" (Hoole 2003: 43).

American missionaries had such an aversion to such observances that they required that catechists and mission employees prove that they had put aside caste distinctions by regularly participating in inter-caste 'love feasts', for which the food was prepared by cooks from historically marginalized castes (Chandler 1912: 144). Ruefully looking back after many years, John Chandler regretted that the mission had not arrived at a better name for these rituals, whose coercive nature drained all the 'love' out of the wished-for fellowship. Catechists whose livelihood and professional identity depended on mission employment were compelled to eat whenever and with whomever their supervisors directed them to, even if, as one frustrated catechist wrote, "I do not like to eat often" (Chandler 1912: 145).

Thus, one could argue that for these missionaries, caste was viewed as a less fundamental and essential and more easily shed constituent part of the self. It was a 'superstition' or a false belief that one could take off like a garment; indeed, one *had* to take it off in order to recognize one's fellow Christians as members of the same community. Around this time, though, a new discourse surrounding caste, which conflated it with emerging colonial 'scientific' concepts of race, was gaining traction among missionaries and Indian Christian communities alike.

[4] When reflecting on Protestant attitudes towards caste-based observances, we should recall Nicholas Dirks' research showing that caste divisions or the status attributed to different caste groups in the early eighteenth century was not as rigid or as racialised as they became in the nineteenth century (Dirks 2001: 63-80). Groups could move up in the social hierarchy by emulating the behaviour of or providing service to high status royal linages. For a similar argument focused on the kingdom of Marwar in northwestern India see Divya Cherian (2023).

Robert Caldwell, Missionary Ethnography and the Racialisation of Caste

The work of Robert Caldwell is particularly illustrative here. "All like sheep have gone astray," wrote Caldwell in 1849 alluding to the universality of our human propensity to sin. "But" he continued, "'everyone…hath turned to his own way,' and some advantage and interest may be found in considering the characteristics of the very peculiar phase of error which obtains in this province" (Caldwell 1849: 6). Caldwell recognized that all humans are alike in being both prone to sin and capable of spiritual regeneration. But his experiences as a missionary and embeddedness within the administrative structures of colonisation made him curious about documenting these differences and mapping them not only against Christian visions of humanity, but also in relationship to new 'scientific' paradigms for understanding difference.

A Scottish clergyman, Caldwell came to India in 1841 at age 24 with the nonconformist London Missionary Society, but later joined the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). He is probably best known for his *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Language of Families*, originally published in 1856, which established the distinctiveness of the Dravidian language family from the Indo-Aryan or Indo-European languages of India. The *Comparative Grammar* fully engaged with late 19th-century racial science, applying the author's special area of expertise, comparative philology, to the problem of distinguishing the world's different language families and associating them with an emergent vision of the world's different racial 'stocks' (Dirks 2001:142, Seth 2010). With a thesis that had long-lasting effects on south Indian culture, society and politics, it advanced the argument that Brahman Aryans and Dravidians belonged to two distinct racial groups, mobilizing evidence of religious, philological, and cultural differences to make the case. These ideas were initially formulated in Caldwell's first publication, *The Tinnevelly Shanars: A Sketch of Their Religion, and their Moral Condition and Characteristics, As a Caste – With Special Reference to the Facilities and Hindrances of the Progress of Christianity Among Them* (1849), which focused on the community from among whom the SPG mission in south India gained the majority of adherents. Written to raise awareness and funds among missionary supporters in England, *The Tinnevelly Shanars* offers a clear window onto how religious conversion – or more precisely its failure to bring about a broad process of transformation – accelerated the momentum of race-making in this particular historical context. In *The Tinnevelly Shanars*, Caldwell develops a complex theory of culture, 'race' and change according to which numerous factors interacted to create the conditions that either facilitated or inhibited a dramatic positive change when individuals or groups were exposed to the Christian gospel. Moral qualities were transmitted through relatively fixed ancestral 'stock', but they were also fostered over time through the more malleable medium of language and culture (custom, tradition, historical memory, etc.), and they could be radically and quickly affected by the climatic environment. If we bracket the popular 21st century assumption that 'race' always and necessarily has to do with biology, we can look afresh at the metaphoric language that Caldwell used to present his theory, combining Christian views with new ideas about human nature popular among scholars of the time. Drawing on Jesus' parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9), Caldwell wrote, "In Europe the good seed of the word is sown in good soil. In India the climate is pestilential, and the soil is yet to be created" (Caldwell 1849: 66). Caldwell's silent affirmation of the beneficial effects of Europe's moderate climate in contrast to the "pestilential" nature of India's tropical drew on the miasma theory of disease prevalent at the time. This theory explained, among other things, why "naturally" robust Europeans fell sick so quickly in mission stations and colonial outposts, and why they needed pith helmets and thick walls to separate and shield them from the malevolent climate. A more enduring influence even than climate in his model, is culture, metaphorically conjured through Caldwell's contrast between the plain, infertile dirt of India and the good soil of Europe. The beneficial influence of Christianity as a form of culture

enriched the soil of Western culture like compost, creating optimal conditions for Christianity as an agent of salvation. He writes (Caldwell 1849: 66-67):

> Ages of antecedent Christian influence have prepared the European mind for receiving and exhibiting an exact impress of the Truth. Christianity has pervaded our laws, and social institutions, our science and literature, and national habits…Hence in most cases when a European is converted from sin to God, all the influences by which he is surrounded are favourable to the development of a high Christian character. But how different from the position in which the Hindu convert to Christianity is placed! The principles and habits received by tradition from his fathers, his mental structure, all his remembrances and all his associations, the precepts of the national religion, the peculiarities of the national character, and the influence of the family and the caste – all those are directly opposed to his growth in piety; and most of those influences are incapable of being turned to better account.

One could argue that insofar as these moral qualities arise from forces we would classify as culture – habits, laws, traditions, memories, religious precepts, etc. – not from physiology or biology they are not associated with 'race'. But through Caldwell's representation of these qualities as fundamental to each group and impervious to change – "incapable of being turned to better account" – they are transformed into what Heng calls "strategic essentialisms" and thus racialised. Elsewhere in *The Tinnevelly Shanars,* Caldwell takes up the question of whether the biologically rooted 'ancestral stock' of Europeans and Indians differs in substantial ways using a different Biblical parable, that of a small amount of leaven (the salvific effects of the gospel) transforming flour and water into bread (Matthew 13:33). According to Caldwell's racial theorizing, we are not individual monads, placed "separately and singly" into the world. "Every man is a link in a long chain, united in weal and in woe with those that preceded and those that follow him….Not only the present, but perhaps several succeeding generations of native Christians, must pass away before the hereditary influence of heathenism ceases to operate, and the mass be thoroughly leavened and purified by the principal of a new life" (Caldwell 1849: 68). Like the Roman Catholic missionaries in New Spain, or medieval churchmen contemplating the suitability of a descendent of Jewish converts for high office, Caldwell holds out the possibility of thorough transformation through Christian conversion, but only after several generations. In Caldwell's theory, character appears to be shaped first and foremost by some kind of inherited essence, which is shaped by climate and culture to arrive at a particularly fixed form. Religion, as a particularly influential form of culture, can have a powerful effect on character, uplifting even the most 'degraded wretches' from their lowly station. The miraculous saving grace of God can take this process even further.

Still, when Caldwell takes the long view, incorporating an evolutionary analytic into his understanding of the differences between Europeans and Shanars he affirms that there is a fundamental, inherited difference that cannot be changed even by the grace of God. He writes (Caldwell 1849: 103):

> When the Shanars were, as they are now, a settled, a peaceable, and an industrious people, our ancestors were illiterate, shivering savages, or wandering robbers; and had not that grace which bringeth salvation arrested them, notwithstanding their high organization and advantages of climate, the race might have remained savage to the present day. It is the Lord's grace alone that has made us to differ. And why should not that same grace elevate the Shanars? They might not rise to the same height….[because] the physical circumstances of the Shanars are inferior to those of our forefathers, -- but why should it not raise them

> proportionately as much above their present state, both in mind and in heart, as it raised the Angles, the Jutes and Saxons above theirs?

Caldwell's model incorporates a notion of some kind of fundamental essence carried through those generations that inhibits that transformative process, not only slowing the process but also limiting its extent.

By the time he wrote *The Comparative Grammar*, Caldwell's views of south Indian communities were fully informed by a broader 'scientific' understanding of race, but I submit that it was in the face of the intractability of Shanars, from Caldwell's point of view, their unwillingness to submit to the conversion program he sought to impose on them that his race-making project began. *The Tinnevelly Shanars* is filled with condescending descriptions of the Shanars' supposed ignorance, timidity, and indolence that are shocking today, and which were, in its day, insulting to educated members of this community when they encountered print versions of the book themselves, as I discuss shortly. Such views helped to rationalise the authoritarian hold that Caldwell, along with other Anglican missionaries, exerted over the administration of the mission and its many employees. We are reminded again of Heng's definition of racialisation, which links the attribution of moral qualities to groups with the differential distribution of status and privilege in order to create a racial hierarchy. For the SPG in the 1840s had a very different attitude towards indigenous church leadership than did their German predecessors in Tirunelveli, the Lutherans of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), who encouraged more self-sufficiency and 'native agency'.

When the SPG took over the evangelization of Tirunelveli in the 1830s (in coordination with the Church Missionary Society, with whom they divided the large district into two), two generations had passed during which the Indian congregations were largely self-organising, led by Indian catechists and 'country priests'. With the arrival of Caldwell and the other SPG missionaries, this state of affairs radically changed. As Ulrike Schröder writes, "They transferred the model of the Anglican parochial model onto the mission field. This model relied completely on an ecclesiastical hierarchy and paternal supervision….organized as strongly hierarchical, it gave all authority to the missionaries as heads of their own missionary establishments" (Schröder 2010: 33-34). In this context, Caldwell's racialised views of caste, articulated within a learned and rational framework that drew on both Biblical notions of ancestral sin (Exodus 20:5 and Exodus 34:7) and emerging racial science, served as a helpful rationale for excluding Shanars from leadership. He wrote (Caldwell 1849: 68):

> In the majority of cases it will hold true morally, as it does physically, that they who are descended from a sickly stock and have themselves been sickly during the period of their youth, though they should be removed to a better climate, will continue stunted and dwarfed to the end, and never be competent to lead the way in any high enterprise. Our native Christians suffer for the offences of their forefathers, as well as their own. The diseases of the soul are certainly as transmissive as those of the body.

Indeed, it is the unmistakable conclusion of Caldwell's book that the Shanars' inability to be fully Christianized due to all these supposed negative qualities – the pestilential climate, the baneful influence of Hindu culture and the permanent inferiority of their "physical circumstances" – makes them unfit for leadership within the mission. Beyond advancing a racialised theory of caste that justified the differential allocation of power and resources within the mission, *The Tinnevelly Shanars* introduced an idea that would have far-reaching effects on South Indian society, namely that the Shanars were members of an autonomous group, distinct from Brahmans whose religion they had only superficially assimilated. After detailing

the ways in which Tamil religion preserves a uniquely primitive form of 'demonolatry' that probably existed, he argues, over all of India going back to antiquity, Caldwell positions Brahmanism as a foreign import, brought by a different 'race' who abhorred bloody sacrifices, unlike the original Tamils which employed them consistently in worshipping their 'devils'. By the time Caldwell writes *The Comparative Grammar,* seven years after *The Tinnevelly Shanars*, his assertions about the nature of different groups are thoroughly in conversation with Aryan racial theory, as formulated and popularized by German comparative linguists like Max Mueller. The different words that Brahmans and non-Brahman Tamils use in religious contexts, the differences in conceptualising and naming deities, the variations in temple design and ritual practice are all cemented by their association with purported racial difference, where race is defined more narrowly as descent from distinct ancestral stocks. The *Tinnevelly Shanars'* somewhat tentative speculations about the foreignness of Brahmans has been replaced by the *Comparative Grammar's* confident theory of the Aryan's slow and steady invasion and conquest of Dravidian south India (Dirks 2001: 141).

In classifying Shanars, Caldwell identified them as both not-Hindu and not-Aryan thereby conflating religious and racial identity, with the resulting amalgam seen as something fundamental, absolute and essential to this group. In this way, Caldwell the missionary ethnographer sought to identify one more distinct leaf – the Dravidian – in the human family tree, whose vertical orientation with English-speaking Protestant whites loftily fluttering in the breeze was unquestioned. And yet, for Caldwell, the missionary evangelist, Shanars were also an "impressionable and improvable race" capable of Christianisation. Indeed, in spite of the authoritarian nature of SPG mission administration in Tirunelveli, many Tamil Christian leaders did rise up through the ranks. Others rebelled, including Arumai Nayakam Sattampillai, an Indian Christian whose early academic excellence augured a distinguished career within the SPG. Sattampillai was among the first from the community to openly contest Caldwell's demeaning representation, sparked by his reading *The Tinnevelly Shanars* around 1850. Sattampillai's Tamil translation, which he is said to have circulated in India, Burma, and Ceylon, galvanised a sense of shared caste identity among people separated by language, religion and geography (Hardgrave 1969: 74, Sarguner 1883: 40-41). In 1858, along with several other Nadars (*Nadar* being the current preferred term for the community, popularised by this very group of activists) who shared his sense of injured pride and resentment towards missionary authoritarianism, Sattampillai led a schism and founded the Hindu Church of Lord Jesus, or the Hindu Christian Church, purging their church of everything smacking of European origins to return to an 'original' Christianity suitable for Indians (Hardgrave: 76-77). The controversies associated with *The Tinnvelly Shanars* resurfaced in the 1880s when several educated members of the community utilized the full range of vernacular and English print media at their disposal – from newspapers to self-published books, tracts, and pamphlets – to challenge the claims made by Caldwell (now Assistant Bishop) and advancing new narratives about their castes' racial origins and nature. Some argued that Nadars were Dravidian Kshatriyas, others that they shared a common Aryan ancestor with Brahmans, but they all were committed to restoring the besmirched honour of their community (Hardgrave: 78-90).

In seeking recognition for a glorious past, and seeking to resurrect a purer, more noble way of life and corresponding identity, they had much in common with modernist reform projects in other parts of India. In concert with this was a preoccupation with the conduct of women, a policing of sexuality and movement so as to ensure the transmission of a 'pure' inherited identity across generations. One Nadar activist, Samuel Sarguner, wrote in a letter to the commissioner of the 1871 census explicitly linking the status of the community with the intensity of its patriarchal surveillance of women: "any person who has personal knowledge of the Shanars will find himself constrained to admit that the relations of the sexes among them are as rigid as among any class or race on the race of the world" (Sarguner: 76). Scholars

have long viewed this movement as an example of Sanskritisation (Hardgrave 1969, Kent 2004). But what if we looked at it through the lens of race and racialisation? The transmission across the generations of a racialised identity newly imbued with significance necessarily requires the policing of women's sexuality to maintain 'purity' of lineage. The rallying of Nadars across religious lines on the basis of a shared, essential, and fundamental identity suggests not only that foreign missionaries had assigned new meaning to caste differences – seeing them as connected to racial and civilizational differences – but also that a group of Indians had themselves appropriated this racialised discourse. What they contested was not that Nadarness was 'false', a cloak easily shed upon conversion to Christianity, but that the derogatory meanings associated with it were false, as was the historical genealogy that defined it as 'low' or 'ignoble'. A new form of race-making was well entrenched. Such ideas circulated widely in 19th-century India through a vernacular public sphere bound by a shared interest in reform in which, and through which, and by which new futures and new selves – communal and individual – were imagined.

Pandita Ramabai, Caste and Conversion

It was by gaining a voice and some modest fame within that reform-minded vernacular print public sphere that Pandita Ramabai launched her remarkable career. She was born in 1858 into a Chitpavan Brahmin Marathi family just as British rule in India was shifting hands from the East Indian Company to the British Crown (and when Tirunelveli Nadars were organizing around a racialised sense of their caste origins). Raised quite unconventionally, Ramabai was educated in Sanskrit by her mother and father, who travelled for many years with their three children as itinerant reciters of the Puranas. After her parents' death, she and her brother continued as itinerant preachers – largely on foot – for 6 years, until they found a base of support in reformist circles in Bengal for their advocacy of women's education, and grew close to members of the Brahmo Samaj (Ramabai in Shah 1977: 15-17). Word of her public speaking reached England via missionary newsletters when a correspondent from Bengal told of a "young Brahman lady of twenty-two years of age, slight and girlish looking, with a fair complexion and light grey eyes, who with her brother, was holding meetings on the education and emancipation of women" (Sister Geraldine in Shah 1977: 7). After her brother died, Ramabai married across caste lines to a Bengali Kayastha friend of her brother, but was widowed after 16 months of marriage.[5] When she moved to Poona at the invitation of social reformers, she became an early leader in the push for women's education. In May of 1883, she published *Stri Niti Dharma*, an early critique of Brahmanical patriarchy written in Marathi, 600 copies of which were purchased by the British colonial government. The proceeds afforded her the means to travel to England, where she planned to study medicine at Cheltenham Ladies College with the support of an Anglican order, the Community of St. Mary's, missionary members of which she had met in Poona. During the sea passage, Ramabai wrote a long letter to a Brahmo friend rebuffing concerns that she would convert to Christianity; and yet, within a few months she was baptised (Kosambi 2017: 102-109). In an autobiographical sketch written early in her stay in England, she condensed her life thus far into three clear stages: "As I was by birth a Brahman, my religion was at first Hinduism. Then for a time I was a Theist, believing that Theism was taught in [the] Vedas. In the last two months, however, I have accepted Christianity and hope shortly to receive Holy Baptism" (Ramabai in Shah 1977: 18). During her two and half years in England Ramabai was, as Meera Kosambi writes,

[5] Kayasthas were another group who contested their assigned caste status in British India. A relatively prosperous community, well represented in the bureaucratic ranks of both the late Mughal Empire and the British colonial state, Kayasthas were classified according to Brahmanical varna categories as Shudras. Ramabai herself, writing around 1883, uses this designation to describe her husband's caste (Ramabai in Shah 1977: 18). But as early as 1889, the Kayastha Sabha issued a public notice that they were, like the Nadars of the Madras Presidency, the region's Kshatriyas (Bellenoit 2023).

subjected to "the full force of the asymmetrical power of relations of the empire through its racism, Orientalism, religious insularity, authoritarianism and patriarchal beliefs" (Kosambi 2003: 21). Thus, her conversion took shape within the crucible of Empire. The power struggles between Ramabai and the Anglican nun assigned to be her mentor and guide, Sister Geraldine of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, are well documented in their voluminous correspondence, providing an apt context for observing at a granular level the process of race-making in response to the 'failure' of conversion. When converts refuse changes imposed upon them that resistance is often theorized as arising from fundamental and immutable aspects of the self, their 'race'; in turn, such evidence of a partial or incomplete conversion on the basis of attributed immutable racialised qualities legitimates the denial of access to power, authority and resources within a gendered and classed racial hierarchy.

The letters between Sister Geraldine (henceforth, Geraldine) and Ramabai, along with ones written about Ramabai by a host of British religious and educational leaders, were first gathered by Geraldine in 1907, when Ramabai, by then the leader of Mukti Mission, a multifaceted independent missionary institution and school, gained worldwide fame due to a proto-Pentecostal revival in 1905 at Mukti (McGee 1999). Geraldine continued to collect letters by and about Ramabai from other correspondents and published them in 1917 in several volumes. These fascinating documents have been analysed by many scholars including Gauri Viswanathan (1998), Meera Kosambi (2003, 2017), and Antoinette Burton (1995). Here, I analyse them to show how the momentum of race-making accelerated around the complex process of Ramabai's conversion. Before delving into the letters, it's important to say something about Geraldine, who was designated Ramabai's sponsor during her stay in England. Geraldine had worked in the order's Community House in Poona, teaching European and Eurasian students. She returned to England in early 1883 to recover from what she termed a "severe nerve break-down" due to overwork (Geraldine in Shah 1977: 5). Yet, because of her experience in India she was tasked with the supervision of Ramabai's secular and religious education in England, though she felt herself far from capable. Reflecting back, she writes ruefully, "All I can say is I strove, as I hope I have always done, to do my best. My best was a failure" (Geraldine in Shah 1977: 5). The letters, however partial a record they provide of the actual relationship between these two women, convey affection in addition to significant conflict. While Ramabai addressed Geraldine with the nickname Ajeebai (Marathi for 'grandmother', sometimes teasingly 'Old Ajeebai'), she also "took keen delight in intellectual fencing" (Geraldine in Shah: 4). This can be seen in the two women's protracted exchanges over theology. Ramabai's Brahmo background, rationalism, and intellectual independence did not permit her to accept the Anglican doctrine of the Trinity, which affirmed the divinity of Jesus, nor other aspects of Anglicanism that insisted on literal belief in the miraculous, such as the doctrine of the Virgin Birth (Viswanathan 1998). Relatedly, they fought about whether non-conformists, including Methodists, Quakers, and Baptists, should be excluded from the Christian community as heretics.[6] In addition, there were fierce exchanges about the propriety

[6] In the 1880s, the Church of England continued to exercise a lot of influence over English society. Its privileges as a state church had become attenuated through a series of laws that granted dissenters (those who refused to submit to the authority of the Church of England, including Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, etc.) rights to worship in public (1689), teach their doctrines to their own children, train ministers (1719), and serve as Parliamentarians (1835). Yet, prejudice and suspicion towards dissenters among conservative Anglicans remained for decades. Education, in particular, was long a stronghold of Anglican control. Formal acceptance of the 39 Articles of the Church of England was required for matriculation and graduation from Oxford until 1854 and graduation from Cambridge University until 1856. See David. L. Wykes, (n.d.) "Legislation" in *Dissenting Academies Project*. The Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature in English:
https://www.qmul.ac.uk/sed/religionandliterature/dissenting-academies/historical-information/legislation/, accessed 20.01.2024.

of Ramabai teaching Sanskrit to young male students, a plan that evoked a storm of anxiety over Ramabai's sexual honour, and the possibility that doubts about her honour among elite men in India would spoil her capacity to effectively work for Indian women's emancipation (Kent 2021). They also quarrelled over what scholars would now call Ramabai's inculturation of Christianity, which Geraldine judged as "little clingings to caste prejudice" (Geraldine in Shah 1977: 100-101). These latter quarrels may seem thoroughly petty, and yet it was on the ground of practice that the genuineness and thoroughness of Ramabai's conversion was fought.

The ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Community of St. Mary (CSM) was suffused by paternalism. Bear in mind that by the time Ramabai arrived in Wantage in 1883, she had walked 2000 miles across India with her brother, married and had a child, published a book, and achieved fame within and beyond India. Yet as a new convert, and a colonial subject, she was treated like a fragile child whose path must be guided by others. In the letters gathered by Geraldine, the authority of male clerics like the founder of the Order, Canon William Butler (1843-1921) and Anglican Bishops with experience in Lahore and Mysore, was invoked, or asserted, as that of a protective father. Similarly, Geraldine saw herself as acting *in loco parentis* to Ramabai and thus empowered to transfer that authority to Dorothea Beale, the Principal of Cheltenham Ladies College, where Ramabai studied. Well aware of Ramabai's intellectual gifts and promise, Geraldine, Beale, Butler, and assorted bishops, jealously guarded her throughout her time in England, arguing that such control was necessary to insulate her from excessive public attention lest it "inflame her vanity" (Geraldine in Shah: 22). However, before long, Ramabai expanded her network of contacts beyond the Anglican notables that Beale and Geraldine approved of, in large part by means of her assiduous letter writing. This afforded her first-hand exposure to the sectarian divisions that roiled English society – its own stratification system whose vulnerability to racialisation as defined by Heng would be a worthy subject of investigation.

An early point of conflict concerned the design of a cross potentially to be worn by Indian Sisters in the CSM. A Sister Eleanor (henceforth Eleanor) wished it to be inscribed with Latin words like those of the English Sisters. But Ramabai preferred the words to be in Sanskrit. This raised an issue that vexed those who sought the inculturation of Christianity in India from the beginning – what elements of culture are "contrary to our blessed Religion" and must be swept away, and what may be kept as harmless custom (Ramabai in Shah: 28)? In this letter one sees Ramabai navigating several layers of the raced and gendered Anglican ecclesiastical hierarchy, including not only Geraldine and Eleanor, but also Father Goreh (Nehemiah Goreh [1825-1895]), a fellow Chitpavan Brahman convert living in England, who endorsed the cross in spite of his Brahmo origins, and opined about the colour of the habit the women would wear. She wrote (Ramabai in Shah 1977: 28, emphasis in original):

> Father Goreh no doubt is good, old and wise, and perhaps he thinks right, but I am sorry to say in some things I cannot agree with him. Whatever may be others' opinion, all the good old things are *very, very* dear to me, and if I do not find anything in them that is contrary to our blessed Religion, I will not and must not part with them. I do not want to take from others what is not wanted, and also what is not good for my country.

Anticipating criticism that her attachment to Sanskrit was a vestige of her prior religious commitments (or perhaps in response to conversations that are not part of the written record), Ramabai writes that Sanskrit is not – to her – the "language of the gods" but merely her favourite language and "the oldest language of my dear native land" (Ramabai in Shah 1977: 27-29). No other letters shed light on what became of this initiative. Yet, this one clearly

showcases Ramabai's remarkable assertiveness: neither the authority of a male Native Christian elder, nor a senior white female monastic had more weight than her conscience in determining what symbols of Christian affiliation she would wear.[7] In addition, it highlights Ramabai's persistent refusal to acquiesce to colonialist versions of Christian universality. British evangelists like Eleanor upheld a vision of Christianity as a universal religion meant to embrace any and all, and yet, the embodied forms used to convey affiliation with it were often, consciously or not, culturally European or British. In turn, Ramabai's attachment to Sanskrit is inseparable, I would argue, from a racialised notion of Brahman identity. In a manner similar to the Nadar activists who challenged Caldwell's representations, Ramabai here underscores her Brahman identity as something immutable and fundamental, passed down to her and through her over the course of generations. In fact, Ramabai did not join the CSM, but later, when she led Mukti Mission, she wore a white sari, in which photographs show her shining forth from a sea of black suits, perhaps defiantly appropriating what had long been a stigmatized sign of Brahman widowhood (Dandekar, this volume).

As made clear by Ramabai's self-confident assertions regarding the symbols that Indian sisters of the CMS might wear, Ramabai was adamant about maintaining her freedom of conscience, refusing to assent to practices or creedal formulations that she didn't find persuasive. This was often interpreted by her British hosts as pride or arrogance, a moral shortcoming whom many British saw as a vice to which Indians in England were especially vulnerable (Thomas and Mylne in Shah 1977: 42-43). In *Outside the Fold* (1998), Gauri Viswanathan explores Ramabai's insistence on the independence of conscience as a quintessentially modern affirmation of individual sovereignty (118-152). For her part, Ramabai seems to have understood her own resistance to the transformation project envisioned by British Christians as ultimately about the indigenisation of Christianity. As suggested in her correspondence regarding religious attire and emblems described above, Ramabai felt a grave responsibility to reach towards forms of Christianity that would be intelligible and appealing to Indians, as she envisioned a future life for herself as a missionary in India. She adored Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, and deeply appreciated the ways that the CSM Sisters and other Christians she met embodied Christian values of charity and service. But she refused to grant the Anglican church or its denizens any special religious authority; that status she reserved for the Bible, and she saw nothing in her reading of the Bible that necessitated a Trinitarian view of the divinity of Jesus.

The Anglican dogma regarding the divinity of Jesus was a recurring point of contention, even costing Ramabai the privilege of access to communion for much of the first year after her baptism (Geraldine in Shah: 21). But as the letters indicate, month after month, Ramabai remained unmoved by the scriptural or theological arguments advanced by Geraldine and Dorothea Beale. Nor was Ramabai persuaded by pleas that she simply yield to the beneficial influence of rites and sacraments (and their rote or nonverbal expressions of theology) so that her faith might grow beyond what her rational intellectual allowed her to receive of divine Truths. On the contrary, Ramabai's insistence on following her own conscience in religious matters grew stronger over time. In a fascinating re-deployment of the paternalistic logic of the Anglican establishment, Ramabai sought to control not only her own conscience, but the influence exerted over her daughter's religious conscience. Upon learning that her young daughter, Manorama, was being taught the Trinitarian doctrine while under the care of the Sisters at Wantage, Ramabai systematically crossed out lines in Manorama's prayer books to prevent her from being exposed to such views. According to the age-, gender-, and race-

[7] It is interesting to compare this episode to the experience of Bishop V.S. Azaraiah, who similarly fumed over the machinations with which white missionaries endeavoured to design appropriately 'Indian' vestments for 'Native clergy' (Harper 2000: 139-145).

graded Anglican hierarchy, this was one area where Ramabai could reasonably expect to assert her own authority – as a mother over her child – and yet that was not automatically granted. Having received mixed messages about whether she could continue to study at Cheltenham Ladies College, and having no independent means of supporting herself financially when her plans to teach Sanskrit were vetoed, Ramabai asked Geraldine if she could return to Wantage in order to learn more about the monastic discipline that the Anglican nuns lived under in preparation for Ramabai's future work as a missionary in India. In addition, this would enable her to supervise her daughter Manorama's education. Ramabai's request provoked an extreme reaction. Indeed, conflict over Ramabai's fitness to exercise her authority as a mother eventually precipitated Ramabai's departure from England.

In the collection's longest letter one sees the racialisation process clearly at work as Geraldine castigates Ramabai for her refusal to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus and her insistence on controlling Manorama's religious education. Ramabai's refusal, Geraldine argued, simultaneously cast doubt on the genuineness and legitimacy of her conversion and revealed an essential mendacity in her character. In a separate letter from the same time period to Dorothea Beale, Geraldine ascribed this to her essential 'Hindoo' nature. "I should think at one time she was an exception to the generality of the Hindoos," wrote Geraldine, "truthfulness was one of the traits of character in which she was an exception to the generality of her countrywomen; but she has both, in word and in letter, proved that she can no longer be accredited with this virtue, and her great lack of this makes one feel that there is great difficulty in the way of her true conversion" (Geraldine in Shah: 115). The apparent 'failure' of Ramabai's conversion provokes in Geraldine a need to theorise about the reasons, which are then attributed to a fundamental racial character. Both Geraldine and Ramabai acknowledge a double-ness in Ramabai's embodiment of Christianity, and converge on the sense that an immutable Brahman-ness affects Ramabai's religious conversion. But insofar as Geraldine sees it as the wellspring of negative qualities – duplicity, pride and arrogance – it legitimates her denial of Ramabai's eligibility to exercise power and authority. Geraldine wrote, "You were urged to put aside all anti-Catholic literature until you were rooted and grounded in the faith…but you have followed entirely your own course…Therefore you are spiritually not in a condition to judge in spiritual matters for your child" (Geraldine in Shah: 92). Given the importance of a mother's duty as primary religious educator to her children, not only within the structures governing access to power and resources within the Anglican social order in England, but also articulated eloquently by Ramabai herself in her first book, *Stri Dharma Niti*, one can only imagine what a grave insult this was. Moreover, Geraldine continued in this letter, if Ramabai would learn something of monastic discipline by living with the Sisters in Wantage, she would not only have to submit to a rigorous vetting of every book she read, but also everything she ate. Geraldine concludes the letter with this admonition (Geraldine in Shah: 100-101):

> One more thing I ought to mention. I am sure no one in the Community would for a moment wish to ask you to take animal food, except when ordered by a medical adviser. We respect you in the aversion with which you have grown up to taking the life of any animal for food; but the matter of eating a pudding made with an egg, or the fruit out of a tart, I look upon in quite another light. I often felt that little clingings to caste prejudices which ought to have been thrown to the winds when you embraced Christianity have been fostering a pride which has held you back from accepting the full teaching of the Gospel.

Geraldine's preoccupation with Ramabai's 'picky eating' is a powerful metaphor for the selective fashion in which Ramabai adopted Anglican theological dogma, refusing to 'eat it all' nor to submit to Geraldine's ecclesiastical authority and assumed racial superiority. Ramabai's

courage in this context can hardly be overstated. She was financially dependent, far from home, and responsible not only for herself but also her young daughter. And yet in her response she lets loose a simmering rage at the surveillance and criticism to which she had been subject (Ramabai in Shah: 109):

> You may if you like trace my pride to pies and puddings, butter and milk, water and rice, shoes and stockings, and even in the enormous quantity of coals that I daily burn. I confess I am not free from all my caste prejudices, as you are pleased to call them. I like to be a called a Hindoo, for I am one, and also keep all the customs of my forefathers as far as I can. How would you an Englishwoman like being called proud and prejudiced if she were to go and live among the Hindoos for a time but did not think it necessary to alter her customs if they were not hurtful or necessary to her neighbours?

Here, what Geraldine describes as "caste prejudices," Ramabai characterizes as the "customs of my forefathers." What meaning did the dietary rules she observed in England hold for Ramabai? What felt social or ritual need was there to maintain purity? "Customs" here carries a lot of weight, comparable perhaps to how Caldwell conceptualised religious culture as an enduring influence on a person, or a community, that shaped them at a deep level, but which was nonetheless not reducible to a biological essence or 'ancestral stock'. The customs may not be essential or inalterable, yet their transmission through a lineage of ancestors, and the tenacity of her adherence suggests how fundamental Ramabai's caste-based Brahman identity was to her self-understanding. She asserts a universal right to such racialised cultural difference when she argues that it would be no more harmful to others if Geraldine were to maintain her customs as an Englishwoman while living among 'Hindoos'. And yet, customs, even the most apparently trivial, create and enforce social boundaries between people, which can then be recruited into the creation and rationalisation of a social hierarchy.

In the two women's intense epistolary exchanges – which continued for many years – one sees a clear pattern: whenever Ramabai challenged Geraldine's authority, the latter's response to it was that Ramabai's prideful attachment to 'caste' was showing forth, in spite of her conversion. Instead of being properly humble she was 'proud', instead of being truthful and trustworthy she was mendacious and unreliable, instead of being meek and pliable, she was arrogant. One can reasonably infer that from Geraldine's point of view as a professional Anglican mentor, committed to a Christian worldview, Ramabai's 'pride' was a sign of unregenerate sinfulness. It was a sinfulness connected to a deeply embedded caste- and racial-identity that was impervious to change. To Geraldine, these choices and the negative characteristics she assigned to them are signs – again – of Ramabai's essential nature as a Hindoo or a Brahman leaking out, as it were, from beneath her Christian exterior. Because of this, she could not be allowed to access the rights or privileges distributed according to the structure of the Anglican hierarchy. In turn, Geraldine's racialised assertions of power provoked a similar counter-assertion from Ramabai, which again affirmed the existence, but positive value, of a fundamental essence impervious to change.

It is unclear which woman was more invested in the notion that there was something fundamental and essential about Ramabai that simply refused to change, that was incapable of change. What is clear is Ramabai's indomitable nature. After a period of agreeing not to talk of theology, the two women maintained their epistolary connection for years. But in one of the last letters she wrote to Geraldine while in England, Ramabai asked for Geraldine's help in cashing a cheque from a supporter for £25 – written by none other than the Queen of England! Perhaps it was, in part, her confidence in a racialised, but also noble inner caste-based essence that did not change with conversion (characterised at the time so frequently as 'pride'

or ‘vanity’, but which we might today call dominant caste privilege) that empowered Ramabai to stand her ground against the Anglican ecclesiastical elites who sought so relentlessly to control her.

Conclusion

As scholars focused on early modern Europe, the Americas, and new Spain have argued, religious conversion is an important site for race-making, the creation of discourses about human nature that legitimate and perpetuate racialised social hierarchies. It’s important to note that these discourses take many forms – from the broadly encompassing visions of history, culture, and biology advanced by communities of scholars (and often taken up and operationalised in state policies) to the more informal theorising that takes place in micro-moments between individuals. In Caldwell’s writings we see how the failure of his evangelising program spurred the creation of a broadly encompassing theory of race to explain how the possibility of religious transformation is affected by ‘ancestral stock’, culture, and climate. In the letters between Geraldine and Ramabai, on the other hand, the historical record sheds light on a more informal and improvisational kind of race-making at the level of day-to-day practice. In both settings – though separated by three decades – one observes a dynamic thrust and parry, where the shock or disappointment of the white evangelist in the face of intransigence evokes the response of racialization – the attribution of moral traits associated with a racialised identity and the denial of access to resources or power to the not-yet-fully converted convert. Indian interlocutors do not necessarily acquiesce to these racialised assertions of power; rather, their attempts to change the valence of the qualities attributed to them from negative to positive grants further solidity to that essentialised identity. Nadar activists embraced their identity as Christians, while simultaneously affirming their caste identity as fundamental and unaltered by conversion. Similarly, a close reading of the correspondence among Ramabai’s circle of mentors and teachers indicates that at times it is her interlocutors who engage in racial theorising, attributing her intractability to her ‘Hindoo’ or ‘Brahman’ identity. At other times, Ramabai herself affirms her willingness and desire to embrace Christianity, but also insists on her caste identity as a ‘Hindoo’ or ‘Brahman’, seen not as her British mentors do as tinged with contempt, but embraced as wholly noble and good. By the late 1880s, discourse about caste was fully racialised within missionary circles, in British colonial policy, and the vernacular Indian public sphere, constituting it as a fixed and fundamental aspect of individuals and communities around which a complex, but ever more rigid social hierarchy was constructed. And yet, while racialised understandings of caste identity made religious conversion more fraught, Ramabai’s example suggests that it also created new avenues for the inculturation of Christianity in India.

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