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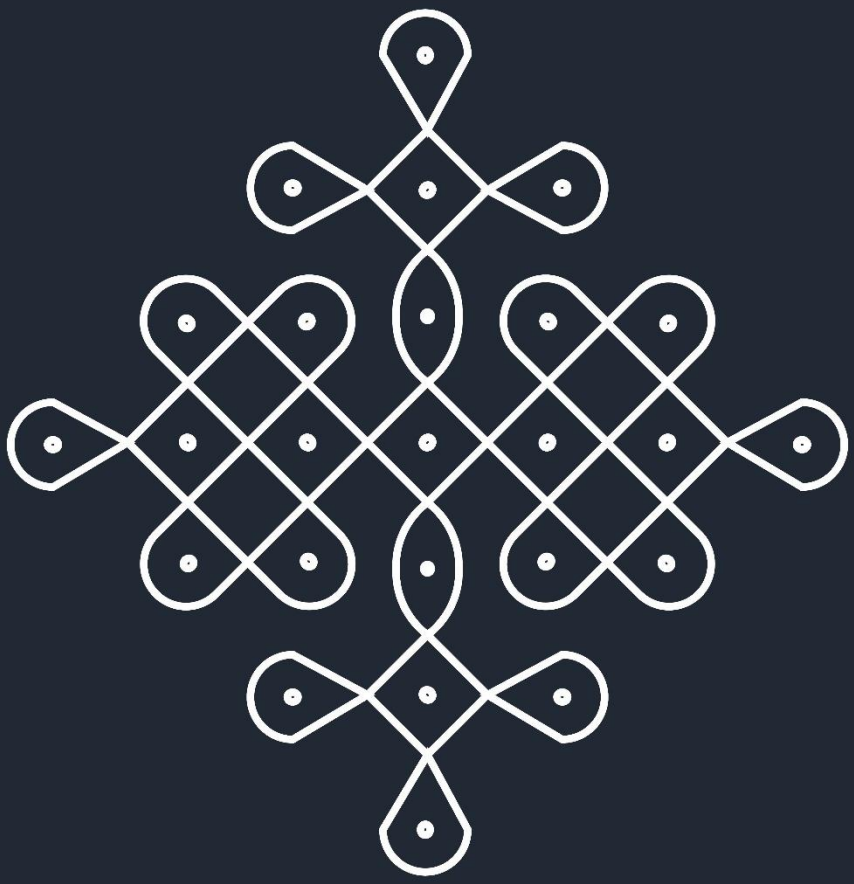

Race, Caste, and Conversion in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia

Guest edited by Eliza F. Kent

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Preface

Intersectionality

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It gives me great pleasure to present our readers with the July 2024 issue of *Nidān: International Journal of Indian Studies* (volume 9). Titled "Race, Caste, and Conversion in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia" this issue is guest edited by Eliza F. Kent, and is, as always, in the open-access mode, published by the University of Heidelberg (HASP – Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing), Germany. This issue has been specially exciting for me. As Kent explains in the introduction (pp. 1-3), the contributors of this issue (me included) came together at a panel on Race, Caste and Conversion in South Asia at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in Denver in the late autumn of 2022. Sponsored by the South Asian Religions Unit and the Religious Conversion Unit, our presentations resonated strongly among contributors and commentators, inspiring us to make a special issue out of it, led by Kent. The chemistry of the panel thereafter continued, spilling over into wonderfully expressed academic articles that even inspired me to design a separate, special study of my own on Pandita Ramabai's Mukti Mission. While we indeed miss Megan Robb and Afsar Muhammad who were part of the Denver panel, we gained Sonja Thomas's engagement, her vibrant voice effortlessly mingling with and strengthening our impassioned arguments. This issue has been a turning point for many of us involved in future writing projects, creating an intellectual bond.

The most important (re)learning for me in this issue surrounds the theory of 'intersectionality' from the late 1980s (see Kent [this volume], pp. 50-67). While it seems that there has been much water under the bridge since the 1980s, theoretical terms like intersectionality have nonetheless retained their charge due to a plethora of empirical research that continues to analyse and apply the concept. Intersectionality for me is closer to a theory of power, of power relations and power balances that critically evaluate the limitations inherent in the simplistic mitigation of systemic disempowerment. Paradoxically, we are often forced to ignore the inadequacy of simplistic power restorations schemes that advertently/ inadvertently end up strengthening already dominant groups, simply because of the importance of justice provision as a mediated political process from above. For example, if we were to consider women a 'section' of Indian society, few among us would oppose the empowerment of Indian women. In fact, so strong is the need for gender-based justice that we are unable to ask the subsequent intersectionality question that automatically follows from gender-empowerment policies: how many 'empowered' women are in fact from urban and already privileged backgrounds? How many belong to already dominant, land-owing castes and/ or traditionally affluent families and communities? Further, in their journey towards becoming the beneficiaries of top-down empowerment policies, how many women are manipulated as political pawns within systemic patriarchy? Finally, how do women negotiate complex intersectional hierarchy?

We can ask many fundamental questions on intersectionality for the South Asian context, exploring asymmetrical power-relations that produce a zero-sum endorsement of the status quo. Some foundational questions for my understanding of intersectionality are: who chooses to exert power? What kind of power? When? To what end? Who benefits, and how? What are the enabling/ disabling, jostling tensions brought to the forefront within the power domain,

defined by complex micro-contexts? In the context of the South Asian diaspora in the West for instance, how does class- and caste-based access to competitive education and professional training play a role in determining social relations within the community claiming origin from the same region/ religious group?

It is well possible to ask limitless questions about intersectionality with the answers addressing asymmetrical power relations between fluid, precarious marginalities. While asymmetrical relations generated through racial, ethnic boundaries have historically, largely been negotiated through conversion—who can ignore Ambedkarite Neo-Buddhism—it is also important to note that converts form independent groups of their own, defined by fluid internal tensions. While converts struggle to establish a new definitional understanding of their 'difference'; on the other hand, they tap into pre-conversion identities that essentialise them to qualify their difference. For example, when B.R. Ambedkar established Navayana or Neo-Buddhism as an independent branch of Buddhism in India, conversion emancipated Dalits from the caste-oppression of Hinduism. Hence, Navayana, especially in Maharashtra is inextricably linked with a strong Dalit identity (mostly the *mahaar* caste). Seen from a historical perspective, Dalit Neo-Buddhism could be considered an intersectional category, especially since not all *mahaar* persons are Neo-Buddhists, and not all Indian Buddhists follow Navayana or are even Marathi. Almost 90% of Navayana Buddhists live in Maharashtra and number 6.5 million according to the census (2011); they constitute 5.8% of the state's population and 77% of the entire Buddhist population of India. While there has been important research on lower-caste conversions in the 20th century, we know relatively little about micro-contexts that witnessed negotiation between Neo-Buddhists and the other Buddhists. For example, what would be the relation between Neo-Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists/ the Dalai Lama in India? Are there any micro-historical contexts of negotiation between them?

Though intensely enjoyable, exploring intersectionality in this *Nidān* issue across various historical contexts has demanded tremendous energy, discipline, and coordination from editors, commentators, and contributors. Therefore, in addition to our contributors Arun Jones, Sonja Thomas, and Torsten Tschacher, I want to thank Eliza Kent for bringing us all together and shepherding us through the issue. I also want to thank Brian Hatcher who read all our papers carefully before writing an excellent concluding note that brought us all back to our previous discussions at the AAR Denver panel. I also want to thank our external scholar commentators and reviewers who have provided us with sound intellectual inputs, encouraging us to hone our arguments. Therefore, a big thank you to Razak Khan, R. Santhosh, Sanal Mohan, Timothy Dobe, and Chandra Mallampalli.

Not to be ignored, *Nidān* brings its readers the usual interesting collection of book reviews. We start our book review section this time with a special essay by Manjeet Baruah who reviews recent studies on Northeastern 'orality'. Outlining an intellectual context that valorises orality as representing Northeastern Adivasi society, Baruah in his *Orality, Identity, and the Sense of the Past in the India-Burma Borderlands* analyses the limitations of this approach. He points instead to the importance of 'discontinuity' that may help us to understand how communities recreate their own pasts, linked with their contemporary identity. Anandita Bajpai provides us with a brilliant review of Isabel Huacuja Alonso's *Radio for the Millions* that outlines how the arrival of the radio in the 1930s built sonic bridges between territorial and national divides within contemporary South Asia. I provide readers with a review of Anjali Arondekar's thought-provoking *Abundance: Sexuality's History* that exhorts us to look at the archival plenitude we live amidst that we paradoxically refuse to read due to our ingrained biases that reconstitute and co-constitute hegemonic evidentiary regimes. Margherita Trento provides us with a review of Chandra Mallampalli's sensitive and exhaustive overview of Christian life and history in India, *South Asia's Christians* that outlines the complex history of a diverse community that is often

unfairly 'Othered'. Ehud Halperin provides us with a review of Kerry San Chirico's *Between Hindu and Christian* that explores the story of a unique Catholic community of Khrist (Christ) Bhaktas in Varanasi—again, an intersectional group of mostly unbaptised Dalit women devotees, whose religious lives centre around the Matra Dham Ashram (Abode of the Mother), an organisation belonging to the Catholic Indian Missionary Society (IMS). Prashant Kidambi provides us with a review of Pushkar Sohoni's *Taming the Oriental Bazaar* that explores the interstitial nature of colonial architectural legacy that results in the formation of categories like *bazaar* halls simultaneously modelled on pre-existing native *bazaar*s. Seema Chauhan reviews Brian Black's startlingly beautiful *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata* that explores the alternative nature of philosophy emerging from the epics through the genre of dialogue and conversation. These alternative values in conversation are self-reflexive, serving to invert conservative and patriarchal notions to make available new spaces for gendered subjects, experiences, and emotions. Finally, to round up the review section, Simon Daisley provides us with a wonderful review of Razak Khan's *Minority Pasts* that explores the formation of Rampur, a capital town and princely state associated with the Rohillas in North India, which, after independence in 1947 was subsumed under the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Though unplanned and not specially elicited to meet this goal, many of our reviews also highlight the importance of intersectionality. I sincerely hope that our readers will enjoy the issue.

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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 indominable 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 Kerela 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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Conclusion

Dis-embedding and Reconstituting Caste in South Asia and the US

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The essays gathered in this issue invite us to think about past and present constellations of race, caste, and religious identity; and they do so in productive—because intersectional and concrete—ways. Together they represent a fine illustration of what may come from leaving behind essentialized categories and their supporting taxonomies in order to think about the political, economic, and social factors that work to shape perceptions of cultural difference within concrete 'historical conjunctures', which is how caste and race should be approached (Bethencourt 2013). While this special issue might in some respects appear to centre itself around the 'core' issue of caste, the authors work effectively to question and destabilise any such core reality. What they reveal, by contrast, is the fluid, contested, and fundamentally ambiguous character of this phenomenon we so readily call caste. In this respect the essays resonate with a range of generative scholarship dedicated to moving reflection on caste and colonialism beyond essentialized models and Orientalist fictions that have for so long worked to figure caste as the 'constitutive institution of Indian civilization' (for a critique of which, see Inden 1990: 82). Here I think of a range of work that situates caste within the political landscapes and historical contexts of premodern and colonial South Asia (see Bayly 1989, 1999, Dirks 1987, O'Hanlon 1985). The force of this scholarship on caste has been to demand that scholars orient themselves more explicitly to the dynamics of politics and the expression of power. It is no longer adequate to advance theories of caste predicated on appeals to Hinduism writ large, or on social-scientific models claiming to reflect a static 'Indian culture'. And while the unmasking of colonial constructions of caste has proven salutary for interrogating the genealogy of sociological models (see Dirks 2001), authors like Rosalind O'Hanlon have also shown that too much emphasis on colonial transformations blinds us to the reality that caste-based systems had been in flux during the centuries prior to British rule (see O'Hanlon 2017). Situating caste in different historical contexts allows us to appreciate how its significance shifts with arguments and counterclaims over social recognition (whether in terms of occupation, birth right, property, status, or entitlement). It attunes us to the many ways Brahmins, merchants, labourers, renunciants, and others negotiated their political and economic worlds. Put simply, we are led to think more carefully about power.

This is precisely what the essays in this special issue do, helping us to appreciate a point made by Francisco Bethencourt regarding the operation of systems of racial or ethnic discrimination, which is to say that an awareness of difference predicated on ideas of descent may be a necessary condition for racism to exist; and yet, sheer awareness of difference is not enough to constitute racism. For that, Bethencourt has pointed out, one needs the added element of discriminatory action (2013: 1, *passim*). To consider the operation of discrimination is to confront the problem of power. Power operates by, and is expressed through, the construction of boundaries. The basis for constructing boundaries can be understood in terms of what Bethencourt calls 'prejudice', which is his word for the awareness of ethnic difference. Groups have such prejudices, which are employed when framing judgments about competitors in an economic or political space or about those considered to be inferior. Bethencourt's research

on racism within the Iberian imperial context, and his theorisation of ethnic identity, are important for the work of Sumit Guha (2013), who takes the arrival of the Portuguese as one important historical conjuncture during which we may consider the modern emergence of 'caste'. Guha notes, for instance, that while the Portuguese introduced into South Asia new idioms around 'blood purity' (*limpieza de sangre*)—and the systems of social stratification thereby enacted—this new mode of classifying human communities also took its place amid a host of pre-existing conceptual categories (e.g. *jat*, *qaum*, *qabila*). As such, anxieties around 'stained descent', for instance, would necessarily become layered among existing South Asian categories (for instance, *varna-samkara*). And in due course the picture would be further complicated by the innovations of British colonial policies and the rise of 19th-century race science. To find a single master key that can explain 'caste' should thus be seen as impossible. Guha invites us to think instead of the South Asian landscape as a 'palimpsest' within which a new British imperial formation would establish itself as the hegemonic 'ruling caste'. This new ruling power dis-embedded a range of existing political structures, while simultaneously embedding itself on a higher scale (Guha 2013: 183). This is the perfect conjuncture to take up the essays in this volume, since they provide detailed case studies that reveal how the dis-embedding and re-composing of caste takes place. What is more, the essays pursue the histories of race, caste, and conversion down to the present day, helping us appreciate how ethnic claims in the United States can work both to challenge inequality and to re-entrench privilege within the same democratic landscape.

As I read them, these essays evince an appropriate concern with the boundary-making and boundary-breaking work of power. The problems of caste, religion, and racial categorization lend themselves here to consideration of how prejudice about different corporate entities (which following Bethencourt we might think of as ethnicities) translates into discriminatory action, and in some cases resistance thereto. Thus in Dandekar's treatment, the well-known figure of Pandita Ramabai is no longer wreathed in a halo of hagiography that owes its radiance to preconceived notions of Hindu or Christian identity; instead she is shown to be a sovereign agent who possesses the power to contest the very boundaries foisted on her. And importantly, Dandekar helps us see that Ramabai does this in and through the boundary-making work of institution-building in her sovereign image: Ramabai *is* Mukti Mission, as the visual record attests. I appreciate the essay by Jones along similar lines, finding in it an occasion to think about Begum Samru's idiosyncratic exercise of sovereignty—both political and classificatory; here was a woman ruler who seemed to employ the strategic deferral of religious and ethnic identity as the best method for securing her ruling power. One cannot read such treatments and not think about what Kent calls in her essay the 'thrust and parry' of prejudice, wherein the emerging taxonomies of colonial caste and religious identity simultaneously afford occasions for self-making and surround it with new limits. In this critical context, Sister Geraldine's concern with Pandita Ramabai's putative sin of pride takes on special resonance; it turns out the 'prejudice' Geraldine sought to eradicate is the symbolic marker of her own practice of racial and ethnic discrimination. Ramabai appreciated this, and she responded artfully to the classificatory awareness foisted on her. Tschacher's essay helps further complicate the push and pull of prejudice under specific historical conditions. He provides something like a cartography of racialisation as played out among Muslims and others in the Tamil region and colonial Ceylon. Along the way he offers us important material for thinking about a point stressed by Guha in his work; namely, the "criteria of social awareness" (Guha 2013: 176 n5, quoting Kothari 1970 [2010]) in given contexts turn out to be mutable—as we see from Tschacher's review of the shifting attitudes toward 'foreign born' or 'racially Indian' Muslims. To borrow from Kent's essay, we find ourselves watching 'race-making in action'. The contemporary critical repercussions of arriving at this kind of historically nuanced understanding of identity formation are brought home powerfully in Thomas's study of the

discourse of race and caste among Syro-Malabar Christians. The challenges she describes for today's Dalit Bahujan South Asian Americans—who face the erasure of caste-based injuries by the competing discourse of racial identity—should remind us of another of Bethencourt's observations, which is that the kinds of discriminations enacted in relation to caste, religious, or racial identity are necessarily "political projects . . . connected to specific economic conditions" (2013: 6). And as caste continues to structure and complicate politics in both the United States and Narendra Modi's India, we do well to attend to the ways in which the organization of our social lives speaks to the shifting, and not always obvious, work of prejudice.

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Research Article

From Courtesan to King: The Conversion of Farzana

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One of the most interesting and famous women rulers of North India at the turn of the 19th century was known as the Begum Samru. Starting out as a dancing girl in Delhi, she became the sole ruler of the state of Sardhana for 30 years. This essay argues that her adoption of Roman Catholicism after the death of her husband played a key role in the *begum*'s personal and professional transformation into a king, in the mould of Indian sovereigns of the day. Having established herself as a military leader with the security afforded by revenue from a sizable tract of land, Farzana drew not only on the codes of Persian and Sanskritic sovereignty, but also on the affordances of 18th century-Catholicism to consolidate, exercise and expand her power.

conversion, indic, kingship, gender, Catholicism

Introduction

The Begum Samru (1750? – 1836), ruler of the small state of Sardhana about 42 miles northeast of Delhi, was a celebrity in North Indian political circles during her lifetime.[1] The Begum was a most unusual person – a woman ruler in a world ruled almost exclusively by men; a courageous warrior and military commander when women of her status lived and worked in homes and palaces; a smart political strategist and negotiator; a dancing girl from the lowest classes who climbed the social ladder of her day to its highest rungs; and a convert to Catholicism who maintained harmonious working relationships with persons from every religious background. Since her death, she has been the subject of numerous biographies and other academic studies, as well as a half dozen novels (Ghosh 2006: 149). Much of the fascination of her life arises from the fact that she succeeded in her political goals when so many – particularly those who were not British – failed. A number of recent studies have provided important insights into the reasons for her attainments (Fisher 2004, Ghosh 2006, Keay 2014). None, however, have investigated how her religious commitments were crucial for her success. This essay argues that Begum Samru's adoption of the Roman Catholic tradition of Christianity allowed her to transform herself into an Indian king. This does not mean that she adopted Catholicism only or even primarily for strategic and instrumental reasons. Yet the change in religion was accompanied by upward social mobility. The two were part and parcel of a more comprehensive change in identity, as the convert explored new ways of existing in her world, establishing for herself a new persona – that of an Indian king – in her own milieu (Kent 2004: 5-6).

[1] In historical records there are various spelling of her name, which she took from her consort: Sumru, Samru, Sumroo, etc. For the sake of consistency, I shall use the spelling 'Samru' unless quoting a text which uses another spelling of the name. The same is true of the name of her consort, Walter Reinhard, Renhard, Reinhardt, Reynard, etc. Again, I shall use the spelling 'Reinhard' unless quoting a text which uses another spelling.

The Times and Life of Farzana, later Begum Samru

The 18th century in India, especially North India, was a century of great political, social and religious change and instability. From the death of Aurangzeb, the last of the Great Mughal emperors of India, in 1707 to the conquest of Delhi by the British East India Company from the Maratha Empire in 1803, a number of Afghani, Persian, Indian, French and British political and military powers vied for control of the exceedingly rich subcontinent. Moreover, national and political allegiances did not necessarily align in this period. Many European mercenaries, for example, fought for various Indian powers against European ones, while the majority of the British East India Company's forces were made up of Indian soldiers. The political volatility of the 18th century in North India yielded a society that provided for significant social and religious flux, which was severely curtailed in the following century under British rule. The instability and flux had profound implications for Begum Samru or Farzana, who rose to prominence in the late 18th century. First, it allowed her, a Muslim Indian woman, to become the chief consort of an already married Roman Catholic European soldier, without any serious objections from their society. As one British chronicler put it, "she was united to Walter Renhard when very young, by all the forms considered necessary by persons of her persuasion when married to men of another" (Sleeman 1893: 267-68). It also allowed her to rise in political power and social status by means that probably would not have been possible in the previous or following century. Third, it allowed her to experiment with religious change as well as religious expression to a degree that would have been difficult, if not impossible in a settled society where religious leaders could more strictly regulate their communities.

Farzana was part of a cohort of Indians and Europeans who crossed cultural, social and religious lines without serious condemnation during this era, as Dalrymple illustrates (2014: x).

> The American-born William Linnaeus Gardner, had married a Shi'a Begum of Cambay, while his son James had married Mukhtar Begum, a first cousin of the Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. Together they fathered an Anglo-Mughal dynasty, half of whose members were Muslim and half Christian; indeed some of them, such as James Jahangir Shikoh Gardner, seem to have been both at the same time.

The Begum Samru, as she was known for much of her adult life, appears in historical records as Farzana at the age of 15 or so in what is now Old Delhi, India, in the year 1765 – making her birth year to be around 1750 (Keay 2014: 15). Her life before that is shrouded in mystery. Early records give conflicting accounts of her basic biographical data (Banerji 1925: 14-15). According to one dominant historical tradition, Farzana's father was a nobleman by the name of Lutf (or Latafat) Ali Khan, although one early source names him Asad Khan, while other sources claim that she was Kashmiri.[2] Lutf Khan lived in the town of Kotana, about 35 miles north of Delhi (Banerji 1925: 14). Farzana's mother was Lutf Khan's second wife – or perhaps his concubine – who according to one biographer "had originally been discovered by Latafat Khan in a kotha, a salon or brothel, in Delhi's Chauri Bazaar" (Keay 2014: 15, Lall 1997: xviii).[3] Lutf Khan had died when Farzana was about six years old. One source writes that she and her mother "became subject to ill-treatment from her half-brother, the legitimate heir, and they consequently removed to Delhi about 1760" (Atkinson 1875: 95-96). The two of them ended

[2] Ghosh (2006:14) makes the point that Farzana's 'noble' parentage appears in accounts *after* her ascension to the position of landholder in North India, which should raise questions about its veracity.

[3] I have found the claim that Farzana's mother was a former courtesan from Delhi only in Keay (2014) and Lall (1997). I am not sure whether these historians (who do not always provide documentation for their assertions) assumed this information since Farzana's mother went to Delhi after being thrown out of her house upon the death of her husband, and would have normally gone back to her 'ancestral' home.

up in Shahjahanabad, a section of what is now Old Delhi, where Farzana became a dancing girl, a profession that defies current categories of employment (Keay 2014: 19-22, Lall 1997: xvii-xix). The dancers were a combination of performing artists such as musicians and dancers, literary figures, and courtesans, who provided varying degrees of artistry along with sexual services to their customers. They achieved different levels of proficiency in the various arts (including erotica) that were possible for them in society at this time and were paid according to the level of sophistication of their various performances (Nevile 2004: 22, Fraser 1851: 285). Farzana does not seem to have been very accomplished in either literature or any of the musical arts, and so it is not unreasonable to assume that it was her beauty, charm, and charisma that made her attractive (Keay 2014: 23, Lall 1997: xviii). Thus, even by the standards of her day, Farzana's social status was a rather low one: she was a dancing girl in Delhi, a courtesan whose main merits, besides her sexual ones of which we know nothing, were her beauty and personality rather than any refined artistic skills.

In the first months of 1765, Farzana was acquired by a European mercenary, a Roman Catholic by baptism, named Walter Reinhard. There is quite a bit of information regarding Reinhard, since he was the head of between four and six battalions of troops – a mixture of Indians and Europeans – who worked for him, and he fought in many battles for various Indian, French, and British belligerents (Sleeman 1893: 272, Lall 1997: 6). He was rather adept both at choosing the losing side in a conflict, and at switching sides when he discerned the final outcome of the conflict in which he was involved.[4] Reinhard received the name 'Sombre' at some point in his life, perhaps when he was in the employ of the French, either because of his dour appearance and demeanour, or because he had named himself 'Summers' at one point when he had deserted to the British, with 'Sombre' being a corruption of that name (Sleeman 1893: 269). The name Sombre was Indianized to Samru. Exactly how Farzana came to join Reinhard's entourage is, like so much about her life, a mystery (Fraser 1851: 284). We do know that Reinhard entered Delhi in January of 1765 as part of the conquering army of the Jat ruler and warrior Rajah Jawahar Singh. Perhaps it was during this campaign that Farzana came into Reinhard's household, most probably his harem. Julia Keay (2014), who has written the most extensive biography of the Begum, strongly suggests that Farzana was purchased by Reinhard from her mistress – a not uncommon transaction in that day. Keay speculates that Farzana may very well have encouraged, even initiated this transfer – her ticket out of a difficult life of prostitution (Keay 2014: 60, Lall 1997: xx). Reinhard already had a wife and son, but he took Farzana as his consort, and she ended up being his indominable companion and finally his heir, becoming known as *Samru ki Begum* (Samru's Begum) and then 'Begum Samru' – Begum being an aristocratic, even royal title for a Muslim woman (Ghosh 2006: 150). As noted above, the lack of a formal marriage at the time was no obstacle to her being considered his wife (Fraser 1851: 285). By taking the name Begum Samru, Farzana simultaneously affirmed that she was a noblewoman, and also that she was attached to an important European soldier in India, who by the late 1760s had under his command four battalions with about 2000 soldiers for hire. Interestingly, the title 'Begum' was hardly ever used as an Indian equivalent of 'Mrs.', which is how Farzana crafted her title, or allowed it to be crafted – showing her ability to take the initiative in forging her emerging identity (Ghosh 2006: 150-151).

Once Farzana became Reinhard's consort and then acknowledged wife, she joined him in his military ventures. She became "the company's mascot, riding out with the troops on every sortie, getting as close to the action as Reinhardt would allow and learning useful lessons on

[4] For early 19th century accounts of Reinhard's career, see Atkinson (1875: 95) for a brief version, Sleeman (1893: 268-73), and Skinner (Fraser 1851: 268-73) for somewhat longer ones. For more contemporary ones, see Sharma (1985: 30-58) and Keay (2014: 33-60). Reinhard's place of origin is unsure. Atkinson says he was from Salzburg or Trier; Sleeman says from Salzburg.

how and how not to conduct a military campaign" (Keay 2014: 64). Her lack of musical and literary skills was no handicap on the battlefield, and she quickly adapted to the life of the soldier. This included not only military campaigns but learning how to live in an army encampment with soldiers, their families and their equipment for warfare. The soldiers grew to enjoy her company; according to Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal, "they were enchanted by her heroism" (Keay 2014: 65). It was in those early years that she started to be known as '*Samru ki Begum'*. Reinhard or Samru, on his part, appears to have been thoroughly Indianised in his lifestyle. A Frenchman who met him in Delhi noted that "he has adopted the customs and habits of the country so thoroughly that even the Mughals believe he was born in Hindustan. He speaks all the languages of the country and even though he can neither read nor write he is much respected" (Keay 2014: 67). He was a European who dressed and lived like a Mughal without becoming a Muslim – and in this he was not unique (Fraser 1851: 284, Ghosh 2006: 154). For example, David Ochterlony (1758-1825) and William Fraser (1784-1835), both appointed British Residents (the chief representative of the British) in Delhi at various times during the first third of the 19th century, also adopted Mughal lifestyles.[5] In a previous century, Father Emmanuel Pinheiro (1556-1619), of the third Jesuit mission to the Mughal court, was known by his colleagues as 'the Mogul'. He refrained from criticizing Hindu and Muslim beliefs and practices, and engaged local Indians of various religious backgrounds in conversation (Powell 1993: 80).

Although Jawahar Singh's foray into Delhi in 1765 proved to be short-lived, for 9 years Samru and Farzana worked for him and his clan of Jats who were based in Agra and Bharatpur, providing valuable strength to his armies. However, when in 1774 the Jat armies were about to be defeated by Mughal forces led by the emperor's commander-in-chief, Mirza Najaf Khan, Samru switched sides and offered his services to the Mughals. Offer accepted, he and his *begum* moved to Delhi with their troops, to be near their new employer, for whom they worked until Samru's death in 1778. There they were able to negotiate the gift to Samru of the small state, called a *jagir* or *jaidad*, of Sardhana (Fraser 1851: 283-284). Farzana was a crucial part of the negotiations which made Samru the lord of this tract of land (Ghosh 2006: 154). Such gifts of land, which were not permanent but temporary, were standard 'payment' from kings to the leaders of mercenary troops, because the income from the produce of the land provided for the salaries of the leader and his household, the troops, the peasants working the land, and tribute to the king. The *jagir* of Sardhana covered about 800 square miles, and at the time had a gross annual revenue of about 600,000 rupees (Keay 2014: 82). It became the home of Samru and his *begum*, the latter supervising the construction of buildings for her husband's household, his troops and his military supplies and equipment (Keay 2014: 83). They had no children of their own.

Until his death in 1778, Samru was haunted by an action of his that had occurred in 1763. In that year, under orders and the threat of death from his employer Mir Qassim, Samru and his soldiers killed a group (the numbers are not known) of British prisoners in the city of Patna (Keay 2014: 48-49). This made him a target of British anger and hatred for the rest of his life, although the British were never able to capture him. It also made him perpetually fearful of ending up in British hands. Towards the end of his life a Frenchman visiting Sardhana in 1775 described him as "devout, superstitious and credulous. He fasts on all the set days. He gives alms and orders masses. He fears the devil as much as the English" (Keay 2014: 84). His last military venture, in which Farzana did not join him, was in 1775 – 1776 with his masters the Mughals against the Jats in Bharatpur – his erstwhile employers. Here the Mughals, with crucial

[5] William Dalrymple (2002, 2005) is well known for having brought to contemporary historical light the prevalence of British assimilation of Indian cultures (and vice versa) during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

help from Samru who knew Bharatpur from the days he lived there, defeated the Jats after a 6 month siege of the city. His reward was the governorship of the city of Agra, to which he and Farzana moved, and there he died of natural causes on the 4th of May, 1778. The death of Samru should have spelled the end of his *begum*'s independence and career. She was only 28 years old, and Samru had a legitimate wife and son. The Mughal emperor Shah Alam II gave Samru's titles, armies, and properties to the deceased's son. The command of the troops was to be handled by a German mercenary, a Colonel Pauli, until the son came of age. In Samru's last recorded statement, "there was no mention of Farzana, no role for her in the brigade, no position for her at Sardhana and no provision whatsoever for her future upkeep" (Keay 2014: 90). She even had no legal title to his name, although she was known as Samru's Begum (Keay 2014: 91).

However, in the turbulent years of the last quarter of the 18th century, might could confer rights, and Farzana managed to get the army to declare her its leader and head, with the acquiescence, if not the connivance of Colonel Pauli.[6] She also had the emperor in Delhi declare her to be the rightful landlord of the *jaidad* of Sardhana. As the British soldier and government administrator, Sir William Sleeman recorded (1893: 273).

> On the death of her husband, she was requested to take command of the force by all the Europeans and natives that composed it, as the only possible mode of keeping them together, since the son was known to be altogether unfit. She consented, and was regularly installed in the charge by the Emperor Shah Alum.

Samru's son, Zafar-yab Khan, described by Sleeman as a "man of weak intellect" (ibid: 268) and by others as a person of moral turpitude (Keay 2014: 96), was no match for the Begum, who side-lined him at Sardhana through her command of Samru's troops. Yet it was neither her influence within Samru's household and army, nor her rise to primary concubine from dancing girl that was unique about Farzana's career. Rather, "what was exceptional about this begum was that she became the successor to Samru's lands and armies, rather than being the custodian on behalf of a favored son" (Ghosh 2006: 154). She ruled alone.

The Begum Samru led a highly adventurous and colourful life, as a fearless warrior and leader of her troops, as a skilled diplomat in a time of immense political turmoil, as a steadfast and wise ruler of the territory of Sardhana, as a benefactor of the poor, as a patron of the Catholic Church, and other religious institutions, until her death at the age of 86 in 1836. She did have her times of trouble, most notably when in 1793 she married a Frenchman, Le Vassoult or Le Vaisseaux, who three years previously had become the commander of her army, albeit a highly unpopular one. However, Le Vaissoult killed himself soon after the marriage, when two battalions of Samru's troops defected and rode to Delhi to ask Zafar-yab Khan to be their leader. Her husband's death allowed the Begum slowly to regain control of her estate and armies (Ghosh 2006: 156, Sleeman 1893: 278-281).

The Baptism of Begum Samru

Three years after Reinhard's death, on May 7, 1781, the Begum Samru was baptised along with her stepson Zafar-yab Khan and received into the Roman Catholic Church (Sharma 1985: 69). By this time she had positioned herself as the protector and provider of the late Reinhard's legal wife and son, while not allowing them any possibility of exercising any control over his armies or estate. At baptism she took the name of Joanna (which, however, she rarely used in life even though it appears on her tombstone); her stepson was named Louis Balthazar (Sharma 1985: 70). The question immediately arises, from both the religious and the secular

[6] Keay (2014: 96-97) claims that Farzana seduced Pauli and thus got him to go along with her plans.

historian's perspective, as to why she was baptised. Keay notes that the timing of the baptism creates a problem for those who want to argue that the Begum Samru was either somehow coerced into the baptism, or did it for gaining control of the army and land at Sardhana. She was baptised not while her Catholic husband was alive, nor when her leadership of his army was in question, nor when his lands were beyond her control, but *after* she had achieved social, economic and political stability, and honour. In fact, becoming a Catholic when she did, in 1781, involved a significant risk, given that various political powers of that era did not particularly favour Catholics (Fisher 2004: 99). Moreover, she continued to be immersed to varying degrees in a Persianate culture as a Christian, at times angering the local Catholic hierarchy. Her baptism seems therefore to have been a matter of personal conviction (Fisher 2004: 99). And yet, as will be elucidated below, it was also a public and professional matter – again, as was the norm for Indian kings. A king's personal religious choices could have profound implications for his political rule. Moreover, at times these choices defied the logic of straightforward political calculations. None other than the great Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), in the middle of his long reign, promulgated his idiosyncratic and syncretic religion, Tawhid-i Ilahi (or Din-i Ilahi), which could have threatened the religious harmony he had painstakingly established in his empire. The conversion of Raja Sawai Ram Singh II of Amber (Jaipur) in Rajasthan from Vaishnavism to Shaivism in the 1860s resulted in significant public disturbance (Clémentin-Ojha 1999). Thus Begum Samru's conversion to Catholicism, with all the risks involved, was not anomalous. In fact, as king, she would have been expected to make at least a public declaration of some religious commitment – which fits the timing of her decision. Characteristically, the Begum transformed a potential liability, her personal choice of Catholicism, into a source of strength for her developing identity and rule.

With the current lack of evidence, we shall never know exactly why the Muslim Farzana was baptised into the Catholic Church. It is probably wise to think of multiple influences, rather than a single one, that went into her decision. We do know that personal relationships have played a crucial role in religious change and conversion, and they may have very well played some role in Farzana's baptism. Thus, the influence of Walter Reinhard on her religious life needs to be seriously considered. She fashioned herself as his *begum*, and in her Catholic practices we see a reflection, even an intensification of his. We do know that he continued living as a Mughal even as he became an observant Catholic in his last years, endowing masses and regularly observing fast days (Keay 2014: 115; 84). One should also consider the possible influence on her of the Carmelite monk, Father Gregorio, who baptised her. He was a constant supporter of hers until he died in 1807, almost 30 years after her baptism, visiting her as much as possible whenever he was stationed in Agra (Keay 2014: 280). He performed the marriage ceremony between herself and Le Vaissoult. Father Gregorio was a missionary who allowed his noble charge to live as a Christian with Persian Islamic influences permeating her lifestyle, as they had her deceased husband's. He was continuing the tradition laid down by at least some of the Jesuit fathers in North India in the 16th and 17th centuries, who had been very open to local cultural and religious influences (Powell 1993: 80). Finally, Catholicism offered some distinct advantages to Farzana's evolving sense of her own identity – her relationship to herself, as it were. Specifically, coming as it did after she had grasped the control of Sardhana, it provided her new possibilities to rule Sardhana in the mould of an Indian king.

The Begum as Indic King

From the 12th century C.E. onwards, ideologies and practices of Indian kingship began to be drawn from two very broad cultural streams: the Sanskritic and the Persianate (Eaton 2019: 10-18). These have also been called 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' forms of kingship, but while religion was certainly one factor in the development of kingship in India, it was not the exclusive nor even the most important one. By the 16th century C.E., Indian kingship functioned as an

amalgam of Sanskritic and Persianate royal cultures. The Arthashastra, an ancient Sanskrit political treatise on Hindu kingship, provides guidance to rulers in the fulfilment of their duties – governance of the state, economic management of the state, and foreign affairs, especially warfare (Olivelle 2013: 40-51) – and its foundational assumptions were manifest in Indian kingly rule. Yet courtly life and kingly rule in India were also deeply influenced by Persianate royal culture "in such diverse areas as military technology and strategy, political and administrative institutions, and above all, the material culture of the court" (Shivram 2005-6: 404). There were many ways that Sanskritic and Persianate modes of kingship and courtly life could combine in the reign of any particular ruler. Begum Samru, quite naturally, drew upon various contemporary Sanskritic as well as Persianate ideas, practices and aesthetics of Indian kingship to establish her rule at Sardhana, showing remarkable skill in military, political, religious, and cultural domains of kingship.

Since the Begum began her ascendance to power through her husband's army, it is fitting to describe first her career as a warrior. Indeed, it was probably her role as a warrior that kept her in charge of her state, for when she temporarily lost control of her army due to her marriage with the unpopular Le Vaissoult, she also temporarily lost her authority to rule. Upon his death, another European military commander (and rumoured former lover), George Thomas, was able to bring her army under her control, and restore her to power in Sardhana (Fisher 2004: 100-101). One mark of the Begum's kingship was her perceived maleness, which was noted by contemporaries (Ghosh 2006: 160), and was particularly salient in the domain of controlling troops and other subordinates. This was done without censure or condemnation, and sometimes with approval. So James Baillie Fraser (1783-1856), a Scottish businessman, traveler, writer, and artist, who lived for 7 years in India, commented, "By means of her uncommon ability and discretion, united to a masculine firmness and intrepidity…she managed to preserve her country nearly unmolested" (Fraser 1851: 285). William Sleeman (1788-1856), who lived and worked in India all of his adult life, said of her, "She had uncommon sagacity and a masculine resolution; and the Europeans and natives who were most intimate with her have told me that though a woman and of small stature, her *Rooab* (dignity, or power of commanding personal respect) was greater than that of almost any person they had ever seen" (Sleeman 1893: 288). William Francklin, an 18th-century chronicler, wrote that she was "endowed by nature with masculine intrepidity" (Francklin 1798: 151). The famous British traveller and diarist, Lady Maria Nugent, noted when visiting the Begum how she even dressed like a man (Cohen 2014: 216):

> Her dress was more like a man's than a woman's – she wore trousers of cloth of gold, with shawl stockings, and Hindoostanee slippers; a cloth of gold kind of dress, with flaps to it, coming a little below the knee, and in some degree doing the office of a petticoat; a dark turban, but no hair to be seen; and abundance of shawls wrapped round her in different ways.[7]

Her masculine "firmness" and "resolution" were underscored by a story that was in circulation both during and after the Begum's lifetime, regarding her execution of one or two (the number differs in various accounts) slave girl(s) who crossed her. The earliest and shortest version of this story comes from the pen of the Anglican Bishop Heber in 1824, more than a decade before the Begum died (Heber 1827: 278-279):

> One of her dancing girls had offended her, how I have not heard. The Begum ordered the poor creature to be immured alive in a small vault prepared for the

[7] See comments below on the *khilat* which note how a ruler's clothing embodied the authority of the ruler himself.

> purpose…and, being aware that her fate excited much sympathy and horror in the minds of the servants and soldiers of her palace, and apprehensive that they would open the tomb and rescue the victim as soon as her back was turned, she ordered the vault bricked up before her own eyes, then ordered her bed to be placed directly over it, and lay there for several nights, till the last faint moans had ceased to be heard, and she was convinced that hunger and despair had done their work.[8]

The bishop was among the Begum's European critics, of whom there were a number to go along with her admirers. He did concede, though, that "her soldiers and people, and the generality of the inhabitants of this neighbourhood pay her much respect, on account both of her supposed wisdom and her courage" (Heber 1827: 278-279). As an Indic king, the Begum was both admired and feared for her "manly" courage and resolution. Such fearlessness contributed to her success as a military leader on the battlefield itself. The Begum regularly led her troops into battle, either on horseback or in her palanquin. J. Baillie Fraser, for example, writes that the Begum came to the rescue of the Mughal Emperor who had been surprised by his enemies in a battle in Gokalgarh in 1788. "Ordering up three battalions of her sepoys, with a gun, under command of a European, and accompanying them herself in her palankeen, she commenced a fire of grape and musketry—which being unexpected, was all the more alarming" (Fraser 1851: 287).[9] Eventually she helped the Emperor's army defeat his opponent, and as a result the Emperor "honoured her with a most magnificent Khilut, and called her "his most beloved daughter," in addition to her various other titles" (Fraser 1851: 287-288).[10] The giving of a *khilat* was a powerful political gesture inherited from the Persianate world. A *khilat* – derived from the Arabic word for "a garment cast off" – was a piece of cloth or clothing signifying great honor, bestowed by a superior ruler or person on an inferior one (Shivram 2005-6: 405). In fact, the *khilat* of a ruler given to a subject signified a transfer of some of the authority of the ruler to the subject, thereby cementing a deep bond between vassal and overlord (Cohn 1996: 114-115).

To return to the Begum's military prowess, Bishop Heber reports that during the Maratha Wars the Begum led her armies "very gallantly into action, herself riding at their head into a heavy fire of the enemy" (Heber 1827: 278). In 1803, when she was fighting for the Maratha king Daulat Rao Sindhia against the British East India Company, Fraser reports that it was "remarkable" that her four or five battalions "were the only part of Sindia's army that went off unbroken from the field of Assaye: they were charged by our cavalry towards the close of the day, but without effect; Colonel Maxwell, who commanded, being killed" (Fraser 1851: 286). The main aim of kingly warfare, according to Sanskritic ideals, was to add territory and riches to one's kingdom.[11] Of course, every king in the region was trying to do the same thing. In this situation, foreign policy "was of paramount importance to the king: if he failed in it, he may well lose his kingdom and even his life" (Olivelle 2013: 47). Begum Samru was not only a courageous and successful warrior; she was also a wily diplomat, able to secure and add to her territory of Sardhana in a tumultuous era of Indian history. It was she who was instrumental in the negotiations that netted the gift of Sardhana for Reinhard in the first place (Ghosh 2006:

[8] See also the account by Sleeman (1893: 274-276). Sleeman writes that the Begum did this to enforce her leadership among her troops after her chief officer, Mr. Pauli, had been assassinated.

[9] See also the description in Francklin (1798: 167-168). 'Grape' here, refers to grapeshot, a kind of weaponry. It consisted of a cluster of small iron balls, which resembled grapes, and which when fired from cannons spread out and sprayed the target area. They were particularly effective at short range against troops.

[10] This occurred in 1787; the Persian title was 'Farzand-i-Azizah', perhaps a play on her name Farzana, while other titles were 'Zeb un-Nissa' (Ornament of the [Female] Sex) and 'Umdat al-Arakin' (Support among the Pillars [of the State]): Fisher 2004: 102.

[11] An example in the early 17th century is Bhim Singh, ruler of Kota (Peabody 2003: 17-18).

154). Realizing the precarity of her situation as a woman ruling over a North Indian territory, over the years she had the Mughal emperor confirm her control of Sardhana on several occasions (Francklin 1798: 151). She did this, in well established Persianate-Mughal political tradition, by being a staunch defender in war of the emperor, "who was effectively a puppet ruler backed by powerful nobles," and who was constantly under threat or attack by Indian and European belligerents (Ghosh 2006: 155). Her aid was especially valuable since emperor Shah Alam II was such a weak and vulnerable ruler. Since the 15th century, local and regional rulers had been involved in the political workings and military activities of the Mughal Empire, and the Begum's ability to ally herself to the Mughal emperor, weakened though he was, stood her in good stead. She also benefited from her alliances with Maratha and British rulers. The Maratha king Daulat Rao Sindhia, recognizing her vital contributions to his conquests in the late 18th century, also added land to her territory (Fraser 1851: 285). When, in 1803, the British defeated their rivals the Marathas in North India, she joined the Mughal emperor in strategically shifting her allegiance to the new rulers (Fisher 2004: 101). Due to her support of British rule, in 1805 she received in writing a promise from the Governor General that Sardhana would be hers until her death (Ghosh 2006: 158). She insinuated herself into British society to extract promises and favours from the British (Fisher 2004: 104-108). As her contemporary J. Baillie Fraser noted, "she managed to preserve her country nearly unmolested, and her authority generally unimpaired, during a period of surrounding storm and tempest, which shook several great powers from their thrones" (Fraser 1851: 285).

Foreign relations did not only involve active warfare, but also the diplomatic maintenance of alliances over time. The Begum kept the British happy and on her side in the last 30 years of her life in part by throwing resplendent banquets and parties for Europeans at Sardhana.

> The begum clearly used her wealth to bestow patronage on the British, and thus to enhance her social and political relationships with them. Indeed, the begum invited almost all nearby Europeans of any stature into her presence to dine at her table. . . . Her palaces at Sardhana and Delhi became widely known as lavishly hospitable places for traveling European dignitaries and other visitors to stay as her house guests (Fisher 2004: 105).

Her Christmas feasts were legendary, beginning with high mass and lasting for days, featuring not only rich food and wine but performances by dancing girls and fireworks (Ghosh 2006: 160-161). As an insightful host, she instructed her dancing girls to modulate their moves to suit the class, gender, and race of the audience (Keay 2014: 286). Raucous European soldiers would witness performances radically different from one for Anglican clergy.[12] The Begum, however, was not only solicitous about British desires and sensibilities. With Indian guests, and in mixed company, she often conformed to Indian expectations of modesty and decency. She did so by establishing a Persianate court culture at Sardhana. She maintained Mughal *darbari* ritual at her "court in miniature" in Sardhana, and used Persian Islamic symbols of government and status, being famously painted with a large *huqqa* (a hookah, or water pipe embellished with jewels) (Powell 1993: 89). She sat behind a screen when holding audience with conservative Indian men who would object to seeing her in person, although she appeared unveiled among Europeans (Fisher 2004: 104-105, Keay 2014: 119). She was known to "exact from her subjects and servants the most rigid attention to the customs of Hindoostan" (Sleeman 1893: 288-289). Even at her "sumptuous" Christmas feasts, a chronicler reported, "the Begam usually honours the guests by presiding at the table but she does not herself partake of any food in their presence," adhering to the Hindu taboo on intercaste eating (Ghosh

[12] For a description from a soldier of a *nautch* performance, see Keay 2014: 21; for Bishop Heber's description of the performance put on for him, see Heber 1827: 320-21.

2006: 161). Yet when she visited the English residency, which was “very frequently” according to Fraser, “she freely participated in all the good things (the residency table) afforded” (Fraser 1851: 294). She could dress like a Mughal, dress like a European, dress like a woman or dress like a man, depending upon the needs of the situation (Ghosh 2006: 159-160). Thus the Begum engaged in shrewd diplomacy and highly skilled cultural performance with a variety of different political and cultural actors in her day, keeping them pleased so that she could keep her independence.

Image 1.1: Begum Samru (between 1780 and 1815). Louvre-Lens, Galerie du Temps (2013) MAO 709. Source: Creative Commons.

An Indian king not only had to engage in war and diplomacy. He also had to manage his lands wisely. According to Hindu *shastra*s on kingship, one of the most important roles of a king was to accumulate wealth, which required careful stewardship of his lands, which in turn would yield increased crops and therefore riches for the royal treasury. To do this, government and economics were intertwined in Hindu kingdoms. As Olivelle (2013: 40) puts it:

> Given that, in an absolute monarchy, there is no clear distinction between king and government, between the wealth and property of the king and that of the state, and between governance and the enhancement of revenue to the state, the structures of government and state bureaucracy cannot be neatly separated from the economic activities of the state.

By all accounts, the Begum's management of Sardhana made it an extraordinarily wealthy state. She took various steps to make her lands prosper. Most notably, she melded together her army and the peasants into one agricultural unit, instead of pitting the former against the latter for the purpose of collecting taxes. This made Sardhana an extremely productive tract of land. She also forsook the custom of being an absentee landlord. While she had houses in Meerut and Delhi which she visited regularly, her permanent residence was in Sardhana, where she personally managed the upkeep of her military and agricultural lands (Keay 2014: 113). The net worth of Sardhana upon the Begum's death is difficult to ascertain, but it was vast. Sleeman writes that it was "sixty lakhs (6 million) of rupees" (Sleeman 1893: 286).[13] Thomas Bacon wrote in 1835, the year before the Begum's death, that her estate was "rich and cultivated, yielding a revenue of 25 lakhs annually, or £250,000, leaving her perhaps a net income of one-half, having deducted her dues to the British government and the maintenance of her army" (Keay 2014: 283). To make her lands flourish, however, she appears to have adopted the rationalised and 'modern' systems of agriculture, politics and economics introduced into India by the Mughals beginning with Akbar in the 16th century C.E. (Eaton 2019: 35; 393-395). Her contemporary William Francklin (1798: 150-51) gives a glowing report of Sardhana's agricultural systems, politics and economics:

> An unremitting attention to the cultivation of the lands, a mild and upright administration, and care for the welfare of the inhabitants, has enabled this small tract to vie with the most cultivated parts of Hindostaun, and to yield a revenue of ten lacks (one million) of rupees per annum. . . . While the surrounding lands exhibit the effects of desolation and distress, the flourishing appearance of this *jagir* impresses the mind of the traveller with sensations most gratifying.

Francklin's passing reference to "a mild and upright administration" indicates one more way in which the Begum adopted Persianate ideas of kingly rule. The goal of Persianate rule was to establish justice, thereby making the subjects prosper, which in turn would enrich the king. In fact, "justice had never been central to Indic political thought" (Eaton 2022: 26). This Persianate ideology is summed up in a medieval Indian aphorism: "To acquire wealth: make the people prosper. To make the people prosper: justice is the means. … They say that justice is the treasure of kings" (Eaton 2019: 16, 26). The Begum's wealth was also evident in the strength of her military. By the last decade of the 18th century, the Begum's military forces consisted of "five battalions of disciplined sepoys (soldiers), commanded by Europeans of different countries, and about forty pieces of canon of different calibres." She also had "about 200 Europeans, principally employed in the service of the artillery" (Francklin 1798: 151). Yet again, the Begum epitomized not only the Sanskritic but also the Persianate ideal of kingly rule, which had been absorbed into Indian political thought: "There is no kingdom without an

[13] Ghosh (2006: 158), uses the figure of Rs. 5 lakhs.

army, no army without wealth, no wealth without material prosperity, and no material prosperity without justice" (Eaton 2019: 15).

One other role traditionally exercised by an Indian king was that of supporter of religious institutions. A Hindu king was known to be especially devoted to a particular deity and its temple (Eaton 2019: 28). He would dedicate his kingdom to his chosen deity and claim to rule the kingdom as the slave or prime minister of that deity (Kawashima 1998: 18, Peabody 2003: 17). Muslim kings in India also participated in religious devotion, patronizing certain saints and orders – the Chishti order being the most closely identified in India with Islamic rule (Eaton 2000: 289-293). Yet such royal devotion to a particular deity or saintly order did not exclude support of other religious institutions or holy persons (Powell 1993: 89; Eaton 2019: 16).[14]

Image 1.2: Begum Samru and her Household (1820). Chester Beatty Library 74.7. Source: Creative Commons.

Like a Hindu king who lavishly bestowed gifts on the temple and priesthood of his deity, or Indo-Muslim ruler who endowed the hospice (*khanqah*) of a favoured Sufi order, the Begum Samru spent great sums of money on the construction of Catholic buildings and institutions, and on providing for the material well-being of Catholic priests and laity. She built a magnificent basilica at Sardhana, hiring an Italian architect for the job and spending lavishly (Rs. 400,000) on the construction, while also setting aside an endowment of Rs. 100,000 for its upkeep (Sharma 2009: 81, Sharma 1985: 160, Sleeman 1893: 286-287). She sent Rs. 150,000 to Rome

[14] For Hindu kings' endowment (and control) of Christian churches in 17th to 18th century Tamil Nadu, see Mosse 2012: 40-41. For Mughal support of Hindu temples, see Eaton 2000: 302-305. Kings, however, did not look kindly upon all deities and temples. They were hostile to the personal deity of enemy kings: and so traditionally one of the first acts of conquest by a king, whether Hindu or Muslim, was to destroy the temple and the deity of the vanquished king, or to capture the deity and bring it back to the victor's home (Eaton 2019: 28-29).

for a charity fund to be administered by the Pope. She also gave Rs. 100,000 to establish a seminary to train Indian Catholic priests. In addition, she gave Rs. 100,000 to each of the three Catholic churches in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. She gave Rs. 30,000 to the Catholic church in Agra and built a "handsome chapel" for the Catholics in Meerut, close to Sardhana (Sleeman 1893: 287). And this was not by any means the sum total of her generosity to the Church. For example, there were over 2000 Christians who lived and took refuge at Sardhana while she was the ruler there, while Catholic priests were invited to and well received at her court (Powell 1993: 89, Fisher 2004: 103). In gratitude for her generosity, the Pope sent her relics from the Vatican, including a piece of the true cross of Christ (Powell 1993: 89, Fisher 2004: 104). He also elevated Sardhana to a bishopric, appointing her personal chaplain as bishop (Powell 1993: 89). However, like any Indian king of her day, the Begum's benevolence was not confined to her own personal religious institution, even though it received the majority of her bequests. At various times she gave Rs. 50,000 for the poor in Sardhana, Rs. 50,000 to the Archbishop of Canterbury for the poor (1/3 of the amount she sent to the Pope for the same purposes), and Rs. 100,000 to the Anglican bishop of Calcutta to provide teachers for poor Protestants in that city (comprising mostly of mixed race and therefore socially very low-ranking children). She also sent Rs. 50,000 to Calcutta "for the poor in that city, and for the "liberation of deserving debtors."(Sleeman 1893: 287). Besides the Catholic chapel in Meerut, she had a church built for the Protestants at a cost of Rs. 10,000. All these were in addition to generous funds she set aside for her family members, as well as Hindu and Muslim institutions (Sleeman 1893: 286-287, Ghosh 2006: 162, Keay 2014: 287).

While many benefitted from the Begum's generosity, there were criticisms of her understanding of Christianity. The main critique of her was that she lived like a Muslim, and patronized different religious institutions, even though she professed being a Catholic. In her old age, when religious boundaries were hardening and religious categories crystalizing, one of her chaplains wrote to the Propaganda Fide, the Vatican office in charge of missionary work, "it is true that this princess is a Christian because she has been baptized, but to all intents and purposes she is still a true Mohammedan" (Powell 1993: 89). Some of her rituals were unorthodox: for example, she insisted on having communion presented to her "dressed up as a flower bouquet" (Keay 2014: 118). At one point she was almost excommunicated by the Vicar Apostolic of Agra – for her financial support to Hindus and Protestants (Fisher 2004: 104). Indeed, for some in the Catholic hierarchy at least, the fact that she patronised Protestants seems to have been as much a blot against her Catholicism as her refusal to give up certain Muslim cultural practices. This was not simply a matter of cultural bias of European priests, it seems, but rather also of the theological regulations of the times (Ghosh 2006: 162).

There was one more way in which the Begum filled the role of an Indian king, and that was in determining her successor. Indian kings did not adhere rigidly to a right of primogeniture. Rather, they looked for the boy who they thought would be the worthiest successor to the throne, and if he was not a legitimate son they would 'adopt' him. Numerous kings of North India were adopted sons of the previous king. The Begum, in similar fashion, chose David Ochterlony Dyce, a great-grandson of Walter Reinhard, as her heir.[15] The Begum took the child away from his parents when he was but 6 weeks old, declaring him to be her son, and brought him up to be a proper English gentleman by entrusting his education to an Anglican priest (Keay 2014: 274-275). Unfortunately for her, as with other Indian rulers, her plans for

[15] The Begum named him after David Ochterlony, the British Resident of Delhi from 1803 to 1806 and from 1818 to 1820, and a good friend of hers. As noted above, Ochterlony lived as an "Indianized European" (Keay: 265, 274-275)

continuing her line did not come to fruition. In David's case, the full force of 19th century British racism destroyed him when he went to Europe to seek a new life (Fisher 2010).

Catholicism and Kingship of Begum Samru

What has been demonstrated so far is how the Begum Samru, over her lifetime, formed and shaped her identity to conform to the pattern of an Indian king. What is not clear, however, is how, or if, her Catholicism contributed anything specific – rather than a religious tradition in general – in this process of self-transformation. What possibilities would life as a Catholic have offered to Farzana as she became the ruler of Sardhana, negotiating the complexities of that role? What resources did Catholic Christianity offer her as she rose to power and authority? There are three general characteristics of Catholicism in 18th century India that allowed the Begum to rule as a Sanskritic-Persianate Indian king. The first was Catholicism's (and Christianity's) promise of the possibility of a completely new life. This possibility is well articulated in the imagery that is associated with baptism – imagery of death and resurrection, of death to an old self and life to a new self. Such an understanding of baptism is grounded in key scripture verses used in the baptismal liturgy, such as Romans 6:4: "We have been buried with (Christ) by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life," and Colossians 2:12: "Buried with (Christ) in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." Moreover, the baptismal liturgy included, among other rituals, an exorcism of Satan and prayers for God's presence and protection in the life of the one being baptised. Of course, Christianity is not the only religious tradition that promises new life – indeed, any tradition that receives outsiders promises new life to new believers. However, if Farzana was looking for a religious tradition that would extricate her from her ties to Islam, then the Catholicism of Walter Reinhard would have been a compelling option for her. Moreover, the 'new life' of Christianity would have brought her more fully into the family of Europeans in India. She was able to draw on these familial relationships to promote not only her own cause but also the cause of her family members, for example when she arranged for marriages of Reinhard's grandchildren and great-grandchildren to Europeans (Fisher 2004: 104-108).

The second resource of the Catholicism of her day was its cultural pliability and flexibility, which paradoxically modulated the new life promised by baptism, offering continuity with the old life from which the convert was coming. While the Catholic Church in other regions of the world was known for its strictness and rigidity, in most of Asia the Church was experimenting with a pluriform cultural identity.[16] The famous experiments in indigenization of Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci (1552 – 1610) in China, Alessandro Valignano (1539 – 1606) in Japan, and Roberto de Nobili (1577 – 1656) in India, as they attempted to interpret Christianity in local cultural, linguistic and ideological idioms, gave rise to vigorous and long-lasting debates about the limits and boundaries of Catholic Christian identity. In the 17th and 18th centuries, these were known as the Rites Controversies.[17]

What is notable in the context of India is that first of all, there was in fact a controversy – that Catholicism's cultural expression was not set in stone but was in fact contested domain within the Church. Secondly, the controversy opened up a space in which religious persons – whether European missionaries or Indian Catholics – could indeed experiment with cultural hybridity and polyvalency. While certain European clerics may have disapproved of the Begum Samru's highly Islamic and idiosyncratic religious practices, it is important to note that she was

[16] One could argue that this was not true in the Catholic enclave of Goa, where the Inquisition had been established.

[17] There were two famous rites controversies in Asia: the Chinese rites controversy and the Malabar (India) rites controversy.

never excommunicated, and in fact was sent important signs of approval from the Holy See (which, granted, probably did not know everything she was up to). Thus, the Begum's ability to absorb and play with multiple identities – religious, cultural, gender, status – was given sanction, even if at times reluctantly, by a Catholicism which was open to cultural experimentation.[18]

The third resource that was available from Catholicism was several authoritative stories of women with power and authority. The Bible, for example, contains the stories of Queen Esther who saved her Jewish people from Persian rulers, and the wealthy merchant and head of household Lydia, who was baptised by the apostle Paul. We do not know how many stories of these and other women Farzana knew. However, there are two women in the Christian tradition about whom she most probably knew something. The first was Joanna, which is the name that Farzana took at baptism, and the second is the Virgin Mary to whom she dedicated her basilica in Sardhana. Perhaps Farzana took the name Joanna because it was reminiscent of Joan of Arc, a Catholic woman who was a warrior and saint (Powell 1993: 88).

However, there is in fact a Joanna in the Bible, and she appears in the gospels twice, both times in the gospel of Luke (Luke 8:2-3, Luke 24:10), a writer known to highlight the lives, importance, and agency of women in Jesus' day and in the early church. Both times Joanna is portrayed as a woman of some social status and economic means, as Farzana strove to be. And both times she provides materially for her Lord Jesus – as the Begum Samru provided for the Catholic Church, the ongoing presence of Christ in the world. The Virgin Mary is an extremely significant figure in Catholic piety and theology, so much so that Protestants complain that she usurps God in the Catholic religious imagination. Among her many attributes she is the Mother of God and the Queen of Heaven. However, the Queen of Heaven did not begin her religious journey in the royal courts of her country. Rather, she was socially insignificant, yet chosen by God to be the most important woman in all of history. In the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), also well known in Catholic piety, Mary declares that she is the ultimate symbol of social status reversal:

> God my Saviour has looked down with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me . . . . (God) has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

As noted earlier, one of the unique aspects of Farzana's career is that she ruled not as the female power behind a titular male, but as a ruler in her own right. Women rulers were rare both in India and Europe; the Maharashtrian queen Ahilya Bai Holkar (1725 – 1795) is one example and may have inspired the Begum Samru (Keay 2014: 107-109). The four begums who ruled Bhopal from 1819 to 1926 may in turn have been inspired by the Begum Samru. But even these exceptional women rulers were part of the aristocratic class, having grown up in the milieu of courtly life. Farzana, on the other hand, had come from the lowest classes of society, as had the Virgin Mary, and had been elevated into a position of power and authority.

[18] Again, this is not to imply that only Catholicism or Christianity more generally provides spaces for social and cultural experimentation. For example, the first two (in terms of age) begums of Bhopal, who ruled from 1819 to 1836, "had ruled in a sense as unisex Pathan chiefs. They wore male dress and were known for their talents in riding, shooting, and directing their own troops" (Metcalf 2011: 6). Note, however, that these begums ruled *after* Begum Samru had well established herself, and "it was only British hegemony that allowed females to serve as regent, let alone chief, among these Pathans" (Metcalf 2011: 5, fn. 9).

This is not to suggest that the Begum Samru viewed the Virgin Mary as some sort of role model for herself.One can hardly find two greater contrasting images than that of the Virgin Mary depicted in the famous Pieta, where as the sorrowful mother of Jesus, she is holding her son's limp, dead body after it has been brought down from the cross, and that of the Begum Samru lying on her bed atop a chamber where her wayward slave girl is dying a slow and agonizing death. The Begum's role model was the prototypical Indian king, not the Christianised and Europeanised Queen of Heaven. But the Virgin Mary, and the Catholic faith that so elevated her, could provide religious inspiration and legitimation for a lowly dancing girl with intelligence, determination, charm and beauty, as she converted to the role of uncontested ruler of a North Indian state during a time of much turbulence and change.

Conclusion

The conversion of Farzana into the Begum Samru was not a momentary event, but rather a gradual one. It involved a change in religion, as well as a change in social status and its accompanying culture. Over the long duration of her adult life, however, one can clearly see the beginning and the end – both in terms of time and goal – of this conversion. Farzana began as a courtesan sold, like a slave, into the harem of a warlord. She ended her life as a ruler of a substantial and flourishing estate in North India. From courtesan, she had become king. Part of this process of conversion was a change in her religious identification and commitments. Once she took up the reins of power and authority in Sardhana, she was baptised into the Catholic Church. Moreover, her Catholicism was neither nominal nor lukewarm. She may have been unusual in her practice of Catholicism – as were well known Jesuit missionaries – but she spent a significant portion of her fortune to build up the Church not only in North India, but around the world. She also cultivated both ecclesial and personal relationships with other members of the Christian community in India. Clearly, her Catholic faith was important to her. In it she found religious resources that would be integral to the new life that she successfully cultivated for herself.

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Research Article

Images of Concealment: Pandita Ramabai and the Mukti Mission

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Pandita Ramabai Dongre (1858-1922) is well-known as an Indian Christian missionary and an early feminist leader, who established an independent mission—the Mukti Mission for destitute women in 1898 in Kedgaon (Maharashtra). Ramabai was also the first Indian leader to use photography as an advocacy and marketing tool, a technology that had recently become popular in India in the mid-19th century, to document Mukti and portray the lives of its residents. To facilitate deeper understanding of how Ramabai contributed to the late-colonial and missionary establishment of 20th century India, this article analyses some Mukti photographs that were published by Ramabai's friend and missionary Helen Dyer (1900 and 1924). Treating photographs as a primary source for missionary history is an important method for understanding how Mukti presented itself and Pandita Ramabai to multiple audiences at home and abroad: an indigenous proto-Pentecostal mission run by a woman leader; an anticolonial patriotic enterprise that resisted denominational control, but elicited funds from donours abroad; and an early feminist enterprise that saved and rehabilitated women.

Mukti, women, missionary, Ramabai, photographs

Introduction[1]

Pandita Ramabai Dongre (1858-1922) was a powerful Christian-feminist progressive reformer and leader who established and ran the Mukti Mission (henceforth Mukti) as an independent proto-Pentecostal mission for destitute women in 1898 at Kedgaon (Maharashtra). An avant garde and pioneering leader of her times, Pandita Ramabai (henceforth Ramabai) used the newly popularised technology of photography (henceforth photo/s) that became popular in India in the mid-19th century to document the mission, Mukti's women residents, and their activities (for a history of photography in India, see Branfoot and Taylor 2014, Edwards 2017, Myrvold 2018, Pinney 2023). Renowned as the most recent Marathi translator of the Bible aimed at women readers, scholarship on Ramabai has lauded and celebrated her, reluctant to locate Mukti in the missionary milieu of late-colonialism. Providing readers with a brief overview of this historiography, this article takes a fresh approach to Mukti by exploring the archival photos that Mukti produced.[2] In this article, I specifically focus on the Mukti photos published by Ramabai's friend and missionary, Helen Dyer (1900, 1924). Read against the grain, my analysis focuses on Mukti's aim at self-representation and self-fashioning. My aim here is not to reveal any contradictory 'reality' that constrasts with Mukti photos, but to explore the construction of Mukti's image as a quest in itself that transformed it into a marketable product. Mukti photos assumed centre-stage for the mission in Ramabai's time as an advocacy and publicity tool that elicited financial support from missionary supporters outside India, from

[1] I want to specially thank my anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions that have greatly helped in sharpening my argument. I also want to thank Eliza F. Kent, Kama Maclean, and Chandra Mallampalli for their invaluable suggestions.
[2] This research is part of a larger future enterprise at Heidelberg University.

Europe, Australia, and America. Printed at notable professional photo studios in the Bombay Presidency, widely-circulated Mukti photos served to consolidate Ramabai's leadership. A fresh analysis of the Mukti photos may enable us to look more closely at Ramabai's power, wielded not only within missionary circles, but within Mukti itself. I have divided this article into three parts. The first part provides a brief outline of the existing tensions in Ramabai's historiography, while the second part explores the importance of Mukti photos as a source for Ramabai's leadership situated in a history of colonialism. In the last section, I read some of the Mukti photos more closely to show how the Mukti women were imaged as merging with the physical structure of the mission, enhancing their own visibility as part of Mukti's growing visibility, and as an extension of Ramabai's power.

A Brief Overview of the Historiography on Ramabai

Image 2.1: Ramabai and some orphans who were adopted by a missionary couple from New Zealand (Dyer (1924: 41). The photos of the Mukti archive underwent enormous circulation as can be seen from "Page 148" in the right-hand corner indicating another publication from which Dyer took the photo.

The first historiographical position position on Ramabai has to do with her identity as a convert. Ramabai is appreciated by scholars of Indian Christianity as a sincere and authentic Christian convert (Frykenberg 2016). This perspective is cognisant of the social milieu of conversion in colonial India: of how conversion for first-generation converts did not provide them with comparable social belonging among the Indians and Europeans of the time in India. First-generation converts thus remained rooted in pre-conversion caste circles, previously held networks and privileges, and dependent on their personal encounters with colonial authority based on their differential access to modern education (Dandekar 2019). The various denominational missions active in Bombay that managed large educational enterprises like the Wilson School or the Robert Money School played an important role in this context. Schools provided converts with a reformed community network of students, teachers, reformers, and missionaries that produced converts as a vernacular but powerful sub-ethnicity in their own regions. In contrast to this, Ramabai's education and conversion took place outside the institutional network and educational framework of Bombay Presidency, following an entirely different trajectory unfamiliar to the native Christians of Bombay. Ramabai's conversion in England, and rumours of her subsequent disagreements with her English missionary mentors (Shah 1977, Kosambi 2016, Kent [this volume]) was met with ambivalence, suspicion, and hostility by native Christians in Bombay (Dandekar 2021a)—a rift that Ramabai never tried to resolve either (Kosambi 1992). The hostility to Ramabai encouraged scholars, Ramabai's biographers (ibid),

to view her as a victim of patriarchal violence (also cf. Rao 2008). This view served to obscure some of the competitive aspects of Ramabai's own journey towards missionary leadership. Existing outside the denominational, regional educational framework, Mukti was different and separate from other missions in Bombay. Missions like the CMS or the Scottish Mission had head offices outside India that not only regulated its functioning, but also prescribed fixed pathways for the emergence of native Christian convert-leaders. On the other hand, Ramabai, as Mukti's leader, did not report to any head office or external auditor/ control mechanism. She established herself as an independent missionary leader and ran Mukti as an independent mission, using pathways that were outside the existing parameters available to other native Christian convert-leaders of Bombay. As a result, Ramabai struggled for funds, a struggle to which Mukti photographs bear testimony. This poses more prosaic historiographical questions about Mukti's publicity optics designed to garner much-needed financial support. As seen in image 2.1, Ramabai stands with a small group of 5 adopted children against the backdrop of Mukti's distinctive dressed-granite walls: 2 young children are held by the fostering missionary couple from New Zealand, 2 girls stand in front of Ramabai, one of them looking distinctly hopeful, while a younger girl shyly stands right in front. While Ramabai looks resolute, the missionary couple is seen wearing garlands and holding bouquets of flowers, perhaps honoured for funding the mission, and for adopting the 5 children.

The second, third, and fourth historiographical positions on Ramabai are interconnected, celebrating Ramabai as a feminist, a social reformer, and a patriot. Ramabai is lauded as a feminist leader much ahead of her times, but this approach (Chakravarti 2014, Kosambi 2016, 2000; Anagol 2005) also over simplifies Mukti as a missionary enterprise. While 'feminist' would imply a left-leaning stance that deconstructed patriarchal institutions, this description cannot be entirely bourne out for Mukti. While Ramabai rescued women from abuse, she cannot be called an anti-patriarchal agent, especially as she was herself the patriarch of Mukti. A believer in the marriage institution—a deeply Protestant view—Ramabai's missionary identity reconciles poorly with left-leaning feminism. Perhaps, Ramabai can be better linked with Christian feminist leaders like Josephine Butler (1828-1906), who was instrumental in repealing the Contagious Diseases Act of 1869, and became famous for her advocacy against the slavery of women, child labour, and prostitution (Ichikawa 2015, Anagol 2005). While other Christian-feminist rescuers of Ramabai's times, like Amy Carmichael or Ida Scudder, were all Euro-American, white women, Ramabai was the first Christian rescuer of colour. There is no real precedent for Ramabai's leadership, and this apparent absence produces intellectual space for multiple scholarly engagements (Burgess 2006): was Ramabai an anticolonial patriot? Was she a social reformer? Was she a feminist? Was she a missionary? Or was she simply a rebel who resisted control (see Viswanathan [1998] for conversion as rebellion)? This leads us to the next question: it is clear that Ramabai resisted external patriarchal control (Kent [this volume]), but did she allow Mukti women residents to resist the institutional patriarchal control she wielded on Mukti (White 2023)? Ramabai is strongly associated with reform movements—the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal and the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay (Kosambi 2016). Indeed, Ramabai's previous work at the Sharda Sadan (also spelled Sharada Sadan) undergirded Mukti's initial working style and rescue work that proximated Mukti with the Christian reform movement already prevalent in Bombay (Dandekar 2021a, 2021b, 2022, Karhadkar 1979), and the Prarthana Samaj initiated by Hindu reformers. Ramabai was unique for the way she merged Christian and Hindu reform at Mukti, transcending prevalent religious battlelines between reformers, Christian converts and Hindu reformers of Bombay (Dandekar 2021a). Her move to continue with the Sharda model at Mukti perhaps drove a wedge between Ramabai and the polarised missionary domain of Bombay that stridently emphasized conversion and Christian difference. The struggle to define what an authentic Christian or a true reformer encompassed produced the missionary and reformist domain of Bombay as a competitive and confrontational battleground, with Ramabai competing with the other native

Christians of Bombay by keeping Mukti separate and different, and perhaps implying that Mukti was better because of that difference. This automatically also brings Ramabai's anticolonial and patriotic resistance to her English mentors into salience. Historians have often highlighted how Ramabai stood her ground against British missionaries (Kosambi 2016, Shah 1977, Kent [this volume]), and Ramabai's rebellion has often been interpreted as evidence of her anticolonialism and patriotism. However, this view also over simplifes Mukti and Ramabai's close association with Euro-American missionaries at Mukti, as can be seen in image 2.1.

Mukti Photographs: Seeing, Being Seen and Being Shown

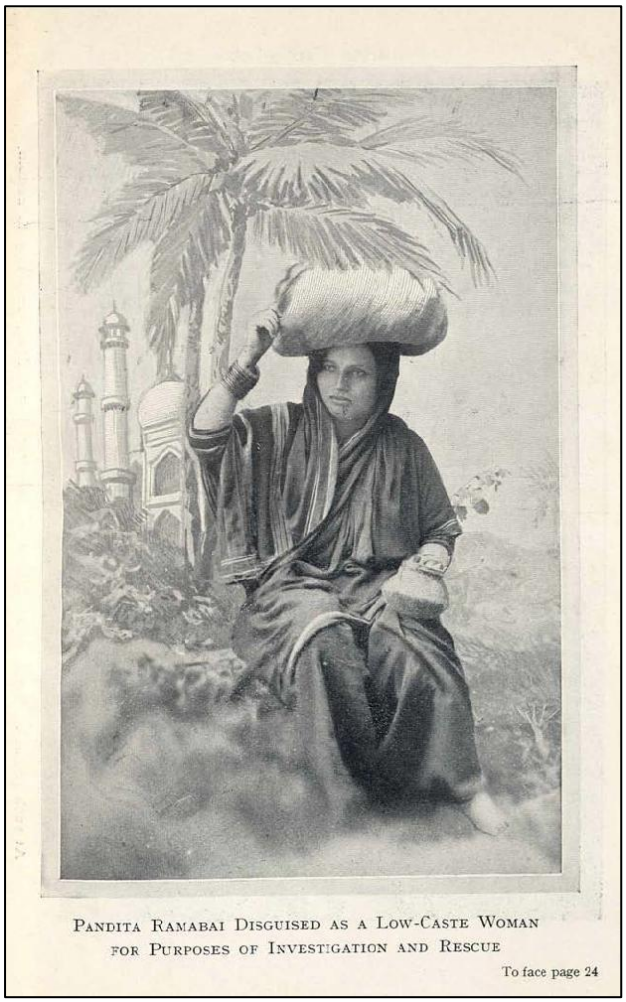

Image 2.2: Ramabai disguised as a Mahar (lower-caste) woman (Dyer 1924: 24). Given Ramabai's power to rescue the destitute, her 'disguise' as a poor woman only visually enhanced her power as privileged enough to 'play' at reality. Wearing the clothes of what the region's historically marginalized castes could afford, made her look even more Brahmin. Given her distinctive features and fame, news of Ramabai's arrival must have preceded her presence, making the disguise unnecessary. As can be seen from similar disguises frequently donned by other white women missionaries, this cross-ethnic dressing is a theme that is closely associated with missionary power in India.

Shifting to Mukti photos introduces other themes into the discussion such as Ramabai's missionary zeal that inspired her rescue missions. Saving famine-striken destitute women and children constituted a hallmark of Mukti. But this also introduced additional tensions about the Protestant conviction of rescued women among missionaries. Cox (2002: 163) describes the moral implications of using famines as an opportunity to make Christians, and Midgely (2007: 111) argues that rescuing orphans expressed the White feminine privilege of the maternalist Christian-imperialist mission. From a more global perspective, Swain and Hillel (2010) have underlined how the rescue of children was discursively created, spread from 19th century Britain to Canadian and Australian colonies, to produce Victorian knowledge about the correct treatment of indigenous children, and inform their conceptions about childhood. Evangelical child rescue organisations problematised and blamed poorer families, creating them as incapable of providing proper child care. In the early years of Mukti, Ramabai travelled in the Deccan region, the Central Provinces, and Gujarat, rescuing famine-stricken destitute women and children (image 2.2). However, their status as rescuees who wanted to convert were dissonant with Protestant anxieties about Christian conviction. Suarsana (2014) describes how the 'Mukti Revival' in 1905 inaugurated change in that direction, heralded by Minnie Abrams, whose arrival in Mukti gave rise to a new proto-Pentecostal evangelism among the Mukti women that resulted in them talking in tongues. The revival resolved any lingering doubts about Christian conviction and served to ensconce proto-Pentecostal evangelism at Mukti as its primary Christian nature (cf. Sahoo [2018], Singh 2016) and even reconciled Ramabai with some stalwart native Christian leaders of Bombay (Dandekar 2021a).

Mukti's evangelism did more than influence its devotional style. It also transformed the mission by bringing Mukti women more international visibility as the new Protestant women of India, and attracting more missionary interest and funding to the mission. This interest led to the intensification of the Mukti photo archive that documented its evolving physical structure, its rescued residents, its funding requirements, and its activities showcasing industrious and happy, educated Protestant women. Mukti photos found increasing circulation across contexts, matching the diverse authorial interests that underlay their citation (see caption of image 2.1). In addition to the Mukti newsletter and mouthpiece *Prayer Bell*, various versions of the same photos were published in other reports and books, where the photos were differently contextualised, depending on what viewers were asked to see. Mukti photos published by Helen S. Dyer, Ramabai's friend and missionary (*Pandita Ramabai: The Story of Her Life* [1900], *Pandita Ramabai: A Great Life in Missions* [1924]) are a great example of this circulatory trend. Historian Uma Chakravarti has recently argued (2023) that these photos illustrate and represent Ramabai's carefully crafted and archived self-representation of feminist leadership.[3] Having written about Ramabai and her times as constituting a new era of feminist assertion and leadership in the Bombay Presidency (2014), Chakravarti celebrates Mukti photos as a reflection of Ramabai's feminist and anti-patriarchal spirit that constituted a radical alternative to how Indian women were photographed until then—within conjugal contexts, controlled by husbands. Chakravarti argues that Ramabai was radically different in her depiction of women, formulating alternative pictographic families that were made up of women. Quoting from Chakravarti's article:

> Ramabai's use of the photograph to document women's non-conjugal existence, the redefining—even the subversion—of the family happens through the photograph. Moving away from the husband-wife photograph which ultimately became the visible symbol of new conjugality in the 19th century (and continues to dot our drawing rooms to this day, proudly displayed by families as necessary symbols of the modern household) Ramabai rewrote even the 'happy family' photograph, as she used the camera to capture the battered conditions under which child wives/ widows arrived at the doorstep.

Chakravarti writes about how the Mukti women were photographed in the same poses as married couples, and arranged together in larger collectives that simulated clans. They were imaged at other times in smaller, more intimate groups that refashioned immediate families. The smaller groups often consisted of mother and child/ children that included Ramabai posing with her daughter Manorama. Quoting from Chakravarti's online article:

> These amazing photographs, captured by using some technique to piece together segments of the group to make a whole at a time when the wide-angle lens was not available, stunningly show us how dramatically Ramabai pressed against the boundaries of conventional thinking in her own life and work, never failing to document that process with all its dramatic intensity… I read this move on her part as a new way to think about reproducing the family in a situation where there were few conventional resources at her disposal.

[3] "The 19th Century Woman Who Challenged the Image of Indian Coupledom: Historian Uma Chakravarti on Pandita Ramabai's Radical Photographs of Conjugality and its Discontents" (https://behanbox.com/2023/03/16/the-19th-century-woman-who-challenged-the-image-of-indian-coupledom/#:~:text=History-,The%2019th%20Century%20Woman%20Who%20Challenged%20the%20Image%20of%20Indian,of%20conjugality%20and%20its%20discontents.), accessed 03.12.2023.

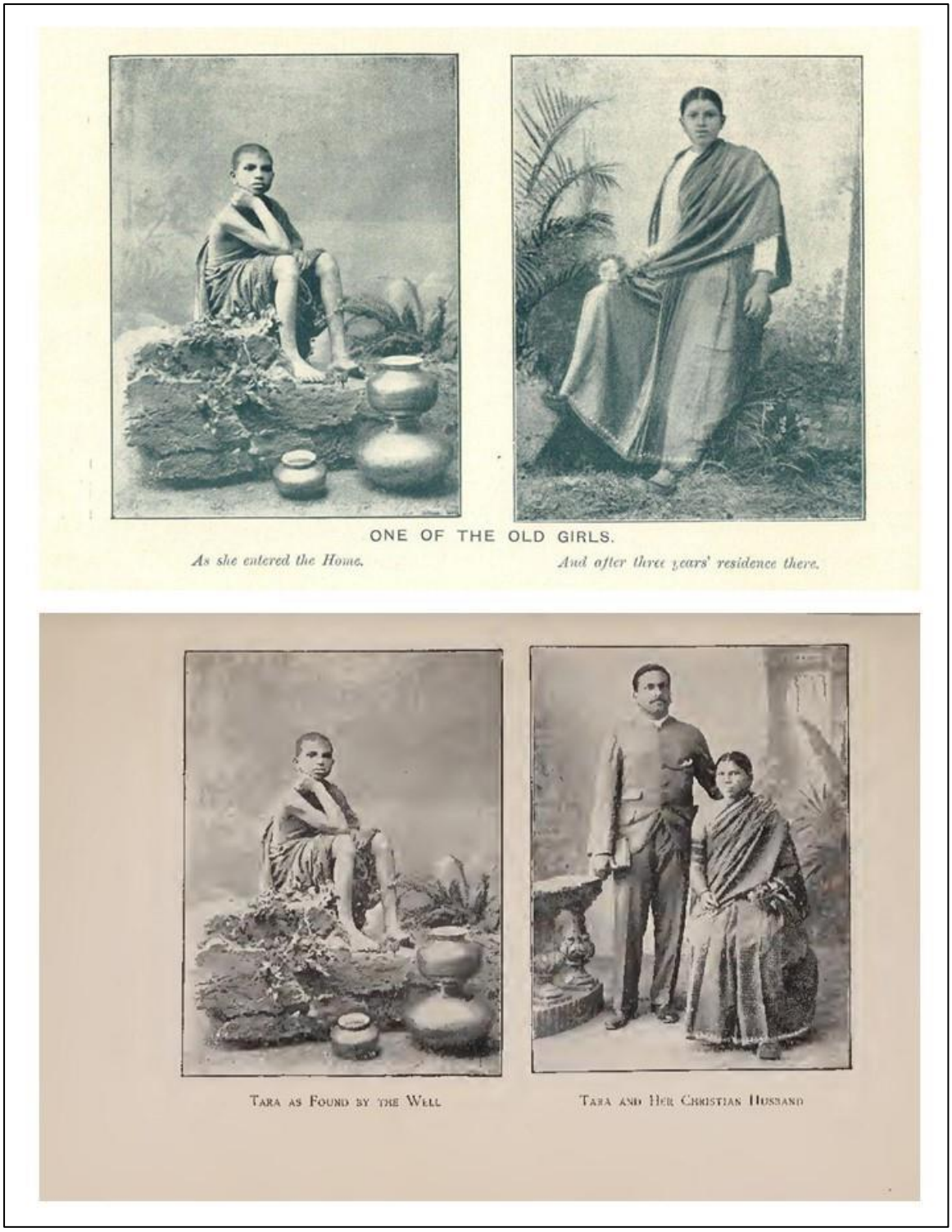

Image 2.3: The top two pictures are used by Chakravarti in her online article (2023), and are drawn from one of Dyer's numerous hagiographies of Ramabai and Mukti. But, as is typical of Mukti's circulating photo images, another book also by Dyer (1900: 88) sports the bottom two images that recount a different story of Tara in which she is shown as married to an Indian Christian.

There are several issues that immediately crop up, especially from a subaltern feminist perspective. One might ask: who were the largely anonymous women in Mukti photos? We know little about their lives except for some of their names and short descriptions. What ultimately became of them? How did their biographies or resistance find any representation in Mukti documentation? How extensively were their photos replicated and circulated across contexts—used as representative musters to illustrate the catastrophic nature of famine, and

women's misery under patriarchy? While it is true that images of Mukti women did not represent the patriarchal interests of husbands and marital families, these photos nevertheless represented Ramabai's interest in showcasing Mukti as a stellar and competitively successful mission. In the light of scholary adulation, how can Mukti be analysed anew as a missionary institution that was part of a competitive domain, where Ramabai was seeking to strike out on her own? What we need to ask is: how can the support Mukti received be contextualised in the history of missions from late colonial Bombay Presidency (cf. Koven's [2023] analysis of the nexus between missionaries, converts, and colonial governmentality)? If Mukti photos constituted a radical shift in visually producing alternative families, then what underlay the production of these carefully crafted self-representations?

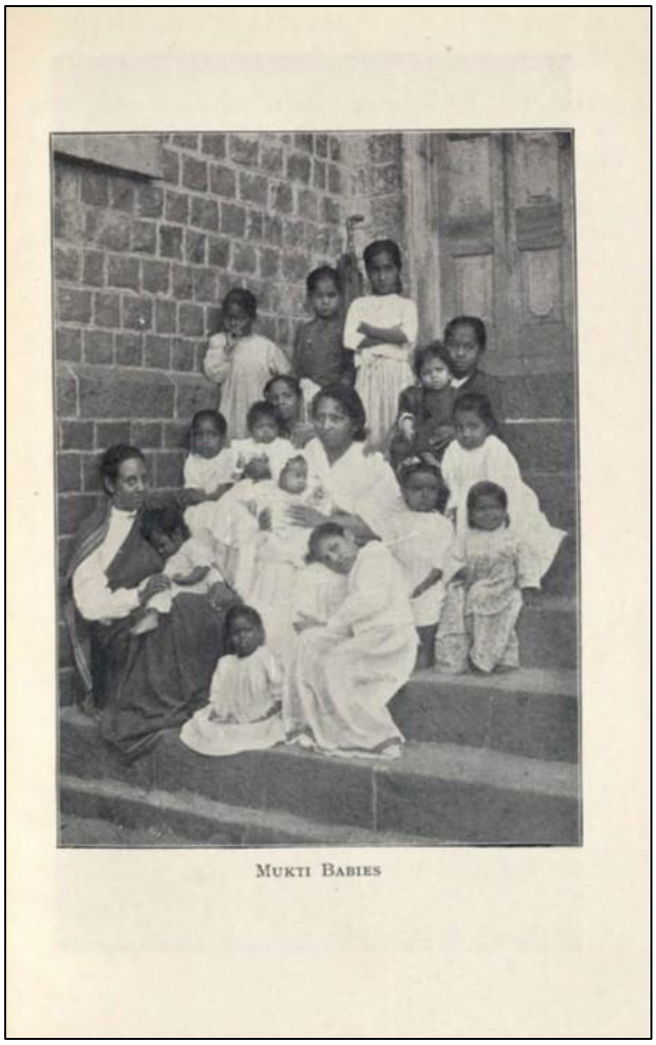

Image 2.4: (Dyer 1924: 152) simply titled "Mukti Babies" shows four adult women with Ramabai in the centre, Manoramabai (her daughter) sitting a step below her, and another two women, along with 13 orphaned girls, many of them infants.

The alternative conjugality argument assumes that Ramabai and the Mukti women were equals. It assumes that not just Ramabai, but Mukti women too had also already deconstructed marriage and the patriarchal marital family and were performing feminist subversion with natural grace by self-reflexively mimicking and parodying it. The idea that Ramabai disregarded the value of matrimony as a Protestant missionary is impossible to consider, especially given the fact that many Mukti women were married off to eligible Christian men, many of them widowers. But what feels even more unimaginable is the subversive mimesis of the marital family motif itself. Why would the marital family motif, containing haunting traces of its absence, continue to dominate the photographic representation of destitute women at Mukti—women, whose families were lost in reality—especially if Ramabai was a feminist? And who was meant to see this performance of alternative conjugality? Instead of arguing that these photos showcased Ramabai's feminism, I would argue that they showcased Ramabai's power. Ramabai was displacing the family, replacing it by Mukti in the photos, presenting Mukti to viewers as a place that was more than a mission. Ramabai was presenting herself, not just as an institutional and missionary head, but an emotional, familial patriarch. Image 2.4 for example, titled "Mukti Babies," shows Ramabai's emotive power as the absolute head of an ersatz family. While both Ramabai and Manorama look stoic, more interestingly, the children have been specially dressed up. They pose to show viewers how lovingly they are cared for, with one of them laying her head on Ramabai's lap while simultaneously looking at the camera.

Addressing the question of image 2.3, Chakravarti notes Ramabai's efforts to rehabilitate destitute women through the example of Tara's before-and-after photo:

> …she used the camera to capture the battered conditions under which child wives/ widows arrived at her doorstep. Sometimes she coupled them with pictures taken years later, showing the transformations in the personality of the girls who had spent a few years in the Sharada Sadan, her home for widows.

However, this particular before-after photo poses interesting conundrums. Butler's (1922: 25) account of Tara says that she had been branded by hot irons when discovered. Dyer's book (1900: 88) contains other additional photographs and information of Tara, wherein it is said that Tara was discovered near a well, perhaps sitting there with the intention to commit suicide (as a child widow). This information is hardly contradictory—Tara could have, all at once been branded; found starving; and sitting near a well wanting to commit suicide. The cluster of information about Tara serves a rhetorical purpose—to show that Ramabai saved Tara, also borne out by the photo captions. In the bottom two photos (placed by Dyer on the same page p. 88), Tara is shown in a typical marital and conjugal pose with her Christian husband. While this placement could have been Dyer's choice or the choice of the publisher, it complicates Chakravarti's (2023) criticism of the valorised Hindu marriage and conjugal photo that might be dotting contemporary *Savarna* homes. How can we, using Tara's instance, say anything to the contrary? Did Tara's 'happily married' photo not valorize Protestant marriage? Could the photo, at least in principle, not dot the walls of Tara's decendents and family home? Drawing on Majumdar's research (2009) on marriage as a simultaneously ancient and modern institution in 19th-century colonial Bengal, one can say that Mukti, too, remodelled the Indian Protestant-Christian marriage as an institution that was simultaneously religious, patriarchal, and a modern reformed institution that promoted widow remarriage, along with the conversion and education of women. Apart from demonstrating the extensive circulation of Mukti photos from the various combinations in which Tara's photos were reassembled and published, the Mukti photos also demonstrate an emancipated Protestant marriage model, where the marriage of converted Mukti women produced a new form of sociality for the nascent Indian Christian community in Western India that was strongly based on the reformed Hindu marriage.[4] In many ways, and being based on it, the Protestant marriage model retained its *Savarna* Hindu components that were simultaneously reformist, arranged between compatible adult partners (see Dandekar [2022], also Chakravarti [2014] for the first divorces initiated by women in Bombay for marital incompatibility). The Protestant marriages of Mukti were hardly rid of the trappings of *Savarna* patriarchal components. For many Mukti girls, the mission trained them for future marital roles exactly like Hindu reformist families did. In Dyer's words (1924: 136):

> The young women make good, thoughtful wives. None of them are idle. They do their own cooking and washing, take care of their babies, and, in addition, each has some duties at Mukti which employ them several hours daily. Many of the girls from Mukti have married Christian men and have gone to live in distant parts of India, where they are testifying to the heathen around them of the Saviour's love.

The possibility that Mukti remodelled the Indian Protestant marriage and nascent Christian community is evident from the anxiety that the post-marital exit of women to the outside world caused the Mukti community, wherein missionaries feared that Mukti girls, once back into the

[4] See Arondekar (2023) of how the headshots of women in the *Samaj Sudharak* magazine run by the Gomantak Maratha Samaj drew on existing musters and photographic genres.

Hindu mainstream, would lose their Christianity. Dyer clearly describes this anxiety in the following words (1924: 137):

> Occasionally it has been found that some of the girls and young women rescued during famine times have been married in their heathen days, and the husbands or some relative has come to claim them. One of these, a peculiarly fine girl, thoroughly converted and on fire for souls, was claimed by her husband from Gujerat. After ascertaining that his claim was genuine they were permitted to meet, when the young woman consented to go with him on his promise to allow her to remain a Christian. She wrote afterwards thanking Ramabai for what had been done for her, and telling of her endeavours to spread the Gospel message in the place where she was. Several others have boldly declined to go back into their heathen homes where they would not be allowed to confess their faith in Christ. It was a joy to Ramabai to stand by one and another of these as they testified boldly to their people.

Chakravarti identifies some before-after photographs of famine victims from the Mukti photo archive (image 2.5). There has been significant theoretical writing on the 19th-century genre of famine photography in colonial India (Chaudhary 2012) that served to consolidate colonial control, based on the shared emotions of sympathy that viewing the photos evoked. Chaudhary argues that the shared sympathy for the photographed object produces an affective bond between photographer and viewer that allows the latter emotional access into the staged photographic productions of the former. Hence (ibid: 171-172), sympathy for famine victims, and the visual horror of famine becomes an important conduit of imperial intervention, bringing suffering populations under imperial control: “an irresistible tending toward the other and therefore an affirmation of the self” (p. 183). Similarly, Mukti famine rescue before-after photos also consolidated Mukti’s power, allowing its viewers to share in Ramabai’s rescue drive. It is not difficult to predict the evolution of a similar empathetic conduit when beholding Mukti famine photos either. Beholding the photos might have allowed Mukti funders to emotionally participate in Ramabai’s rescue mission and strengthen it. In some senses, images 2.4 and 2.5 functioned in the same way: as publicity materials to garner financial support from donours. Mukti famine photos not only showcased Ramabai’s success and Mukti’s power to bring women back from near death—an almost Biblical power—they also demonstrated the material power of Mukti that afforded hundreds of women food, clothing, medicines, education, work-learning opportunities, and rehabilitation. This was no small achievement and not too different from other globally active missionary enterprises like

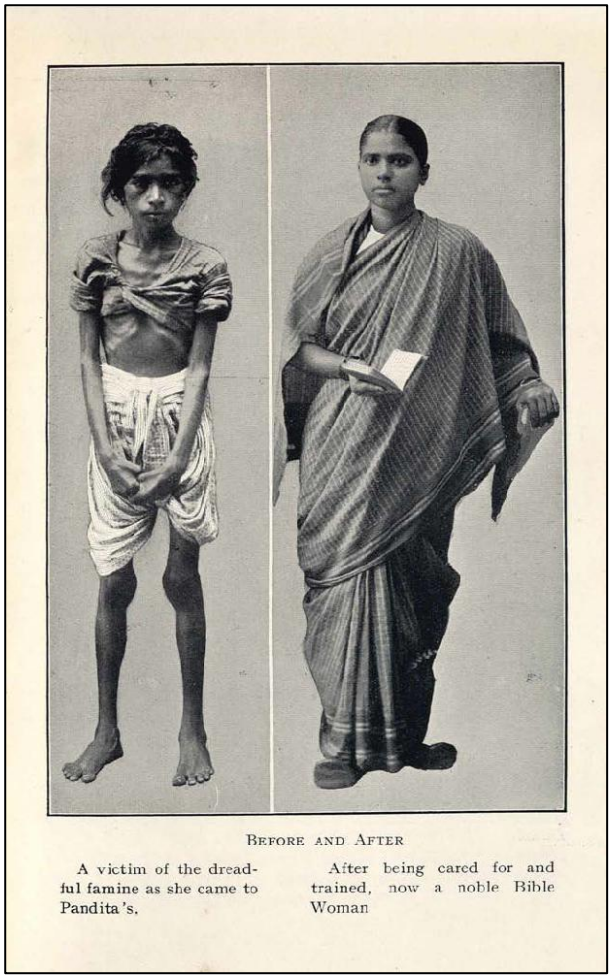

Image 2.5: A before-and-after famine photo from Dyer (1924: 72).

boarding schools and orphanages. The showcasing of Mukti's power generated a powerful convergence at Mukti, wherein Ramabai and the photogenic among Mukti girls visually produced the mission as chosen by God, a conduit of divine miracles, teleologically creating Mukti as both the result and wielder of miracles.

Image 2.6: Women working at the Mukti Mission printing press where Ramabai's translated Marathi Bible was also printed (Dyer 1924: 76).

Dyer's Mukti photos are replete with Protestant messaging about the redemptive power of labour, with women residents working cheerfully at chosen vocations and enjoying their well-earned meals at congregations. Neatly dressed and industrious (image 2.6), Mukti women were showcased as adept at technologically advanced gadgetry and industrial tasks that required knowledge and training. This was combined for them with intellectual and spiritual growth as Bible women (as the in-photo caption of image 2.5 reveals). Images of a 'good' Mukti were a potent message beamed out to donors and supporters, and functioned perfectly as publicity materials for an institution that was additionally described in eulogistic terms by visitors, mostly, Ramabai's friends (cf. Butler 1922). The in-image caption of image 2.6 gives an impression of Mukti being a formal office, an industrial unit with different departments like the "Printing Department". Two women are seen at the centre of the frame of image 2.6, posing as if they are consulting each other over a sheaf of papers held in their hands. They give viewers an impression of being candidly photographed, their pose bearing a striking resemblance to government officers. The product that image 2.6 markets is not the Mukti printing press or the printed materials that came out of that press, but Mukti women themselves, who were successful at running it and who encompassed a new generation of Indian Protestant women.

With publicity materials being vital to Mukti's survival and financial viability, Mukti photos revealed the simultaneous presence of two Muktis: one that was photographed and one that was not. I am not arguing that the un-photographed Mukti was 'bad', lurking underneath the 'good' photographed Mukti, or that there were two 'good' and 'bad' Muktis. Instead, I draw attention to the constructed and mediated nature of Mukti itself, the 'good' Mukti promoted visually, marketed through self-fashioned images. Mukti was a closed institution where evaluation did not take place independently of the discourse generated from within, and the

visually available 'good' Mukti is interesting for historians exactly for its conspicuously perfected effortless projection of uniformity among photographed women. This uniformity was important for Mukti's public image, as it is equally important to note that there were no dissenting voices from inside Mukti that were ever included in its outward-projected discourse. There must have been a complex process, perhaps including a cadre of photogenic women, like the famine-rescued Mukti woman of image 2.5 or Tara from image 2.3, whose successfully rehabilitated state could be visually mobilised to strengthen Mukti's public image. While the success stories of the many photographed/ photogenic Mukti women were not concocted, their images were certainly reassembled and deployed within Mukti's discourse (image 2.3). It also goes without saying that this cadre of photogenic women, if it at all existed, was hierarchically junior to Ramabai and Manorama, whose images were never used as illustrative examples or musters that demonstrated a 'convert's life', or an 'Indian destitute woman's/ widow's life', or a 'mission resident's life'. Despite being heavily photographed, Ramabai and Manorama primarily represented themselves, a mark of their power and hierarchical superiority. The only instance we find of Ramabai depicting 'Others' comes from an example where she 'plays' at cross-caste dressing. Commonly encountered among white missionary ladies traveling in India at the time who were self consciously photographed as 'native' women wearing 'native' clothes, Ramabai too engaged in 'playful' disguise (image 2.2). Wearing the 'native' clothes of a lower-caste woman, Ramabai, like the traveling white missionary ladies of her time, also posed at an Otherness that simultaneously underlined her caste privilege, implicit in the act of 'playing' (image 2.2). While her 'disguise' as a "low-caste" woman in image 2.2 has been explained by supporters as a necessary prop to facilitate the rescue of orphans from the famine-stricken countryside, the backdrop of image 2.2—a faux Taj Mahal with faux palm trees—proves otherwise. This was not a necessary costume that enabled Ramabai to work better; it was Ramabai 'playing', something attested to by Ramabai's niece in the latter's memoirs (Dongre and Patterson 1963: 42-44).

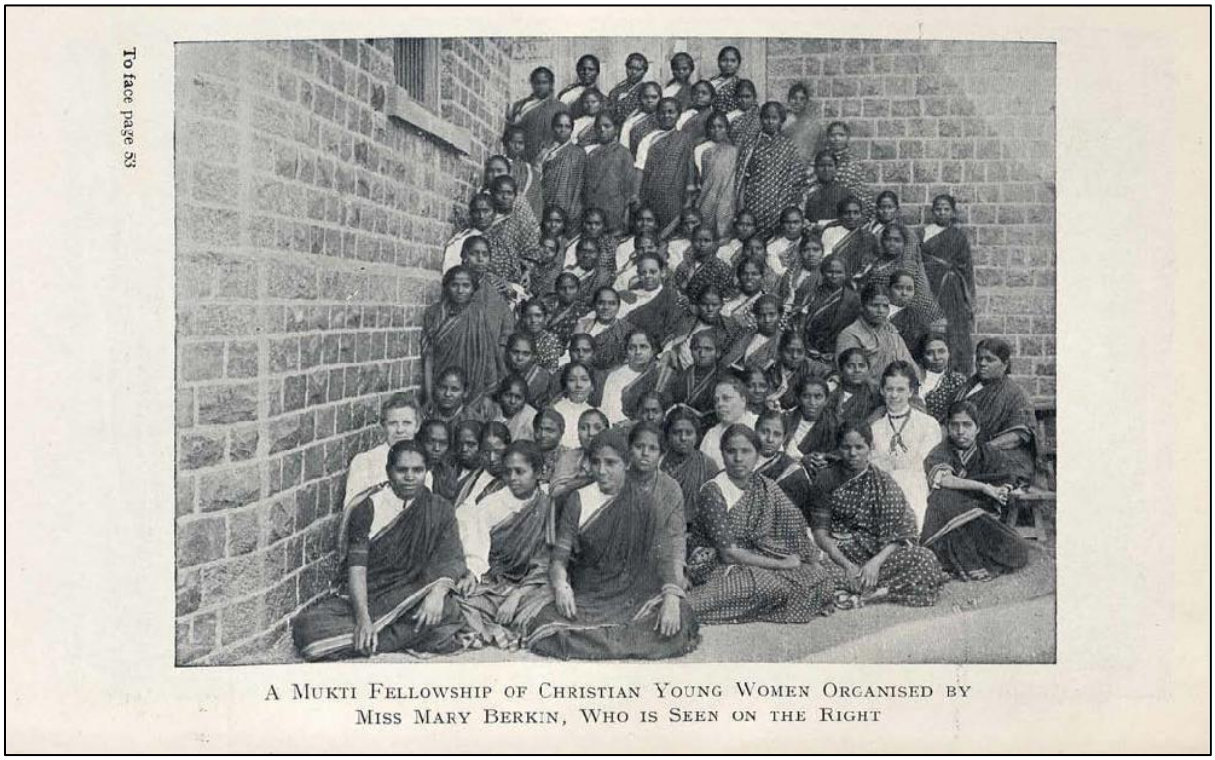

Image 2.7: Some Mukti women photographed together with Ramabai (Dyer 1924: 53).

Ramabai's interest in beaming out the public image of a 'good' Mukti was produced through a complex process that merged Mukti women's rescue narratives with her story of rescuing them.

Evident from the photos of Mukti women, who drew immense meaning from being photographed with Ramabai (image 2.7), the consensus between their co-written narratives of rescue-rescuing empowered Mukti women too, or the more photogenic among them, to embody Mukti, even if at the expense of de-individualizing their personal stories. Each photo of a rescued Mukti woman was thus indirectly a photo of Ramabai's rescue mission and 'good' Mukti itself, producing uniformity among photographed women. Being photographed at self-fashioning was thus a reward for self-fashioning itself; it was contractual and hence not without empowerment (images 2.6 and 2.7). Being consensually photographed allowed for a transaction to take place between women and their agency to self-fashion (Pinney 2023: 1-62), and not only did Mukti women show themselves in agential ways, they also saw themselves as future viewers of their own agential images. Their desire to see and to show themselves in compelling ways, as modern, global woman Protestant citizens from India built a powerfully aspirational, and reconstructive bridge, a reward, or justice mechanism. When considering some of her innumerable photos with Mukti women, one cannot help but notice the light radiating out of Ramabai, accentuated by the white colour of her sari (image 2.7—third row, fifth from the right). But Ramabai's power in these photos also draws from the intensity of the Mukti women photographed with her, who lean in towards the 'centre', towards Ramabai. Coloured in greyer tones due to their darker saris in the black and white format, Mukti women, apart from the same projected uniformity seen in image 2.6, embody Mukti as Ramabai's extensions, simultaneously radiating towards her and out of her. They collectively present viewers with a vision of a unified 'good' Mukti, the new Protestant woman whose proto-Pentecostal evangelism was similar to the Black churches of early 20th century American Christianity (See Napierala [2021] for the 'different' evangelism of Black churches of the early 20th century). Given the complexity of this desire, it is unlikely that Mukti women ever rejected Mukti and the power and potential for visibility it afforded them. In fact, photos were a new forensic tool that bolstered Mukti women, their images turning into 'evidence' that proved that they were indeed the 'Mukti women', something of importance for families that kept the Mukti photos of their ancestresses. These photos kept the door open for Mukti women, for their possible return to Mukti in case circumstances did not bode well for them in the outside world. This is not to say that their Christian conviction was strategic (cf. Roberts 2012); having the security of evidence that proved that they were indeed 'Mukti women' photographed with Ramabai also meant that the material anxieties, desires, and aspirations of Mukti women were inextricable from their spiritual and religious lives.

The 'Burning' Within

But what happened to those hundreds of women who were never photographed? For all those who were photographed, there must have been many others who were not photographed. Their images (like in image 2.9) perhaps contributed to large Mukti crowds, visually representing Mukti's bulwark and testifying to the numerical strength of the Mukti product. As part of a crowd, these women were mostly nameless and sometimes indistinguishable (cf. Spivak [2000: 324] for a discussion of feminism and subaltern silence). A question I have often returned to while looking at Mukti photos is: who were the other Mukti women seen in crowds (like in images 2.7, 2.8, and 2.9)? Mukti women did not write candid critical autobiographies that resisted power or asserted individuality, much in contrast to Brahmin women outside missions like Lakshmibai Tilak (cf. *Smritichitre* 2017). It is also unlikely that Mukti women wrote resistant narratives, their security in the mission being at stake. They are lost to the archival record today, apart from some chance appearances in group photos. For example, consider the 3rd woman from the left in the first row (counted horizontally) of image 2.9 who looks away from the camera (I am unsure if she is smiling); it is also difficult to tell whether she looks away deliberately. Similarly, in case of the first lady in the 2nd row from the right in image 2.7. While her looking away does not seem deliberate, I would suggest that though photographed

consensually, those who looked disinterested and away in the Mukti photos *were* perhaps indeed disinterested in the contractual agency that being photographed afforded women. While I do not have their voices to ascertain whether they were really disinterested, or qualify the nature or reason for this disinterest, I can only analyse their looking away by placing it within the Mukti context. For many destitute women, the world ended with Mukti walls. They had no relatives outside who came seeking them in Mukti; they were alone in the world with nowhere to go. For women, whose lives were limited to Mukti; they perhaps gained little from the contractual agency of being photographed. Looking polite and passively disinterested was therefore indeed an expression of actual potential disinterest, their physical presence supplied by themselves and inserted into photos to add to Mukti's bulwark.

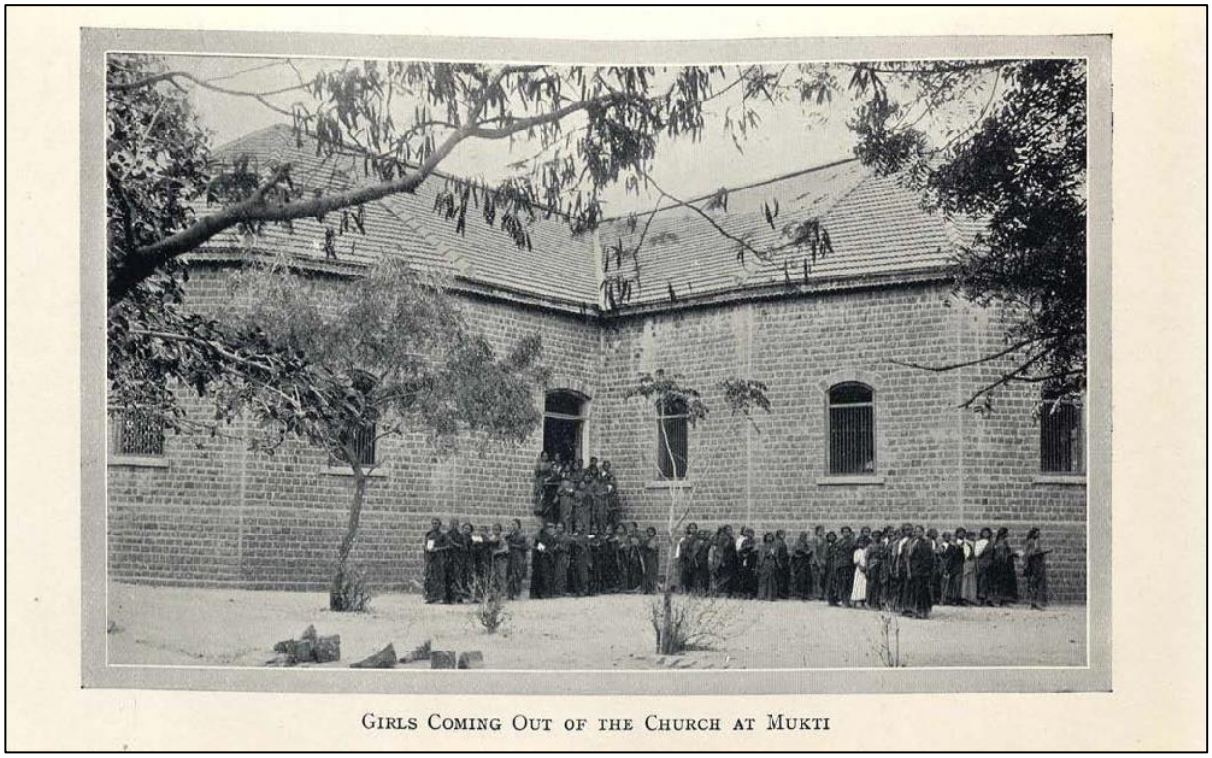

Image 2.8: The Mukti women photographed in front of the Mukti Church (Dyer 1924: 52).

Campt's writings on photography (2017) documents the experiences of black subjects within the diaspora, and she poignantly asks us to listen to images and the imagery produced through physical movement or even humming (pp. 3-4), as a counterintuitive force. Campt argues that photographs produce a vernacular, quotidian form through the haptic mundanity of everyday images that resists and opposes the creator's intention (ibid: 7-8):

> As a vernacular practice mobilised by black people in the diaspora, photography is an everyday strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility. Vernacular photographs are banal as well as singular; they articulate both the ordinary and the exceptional texture of black life.

Accepting Campt's invitation to listen to the images of Mukti women and analyse their belonging to Mukti (like in image 2.8), brings us to a consideration of what was necessary to attaint that state of belonging. To be saved and rescued, Mukti women had to somehow make themselves be 'seen' by Ramabai, a prerquisite for their subsequent inclusion in Mukti. This transformed Ramabai's rescue of women into a powerful 'seeing' process, with the women eliciting Ramabai's gaze and showing themselves to her, a process that was akin to receiving *darshan*. Dyer recounts an example of the power of Ramabai's 'seeing' and the urgent need

among women to elicit Ramabai's gaze, resulting in their rescue. Recounting a time when Ramabai was touring the Central Provinces, Dyer writes (1900: 119):

> When Pandita was bringing widows from the Central Provinces, a deaf and dumb woman insisted on coming. Pandita refused to bring her. She came and sat in the train. They made her understand that she could not learn in school, hence could not be taken. She told them by signs that she would grind, cook, wash clothes, scrub, etc. She literally refused to leave the train and at the last minute Pandita laughed and bought her a ticket. She has been true to her word and works cheerfully. She always preserves a reverent attitude during worship. When the women were asking Pandita for baptism, she persisted in having her name written. Pandita tried to put her aside, but again she was persistent. One day she rose to testify. We all felt God's presence as she stood in silent eloquence before God. The girls said aloud, 'Mookkie [the dumb one] knows God as well as we'. On two occasions she tried to speak and made a low sound. She received baptism with the others.

Mookie's example is poignant, and also powerful, due to her dumbness. Her case constitutes an example of how women needed to be urgently 'seen' at the moment of their rescue, to be rescued. And this 'seeing' depended on Ramabai. Mookie's determination to be seen by Ramabai, by missionaries like Dyer, or the other girls who were the recipients of Ramabai's gaze, and who noted Mookie's dumbness, and finally by God who accepted her soul, exemplifies the transactional energy of 'seeing' and 'showing' that empowered Mukti women, their contribution to Mukti rewarded through the forensic, photographic documentation of their presence and contribution. I have yet to find a single photo of Mookie.

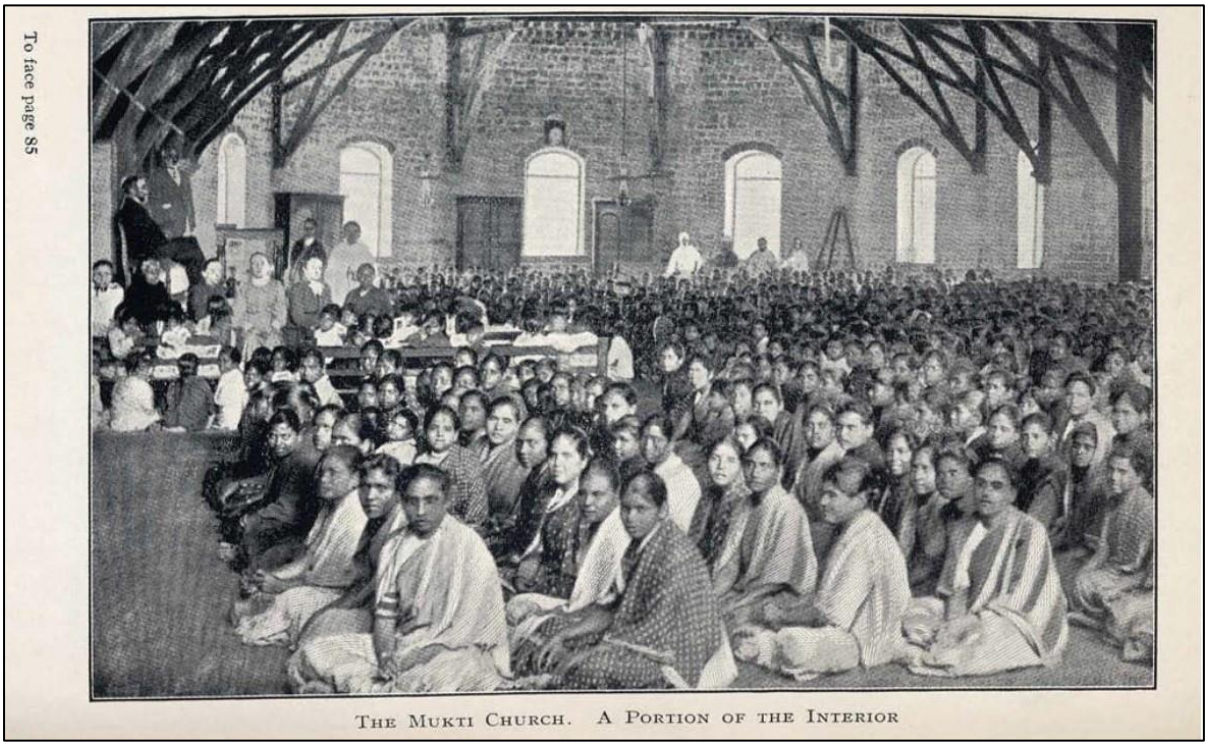

Image 2.9: Mukti women inside the Mukti Church (Dyer 1924: 85).

The necessary justice of being 'seen' has been sensitively pointed out by Hatcher (2023) when describing the empathy implicit in Vidyasagar's seeing of the Bengali widow's distress. But Vidyasagar was not a missionary leader, and his seeing remained limited to legal activism. The

empowerment and justice of being 'seen' by missionaries who saved and rescued was hardly static or even worldly. It was not simply always there once conferred. This power had to be remade, reformulated, and maintained with care. This need to be permanently 'seen' was an important context for conversion. We see in Mookie's case, how the need to remain permanently seen by Ramabai, other missionaries, and the other women residents was a powerful context that resulted in her step towards baptism. On the other hand, for women who had already been saved and would never leave Mukti, being seen was more passive and perhaps grew personally uninteresting over time. Perhaps every girl like Mookie, enthusiastic in the beginning to be seen, gradually turned passive once she had been saved, and once she realized that was going to turn into one of Mukti's permanent residents.

'Seeing' and 'showing' converged at Mukti at the moment of proto-Pentecostal Revival in 1905 that democratised the gaze, substituting Ramabai's gaze with God's gaze. Revival thus played a positive role, according women democracy through God's universal gaze bestowed on them. This divine gaze replaced the anxiety of remaining unseen by Ramabai, facilitating mass-scale conversion and religious experiences accompanied with tremendous fervour. Mondal (2017: 113) describes the experiences of Mukti Revival as generating a 'burning' sensation among Mukti women, resonating with the imagination of what a Sati would experience, a feared fate in case widows had not been rescued. Feeling the 'burning' at the moment of revival functioned as an ultimate form of redemption from Sati, Hinduism and marital patriarchy, and some women even saw tongues of fire as part of their spiritual experiences connected with conversion. Mondal quotes Dyer (ibid: 123-124):

> They experienced "trembling, shaking, loud crying and confessions, unconsciousness in ecstasy or prayer, sudden falling to the ground twisting and writhing during exorcisms, and 'joy unspeakable' manifested by singing, clapping, shouting praises and dancing"…The series of events—the Holy Spirit entering the woman's body, the sensation of fire at its entrance, the all-consuming nature of the event, the sometimes indecipherable crying aloud, and the writhing on the floor or other uncontrollable bodily movement—privileged the body as a site of pleasure and pain, as the ultimate bearer of direct revelation from and communication with God…The "fire" experienced during the revival redefined the association between burning and widowhood. Dyer described how "the burning within" shaped the women's transformation: "their faces light up with joy, their mouths are filled with praise." In a religious context that did not encourage sati and that permitted widow remarriage, the "burning within" brought laughter, songs, and renewal. The "baptism of fire" thus significantly recast widows' subjectivity towards self-expression rather than self-denial, to a new life rather than death.

Revival helped the Mukti women gain new visibility, and legitimacy, but it also led to greater fame and fund-raising success for Mukti, which in turn financed ambitious construction projects. Campt's approach (2017) invites us to carefully examine the photos celebrating this success. Images 2.8 and 2.9 displays the enormity of the Mukti Church begun in 1899. Completed in 1905, it assumed centre stage in many Mukti photos and dwarfed the women standing in front of it (image 2.8). While women on the left-hand side in image 2.8 leaned on each other, the women on the right-hand side lean against the Church walls, looking away from the camera as if redirecting the viewer's gaze to the Church. In image 2.8, Mukti women are seen/ shown as being part of Mukti's physical environment, its campus, its space, and buildings. While the Church's enormous structure adhered to the fashion of the day, its construction plan was nevertheless deliberate. In contrast to intimate smaller chapels that women could have inhabited with friends and children—practical and intimate spaces—the

Mukti Church was the opposite (image 2.9). It demonstrated God's power and mandate about Ramabai's success and victory in the competitive missionary domain of Bombay and beyond. Shaped in the design of a cross, the Church's centralised space could seat hundreds of women at once (image 2.9).[5]

Conclusion: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Image 2.10: Rambai and Manorama posing with colleagues and missionary associates (Dyer 1924: 169).

I began this article by arguing for a historiographical approach to Ramabai that would reinstate her as a competitive missionary leader of the 20th-century late-colonial context in Bombay Presidency, a context that had Hindu reformers enter the competitive fray against missionaries. Ramabai possessed tremendous charisma and acumen. Over time, she gained financial stability for Mukti from missionary benefactors outside India, especially after the Revival. She enjoyed rich networks among Hindu reformer friends in India, and apart from elite educational opportunities, Ramabai had enough caste privilege to allow her to straddle both reformers and native missionaries in Bombay, enough to break the racialised glass ceiling that native convert leaders usually faced. Breaking this glass ceiling, Ramabai's leadership reached new transformative heights, producing her as almost-white, akin to other white missionary ladies of her time (image 2.10). Her power surpassed the native missionaries of her time in Bombay, as she launched her own independent Bible translation, and built an enormous Church that represented Mukti's success. In this last image (image 2.10), Ramabai and her daughter Manorama take centre stage, with Ramabai being the only one seated on a throne-like ornate sofa. The others either stand, or sit around her on stools, chairs, or on the floor, with Manorama resting her elbow intimately on her mother's knee. Most interesting is the in-photo caption that names only Ramabai and Manorama, categorising the other white Euro-American missionaries

[5] See Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission Church (https://www.prmm.org.in/projects/pandita-ramabai-mukti-mission-church/), accessed 03.12.2023

as “workers and friends.” It would be difficult to claim that Ramabai shared power with the rescued women of Mukti, girls like Mookie, who struggled to be seen. In fact, Ramabai’s power of ‘seeing’ women was inherent to her hierarchical superiority. It is thus difficult to claim that Ramabai was a ‘feminist’, especially since the term has an intellectual genealgoy inspired by detailed Marxist analysis about women’s labour within patriarchy. Similarly, it is equally complicated to claim that Ramabai was a ‘patriot’ for resisting English missionaries, jostling for power and control over the definition of what Indian Protestantism encompassed for Hindu Brahmin converts like herself (Kent [this volume]). Ramabai had a vast network of Euro-American missionaries and benefactors as well and Mukti also benefitted from them. Ramabai became famous after the Revival and this gave Mukti and its proto-Pentecostal women residents fame as well—evident from their photos. However, the enormity of the Ramabai-Mukti project also obscured women’s individual differences, producing them as the enterprise’s mass-produced and uniform products.

As historians, one often works with asymmetries, absences and silences expressed through fault lines (De Certeau 1996 [2000]). To write a more realistic and prosaic history of Ramabai, it is important for historians to shift focus from her to Mukti, the real context of her work.[6] In turn, to write a more realistic history of Mukti women, it is important to shift focus from a methodology that peruses eulogistic narratives about Mukti written by Ramabai’s friends to examine other archival sources, such as Mukti photos that can be read critically and against the grain to reveal more information about the lives of Mukti women. While writing a history of the Mukti women—the new Indian Protestant woman—through their photographs is a daunting task reserved for the future, this article attempts to begin the journey by outlining how being ‘seen’ not just by Ramabai, her associates, other Mukti women, and the camera, but later after the Revival, by God inside Mukti’s massive Church, remained at the centre of women’s agency, empowerment, and justice. Their urgent need, that they not be forgotten after being ‘seen’ and rescued once, but remain constantly and perpetually ‘seen’ as individuals, brings conversion into salience. Conversion always takes place in a social context of personal crisis that demands self-definition (Viswanathan 1998), where gendered expression of desire and pleasure play an important role in the journey towards self-assertion (Dandekar 2018). For Mukti women, conversion took place in the context of Mukti itself, defined by their desire and aspiration to be seen, to break the glass ceiling at their own levels that threatened to conceal them as uniform and merged embodiments of a ‘good’ Mukti.

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[6] A similar methodological shift is demonstrated by Miller (2003) in his research on the Basel mission in Africa which shows how material organizations recreated their independent spiritual profile, dictated by the context of their operation. The missionaries of the Basel mission at one of their mission outposts in Africa ended up changing the quietistic character of the mission, due to the real-time context in which the mission operated.

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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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Research Article

Diagnosing 'Ignorance': Conversion, Race, and Reform among Muslims in Madras and Ceylon

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This article analyses the impact of colonial racialisation on Muslim reform movements in the Madras Presidency and Ceylon. It argues that that the internal racialisation of Muslims into 'racially foreign' 'born Muslims' and 'racially Indian' converts had direct consequences on the manner in which Muslim projects of religious reform in the colonial period were formulated. In the Madras Presidency, the Malayalam-speaking Mappilas and the Tamil-speaking Labbais were identified as communities of 'converts' with a thin 'mixed-race' elite, and consequently addressed by reform movements primarily as Muslim Malayalis and Tamils, who not only needed to purge their Islam of religious practices that were conceived of as remnants of their 'Hindu' identities prior to conversion, but also to remove 'secular' Arabic elements, such as the use of the Arabic script to write Malayalam and Tamil, in order to become properly 'modern' members of their respective ethno-linguistic groups. In Ceylon, in contrast, the claims to Arab-descent by local Tamil-speaking Muslims were recognised by the colonial state. Consequently, the Ceylon Muslim Revival, despite emerging from a similar social position as reform-movements in Madras, and similarly aiming at the upliftment of Muslims in terms of English-style education and the introduction of 'modernity', was more concerned with a quasi-secular Arabisation of its constituency rather than with religious purification.

Islam; race; reform; Madras; Ceylon

Introduction[1]

That 'race' and conversion played an important role in the social history of Christianity in British India means to state the obvious. As in many other colonial contexts, conversion to Christianity by the colonised erased one of the primary distinctions through which the alleged 'superiority' of the colonisers was argued, and it required the production of new distinctions and boundaries that would provide justification for the continued inequality between coloniser and colonised. As the religion of the colonisers, Christianity became embroiled in the murky history of colonial exploitation and racial discrimination, even as it provided converts with a language to challenge colonial inequity. But how far was 'race' a significant category for British India's Muslims, as, ostensibly, Muslims were all part of the Indian population subject to colonial power? And is it possible to link this category to processes of 'conversion', even as scholars have expressed serious doubts about the usefulness of this term in reference to processes of Islamisation in southern Asia (Eaton 1993: 268-269)? When scholarship has considered 'race' and processes of 'racialisation' among India's Muslims, the perspective has usually been a totalizing one, in the sense that it relates Islam and Muslims as a whole to questions of 'race'. An important line of argument has sketched how Muslims were progressively 'minoritised' and 'racialised' by

[1] I would like to thank my anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful suggestions, which have greatly helped me to sharpen the argument. All remaining deficits are solely my own responsibility.

colonial and post-colonial regimes in India. That is, Muslims have been identified as a group with singular traits and denied power and access on the basis of that identification, while the traits that they have been invested with are seen as immutable, 'race'-like (cf. Morgenstein Fuerst 2022). Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst has identified the Indian Rebellion of 1857 as a watershed moment for the minoritisation and racialisation of Muslims in India through British colonial discourses, but British narratives were soon adopted into Hindu contexts, and they continue to resonate in the treatment of Muslims in contemporary India (Baber 2004, Morgenstein Fuerst 2022). The 'racialisation' of Muslims was, moreover, not a process limited to British India, but tied to a general tendency to racialise Islam and Muslims in 19th-century European discourses, especially in the notion of a 'Muslim World' centred on the Middle East and perpetually opposed to 'the West', and the denial of universality to Islam as an 'Arab religion' (cf. Aydin 2017, Masuzawa 2005: 179-206). But as scholars have noticed, 'racialisation' was not only operative with regard to Muslims as a group, it also divided Muslims along racial lines into those who claimed origins in the Middle East and Central Asia, who supposedly formed the 'nobles' (*ashraf*) of Indian Muslim society, and the 'coarse' (*ajlaf*) descendants of Indian converts. The racialisation of Muslims produced a proclivity to distinguish between 'real' Muslims and 'converts'. In the colonial imagination, 'real' Muslims claimed to hail from the Muslim heartlands and embodied 'correct' Islam as a result of their 'racial' heritage, even if they did not always follow it. Yet most Muslims in Asia and Africa did not originate in the Middle East. They were imagined as the descendants of those hapless 'natives' who had converted to Islam, usually under the coercion of those who had come as conquerors from the Muslim 'heartlands'. This narrative obviously served European colonialists in constructing their own rule as parallel to that of earlier Muslim rulers, but simultaneously as more benevolent towards local populations. It also affirmed the universal pretensions of Christianity as a religion appealing to all human beings, in contrast to Islam, which allegedly had to be forced on non-Arabs, who would otherwise not have adopted the 'national religion' of another people. But this racialisation also had benefits for those Muslims who could convince the colonial power that as descendants of foreign migrants, they embodied the 'real' Muslim of the Middle East. Not only were they recognised as authorities in all matters concerning Islam, they were also able to claim political representation for the whole Muslim community.

In this article, I will argue that the internal racialisation of Muslims into 'racially foreign' 'born Muslims' and 'racially Indian' converts had direct consequences on the manner in which Muslim projects of religious reform in the colonial period were formulated. This is most salient, I argue, in precisely those cases where the racial logic of classifying Indian Muslim populations faced its greatest challenges, namely among Muslims along India's seaboard. Coastal Muslim communities had the clearest and, in many cases, ongoing relationships with the Muslim 'heartland' on the Arabian Peninsula. Yet as they did not belong to the erstwhile Mughal nobility that claimed the status of *ashraf* in the rest of India, their claims to descent from Arabs met doubt and outright rejection. In the first part of the article, I briefly outline how British ethnographers navigated the tensions between the claims of the Ashraf and of coastal Muslim elites by placing the latter outside the *ashraf-ajlaf* binary in separate categories of 'mixed-race' Muslims defined by language. In the second section, I discuss how 'mixed-race' and 'convert' Muslim populations were invested with notions of 'ignorance' of Islam, in contrast to the authority of 'pure' Muslims, who were identified as the sole authority on religious matters. This led to strategies of reform which stressed the 'ignorance' of 'convert' populations, who were to be addressed by increasing Muslim discourse in their respective mother-tongues. In particular, I focus on two such Muslim groups in the Madras presidency, namely the Malayalam-speaking Mappilas and the Tamil-speaking Labbais. In the final section, I contrast this case with neighbouring Ceylon, where the majority Ceylon Moors differed only marginally from the Labbais of Madras. But in contrast to India, where the Labbais' claims to Arab descent met with scepticism and scorn from both the British and North-Indian Ashrafs, there were no

competitors to the Ceylon Moors' claim of being of Arab descent. Consequently, projects of reform in Ceylon were aimed not at educating the convert Muslim, as they were in Madras, but at reviving the 'Arab-ness' of local Muslims.

'Racialising' the Convert Muslim

The classification of Indian Muslims into *ashraf* and *ajlaf* has enjoyed a long-lived popularity in governmental, scholarly, and popular discourses in South Asia.[2] The basic bifurcation of South Asian Muslim societies into these two categories has been widely accepted as reflecting basic divisions on the ground, as has been the assumption that both categories can be further subdivided, even if the basis of that subdivision differs between both groups. The subdivisions of the *ashraf* category, often known as *baradari* or *biradari* (Persian 'brotherhood', 'relationship'), further specify a group's descent from the Prophet (*sayyid*), his tribe and companions (*shaykh*), a Central Asian (*mughal*), or Afghan (*pathan*) background. In contrast, the *ajlaf* category is commonly subdivided into occupational groups (*zat*) such as weavers (*julaha*) or butchers (*qasab*) in a manner that is reminiscent of Hindu occupational castes (*jati*). The racial underpinnings of divisions identified in South-Asian Muslim societies have long been perceived, as has the connection of these divisions with questions of conversion (e.g. Hardy 1979, Levesque 2023: 291-294, Sheikh 1989: 93-96, 114-118). At the same time, the genealogy of this division and the attendant terminologies has only received sporadic attention. On the one hand, it is clear that many divisions of South-Asian Muslim society that later found their way into colonial censuses and official discourse originated in pre-colonial times. This is as true for the *jati*-like occupational terminology through which distinctions among the Ajlaf were conceptualized, as well as for the Ashraf and their sub-divisions based on claimed descent from various West-Asian populations (see Pernau 2013: 60-66). On the other hand, it is also clear that these divisions and distinctions were for a long time shifting and employed only in specific societal and geographic contexts. While the bifurcation of South-Asian Muslim society into Ashraf and Ajlaf, together with the attendant subdivisions, and the racialised idea of 'original Muslims' versus 'converts' that arises from these divisions are common knowledge, the genealogy and history of this classification are murky and unclear. The burgeoning scholarship on the history of caste and the impact of colonial classificatory systems on the practices of caste have largely stayed clear of considering the divisions by which Muslim society in South Asia came to be understood and classified (cf. Bayly 1999, Dirks 2001, Guha 2013). In adopting the *ashraf-ajlaf* distinction, the colonial knowledge economy transformed the manner in which this distinction was understood and operated in British India. First, by linking status in Muslim society exclusively with claims to foreign descent, it made 'foreignness' the *sine qua non* of being a proper Muslim. Second, it formed an absolute distinction – individuals were either of foreign descent, and thereby Ashraf, or not, and thereby Ajlaf, with no middle ground.[3] Third, it thereby transformed individual claims to status into factual communities. It is clear from pre-colonial sources that categories such as *sayyid* or *pathan* were predominantly claims to status, rather than constituting historical fact (Pernau 2013: 62). But in the British reformulation, these categories were seen as indexing factually existing communities, whose validity as an indicator of foreign descent was unconnected to the lack of validity of any specific individual claim. Fourth, this move internally racialised South Asian Muslim society into a small elite of racially distinct 'foreigners' and a majority of those who were racially indistinguishable from their Hindu neighbours, indexing their 'convert' status, even if that conversion lay beyond the memory of the individual concerned. Fifth, it conflated religious knowledge with 'race', in so far as elite Muslims of 'foreign descent' were perceived as lacking

[2] Other terms used for socially disadvantaged Muslim groups in contrast to *ashraf* are *arzal* ('the despised') and *atraf* ('the margins').

[3] Cf. Gottschalk 2013: 197-198, regarding the importance of exclusive taxa to the colonial census.

a history of conversion from 'ignorant' non-Muslim to knowledgeable Muslim. And finally, sixth, the system was totalising (cf. Gottschalk 2013: 197) in that it was assumed to be valid throughout British India – whoever did not belong to the Ashraf, with their specific cultural roots in the elites of the late Mughal Empire, was simply assumed to occupy the category of *ajlaf*.

The link between race and religious knowledge in this system was reinforced by the overlap between racial 'Indianness' and the idea of conversion. In the 19th century, 'race' and 'religion' were only slowly developing into the exclusive categories that they were later to become. Yet when British observers first integrated the distinction of 'foreign-descent' and 'local-convert' into their perception of Indian Muslims around 1800, they were still used to understanding these categories through a different taxonomy. This earlier European taxonomy divided the nations of the world into 'Jews', 'Christians', 'Mussulmans', and the rest, usually dubbed 'Heathens' or 'Gentiles' (Masuzawa 2005: 46-50). The *ashraf-ajlaf* distinction helped explain the anomaly that predominantly 'gentile' India apparently had a large population of Muslims. These could now be explained as a small elite of foreign 'real Mussulmans' and a large mass of superficially Islamised 'Gentiles'. In other words, racialisation did not simply overlap with an idea of conversion, however far in the past, but the degree of religious knowledge was itself racialised. Being the descendants of Gentile converts, the masses of Indian Muslims could not be expected to be knowledgeable about Islam. Yet despite the pervasiveness of the distinction and the totalising imperatives of colonial knowledge production, the British discovered very soon that this distinction was not recognised in quite the same manner all across their Indian territories. In certain contexts, the logic underlying the distinction could actually prove to upset the distinction itself. This became clear once the gaze was turned from the Muslim communities of the Gangetic plains to those on India's coasts in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies. Here, the colonial state encountered Muslims who claimed descent from transoceanic Arab traders. Nor could this claim be easily dismissed: the presence of Arabs throughout peninsular India was too obvious to be overlooked (see e.g. Dale 1997). But this produced a problem: if coastal Muslims, even only a part of them, were descendants of Arabs, they should be counted among the Ashraf. Yet the erstwhile Mughal nobility did not perceive these groups as being on par with them, even those that could validly argue to be of Arab descent.

Coastal Muslim populations thus came to inhabit an ambiguous space outside the primary distinction into Ashraf and Ajlaf. Throughout the 19th century, coastal Muslims were treated by the colonial state as single communities defined not by status or descent, but by language, such as Mappilla (Malayalam), Navayat (Konkani), and Labbai (Tamil). Their historical interactions with and partial descent from Arabs was acknowledged, but not in the absolute manner in which all North-Indian Ashrafs were presented as descendants of foreigners. Rather, Muslims in the southern coastal belt were identified as being of a 'mixed' racial background, a notion that had been formulated as early as 1810 by Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) (1816: 127). The notion of 'mixed race' actually reveals how much colonial conceptualizations of Muslim social divisions differed from pre-colonial concepts. In pre-colonial terms, Arab-ness was a matter of patriliny: anyone descended through the male line from an Arab could lay claim to that descent, no matter how many intermarriages with non-Arab women occurred in the intervening generations (cf. Ho 2006: 144-151). The colonial concept of 'race', however, operated with a notion of purity in which ideally all ancestors of an individual belonged to a particular 'race' to allow for inclusion in a racialised category. To be of 'mixed' ancestry meant that a person was not sufficiently 'pure' and exhibited the traits of a 'race' lower in the hierarchy of human groups. The idea that certain Muslim communities were of 'mixed' race, descendants of Arab fathers and Indian mothers, allowed colonial observers to simultaneously affirm and undermine the claims made by Muslim individuals about the nobility of their ancestry. While colonial observers conceded to the possibility that coastal Muslims in Madras indeed had some Arab ancestors, they simultaneously highlighted that these Muslims failed to meet the

standards of 'racial purity'. This allowed the maintenance of a hierarchy between coastal Muslims and the Ashraf. While the former were the mixed offspring of immigrant Muslims and Indian women, the latter were "purebred Mussalmans" (Khan 1910: 7, cf. Bjerrum 1920: 172-173), no matter to what degree immigrants and Indians had intermarried in North India.

As with North-Indian Muslims, British observers were quick to 'communitise' and racialise claims to Arab descent made by coastal Muslims in Madras. Arab descent was not perceived as a claim to status made by individuals, but as a fact defining whole 'communities', allegedly visible in the 'racial' features of those communities. This also made it possible for observers to evaluate the claim to Arab descent by judging how far a community literally embodied the physiognomic features associated with Arabs. Mark Wilks (1759-1831), who served as Resident at the Wodeyar court in Mysore between 1803-1808, noted that both the Navayats of the western coast and the Labbais of the eastern coast claimed descent from Arabs. But whereas the fact that the Navayats' "complexions approach the European freshness" served as proof that the Navayats had "preserved the purity of their original blood by systematically avoiding intermarriage with the Indians, and even with the highest Mohammedan families", the Labbais could make no such claim. Instead, while they "pretend to one common origin with the Nevayets, and attribute their black complexion to intermarriage with the natives", Wilks was more inclined to follow the Navayats' claim that the racial characteristics of the Labbais were due to them being the descendants of the Navayats' Abyssinian slaves: "there is certainly, in the physiognomy of this very numerous class, and in their stature and form, a strong resemblance to the natives of Abyssinia" (Wilks 1810: Vol. 1, 242 note*). This rather ridiculous story about Tamil Muslims' African origins continued to be repeated by British observers throughout the 19th century (e.g. Cox 1895: 206-207). That British ideas about Muslims became increasingly filtered through the concept of race can also be traced in visual culture. While company paintings of Labbai traders produced in Thanjavur before 1800 depict them with a fairly light skin tone,[4] another specimen painted in Madurai in the 1830s shows especially the male figure with a distinctly darker complexion (image 5. 1). However, ultimately the notion of large 'mixed-race' communities proved unsatisfactory to the official discourse on Muslim difference in British India. Once the danger that Arab-descended coastal Muslims might upend the hierarchical precedence given to the Ashraf among colonial elites was averted by demoting coastal Muslims to the 'mixed' category, public discourse could reconceptualize coastal Muslim societies from within by applying the logic of the *ashraf-ajlaf* divide prevalent among northern Muslims. During the three decades following the production of the first *District Manuals of the Madras Presidency* in the late 1870s, colonial ethnography increasingly came to sub-divide coastal Muslim communities into those who could claim Arab descent, however mixed, as distinct from purely convert communities. The tendency was most developed in the case of Tamil-speaking Muslims, where the new terminology was adopted as census categories in the early-20th century. Similar debates also concerned the Malayalam-speaking Mappillas (e.g. Khan 1910, Thurston 1909, cf. Tschacher 2014b). The only group that seems to have escaped this re-division into 'original' Muslims and 'converts' were the Navayats, which may be explained by the term itself referencing several distinct groups. While the origins of the Navayats in the Madras Presidency were located on the Canara coast, British colonial officials were most familiar with those Navayats who had been integrated into the Arcot aristocracy in the early 18th century and now formed a group very similar to local Urdu-speaking Ashrafs. As such, the claims of Arcot Navayats were the least threatening to the established *ashraf-ajlaf*

[4] For copyright reasons, I am not able to reproduce the image here. It can be viewed on the website of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (Lubbee pedlars | Unknown | V&A Explore The Collections [https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O433677/lubbee-pedlars-painting-unknown/]), accessed 26.06.2024.

division, and therefore, there was less need to reinvent the community by splitting it into descendants of ‘foreigners’ and ‘converts’ (cf. D’Souza 1955: 23-34).

Image 4.1: “Lapidary (Mussilman)” and “Female”; painting in album *Seventy Two Specimen of Castes in India*, Madurai 1837. Source: Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Yale University. Nkp24 837p, New Haven, CT

The colonial categorization of Muslim communities in coastal Madras thus constitutes a history of making coastal Muslim communities conform to expectations about race, religion, and community that hinged on idealised distinctions between ‘real Muslims’ of ‘pure foreign race’ and the descendants of ‘converts’ who were racially ‘Indian’. Thereby, not only were Muslim communities racialised, but ultimately, the religion of Islam itself. There was, however, one territory of coastal South Asia where the coastal Muslims’ claim to Arab descent led not to a dismissal or qualification as in British India, but was accepted wholesale by the colonial administration. In British Ceylon, official discourse came to accept Muslim claims to Arab ancestry in contradistinction to the ‘native’ races, most importantly the Tamils. Already under Dutch rule during the 18th century, Europeans often perceived Ceylon Muslims or ‘Moors’ as foreigners, though not necessarily as ‘Arabs’ (Rogers 1995: 158). In Sinhala literature, Muslims generally figured as dangerous Others, though by the 18th century, they occupied a niche more akin to Tamils in the imagination of Sinhala poets (McKinley 2022). The British saw the Moors as potential allies in reviving trade in Ceylon, by attracting Muslim traders from Malabar, the Coromandel Coast, and beyond. It was in this context that they highlighted the presence of Arabs on the island before any adverse measures were taken against Muslims under Portuguese and Dutch colonialism (cf. Johnston 1827). In the course of the 19th century, the question of descent assumed new importance as the British began to introduce systems of communal representation first at the local, and then at the level of the colony. In contrast to British India, where ‘religion’ provided the most important category for the representation of

native society, in Ceylon, it was 'race', reinforced in part through the introduction of various sets of 'customary law' for different groups. It was these groups defined by customary law and their grounding in a theory of race that became the basis for the first attempts to introduce political representation on the local level in 1866. In practice, this meant that in order to make political claims to representation, it first became necessary to 'racialise' the community that sought to represent itself (see Nissan and Stirrat 1990: 26-30, McGilvray 1998: 449). The main catalyst for the formulation of claims to Arab ancestry among Ceylon Moors consisted of debates surrounding the extension of the Legislative Council. Already from its introduction in 1833, the Council included unofficial representatives of the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Burghers. Ceylon Moors were, in this scheme, represented by the Tamil representative. Yet by the 1880s, several groups demanded separate representation on the council, including the Moorish elites in Colombo and Kandy. This triggered a response from Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851-1930), who at that time served as the unofficial 'Tamil' representative on the Legislative Council, and whose influence would have been curtailed if a separate representative for the Moors were to be admitted to the Council. In April 1888, Ramanathan presented a paper to the Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon entitled "The Ethnology of the "Moors" of Ceylon". In this paper, Ramanathan argued that the Moors of Ceylon differed only in terms of religion from the Tamils, but not in terms of language, culture, and race – in other terms, that the Ceylon Moors were nothing but Muslim Tamils, and therefore did not require separate representation (Ramanathan 1888). In fact, it seems that Ramanathan had presented an earlier version of the paper to the Legislative Council in 1885 (McGilvray 1998: 449). His efforts went, however, in vain, for just a year later, the government gave in to the Moorish demands. Backed by official recognition from the government, Moorish elites began to publish critiques of Ramanathan's claims, most importantly a tract originally published by I.L.M. Abdul Azeez (1867-1915) in 1907. Central to these was the claim that the forefathers of the Ceylon Moors had been 'racially pure' Arabs, and not Muslims from the Tamil-speaking parts of India, as Ramanathan had claimed (Azeez 1957). What matters here are not the details of the debate, but simply that the Moorish viewpoint was accepted and enshrined in official colonial policy. To this day, the Sri Lankan government recognizes 'Sri Lankan Moors' as an ethnic group separate from Sinhalese and Tamils, and not coterminous with the religious category of 'Muslim' (see McGilvray 1998). What makes the case of Ceylon so startling is that the claims brought forward in favour of the Arab ancestry of the Moors are not really different from those of the Muslim communities in the Madras Presidency. In both cases, the basic narrative posits that the local community developed out of intermarriages between Arab traders and local women.[5] While Azeez himself could not avoid admitting that there had been intermarriage between Arab men and Tamil women, he maintained the patrilineal approach that only the male lineage mattered, which, though it was in line with pre-colonial conceptions, sat only uneasily with the argument that Ceylon Moors were racially different from Tamils (Ismail 1995: 74-77, cf. Azeez 1957: 11). While this detail was overlooked by the colonial government of Ceylon (as it indeed was in the case of the Ashraf in British India), it mattered in the case of coastal Muslim communities in British India, arguably due to one simple factor: in British India, coastal Muslim aspirations clashed with those of the Ashraf, who ranked higher in the colonial government's perception of hierarchy and importance. In contrast, there was no Muslim community in Ceylon who could have challenged and contradicted the Ceylon Moors' claim to Arab ancestry. It also explains why the claim was not subjected to the same physiognomic scrutiny as in India (again, as in the case of the Ashraf). While the most obvious result of the successful claiming of Arab ancestry by Ceylonese Muslims lies in the official recognition of the community as a separate ethnic group, this simple difference between the Madras Presidency and Ceylon had other consequences in the field of religious reform that may not be quite as obvious.

[5] Cf., for example, the accounts contained in Azeez 1986 and Fanselow 1989: 265-270.

Racialising Muslim 'Ignorance' and 'Reforming' the Convert in the Madras Presidency

The official colonial perspective on Muslims thoroughly racialised the community as a whole, and also its assumed sub-divisions. But this racialisation was always accompanied by a plethora of other discourses of hierarchisation, which were held together and assimilated through the frame of racialisation. That the Ashraf were racially 'pure' Muslims occupying the top of the social hierarchy also made their culture – comportment, dress, food, language – superior to that of other Muslims. But most importantly, being the descendants of 'born Muslims' rather than 'local converts', Ashraf knowledge of Islam was considered to be better and more reliable than that of racially 'Indian' Muslims. The basic argument, in this case, does not emerge from 'race' per se, but from the implication that being 'racially' Indian meant that non-Ashraf Muslims descended from 'converts'. 'Conversion' implied prior ignorance: a convert was someone who had had to be shown knowledge about the truth that they did not possess earlier. In British India, this was compounded by the suspicion of conviction that converts to Christianity were under. As Gauri Viswanathan argued, in India, conversion was not simply a matter of religious conviction, but even more of legislative and judicial consequences. "Because of the patently material dimensions of religious change, it is not surprising that the official British position on conversion should so strongly stress its political rather than religious aspects…", leading in effect to "a devaluation of the status of belief and religious conversion itself" (Viswanathan 1998: 82). Further, given the material dimensions, the sincerity of converts was easily doubted (see e.g. Dandekar 2019: 15, Webster 2007: 63). The devaluation of conviction in favour of material motives for conversion was even more pronounced in the case of Islam. As Europeans denied Islam any value as a universal religion (cf. Masuzawa 2005: 179-206), conviction in the message of Islam itself emerged as a form of ignorance. However, it was easier to account for conversion to Islam by assuming that this conversion had been motivated not by conviction, but by material benefits, like avoiding violence, gaining patronage, or escaping from the indignities of caste hierarchies. It is therefore unsurprising that all early theories of Islamisation in India revolved around such material incentives (Eaton 1993: 113-119, Hardy 1979). The only Indian Muslims not tainted by the ignorance of conversion were those who allegedly never converted, namely the Ashraf.

Unsurprisingly, it was the Ashraf and the Ashraf-ised Arcot Navayats who formed the main source of information about Islam in the Madras Presidency (Vatuk 1999, 2009). The presence of the Prince of Arcot and his court in Madras city ensured a steady contact between British Officials and Arcot aristocracy, most of whom were either recent migrants from North India or Arcot Navayats. This cemented the conviction that 'correct' knowledge of Islam was limited to this tiny segment of 'pure' Muslims. In contrast, other Muslim communities of the Madras Presidency, especially the coastal ones, soon acquired the reputation of being 'ignorant' problem-populations. This is most visible in Malabar, where a series of peasant disturbances among Muslim agricultural labourers convinced the British that Malayalam-speaking Muslims or 'Mappillas' were particularly 'fanatic'. The diagnosis of 'fanaticism' marked Mappillas as being beyond the pale of reason and exploitable by unscrupulous 'priests'. As converts from the lower castes of Hinduism, they were perceived as being particularly far removed from any 'rational' knowledge that would have permitted them to follow British law and order (Ansari 2016: 73-99). Even observers who were willing to concede that exploitation and economic hardships played a role in the 'Mappilla outbreaks' continued to emphasise the links between 'ignorance' and the 'mixed race' or 'native' ancestry of the Mappillas. William Logan (1841-1914), the Collector of Malabar between 1875-1887, emphasised that the 'pure Arabs' settled on the coast "despise" the learning imparted by Mappilla centres of learning such as Ponnani, which were explicitly depicted as being operated by people of 'mixed' ancestry. Logan's comments on the 'noble' qualities of the 'pure Arab' settlers in Malabar, who "in their finer

feelings… approach nearer to the standard of English gentlemen than any other class of persons in Malabar" (Logan 1887: Vol. 1, 108), are particularly surprising given the hostility between the British colonial government and the arguably most important Arab individual in 19th-century Malabar, Sayyid Fadl (1824-1900), who was ultimately exiled in 1852 for his alleged influence in Muslim insurrections (see Dale 1980: 154-158, Jacob 2019). This demonstrates that some British observers were willing to allow the logic of race to shape their appreciation even when it came to individuals officially deemed 'dangerous'. The British came as close as was possible for them to accept the superior status of Arab Sayyids, provided they abstained from exerting any form of 'sovereignty' (cf. Jacob 2019: 43-48). Elsewhere, Logan explicitly depicted the Mappillas as a "mixed race" (Logan 1887: Vol. 1, 196), though one in which the Indian element grew larger by the day due to conversion of low-caste Hindus. Their religious knowledge was presented as deriving chiefly "from Malayáḷam tracts", by which the Mappillas gained an "accurate description of the outward forms of their religion, in the observance of which they are very strict", but apparently not of the more inward aspects of religious life (Logan 1887: Vol. 1, 198). Some of the prejudices regarding the "intellectual poverty" of Mappilla Islam have persisted well into post-independence times (e.g. Dale 1980: 260).

The Tamil-speaking Labbais of the eastern coastal regions, in contrast, had no such history of causing disturbance, but they were nevertheless eyed with suspicion by the British. While their enterprise and industriousness were praised by some observers (e.g. Maclean 1893: Vol. 3, 437), they had long developed a reputation for being competitors of British traders who were unwilling to play by British rules, i.e. to British benefit. Already in the late 17th century, trader Thomas Bowrey (1659-1713) cast aspersions on the religious commitment of Tamil-speaking Muslims, calling them "a Subtle and Roguish people of the Mahometan Sect, but not very great Observers of many of his laws" (1905: 257), while Bowrey's editor, Richard Carnac Temple (1850-1931), added that he found them "a hard-working but turbulent people in Rangoon" (Bowrey 1905: 256 n. 1). By and large, the colonial government's perspective seems to have failed to recognise the Labbais as anything but a population to be administered. Knowledge of Islam, on the other hand, was sourced from the Ashraf, who were known to "look down" on their Tamil-speaking coreligionists (Maclean 1893: Vol. 3, 437). Other Europeans, such as missionaries, held similar opinions. The activities aimed at Muslims by the South India Mission of the Church Mission Society (CMS), for example, were wholly focused on the Urdu-speaking Ashraf elites of Madras city through the operation of the General Harris School. When the plans to open a school among Muslims became known among local missionaries in 1854, one of the veteran missionaries in the region, Rev. Ludwig Bernhard Schmid (1788-1857), enjoined the CMS to despatch the mission "to the numerous places on the Coast and in the Interior…where so many industrious and wealthy Mahomedans reside", rather than to those "living upon the bounties and pensions of a Mahomedan Prince" in Madras. Moreover, he emphasized that the missionary should know some Tamil beside Hindustani (Schmid 23.09.1854: 4). Yet the Harris School and the attached missionaries focused exclusively on 'Hindustani'. Some were obviously aware of the criticism voiced by Schmid. For example, Rev. Malcolm G. Goldsmith, who joined the Harris School in 1874 as one of the missionaries of the CMS Madras Mohammedan Mission, conceded that the Muslims of Tinnevelly and similar districts "know more of the Hindu languages than *their own*…but the *better educated* must always be better reached through books adapted to their sacred language…" (Goldsmith 21.11.1876: 2, emphasis mine). After a visit to Pulicat in 1880, Goldsmith again complained about the "ignorance and bigotry" of the Muslims of "the Labbay (Lubbay) class, whose language is Tamil", and "very few" of which knew Hindustani (Goldsmith 1881: 304). British discourse thus habitually came to link 'mixed race' and 'convert' Muslims with the 'vernacular' and 'ignorance', while 'knowledge' of Islam remained the preserve of Urdu/Hindustani and 'pure Mussalmans' of the Ashraf.

Given the widespread appeal of this discourse, not only within government circles, but also among missionaries and among many Ashraf Muslims as well,[6] it is unsurprising that these views ultimately came to be adopted in the discourse of local Muslims. Given the emphasis on the lack of 'knowledge' of those Muslims who were deemed as descended from converts, it is not surprising that the greatest impact of such racialised discourse is seen in precisely those discourses that aimed to ameliorate 'ignorance' among Muslims. The Madras Presidency appears as a late-comer in the Muslim reformist landscape of British India, something that, if anything, seems to underwrite the image of South India as an 'ignorant' backwater as far as Islam was concerned. Yet the genealogies of reformism among Muslims in the Madras Presidency were quite diverse. Along the western coast, and especially among the Mappillas, a strong intellectual current connected local reformism to reform movements in the Arab world. In the colonial period, the prime influence came from the Egyptian modernist Salafism of reformers such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935). After independence, 'Wahhabi'-influenced reform projects in the Gulf states have had greater traction (Abraham 2014: 35-39, Miller 2015: 94-100, Osella and Osella 2013). In the Tamil country, the impact of northern Indian thought, such as that connected with Deoband or the Aligarh movement, but also the Ahmadiyya, and in recent years the Tablighi Jama'at and the Jama'at-e-Islami, has been stronger. However, while doctrinal debates and controversies draw on different intellectual genealogies, they nevertheless arise in response to similar contexts and discourses, which are important for analysis (cf. Osella and Osella 2013: 141-142). Despite the diversity in intellectual genealogy, there are some noteworthy parallels between the various colonial-period reform projects in the Madras Presidency which connect them to the racialised discourse on conversion and descent.

Central to Madras-Presidency reformism was an emphasis on the failure of the religious classes or *ulama* to educate local Muslims. Partly, this mirrored the Protestant critique of Catholicism, in which vernacular translations of the Bible supposedly broke the priestly monopoly on religious knowledge kept in Latin. But more importantly, the critique of the *ulama* signalled, from the perspective of the reformers, an identification with the 'common Muslim' of their respective communities against the social and religious elites, precisely those elites among the Mappillas and Labbais who claimed an Arabic background and who were classified by the British as being of 'mixed race'. In this context, it is noteworthy that the pioneers of Muslim religious reform in the Madras Presidency did not emerge from the mixed-race elites. In Kerala, both Makti Thangal (1847-1912) and Vakkom Maulavi (1873-1932) were (somewhat surprisingly) descended from Ashraf families who had recently entered Kerala as parts of local administration. Makti Thangal could further lay claim to Hadrami-Arab descent in his father's line, i.e. he combined the 'pure Arab' ancestry Logan had praised so much with a 'pure Mussalman' (in his case Central Asian) ancestry in his mother's line (Ashraf 2020: 6, Abraham 2014: 22). In contrast, the most prominent reformer on the Tamil side, P.M. Daud Shah (1885-1969), was born into a family of 'Ravuttars', one of the groups among Tamil-speaking Muslims that were declared to be purely of convert ancestry (see Vadlamudi 2018: 457, on the 'Ravuttar' category, see Khan 1910: 34-39). While these reform movements focused much of their criticism on popular practices that were shared with or resembled those of Hindus, and while such practices could easily be blamed on the insufficient Islamisation of converts, the prime blame for this situation was laid on the shoulders of those who could have corrected popular

[6] Cf. e.g. Khan (1910: 47-59, esp. 52), where the impact of Hinduism on 'superstitions' among South Indian Muslims is directly correlated to the strength of 'Arab blood'. This was despite Khan being on the whole readier to accept and respect the presence of Arab ancestry among coastal-Muslim elites compared to British observers.

practice, but for various reasons of their own did not do so – the local mixed-race elites (cf. Abraham 2014: 81-87, Ashraf 2020, More 2004: 122-131, Osella and Osella 2013: 146-152).

The most significant element in the reaction against these elites and the 'mixing' by which they were defined is the reformers' discourse about language. All the early reform movements in the Madras Presidency laid a premium on the adoption of 'modern', English-style education by Muslims. Indeed, the anxiety to prove that Islam was, and had always been, 'modern', is what fundamentally connects the movements for reform among Muslims in Malabar, the Tamil country, and even Ceylon. While all the reformers under consideration here received a rather elite education and all of them had at least basic knowledge of English, an important part of their reform projects engaged with the instilling of Islamic knowledge through the medium of Malayalam and Tamil. Local Muslims, they argued, needed to be taught in the language they knew, which at least Makti Thangal explicitly referred to as their 'mother-tongue' (*matrubhasha*, see Ashraf 2020: 10). But what appears to be reasonable from a contemporary perspective is in fact far more complex, for neither the standard Malayalam advocated by Makti Thangal and Vakkom Maulavi nor the 'refined Tamil' (*centamil*) claimed by Daud Shah were spoken idioms for a majority of Muslims. In fact, these written standards were far removed from any spoken variety of Malayalam or Tamil. Neither were they traditionally written idioms with centuries of history to them. In the form that they were pushed by Muslim reformers, these languages were hardly a few decades old. They had been developed in response to the introduction of missionary discourse, European-style education, and a local print culture in the course of the second half of the 19th century by precisely those social groups that were closest to the colonial state: Brahmins, agrarian dominant castes like Nairs or Vellalars, and elite Christians (cf. Arunima 2006, Bate 2021, Ebeling 2010: 165-203, Kumar 2010). These 'modern' prose styles responded, as Bernard Bate has shown, to a distinctly Protestant 'ethics of textuality' that demanded texts to be universally understandable and public, open to the scrutiny of every speaker of a particular language. In this process, Protestant textualities enabled the creation of publics based on certain languages, and ultimately linguistic nationalism itself (Bate 2021: 38-41). By claiming their prose idioms as the only legitimate, 'universal' expression of the Tamil or Malayalam nation, native colonial elites could claim to be the sole inheritors of older, 'classical' literary projects, and demand uniformity from all the groups that could validly be claimed as part of the nation. Given that local Muslim groups had already been identified as the descendants of 'converts' within colonial discourse, it was therefore easy to demand that they be taught in the idiom of their 'mother-tongue', however little that idiom was actually their 'own'.

Yet it is not that Muslims had no written idioms of their own. Both in Tamil and Malayalam, texts with Islamic content had been created from around the turn of the 17th century, often with the involvement of religious scholars (Ilias and Hussain 2017: 71-159, Karassery 1995, Uwise 1990). Given the reformers' dismissal of the *ulama* and their support for the newly 'universalized' prose idioms of the colonial elites, it is unsurprising that this corpus of locally created Islamic texts came in for strong criticism. These texts challenged reformers in several ways. In terms of content, they often defended and supported ideas and practices that reformers decried. But more importantly, they failed to meet the reformers' ideas of how texts should convey knowledge. Most of the texts consisted of poetry and songs, which in the colonial context was either considered too opaque and frivolous (cf. Ebeling 2010: 165-171), or too demotic and connected to popular religious practices such as vows and saints' holidays (*nercca*, *kanturi*, or *'urs* cf. Ashraf 2020: 9, Osella and Osella 2013: 147-148). However, somewhat surprisingly, the use of the Arabic script to represent local languages became the prime enemy of local Muslim textual culture. These practices, retrospectively dubbed 'Arabi-Malayalam' and 'Arabu-Tamil' (Ashraf 2022, Ilias and Hussian 2017, Tschacher 2018), were even more surprising targets for reformers on both the coasts in that they, despite some superficial similarities, were rather different in terms of their application. While some elements,

such as certain letters and the tendency to generally write vowel-diacritics in all cases (cf. Tschacher 2018: 18), point to similar origins, there are substantial differences between Arabi-Malayalam and Arabu-Tamil. Most importantly, there is no indication that Muslims were using the Malayalam script at all in Kerala. In other words, nearly all Malayalam texts written by Muslims before the 20th century qualified as Arabi-Malayalam, making any critique of the practice more devastating for the fact that it denounced the whole of Muslim textual culture of Malabar as deviant. In contrast, both Arabic and Tamil script were used side by side on the east coast, sometimes for the same texts or in the same manuscripts. Nevertheless, the pattern of criticism remained broadly the same: the texts were treated as doctrinally suspect, stylistically deficient, and most importantly, they defined a specifically Muslim field of textual practice that was not accessible to non-Muslims, thereby separating Muslims from the 'nation' they, as the descendants of 'converts', naturally belonged to (see Abraham 2014: 74-75, Ashraf 2020: 8-11, Ashraf 2022, Tschacher 2018: 23-28).

The reformist opposition to specifically Muslim patterns of language use and textual culture becomes most apparent in the debates surrounding translations of the Quran. The claim that a return to the Quran was necessary to purify Islam of later 'contaminations' was common to many reform movements of the period, and the movements of colonial Madras were no exceptions. Both Daud Shah and Vakkom Maulavi attempted to translate the Quran into Tamil and Malayalam, though neither achieved a complete translation during their lifetime (Abraham 2014: 40, Tschacher 2019: 460-461). Especially in Kerala, Quran translation has become a hallmark of reformism (cf. Miller 2015: 100, Osella and Osella 2013: 146). Indeed, reformers have often been credited as being the first to translate the Quran into Tamil and Malayalam, while traditionalist scholars supposedly remained opposed to this process of translation (Miller 2015: 79-81, Tschacher 2019: 460-464). What is striking about these claims is that they are mistaken. Both in Tamil and in Malayalam, complete translations of the Quran existed since the 19th century. In Malayalam, Mayankutty Elaya's translation was first printed *in toto* in 1870/ 71, while the first complete Tamil translations, by Habib Muhammad al-Qahiri and Nuh b. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Qahiri, were published in the early 1880s (Kunnakkadan, Ahmad and Abdo Khaled 2020: 17-18, Tschacher 2019: 464-466). Beside these, other, partial translations also existed (Kooria 2022: 99, Tschacher 2019: 466). The obvious disjuncture between the existence of these translations and the claims made by reformers has been explained in two ways. On the one hand, earlier translations were supposedly not considered translations of the Quran but commentaries on the Quran. However, at least in the Tamil case, this claim can be dismissed. The translations were generally literal, with additional exegetical material clearly marked as such; the main difference is that 20th-century translations usually made use of marks like brackets borrowed from English to signal the addition of individual words in the translation. Furthermore, while early translators often identified the Arabic commentaries that they based their translation-choices on, reformist translators, despite protestations to the contrary, similarly followed reformist authorities. In the case of Daud Shah, for example, this authority was the English Quran translation and commentary by the Ahmadi scholar Muhammad Ali (1874-1951) (Tschacher 2019: 470-473). Rather, what distinguished reformist translations, were the changes in the use of written language, such as the use of brackets and other punctuation marks, or the prose style. The most important change, however, *was the shift in script* from Arabic to Tamil and Malayalam.

What the controversy over Quran translations allows us to perceive more clearly is that, behind the debate about style and content that undergirded the reformist critique of Arabi-Malayalam and Arabu-Tamil, there lay an even more important point of contention: the question of audience. In the case of Quran translations, traditionalists defended the use of the Arabic script because in their eyes, it protected the Quran from being slighted and blasphemed by non-Muslims. It was this attitude against the use of Tamil or Malayalam scripts that was often

misrepresented as an opposition against any kind of translation. Reformists, on the other hand, argued for making the Quran available to non-Muslims in the interest of missionising (see Tschacher 2019: 475-476). While the reformers may have genuinely believed that they were benefiting local Muslims by translating the Quran into 'proper' Malayalam or Tamil, employing the written standards and scripts used by Hindu and Christian elites rather than the Muslim prose idioms of 'Arabi-Malayalam' and 'Arabu-Tamil', demonstrated the reformers' modernity and willingness to submit to non-Muslim standards in presenting Muslim knowledge. What is obvious is the degree to which the reformist critique operated in and through the acceptance of a historical framework that thoroughly racialised Madras Muslims as descendants of converts. In this framework, anything 'mixed', whether it was local religious elites claiming descent from the unions of Arabs and local women or whether it was the mixing of Dravidian and Arabic textual practices, became suspect. 'Mixed' traditions were neither here nor there, neither sufficiently Arabic nor sufficiently local. In this context, Muslim reformers in Malabar and the Tamil country identified Muslims primarily as local converts who needed to be addressed first and foremost as Malayalis or Tamils. This required addressing them in their 'mother-tongue', the modern, elevated prose through which non-Muslim elites imagined the Malayali and Tamil identity. Any other idiom, such as the Arabised writing styles employed in the 18th and 19th centuries, was unsuitable for people who were essentially Muslim Tamils and Malayalis. In contrast, none of the reformers critiqued the use of the Arabic script for Urdu, because the racially 'pure' Ashraf were not perceived to belong to the same race as North-Indian Hindus. This critique also made it possible to square the circle between the claim that the *ulama* were deliberately misleading local Muslims and the existence of a sizeable corpus of vernacular texts based in Arabic knowledge systems. Rather than identifying them as the attempts of the *ulama* to impart Islamic knowledge, they could now be criticised as incomprehensible, deliberately obscurantist, and dangerously outdated texts designed to keep the common Malayali and Tamil Muslim ignorant (Tschacher 2018: 27-28). The imbrication of Muslim reformist discourse in the Madras Presidency with the racialised colonial discourse about Muslim 'purity' and conversion becomes most salient when considering the development of a different kind of reformism underway just across the Palk Strait in British Ceylon.

'Reforming' the 'Arab' in Ceylon

As mentioned above, the position of Muslims in British Ceylon was curiously different from those in the Madras Presidency. While the basic narrative of the history of Muslims and Islam in both cases was strikingly similar, the conclusions reached by elite colonial discourse differed diametrically. In the Madras Presidency, the claim to Arab descent was ultimately denied to the majority of Muslims, and the few whose credentials were accepted were eyed with suspicion as primarily interested in exploiting their ancestry for social advancement. In Ceylon, Muslims came to be accepted as being essentially of different 'race' than local Tamils or Sinhalese. This does not mean that Ceylon Muslims became accepted in colonial discourse as authorities on Islam. As religion was deemed less important than 'race' in the administration of Ceylon, there was little need to ascertain the knowledge of Islam among Ceylon Moors, with observers finding it more worthwhile to comment on the customs and rituals of the Moors than on their 'orthodoxy' (Anonymous 1918, Chitty 1834: 254-271). The British acceptance of the Moors' claims to Arab ancestry rested to a certain degree on the good relations the British had with the Moors. The Dutch, who were in greater competition with Muslim traders, had had no compunctions in assuming that the Ceylon Moors were descendants of "Malabar outcasts" (Tennent 1859: Vol. 2, 53 n. 1), while the British saw the Kandyan Moors as allies after their conquest of the kingdom in the third Kandyan War 1817-1818 (Marshall 1846: 180-182). However, on the whole, Ceylon Moors were judged to "care little for education", and the state of religious knowledge in the mid-19th century has been described as "religiously obscurantist and intellectually sterile" (Azeez 1968: 755). The educational condition of Ceylon Moors, and

the contest for representation in the Legislative Council, produced a movement in the late 19th century often described as the 'Muslim Revival'.

The Muslim Revival presents us with an ideal case to gauge the degree to which Muslim reform discourse in Madras and Ceylon was shaped by the racialisation of Muslims in colonial discourse. To begin with, the Muslim Revival in Ceylon shares a number of elements with early reform movements in Madras, though preceding Madras by a few decades. As in Madras, the driving force behind the movement consisted of well-educated elites with close contacts with the colonial government: lawyers, publishers, and contractors (Mahroof 1986: 85-91, Samaraweera 1979). Their prime focus of reform, as across the Palk Strait, was the spread of 'modern', colonial-style education among Muslims, in order to create a Muslim middle-class that would be able to benefit from the modern state while remaining impervious to the enticements of Christian missionaries. In this, the Muslim Revival also paralleled similar movements among Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus, again in a situation comparable to South India (cf. Osella and Osella 2013: 141-142). Muslims, equipped in this manner, could take their rightful place in the public life of a 'modern' colony and future independent nation. But despite these similarities, there are several noticeable differences between the Muslim Revival among Ceylon Moors and early reformist discourse among Tamil- and Malayalam-speaking Muslims in the Madras Presidency. It is precisely these differences that highlight the impact of differential processes of racialisation in the two British colonies. The most striking of these is the largely non-religious character of the Revival. While the reformers in Madras set out to overcome Muslim resistance to English education on religious grounds, the Ceylon Revival was only marginally interested in religious reform beyond convincing Muslims that English education could be compatible with Islam. Occasional criticism of religious practices or fraudulent holy men is of course found in literature connected to the Revival and in the newspapers published by its protagonists; yet the prime concern of the Ceylon reformers lay elsewhere. The Tamil-language Muslim press, especially the Revival's main mouthpiece, *The Muslim Friend* (*Muslim Necan*), was more concerned with discussing the history and identity of Ceylon Moors, reporting on disturbances between Moors and the Sinhalese, and imparting pan-Islamic solidarity by discussing Muslim struggles all over the planet. The *Muslim Friend*'s founder and first editor, Mohammed Cassim Siddi Lebbe (1838-1898), in many ways the most prominent intellectual of the Revival, focused on publishing educational books, such as primers for arithmetic and Tamil language, and most tellingly, elementary grammars of Arabic (cf. Barnett and Pope 1909: 183-184). But throughout his life, Siddi Lebbe identified with a variety of traditionalist Islam and remained a follower of the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood. His only primarily religious publication, a book entitled *Asrarul Alam* (The Mysteries of the Universe) that was published a year before his death, is written as a dialogue between a Sufi master and his disciple. Content-wise, much of *Asrarul Alam* is concerned with harmonizing European scientific advancements with traditional Sufi occultism and esotericism, disciplines that would have been anathema to Madras reformers (cf. McKinley and Xavier 2018). Religious reform was thus very muted in the Ceylon Muslim Revival.

There is more similarity between the linguistic and literary concerns of the Revival and those of reformers in the Madras Presidency. True to its support for 'modern', English-style education, the Revival championed a language fit for the task. Given that Tamil was the prime language used among Ceylon Moors, many of the revivalists' publications were in Tamil and championed modern prose styles and genres, such as the newspaper. Indeed, there is an argument to be made that the Revival offers the only major Muslim strand in the creation of the modern Tamil prose style, though characteristically, this strand has been routinely overlooked in histories of Tamil textual cultures. In a rare passage towards the end of *Asrarul Alam*, Siddi Lebbe voiced criticism of Muslim poets, who preferred to compose songs and epics in obscure language rather than to translate useful knowledge for the benefit of Muslims (Siddi Lebbe

1897: 189, translated in Tschacher 2014a: 203). Despite their claims to Arab descent, the Revival's supporters did not favour the Arabic script. However, they did not denounce Arabu-Tamil either, as later Sri Lankan Muslims would do (see Tschacher 2018: 29-31). Unsurprisingly therefore, the Muslim Revival does not seem to have seen much need in augmenting the already existing Arabu-Tamil translations of the Quran. The only case of a partial Quran-translation connected to the Revival illustrates its attitude towards language. The translation is actually written as a primer for children, thereby exemplifying the Revival's penchant for producing modern educational materiel. But at the same time, the text is written in Arabu-Tamil and was vetted by one of the most important traditionalist scholars and Sufi shaykhs of the period, 'Mappillai Labbai' Sayyid Muhammad b. Ahmad (1816-1898) (Sulayman 1897: 3).[7] 'Reform' in the Muslim Revival was, thus, primarily a reform of the methods and sources of knowledge, and not of theological interpretations and religious practices. The intellectual framework undergirding the Ceylon Muslim Revival and its fundamental differences from Madras-Presidency Muslim reformism are perhaps most poignantly expressed in one of the most unusual (and most ignored) texts by Siddi Lebbe, his novel *Asanpe Carittiram* (The Story of Hasan Bey), first published in 1885. Despite being the chronologically second Tamil novel (and the first from Ceylon), the work is usually ignored in histories of the Tamil novel (cf. Ebeling 2010: 205-145). This is perhaps as much due to its connection to a Muslim revivalist movement as it is to the novel's plot, which plays outside the Tamil linguistic area and includes no Tamil-speaking characters of note (see Siddi Lebbe 1922). In its plot, *Asanpe Carittiram* offers a parable of Siddi Lebbe's hopes for Ceylon's Moors: an Arab, orphaned on the shores of the Indian Ocean, gains an English education, converts an English woman to Islam, and finally discovers his true identity as a respected Arab citizen. If Madras reformers were concerned with reforming Islam among the 'converts' of South India by providing them with 'better' Islamic knowledge, the Revival hoped for the ultimate re-Arabisation of Ceylon Moors with the help of English education.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that colonial discourse in British India racialised Muslims not only in terms of creating them as a minority community with immutable features. It also racialised distinctions among Muslims, with the socially disadvantaged segments of Muslim society identified as 'racially Indian', descendants of Hindu converts, contrasted with the elites claimed as being the offspring of 'racially foreign' immigrants from the Middle East. This marked the elite as 'proper', indeed, 'pure' Muslims, juxtaposed to a large number of erstwhile converts who were deemed religiously ignorant and thus legitimate targets for projects of conversion and reform. The effects of that racialisation can still be seen in scholarship, where Muslim engagements with Hinduism are studied as intellectual, philosophical discourses when voiced by elite Muslims in the Persianate context (e.g. Nair 2020), but as evidence of 'Islamisation' and conversion when voiced in the Indian vernaculars (e.g. Eaton 1993: 268-297, Irani 2021: 137-171). Yet while in most parts of India, a neat bifurcation was produced between Muslim communities who were 'foreign' and those who were non-elite 'converts', the internal racialisation of South Asian Muslims reached its limits on India's coasts. The presence of Muslim communities who participated in transoceanic exchanges with the Middle East for centuries produced a conundrum for official models of racialisation in how to rank these communities. Ultimately, discourses were modified to allow for the notion of 'mixed-race' communities. However, the idea of 'mixing' has never rested easily with the notion of 'race'.

[7] The title 'Mappillai Labbai' is only superficially connected to the ethnic labels 'Mappilla' and 'Labbai'. These have to be understood through their literal meaning, 'bridegroom, son-in-law' and 'mullah, imam'. Sayyid Muhammad was known as the 'bridegroom imam' because he married two daughters of the Sufi *shaykh* whose deputy (*khalifa*) he was.

This tension gave rise to discourses which undermined the idea (and desirability) of such 'mixed-race' Muslims by classifying more and more groups as actually comprising of 'converts'. But the most important challenge to the notion of mixing was provided by Muslim reformists, who, in their aim to 'uplift' local Muslims, targeted all illegitimate forms of mixing. If Muslims had to purify their religion from 'Hindu' accretions, they simultaneously needed to become 'pure' members of their respective 'nation'. Therefore, not only were religious practices that were deemed 'un-Islamic' attacked, but reformists vociferously campaigned against any 'pollution' of 'national' linguistic and cultural inheritance that was instigated by 'Arab' elements, most importantly, the Arabic script. That the opposition to the 'Arabisation' of local Muslim culture by Muslim reformers in the Madras Presidency was motivated by the script provided by racialisation is demonstrated by the fact that the same notions were not applied to communities of 'pure' descent – no reformer ever disparaged Urdu as 'Arabi-Hindi'. Yet in Ceylon, where no other major Muslim community existed that could claim the status of racially 'pure' Muslims, the Tamil-speaking Moors came to be accepted as 'racially' distinct from Tamils and Sinhalese by the colonial government. Despite the largely similar historical, social, and economic background of Ceylon Moors and Madras Labbais, the former came to be considered as being of Arab descent, while the latter were deemed as descendants of converts with a small elite of 'mixed-race' individuals. Consequently, the Ceylon Muslim Revival from the 1880s onwards, despite emerging from a similar social position as reform-movements in Madras, and similarly aiming at the upliftment of Muslims in terms of English-style education and the introduction of 'modernity', was more concerned with a quasi-secular Arabisation of its constituency rather than with religious purification.

Tracing the impact of racialisation on the history of Muslim reform and revival in colonial Madras and Ceylon allows us to question several received narratives regarding these projects and the constituencies they targeted. The first is the realisation of the paradoxical situation Muslim minorities of the region are still regularly placed in. While early reform movements in South India emerge as supporters of regional linguistic (sub-)nationalisms, their inheritors in South India are often criticised for having gone too far in their attempt to distinguish 'race' from 'religion'. Their attempts at purifying religion are often nowadays in themselves perceived as forms of illicit 'Arabisation' leading to an alienation of Muslims from their non-Muslim compatriots (Osella and Osella 2013: 143, Tschacher 2016: 205-206). In this, Muslim reform has become trapped in the 'purification' process it initiated among Muslims. Second, the article has stressed the historical contingency of local identity processes. The Ceylon-Moor identity project has often been criticised as ignoring its links to local society and the heterogeneity of Moorish society(s). Certainly, the racialisation of the Ceylon Moor was a project pushed for the benefits of a small elite. Yet the 'Malayalisation' and 'Tamilisation' of Muslims in Madras were no less contingent, but similarly the effects of elite self-fashioning without considering other links and identities. Indeed, the problematic racialisation visible in these movements results from the very championing of 'modernity' that these movements are often celebrated for today. For 'race' was a foundational category of colonial modernity, and the adoption of its logic by reformers makes it a problematic part of the legacies of modernity that Muslim traditionalists, especially in Kerala, have begun to point to in their critical engagement with reformism (see Visakh, Santosh, and Mohammed Roshan 2021). Finally, this article has hopefully signalled the problematic nature of a tendency that argues with the 'convert' background of South Asian Muslims to explain the forms taken by Islam in South Asia. All Muslims, even Arabs, are the descendants of erstwhile converts. In themselves, 'conversion' and 'Islamisation' are important fields of research, but South Asian Islam does not differ from Middle Eastern Islam because of conversion. The image of the 'convert' Muslim is itself a product of colonial racialisation.

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Research Article

Race, Caste, and Missionary Work of the Syro-Malabar Catholics in Postcolonial India and the US

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In this article, I discuss the rise of Syro-Malabar Catholic missionary work in India in the mid-twentieth century and the United States today. At a time when India was beginning to curb foreign missionary work in India, in-house Syro-Malabar Catholic missionary work was on the rise. I examine the racial differences between (white) Catholic missionaries and (brown) dominant caste Catholics. In India, there are three rites of Catholicism: Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, and Latin. While the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites are considered 'forward' caste in the state of Kerala, Latin Catholics are recognized as OBC. The majority of Catholics in India are Dalit and Adivasi, but the Catholic hierarchy remains overwhelmingly dominant caste. Thus, there is a caste division between rites of Catholicism in India which plays into missionary work. This caste dynamic is key in understanding Syro-Malabar missionary work especially outside of the state of Kerala. In the US, Syro-Malabar dominant caste priests may experience racism especially in predominantly white rural areas where they have little support systems in place. They also may be sent to Native communities, entering into the long history and present of Catholic settler colonialism. I examine how caste and race configures Catholic missionary work by specifically examining how the Catholic hierarchy is structured by caste, how caste and race may shape how spiritual labour is perceived by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and how caste and race shape how priests themselves view the spiritual guidance of white, Indigenous, Dalit Bahujan, and Adivasi parishioners.

caste, race, catholic, missionaries, colonialism

Introduction

This article examines missionaries from the Syro-Malabar rite of Catholicism in India (OR18).[1] While South Asian Studies tends to imagine Christian missionaries as white and American/ European and converts as brown and 'indigenous', it is estimated that 70% of Catholic missionaries in India come from the Syro-Malabar rite *within* India (OR18).[2] In addition, many Syro-Malabar Catholic priests are today traveling to countries in the Global North as missionaries leading to a 'reverse missionary' phenomenon where brown priests are

[1] 'Rite' refers to the distinct traditions in liturgy that arose within the Catholic faith over the centuries in different locations throughout the world. While the Western world (and many postcolonial nations where Catholicism was brought by Western missionaries) operates under the 'Latin' rite, there are Churches in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and India in the Eastern rites with distinct liturgies and traditions. These rites or 'Churches', while distinct from one another, are in full communion with the Catholic Church in Rome. It does get confusing and so below, I discuss the rites of Catholicism and specifically the Syro-Malabar rite and its relation to the Latin rite in depth (also see OR18).

[2] Much of the Catholic missionary work within India is conducted by Syro-Malabar Catholic priests in Latin rite dioceses in North India.

missionaries amongst mostly white congregants.[3] In order to understand the complex racial dynamics animating Catholic missionary work in India and the US today, it is essential to examine both the historical shift in the Syro-Malabar Catholic rite's stance on proselytisation and the influence of caste hierarchy in Indian missionary work. In this article, I examine the origins and influence of caste and racial hierarchies while providing an overview of Catholic missionary work in/ from India post independence.

The article is divided into two parts. In part one, I discuss the historical narratives and caste dynamics that helped to anchor the distinct community identity of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in order to contextualise the growing numbers of (South Indian) Syro-Malabar Catholics engaged in missionary work in (North Indian) Latin Churches. This surge is especially significant in light of xenophobic fears of a 'threat to the (Hindu) nation' which has fueled anti-conversion legislation and anti-Christian violence in many Indian states. In the second part, I turn my attention to Syro-Malabar Catholic priests engaged in missionary work in the US examining how, on the one hand, dominant caste networks have allowed for the migration of Catholic elites, and on the other hand, such migration has produced racial anxieties as brown Indian priests necessarily have to navigate the United States' complex racial hierarchy while simultaneously entering into a long, and continuing, history of Catholic settler colonialism. I focus on the Syro-Malabar rite because the Syro-Malabar rite is the second largest of the Eastern rites after the Ukrainian Church and has the most vocations (ordained priests) of any of the Eastern rites of Catholicism (OR8).[4] The rite appears to be the most active in Indian Catholic missionary work in the US.[5] In addition, my focus on the Syro-Malabar rite stems from an auto-ethnographic project of which this article is a part. I come from a Syro-Malabar rite lineage—my parents were part of this Church before they migrated to Germany in the 1960s, and then to the US. Although I was raised in Montana in the Latin rite and the nearest Syro-Malabar congregation was over 1000 miles from where I was born, many missionary priests in the neighboring state of North Dakota and later in Montana were and are from the Syro-Malabar rite. Thus, this article is based on ongoing auto-ethnographic research on Indian priests and missionary work in the rural West.

Rites of Catholicism and Caste

'Rite' refers to the distinct traditions in liturgy that arose within the Catholic faith over the centuries in different locations throughout the world. There are 23 different rites of Catholicism, the largest being the Latin rite of Catholicism with which readers will be most familiar. While the Western world (and many postcolonial nations where Catholicism was brought by Western missionaries) operates under the Latin rite, there are Churches in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and in India with liturgies and traditions that differ from the Western Latin rite. These Churches are part of the Eastern rites or Oriental rites. Eastern rite Catholics number about 16.3 million (OR21) and include the Coptic Catholics of Egypt, Maronite Catholics of Lebanon/ Syria, and Byzantine Catholics of Greece, among other Eastern Catholic rites. The Eastern Code of Canon law defines rite as "the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary heritage,

[3] In the US, Catholic missionaries from India are sent to Native American reservations and to Latina Spanish- speaking Churches as well.

[4] Vocations referes to the numbers of men entering the priesthood. According to the *National Catholic Register*, "the Syro-Malabar Church accounts for 6% to 9% of the worldwide total of diocesan priests, religious priests, nuns, and seminarians giving India the highest vocation ratio in the world" (OR8).

[5] My research on Indian Catholic missionary work in the Global North is focused on the US. The majority of missionaries in the US are diocesan priests. The US does not gather data on the diocese or rite these priests come from/are ordained in, only the US diocese in which they serve. Thus, it is difficult to get accurate data on the exact number of missionary priests in the US from the Syro-Malabar rite. My qualitative research shows 64% of my participants are from dominant caste backgrounds.

distinguished according to peoples' culture and historical circumstances, that finds expression in each autonomous Church's way of living the faith" (OR21). Some examples of particular 'cultures' or 'historical circumstances' could be sacred language (Latin or Syriac) or the Apostle associated with evangelism in different locations (St. Peter in Rome or St. Thomas in India). Both Eastern rite Catholics and Latin Catholics are in full communion with the Vatican belonging to 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Faith' as described in the Nicene Creed which is recited at mass by the faithful in all rites of Catholicism. Faithful Catholics baptised or receiving sacrements in an Eastern Catholic rite are fully able to attend mass and receive communion in the Latin rite and vice versa. With a special 'bi-ritual' faculty from the Vatican, an Eastern rite ordained priest can practice mass or be a missionary in the Latin rite and vice versa. In theory then, rites do not separate Catholics from each other. Rather, rites should only be an expression of multiple ways of being Catholic globally. In practice, however, the rites of Catholicism can be very separate from one another. In India, the separation between rites is even more complex because it occurs along caste lines.

There are three rites of Catholicism in India; Latin, Syro-Malankara, and Syro-Malabar.[6] The Latin rite was brought to India by the Portuguese in the 16th Century. The Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar rites belong to the Eastern rites. The Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar rites are united in a shared origin story, shared sacred language, and by caste. According to oral histories, St. Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve Apostles, came to Kerala, South India in the year 52 CE, converted Brahmins to Christianity, and was later martyred outside of Chennai. The historicity of this evangelical mission of St. Thomas is recognised and supported by the Vatican. St. Thomas spoke in the language of Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic used by early Christians. Thus, the 'Syro' part of the Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar rites refers to their Syriac traditions and language. Before the 1960s, the Syro-Malabar mass was conducted in the Syriac language, just as Latin was the language of choice for Western Catholic masses. Now, the Syro-Malabar mass is conducted in the vernacular language of Malayalam. But the importance of the Syriac language remains in particular prayers, chants, words, naming practices, and in seminary training. Both the Syro-Malanakara and Syro-Malabar rites, in addition to certain other Christian denominations including Syrian Orthodox Christians, Marthoma Christians, and Knanayan Christians, are all known as 'Syrian Christians' because of their origin stories (caste and conversion), their shared Eastern traditions, and the historical and ongoing importance of the Syriac language to their shared heritage. Of all the denominations of Christians that fall under the umbrella of 'Syrian Christians', the Syro-Malabar Catholics are the largest.

Whether or not St. Thomas actually came to India and whether or not he converted Brahmins is a matter of dispute from those outside the St. Thomas/ Syriac communities. For one, the social organising system of caste was not the norm in this area of India at the time and only started to consolidate somewhere between the 7th to 10th centuries. Secondly, much of the early history of the Syrian Christians is carried forward by oral traditions. Nevertheless, clergy and members of the Syriac rites in India believe in the St. Thomas apostolic mission, and St. Thomas is very much celebrated. St. Thomas' portrait can be found in almost every Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala today, the name 'Thomas' is very common in the community—illustrated in my father's name and my surname. St. Thomas' feast day, July 3rd, is called *Dukhrana* or 'remembrance' and is an important feast day for all Syrian Christians. The Syro-Malabar Church has urged all public universities in Kerala to view July 3rd as a holiday, as most Christian institutions in the state already do. It is not just the community that holds onto

[6] There are also dominant caste Catholics who identify as Knanayan. Knanayan Catholics do not have their own rite of Catholicism. In 1911, Pope Pius X erected the Vicariate Apostolic of Kottayam for Knanayan Catholics which was later raised to an Eparchy co-extensive with the Syro-Malabar Church.

this belief in St. Thomas' visit to Kerala and their ancestors being dominant caste. Wider Kerala society also understands the Syrian Christians to be dominant caste. The Syrian Christians became merchants and landowners and their accrued generational wealth led to economic, social, and political power in the caste-stratified society. In 849 CE, a series of edicts were hammered onto a set of copper plates giving the Syrian Christians certain rights that mirrored the rights afforded to caste-privileged peoples in Kerala society. Today, the Syrian Christians remain the largest landowners in Kerala, India (Zachariah 2006: 28) and, as a 'forward' caste, they do not qualify for reservations.

After the arrival of Vasco deGama on the Kerala coast in 1498, Portuguese Catholic missionaries came to this area of India. St. Francis Xavier converted tens of thousands of Muslims and Hindu fisher-folk to Latin Catholicism. As mentioned, 'Latin' refers to the Latin language associated with Western Christianity and denotes a liturgical and sacred language different from 'Syriac'. The Portuguese tried to Latinise the Syrian Christians in a Synod in 1599. In 1653, some of the Syrian Christians rebelled against Portuguese Catholicism in an event known as the *Coonan Kurisha* or 'crooked cross oath'. These Syrian Christians became what we now know as 'Orthodox' Christians in the region. There were a number who stayed faithful to Catholicism, but did not want Latinisation either. This group became the Syro-Malabar Catholics. The Syro-Malankara are a small group of Orthodox Christians who attempted and were successful in reuniting with Rome in the 1930s. Latin Catholics are differentiated from Syro-Malabar Catholics and Syro-Malankara Catholics not just by language and liturgy, but also by caste and origin story. As Syro-Malabar Catholics would see it, Latin Catholic history in India is not the mission of one of Jesus's own Apostles, but rather, the evangelical mission of foreign/ coloniser Portuguese missionaries centuries later. Since Portuguese missionaries worked along the coast and primarily with fisher-folk, the landowning dominant caste merchants from the Syrian Christian community set themselves apart from them. Syro-Malabar priests insisted on separate seminaries, objected to Latin Catholic priests using their vestments, and even from having Latin Catholic priests trained in the Syriac liturgy (Podipara 1986: 60). Latin Catholics experienced and continue to experience casteism from dominant caste Christians and Hindus. While the Syrian Christians are considered 'forward caste' in Kerala, Latin Catholics are considered OBC (Other Backward Castes) in the state. When the Kerala government tried to create scholarships for Latin Catholics in 2015, Syro-Malabar Catholics protested, saying such scholarships would divide the Christian community (without discussing how the Catholic community is already divided by caste). Latin Catholic concerns and the plight of fisher-folk seem far removed from the concerns of the Eastern rite clergy. For instance, while Latin Catholic priests have joined fisher-folk in protests against a shipyard in Kochi that will displace Latin Catholics, the Syrian Catholic hierarchy meets with Narendra Modi and the Hindu Right to discuss the falling price of natural rubber on the world market—a business where the Syrian Christians are prominent. Thus, the Catholic religion usually does not unite Syro-Malabar Catholics with Latin Catholics politically or socially.

While these caste dynamics play out via Latin and Syrian Catholic rites in the state of Kerala where St. Thomas Christianity has a long history, they may not be as well known in other areas of India where Christians in general and Catholics specifically are assumed to be Dalit Bahujan and/or Adivasi. In the late colonial period, India witnessed mass conversions of Dalit and Adivasi communities to Christianity; these mass conversions were, moreover, facilitated by foreign missionaries. This is not to imply that European missionaries were necessarly anti-caste in their missionary endeavors or that Dalit and Adivasi Christians did not employ their own agency and self-determination in these mass conversions. In fact, British Anglican missionaries tried to first work amongst Syrian Christians, believing their Eastern traditions/ Catholicism to be lackadaisical and hoping that the reforming of the dominant caste Christians would result in the transferring of Dalit Bahujan workers to Protestant Christianity with them.

But the Syrian Christians held fast to their Eastern/ caste traditions much as they rejected Portugese Latinisation centuries before. Only after the Syrian Christians broke from the Church Missionary Society in 1836 did British missionaries start to work amongst Kerala's Dalit slave castes (Mohan 2016: 45). As Sanal Mohan explains in his research on caste, prayer, and social space, colonial modernity was shaped by missionary Christianity which fundamentally altered public life for many of Kerala's slave castes. Through their own Dalit schools, chapels, and prayer meetings, a new social imaginary was possible as Kerala's most oppressed castes challenged caste segregation and casteist practices imposed upon them (Mohan 2016: 46). The impact of caste activism and a new social landscape that public life and prayer provided played a role in these mass conversions. Now, the majority of Catholics in India, an estimated 65%, are Dalit (OR11). In some states, that statistic is much higher. In the state of Tamil Nadu, for example, 75% of the Catholics are Dalit (OR22).

(Foreign white) missionaries coming to convert (Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi) Hindus to Christianity stoked fears that the Hindu community was on the demographic decline, motivating anti-conversion legislation in many Indian states in nationalist India.[7] In *Religious Freedom and Mass Conversion in India,* Laura Jenkins (2019) has given an overview of anticonverstion legislation in India starting from regional laws passed in the early 20th century such as the Raigarh State Conversion Act in 1936 or the Udaipur State Anticonversion Act of 1946. These state laws were followed by national bills post Independence such as the Indian Conversion Bill of 1954 and the Backward Communities Religious Protection Bill of 1960 (ibid). As Jenkins explains, "Regardless of shifts in motivations or justifications, political leaders and administrators have used the laws to patronise and scrutinise lower castes, Adivasis, women and group converts, making them less eligible for religious freedom" (ibid: 139). Today, there is widespread (dominant caste) support for regional 'religious freedom' laws to curb all missionary work—foreign and domestic—especially when missionaries work amongst Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities. The Indian Governement has even blocked (and then subsequently removed the block after outcry) foreign funding to Mother Teresa's celebrated organisation, 'Missionaries of Charity'. Investigative reporting by the *New York Times* has found that in Modi's India, anti-Christian vigilantes are "sweeping through villages, storming Churches, burning Christian literature, attacking schools and assaulting worshipers" (OR13). Chad Bauman's research on Pentacostal Christians has shown that Hindu nationalist attacks on Christians often single out Indian pastors/ evangelists by targeting their evangelistic activities, following them to and from Churches and attacking missionaries in their homes, or even attacking family members of evangelists (Bauman 2020: 83-86). In March 2021, an executive order under the Modi government placed restrictions on the Overseas Indian Citizenship (OCI [Overseas Citizens of India]) visa prohibiting research, journalism, and *missionary work* (emphasis mine) in India by registered Overseas Indian Citizens—restrictions previously not part of the OCI since its inception in 2005 (OR23). But while conversion activities may face Hindu Right opposition, Syro-Malabar Catholic (brown) missionaries with caste privilege and ties to dominant caste Hindus may not be scrutinised with the same lens.[8] This

[7] Laura Jenkins discusses how mass conversions to Christianity also engendered a debate over whether or not Dalit Christians should receive reservations (because Dalit Christians are not recognised as Scheduled Caste), created a legacy of other mass conversions over the years, and created a narrative of whether or not the conversion is "authentic" based on spiritual sincerity (Jenkins 2019: 36-37).

[8] To be sure, Syro-Malabar institutions in North India have also been attacked by the Hindu Right. For instance, in 2021, St. Joseph School in Ganj Basoda, Madhya Pradesh, run by Syro-Malabar monks, was attacked by a Hindu Right mob of over 500 because it was alleged that the school was actively engaged in conversion activities. My purpose here is not to dismiss the anti-Christian violence leveled at Indian missionaries, but rather, to think through how caste and race might set some missionaries apart from other missionaries in the larger social imaginarary of who a missionary is in relation to the

is something that the Syro-Malabar Church has actually prided itself in. As the late Syro-Malabar Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil stated (OR4):

> In India our missionaries are appreciated. Fundamentalists complain that missionaries have European faces and names, life-style and customs and that they are almost all foreigners who came with colonialism. Whereas we are an all Indian Church. We have the same Indian culture as Hindus. For us missionary work is easier.

Almost as a symptom of this marked difference between missionaries, there is less scholarly discussion and research into the rise of Syro-Malabar missionary work in the 20th and into the 21st century despite the Catholic rite's profound presence in missionary activities today.

Syro-Malabar Missions within India

Generally speaking, missionary work was not a feature of the Syro-Malabar rite for most of its history. In a caste stratified society, dominant caste peoples distance themselves and segregate from Dalit Bahujan peoples, cutting off access to dominant caste enclaves, economic opportunities, and from socio-political power. Evangelistic activities are antithetical to any group invested in the caste system. As B.R. Ambedkar notes when discussing conversion and the Hindu religion (OR9):

> Caste is inconsistent with conversion. Inculcation of beliefs and dogmas is not the only problem that is involved in conversion. To find a place for the convert in the social life of the community is another, and a much more important, problem that arises in connection with conversion. That problem is where to place the convert, in what caste?

If Syrian Christians worked amongst Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities, they would be 'allowing' oppressed caste people to enter into a dominant caste community which would breach the norms of the caste system—a system which Syrian Christians benefited from. In addition, this breach of caste norms would work against dominant caste Christian and Hindu alliances which are forged across religions to uphold the casteist patriarchy. As Syro-Malabar Catholic Archbishop Andrew Thazhat explains, "after the 8th century, Thomas Christians became safe and secure in the caste system following its own secluded methodology; at the same time, it had the adverse effect of not venturing for proselytization" (Thazhath 2008: 21). Thus, evangelisation and missionary work was not something the Syrian Christians invested in from the very beginnings of Christianity in India. Rather, the Syrian Christians sought to create political and economic ties to dominant caste Hindus which, to this day, tends to separate dominant caste Syro-Malabar Catholics from Latin Catholics. Later, Syro-Malabar Catholics were restricted from missionary work by the Western Latin rite. When the Portuguese arrived in India, the Vatican gave jurisdiction for missionary work outside of the area of Kerala to the Portuguese/ Latin rite. Because the Syrian Catholics were not really involved with missionary work for the caste reasons I have outlined above, this did not seem to be much of an issue for Syro-Malabar Catholics until the 20th century.

One reason for this change could be the influence of foreign Protestant missionaries. In the mid-19th century there was a higher density of Protestant missionaries in Kerala than in any other part of India (Jeffrey 1992: 97). One sect of Orthodox Syrian Christians were very much influenced by Anglican missionaries and initiated a set of reforms in worship and prayer that

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populations they work amongst. Further, I seek to understand which (if any) hierarchical divisions between missionaries may be deemed as 'acceptable' in caste stratified India.

led to the founding of the Marthoma Church. The Marthoma joined the conglomeration of Churches now called the 'Church of South India' which includes Protestant Churches with Dalit Bahujan Christians. The impact of Protestant missionaries in Kerala was felt not just by Marthoma Syrian Christians, but by all religious groups and castes, as Dalit Bahujan Christians aided by Protestant missionaries fought for schools and education, fought against unjust labour practices and the sharecropping/ tenant system, and fought for land redistribution. Dalit Bahujan Christian women fought for the right to use the dominant caste breast cloth in a highly visible anti-caste movement that lasted for decades in Kerala's public sphere. In this period of social reform, we see Kerala society go from one of the most caste stratified socities in India to one of the most educated, although high literacy rates and education has not eradicated casteism. In turn, dominant caste Hindus and Christians gradually began to see themselves as 'casteless' in their reluctant acceptance of temple entry, breast cloth usage, and universal education. Castelessness does not mean anti-caste. Rather, it is a way for dominant caste people who do not experience casteism to point the finger at Kerala's historical 'bad actors' (those who stripped Dalit Bahujan Christian women of their breast cloth, prevented temple entry, or burned down Dalit Bahujan Churches and schools) as they invisibilise their own caste, power, and networks in the present (Subramanian 2019, Deshpande 2013).

I cannot say with certainty that the Syro-Malabar rite took its cue specifically from Protestant missionaries in the sudden change to embrace missionary work. Neither Portuguese Catholics nor British Protestant missionaries managed to sway Syro-Malabar Catholics from their Eastern rite/ caste 'traditions' which would suggest that Syro-Malabar Catholics would not necessarily wish to emulate Protestant missionaries. That said, it is clear that previously, there were little to no missionary entities within the Syro-Malabar rite, and suddenly we see the founding of missionary orders such as the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament (MCBS) in 1933 with evangelising as one its prime endeavors. Given the ubiquity of Protestant missionaries in Kerala in the 19th century, the impact of Dalit Bahujan Christian activism and social reforms in Kerala, and the gradual embracing of castelessness amongst dominant caste Hindus and Christians, all were at play leading up to the founding of such missionary orders within Syro-Malabar Catholicsm. As mentioned, regional and national laws began to curb missionary work in India starting in the early 20th century. But in post-independent India, the 'threat' of conversions took on a new valence: threat to the cohesion of the nation. In 1956, the Madhya Pradesh government published the 'Niyogi Committee Report on Christian Missionary Activities'. The report warned that Hindus were on a demographic decline as Dalit and Adivasi communities were converting to Christianity. As Chad Bauman argues, the extreme anxieties around conversion were tied to the anxieties about the (Hindu majority) new nation (Bauman 2008: 183):

> these anxieties placed certain Hindus in a defensive posture, causing them to seek, as a bulwark against national disintegration, a primordial, unalterable, and unifying cultural essence. Given the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Indian nation, which prevented unity on ethnic or linguistic grounds, many identified "Hinduness" (hindutva) as that unifying essence…

But the flip side of this coin is that desire for Hindu/ Indian homogenisation and opposition to *foreign* Catholic missionaries led to an increase of *Indian-born* Catholic missionaries working within India. Syro-Malabar Indian missionaries did not arouse the same kind of anxiety from the Hindu majority as white foreign missionaries. The differences between white missionaries and Indian 'natives' was marked not just by race but also by wealth, mobility, and culture. That is, white missionaries had the means to travel and their culture was markedly different than their converts. These differences in wealth and mobility, in addition to their whiteness marked European missionaries as visibly and culturally different than in-house Indian missionaries.

Indeed, the Syrian Christians are again and again described as 'native' Christians in the colonial historical record (Report on the Census of Travancore 1876: 160-161), tying them to new converts in a way that no white missionary could lay claim to. The above mentioned MCBS order founded in 1933 describes itself as "An *Indigenous* (emphasis mine) Catholic Clerical Religious Congregation" (OR1). Further, white missionaries worked amongst Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities in a way that dominant caste Hindus and Christians historically did not. As dominant caste Christians, the Syrian Christians had a long history of not upsetting the caste order, but of enforcing it. 'Indigenous' Christian missionaries were thus not as easily marked as threats to the caste/national order. And hence, we paradoxically see Syro-Malabar priests start to engage in missionary work within India at the same time as conversions were seen as a threat to the Hindu majority/ Hindu nation and laws were enacted to curb conversions.

By the 1960s, another change was taking place. Vatican II recognised the rights of individual (Eastern) Churches which created a new discourse on missionary work within the Syro-Malabar rite. We begin to see resentment amongst Syrian Christian clergy for being restricted by the Vatican from missionary work outside of Kerala.[9] Rather than contextualising the lack of missionary work of the Syro-Malabar Church within a history of caste realities which did not encourage evangelising, an east/ west binary takes center stage that portrays the Western colonising Church as unfairly restricting the Eastern 'indigenous' Syro-Malabar Church. For example, in "Theological Considerations of the Ecclesial Mission and the Pastoral Care of the Migrants of the Syro Malabar Church," Dr. George Karakunnel writes (2009: 82, 87):

> The insistence of the Latin hierarchy in India on the principle of "one territory, one bishop, one jurisdiction" has been in direct opposition to equal rights of the Orientals to minister to their faithful and to evangelize (p. 82) … Suppression or subordination of non-Latin traditions, even of local variations of the Latin tradition, has been a fact of history. Missionaries who came for evangelization succeeded in establishing the supremacy in imposing their form of Christianity over the Church of St. Thomas Christians in South India (p. 87).

It is true that the Western Latin rite did try and Latinise the Eastern rite Syrian Christians and restricted the Syro-Malabar Church geographically to Kerala. It is also true that the Syro-Malabar Church fought for centuries to maintain their traditions and for 'indigenous' bishops. However, the supposed restriction on missionary activities by the Latin rite is awkward, at best, when placed within caste hierarchies that structured the Syro-Malabar rites' relations with other groups. Centuries before Portuguese arrival in Kerala, there were no restrictions placed on the Syrian Christians by the Vatican or any other entitity and still, missionary work was not common. Today, Syro-Malabar Catholic ordained priests can be missionaries in the Latin rite if they receive bi-ritual faculty from the Vatican, meaning that the Vatican has granted the priest permission to celebrate in the Latin rite. And the Syro-Malabar rite has hardly been restricted from this either. Especially after Vatican II, many Syro-Malabar priests have become bi-ritual and now are missionaries in Latin rite Churches across India. So much so that by the end of the 20th Century, 70% of all missionaries in North Indian Latin dioceses were priests who were ordained in the Syro-Malabar Church (Kaniamparampil 2008: 189). Further, in the late 20th and into the 21st century, many Syro-Malabar priests with bi-ritual faculty have obtained leadership positions in Latin rite dioceses outside of Kerala. This means that dominant caste priests are bishops in Churches where many, if not all, of their congregants are Dalit Bahujan or Adivasi. Of the 180 Catholic bishops in India today, only 11 are Dalit (OR22). The first and only Dalit cardinal was appointed in India in 2022. In the state of Tamil Nadu where 75% of

[9] The fact that missionary work is often conducted outside of Kerala is of note, and I discuss it below.

Catholics are Dalit, only one out of 18 bishops are Dalit and there are no Dalit archbishops (OR22). In the Spring of 2022, widespread protests erupted after yet another non-Dalit archbishop was appointed in the state (OR22). To be sure, some of these non-Dalit bishops have been ordained in the Latin rite. But many are Syro-Malabar with bi-ritual faculty in the Latin rite. Out of the 120 bishops in Latin dioceses in North India, 35 of them are Syro-Malabar priests (Kaniamparampil 2008: 189). This is a clear case of *institutionalised casteism* where the institution of the Catholic Church in India reproduces the caste hierarchy in appointments and leadership. Though bi-ritual faculty can be granted to a Latin ordained priest to administer sacraments in the Syro-Malabar rite, it is difficult to say how often this happens. I have yet to attend a Syro-Malabar mass officiated by a priest ordained in the Latin rite in Kerala. And the numbers currently indicate that bi-ritual faculty is more often granted to dominant caste priests going to Latin Churches than the other way around (OR20). Given the long history of Syro-Malabar priests advocating for separate seminaries and vestments, and objecting to Latin priests being trained in the Syriac language, the granting of bi-ritual faculty appears to be asymmetrical. As a Syro-Malabar missionary priest (deliberately kept anonymous to protect the identity of research participants) with bi-ritual faculty in the Latin rite explained to me in 2019: "In Kerala, you know, Kerala Churches are very strict. Kerala Churches only take Syro-Malabar priests only in the Syro-Malabar dioceses. Only Latin in the Latin dioceses" (2019).

I mentioned that recent Syro-Malabar missionary work is mostly conducted outside of Kerala. Rite, caste, and conversion/ origin stories for Christians are very apparent in the Kerala context where there is a long history of Christianity in the region and a strong Syrian Christian (caste) presence in the socio-political landscape. That is not to say that cross caste Catholic missionary work is not conducted in Kerala. Catholic missionary work across caste does exist in Kerala. It's just not as common as cross caste missionary work in North India. Further, the handfuls of Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi Syro-Malabar converts in Kerala may not be integrated with the existing Syro-Malabar Catholic community and established Churches. Syro-Malabar families tend to attend their family Church and will cite 'tradition' as the reason they would not attend a Syro-Malabar Church frequented by Dalit Bahujan converts, even as caste may be a co-shaping factor for the lack of integration. This holds true for other denominations in Kerala with a dominant caste/ Thomas origin story as well. Prema Kurien has found that "while evangelists belonging to the Mar Thoma Church do work among lower castes in Kerala and in other parts of India, such convert communities are formed into separate parishes and are not integrated into the Syrian Christian community or parish" (2017: 69). As Anderson Jeremiah writes, caste divisions in the Churches of South India keeps them from ecclesial communion and "unable to bear a holistic witness to the gospel in their territory" (2014: 108). Jeremiah's research on Dalit Studies and Christian theology also points out that such caste divisions (perpetuated by dominant caste Churches) means that Christians may not stand in unity against the continued attacks on Churches and oppressed caste Christians by the Hindu Right (ibid: 108). And indeed, this is what we see happening with dominant caste Christians—some Syro-Malabar 'Chrisanghis' are even joining right wing groups that are quite vocal in their support for Hindu Right Islamaphobic policies (OR16). In short, the Syro-Malabar Church went from centuries of very little to no missionary activity, to a profound presence in missionary work *especially* outside of Kerala in Latin rite dioceses with Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi faithful. This presence was Indian (dominant caste) missionaries working amongst Indian (Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi) communities mostly outside of Kerala and thus was not and is not seen as an outside foreign presence in the same way that a Western (white) presence is. And with this new Syro-Malabar Catholic presence in missionary work, the caste hierarchies of a previous age which divided Syro-Malabar Catholics from Latin Catholics continues on in the Indian Catholic clerical hierarchy. And, as I examine below, these caste hierarchies continue to ramify and impact missionary work by Syro-Malabar priests who emigrate to the US, along with other dominant-caste Indians, as they have done in increasing numbers since 1990.

Race, Caste, and Indian Missionaries in the US

Often, Indian Catholic missionaries are not included in demographic data on diaspora studies on South Asian Americans. Their labor is just different from that of IT professionals, doctors, or nurses—the jobs most associated with Syrian Christians in the diaspora (George 2005, Benjamin 2013, OR14). However, in the late 20th century, Western Europe and the US saw a sharp decline in (white) Catholic vocations to the priesthood. With this decline came a rise in Catholic missionaries from the 3rd World serving in 1st World Churches and a large number of these missionaries are coming from India (CARA Report 2014). Today, 25% of diocesan priests in the US are foreign born (CARA Report 2014). And in some dioceses, that number is even bigger. In the diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin, for example, 33% of diocesan priests are foreign born (OR7). South Asian Americans, while racial minorities in the US, are overwhelmingly from the dominant castes. This skewed migration was aided by US immigration laws. For many decades in the 20th century, the US settler state had laws restricting the migration of peoples from Asian countries including India—such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act of 1924. But racist immigration policies changed in 1965 with the Hart–Celler Act. Hart-Celler allowed for the migration of 'skilled professionals'—doctors and engineers—to migrate to the US, such as my father who was a doctor and my mother who was a nurse. The 1965 Act has had a profound effect lasting over many decades: Indian Americans are now the second largest immigrant group after Mexicans (OR24) and the Indian American population grew from 206,000 in 1980 to about 2.7 million in 2021 (OR15).

In 1990, another US immigration act created a number of new visa categories, including the H1-B and R-1. In terms of fueling South Asian migration, the H1-B visa has been particularly significant. The capacity to hire highly educated and trained workers for 'specialty occupations' on relatively short-term (3- to 6-year) visas 'diversified' the tech industry; in Silicon Valley an estimated 75% of software engineers come on the H1-B visa from India (for 'Temp. Professional Foreign Workers' [2022] see OR5). But this diversity was in race alone, as the caste make-up has been extremely homogenous. In fact, of Hindu Indian Americans who identify with their caste, 83% are from dominant caste backgrounds and only 1% is Dalit (OR10). With the 1965 Act and creation of the H1-B visa in 1990, only those with an education, particularly with medical and engineering degrees, and with generational wealth and/ or family support were able to migrate. Indian Americans thus are currently the most wealthy racial minority in the US, and tend to be college educated (OR12). In contrast, Indians without acrrued generational wealth, and Indians who have experienced caste apartheid and discrimination in education face almost insuperable barriers. This is a direct result of caste in India—especially when we think of how institutionalised casteism and caste discrimination in education affects Dalit Bahujan students, and how caste privilege begets wealth by cutting off access to opportunities, networks, jobs, and promotions to oppressed caste peoples.

Indian Catholic priests started coming to the US before the 1990 legislation, but they increased significantly after the creation of the religious worker R-1 visa which was created alongside the H-1B. The US Catholic Church has lobbied to expand the religious worker visa, to expedite visas for missionary Catholic priests, and to move temporary religious worker visas into permanent visas (see OR3, OR2, and OR6). Like the H1-B, migration via the R-1 visa reveals similar patterns of caste privilege. My ethnographic research suggests that many Indian priests on missions to the US are from the Syro-Malabar rite with bi-ritual faculty in the Latin rite.[10]

[10] That said, I have had difficulty in finding exact numbers and statistical data on caste and migration of priests. The US Catholic directory records the diocese in which the priest serves in the US, not the rite in which the priest was ordained or diocese they are from in India.

64% of priests I have interviewed, known personally through my family, and encountered during field research in the rural West have been from dominant caste backgrounds (27 out of 42 priests). In addition, many bishops in the US have ties to Syro-Malabar dioceses in India, setting up networks to receive Syro-Malabar diocesan missionary priests specifically. For instance, the Syro-Malabar diocese of Sagar in Madhya Pradesh has close connections with the Great Falls-Billings diocese in Montana. North Dakota's Bismarck diocese historically has had a close relationship with the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament—the Syro-Malabar missionary order I discussed above, which was created in 1933 during a time when India was turning away foreign (white) missionaries and in response, cultivating 'indigenous' missionaries.

In India, Christians constitute only 2% of the Indian population (OR17). But they constitute 18% of the Indian American population (OR12). While the majority of Christians in India and the majority of Catholics specifically are from Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi communities, the majority of Indian Christians in the US are from dominant caste backgrounds (Kurien 2017: 3). Further, because 'Indians' function as if they are a homogenised racial minority, "no reliable estimate of the number of Latin-rite Catholics from India in the United States is available" (Williams 2008: 150). Even as Latin Catholics are more numerous in India, there remains a lack of networks and lack of opportunities for Latin Catholics to come to the US in comparison to Syro-Malabar Catholics (Williams 2008: 149). The racial homogenisation of brown Indians and a lack of understanding of caste in the diaspora causes non-South Asian Americans and South Asian Americans hailing from religions outside of Christianity to treat Syro-Malabar Churches in the US as 'ethnic minority' Churches representative of 'Indian Christianity'. A report for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops on Asian American and Pacific Islander Catholics found that Eastern Rite Indian Churches in the US were ethnically homogenous. They also found that Indian Latin Catholics in the diaspora chose to not attend Syrian rite Churches, but rather, chose to be minorities in white or mixed raced American (Latin) Catholic parishes (Bruce et.al 2017: 45). For the Syrian Christian diaspora, this may create a second and third generation with little to no knowledge of their caste privilege amidst a society-wide ascendancy of discussions of race, potentially at the expense of caste. It also means that white bishops and the US Catholic community, in addition to scholarly research on the South Asian diaspora, is thinking very little about caste and Christianity in the diaspora. As caste protections in non-discrimination policies become an ever more politicised issue with dominant caste peoples arguing that caste protections are not necessary in American schools, companies, and cities, it is vitally important that both religious institutions and scholars of religion not overlook caste in Christianity and how caste is shaping missionary work in the US.

Race does affect Indian priests' experiences of missionary work in the US and my ongoing autoethnographic research is revealing ways in which they both experience racism and try to benefit from a self-produced 'model minority' identity. While Syro-Malabar missionary priests administer pastoral care to Syro-Malabar congregants in urban centers like Chicago and Houston, they are also bi-ritual priests serving in Latin rite Churches in white, Latina, and Indigenous communities in the US. My research has focused on (mostly) Syro-Malabar priests in rural Montana and North Dakota where the majority of the congregations they serve are either white or Indigenous. These areas are rural, with no South Asian American grocery stores, family networks, or cultural centers. As a result, Indian missionary priests often form their own networks relying on each other for advice and friendship. Sometimes priests can experience overt racism from their brother priests or parishoners. Other times, there could be unexpected cultural misunderstandings and innocent ignorance. And many times, it's hard to know which is which. For instance, Syro-Malabar priests are very much welcomed into houses, revered by parishioners, and constantly around other priests in India. White priests in American parishes often lead more solitary lives in comparison. An Indian Syro-Malabar

missionary priest in the rural West recounted to me a story where the white priest in the parish, who was tasked by the bishop to stay with the missionary priest, left him alone at the rectory and went to stay at another rectory by himself in a nearby parish. It was winter and the Indian missionary had never even seen snow. But the white priest failed to explain how to use a thermostat, leaving the Indian priest to sleep in his coat and under many blankets until a congregant showed him how to turn on the heat. Is this a clash of cultures where the solitary American life of priests did not match up with the more social one of Syro-Malabar culture? Or was the white priest not interested in helping the Indian missionary priest literally leaving him in the cold? In the rural West, Indian missionary priests are sometimes stationed on Native reservations. Indian priests thus enter into a long and disturbing history and present reality of Catholic settler colonialism that has been brutal and genocidal. This history and present is hardly discussed by their white congregations or by US Catholics who are non-indigenous because settler colonialism aims to disappear the Native and center the settler. This also means that an Indian missionary priest's first service as a missionary outside of India could be on a Native reservation and he could be given little to no explanation of the Indigenous peoples he will be working with. But while Indian missionaries and white priests may not be aware of the long history and present of the Catholic Church as a settler colonial Church, Indigenous communities themselves are aware and continually deal with centuries of abuse by Catholic missionary priests and nuns. The diocese of Great Falls-Billings in Montana, the diocese of my birth, went bankrupt in 2017 to reorganise its assets just months before the trial was set in a lawsuit brought by sexual abuse survivors—most of them Native survivors and most of the accused priests stationed on Native reservations (OR19).

The histories of race and caste of Indian Catholicism can play a profound role in how Syro-Malabar Indian missionary priests configure their 'service' on Native reservations. Researching South Asian Canadian workers on the tar sands, Nishant Upadhyay (2019) has argued that the self-production of South Asian Canadians as racial 'model minorities' needs to be understood through the intersections of settler colonial capitalism, white supremacy, religious divisions, and casteism. South Asian Canadians map their 'immigrant' contact points with land, labour, and Indigenous people through these intersections which engenders a sense of belonging, and entitlement over and against Others. As they explain (ibid: 154):

> While the Native body is distinct and particular to the local contexts in the Americas, my interviewees construct and understand Indigeneity through an assemblage of additional Others, namely, the Black Other, caste Other (including Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi and Tribal peoples), and the Muslim Other. Through these constructions of the self and Others, the latter are rendered interchangeable (whereby grammars for recognizing one Other are conflated with those of knowing another Other), homogenous (all other Others are imagined to be similar), and disposable (none of the Others matter).

In many ways, the entry of Indian priests on Native American reservations illustrates what Upadhyay's research has first uncovered. For instance, during one mass on a reservation, I listened to an Indian missionary priest from a dominant caste rite give a sermon to a handful of Indigenous and white congregants about his missionary work amongst Adivasis in North India. He explained how, although he was an immigrant and unfamiliar with American culture or racial politics, working amongst tribals in North India prepared him for working amongst Indigenous peoples in rural America. Adivasis and Indigenous peoples on the Reservation are interchangeable and simultaneously homogenous, and this interchangeability/ homogenisation shapes how the dominant caste priest understands his work in both North India and on the Native reservation.

Conclusion

The differences between Catholic rites is extremely denomination specific and complex, even for Catholic scholars. But when we delve into the rites of Catholicism in India, we can see the ways in which the relatively new phenomenon of missionary work within the Syro-Malabar rite has been structured by existing caste divivions and assumptions about (white) foreigners and (brown) 'natives'. Race and missionary work in the Indian context engendered anti-Western postcolonial anxieties about foreign missionaries and the need to control and question Dalit Bahujan and Adivasis' faith. Simultaneously, the speed at which the Indian Catholic Church reproduced the caste system in clerical hierarchies in within-India missionary work clues us in to how salient and pervasive casteism is in the postcolonial Indian nation-state. When we attend to the racial and caste-based dynamics in which Indian missionaries in the diaspora are embedded, we see racial differences between Syro-Malabar Catholic priests and larger (white) Catholic population, non-South Asian assumptions that 'Indian' Churches are 'ethnic' Churches without an understanding of caste, and Syro-Malabar missionaries placed on Native reservations entering into a long and on-going history of Catholic settler colonialism. While originally, foreign priests filling in for small parishes in the US was seen as a stop-gap measure due to temporary shortage of (white) vocations, the model of 'importing' priests has been in place for decades and shows no signs of stopping. The landscape of Catholic life in many US dioceses has been shaped by the arrival of Indian priests for over 40 years. But despite this reality, the Catholic Church in the US and scholars of South Asian diaspora have been slow to examine caste in Christian communities or think through the racial intracacies of 'reverse missionary' labour.

The material effects of caste networks and migrations with missionary work can be manifold especially when we think through the socio-economic realities of remittances to families and the funneling of monies back to (specifically) Syro-Malabar dioceses. Further, I mentioned that the 2nd and 3rd generation of Indian Christians in the US—Christians overwhelmingly hailing from dominant caste backgrounds—could potentially be raised to understand only their racial minority identity, and not ever discuss the effects of caste power and privilege in their places of worship or in their social groups. As Dalit Bahujan South Asian Americans continue to share stories of caste discrimination they are facing in the US, the accendancy of discussions of race over caste in the dominant caste Christian diaspora could unfortunately work to homogenise all Indian Christians and push forth a false narrative of a casteless diaspora. This became clear, for example when a Knanayan American Christian attending a Syro-Malabar Church brought an Indian flag to the Capitol riots, then claimed that Trump supporters' acceptance of his racial minority presence proved that all Trump supporters were not racist. Meanwhile, no discussion of caste in the diaspora or the privileges afforded to dominant caste Christians in migration needed to be mentioned (OR25, OR26). I see a very real danger here if particular experiences of Indians as 'model' racial minorities are homogenised across castes and then dominant caste peoples are reticent on the topic of caste in the diaspora. I see the need for more research on the subject of caste and race in the Christian diaspora in general. More specifically to this article, the reverse missionary phenomenon begs for more statistical data informed by caste realities and for a nuanced understanding of race: an understanding that sees missionary work as embedded in conceptions of foreign vs. 'indigenous' missionaries even as Indian priests can face racism as 'ethnic minority Catholics' in the US today.

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Review Essay

Orality, Identity, and the Sense of the Past in the India-Burma Borderlands: A Review of Recent Studies[1]

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Orality remains a powerful idiom, a point of reference and meaning in the politics of ethnicity in the India-Burma borderlands. In a recent body of works on the area, the continued significance and meaning-bearing capacity of orality has been studied through departures from earlier colonial anthropological frameworks. For example, what constitutes the relation between oral form and social relations? Or is orality ideologically embedded? Or what would be some of the methods to read and understand orality beyond their popular representations in the societies? While highlighting the importance of these questions, this essay critically engages with this recent body of work on the above topics. At the same time, the essay also points to some of the limitations in the approaches applied, and indicates possible aspects that could be considered in this regard. The essay also argues that the relationship between orality, identity and the sense of the past needs to be studied beyond the framework of there being a necessary correspondence between form and context. In this regard, identifying the discontinuities in the relationship could provide further insights into the nature of the oral field.

India, Northeast, borderlands, orality, ideology

Introduction

India-Burma borderlands comprise a large area that mainly encompasses north-eastern India, the eastern Himalayas, and the northern-western borderlands of Burma.[2] Inhabited by a range of communities, mostly classified in state lexicon as 'tribes', the area once comprised the frontiers of British India, British Burma and China between the 19th and mid-20th century. In the post-independence period, the area came to be identified and studied through the conceptual lens of 'borderland'. Geographically, the area is constituted by valleys, hills and mountainous zones, crisscrossed by passes and routes through which mobilities of trade, people, religion, textual cultures, or soldiers historically took place. The area is comprised of diverse ethnic groups in terms of their histories of migration, religion (Buddhists, Christians, traditional religions, Hindus, and so on), and in terms of their material cultures (such as wood-

[1] I would like to thank S. Seigoulien Haokip for his comments on an earlier draft of the essay. I am grateful to Deepra Dandekar for her suggestions and comments.

[2] Comprising areas of Eastern Himalayas, Northeast India, and northern-western and northern Burma-Yunnan (China) border, the term India-Burma borderlands has been used in this overview for lack of any established definite classification. To cite just two examples of the descriptions applied to the region over the years, Major S. Johri (Johri 1933) generally described the area as 'Where India, China and Burma Meet' when referring to Tibet-NEFA/ Assam-Burma border areas. Joy L.K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel (Pachuau and Schendel 2022: 1) on the other hand have described it as Eastern Himalayan Triangle', referring to the 'triangular region' between the 'eastern Himalayas and the Indo-Burma Arc', and the basins formed by rivers that flow through them.

or bamboo-based economies, cotton- or wool-based ones, or defined by shifting cultivation, or settled wet rice cultivation, etc.). Tibeto-Burman is the dominant language family of the area, although Austro-Asiatic and Indo-Aryan language families are also present in the region. This essay mainly looks at a particular thematic concern that has found a place in a recent body of works on the area that is deemed one of the most interesting analytical developments of recent times with regard to the region. This theme pertains to understanding the oral field and how it gets structured with regard to identity and ideology while configuring itself to building a sense of the past. This thematic concern is moreover important because it comprises a departure from earlier studies that approached orality as tradition or only as a form of literature. In contrast, published mainly between 2008 and the present, the broad concerns of these recent works range between folklore, history, religion, and identity studies. But despite such disciplinary diversity, a common concern has invariably engaged with understanding the structuring of orality. An important outcome of this has led to widening the scope of orality, both in terms of theory and method, and studying orality in ways that go beyond the earlier framework of tribal-oral societies of the borderland. Further, while in the case of most communities, writing became the dominant medium during the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, this did not reduce the significance of orality. In fact, as studies show, orality (such as mythology) continues to remain a dynamic site that produced and made the articulation of identity, ideology, and sense of the past in borderland areas possible. In this regard, the basic problems that researchers have faced lies in explaining the relationship between orality and a sense of the past. For instance, if the sense of the past or 'pastness' (Handoo 1998: 1-17, also cf. Halbwachs 1992 that Handoo draws), is not per se about past historical periods of a given community, but about how the past is conceptualised and socially remembered, then how would one investigate the capacity of oral registers that contain these processes, to structure the social relations of a given present community in different ways. It is with this understanding kept in mind that some recent studies have worked more closely on oral mythology and legends. Notably, in taking such a line of enquiry, they are faced with two issues. One: is the relationship between orality and sense of the past a more general phenomenon in the borderlands? For example, can it be found across the ethnic diversity of the borderlands? Two: if the relationship between orality and a sense of the past is real, then how would one explain its salience in contemporary times? Regarding the two issues, the argument in recent works is not that different local communities share (or need to share) the same narrative of the past. Rather, the sense of the past that is common across local communities exhibits certain similar underlying conditions. This makes it possible to study the relationship between mythology and historicity as a more general phenomenon that is common across the ethnic diversity of borderlands. But then, what comprise these underlying conditions? There are broadly two things to note, and both hinge on the place and role of orality in community life: (a) orality is a distinct field of culture through which communities continue to produce meaning, and (b) ideology through orality is a crucial underlying factor that constitutes a sense of the past and the idea of the self within the community. In other words, a sense of the past needs to be seen as fundamentally connected to the (re)production of the oral field which continues to be meaningful, and the perpetuation of an ideological construct vis-à-vis the production of political identity. The various works on the subject differ in their argument, with some focusing more on one or the other underlying factors outlined above, yet when considered together, what emerges is that even if questions of the oral field or ideology are conceptually different, the two cannot be treated as water-tight compartments. For example, researchers have pointed to how oral forms can be found as bearers of a twin character. On the one hand, oral forms are found to exist as bearing reference to the past, and on the other hand, they also exist as bearers of their powerful relevance in the present. In this regard, the question for researchers has been to ask what this kind of meaning-bearing capacity of orality explains? What makes it possible for orality to get meaningfully positioned in a dynamic range between the past and the present, especially a present which is concretely

contextually located within the dominance of writing? In terms of research, one of the outcomes of raising such analytical questions is an increasing emphasis placed in recent works on the need for more systematic examination of the oral data. The discussion below is not really a survey of all the recent works on the subject of orality or identity in the India-Burma borderlands. It is a limited overview of a few select works that have generally engaged with the above-stated research questions. However, these surveyed works are important when considered together, as they bring forth an issue, or rather, two inter-related issues, which have not received adequate attention (see Dutta 1995). These two issues are namely: what constitutes orality as a textual system (something that is much more than genre, and types of essential relics)? And under what conditions can orality become part of contemporary political and ideological practices? Second, these works have highlighted that researchers studying orality need to be careful and systematic in their understanding of oral data. For example, consider how the given nature of space can produce certain patterns in myths, or how myths or ballads, rather than being seen as pre-given or essential, can actually be viewed as constructions under given historical conditions. When the above points are considered, it is evident that these scholars not only take the study of orality beyond the colonial anthropological framework (isolated, kinship-based oral societies, or of the 'tribes'), but also highlight why finding meaningful answers to their continued salience is important to understand contemporary social and political processes in the area.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first section discusses some recent works that have engaged with the question of oral text, social relations, and ideology. The second section engages with some recent works that have examined how approaching the oral text also involves methodological questions. There is a common dimension to the works discussed in these two sections, namely, their underlying premise about the presence of a correspondence between text and context. Correspondence here means that a text represents the context of its production, or that a text can 'speak' about its context, especially because a given context (whichever way context is conceptualised) has a corresponding oral form. The third section, in a manner of conclusion, argues that the meaning-bearing capacity of orality also needs to be examined in terms of discontinuities in the relation between oral text and the context of its production. Discontinuous relations here means that an oral text is unable to represent or reformulate the context of its production. In other words, there can be situations when a given context does not have a corresponding oral form. In such cases, it is the ruptures and silences within the oral text that provide clues about its meaning.

The Oral Text, Social Relations and Ideology

Tradition and the idea of pre-modern wisdom (that continues to be relevant) have generally been the considered recurring themes through which the orality of the area is studied. For example, as Desmond Kharmawphlang (Kharmawphlang 2022: 364), who works on Khasi folklore has pointed out, "The ethnic diversity of Northeast India is observed and felt through the stock of folklore materials, especially of the verbal kind which embody the process, resource, and responsibility of tradition. They are a testimony to the thousands of years of accumulated knowledge." However, in some of the recent works, one can see a shift in the way this research problem is framed. Rather than looking into questions of tradition and pre-modern wisdom (on pre-modern 'wisdom' see Bourdieu 1979), the emphasis has shifted to examining whether there is a difference or an inter-relation between orality as textual system on the one hand and the conditions under which orality can become part of contemporary ideological practices on the other hand. Either way, the emphasis has shifted focus to uncovering the structure of the oral text, its relationship with social relations across communities, and to how political ideology also plays a role in the construction of oral texts. It is also in this context that the role of space is examined. In other words, the relationship

between orality, identity and the sense of the past is not self-evident; it has to be looked for in the complex relations between oral forms, social relations, ideology and geography. Nevertheless, what is notable is that different scholars would view this factor from different vantage points. For example, the folklorist Stuart Blackburn (Blackburn 2008), in his study of the Apatanis (the Apatanis mainly inhabit the central parts of Arunachal Pradesh in India), has demonstrated that oral forms (such as mythology and folktales) cannot be explained as unique and primordial productions of a given community. Stories or motifs that constitute such oralities are geographically distributed across communities, regions, or even globally. For example, myths such as the stories of the Sun and Moon, or tales of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine prevalent among the Apatanis are not only found across the 'extended eastern Himalayas',[3] but also globally. However, Blackburn also shows that at another level such regional or global elements would still need to undergo a process of interpretative appropriation at the local level so that the regional or global elements of such folklore would become meaningful at the local level. This diversity manifests itself in the different organisation of similar motifs across cultures. For example, the three basic motifs of the Sun-Moon myth (excessive heat of multiple suns and moons/ the shooting down of one or more of the suns and moons to cool the heat / mortality or death due to the shooting down of the sun and moon) are found to be differently distributed. Blackburn shows that while the first motif is globally found, the second motif is mostly found in central Arunachal Pradesh, upland Southeast Asia and south west China. The third motif is confined to central Arunachal Pradesh and Yunnan, the different combination and arrangement of these motifs being dependent on local mediation. In terms of the local mediation of Apatanis, Blackburn indicates that mythology among the Apatanis is mainly part of the (re)production and expression of social relations, organised across four categories: *tanii* (Apatanis themselves), *misan* (neighbouring communities, like the Nyishis), *manyang* (ceremonial friends), and *halyang* (the outsider). This would mean that the specific arrangement of motifs in Apatani myths is meaningful only when seen in terms of (re)production of such social relations. Similarly, in the case of the tale of the *Kokii Yamu* (Innocent Persecuted Heroine), the specificity of its meaning is not merely in the motifs per se (which is globally found) but in how the arrangement conceptualises and simultaneously reproduces the dynamics of social relations across categories.[4] Blackburn terms this process as being 'between culture and inside culture'. With regard to social relations, Blackburn's analysis is interesting, even though Blackburn himself does not really foreground the point. His analysis reveals that social relations are not merely about 'tribal' and the kinship-based organisation of society. When the fourfold classification (*tanii*, *misan*, *manyang* and *halyang*) that Apatanis practice is taken into account, kinship is hardly unimportant. Rather, the point is that neither social relations comprise of a closed structure, nor does kinship alone determine the nature of social relations. Instead, if social relations are understood in terms of the above-described fourfold classification, one can see how the Apatani social structure is dynamic, providing us clues regarding the nature of orality i.e., the oral text being between culture and inside culture. Blackburn indicates that the Apatani social categories of *tanii*, *misan*, *manyang* and *halyang* are abstractions and not fixed in practice. Under given conditions or situations/ events, who is seen as a component of a specific category can vary. This dynamic relation between abstraction and practice comprises what is socially remembered as the history of social relations, or a sense of the past. It is in such

[3] Blackburn's 'extended eastern Himalayas' comprises of eastern Himalayas, India-Burma border and upland Southeast Asia/ south west China.

[4] Versions of the Innocent Persecuted Heroine were collected from the Angami Nagas (the tale of Hunchibili by Hutton 1921: 280-282), the Sumi Nagas (the tale of Muchupile by Hutton 1921: 257-260) and the Assamese (the tale of Tejimola by J. Barooah 1915: 59-71) in the colonial period. However, unlike Blackburn's analysis of the tale of Kokii Yamu, these early collections did not analyse the problem of motifs and social relations that explain the nature and context of a particular version in the overall group of motifs.

processes that one would discover several configurations: motifs, events and memories that take the form of mythology. One such example in Blackburn's work that pertains to the myths is of the first colonial contact of 1897 (Blackburn 2008: 129-133). Blackburn argues that though orality, mythology and social relations are not the same, they are mutually bound in their meaning and hence dynamic, and not closed systems. If orality articulates as well as is part of social reproduction of the same process, oral forms become the signifiers of ethnic identity, i.e., orality acquires an idiomatic political value of being the signifier of a discrete political community that is marked off from others. Based on Blackburn's analysis, orality can be considered an idiom of social relations as well as an idiom in social relations. This possibility is already present in how orality and social relation are bound together in their meaning. But the politics of ethnic identity is not the same as traditional social categories. It is a field that has emerged through an encounter with the modern colonial and postcolonial state. In the same way, orality as an idiomatic signifier of ethnic identity is also an aspect that denotes the emergence of a new field of identity. In other words, the idiomatic political value of orality comes from a different field, namely the role of politics and the production of 'tribal' or ethnic identity through it;[5] and it is the need of that process to seek representation that now endows orality with idiomatic value, or hold within it the capacity to reference and come to mean an ethnic identity. In studies such as Blackburn's the departure from one of the basic premises of colonial anthropology constitutes a notable point that challenges the traditional notion of isolated, disconnected, and primordial communities as the bearers of pristine culture and its forms. Besides Blackburn, Tibetologist Toni Huber (Huber 1999) in his earlier studies on the eastern Himalayas, or anthropologist Marion Wettstein (Wettstein 2012: 213-238) with regard to the Nagas have also shown that to analyse orality as a primordial feature of a given community is to overlook how orality is part of negotiating diffusion, culture contact, and the actuality of exchange relations prevalent across communities. Recognising such negotiations, they argue, also analytically opens up orality to a process of time, and thereby enables researchers to identify its dynamism in social relations. As in Blackburn's work, Huber and Wettstein in their works also distinguish the idea of given and primordial oralities that are considered to constitute a unique representation of ethnic identities. The latter is a different field of modern politics that seeks symbols and markers for its expression. As evident, distinction needs to be drawn between orality and ideology, since ideology in terms of a political discourse of identity does not internally constitute orality, i.e., the production of an oral text. It is more a matter of orality becoming appropriated by ideology to represent identity.

However, there are a few other recent works which suggest that orality cannot be explained by separating it from ideology. In fact, it is through ideology itself that orality becomes explicable. For example, Mandy Sadan (Sadan 2013) in her historical cum anthropological work on the Singphos/ Kachins (stretching from the borders of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India, through northern-western Burma to the borders of Yunnan in China) have examined how spirit cults (*nat*s) that are orally expressed by possessing mediums, can mainly be explained as an ideological complex. Sadan here is referring to an interesting phenomenon. While the production of such spirit cults can be an expression of ideological agency, the location of the cults at the interstices of inter or intra-ethnic relations produce multiple ideological agencies out of its form and practice. One such case she examines is that of the *tawn nat* (chair or throne spirit). Sadan shows that while such *nat*s were part of the production of Burmese kingship as a pan-ethnic phenomenon in the 19th century, "Most of these *nat* had

[5] Blackburn (Blackburn 2003: 143-177) in his earlier studies on South India argues that the field of modern politics and nationalism is external to folklore. In his later studies of the Apatanis, his more nuanced position appears to be that modern politics is still to be conceived as a field external to folklore, but something that is able to produce a connection with folklore due to an already existing structural possibility of doing so that is ingrained within folklore.

biographies in which they died following some degree of encounter with Burmese kingship and, significantly, many were of non-Burman origin" (Ibid: 123). By *nats*, Sadan here refers to figures after whom (after their death) cults emerge. But through the agency of these spirit cults, non-Burman elements also become incorporated and rationalised into the pan-ethnic 'pretension' of Burmese kingship. The *tawn nat* cult too also pertains to an encounter between Tsumkha Duwa (an important Lahpai chief near Swegu, close to Yunnan) and King Mindon (1853-1878). Through the *tawn nat* cult, the Singpho chief Tsumkha Duwa could now be represented as one of the elements that comprised the pan-ethnic geopolitical body of King Mindon's kingship. In effect, this came to mean the Burmese 'national geopolitical body'. However, Sadan argues (Ibid: 127) that if a Singpho chief is a participant in the ritual narrative of the *nat* that acknowledges Mindon's kingship, that participation cannot be merely explained as "a sign that Jingphaw communities in this region had become integrated into the Burmese cosmological, cultural and political order." On the contrary, Sadan shows that while the ritual narrative acknowledge Mindon's kingship, it does not acknowledge Mindon's authority per se, or that the Singphos were in a tributary relationship with the Burmese king. This is because the motifs that constitute the ritual narrative, such as marriage and kinship, obligations of gift, lower ritual rank of the king as a wife-taker from the Singphos, or the king's ill-treatment of his Singpho wife Wa Htao Tsumkha Nang (in the ritual narrative, the *tawn nat* cult emerged in relation to Wa Htao Tsumkha Nang after her death), these various motifs were mainly about how the Singphos subverted their integration into Burmese cultural and political order through a witty re-interpretation of signs. Sadan's work exemplifies how ritual narratives such as of the *tawn nat* cult expresses two different ideological agencies. One, of Burmese (kingship) as a pan-ethnic ritual and political order and the other that critiques and subverts it. However, one may also argue another interesting point in this regard that Sadan does not foreground: why should the same motifs and the same ritual narrative serve two different ideological uses at the same time? The answer to this problem, one may argue, lies in the fact that the two orders, Burmese and Singpho, exist in an interrelationship with each other, even if this is a relation of contradiction. The meaning of the motif pattern thus lies is in its ability to articulate this relation of contradiction. This is a point not recognised by Sadan.

Nevertheless, approaches such as Sadan's are deeply nuanced and develop earlier discussed approaches that ontologically bind orality and social relations in terms of meaning. But what they do not look at is how, at given historical moments, such meanings become ideologically constituted, highlighting the role of ideology embedded in the production of meaningful orality. Therefore, what one might find in an oral form is also the construction of representation (on representation as construction, see Hall 1984: 3-17), even if these are figurative or encoded in nature. Returning to Sadan, there is also another level at which ritual narratives, such as those of *tawn nat* cult reconstitute a complex ideological interplay among two different classes of the Singphos themselves. Sadan shows how Tsumkha Duwa was a *gumsa* chief (i.e., a chieftain-based Singpho polity) in an area surrounded by *gumlao* rebellions, (i.e., popular Singpho rebellions against their chiefs, and chiefly authority since the mid-19th century due to various transregional and colonial factors). In other words, it is a ritual narrative about a *gumsa* chief but also the narrative about an area where the same chief is surrounded by the *gumlao* context of his times. This complexity, as Sadan argues, is expressed in the motif pattern as well as in the practices of the ritual narrative. The chief subverts the authority of the king, while in the process endowing himself with authority. In effect, the authority of the king is signified as a 'pretence', which the chief is able to cleverly expose through his alternative interpretation of signs and customs. However, at the same time, the motifs that are used in the ritual narrative to do so are nevertheless drawn from popular practices. The motifs reflect the Singpho commoners' way of life (such as, disposal of leaf platters, etc.), and does not necessarily concern chiefs and chiefly lineages. As a result, this signification of motifs also subverts the 'pretence' of authority invested in the *gumsa* chief. Sadan formulates the problem

conceptually as that of mimicry and alterity. Further, because the *tawn nat* is a spirit of food and stomach ailments, it has been one of the popular rituals of the Singphos to invoke the cult on occasions that entail shared food and eating. Ritual practices in relation to the *gumsa* chief have therefore been historically connected to *gumlao* egalitarianism. To reiterate the earlier comparison between Blackburn and Sadan, both argue how orality and social relations are ontologically bound together in their meaning. But for Blackburn, this condition of being bound in meaning embeds a possibility in orality to intervention and interpretation by politics of identity. For Sadan, the possibility itself exists in the first place because of the ideological embeddedness of orality. Therefore, if one views the matter through Sadan's framework, without taking into account the ideological embeddedness of orality, what enables the political use of orality remains inexplicable. Nevertheless, it is not clear from Sadan's analysis whether ideology is to be viewed as an originary moment in the production of orality.

Besides Sadan, there have also been a few other recent works which have highlighted the ideological basis of orality. For example, Arkotong Longkumer (Longkumer 2010), an anthropologist of religion, in his study of the Heraka religion among the Zeme Nagas (North Cachar Hills of Assam, India) shows how constructing new ritual meanings (such as, dealing with the 'renewal' of a village, or changing the *hezoa*: the ritual centre of village) play a crucial role in (re)producing a break between the present and the past of the Zemes. What one can find in Longkumer's work is that it is the ideological embeddedness of orality (rituals and worldview) that produces its capacity to both effect and express the change that a community has undergone. It is not a case of ascribing ideology to orality. As emerges from Longkumer's study, the community's sense of the past become analytically accessible to the researcher through its orality.

The Researcher and Oral Data

An interesting body of recent scholarship has emerged on borderlands that begins with the premise of a basic distinction between how people perceive and represent orality and how researchers handle that representation. In effect, the discussion hinges on the researcher's relation to a basic question: what is oral data? For example, in his study of the Dimasas (North Cachar Hills of Assam, India), anthropologist Phillipe Ramirez (Ramirez 2007: 91-107) points out that if one is trying to examine oral tradition, how people view it can be different from its underlying structural nature. For instance, Ramirez shows how *daikho* in Dimasa society is a ritual-religious complex with a territorial sense (i.e., a ritual arrangement of clan, area/ locality, and deity/ worship). However, when the Dimasas are asked about the *daikho*, there is no uniformity in the way the ritual elements are to be arranged. In other words, while the idea of *daikho* and its various constitutive elements can be configured in different arrangements, the arrangement itself could vary, with different combinations of the above elements depending on who is providing an account of it. This is because ritual, clan, locality, area, and worship do not exist or are not thought of in a neat, well-defined pre-given and ordered format. But such multiplicity in practice, Ramirez points out, cannot exist without the general principle or ideal of *daikho* as a ritual-religious complex with a territorial sense. After all, it is this ideal or norm which makes the actuality of practice a meaningful tradition. In the process, it provides the Dimasas their social structure, the concept of ancestry or time, and also the basis of their identity. It also means that *daikho* has to be approached both as a construction as well as a pre-given tradition at the same time. It is an interrelation between the two that explains what *daikho* is for Dimasa society, as well as what it can mean for the Dimasas in a given context. To put it another way, the unconscious is not cognitively represented in, or by consciousness, but it is in their interrelation that the structure as and in practice can be identified. What Ramirez tries to demonstrate is how people cognitively represent their actions and thoughts. But this alone does not necessarily explains what makes their actions and thoughts meaningful.

In the case of orality, the implication therefore is that when a researcher is approaching orality as data, a lot depends on the researcher's own conceptual framework about what that form is representing. The meaning of representation entailed in an oral form is not self-evident. In another work, Ramirez (Ramirez 2014) interestingly extends the above point to examine how people perceive and represent their reality, and how the researcher's abstraction of that process would lead to different interpretations vis-à-vis a particular type of borderland space. For example, in his study on the foothills between the Assam plains and the Meghalaya highland, Ramirez outlines how the myths of the Jayantias and the Tiwas (two ethnic groups) identify their ancestors as brothers. In fact, as Ramirez shows, brotherhood is a widely prevalent mythical motif across communities of the foothills that communities themselves attest to. However, a structural analysis of the motif expresses and reproduces something else, namely, a pattern of inter-ethnic social relations (to be seen in kinship or village organisation) that a particular form of space like the foothills, engenders. In short, though Ramirez does not formulate it thus, one may argue that the foothills engender a dialectical tension across ethnic identities: one's difference from the other is also due to one's mediation by the other. This dialectical tension then gets expressed through the brotherhood motif that distinguishes one group from the other while also tying them into brotherhood of lineage, with the different brothers under different series of events going and settling in different directions. The important point here is that this overall nature of the myth becomes explicable only through a conceptual framework (foothill space). This, moreover, depends on the researcher's point of analysis, and not on what myths communicate at face value, or on how myths are popularly perceived and represented. It is thus that the researcher makes the oral data meaningful.

In recent times, works on Mizo mythology (generally covering Mizoram in India and the Chin State of Burma) have engaged with the epistemic of oral data. For example, Joy L.K. Pachuau (Pachuau 2014) in her historical and anthropological work on the Mizos points to the production of Mizo as a political identity (re-imagining of the community through the concept of nationhood and Christianity) in the early 20th century. This reimagination impacts Mizo mythology too, seen mainly in the re-arrangement of the order of myths. For example, a set of mythical accounts are selected and rearranged in a particular sequence, with this new arrangement (the complex of *chhinlung* myth) providing its audience with a linear past of the Mizos. That is, the sequence of the myths allows for a construction of the history of origin and migration of the Mizos over the centuries. Notably, this sense of a historical past also makes it possible to construct the past of the Mizo nation. The myth complex has now become a traditional 'source' for the narrative history of the Mizo nation. Further, on the other hand, these myths that have found place in the arrangement also simultaneously correspond to Biblical myths. This correspondence in turn allows Christianity to shape the concept of nationhood. As Pachuau points out, these developments in the field of myths are connected to the arrival of print culture in society in the 1890s, made possible through the introduction of the Bible and Christianity. In other words, it is in the writing of orality, and not orality per se, that demonstrates the above arrangement and locates the place of religion in it. Pachuau shows that this arrangement of selected and sequenced accounts becomes meaningful for an account of Mizo origins and for their migration myths. Further, it is also through this arrangement that not only social and geographical diversity are now negotiated (such as, what constitutes agnatic, adoptive, or unrelated groups among the Mizos), but the negotiation itself that can now be plotted in time vis-à-vis the group's agnatic, adoptive, or unrelated character (i.e., to understand when given groups become agnatic, adoptive, or unrelated in the course of migrations). While such linear plotting of myths comprises the introduction of a new teleological re-structuring of the myths, it is also what allows myths to now be perceived as historical 'sources'. In this process, Pachuau's analysis can take one to an important conclusion. Namely, if the very character of oral data is inseparably tied to historical processes, then it is not necessarily possible to recover what is 'traditional' about myths from that body of

oral data, with 'traditional' here meaning cultural forms or practices that carry an essential character deemed inherent across time to a given community.

In a somewhat different line of argument, folklorist and literary scholar Margaret L. Pachuau (Pachuau 2018: 172-194) argues that such arrangements, as noted above, can also be examined in a different way. The interpretation of orality now exists as part of an entirely different medium in the Mizo culture, namely writing. It is through writing that the modernity of the interpretative act and that of the political community is established. The sense of modernity is important here as it is through this lens that the present is distinguished from 'primitive' past. Therefore, if orality is taken on board in the process of political community making, then it is through a logic of a sociality which is different from whatever tradition was earlier. As Pachuau shows, if orality finds a place in the act, it is nevertheless relegated to the periphery of modern sociality, and it is through this location of marginality that the modernity of the present is reinforced and reproduced. At the same time, orality is also transformed into a symbol or as an identity marker, rather than being the literary means or the articulation of an oral society. As symbol, orality now reinforces and reproduces the political community (i.e., ethnicity and nationhood). Reading Margaret L. Pachuau shows us that an expression of this complexity is the peculiar position that the idea of 'tribe' came to occupy in this regard. Tribe as an idea is dialectically positioned in a state of tension between a state of being that draws on orality and the past (through mythology) to produce the present, while at the same time, also peripheralizing the relevance of orality as symbolic of the present and its modern sociality, centred on the rationale of writing. Therefore, unlike in the case of Joy L.K. Pachuau's research, the problem that Margaret L. Pachuau engages with can be framed in the following manner: it is not whether oral data can (or cannot) provide the researcher access to the 'traditional'. The point is that oral data, when viewed thus, allows one to capture a cultural logic in the making of communities in an area constituted by a dialectical tension between the oral and the written.[6]

A Reconsideration for Future Research

In each of the preceding sections, a body of recent works has been discussed. Though the specific communities of the borderlands that these works have studied are different, it is possible to highlight certain general points. In the first section, the issue was whether or not, analytically speaking, the problem of ideology can be considered external to the oral field. In the second section, the issue was how to approach orality in terms of data, and what would analytically entail considering orality as beyond how it is perceived and represented by the communities themselves. As is evident, there is an interesting difference between the works reviewed in both the sections. In the first section, an underlying premise of the works focuses on the recovery and nature of consciousness to uncover the meaning of orality in the area under study. Even Blackburn's interpretation about the localisation of regional or global folk elements hinges on this premise. In the second section, the review has attempted to cover works that read orality as being beyond questions that revolve around the subject of consciousness. Nevertheless, there is one premise that still runs through both kinds of works, namely, the idea that there is a correspondence between orality and the context of their occurrence, which the researcher needs to identify. The question then is, is this premise of a correspondence necessarily always correct? For example, a genre of oral peasant ballads

[6] G. Kanato Chophy's work (Chophy 2019) on Sumi Nagas can be read as an interesting rejoinder. Chophy's analysis brings out the problem of existing dialectical tensions between the oral (pre-Christian) and the written (Christian-Biblical). But he argues that if the written is the norm in which the oral has to find its place and not the other way around, then it is also due to the presence of the oral in the written that the written gets interpreted in more than one way, thereby giving rise to sects among the Christian Sumi Nagas.

emerged in 19th century colonial Assam (*Barphukanar Geet*, *Moneeram Dewanar Geet*, *Doli Purana*) dealt with historical events or historical figures of the 19th century (Saikia 2012: 37-72, Baruah 2018: 195-216). A peculiarity of these ballads is that, while they portray the violent and disruptive aspects of colonialism, they nevertheless do not provide an ideological critique of colonialism. It is a peculiarity evident in all the ballads of this nineteenth-century genre in Assam. In this regard, a study of the ballads in question would show that its constitution was based on certain literary features, such as, formulaic language, terms used for social groups, agrarian imaginaries, styles of representing authority and other factors borrowed from pre-colonial genres. While features of pre-colonial genres lacked the capacity to deal with colonialism, the ideological contexts of pre-colonial genres were also different. As a result, one may argue, while its features allowed for the portrayal of violence and disruption to peasant life in general, they could not formulate that same condition ideologically, in order to critique colonialism. Their articulation was anachronistic to the general colonial condition.

The case of the ballads is interesting for two reasons. First, it highlights that dealing with orality requires researchers to deal with the specificity of oral form. The emergence of the ballads during the colonial period demonstrates how oral forms need not be deemed primordial. Rather, they are historical. At the same time, they are not a straightforward case that is ideologically constituted. Neither do they constitute a form that is appropriated or used to interpret, or become interpreted through a political field (identity discourse) external to itself. Second, the case of the ballads also highlight that the methodological shifts of recent times needs to take into account the possibility of discontinuous relations between the oral form and its context. In fact, the problem of discontinuous relations has not attracted enough attention with regard to the study of orality in the Northeast. The problem of discontinuous relations between the oral form and the context of its production is a pertinent question vis-à-vis uncovering the ontology of orality. If a text is not able to ideologically formulate on a condition even while it is dealing with it or being produced in it, then what is it that the text is speaking (cf. Macherey 1978)? For example, unlike the cases discussed in the previous two sections, there is little correspondence between the text and the context that it seeks to reflect. That is, a text produced in a context of peasant insurrection against colonialism (which was widespread in colonial Assam) does not ideologically contribute to the discourse of that context, even figuratively. But this in turn raises another question. Why should the peasant then return to such a form repeatedly (in different ballads) to deal with that context? In this regard, what we have is the following. The peasants articulate themselves through an oral form, but the textual features of the same form are from pre-colonial genres. In other words, the features are anachronistic to the colonial context. But in the process, something else is simultaneously taking place at the level of text. Namely, a particular and specific genre is getting produced through a series of opposite or inverse textual relations that include the breakdown of existing order despite the lack of its ideological critique, and the description of events but in figurative narrative (on opposite or inverse relations at the textual level [relations of contradictions], see Levi-Strauss 1955: 428-444). The series of opposite or inverse relations is actually both produced in, as well as is a sign of the discontinuity between an oral form and its context. However, once a form becomes possible through a discontinuous relations, different kinds of events or experiences can be accommodated in that form. Thus what gets produced in the process is an oral genre. But in all this, the fact of the discontinuity remains same, which is also the basis for the genre's persistence. When viewed thus, an important point that emerges about the meaning bearing capacity of orality that needs to be looked for in the discontinuous processes of its constitution. This would also mean that orality is not only about how peasant consciousness speaks; it is as much about how a genre speaks. In turn, one may find that questions of identity and sense of the past can have more complex relations with the oral form; and with regard to India-Burma borderlands, such an approach may provide

new understandings for the complexity of the oral field and its persistence as a significant site of identity, politics, violence and hope in the area.

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Book Review

Isabel Huacuja Alonso. (2023). *Radio for the Millions: Hindi-Urdu Broadcasting Across Borders* New York: Columbia University Press. Pp. 295. Price: $35. ISBN: 9780231206617

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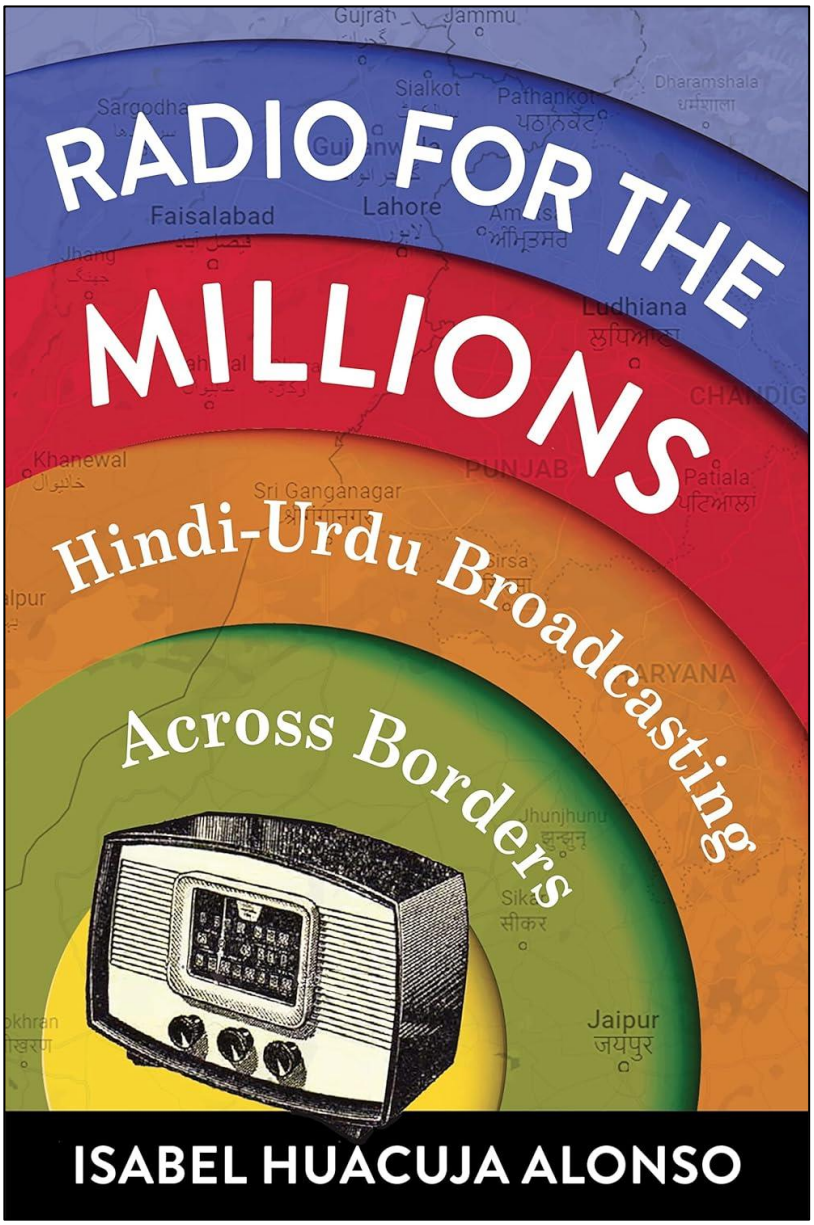

Image 7.1: Jacket Cover. (Source: Columbia University Press / public domain).

Radio for the Millions is not only a book that captures the history *of* radio as a medium in South Asia, it successfully shows how radio history is intricately entangled *with*, in fact how it aurally and affectively shaped, the history of the subcontinent (from colonial to postcolonial times). To put it in the author's own words "[…] the study of media forms, and in particular sound media, is fundamental to the study of history– […] South Asian radio history *is* South Asian history" (p. 203). The author illustrates this convincingly by showing how tracing the history of the medium in South Asia inevitably leads to rethinking several temporal and spatial divides which are otherwise usually treated as 'obvious' and pre-given in the history of the subcontinent. One such temporal divide, which does not govern the structuring logic of this book, is Partition and the simultaneous independence of the states of India and Pakistan. The author successfully shows (Chapters 1 and 2) how radio's arrival, presence,

eventual persistence and popularity was a journey that began in the 1930s and spilled over right into the 1980s. Similarly, spatial divides (territorial borders) informed by the realities of Partition, new nation-states and their competing nation-building projects, in fact could not always be maintained on airwaves, which brought together listeners *across* borders. Both these divides are never treated as given in the book – the author goes into specific moments when the divides were actively produced and exacerbated via radio (for e.g. war time coverage on Radio Pakistan in 1965) or when they were overcome also through radio (for e.g. All India Radio's Urdu Service which became a platform for exchange for both Indian and Pakistani audiences).

Throughout the book, the author relies on 'radio resonance' as a sensitizing lens to elucidate how, even in the absence of archival sources, radio listening as a practice has left very concrete traces which can help reconstruct its histories. This approach works successfully and especially for the first two chapters, which deal with Axis radio broadcasts and those by the Indian revolutionary and Axis-sympathizer Subhas Chandra Bose (from Germany and later Singapore) on his radio station called *Azad Hind* (Free India). There is no way to assess statistics related to the actual number of listeners, for e.g. those not registered (and paying a license fee) or how many listened collectively often relying on one set owned by one person in a group. There are also no concrete statistics related to how many listeners tuned into axis broadcasts or Bose's programmes. Nonetheless, the author shows how radio's formative presence and its steady popularity as a medium can be gauged through its resonance. For e.g. this is evident from magazine advertisements that increasingly showed new radio models launched by companies hinting at the technology's increasing popularity; or from 'rumour' and 'gossip' which made people talk about what was being broadcast on radio; or in the anxiety-effects that Axis radio broadcasts had on the colonial administration, pushing it to also revise its strategies and respond to Axis propaganda. While 'resonance' continues to inform the author's take on tracing how radio permeated people's everyday lives for decades to come, and is a concept she often refers to throughout the six chapters, it is perhaps most befitting and most accessible in this first section. The two chapters concentrate on the genre of news and how airwaves became a site for anticolonial agitation for Bose, fascist and anti-Semitic propaganda for Axis broadcasters from Germany, Italy and Japan, and how tracing the histories of both makes Bose's, often de-emphasized ties to sponsoring Nazi/fascist regimes apparent.

Chapters 3 and 4 transition into the second genre of focus – music. These are brilliantly written chapters which speak rather well to each other. While chapter 3 traces how independent India's presiding Information and Broadcasting minister B.V. Keskar attempted to create "citizen-listeners" (p. 86), pushing to train and teach Indian audiences to become sensitive to Hindustani and Carnatic classical music, chapter 4 traces how Keskar's ban on Hindi film music on All India Radio backfired and contributed to the simultaneous success of Radio Ceylon, which ran several film music programmes. Keskar's term and his pedagogic attempts throughout 1952-62 at creating the category of 'Indian' citizen listeners, who valued India's (understood mainly as Hindu) rich musical heritage, was not free of anti-Muslim and casteist politics. Chapter 4 historically sketches the biography of Radio Ceylon, which capitalized on the possibility to transmit Hindi film songs to eager Indian and Pakistani audiences through the airwaves. The author also interviewed the station's most popular broadcaster Ameen Sayani, who hosted the *Binaca Geetmala* show and was a radio celebrity across the India-Pakistan border. This is a remarkable feat, not only because such interviews are a way to capture and chronicle Sayani's radio aura and his own narrative of his fame and popularity among listeners. It is also valuable because it is perhaps one of the last interviews given by the broadcaster

before his recent demise in 2024. The author shows how the format of Radio Ceylon's music programmes made it exceptionally popular because listeners did not just listen in, but also felt that they were participants, part of the shows' aural atmospheres. One historical detail, which is certainly not insignificant and runs as a common thread from the first two chapters into the next four, is the broadcasters' linguistic choice and usage of Hindustani (over Hindi or Urdu) and how this produced both aural and textual liberties for listeners across territorial (national borders between North India and Pakistan) and linguistic divides, who could interact with broadcasters in Hindustani (in some cases, as seen in the last chapter, via *both* the Devanagari and Nastaliq scripts).

Chapters 5 and 6 draw attention to the genre of radio drama, focusing on two different kinds of affective charges that radio broadcasts produced – war time patriotism embedded in sentiments of hate towards the 'other' nation and nostalgia for a time that existed prior to Partition and the creation of two nation-states. The author intelligently weaves these two contrasting emotional repertoires together, also hinting at their fragility especially during the tense years after 1965 up to 1971, which witnessed wars and the creation of the state of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan). While chapter 5 exclusively looks into radio dramas and songs which were produced by Radio Pakistan for a brief, but intensely 'radio' active, 17 days for the listening publics of Pakistan, chapter 6 focuses on All India Radio's Urdu service which was especially designed for West Pakistan's Urdu speaking audiences shortly after the 1965 war. We are thus introduced to how national pride, support for the nation's war efforts, and anti-Indian sentiments were produced round-the-clock by radio. Chapter 6 fantastically elucidates how AIR's Urdu service not only became popular among West Pakistan's Urdu speaking audiences, but also among several listeners across North India. It became a platform for listeners with pre-Partition pasts on the 'other' side of the border to share and exchange pre-partition memories with each other. The chapter once again establishes the transnational or translocal nature of radio reception pasts despite broadcasting stations being embedded in the logic of nation-states and separated by territorial divides.

Radio for the Millions is recommended reading for historians and anthropologists of South Asia. It is also an instructive read for scholars from media studies (radio studies, sound studies, reception studies, fan studies, etc.), especially those who have diverted their gaze beyond Euro-America to colonial and postcolonial contexts in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The author cannot be commended enough for being one of the few scholars who has extensively explored archival sources as well as interviewed interlocutors *across* the territorial divide of India and Pakistan. In doing so, she certainly brings a sense of contentedness to all fellow South Asianists, who come from either of the two countries and are usually barred from direct access to both archives and interlocutors from the 'other' side.

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Book Review

Anjali Arondekar. (2023). *Abundance: Sexuality's History*. Durham: Duke University Press. Pp. 166. Price: €26.15. ISBN 978148019909.

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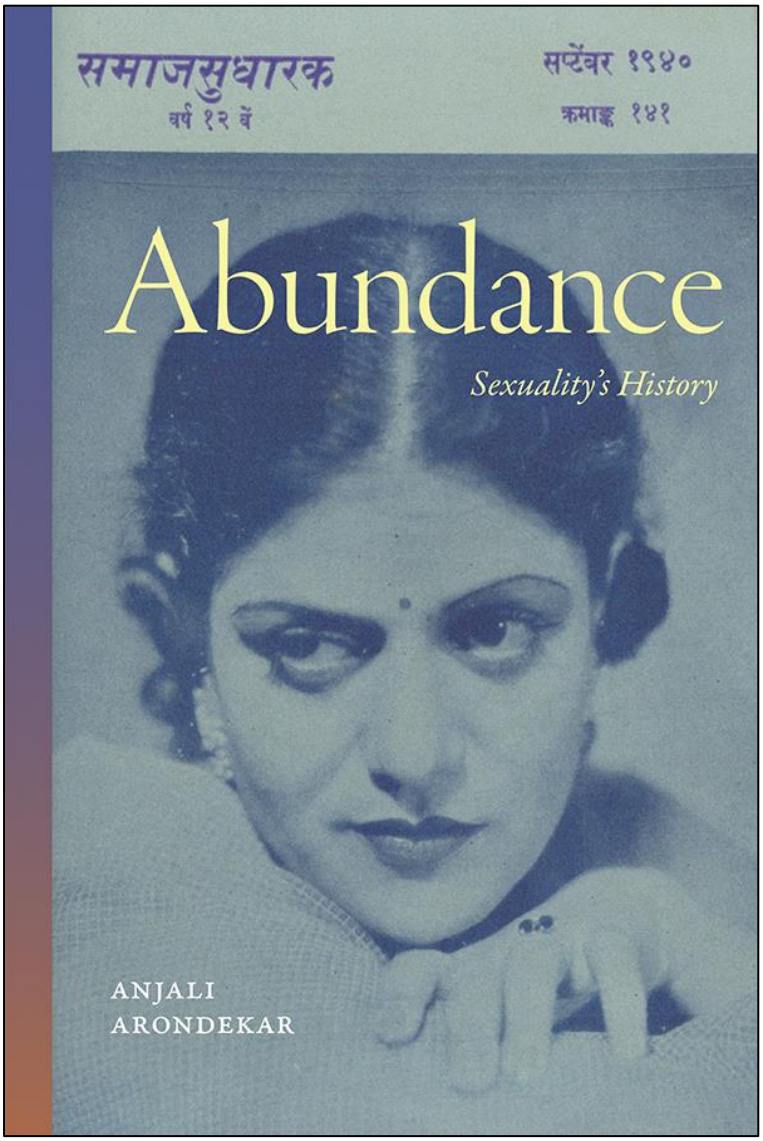

Image 8.1: Jacket Cover. The cover page of *Samaj Sudharak*, January 1933. Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archive, Mumbai India. (Source: Duke University Press / public domain).

Arondekar uses 'abundance' as a concept and metaphor in her ground-breaking new book titled *Abundance: Sexuality's History* that in her words is "a messier experiment, an open-ended inquiry that travels between a difficult present and an unfinished past, a reeling spiral of flight and return, approaching histories of sexualities aslant" (p. 3). In terms of both theory and method, Arondekar focuses on the plethora of sources on the sexual history of *devadasi*s in Western India, referred to as artists (*kalavant* or *kalavantin*). Arondekar's book is a critique of a historiographical pattern that is recuperative and liberatory, that harbours elitist biases of seeking to discover loss, where sexuality is the Other, divested from the continuous historical presence of subaltern minorities and their archive on sexuality. The history of sexuality of subaltern groups inhabits asymmetrical relations with the western academic and historical habitus where it loses legibility for not needing to be 'saved'. In search of loss that needs saviours, liberatory and recuperative historiography thus endorses hegemonic evidentiary regimes that elide the presence of subaltern abundance, fixating instead on sexuality within the "wider historical structures of vulnerability, damage, and loss" (ibid.). Identifying this historiographical trend as a form of hubris, Arondekar argues that minorities struggle additionally, not only with caste oppression, but with evidentiary genres that serve to obliterate and devalue their presence in archives owned by communities outside official and state-sanctioned 'endangered' collections. Reading sex as abundant is enriched (or complicated)

here through a geopolitics that is incommensurable with the historical value of the archive in relation to the West. Much of the archive on sexuality that is full of "the region's myriad politics, theoretical nuance, and multilingual aesthetics" (p. 5) becomes illegible within western historical traditions. The archive Arondekar explores in this book, that she characterises as abundant, belongs to the Gomantak Maratha Samaj (henceforth, Samaj) in Mumbai. It is a prominent historical collection of materials from the lower-caste *devadasi*s of Western India (Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka) located historically between the colonial Portuguese and the British. Overflowing with materials that continue to be collected, the archive is neither endangered and thus not digitized, as the community—prominent, and affluent members of society today—"cannot prove the exchange value of caste and sex" (p. 10). They are not 'discoverable' by historians since they are present everywhere. Thus, they are not considered historically important enough by historians wanting to save and liberate them. Because of its abundance and consequent unimportance, Arondekar argues that the Samaj's archives becomes seen as errant materiality (p. 8), situated in an uncertain domain where evidentiary regimes transact power with the mainstream.

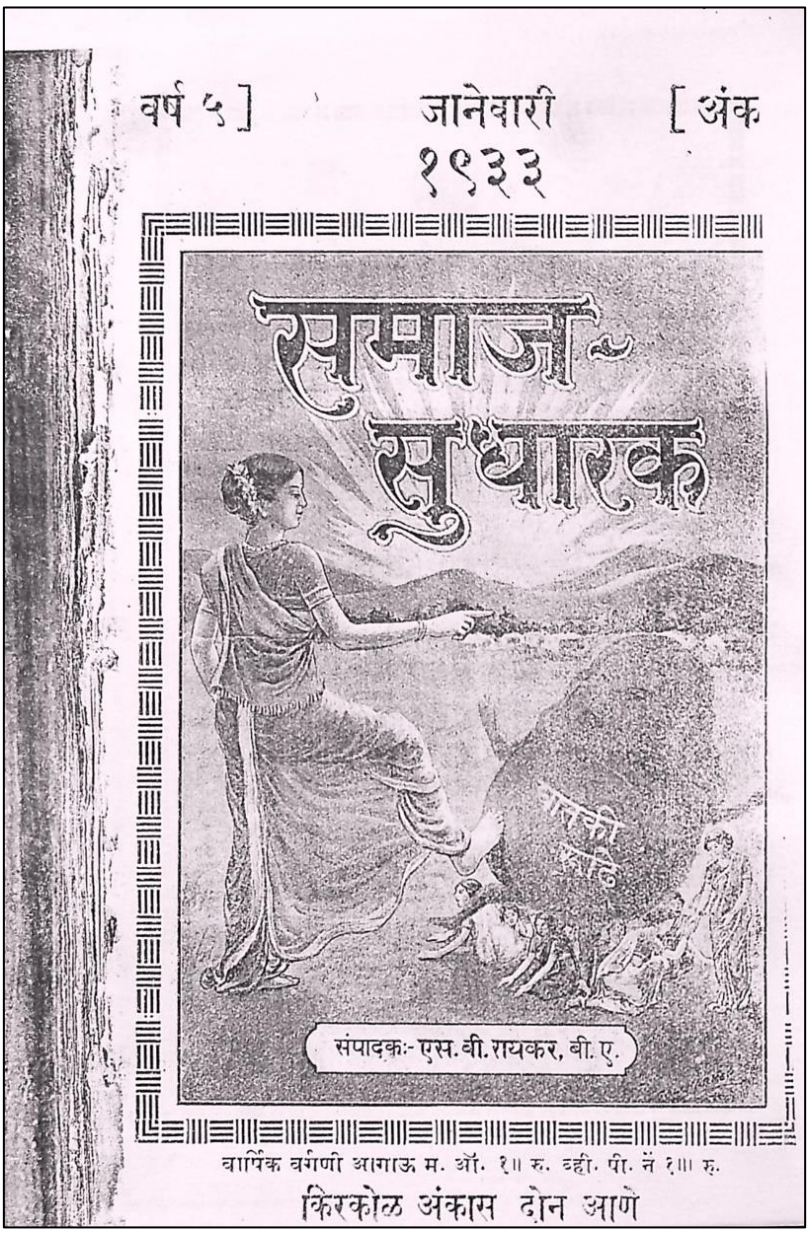

Image 8.2*:* The cover page of *Samaj Sudharak*, January 1933. Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archive, Mumbai India. (Source: author).

As Arondekar describes it (*Introduction: Make. Believe. Sexuality's Subjects*), Samaj members are a *devadasi* diaspora of artists and trained musicians (*kalavant*s) who have existed for more than two centuries between the colonial Portuguese and the British in Western India. Referred to at times as 'Dancing Girls' in Catholic Goan sources, they are denigrated as lapsed 'high-caste maidens'. On the other hand, *kalavant*s hardly gain any dignity from being placed with Hindus, given the history of caste atrocities against them by Hindus and other local elites. The restitution of the *kalavant*s within genealogies of caste and labour in Western India that had Saraswat Brahmins patronise them, demonstrates their longer history of caste exploitation and oppression. The men and women of the *kalavant* community laboured on Saraswat lands, and at the same time, they existed outside the reified category of traditional temple *devadasi*s of South India. The

Samaj is an OBC (Other Backward Caste) community in Goa and Maharashtra today that continues to prosper, its archive copious and growing amidst the lament of the erased *devadasi*s of India. Samaj members cannot be identified as 'prostitutes': "Rather, these *devadasi*s were mostly female singers, classically trained, placed through ceremonies like *hath-lavne* (touching hands) into companionate structures with both men and women" (p. 14). They were exempted from anti-prostitution laws under the Portuguese and British as they "remained in structures of serial monogamy, supported by *yajeman*s, both male and female, who functioned as patrons and partners through the life of the Samaj subject" (ibid.). Many Samaj members, especially on the Goan side, also had gender neutral names that made property inheritance from *yajeman* partners less contentious, even as many, after the passage of the anti-*devadasi* acts, migrated to Mumbai for work in the Hindi film industry (including the famed Mangeshkar sisters—Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle). The Samaj archive, consisting of multiple genres and vernacular registers (Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese) are replete with recordings of public vocal musical performances that are widely available and distributed, and yet the information about members elide their attachment to a history of sexuality—the history of caste and sexual labour to Brahmin *yajeman*s.

This abundance of sexuality's history that prospers under the *Savarna* radar of expectation is marked by its reduced transactional power. This reduced power then discursively produces the Samaj archive as unspectacular and uninteresting as its materials do not ascribe to the need among historians for 'veracity', and instead consist of art, mostly fiction, that Arondekar calls "the production of foundational fiction…that take centre stage in the Samaj's self-fashioning project…rerouting the demand for archival presence, from conventional evidentiary forms to more imaginative modes of representation" (p. 16). These imaginative writings appear in the Samaj journal, the *Samaj Sudharak* (1929 -), "encompassing issues such as education, marriage, devadasi reform, the perils of prostitution, caste shame, travel, contraception, sports, and even the evils of gossip" (ibid.). Arondekar explains academic disinterest in the Samaj archive by placing it within the heuristic frame of Dalit Studies that battles historiographical conformity on the one hand, and on the other, through its rich traditions of orality and vernacularity, finds itself situated at the cusp of mainstream historiographical interest. While the theme of loss in Dalit studies is associated with Brahminical oppression, this loss does not allow Dalit history to be conveniently assembled within dominant, anticolonial, Hindu nationalist arguments. Similarly, the Samaj's archival abundance does not allow it to be yoked to the nationalist, missionary cause of improvement and education. Instead, the Samaj's archival abundance needs to be considered a form of 'historical realism' "that engages the living present, provincializing, as it were, the dead language of lost records and archives" (p.21), while embracing "joyful lineages of possibility and freedom" (p. 22).

The first chapter (*In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Archives*) presents readers with the destabilisation of historical truths in the imaginative writings of Samaj archives that is politically motivated and does not claim historical veracity. Its abundant ecosystem of imaginative genres instead highlights the Samaj's relationship to the past. Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar's biography, for example, who as the son of a *kalavantin* narratively staged a Saraswat Brahmin attack on the *devadasi* community of village Paigan in 1921 did so as "a strategic drama, directed precisely to protect and advance the interest of kalavantins" (p. 40). This narrative moreover had its desired effect as the Brahmins were admonished and "a school is also established for the kalavantin community in Paigan (through the support of the Portuguese state) that exists to this day" (p. 41). No archival record of the attack exists in other Portuguese records and in the subsequent part of the biography, Paigankar admits to narratively staging the attack towards political ends. The Samaj archive has other abundances: minutes of official meetings that see *kalavant*s depend on the Portuguese and their refusal to join the liberation struggle. Essays in the Samaj journal, the *Samaj Sudharak* (1929 -), though mostly anonymous, cover

diverse issues exhorting caste members "to set aside their moral discomfort with their mothers' professions (as devadasis) and embrace instead the legacies of art and affect that found such lineages of sexuality" (p. 46). Early issues of the *Sudharak* (image 8.2) contain short stories, accompanied by images (image 8.1) that emphasise the respectability of art for having sustained the community. The 'lost letter' genre in the *Sudharak* muses on topics that discuss sexuality, gender roles, caste, and class formation.

The second chapter (*A History I Am Not Writing: Sexuality's Exemplarity*) explores how the Samaj archives can be read against the normativity of archival expectations, especially as an archive of sexuality, where instead of reading it as an archive of loss that performs abundance as a cache for the future, can be seen from the perspective of a strong discursive presence. Here Arondekar suggests 'timepass' as a heuristic description when approaching archival exemplars that refer to *kalavantin*s. For instance, in a public meeting at Girgaum (Bombay) in 1911, taxpayers complained of the presence of 'evil' women in their area who loitered around the main roads, thoroughfares, and occupied 'respectable' quarters. The secretary to the government however took note of the fact that these 'evil' women were hardly 'common prostitutes'; they were kept mistresses, the residences they occupied financially sustained by taxpaying members who were responsible for the moral decline of their own localities. Though these 'evil ladies' were in monogamous relationships with taxpaying partners, they were considered a threat to conjugality. Their existence was devalued through the heuristics of 'timepass' that described their artistic activities (*kala*): "Here the evil of the ladies shifts from the corruptions of sex to the debasement of kala (art), a shift that needs to be rerouted (and stabilized) through a more heteronormative marriage economy" (p. 73). Art and *kala* thus needed to be increasingly cultivated by middle-class heteronormative ladies to keep out the evil ladies and protect conjugality. Writings from early Bombay regularly express shock that these ladies (the 'Bombay Dancing Girls') can be so monied, given their perplexing backgrounds as both Hindu and Muslim and as migrants from Goa. This perplexity was added to by the legal petitions by *kalavantin*s to the British state, demanding maintenance from the families of dead patrons or *yajeman*s. This generated further debates on the legal nature of 'true companionship' (p. 71). Indeed, the culture of petitions in Bombay mobilised Samaj members to attain success: form groups, buy prime property in Bombay, and seek upwardly mobile professional positions in Bombay's emerging entertainment industries.

Arondekar introduces us to how geopolitics played an important role for *kalavant*s at the cusp of Indian independence in chapter 3 (*Itinerant Sex: Geopolitics as Critique*) that shifts our historical orientation to how traveling *kalavantin*s located between Portuguese Goa (decolonial in the Latin American Studies sense) and British India (postcolonial in the South Asian Studies sense) were marked by their detachment—non-contribution to resistance movements outside their local contexts. This intersectionality made them illegible to the western gaze, and Samaj members were hardly ignorant of this conundrum either. Arondekar cites B.D. Satoshkar's letter in the *Sudharak*'s September 1947 issue that warns Goans about having to make a choice between India (Maharashtra and Karnataka) or Pakistan where they ran the danger of being seen as dangerous outsiders and vassals of the Portuguese state. The other option was to remain as lower-caste *devadasis* in an independent but Brahmin Goa. "Last but not least, there is always the option of leaving Goa and embracing the (false) promise of Portuguese citizenship in foreign lands, even as such fidelity demands a painful abdication of culture and language, and their histories of sexuality" (p. 91). The importance of geopolitics for a history of sexuality that describes *kalavant*s thus methodologically reiterates a diversity that has the potential to craft south-south transnational networks to generate robust "place-bound ontologies, epistemologies, and technologies" (p. 93). Here, the Samaj's sexuality or *kala* "forges a historiographical lexicon in which genealogies of the past and future merge into a pragmatic poetics that reads geopolitics anew," wherein the Samaj "strategically mobilizes the

politics, desires, and identities made possible by the reach of geopolitics" (p. 97). The upward mobilisation of the Samaj that internalised this geopolitics is exemplified by the lower-caste democratic revolution of Goa after 1961 and the rise of Samaj member Dayanand Bandodkar (BSP—Bahujan Samaj Party) as a leader, who as a trader, used the Samaj's lineage of sexuality, kinship, and geopolitics to enable his own business success in South Asia (p. 96):

> The Gomantak Maratha Samaj, our geo-history here, is neither familiar nor identitarian nor salvageable. It is more a sprawling, geo-epistemology (here and there) that animates the spaces we seek to occupy. It is knowledge less through heroic exemplars—however moving or nimbly organized—than within archival economies that are restless, experimental, and pragmatic, aimed more at the unravelling of space and time. Itinerant sex as heuristic summons attentiveness to places that are ikde aani tikde (here and there), inherently nonrecuperative, not discovered (again). To be ikde aani tikde, as we have seen through the Samaj's history of sexuality, is to focus more on the analytical and political itineraries historical methods follow, and the lessons of geopolitics they bypass or leave behind.

The fourth and final chapter is a postscript or Coda (*I Am not Your Data: Caste, Sexuality, Protest*), providing additional examples of abundance from postcolonial India that cannot be read through the lens of either recuperation or evidentiary genres. Arondekar's analytical turn to 'abundance' demonstrates a shift from the usual liberatory mode of writing the histories of sexuality, to a mode of writing the present that is continuous and "without return or the fear of loss" (p. 25). Moving to the other cases, Arondekar describes how the anti-CAA protests in India were aimed at dismantling evidentiary regimes that demanded paper-work measured against the legal and human rights of minoritised subjects. She moves poignantly to virtual family communications between herself, her partner Lucy, and her mother (Aai) during the pandemic, a condition that again required evidentiary papers (passports and visas) and that contributed to the heartbreak of physical separation (p. 124). The *Acknowledgements* section, coupled with the first two sections of *Primary Sources* (*Call Me Rama*) and (*Only You*) are even more poignant. Arondekar describes drawing her inspiration to approach the Gomantak Maratha Samaj archive (the archive of her own community) from her parents. Encountering a letter by her father (Baba and/ or Rama) in the *Sudharak*'s July 1949 issue, she finds him "excoriating Brahmin fathers and patrons and calling for an end to the biological determinism of blood relationships" (p. 135). "Reading Baba amid the pages of our Samaj archives has meant finally saying yes to Rama. It has meant speaking with, and to, a parent who forged an extraordinary life, despite, or because of, the damning calculus of caste, class, and sexuality" (p. 136). Arondekar ends the book by writing an emotional ode to her mother who suffers from dementia, based on a photograph from 1957: "Aai's photograph summons that history of abundance, asking not to be restored to memory but to be set adrift on a voyage of identifications. Perhaps such abundance leaves us inarticulate; perhaps we are daunted by the weight of its promise" (p. 137).

Abundance is a deeply powerful book. Drawn by the magnetic force of Arondekar's words, I have never quoted verbatim in a review as extensively, as I have done in this case. *Abundance* is also poignant, necessarily personal-political in the feminist sense, and hence, inspiring. It provides a significant point of learning for many of us struggling scholars of colour in the Western academy who have never dared to write the incommensurable and illegible—errant materialities that subvert epistemic categories about South Asia that Western academy generates for itself—couched as it being authored for and by us. Many of us do not dare to write histories that are not discoverable, histories of ourselves, because of our seemingly omnipresent Otherness that has become ubiquitous. The regular shock expressed at how

affluent or educated we are, or our grandmothers were before us, is familiar; it made me smile. Our 'discoverability' is weighed against the hubris of our 'discoverers'. Our ubiquitousness and resistance to being discovered, daring to claim that we are as relatively 'unmarked' as our discoverers are, invites retribution—the label of boringly different—the demand that we compete for affluence. Being boringly different obliterates our diversity, our different histories of the continuous present, our proliferating relationships across groups and regions, our secret loves, our hidden shames. Many of us who, for the sake of being accepted as unmarked, have lived with being uninteresting, hiding our difference under identities that serve to place us within legible genealogies, have forgotten our discomfort, our awkwardness. We have compromised.

The tussle for South Asian South Asianists lies in the conundrums surrounding writing ourselves—selves that are unspectacular but all over the place—as we consider writing anew and differently about a resistant-to-discovery modern South Asia. Reading *Abundance*, parts of it for the second or third time, and marvelling at the courage of the book, I caught myself wondering whether the tragedy lies elsewhere (not that there has to be a tragedy every time). In her reiteration of there being no loss and no absence and no recuperation required for the *kalavant*s and *kalavantin*s of Western India, *Abundance* exposes our own awkwardness about our ordinary South Asian selves in the West that exists between ubiquitousness and Otherness. How do we write ourselves, even as we continue to be ourselves. This methodological difficulty generates a loss that *Abundance*'s readers confront. Readers understand at their very cores, the exhaustion inherent in constantly reinventing Indian history, making it discoverable, fundable, publishable, and deliverable in Western classrooms—a sleuth-self pushed to repeatedly jump the final hoop towards financial security and dignity. The liberation here is not in allowing ourselves to metamorphosise into the data bringers of the West—insiders who jump into dangerous pools to fish out the treasure lying hidden underneath. The liberation lies in being ourselves as powerfully as we can, at the expense of being deliciously boring. This book shouts out at us, excoriating us like Arondekar's Baba (or Rama) would, to make relationships out of choice that are not dominated by what the hegemonic system gives us, whether through blood, or through other equally binding lineages. In its call to us, asking us to rise to the unspectacular, *Abundance* is also deeply political, perhaps as political as Paigankar's staged narrative attack against the *devadasis* by the Saraswat Brahmins of Paigan, written to a politically activist end in 1921.

Not only is the book important for undergraduates, postgraduates, and researchers on gender, sexuality, caste, historiography, archival studies and methods, Western India, and South Asia that is characterised by multiple and intersecting geopolitical colonial histories, this book is mostly important for South Asian readers. *Abundance* will speak differently to each South Asian reader, inviting them to introspect on their locus as co-producers of evidentiary regimes. But not to make a mistake here, *Abundance* does not judge its readers. It is equally unproblematic to become like Dayanand Bandekar who used the ordinary lineages available to him, to enable his own success.

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Book Review

Chandra Mallampalli. (2023). *South Asia's Christians: Between Hindu and Muslim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xvi+368. Price: $29.95. ISBN: 9780190608903

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Chandra Mallampalli's *South Asia's Christians* provides a concise and insightful overview of nearly 2 millennia of history of Christianity in South Asia. It focuses primarily on India, without neglecting the trajectories of Christian communities of different denominations in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. The book thus covers a vast geography and chronology to provide students and specialists alike with reliable information, astute interpretations, and a thoughtful genealogy of the present of Christianity in this part of the world. *South Asia's Christians* is also the first volume of the Oxford Studies in World Christianity, and includes an introduction to the series written by its first editor (pp. xi-xiv), the late Lamin Sanneh. Mallampalli engages with the paradigm of world Christianity advanced by Sanneh in an open and critical way. He recognizes that, in the South Asian context, the focus on translation/ translatability and the agency of local converts can be particularly helpful in countering the Hindutva rhetoric of converts as passive recipients of favours that lead them to choose Christianity and abandon their ancestral faith (p. 14). At the same time, he sees the need to articulate the importance of global (institutional, Western-oriented) and local dimensions behind the spread of Christianity in South Asia as well (p. 14). He also emphasizes the non-obvious nature of the *local*: South Asian culture and society, in particular, diverse, multi-layered, and segregated across caste lines (p. 15).

After offering the reader a balanced overview of the debates on world Christianity, Mallampalli opts for a holistic approach, partly inspired by Koschorke's polycentrism (p. 16). The book is further dedicated to Eric Frykenberg, the great historian of Protestant Christianity in colonial India and the author of another recent history of Christianity in South Asia (2008). Mallampalli's synthesis differs from Frykenberg's work, which is more encyclopaedic in nature, by its tight narrative, which revolves around 2 specific lenses of interpretation. The first is the importance of the plural religious context for understanding the trajectories of Christianity in South Asia. As the book's subtitle announces, and as the various chapters of the book articulate, South Asian Christian identities are better understood by locating them between Hinduism and Islam. The second thread running through the book is a nuanced analysis of conversion, taken seriously as an intimate as well as a social and political choice, along the lines of the classic work by Gauri Viswanathan (1998). This second thread, related to reasons articulated in the introduction about why South Asian Christianity is an important phenomenon and object of study, is particularly evident in the various subsequent chapters, as we will see in a moment. First, Mallampalli argues that the existence of Christian communities in India from the precolonial period demonstrates the long history of South Asia's connections with the wider Indian Ocean world. Second, Christians contributed to the modern development of India's long-standing forms of public debate and controversy (p. 11). For South India, a similar argument has been made by the late anthropologist Bernard Bate (2021: 20-23). Finally, and perhaps more importantly, while Christians have participated in the constitution of the Indian national identity and the articulation of nationalism and religion, they have also been cast as the 'other' against which national discourses has been constituted. Unlike Islam, Christianity has often not been

seen as a local religion by Indian nationalists, beginning with Gandhi. Thus the study of South Asian Christians compels us to examine the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion at work in the historical and contemporary process of identity-making.

After a short but dense introduction, the book is divided into 9 chapters, roughly chronologically arranged. The first 3 chapters focus on the precolonial period, with a fourth thematic chapter on the early encounters between Europeans and South Asian religions. This is followed by 5 chapters focusing on the colonial and postcolonial periods. However, and this is one of the strengths of the book, Mallampalli is never afraid to explore the links between past and present and the chains of causality that link precolonial and contemporary Indian history. The first chapter begins with the oldest Christian community in South Asia, the Syrian Christians or St. Thomas Christians of Kerala, whose origins, according to both local and Western traditions, date back to the time of the Apostle Thomas. Mallampalli analyses the content of the apocryphal work known as *The Acts of Thomas* (pp. 19-24), showing its interest as well as the difficulties in accepting it as a historical narrative. However, he doesn't mention the most important available documents for the history of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala outside of the oral tradition, namely the Kollam Tarisappalli copper plates (9th century), which may contain mention of an earlier set of Thomas of Cana copper plates (Perczel 2006, Devadevan 2020). More generally, in this chapter, as in all the chapters on precolonial history, one rarely gets a sense of the available sources and thus of the difficulties inherent in studying these periods of Christian presence in South Asia. Still, this chapter is important in the economy of Mallampalli's book because it foregrounds the presence of non-European Christianity in India. It also introduces the issue of caste at the outset and outlines its importance for understanding Christian trajectories in India by exploring how Thomas Christians were assimilated into the elite circles of Kerala, thus providing scholarship with a model of a high-caste Christian group.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of the early Catholic presence on the subcontinent in 2 very different settings, the Mughal court of Emperor Akbar and rural South India. In analysing the Jesuit mission at Akbar's court, Mallampalli stands at the intersection of religion, diplomacy, and conversion to explore the relationship between Portuguese colonial power and the Islamic Mughal Empire. He emphasizes the relative marginality of Portuguese-sponsored missionaries in the world of 17th-century northern India, as well as the impossibility of an encounter between Akbar's inclusive views of religion and the Jesuits' exclusive views (p. 56, p. 61). Chapter 3 deals with the Jesuit missions in southern India and the strategy of social and cultural adaptation they employed there. Mallampalli draws on the work of Susan Bayly (1989) and Ines Županov (1999), who each describe from their own perspectives – historical anthropology of South India and mission history, respectively – how such Jesuit strategies of accommodation went hand in hand with forms of religious encounter and even syncretism. Mallampalli offers a refreshing and persuasive view on such encounters, well summed up in the final sentences of this chapter: "Often, superficial similarity in religious practice is accompanied by contestation over power, authority, doctrine, and sacred space. If accommodation is a fact of history, so are assertions of difference" (p. 88). Still, being far from his area of expertise, these chapters rely on existing scholarship. The biases of Mallampalli's anglophone references explain the gaps in his bibliography on Indian Catholicism, with works by towering 20th-century Jesuit scholars – Léon Besse, Georg Schurhammer, Joseph Wicki, Savarimuthu Rajamanickam – being absent. Portuguese historiography is also absent, especially Ângela Barreto Xavier's important oeuvre on conversion in Goa.

Chapter 4 similarly provides readers with an overview of early modern European understanding of the plural context of South Asia and the Christian presence alongside Hindus and Muslims. It shows the role of missionaries in the (pre)history of Orientalism, and how the image of

India in-the-making helped to shape the place of Christianity within it. This chapter successfully crosses the confessional (Catholic-Protestant) divide; however, Barreto Xavier and Županov's *Catholic Orientalism* (2015) could have offered the book clues to compare the 2 Christian processes of knowledge production. The chapter could also have gone further in rethinking the role of the popular figure of Pietist missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg. Surprisingly, Mallampalli seems to agree with some confessional scholarship that Ziegenbalg "was neither a racist nor a colonialist" (p. 116), without reminding readers that he was on the payroll of the King of Denmark. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the entanglements of Christian mission, colonialism, and modernity in 19th-century India. They offer a lively synthesis of this important period of change, including some primary sources that provide a coherent narrative of the colonial period and its postcolonial present. Chapter 5 focuses on issues of education, rhetoric, and preaching in the Protestant context. In demonstrating the emergence of a public sphere of religious controversy, Mallampalli also shows that Christian attacks on Hinduism and Islam provoked reactions that led to reforms in both fields, and concludes by proposing the hypothesis of Protestantisation for assessing the broader impact of missionaries in South Asia (pp. 140-42). Chapter 6 follows the trajectories of some upper-caste converts to Protestantism, since the exceptional sources associated with the lives of these privileged individuals provide us with a key to understanding the complexities of conversion, "the identity crises faced by converts, especially their anxieties about being in-between" (p. 145).

The last 4 chapters of the book deal in a sensitive and insightful way with some key modern phenomena that have shaped South Asian Christianities. In chapter 7, Mallanpalli discusses mass conversions among the most destitute sections of the population, the Dalits and the tribal community. He focuses on 3 different regions here – Andhra Pradesh, the Northeast (Nagaland and Mizoram), and the Punjab – and the unexpected trajectories of mass conversion that took place there. The section on the Nagas and Mizos is particularly effective in showing the role of local agency and social structures, and the presence of multiple political relationships – with the colonial power, with independent India, and with neighbouring Buddhist Myanmar – in terms of the decision to convert (pp. 172-174). As an aside, this also provides students with tools to understand the recent 2023 violence in the region. The issue of mass conversion touches on some of the same questions about elite conversions, but from an opposite perspective: When is conversion authentic? Who is a true Christian, and does the new religious identity affect social status? Chapter 8 analyzes the 'othering' of Christians during the period of national uprising and independence in India (with a sustained reflection on the figure of Gandhi), Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Comparing their different paths to independence and asking the uncomfortable question, "Whose country is 'one's own' and who would be excluded?" (p. 212), Mallampalli shows how Christians became an 'alien' minority in different ways, as the principle of cultural and religious homogeneity would come to underpin many anticolonial nationalisms that laid the foundations of Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist majority states "that marginalized those rendered minorities upon independence" (p. 212). Chapter 9 creates a diptych with chapter 7 by discussing the issue of Dalit conversion, and showing how their struggle for conversion became part of a larger struggle for social uplift and liberation. This chapter tackles the issue of Christianity and caste head-on by discussing the issue of affirmative action for Dalit Christians and their lack of access to government assistance granted to backward classes through reservations (pp. 234-238). The government's position is that caste is not a Christian institution – which is true in theory but not in practice, with many Christian converts belonging to backward communities and retaining that affiliation even after conversion. This highlights the issue of multiple, often conflicting identities that characterises the lives of Christians in South Asia. Mallampalli accurately identifies such contradictions, and fissures, along with their historical constitution.

Finally, the recent phenomenon of the growth of Pentecostal churches in India is the focus of chapter 9, the last in the book. In this chapter, Mallampalli explores local and transnational factors that make Pentecostalism so successful in South Asia, especially in the context of growing anti-Christian violence (p. 255-56). He draws attention to the cross-class and cross-caste nature of the Pentecostal message, as well as its emphasis on tangible experiences of the supernatural through gifts of the Spirit, including healing and speaking in tongues. This makes the comparison between Pentecostalism and early modern forms of Christian conversion an interesting avenue for future research. Healing and possession powers have always been at the centre of Catholic activity in Tamil Nadu (Sébastia 2004), although it is equally true that the non-mediated nature of Pentecostalism makes this phenomenon *sui generis*. These last chapters, dealing with contemporary issues, provide the readers with a lucid synthesis that, to the best of my knowledge, does not exist elsewhere in the same form. While I have pointed out some bibliographical gaps and problems in the book's chapters, especially those dealing with the precolonial period, these omissions – almost inevitable in a book of this kind – do not detract from its overall coherence and effectiveness. On the contrary, the historical chapters have their place in articulating the long history and genealogy of the phenomena examined in the later sections.

In conclusion, this is an important book that will be useful to the general public – but especially so to students and specialists of India. It teaches them (us) the long and complex history of Christianity in the region, and the way it has been historically constructed as the 'other' to pave the road towards contemporary discourse. It also teaches us the importance of Christianity, and religion more generally, in the social and political life of backward groups trying to negotiate their role in colonial and postcolonial India against the backdrop of the rise of Hindutva. Indeed, one could even say that this is a brave book that speaks calmly but frankly about the difficulties of being a Christian in South Asia, about violence and marginalization, and about the importance of looking at its diverse Christian community and its long history as a mirror for understanding South Asian history that is especially relevant today.

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Book Review

Kerry P.C. San Chirico. (2023). *Between Hindu and Christian: Khrist Bhaktas, Catholics, and the Negotiation of Devotion in Banaras*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. xxii+331. Price: $99.00. ISBN 9780190067120.

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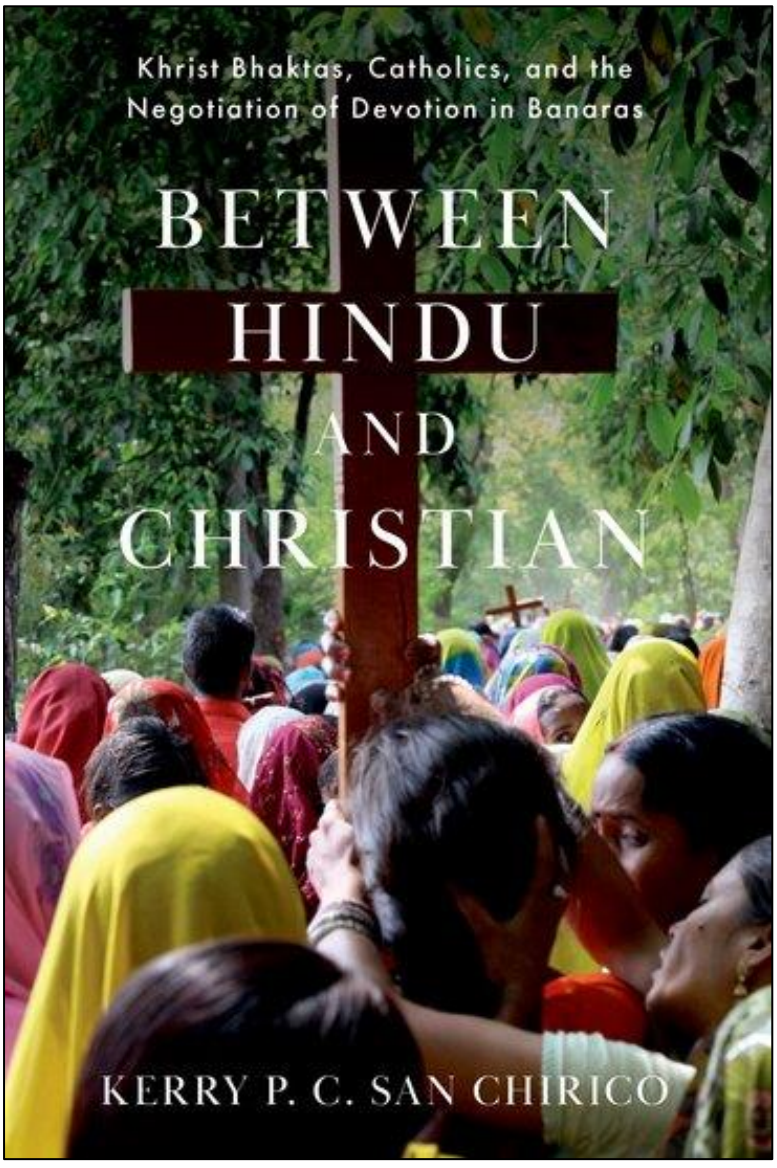

Image 10.1: Jacket Cover. (Source: Oxford University Press / public domain).

Kerry San Chirico's book, "*Between Hindu and Christian*," tells the story of the unique community of Khrist Bhaktas ("devotees of Christ"), whose religious lives centre around the Matra Dham Ashram ("Abode of the Mother") in Varanasi which belongs to the Catholic Indian Missionary Society (IMS). The group, consisting of thousands, mostly unbaptized Dalit female members does not lend itself to easy, clear-cut categorization. In a deeper sense, this is the driving question of this monograph – who are these Khrist Bhaktas? And in what contexts should this question be explored and answered? During field research spanning almost a decade (from 2009 to 2010, with several additional visits up to 2017), San Chirico participated in the Ashram's daily activities and festive events. He spoke to the clergy and lay devotees, explored the nearby villages where members resided, and gathered ethnographic data presented in this book.

To support and better situate his findings, he has accompanied his research with a useful survey of the history of Christianity in India and the more particular legacy of the IMS and the Matra Dham Ashram in Varanasi, as well as helpful presentations of related theological, socio-political, and economic issues. This turns the book into a rather rich study that nicely juxtaposes accounts of lived realities against

the background of both Christian and Hindu traditions that prove to be indispensable for the task at hand. Drawing on the metaphor of *sangam*, a confluence of rivers, San Chirico sets out to explore the many streams that feed into the historical and ongoing formation of Khrist Bhaktas. The issues at hand, as I describe below, are many. Still, at least in my reading, San Chirico establishes three major goals for the book, which he indeed accomplishes.

The first goal is a straightforward descriptive one. San Chirico aims to introduce the community of Khrist Bhaktas to a readership that is unaware of its existence, let alone its practices, beliefs, and other defining characteristics. In doing so, he provides a historical background to the institution and the individuals involved in its establishment and operation; a description of its main location and the Matra Dham Ashram's architecture, functions, and ongoing development, along with accounts of its daily routines, activities, and festive occasions. San Chirico bases his description on interviews with leaders and key members of the Ashram, exploring their biographies, worldview, and experiences, as well as their hopes and fears. By the end of the book, one gets a good sense of this group, and especially appreciates its uniqueness within the Indian socio-religious landscape. The second goal, explicitly stated throughout the book in various ways, is to achieve a nuanced understanding of Khrist Bhaktas. To do this, San Chirico examines them against several key backgrounds ("streams" feeding into the *sangam*): First, he examines the broader context of Christianity, focusing on Catholicism and Charismatic Catholicism, and their expressions in India. Second, he delves into Hinduism, emphasizing core concepts like *dharma* and *shraddha* as well as practices such as *darshan* and *prasad*. He also examines popular lived Hindu traditions, contrasting them with the more Brahmanic Sanskritic ones, and highlights the role of *bhakti* devotionalism as a key framework for understanding Khrist Bhaktas. Third, San Chirico examines social and communal issues, in particular those of caste and Dalit politics, to provide a comprehensive understanding of Khrist Bhaktas within the broader societal context. Fourth, he discusses Varanasi as a geographical and cultural region, illustrating its importance as the heart of Hindu India and its influence on Khrist Bhakta identity and practices. Juggling these perspectives is challenging, just like in real life. However, San Chirico skilfully navigates these frameworks. While these themes naturally blend occasionally, he keeps calling attention to this analytical division, making it easier to grasp the different factors at play. The third goal of the book is to address its central question: how do we classify Khrist Bhaktas in terms of their religiosity? Are they Christians? Are they Hindus? Or are they something else altogether? As the title suggests, San Chirico argues that Khrist Bhaktas exist somewhere in between. Throughout the book, as our understanding of Khrist Bhaktas deepens, we are encouraged to further embrace their fundamental 'in-betweenness'. The question becomes even more nuanced: are Khrist Bhaktas a hybrid Christian-Hindu community, or perhaps a Hindu-Christian one? Or in other words, even if understood as manifesting a sort of religious liminality, do they lean towards one tradition over the other? Admittedly, this is a tough question to answer, and I wrestled with it myself as I read through the book. San Chirico thoughtfully addresses this question in the book's conclusion.

The book opens with a thick description of a *mela* (festive gathering) that is held at the Matra Dham Ashram on the second Saturday of every month. As this choice of words (*mela*) immediately attests, San Chirico places us right away into a ritual world that centres on Yesu (Jesus) and Mata Mariyam (Mother Mary) but is at the same time infused with Hindu concepts and practices. *Bhajan*s (hymns) are sung, *darshan* is sought and *daan* (offerings) of rupee coins is made. Standing under a twelve-foot billboard of Christ, "the ācārya or abbot of Mātṛ Dhām, Swami Anil Dev … offers instruction for an hour with Dharmaśāstra, or Scriptures, in hand" (p. 1). Thus, from the very start, we realize that while the gathering celebrates key Christian figures, "the practices (modes of encounter, bodily gesture, etc.) encountered at Mātṛ Dhām are largely Hindu" (p. 4). This, San Chirico argues, calls for 'Indic' interpretation of

Khrist Bhakta identity, namely, an interpretation of this form of local Christianity that acknowledges and is willing to accept, at least to an extent, a certain level of its Indianization and Hinduization. The rest of the introduction provides necessary general background on the Khrist Bhaktas, and the nature of the fieldwork done by the author among them. Chapter 1, *At the Confluence of Rivers: Situating the Khrist Bhaktas*, and chapter 2, *More Streams at the Saṅgam: Indian Christianities, Īsāī (Christian) Banaras, and Subaltern Liberations*, can be largely seen as a single unit. While chapter 1 delves into the Hindu context, providing a history of Varanasi, known as 'The Heart of Hindu Civilization', as also a centre for the proliferation of other religions and religious identities (Buddhism, Islam, Sufism, and Sants), the chapter also examines *bhakti* devotional traditions and their resonance within the practices of Khrist Bhaktas. Additionally, the chapter offers a brief analysis of the distinction between vernacular and Brahmanic forms of Hinduism.

Chapter 2 then surveys key moments and developments in the history of Christianity in India from its foundation with the Thomas Christians in 4th-century South India to its relative heyday under British rule. The general argument presented in these 2 chapters is as follows: Khrist *bhakti* proves to be well-suited to the needs of Dalits. The latter seek emancipation from caste inequality and Brahminic religious practices, values, and deities, as well as political power (especially since the 1990s). Christianity, to begin with, addresses many of these concerns. It brings with it a new deity. Yesu, being non-Hindu, Khrist *bhakti* advocates for (an anti-caste) social egalitarianism, with its presence in the Banaras region making it readily available. As such, Christianity offers a departure from Brahminism. But this goes even further as the Christianity practiced by Khrist Bhaktas is heavily influenced by *bhakti* traditions. This flexibility, San Chirico argues is enabled by 'inculturation' – the "Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council's stated commitment to share its message in ways corresponding with the local culture" (p. 10). This *bhakti*-fication of Christianity aligns itself with the Dalit cause even more, as it, like other *bhakti* traditions, produces its followers in terms of a 'public', a self-aware group that seeks the democratisation and popularisation of religious practices and the relaxation of caste hierarchies. It is in this regard that Khrist Bhaktas are an Indic, in-between religious group, their goals and practices aligning with Hindu bhakti, even as their deity and governing institution are that of the Catholic Church.

Chapter 3, *Ādi Kahāniyāṅ (Origin Stories): A History in the Telling* sets out to demonstrate the beginning of the Khrist Bhakta movement and how it is rooted "in activities of the IMS priests and seminarians, beginning in the 1970s, coupled with the advent of the Catholic Charismatic movement in the region in the early 1990s" (p. 84). Such activities, held among low-caste Hindus living in the area's villages blended different elements: social (offers of financial help in the form of micro-loans), Christian (prayer and hymn singing), and Hindu (especially performance of *aarti* and the distribution of *prasad*). This work led to an increasing number of villagers getting involved in the Ashram regularly in a process characterized by a rather common pattern: a village person struggles with health problems, alcoholism, and family strife; his family encounters an IMS worker who offers assistance and invites them to attend prayer meetings at the Matra Dham Ashram. There, the village person's family members begin to pray and hear readings from the Bible. Eventually, a dramatic turnaround takes place in their lives, marked by recovery, reconciliation, business success, and improved social standing for the family. This compels them to share their story and spread the word about the transformative power of the Ashram, which encourages additional villagers to join in as well. According to some accounts, a significant community breakthrough took place during a convention in 1993, in which Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians also participated. This brought hundreds of needy villagers to the convention. Seeking healing and guidance, they flocked to the Matra Dham Ashram, marking the birth of the Khrist Bhakta as a movement.

In chapter 4, *An Encounter with the Light of Truth*, we meet Satya Prakash, who is identified by several devotees as 'the first Khrist Bhakta'. His personal story in the form of an elaborate interview very much resembles the pattern presented above. Only Satya Prakash is a bit different since he eventually chose to be baptized. This turns him into what he and others call a *mool vishvaasi* (a root believer), which amount to about 10% of all Khrist Bhaktas. Several elements are highlighted in Prakash's narrative like the hybrid language he employs, speaking, for example, about *paap* and *punya*, sin and merit that is characteristic of what San Chirico calls the Hindu "karma language" (p. 109). The modelling of his life narrative is based on the scriptural trope of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), of a sinful son who comes to his senses and makes his way back to the father. The defining event which made Prakash decide to be baptized entailed a proof or *pramaan* that he asked for and got, of the existence of the Lord, though such demands are usually discouraged and criticized within Christian contexts. Another element is the extent of exclusivity that Prakash grants Yesu *masih* and the following chapters tilt towards arguing that this exclusivity could constitute a defining factor for Khrist Bhaktas. Underlying this elaborate discussion with and about Prakash is the question of his identity. Is he indeed, and if so in what sense, the 'first Khrist Bhakta'? Or maybe he has gone even further and turned into a real Catholic? Or could it be that in some ways he still remains a Hindu? As per the general stance of the book, while these questions are elaborately explored, the answer is left to the reader to decide.

Chapter 5, *The Substance of Things Hoped For: Viśvās in the Kali Yuga and a Worldview in the Making*, continues to intimately present readers with the biographies of specific Khrist Bhaktas. This time we meet Malini, a late middle-aged devotee, "a self-effacing force of nature who, as an aguā, or 'animator,' can be found traversing the area to minister to fellow bhaktas and to any others who will listen" (p. 132). From Malini, we learn a bit of 'Yesulogy', of how Jesus is perceived in terms that are both Christian (Son of God, Savior) and Hindu (*avatar*, *muktidaata*). We learn about Malini's and the preference of others to talk of their faith in terms of *vishvaas* or belief, a term that is often used in non-religious contexts, in contrast to *shraddha*, which is closely related to Hindu devotionalism. Malini sees herself as the lord's *dasi* (slave) and that much of the vocabulary and sentiment that underlies her relationship with Yesu is deeply influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnava theology. Malini too, thus, emerges as an in-between figure – "her devotion is 'Christian' in the sense of absolute devotion to Yesu, but in her sensibility, in her manner of understanding how a deity communicates to a devotee, and how one then responds in return, she is, well, Hindu" (p. 132).

Chapter 6, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen (Through the Things That Are): Kindling Presence, an 'Abundant Place,' and the Stuff of Salvation*, attends "to the embodiment and materiality of developing Khrist Bhakti in Banaras" (p. 179). Thus, for example, we learn how women press their heads to the cross during circulations performed on all the Fridays of Lent, as a way of merging with Christ's body (an excellent interpretation which is regrettably offered only in a footnote instead of in the text itself). In another example, we realize how pervasive the practice of call and response is, wherein participants are requested to close their eyes and repeat words uttered by particular Khrist Bhaktas, priests, or nuns, in the hope of inducing inner transformation. The chapter is rich with detail and related background discussions, but its main argument is harder to identify. What I take to be the main point of chapter 6 is that while, on the one hand, the practices surveyed are not essentially different from those of Hindu *bhakti*, the interpretational framework offered to devotees for giving meaning to these experiences is identifiably Christian. San Chirico draws on Tanya Luhrmann's concept of 'faith framing', which in this context means the "taking people's experiences and interpreting them through a particular Christian matrix of interpretation" (p. 264). This is exactly what seems to happen during religious performances in the Matra Dham Ashram, namely an attempt to reframe *bhakti*-related experiences in the hope of transforming participants and "of creating a

special kind of self, which... given the centrality of the Bible to this space," San Chirico calls "a biblical subject" (p. 190).

Chapter 7, *The Shape of Things to Come: Imprudent Prognostications on Khrist Bhakta and Indian Catholic Futures*, explores the possible futures of Khrist Bhaktas. Given the in-between nature of the community, and the religious as well as socio-political forces working around and through them, as well as diverse other available options, the road ahead remains unclear. San Chirico analyses these different available paths, weighing each from multiple perspectives, and making each sound quite plausible, until we move on to the next one, which replaces it. Here too, things remain open, and only the future will reveal the road that is eventually taken.

The conclusion wraps up the book by returning to its core question, namely, where exactly, on the spectrum between Christianity and Hinduism, do Khrist Bhaktas stand. San Chirico reveals what should become clear to readers by now, that Khrist Bhaktas "do not fit so easily into religious categories as long as we see those categories as necessarily mutually exclusive, that the categories are themselves unstable and often unrepresentative on the ground, and that this community, as anomalous, provides us interesting vantages through which we might see in new, different, and differing ways" (p. 261).

Throughout the book, San Chirico is candid and thoughtful in his writing, openly sharing his own deliberations and the challenges he faced during his research, both practical and intellectual. He provides ample space to specific individuals, such as Malini, Satya Prakash, and Anil Dev, to speak for themselves, often quoting long conversations, and allowing readers to form their own thoughts before delving into his side of the analysis. However, it was also on this front that I found myself wishing for more. The book, I felt, could have benefited from presenting additional voices, particularly those of other 'lay' Khrist Bhaktas, even if briefly and only on specific topics. For instance, in chapter 3, where the common pattern underlying the narratives of newly joined members during the emergence of the community is discussed, there is a dearth in the voices of those members that had actually joined during that period. While in the next chapter, we get an elaborate account of Satya Prakash, 'the first Khrist Bhakta', we hear mostly from the Ashram's fathers and nuns. Hearing additional testimonies, even if brief, and the nuances accompanying them, could have shed more light on how things looked from the perspective of villagers. Another example is in chapter 6, where we learn about the women who touch their heads to the cross in *bhakti*-like behaviour. It would have been insightful to know what these women actually think about the new statue of Mary and how they explain why worshipping her was so important to them. More generally, I would have been interested in hearing a range of answers to questions like "Is Yesu different from Hindu gods?" "If so, how?" and quite directly, even if somewhat unfairly, "are you a Hindu or a Christian?" While the book does a great job in providing in-depth accounts of several individuals, I would have liked to get a better sense of the 'general view' on certain topics.

Another particular issue that could have been explored further relates to a central characteristic of the embodied performance that is encouraged at the Ashram. San Chirico repeatedly mentions that the audience is directed to close their eyes in contemplation. This stands in stark contrast to a key aspect of Hindu worship, especially *bhakti*, which encompasses the act of *darshan*. The reciprocal gaze between deity and devotees lies at the heart of Hindu worship and is, therefore, a sort of antithesis to what is encouraged here. Could this represent another defining issue that distinguishes Christianity from Hindu *bhakti*, akin to the matter of divine exclusivity? I found myself pondering whether the call to redirect the religious gaze from the external world to the internal one, might carry more significance and weight than San Chirico acknowledges. This call appears to promote not just a reframing of an embodied performative experience but also an attempt to forge an entirely new type of

experience—one that depends more on the cultivation of the imagination than on the honing of the senses. What do practitioners themselves think about this? Do they perceive this practice as exceptional? Do they ascribe any special meaning to it? I am confident San Chirico would have many insightful comments on this matter, and I wish he had addressed it more explicitly in his book. However, considering the broad scope of the book, it is inevitable that some topics receive lesser attention than others. Nonetheless, San Chirico does an excellent job in addressing many of these topics. I would end by saying that this book would be of interest to those interested in both Hinduism and Christianity, in popular religion, and in the relations between practice and theology, socio-politics of religion, and, of course, inter-religious encounters, South Asian religions, and the History of religion in India.

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Book Review

Pushkar Sohoni. (2023). *Taming the Oriental Bazaar: Architecture of the Market Halls of Colonial India*. London and New York: Routledge. Pp. x+110. Price: $35.99 (eBook). ISBN: 9781003079774 (eBook).

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Among the many architectural legacies of the British Raj in India, none perhaps is as ubiquitous and unseen as the public market hall. In the colonial era, every city and town possessed one; many have endured as a familiar part of the subcontinent's contemporary urban landscape. But, as Pushkar Sohoni notes, there is a "glaring lack of scholarship on market halls in India" (p. vii). Existing works on the built environment fashioned by colonialism typically fall in two categories: on the one hand, works of architectural history that focus primarily on questions of form and style; on the other hand, cultural studies that explore the ways in which buildings reflected competing ideological visions of empire. Neither tradition, Sohoni argues, has engaged in a sustained and systematic analysis of "single architectural programmes" nor paid due attention to "the materiality of the objects of study" (p. viii). That is the task his fascinating—if regrettably telegraphic—survey sets out to accomplish. "Ideally, the book would have been informed by more archival work and detailed field studies," the author states at the outset, "but the (Covid-19) pandemic effectively reduced that ambitious project to a cursory study" (p. x). Notwithstanding this unanticipated attenuation, Sohoni's work offers a useful overview of the historical dynamics that shaped the emergence and evolution of markets halls in colonial India.

The market hall—which Sohoni defines as a "large-scale environmentally controlled retail space" (p. 1)—formed part of a panoply of public buildings that represented the new civic culture inaugurated by colonial rule in India. Essentially an urban phenomenon, it stood forth as a "universal sign of modernity and progress" (p. 4). The historical logics that underpinned the creation of the public market hall were "radical medical theories of disease, emergent technologies of large-scale construction, and the economic centralisation of markets" (p. 1). As with other built forms spawned by colonial modernity, the public market hall was thus emblematic of order, rationality, discipline, efficiency, and good government. But, Sohoni suggests, "The public market with its own architectural space was not a completely new idea in India" (p. 19). The Sultanates of the medieval period as well as the Mughals had constructed buildings in the past that were meant to function as business sites. Such retail spaces in pre-colonial times were "mostly functional and not meant as architectural proclamations" (p. 19). Their cultural meanings, he suggests, owed less to their monumentality (or lack thereof) and more to their role as a vibrant space of everyday life (p. 19). Moreover, the commercial life of pre-colonial cities tended to be dominated by the permanent bazaars devoted to commerce on public streets and the temporary weekly markets that were set up in large *maidan*s. Importantly, too, the construction of public market halls marked a rupture within the history of colonialism in India. Prior to the mid-19th century, retail spaces in British India were of two kinds. First, there was the storied 'Oriental Bazaar', perceived in the imperial imagination as "an exotic and dangerous place, with equally sinister merchants and goods" (p. 11). In late-19th-century colonial discourse, its automatic association with dirt and disease rendered the 'native bazaar' unsuitable for the buying and selling of commodities. Second, the military conquest of India, the growing size of its standing army, and the presence of a European civilian population, led to the emergence of independent 'colonial bazaars'. In most town and cities,

these bazaars were located at the 'interface' between the 'Indian' quarters and the British cantonments and civil lines. Known as "Sadar (or Sudder) Bazaars, these constituted 'the principal bazaars for the colonial establishment" (p. 14). They were tightly regulated spaces because of their location within or in proximity to cantonments. Unlike the Oriental Bazaar, these 'cosmopolitan' retail areas sold a wide range of "goods and products imported from Britain and Europe in general" (p. 14).

As the size of the European population increased after 1857, the colonial elite increasingly sought to fashion sanitised retail spaces. The market halls that were constructed across India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a departure from the Oriental Bazaar and the Sadar Bazaar. Suffused with the values and norms of urban modernity, the market hall was "a monolithic building that was a visual spectacle for the native gaze" (p. 18). In other words, it was meant to be 'consumed visually' as a structure even as it served as a functional retail space. Simultaneously, it was also meant to offer a safe and healthy space for "negotiation between the European and native population" (p. 19). In intent, if not in form, these newly created market halls in colonial India bore the impress of their metropolitan inspiration. From the early 19th century onwards, this type of retail space became a common feature of the British urban landscape. Marked off and enclosed, and reflecting new ideals of order and transparency, these set the template for the proliferation in market halls that occurred over the course of the 19th century (pp. 16-19).

After tracing these intersecting genealogies in chapter 2, Sohoni proceeds to identify the historical imperatives that underpinned the construction of markets halls in colonial India. He identifies two factors as crucial determinants of this process: (a) new scientific theories about disease and the attendant transformations in the discourses and practices of public sanitation (chapter 3); and (b) the impact of the railways (chapter 4). New theories of disease causation highlighted the importance of sanitary standards in retail spaces; the railways dramatically scaled up the quantity and quality of retail activity. Both these developments spurred the construction of market halls both in British and princely India. The architectural styles of these new retail structures tended to comprise a mix of buildings in the Victorian Gothic and Indo-Saracenic style. "Generally," writes Sohoni, "the British favoured English styles for market halls as they wished to project the grandeur, superiority, and vision of their government, whereas the Indian princely states preferred variations on the Indo-Saracenic, which reflected their own patrimony and association with buildings" (p. 47). The Mahatma Jotiba Phule Mandai (Crawford Market) in Mumbai (1869), the New Market (Sir Stuart Hogg Market) in Kolkata (1873), the Shivaji Market (Connaught Market) in Pune (1886), the Mahatma Jotiba Phule Mandai (Reay Market) also in Pune (1886), and the Empress Market in Karachi (1889) can all be considered prominent examples of the neo-Gothic category. While market halls in the Indo-Saracenic style were mostly located in the princely states – notably, the Victoria Memorial Market in Gwalior (1905) and the Khanderao Market in Vadodara (1906) – they were also to be found in British India: for example, the Moore Market in Madras (Chennai) and Russell Market in the Bangalore Civil and Military Station. But some market halls were *sui generis*. Thus, the Moazzam Jahi Market in Hyderabad (1935) was constructed in the 'Osmanian' style, patented by its City Improvement Board.

Chapter 7 of the book provides brief summaries of the various market halls in India that were constructed in late 19th and early 20th century. These provide a wealth of empirical detail, but in a largely descriptive vein. It would have been useful had this part of the book been more closely integrated with the thematic strands identified in the preceding chapters. This points to a more general drawback in the organization of the book. Chapters 3 to 6 are thematically arranged with little by way of empirical detail; indeed, these are notable for their startling brevity, adding up to a total of 23 pages. This content might profitably have been condensed

into one or two chapters and connected more robustly to the material presented in chapter 7. In terms of analytical framework, too, the book suffers from an excessive focus on the visions of creators (both British and Indian). It would have been useful to know how these market halls came to impinge on popular perceptions, representations, and practices. A focus on the users of these spaces would have helped to make for a more dialectical historical account. Moreover, as new sites of retail activity, market halls raised important issues pertaining to caste, religion, and gender. Chapter 5—entitled *Market Halls and Gender, Literature, and Popular Culture*—gestures towards such an analytical move, but this is also the shortest chapter in the book (4 pages) and is marred by an eclectic use of supporting evidence.

Overall, then, this book should be seen as a spur to further research on the social and cultural history of specific genres of buildings that formed an indelible feature of colonial modernity. We need more works that recover the histories of the quotidian architecture that proliferated under British rule: town halls, railway stations, post offices, public libraries, museums, hospitals, and prisons. And it is to be hoped that this research agenda will transcend the watershed of 1947 and trace the postcolonial career of these structures.

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Book Review

Brian Black. (2021). *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata*. Oxon and New York: Routledge. Pp. 228. Price: €51.99. ISBN: 9780367547271

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It should come as no surprise that a monograph entitled *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata* would examine verbal exchanges between characters in Vyasa's Mahabharata. And why shouldn't it? Dialogues distinguish Vyasa's Mahabharata from its contemporaneous counterpart, Valmiki's Ramayana*,* as well as from earlier Brahmanical texts, such as the Upanishads. It is not that other texts are devoid of dialogues. Rather, it is the extraordinary degree to which Vyasa's Mahabharata employs dialogues—verbal exchanges that debate philosophical concepts, structure the epic through frame stories and sub-tales, and model a method for interpreting speech (p.4)—that marks Vyasa's Mahabharata as distinct. As such, Black's *In Dialogue* explores what philosophical dialogues tell us about the Mahabharata, and what the Mahabharata tells us in turn about philosophical dialogues.

Each of the five chapters in the book explores how a particular philosophical concept is examined through different dialogues that punctuate the plotline of Vyasa's Mahabharata (pp. 5-8). For instance, chapter 5 explores dialogues that examine Krishna's divinity. In the Bhagavadgita, Arjuna's questions prompt a point-by-point examination of Krishna's ontology. Arjuna's questions and doubts allow for Krishna's divinity to be fully examined for the first time in the Mahabharata. In contrast, the silence that befalls both characters when Krishna reveals his all-pervasive form conveys the idea that divinity exceeds the limits of logical argumentation. In addition, whereas Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna on the eve of war examines, justifies, and glorifies Krishna's divinity, later dialogues downplay, complicate, and challenge it. Notably, when Gandhari asks why Krishna did not act when he had the power to stop the war, Krishna absolves himself of all responsibility by crudely blaming Gandhari for poor parenting. Krishna neither bothers to engage Gandhari in theological questions nor admits the limits of his divine powers to her in the way that he willingly does with his male interlocutors.

Key to Black's methodology, then, is an examination of each dialogue on its own terms before examining the intramural relations among the subsequent dialogues as they unfold in the *Mahabharata*. In each verbal encounter, Black traces the intersection between the philosophical content of arguments, the method of argumentation, and the characterization of the speakers (their perspectives, affective responses, and their gendered and social statuses). He then reads multiple dialogues together. This second-level reading brings into stark relief the ways in which the content and method of philosophical dialogue change according to the identity of the speakers and their relation to their interlocutors. Black's unique method yields new insights into the Mahabharata's philosophical import and its use of dialogues. In terms of philosophical import, Black's reading reveals the situatedness of possibly the most contentious discourse in the Mahabharata: *dharma*. Dialogues in Vyasa's Mahabharata "root otherwise abstract philosophical doctrines as arguments of specific individuals in concrete situations" (pp. 10-11). This reading challenges earlier scholarship that reads essentialist or universalist interpretations of *dharma* into the Mahabharata. Black takes seriously what the characters themselves have to say about *dharma* and about how characters tell us that singular, abstract philosophical concepts do not exist. *Dharma* is defined and redefined, often without resolution,

through the situations, embodiments, and relationships that characters find themselves in. The understanding that philosophical concepts are embedded in situated dialogues likewise demonstrates the role that dialogues play in the Mahabharata. In Black's words, dialogues "develop" *dharma* (p. 21). They show rather than tell *dharma*. This is because an essential aspect of understanding *dharma* consists of a method through which it is examined: dialogues. Dialogues operate as dynamic, on-going sites of debate through which characters navigate their understanding of *dharma* with one-another through events that they experience in the storyline. Black's re-reading complicates the claim that dialogues in the *Mahabharata* are "didactic" sites of moral pedantry that are inferior to other literary sites such as plot and character (p. 13). Instead, he centres dialogues as an indispensable site for the understanding of literary construction and the philosophical content of Vyasa's Mahabharata.

Particularly insightful are the two chapters on Draupadi: chapter 2 called *Draupadī's Marriage* and chapter 4 called *Draupadī's Questions*. As with all chapters in *In Dialogue*, chapters 2 and 4 demonstrate how characters develop their understanding of *dharma* through their ongoing conversations with one another. But what makes chapters 2 and 4 valuable is that they best exemplify Black's second argument about dialogue that explores ethical relationships between interlocutors (p. 9, p. 11). For example, dialogues about Draupadi's polyandry lay bare the fraternal tension between Arjuna who wins Draupadi, and his elder brother Yudhishthira, who falls in love with Draupadi and ought to be married first according to *dharma*. In addition, dialogues about Draupadi's polyandry reveal the gendered relationships between Kunti as a mother who unknowingly tells her sons to share Draupadi, and her five sons who, in desiring Draupadi, do not let their mother go back on her words in the way that male characters can and do. Finally, such dialogues outline the political and moral relationships between King Drupada, Draupadi's father, who doubts the validity of polyandry and figures who are authoritative in matters of *dharma*, such as Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata who reveals Draupadi's divine identity, and Yudhishthira, the embodiment of *dharma* who has been crowned prince regent. Each of these dialogues betrays the ethical boundaries that structure familial, political, and cosmological relationships among the interlocutors. We could say that dialogues about Draupadi ironically decentre Draupadi, the silent object of discussion, to define the relationship between interlocutors instead.

Chapter 4 dovetails chapter 2. If chapter 2 shows how the Mahabharata decentres Draupadi's perspective in favour of those of primarily male characters, then chapter 4 (*Draupadī's Questions*) shows how the Mahabharata centres Draupadi's voice amidst the silence of those same men who previously talked about her. Draupadi develops her own claims about *dharma* after she is staked and lost by Yudhishthira in the dice match. Her arguments progress through a set of dialogues with different characters. Draupadi addresses the logical procedure of the dice match with the messenger before defending her social status and virtues as a wife in front of the court. What differentiates Draupadi's dialogues from those of the male characters is that her arguments work harmoniously with one another offering consistent refutations of the inconsistent patriarchal interpretations of *dharma*. Chapter 4 therefore demonstrates how depictions of *dharma* change when female perspectives are centred. Taken together, chapters 2 and 4 complement each other. In the first case, they work together to reject the claim that women are passive onlookers of philosophy. Black showcases female characters as active interlocutors who expose not only the ambiguous experiences of women in a world defined by men but also vice versa, who expose the limits of reasoning that men impose onto women. In the second case, these chapters challenge the claim that philosophical debate can be distinguished from the gendered relationships in which interlocutors are embedded. With these two implications, chapters 2 and 4 build upon long-standing scholarly debate about Draupadi in the Mahabharata, while speaking to nascent discussions regarding the representation of women in philosophical dialogues.

Where *In Dialogue* falls short is in its discussion of the relationship between Vyasa's Mahabharata and the Upanishads. While the book is framed by the suggestion that some features of dialogue in Vyasa's text may have emerged from dialogues found in the Upanishads (pp. 2-3, p. 178), such parallels are so infrequently and tenuously discussed in the body of the chapters that they do not constitute sufficient evidence to establish a clear connection between the Mahabharata and the Upanishads. This is not to say that Black's suggestion is wrong. But rather that such claims would be better explored outside this monograph. Or better still, perhaps such connections could be left to the reader to explore themselves, especially for those who have already read Black's scholarship on the Upanishads. Just as Vyasa encourages his readers to engage in dialogue with his epic and reflects on the relationship between his Mahabharata and earlier texts, so too might have Black left his readers, such as students of Indian philosophy, to put *In Dialogue* into conversation with his first monograph, *The Character of the Self in Ancient India* (2007), wherein Upanishadic dialogues are explored. Certainly, Black's discussion of Draupadi (pp. 115-147) provokes substantial claims about intertextual relations when read alongside Black's earlier discussion on female speakers in the Upanishads (2007: 133-168).

My point is nevertheless only a suggestion. *In Dialogue* is successful because it recuperates dialogues as a valuable site for meaning-making in Vyasa's Mahabharata. It demonstrates that dialogues should not be divorced from the identity of characters who voice them in particular situations. As a result, philosophical concepts are revealed through dialogical presentation to emerge as multi-vocal, dynamic, and relative to the context of the character. In making these points, *In Dialogue* is a valuable contribution to readers and students interested in Epic literature, and the intersection between narrative and philosophy.

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Book Review

Razak Khan. (2022). *Minority Pasts: Locality, Emotions, and Belonging in Princely Rampur*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pp. xiv + 316. Price: $75.00. ISBN: 9788194831686.

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It is fitting that I should write a review of *Minority Pasts* by Razak Khan following a recent visit to Najibabad in Uttar Pradesh, India. Founded in the 18th century by the Rohilla *nawab*, Najib ud-Daulah, the town does not often feature on the itineraries of foreign visitors. However, my day excursion from Delhi had been driven by a desire to study the fortress of Pathargarh. Built by the *nawab* at a time when the Rohilla's military strength stood unchallenged, it now stands empty and in ruins. My visit to Najibabad was brief and unfortunately it did not allow me further time to investigate whether the local Muslim population still upheld the Rohilla traditions of the town's founders. Were the Muslims I passed in the street descendants of these 18th century Rohillas or were they descended from Muslim families who had migrated to the town following the upheavals caused by the 1857 war and the independence of 1947? If they claimed descent from the families who had settled under Najib ud-Daulah, what remaining Rohilla traditions separated them from other Muslims? Was their identity still derived from Rohilla heritage or did they primarily see themselves as part of a broader, pan-Muslim community?

Minority Pasts, however, is not a study of Najibabad but rather about the city most often associated with the Rohillas, Rampur. Once the capital of the former Princely State of Rampur, following 1947, the town was subsumed into the modern nation of India and is now situated within the state of Uttar Pradesh. From the outset, Khan raises the issue of how the study of Muslim communities in both British India and contemporary India has been overshadowed by studies that treat Muslim communities as a cohesive body. *Minority Pasts* challenges this assumption by demonstrating that the Muslims of Rampur, whether they were Rohillas or migrants, middle class or nobility, were responsible for establishing a variety of Muslim identities that evolved and adapted to new circumstances arising after 1857. The author approaches the subject from a variety of disciplines including history, political studies, religious studies, and sociology, making the work suitable for students and readers of these fields. While the book does require that readers are familiar with the Muslim cultures of North India, it is not too overwhelming for a newcomer either. The book consists of an introduction, 5 chapters, and an epilogue, the text accompanied by 2 maps and 6 illustrations. Along with various archives on national and local levels, the bibliography reveals that the author has consulted a wide range of primary and secondary sources in English, Persian, Hindi, and Urdu. The author has also conducted interviews with individuals who have connections to Rampur both in India and in Pakistan. The study of Rohilla history is still limited in Western scholarship, with the Rohillas having often been overshadowed by the Shi'a Nawabs of Awadh. While the work to which one is often directed, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, C.1710-1780* by Jos J. L. Gommans (1995), *Minority Pasts* does much to address the neglect in scholarship.

In chapter 1 *Oasis in the Desert: Rampur as a "Muslim Princely State" in the Aftermath of 1857* (pp.26-54), Khan examines how Urdu poetry was used to convey an image of Rampur as a haven for Muslims in the wake of the Indian Mutiny. He shows that this portrayal of Rampur as heir to Mughal and Awadhi culture, shattered in the aftermath of 1857, was utilised both by Urdu poets who were attracted to the stability provided by the court of Rampur, and Nawab Kalb-e-Ali Khan (r.1865-1887). For the latter, Urdu poetry was a vehicle to propagate his image

as a pious Muslim ruler and the chapter concludes by noting that it was not only the elites who were establishing a shared culture in Rampur during the latter half of the 19th century. Here, Khan introduces the rising Muslim middle class of Rampur who took advantage of the newly introduced printing press to create public discussions and to disseminate their own political and religious views in contrast to that of the Nawabi court. Chapter 2, *Courtly Modernity: Tradition, Reform, and the Politics of "Muslim Culture"* (pp.55-109), examines the various ways in which Rampur, as a Nawabi princely state, was portrayed by its own middle class Muslims, colonial administrators, and nationalists during the reign of Nawab Hamid Ali Khan (r.1889-1930). Khan shows how, during the regency of Nawab Mushtaq Ali Khan (r.1887-1889), factionalism among the Rampur royal family and Rohilla clan leaders led to further interference by colonial officials and the encroaching influence of the British on Rampur society. Public debates and interfaith clashes between Hindus and Muslims, which were resolved by community leaders, were instrumental in producing a cohesive Rampur identity in which both colonial officials and the Rohillas from Najibabad were considered an 'other'. Khan builds upon a theme introduced in chapter 1 here, that of the binary notion of the decadent *nawab*s and the reformed Muslim middle class. However, he shows that these were not static categories but rather, both parties were influenced by external factors.

Chapter 3, *Princely Progress: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Cultures of "Muslim Politics"* (pp.110-155) covers the reign of Nawab Raza Ali Khan who succeeded his father in 1930. While his reign oversaw the modernisation of Rampur, with changes being made in areas such as administration, education, and industrialisation, these changes were not imposed without resistance. Khan demonstrates that the changes to Rampur were not only forcibly made by the *nawab* but were also shaped by local citizens of Rampur through public protest movements that sought to protect their traditional rights. In this chapter, which culminates in the integration of Rampur into the Indian Union in 1947, Khan also touches upon the creeping influence of translocal voices who sought to bring Rampur in line with the rising nationalist vision. In chapter 4, *Locality, Genre, and Self-Definitions of Rampuris* (pp.156-189), Khan moves beyond the discourses of the *nawabi* court and public to examine the personal writings of Rampur subjects. Part of this focus is driven by the need to recognise that within scholarship, local Urdu writing has often been overshadowed by the Persian dominated culture of the Mughals. In doing so, Khan touches upon three forms of Urdu literature: *tarikh* (history), *tazkira* (biographical compendia), and *hayat* (life writings). Khan shows that local and emotional knowledge of Rampur was produced within these writings that offer readers a different insight into the culture of the Rohillas in contrast to the knowledge produced by colonial administration. By examining the writings of former Rampur residents, Khan shows that Rampur is not only a physical location but encompasses a shared emotional geography. Chapter 5, *Princely Past, Subaltern Present: Memory, History, and Emotions* (pp.190-216) builds further upon the theme of a shared emotional geography by examining the works of four writers who have connections to Rampur in the period following Partition. While the first two, Abid Raza Bedar and Shaair Ullah Khan are from India, the latter two, Zakir Ali Khan and Saul ul Hassan Khan are from Pakistan. The works of Bedar are particularly poignant, as he argues that the primary identity of Rampur's Muslim community should be that of a Rampuri rather than as part of a broader pan-Islamic community.

Although *Minority Pasts* places Rampur under a specific research lens, the methodology used by Khan could easily be applied to other cities in contemporary India. The topics discussed in the book force us to reassess how we perceive the modern inhabitants of cities whose social groups allegiances have been fractured by the displacements following 1857 and 1947. While *Minority Pasts* addresses a post-1857 Rohilla society, the broader study of Rohilla culture and history still offers readers access into an untouched area of scholarship that is fruitful to furthering explorations, particularly for the decades following the defeat of the Rohillas by the

British in 1794. The forthcoming work of other scholars such as Naveena Naqvi may indeed help to contribute to this scholarship. When reflecting upon my trip to Najibabad in hindsight, I am struck by a couplet that Khan quotes and translates (page 209):

Ab bhi hai kuch purani yadgareh
Tum aana shahr mera dekhne ko

> There are still some old memorials left
> You must come and see my city

While written with Rampur in mind, these lines could easily be applied to Najibabad as well.

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