

Uplifting the “Heathen”: Religious and Cultural Encounter Between Basel Missionaries and South Indian Religiosities

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Studies on Protestant Missions continue to face the question of whether colonialism and religious proselytization were inextricably linked to each other or not to achieve European cultural and economic hegemony over vast swathes of the Global south. This perplexing issue has often been seen from the vantage point of cultural imperialism, the extension of European modernity, globally circulating capital, colonisation of consciousness, and orientalism among other frameworks.¹ With the emergence of postcolonial discourse as an epistemic field, the difference between “the” coloniser and “the” colonised was also overwhelmingly viewed from a binary perspective of active and passive agents in the story of an encounter between the European and non-European world. The postcolonial discourse, too, assumed the diversity and plurality of “the” colonised people as one homogenous block vis-à-vis “the” coloniser, and ignored the internal social, cultural, and religious divisions, multiple responses, entangled processes, and dynamic exchanges between the two. The problem emerges because nationalist and Marxist scholars have long casually conflated Christianity with colonialism.²

This paper offers an intersectional perspective on Basel missionary encounters with colonised people in South India to show how issues related to caste, class, and sectarian and religious divides occupied missionary agendas and shaped native responses. In 1834, the Basel Mission started its missionary activities in the coastal city of Mangalore in the then South Canara province and slowly expanded into other areas

¹ See, Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L. (2008). *Of revelation and revolution, volume 1: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press; Dunch, R. (2002). Beyond cultural imperialism: Cultural theory, Christian missions, and global modernity. *History and Theory*, 41(3), 301-325; Porter, A. (1997). ‘Cultural imperialism’ and protestant missionary enterprise, 1780–1914. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 25(3), 367-391.

² The German mission functioned in a British colony, a fact which does not directly associate them with colonialism but there was a close contact between German and English Protestant missions. Many colonial officers and soldiers donated to the Basel Mission in India. Although there are some grounds of conflation, Christianity and colonialism were not the mirror image of each other.

of Karnataka and the bordering regions of the neighbouring states of Kerala and Maharashtra. The expansion led to encounter with various socio-religious groups and individuals on preaching tours and other Evangelical works. Initially, the Mission heavily interacted with three social groups, Brahmins (upper-caste Hindu priests and advocates of the caste system), Billavas (low caste poor toddy-tappers and the largest converts of the BM), and Lingayats—a predominant Shaivite sect of Karnataka that historically rejected caste, class, and the Brahminic world-view. The local Canarese population was broadly divided between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, a division that also simultaneously corresponded to economic, social, religious, and literacy divides. For Basel missionaries, this social-economic inequality meant a mixed attitude of respect and ridicule towards Brahmins and disrespect for lower castes. Thus, missionary policies of religious reforms were locally mediated by caste, class, and sectarian divisions. These encounters complicate the notion of cultural imperialism and show the extent to which various groups exercised their agency to discard, negotiate, and distinctly shape Protestantism for their own benefit and from their own socio-religious positions. Protestantism became uniquely Indian, much to the frustration of German missionaries. The missionaries were also compelled to interpret, respond, plan, and make amendments to achieve the German pietistic Protestant goal of “real converts”, who were to be made to rise above worldly lusts and material desires.

Brahmins and the Basel Mission:

The numerically minority section of Brahmins in South Canara³ was economically better off, well-versed in reading Sanskrit scriptures, and had perched themselves on the top of the social ladder against the poorer, illiterate, and lower caste sections like Billavas. Since the beginning, the Basel Mission enterprise had begun to engage in “spiritual warfare” with the Brahmins, using the Christian doctrines of sin, salvation, and true and false worship of God, mounting an attack on idol worship as heathenism and blasphemy against God.

³ South Canara was a province of colonial Madras with its headquarter in Mangalore. It included the whole of present-day South Canara of Karnataka and the Kasaragod district of north Kerala along the spread of Western Ghats.

The Brahmins were further seen as mentally enslaving lower castes by their “false” theological and scriptural knowledge. However, they were also considered worthy since their scriptural knowledge and literary abilities made them ideal for Protestant theology, considering that Brahmin converts would better understand the gospel since they already possess the skills to read and interpret Sanskrit scriptures. For instance, one missionary reports in the following words:

Among the higher castes pride and self-complacency present themselves on all occasions, and often when I desire in a friendly way to argue with them about the truth, they either bring forward some unmeaning assertions, or leave me with a disdainful air, as if to say what have you to do with our concerns? Those of the common castes we find exceedingly dull, scarcely capable of comprehending one idea of a spiritual nature. Their answer generally is, you must talk to our superiors about these matters, we cannot judge of their correctness, and if they think it right, it must be so, and we will then follow it.⁴

Brahmins were spiritually superior in the eyes of Missionaries. They also preferred to convert Brahmins assuming that if they accepted Christianity, it would establish the theological superiority of Christianity over Hinduism and prompt others, especially lower castes, to follow the same path. It led to a policy of differential treatment for Brahmins: For instance, in 1856, a girls’ school was opened specially for Brahmin girls.⁵ The reason for this was not only to evangelize the domestic sphere of the Brahmins but also to form a connection between Protestantism and religious transformation through personal reading of the Bible. Education would prepare individuals to understand the importance of Christian scriptures while enabling them to interpret the Gospel’s meaning personally. For missionaries, Brahmins represented the quality that they were looking for. They were considered relatively better “civilized” than the rest of the population due to partially echoing the missionary perception of an “ideal convert”. This was the main reason for greatly rejoicing some Brahmins’ conversions in 1844, including Anand Rao Kaundinya, over numerous converts of other castes.

On the other side, since Evangelicalism was a direct attack on the socio-religious capital of the Brahmins, the missionaries faced stiff resistance from them, ranging from regular verbal spats to physical attacks. The following report describes one such incident:

⁴ Annual Report for the year 1847, 20

⁵ *ibid.*

On Krishna's birthday (5th Sept.) preaching to the crowd of pilgrims was attempted, as had been done in other years, but it provoked the insolent demand on the part of the *Matha Swamies* (priests) to desist at once. When that was not complied with, a shower of stones upon the missionary and bystanders enforced the argument. The tumult increased to such a degree, that the local authorities succeeded with difficulty in extricating the preacher from the crowd. From that day the attitude of the Brahmans became more menacing, and they made no secret of their resolution to drive the Gospel from Udupi (north of Mangalore). In the evening of the 15th of December rumours were heard that the Mission house would soon be burnt: and the threat was executed towards midnight. After this followed the sad disclosures above alluded to, in consequence of which Mr. G. had to leave the Mission.⁶

In this situation, missionary encounters with Brahmans became a contestation for maintaining hegemony by the latter, whose social capital was threatened by the Protestant doctrines of equality. Attacks on missionaries in Brahmans' villages were frequent. It was widely believed that the missionaries would destroy the caste system and, therefore, their hegemony, too. Brahmans were very interested in secular education offered in mission schools but least in conversion. However, the presence of children of lower castes in the same school did not go very well with them. They would often complain about this issue. But the missionaries did not compromise with their stand against caste inequality by not tolerating their caste prejudices. For instance, in 1854, many Brahmin students were kicked out of a school on the issue of following caste practices and were not allowed to return until they agreed to share the same social space with lower-caste children.⁷ It was repeatedly emphasised that every Christian is equal in Christ; there is no Black or White, neither male nor female; they are all one. The moral percept of Protestant Christianity allowed missionaries to see everyone equal, which was a revolutionary idea for many communities like the Billavas and the Lingayats (discussed in the remaining sections). However, in practice, a hierarchy still existed in the mission, from the issue of decision making and local institutional control in the hands of German missionaries to hiring native converts as foot soldiers. The missionaries always controlled from the above, provided instructions to natives by mostly remaining teachers and trainers, and punished those who disobeyed, maintaining a structural hierarchy for imposing rules, authority, and power.

⁶ Annual Report for the year 1856, p. 16.

⁷ Annual Report for the year 1854, p.24.

The missionaries imposed absolute social equality of caste on their converts without ever allowing their converts to claim similar equality with them.⁸

Billavas and The Mission:

Low caste Billavas, who constituted the largest number of converts for the Basel Mission, became objects of reform of various kinds. Basel missionaries had an antagonistic attitude towards all local religious practices. However, they termed non-Brahminic practices, the ones associated with the Billavas “devil worship” due to their widespread practice of *bhuta* (literally “ghost” or “spirit”) ancestor worship. Such a religious practice, missionaries thought, would directly lead them to hell; therefore, they became objects in need of immediate reform. Most Billavas were illiterate, unlike the Brahmins, making the task of the missionaries of imparting “the written words of God” more difficult. Many missionaries believed that it was particularly difficult to make people of the lower castes comprehend the truths of the gospel. They often complained about lower castes that “their mental capacities and powers of reasoning are so deficient, that long and repeated teaching and catechizing are necessary”.⁹ The difference between writing and orality became a more significant measure to term non-Brahminic practices as primitive, totally different from better “civilized” Brahmins, and closer to demon worship. The Protestant emphasis on “text” moved the missionaries closer to Brahmins and away from illiterate lower castes.

Billavas’ life was a perfect Protestant model of a sinful state. They were professionally involved in toddy-tapping and religiously in *bhuta* (ghost/spirit) worship, both of which constituted an ideal subjecthood for Protestant reforms. Apart from enhancing their literary abilities, the missionaries also sought to decrease their professional dependency on toddy-tapping and its consumption. For the BMs, consuming toddy became a marker of religious insincerity, the continual ties with customary habits of heathenism, and a sign of unwillingness to rise above worldly temptation. Many Billavas were kicked out of the local congregations of Christian converts for not following temperance. Alcohol and moral values, thus, became irreversibly connected.

⁸ Fernandes, D. Perception of the natives in the Basel Mission writings of the 19th century. *Al-Shodhana*, p. 12.

⁹ 1847, p. 8.

Missionary reports show that several Billavas of the Christian congregations were excommunicated on account of drunkenness.

Religiously, their mind was presented to be obsessed with *bhuta* worship. The belief in the *bhutas* was very deeply rooted in the local religious cosmology and transcended the Christian understanding of “demon” or “Satan”. *Bhutas*’ roles for Billavas were similar to Christian angels, but the missionaries took them as “demons”. It was widely believed by the Billavas that there were a great many spirits, servants of God, who, in by-gone times, were mighty men upon this earth but have left it as spirits and are now in the presence of God. According to Canarese folk stories, the *bhutas* asked God for food, and He advised them to get it from the Tulu (the region and language of the Billavas) people. If they were given food (which consisted in the offerings of rice, fowls, pigs, toddy, and water) the *bhutas*/ghosts benefitted their worshippers, blessed their house and business, cured their diseases, protected them from danger, from the influence of evil spirits and bad men, punished those who hurt them and can even be pleaded to punish and kill their enemies. Thus, the *bhutas* were both benevolent and harmful, godly and ghostly, and objects of reverence and fear at the same time, presenting a complex religious system of the Billavas. If *bhutas* did not receive offerings, they were believed to visit men and cattle with disease and even death. Thus, almost every misfortune or illness is ascribed to them; on such occasions the “demon priests” were consulted upon and sacrifices were immediately brought to the offended deity, either in secret or in the presence of many others, and if a god was the cause of the misfortune, money and feasts for the priests was promised.

This mode of religiosity of relying on miraculous powers for everyday care and well-being was to be catered for by the missionary industrial structure and material advantages of the Protestant modernity.¹⁰ The material advantage proved a more critical factor for the missionary perception of religious superiority combined with the Protestant notion of Christianity concerned with the salvation of body and soul. By not

¹⁰ Basel Mission industries were crucial factors for converting and sustaining the converts. See, Fischer, Rudolf, *Die Basler Missionsindustrie in Indien, 1850-1913: Rekrutierung und Disziplinierung der Arbeiterschaft* (Zürich, 1978).

relying on "demons/angels" for material welfare like the Billavas, the missionaries positioned themselves as people more concerned with "spiritual goals."

The complex functional role of *bhutas* further enriched the community's cultural practices. *Bhutas* were supposed to have taken abode in a house and were called together every evening by the sound of a drum as they may have left during the day the house committed to their care. Some *bhutas* were supposed to be the guardian, not only of houses and families, but of whole villages; for these, a great feast was kept at least once a year, at which all the inhabitants of the village presented their offerings, and people come from a distance to offer such gifts as they may have vowed to a *bhuta*, when in danger.

For missionaries, the complex set of religious practices were markers of paganism and demonology. The poor Billavas were further thought to be kept in constant fear and religious slavery by this religious system; and thought to be supposedly deluded by the beliefs that these ghosts are angels of God and had been permitted by Him to be served by men. It was a difficult challenge for the BMs to overturn this practice since they witnessed that even after conversion, many Christian Billavas live in a constant fear of a *bhuta* if they were to give up their worship entirely. The missionaries assumed that the fear was deeply rooted in their hearts. It was believed that nothing short of the grace of Christ could loosen bonds between *bhuta* worship and their majority converts. Therefore, more intensive preaching would often happen.¹¹

They constantly witnessed a continuation of old religious practices in their religious congregations. In 1851, even after living as Christians for a good number of years, one family confessed of committing sins of witchcraft (*bhuta* worship) for curing sickness. When the case was investigated, others came forward and admitted their deeds. It was discovered that many had occasionally resorted to very "questionable remedies", whilst others too resorted to the same practices, the missionaries felt some hesitation in condemning them altogether. The healing art, as practised at present among natives, particularly of the lower classes, remained an intricate subject. And the missionaries

¹¹Annual Report for the year 1849, 16-18.

lamented that the “true” faith was substituted by the remedies tried by the local congregation.¹²

Billavas’ low caste-class origins subjected them to a more apprehensive attitude of the missionaries who constantly suspected their desire to join the Protestant community. The bar set to check the “real intention” of a convert was higher for them, which included a radical display of disassociation with *bhuta* and idol worship. Radically forsaking idol worship became almost a valuable measure to judge the sincerity behind a religious congregation. For instance, missionary reports and letters are full of descriptions like the following

Mani, a poor but courageous and respectable man, after a long struggle with his own heart and with his relations, arose at last boldly, destroyed his demon temple and idols; and drew after him his brother-in-law Meinde, the head of a large family. When Mani cast his idols away Meinde wavered and waited to see what would happen to his brother after the bold deed. No misfortune occurring, he took courage and joined him; he is a good natured, honest, but weak man.¹³

Since Billavas formed the largest number of converts, the mission appeared to be homogenous along the caste line without experiencing much trouble on the caste issue. However, their low caste-class status proved to be an anxiety for the mission. What contributed most to the missionaries’ apathy towards the cultural-religious world of the Billavas was the historically existing European Christian notions of paganism and primitive religions.

On the other side, the missionaries’ support also helped many Billavas advance their socio-economic profiles. Access to education was a key to their socio-economic mobility and helped them get out of vulnerable conditions. Protection from economic hardships during famines and epidemics and conditions generated by colonialism, such as extremely high liquor tax on toddy, further moved Billavas towards the Basel Mission. The following section shows that local theological and religious values reflected, even partially, in the missionaries’ definition of Protestant Christianity were

¹²Annual Report for the year 1857, p.8.

¹³Annual Report for the year 1851, p. 9.

seen hierarchically above on the ladder of religious evolution and commanded respect in the eyes of the missionaries.

Lingayats and The Mission:

Studies on Christian missions have also singularly constructed the image of Protestant missions as vanguards of “cultural imperialism”, assigning a passive role to the “native” agency. This view has not only reinforced a binary of “imperial” and “native” tied to each other by modes of domination and resistance but also ignored the possibility of interpreting religious developments in a colony from a more meaningful theological perspective of non-Europeans. For instance, Kalagananis, literally “knower of the times”, a branch of the prominent Hindu God *Shiva* worshipping Lingayats of Karnataka viewed Christianity offered by the Basel missionaries from their own religious reference point as described in their sacred prophetic scripture called *Kalaganana* (knowledge of the times).

It was predicted in their old prophetic texts that a time will come in which a great lord will appear in this land, and He will overturn the whole worship of idols, introduce the worship of the one true God, and punish those who resist.¹⁴ Furthermore, the teachers of the true religion were described as coming from the West; and the fall of the great city of Seringapatam (sic) was proclaimed as the precursor of the fulfilment of the prophecies contained in their extraordinary prophetic book.¹⁵ The city had already been won over by the British in 1799, earlier under the control of a local ruler, Tipu Sultan, followed by the arrival of the Basel missionaries in the 1830s. Stirred by these predictions, the religious leaders of Kalagnana requested Basel missionaries to give counsel and assistance to find the way of truth.

The Lingayats sect was established about 500 years ago and represented an assortment of faiths, well acquainted with Hindu Vedantism and the Quran. Their religious belief was a mix of Vedantism, i.e., ‘knowing the truth of soul’, and Hindu and Islamic doctrines and traditions. They were distinguished by a belief in a resurrection of the body and by bearing a short *linga*, the phallic representation of Shiva, in a string

¹⁴ C-1.5.1840.5. BMA. Also, see, Jenifer and Pual Jenkins translated documents, *Journeys and encounters*, pp. 2.26-2.30.

¹⁵ Annual Report for the year 1845, P. 33.

necklace around the neck. The movement inspired by the medieval Indian *bhakti* traditions (devotion to one formless God) was strongly anti-Brahmin and anti-caste. The sect included all sections of society from lower to upper castes, which led to the formation of various sub-branches.

The prophecy of the two events led Lingayats to the Basel missionaries in 1839. They discovered their own doctrine of the resurrection in Christian tracts and the Bible distributed by the missionaries. In the first meeting, the Lingayats representatives said, “You are the people from the West. Your preaching and the teachings in your books correspond to our prophecies correctly. Therefore, we are convinced that the prophecies have come about and have come to ask you to open the door of the Church of Christ to us.”¹⁶ Afterwards, the missionaries paid many visits to a monastery of the sect interpreting their move as “a sincere desire after truth”.¹⁷ However, the missionaries soon interpreted for themselves that there was a strong “worldly side” to their intention because the Kalagananas had assumed that the British Government would enforce Christianity as the true religion by forms of arms and would punish those who resisted, in line with what was written about “the punishment of those who resist” in their texts.¹⁸ This apprehension on the part of missionaries about the use of force in “awakening”/conversion was seen as an insincere acceptance of Christian doctrines. Therefore, they explained to Lingayat leaders, “the only people who are (true) Christians are those people who have been awoken to new life through preaching, and who feel moved voluntarily to leave all other deities, all other ways, in order to serve Christ. Jesus Christ, the King, wants nothing to do with subjects who are forced into His kingdom. In order to be his disciples, you must become quite (“entirely” sic.) different people.”¹⁹

When the missionaries might have assumed that this theological encounter was potentially over, the next year in 1840, a fresh round of talks began with Koppa Gowda, a local leader of the Lingayats.²⁰ Now, the question of material advantage was pushed into the background (clearly to get the attention of the missionaries), and most

¹⁶ C-1.5.1840.5. BMA.

¹⁷ *ibid.* P.34. Also, Jenkins *Journeys and encounters.*

¹⁸ C-1.5.1840.5. BMA.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

conversations happened along theological lines, in which the missionaries and the Kalagananas read and expounded each other's religious texts.²¹ Biblical portions translated into Kannada found immediate acceptance in such meetings as having the status of shastras, religious manuals or instructions of the Kalagananas. The missionaries frequently visited such meetings to expound Christian doctrines before the gathering of 50-60 people, in which Christian messages were considered equivalent to their own moral precepts. Jenkins suggests that the Kalagananas really tried hard to understand what the missionaries wanted and to prepare themselves accordingly.²²

The interaction in the second phase slowly led to one of the material demands that a "colony of refuse" should be developed for them since the area where most Kalagananas lived was still under a local king, and they experienced persecution from time to time for not conforming to the mainstream societal doctrines. It was a demand similar to what pietists in Württemberg had imagined for themselves by developing a small village called "Korntal", the valley of corn, near Stuttgart to build community solidarity, in line with the Biblical foretelling of a catastrophic event that would happen towards the end of the world. The committee in Basel gave the nod to this demand to build a colony near Malsamudra north of Karnataka. As it turned, very few Kalagananas moved to live in this missionary colony. However, the whole engagement failed due to Basel missionaries' insistence on not accepting the entire local fellowship into their fold as was demanded. Instead, they picked a few selected individuals for Baptism. Similarly, when a group of 5000 Billavas met the missionaries to convert on some conditions like, they should be allowed to retain some cultural practices because they constituted a group, their demand was denied since it violated the Protestant notion of conversion at an individual level.²³ However, the interaction with this branch of the Lingayat sect continued for another 20-25 years in isolated forms. Many Lingayat individuals were convinced to join Christianity on their own.

²¹ Report from Heinrich Frey from Hubli, 1840.

²² P. Jenkins, A Lingayat initiative, the Basel Mission in northern Karnataka. Unpublished paper, 2011. P. 5.

²³ Schlatter, Wilhelm. *Geschichte der Basler Mission: Die Geschichte der Basler Mission in Indien und China*. Vol. 2. Verlag der Basler Missionsbuchhandlung, 1916, .

These cited cases suggest that missionary attitudes toward a particular group or an individual varied depending on the socio-economic position of the other party involved and the religious view of the person or the group. The question of “native agency”, therefore, cannot be uniformly assigned to every social-cultural encounter between “the” missionaries and “the” colonized people. The paper has shown that various socio-religious sections of the native had as much agency as the missionaries and the response or resistance to Christian evangelism was equally complex due to the extreme complexity of the social structures, theological differences, caste divides, and class among “the natives” or “the colonized”. These differences continue to shape the distinct cultural identities of Indian Christians. The interaction between the missionaries and the locals was not uniform; it moulded as per the social status of the locals. There was a constant negotiation as the missionaries were also trying to understand the natives and raise them to their level.