

# Voices from the Archives: Indian Bible Women of the Basel (Women's) Mission in the 19th/20th Century

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## 1. Introduction and preliminary remarks

- **Aim: To** give an overview of the missionary branch of the Bible Women's Mission of the BFM and to give an insight into the work of the Bible Women.
- **In the lecture I try to answer the following questions:**
  - o What are Bible Women?
  - o Where did this branch of mission come from and how did it develop?
  - o What were the tasks of the Bible women and how have they changed over time?
    - What was the relationship like between European and indigenous women workers in the mission; and of course with indigenous women?

Some preliminary remarks [\[click\]](#):

I begin with a short quote from the preface to Waltraud Haas' book *Erlitten und erstritten. The Liberation Path of Women in the Basel Mission*: "There is no need for long debates about the patriarchal nature of the Christian missionary movement, because the point is clear: men not only monopolised leadership"<sup>1</sup> (Mercy Amba Oduyoye) - they also established a hierarchical structure.

For this, they anchored the (dualistic) gender orders (male - female) in their principles and described them as an expression of a right, Christian way of life. The highest governing body of the Basel mission, the mission committee, which saw itself as a pietistic mission society, thus assigned women a subordinate position.<sup>2</sup> This had an impact on the mission branch of the Bible Women's Mission, as it was closely linked to the Women's Mission (and this in turn to the male-dominated committees) [\[CLICK\]](#).

In the 19th century, gender constructions were predominantly based on male experiences. Here, the public sphere (gainful employment and politics) was considered to have male connotations and the private, domestic sphere female connotations [\[CLICK\]](#).

With the rising prosperity of the middle classes, however, new spheres of action also opened up for women, which went hand in hand with a differentiation of numerous possibilities for action - e.g. in the form of cooperation within the *external* mission; in this way, the constructed gender boundaries were sometimes transgressed. In this way, the so-called Bible women - as indigenous helpers - also emerged from missionary work.

The European constructions of femininity claimed to be universally valid; they were supposed to apply not only to the European but also to the indigenous-Christian, as well as the

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<sup>1</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Preface, in: Waltraud Ch. Haas, *Erlitten und erstritten. Der Befreiungsweg von Frauen in der Basler Mission 1816-1966*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> European women could first participate in the mission as outsiders, from 1837 as *missionary brides* and from 1842 as single sisters - but it was not until after the re-establishment of the Women's Missionary Society in 1901 that single sisters were actually sent out.

Indian women. India turned out to be of central importance for the *Western* notion of the *Other*.

Although a rich mosaic of images and facets of India also emerged in the tradition of the *West*, the descriptions of Indian femininity - from the point of view of the BM - can be summarised as follows: Indigenous women were regarded by the missionaries as the *property and objects of their husbands, from whose shackles they had to break free* [\[CLICK\]](#).

In this sense, Missionary Meyer writes in her quarterly report of 1937, for example:

"There is no room for the unmarried; otherwise, according to Hindu thinking, she must become a harlot.

[...] She is not a helper because she is considered dependent and weak. [...] She is not a helper, because she is considered dependent and weak.<sup>3</sup>

The missionary writings thus conveyed generalised and stereotyped social, cultural and gender-specific characteristics. This gave the impression that European women occupied a *higher position*, which their *Western* education and their Christian faith had imparted to them. The dominant image of the woman as equal to the (Christian) man was diametrically opposed to the Indian woman dominated and oppressed by her husband. The aim of the BFM was therefore to *uplift* Asian womankind - following the Christian, European model. [\[CLICK\]](#)

The report goes on to say: "Influenced by English education, European culture and the Gospel [...], she [the Indian woman] moves more freely within her family and circle of acquaintances, as well as in public life. She is no longer disinterested, but wants to know what is going on in her country and in the world. The awakening of the Indian people and their desire for freedom and equality has especially shaken women [...] out of their sleep." <sup>4</sup>

Through the proclamation of the Gospel and the message of freedom contained therein, the living conditions of indigenous women were to be improved; this was done in particular by the Bible women, who had previously been indigenous women themselves.

## 2. What are Bible women? [\[Click\]](#)

"These are indigenous Christian women who visit heathen women under the leadership of a missionary woman"; as "direct evangelisation work"<sup>5</sup> - this is how missionary Hoch describes it in 1888.

Mainly widows or married women were used as Bible women.<sup>6</sup> The condition for this was that they were suitable for the required tasks, which included the

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<sup>3</sup> Meyer, Die Stellung der heidnischen Frau im Volkstum v. Süd-Kanara (BMA C-4-3,8 Quartalberichte II.) (1936-1940), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Meyer, Stellung (BMA C-4-3,8 Quarterly Reports II.) (1936-1940), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Z.5\_1882-1891; Address by Mr. Missionary M. Hoch from India, in: Sieundvierzigstes Schreiben des Frauenvereins zu Basel für weibliche Erziehung in den Heidenländern an die theuern Hilfsvereine in Deutschland und der Schweiz, Basel August 1888, pp. 22-29; here: 25.<sup>6</sup> "Several wards entered the work and sent such, mostly elderly widows, to the heathen houses where they read and explained Bible passages [...]" (Schlatter, History, vol.2, 172).

travel service belonged to, could take time off - i.e. had no overly time-consuming commitments at home that could keep them from working. [CLICK]

Here, a "determination of the qualities required for such a post [...] was very important" in order to guarantee "on the one hand, the necessary independence and autonomy of action, and on the other hand, the right femininity and suppleness"<sup>7</sup>. This right femininity and smoothness already began with the way of speaking [CLICK]: "Voice: calm and floating; pronunciation: clear and slow; speech: original and clear, [...] graceful, tactful and cordial, concise and impressive."<sup>8</sup> [CLICK]

In addition, §27 of the 1900 congregational order states that "women and virgins of God-fearing mind and blameless character [...], if they have the necessary gifts and powers, [can] be called to the service of the congregation [i.e. as Bible women]".<sup>9</sup>

Just like the European missionaries, the Bible women also needed to have a blameless, pure character and ideally a God-fearing mind. Bible women should therefore stand firm in their faith in Jesus Christ and, as it were, take on a role model function with regard to a correct, Christian way of life for the indigenous women who had not yet converted. [CLICK]

In theory, it was agreed that "[t]here is [...] no doubt that the work of Bible women is necessary if the people as a whole are to be made acquainted with the Gospel."<sup>10</sup>

The requirements for the calling of the single missionaries can therefore be transferred to the Bible women, as it were. Not only the missionary service of the European missionaries, but also the service of the Bible women had to fit into the existing order of the BM. [CLICK]

### 3. Where did this branch of mission come from and how did it develop?

The BM was the first German-speaking missionary society to use Bible women in India. The origins of this missionary branch are in the Anglo-Saxon world.

The reason for this was that male missionaries in Asia did not have access to the secluded world of women. Women lived in so-called *zenanas*, a separate area in the house where only women lived [REFER TO PICTURE].<sup>11</sup> These women's chambers were only allowed to be entered by other women.

Out of this *need*, the Anglo-Saxon Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) founded a *Baptist Zenana Mission* (1854) in the 19th century and specifically sent (single) women to the

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<sup>7</sup> BMA C-9.1 (15), 4f.

<sup>8</sup> BMA QF-7.7 (5), 3.

<sup>9</sup> BMA Q-9.21 (20), 8. In §54.it is added: "A woman or virgin who is in the service of the community [...] shall be of blameless character. be of character and wait in the fear of God, humility and chastity of their service (Tit. 2:3-5)" (ibid., 14).

<sup>10</sup> Missionary Walter, quoted in Schlatter, *Geschichte*, vol.2, 236.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sutapa Dutta, *British Women Missionaries in Bengal, 1793-1861*, London/New York 2017, 139f.

mission territories. It was also the first missionary society to use the term *Biblewomen* for the indigenous helpers in the (*outer*) mission field.

Through the international cooperation of various mission societies, this mission concept quickly spread beyond the Anglo-Saxon region into the German-speaking world.

However, before the establishment of the Bible women's work (1884), there was an extended discussion about whether it made sense to have such a missionary branch at all. With his memorandum "On the Evangelisation of the Heathen Women and Girls in Kanara, South Mahratta and Malabar"<sup>12</sup> (1882/83), Missionary Diez gave the home leadership the decisive impetus for the development of such a missionary branch, which became more and more differentiated over time. [\[CLICK\]](#)

With the increase in the number of women mission workers, differentiation also began (from 1902) between their areas of responsibility; thus there were: 1. nurses; 2. teaching sisters: for girls' schools and institutions; 3. Bible sisters. This service of women in the church was regarded as diaconal charity, which included "a) The care of the sick; b) The teaching of the weak; [and] c) The advertising of women for Christ"<sup>13</sup>. [\[CLICK\]](#) Accordingly, there was a need for "doctors and nurses for the sick, teachers for the girls, [and] Bible women for the adult women of the Gentile world."<sup>14</sup> Bible women worked in all areas of the mission in which they could be evangelistically active: In schools, hospitals, on home visits, on the road - later increasingly also in church work. [\[CLICK\]](#)

#### 4. What were the tasks of the Bible women and how have they changed over time?

The reports of the missionaries in particular provide information about the tasks of the Bible women. For example, missionary Emanuel Preiswerk reported in 1886:

"Another beneficial institution has been continued and extended during the past year, which contributes no less to bringing the leaven of the Gospel into many female hearts in India. It is the English Bible Society, which now pays 15 native Bible women, who, under the faithful guidance of our missionary women, are active for the Gospel in their surroundings, by going two at a time to the homes of the heathen women, who are otherwise less accessible, and reading passages from the Bible to them, talking to them about it, and also selling parts of the Holy Scriptures or tracts to them. They also offer parts of the Holy Scriptures or tracts for sale. The reception, as is to be expected, is varied; often the heathen women desire such visits, while their husbands or sons scold our Bible women and send them away. [...] I shall refrain from sharing excerpts from the diaries of those women here, [...] but those diaries also bear witness to the fact that these women, who come from our Indian

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<sup>12</sup> Schlatter, Geschichte, vol.2, 171; cf. also BMA C-5.1,26a, 1.

<sup>13</sup> BMA QF-1.11 (116), 1.

<sup>14</sup> BMA QF-1.11 (116), 1.

The Bible women chosen by our missionary brothers and sisters in the Christian churches, while bringing manifold blessings, are at the same time blessed by the Lord for their own hearts".<sup>15</sup>

From this report a number of things emerge in relation to the Bible Women's work [CLICK]: The Bible women are paid by the *British and Foreign Bible Society*. The practical legitimacy of the missionary branch came from the fact that the Bible women - together with the European missionary wives - go into the "otherwise less accessible [...] homes" to proselytise indigenous women there. [CLICK]

However, they were not only accompanied and guided by European missionary wives (and later by single missionaries), but also wrote so-called diaries, which served as a control instrument for the European missionaries in two ways: 1. to see whether the missionary work was being done *properly*; 2. to document the blameless Christian lifestyle.

What is not mentioned here: The European women also needed the guidance of the Bible women, insofar as they acted as bridge builders between the indigenous and the European women. Bible women knew the respective customs and language(s) and were thus an indispensable help in missionary work. [CLICK]

In the homes themselves, the Bible women then read passages from the Bible and talked to the indigenous women about the Bible stories. The methods used became more complex over time. A report from 1935 states retrospectively [CLICK]:

"Around 1900, Sister Ehrensperger [...] successfully developed reading lessons as a means of Bible women's work. [...] Reading and sewing lessons were given, and most of the reading lessons were then devoted to the biblical story, which was told and quizzed. [...] Some learned to read so well that they could buy the New Testament and read it themselves."<sup>16</sup>

With the onset of literacy, Pietism also placed great emphasis on Bible study. Since the Bible was understood as the revelation of the entire divine plan of salvation, the Bible women were supposed to teach indigenous women how to read. The Bible stories used for this purpose also boosted the sale of Bible portions and tracts. Handicraft lessons were added to the reading lessons. Although this evangelisation work in combination with the handicraft lessons was not always entirely consensual, learning a handicraft could be useful in order to participate in the "Kingdom of God work" to participate (e.g. in the industrial mission).

Both the lessons in reading and writing and the handicrafts associated with them made it possible, on the one hand, to practise the Christian faith; on the other hand, here

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<sup>15</sup> Z.5\_1882-1891; Report of the Reverend Emanuel Preiswerk held on 30 June 1886 in the church of St. Martin, in: Fünfundvierzigstes Schreiben des Frauenvereins zu Basel für weibliche Erziehung in den Heidenländern an die theuern Hilfsvereine in Deutschland und der Schweiz, Basel August 1886, pp. 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Meyer, Arbeit (BMA Y.1) (1935), 68...

but also opened up certain (free) spaces; not least because the Bible women acquired theological skills as well as manual skills.

Nevertheless, a speech by missionary Frohmeyer from 1886 [CLICK] states:

"The main thing is and remains [...] the example that our Christian women in India set against the pagan women. And thank God, there is quite a big gap. Of course, in all sorts of outward appearances and trifles, pagan leaven is still often evident."<sup>17</sup>

According to this, the European missionaries recognised the Bible women as Christians and contrasted them with the indigenous women [CLICK] ("The gap is quite large"), but at the same time it is emphasised that they would persist in old *pagan* habits. Thus the biblical women still lacked something to be able to be equal to the European women in their *blameless way of life*. The hierarchy established here is also found in later sources: Missionary Ehrensperger describes in her annual report of 1913 that the Bible women - as well as all other indigenous helpers in missionary work - lacked the ability to "stimulate their pupils to think for themselves and to ask questions"<sup>18</sup>. They had not yet understood the purpose of their work (lack of *revival*), which meant that they could not adequately communicate the Christian faith.

In order to protect themselves from precisely these dangers - the *viciousness of paganism*<sup>19</sup>, as missionary Meyer wrote in 1938 in her report on the Bible women's work - the Bible women needed daily (self-)edification and reassurance. They learned this from the European missionaries: In common Bible and prayer lessons, in courses and later also on Bible women's journeys. By practising the *Christian-Western* way of faith and the practices associated with it, the Bible women trained themselves, so to speak, to be exemplary Christians, which they almost fulfilled in later times. [CLICK]

At the same time, the missionaries always demanded a higher education for Bible women; insofar as one wanted to avoid the dilemma of finding suitable candidates instead of women in need of care, the demands on Bible women's work thus also increased. "The General Conference [...] specified the demands [...] [of] 1903: thorough training of Bible women."<sup>20</sup>

This reflects the relationship of the European missionaries to the missionaries: the need for better education for indigenous women helpers thus established itself

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<sup>17</sup> Z.5\_1882-1891; Address by Missionary I. J. Frohmeyer from India, in: Fünfundvierzigstes Schreiben des Frauenvereins zu Basel für weibliche Erziehung in den Heidenländern an die theuern Hilfsvereine in Deutschland und der Schweiz, Basel August 1886, 12-20; here: p. 18.<sup>18</sup> "The Bible women are, as far as I can judge, diligent and do their duty as well as they can, and are united in love with their pupils, be they young or old. Of course, there are some things about their work that do not satisfy me. One thing they still don't seem to have the right understanding of is that this work on human souls is not so much about teaching knowledge as it is a b o u t awakening new life. Then they are also quite adept at telling Bible stories, but they do not know how to stimulate their pupils to think for themselves and to ask questions. This weakness is not only found among Bible women, but also among seminary-educated teachers and even among catechists" (Ehrensperger, Jahresbericht (BMA Z.5) (1913), 83).

<sup>19</sup> Meyer, Bibelfrauenarbeit (BMA Z.5) (1938), 137f.

<sup>20</sup> Schlatter, Geschichte, vol.2, 238.

only in the course of time, when the demands on the single missionary sisters also grew.

Due to the time-intensive occupations, the accompaniment of the Bible women could no longer be pursued as a part-time branch. Until the middle of the 19th century, women were usually only allowed on the mission field as wives of missionaries. For a long time, the wives were almost the sole ministers to the indigenous women. In order to expand the external mission - and not only the internal mission work - single missionary women were needed, as neither the male missionaries nor their wives were able to provide a distinctive travelling service for the missionisation of indigenous women. Through a new foundation, the Women's Missionary Association was able to select suitable candidates for missionary service and to provide for their training as well as financial support.

Thus the work of the Women's Mission (and its affiliated Bible Women's Mission) continued to develop, but remained without any representation to the outside world, or without any major say on the part of the women themselves. It was only later that the Women's Mission Committee, in consultation with the higher-level committee of the Basel Mission - in which Dorothee Sarasin had been accepted as secretary and the first woman since 1939 - was able to determine who was to work in the mission. The final decision, however, was made by the mission committee in Basel. This circumstance fits seamlessly into the patriarchal structure of the BM.

Nevertheless, over the course of the decades, the Bible woman has disappeared, especially in Asia. Accordingly, the thirties of the 20th century can be seen as the high point of Bible women's work, insofar as the work declined continuously in the years thereafter. On the one hand, the voluntary service of women in the congregation was emphasised, on the other hand, various forms of women's ministry in the church developed - the areas of work became more differentiated.

The more the possibilities of higher education for women increased, the more the importance of simply trained Bible women decreased. Various reasons may have been decisive for this.

Through their activities, Bible women represented the central, decisive link between the European missionaries and the indigenous people for decades.

This shows the ambivalent character of mission: the European missionaries had the (positive) claim of *lifting up* the female sex, but the indigenous women became *objects of* Western benefactor spirit; under the guise of a good (Christian) claim, colonial structures of violence were reproduced and transferred to missionary action. At the same time, the Bible women (just like the European missionaries) acquired certain skills for their work in order to be able to *play a role in* the mission discourse (such as preaching and evangelising). In doing so, they mostly acted contrary to the prevailing female role models, which for women were

were accompanied by defined spaces for action. This opened up emancipatory (free) spaces that enabled a step towards gender justice. Christiane Keim, for example, describes biblical women's work in her research paper *Frauenmission und Frauenemanzipation (Women's Mission and Women's Emancipation)* as the forerunner of women's ordination.

The biblical women can thus be described not only as cultural but also as *gender-transcending* border crossers who acted in both the public (male connotation) and the private (female connotation) spheres. In doing so, they overcame some of the barriers of caste, religion and gender norms.

In conclusion, (Protestant) Christianity in India would probably not have spread in this way without the indigenous biblical women. The interactions between the European and indigenous women influenced the way these women understood their *self* and how the European missionaries, on the other hand, constructed their counterpart - the *pagan other*. That the Bible women's work was successful is shown not least by the fact that there are still Bible women in India today.