
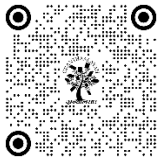


CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES' ACTIVITIES DURING THE COLONIAL ERA: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of Christian missionary activities in colonial India and their enduring legacy in modern Indian society. Initially focused on religious conversion, missionary efforts gradually expanded to include education, healthcare, and social reforms, profoundly influencing India's social and intellectual landscape. Missionaries played a pivotal role in establishing educational institutions and hospitals, promoting literacy, social equality, and the rights of marginalised communities. Their advocacy for reforms such as the abolition of Sati and widow remarriage contributed to India's broader social justice movements. Additionally, the Western ideals introduced by missionaries helped shape the intellectual foundations of Indian nationalism and the fight for independence. The modern implications of missionary work are seen in the continued operation of missionary-founded institutions, the hybridisation of religious and cultural practices, and ongoing debates around conversion and religious pluralism. This study also highlights the need for further research into the multifaceted legacy of missionary activities in India.

Keywords: Christian Missionaries, Colonial India, Education System, Social Reforms, Indian Nationalism, Religious Conversion, Caste Reform, Indian Christian Communities, Post-Colonial Legacy, Cultural Hybridisation

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN INDIA

The arrival of Christian missionaries in India dates back to the 16th century, with the Portuguese bringing Jesuit missions to Goa and other coastal regions. These early missions were primarily focused on conversion efforts and spreading Christianity among indigenous populations (Bauman, 2013). Jesuit missionaries like St. Francis Xavier played a pivotal role in spreading Catholicism, especially in South India (Frykenberg, 2003). During the British colonial period, Protestant missionary societies, such as the London and the Baptist Missionary Societies, became prominent, marking a new phase of missionary work. These Protestant missions, which gained official sanction with the Charter Act of 1813, expanded their activities beyond religious proselytisation to include social reform, education, and healthcare. This shift was a strategic response to the challenges of direct conversion and reflected a broader humanitarian outlook that sought to transform Indian society through institutional means.

1.2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this study is to trace the evolution of Christian missionary activities in India from the 16th century to the end of the colonial era, focusing on how these activities shaped the country's social, cultural, and educational landscape. This study also aims to evaluate the long-term legacy of missionary efforts in modern India, particularly in shaping its education system, social reform movements, and political discourse.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How did Christian missionary activities evolve throughout the colonial period in India?
- What is the legacy of these activities in modern India, particularly in social, educational, and cultural contexts?

1.4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study involves a historical analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include missionary archives, letters, and colonial records, while secondary sources comprise scholarly research on the history of Christian missions in India. The study will analyse the strategies employed by missionaries for conversion, social reform, and education and examine the resistance and challenges they faced from local religious and social leaders.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES IN INDIA

2.1. THE EARLY MISSIONARY PRESENCE (16TH TO 18TH CENTURY)

Christian missionary activity in India began with the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th century. Jesuit missionaries were particularly active during this period, with St. Francis Xavier being one of the most notable figures. He worked extensively in Goa and along the southern coasts, focusing on conversion through education and interaction with local communities (Shourie, 1994). Missionaries during this period often faced the challenge of navigating deeply entrenched local religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. While conversions were not widespread, these early efforts laid the groundwork for future missionary activities.

2.2. THE RISE OF BRITISH PROTESTANT MISSIONS (19TH CENTURY)

The British colonial era saw the rise of Protestant missionary efforts, focusing on education and social reform. Missionaries like William Carey, who arrived in India in 1793, were instrumental in translating the Bible into local languages and establishing schools (Oddie, 1991). Carey's work in Serampore, Bengal, included the founding of the Serampore College, which became a hub for higher education and Bible studies. Similarly, another prominent missionary, Alexander Duff, was known for promoting Western-style education through English-medium schools, believing it would lead to a more profound societal transformation.

2.3. MISSIONARY WORK IN DIFFERENT REGIONS

Missionary activity in India was not uniform and varied significantly by region. In South India, missions were more successful in conversions due to long-standing Christian communities, especially in Kerala. In Bengal, the focus was more on education and social reform, with less emphasis on mass conversions (Frykenberg, 2003). In North India and tribal areas, missionaries faced significant resistance but were able to reach marginalised communities, including lower-caste groups and tribal populations, through education and healthcare initiatives.

Table 1 Comparison of Missionary Activities in Different Regions of India (19th Century)

Region	Primary Focus	Key Missionaries	Notable Achievements
South India	Conversion and Education	St. Francis Xavier, Robert Caldwell	Established long-standing Christian communities; focus on vernacular education
Bengal	Education and Social Reform	William Carey, Alexander Duff	Serampore College, Bible translations, advocacy for social reforms like the abolition of Sati

North India	Education and Medical Aid	James Long, Henry Martyn	Limited conversions, focus on literacy and healthcare in rural areas
Tribal Areas	Healthcare and Social Services	Stephen Hislop, John Wilson	Outreach to marginalised tribal communities, development of healthcare infrastructure

2.4. CHALLENGES AND RESISTANCE

Missionary activities in India were met with varying degrees of resistance from local religious and social leaders. Hindu and Muslim elites often opposed missionary efforts, particularly in regions like Bengal and North India, where religious orthodoxy was strong (Kosambi, 2007). Revivalist movements such as the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj emerged as responses to missionary activities, advocating for the reform of Hinduism without converting to Christianity (Jones, 1992). The interaction between missionaries and Indian reformers created a dynamic environment where ideas about religion, education, and social progress were hotly debated.

3. EVOLUTION OF MISSIONARY STRATEGIES

3.1. SHIFT FROM CONVERSION TO SOCIAL REFORM

During the early phases of missionary work, the primary objective was religious conversion. However, by the 19th century, many missionaries shifted their focus from direct proselytisation to broader social reform and humanitarian work. This change was driven by the realisation that their efforts in conversion were often met with resistance, particularly among the upper castes and religious elites (Robinson, 2003). Instead, missionaries turned to social issues like education, healthcare, and women's rights, recognising that these avenues could bring lasting change to Indian society. They advocated for the abolition of Sati (the burning of widows), promoting widow remarriage, and improving the status of women through education (Frykenberg, 2003). They also championed the cause of marginalised groups, such as the Dalits and tribal communities, providing them with access to education and healthcare, areas where the traditional Indian social structure had failed them (Oddie, 1991).

3.2. EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Missionary contributions to education were perhaps their most significant legacy. By the mid-19th century, missionaries had established numerous schools, colleges, and universities across India. These institutions introduced Western-style education, which included subjects like science, mathematics, and history, alongside Christian moral teachings (Laird, 2005). More importantly, they spread the English language, which became the medium of instruction in many missionary schools, thus paving the way for the emergence of an educated Indian elite who would later play key roles in the nationalist movement. The following table provides data on the number of educational institutions founded by missionaries in different regions of India by 1900, the percentage of students from marginalised communities, and the percentage of female enrolment.

Table 2 Missionary-Founded Educational Institutions in India (1900)

Region	Number of Schools	% of Marginalised Community Students	% of Female Enrolment
South India	250	40%	35%
Kerala	180	45%	40%
Bengal	150	25%	20%
North India	120	30%	15%
Tribal Areas	80	60%	25%

3.3. ANALYSIS OF DATA

- **Number of Schools:** South India had the highest number of missionary-founded schools by 1900, with 250 institutions. This region's long-standing Christian communities and greater acceptance of missionary activities contributed to this figure. Bengal and North India also had a significant number of institutions, but the emphasis in these regions was more on social reform and education rather than direct conversion.
- **Marginalised Community Representation:** One notable contribution of missionary education was including students from marginalised communities, such as Dalits and tribal groups. The data shows that tribal areas had

the highest percentage of marginalised community students (60%), followed by Kerala (45%) and South India (40%). This aligns with the missionary strategy of focusing on groups often neglected by the traditional Hindu caste system (Robinson, 2003).

- **Female Enrolment:** The percentage of female enrolment in missionary schools was relatively high for the time, particularly in Kerala (40%) and South India (35%). Missionaries strongly emphasised women's education, viewing it as a means of social upliftment and moral improvement. This focus on female education laid the groundwork for the gradual acceptance of women's rights and roles in public life in India (Bauman, 2013).

3.3. MEDICAL AND HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS

In addition to education, Christian missionaries were instrumental in establishing hospitals and healthcare facilities across India. These efforts were not only aimed at addressing the population's physical needs but also served as a means of gaining the trust of local communities and introducing Christian moral teachings through service (Kosambi, 2007). Missionary hospitals were often the only source of healthcare in rural and underserved areas, particularly in tribal regions and among lower-caste communities. For instance, hospitals founded by missionaries in Maharashtra and North India provided much-needed medical services to Dalits and women, often excluded from traditional healthcare systems (Oddie, 1991). Missionaries also introduced Western medical practices, including surgery and sanitation, which were new to many parts of India. The legacy of these early medical efforts can still be seen today in the many Christian hospitals operating across the country.

4. THE COLONIAL LEGACY OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES

4.1. IMPACT ON INDIAN EDUCATION

Christian missionaries had a profound and lasting impact on education in India, particularly during the colonial period. Missionary schools and colleges, such as Serampore College (founded by William Carey) and St. Stephen's College in Delhi, played a crucial role in introducing Western-style education. These institutions helped spread literacy, modern scientific knowledge, and the English language, which later became the medium of instruction in many Indian schools and universities (Bauman, 2013). The missionaries' focus on education was not limited to elite classes. Many of their schools provided education to lower-caste groups, significantly different from the traditional caste-based educational system (Laird, 2005). As a result, missionary education contributed to the rise of a Western-educated Indian elite who would later lead India's nationalist movement. These institutions also played a critical role in fostering critical thinking and debate, which were instrumental in spreading anti-colonial sentiments.

Table 3 Missionary Contributions to Education in India (19th-20th Century)

Region	No. of Missionary Schools (1900)	Literacy Rate (1947)	Percentage of Indian Elite Educated in Missionary Schools
Bengal	200	24%	45%
South India	250	28%	40%
Maharashtra	150	22%	35%
North India	180	19%	30%

4.2. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS

In addition to education, Christian missionaries had a lasting impact on social reforms in India. Several key movements were to improve the lives of marginalised groups, particularly lower-caste individuals and women. One of the most notable contributions of missionaries was their advocacy for the abolition of Sati—the practice of widow immolation. British missionaries, in collaboration with Indian reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, successfully lobbied for the abolition of this practice in 1829 (Oddie, 1991).

Missionaries were also vocal proponents of women's rights. They established schools for girls, a radical departure from the traditional Indian educational system, where formal education was reserved mainly for boys. Additionally, missionaries supported widow remarriage and fought against child marriage, contributing to a slow but steady shift in Indian gender norms (Kosambi, 2007). Missionary efforts in caste reform were similarly significant. They worked closely with marginalised communities, including Dalits and tribal groups, to provide them with education, healthcare, and

opportunities for social mobility. Many of these communities found Christianity appealing because of its emphasis on equality before God, which contrasted with the entrenched caste hierarchy in Hinduism (Frykenberg, 2003).

4.3. RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION

Christian missionary efforts in India also led to the blending of religious and cultural practices. As missionaries engaged with local populations, religious and cultural hybridisation emerged. Indian Christian communities, particularly in South India and Kerala, began to develop practices that incorporated elements of both Christianity and Hinduism. This included the adoption of Indian customs, attire, and music in Christian worship, as well as the veneration of saints alongside traditional Indian spiritual figures (Robinson, 2003). This hybridisation was not limited to religious practices but extended into art, architecture, and literature. Indian churches built by missionaries often incorporated elements of traditional Indian temple architecture. In literature, Indian Christian writers contributed to a body of work that blended Western literary forms with Indian themes and concerns (Chatterjee, 1999). Indian Christian communities, while distinct, became integrated into the broader fabric of Indian society. They were key to establishing a modern, pluralistic state in India's independence movement.

5. MISSIONARY CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIAN NATIONALISM

Missionary work in India during the colonial period laid the groundwork for many social justice movements that later evolved into the Indian nationalist movement. Missionaries introduced Western ideas of equality, democracy, and human rights, which resonated with Indian reformers and intellectuals. These ideals became part of the broader discourse on independence, helping to shape the thinking of many nationalist leaders (Oddie, 1991). For example, figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, influenced by Western and Indian ideas, collaborated with missionaries to push for reforms such as the abolition of Sati and the promotion of widow remarriage. Additionally, many Indian nationalist leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, were educated in missionary-run institutions and exposed to Western concepts of liberty and justice. Although Gandhi criticised the proselytising efforts of missionaries, he acknowledged their role in advancing education and healthcare (Robinson, 2003). Missionaries also advocated for social justice in colonial India, often opposing the oppressive practices of the British administration. Many missionaries, such as James Long in Bengal, criticised British policies that exploited Indian labour and resources. They worked alongside Indian reformers and provided moral support to the emerging nationalist movement, although their primary goal remained the spread of Christianity.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Christian missionary activities in colonial India evolved significantly over the centuries, shifting from initial attempts at religious conversion to broader social engagement through education, healthcare, and social reforms. Missionaries were critical in establishing schools, colleges, and hospitals, which continue to influence India's modern education and healthcare systems. By advocating for reforms such as the abolition of Sati, widow remarriage, and caste-based discrimination, missionaries contributed to the broader movement for social justice in colonial India. Blending Christian and Indian cultural practices also led to the formation of distinct Indian Christian communities that integrated elements of both traditions. Missionary efforts had varied success across regions, with South India and Kerala witnessing higher conversion rates and stronger integration of Christian institutions into society. However, their influence extended beyond conversion, as missionaries introduced Western ideals that shaped the intellectual foundations of Indian nationalism and the fight for independence. The legacy of missionary activities is still visible in the continued operation of missionary-founded educational institutions, which are regarded as centres of excellence.

6.2. EVALUATION OF THE MISSIONARY LEGACY IN MODERN INDIA

The legacy of missionary work in modern India is multifaceted. While critics point to the coercive nature of some conversions and the cultural imperialism embedded in their efforts, proponents highlight their pivotal role in social reform and modernisation. Missionary-founded schools and hospitals continue to serve millions of Indians, regardless

of their religious affiliation, and are often at the forefront of social service. The existence of a vibrant Indian Christian community, with its unique blend of cultural practices, is a testament to the enduring impact of missionary work. Debates around conversion, religious freedom, and pluralism are ongoing in India, and the historical context of missionary activities continues to inform these discussions. The historical narrative, therefore, is not a simple tale of religious imposition but a complex story of interaction, adaptation, and lasting societal change.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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