Protestant Missions and Dalit Mass Movements in Nineteenth Century India

*Joseph McQuade*

Christians in India trace their roots to the apostle Thomas himself, forming an ancient community which has seen the rise and fall of empires. In spite of this fact, Christian communities in India had remained small and localized for centuries, never achieving the rates of expansion and mass conversion that took place in Roman and Medieval Europe. With the coming of Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century and, in particular, through the efforts of Jesuits such as Francis Xavier and Robert de Nobili, Christianity expanded marginally. Despite moderate successes in coastal regions of Portuguese influence, Christianity failed to attract a widespread following across social boundaries and remained generally confined to Indians of higher castes. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, these demographics changed drastically as people of lower castes, and particularly the casteless dalits, flocked to the Christian religion in unprecedented numbers. To give some idea of the scope of these changes, the number of Christians in India had increased from around one million in 1860 to nearly five million in 1930\(^1\), including the conversion of over one million dalits by 1914.\(^2\) An official census taken in 1931 indicates that approximately five out of six Indian Christians lived in a rural rather than an urban environment.\(^3\) The reasons for these radical changes can be partly traced to the Protestant missionary activities that took place during this period, but the enormous success of these missions could not have been achieved without the initiative and enthusiasm of the thousands of dalits who converted en masse. For this reason, it is impossible to understand

\(^3\) Ibid, p. 61.
the expansion of Christianity in nineteenth century India without understanding its relationship to the marginalized dalits. Ultimately the Protestant missions of this period were able to achieve their remarkable success as a result of their focus on the poor and marginalized of society, their willingness to fight on behalf of these marginalized individuals on issues of social justice, and the opportunity for emancipation and dignity which Protestant Christianity promised to its converts.

While the decision to focus on the poor and marginalized members of society may seem a logical Christian approach, it was not the prevailing strategy of missionaries at the beginning of the nineteenth century. When the first Catholic missionaries arrived in India with the Portuguese trading ships in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the few Indians who converted tended to belong to lower castes, as members of the higher castes did not want to mingle with the ‘unclean’ Portuguese who ate meat, drank liquor, and rarely bathed. Hoping to win over the higher classes of Indian society, Robert de Nobili decided to try a different approach and adopted Hindu customs such as abstaining from beef and associating only with members of the higher castes. This approach achieved some localized success at conversion, but created an unfortunate precedent by perpetuating the distinctions of caste even though “it is the ambition of Christianity to destroy” said system. While many Christian missionaries challenged attitudes towards dalits and the poor, their efforts were centered around reforming the existing caste system as opposed to completely abolishing it. Centuries later, in the first half of the nineteenth century, missionaries such as the Protestant Alexander Duff were still using the same basic strategies of

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5 Ibid, p. 88.
6 Ibid, p. 50.
attempting to convert the upper castes and from there uplift the Indian people. This was a standard Christian missionary approach; it was aligned with the example of Saint Paul, who sought to evangelize rich urban centers in the hopes that Christianity would subsequently flow out into the rural countryside. However, it was becoming readily apparent over the course of the nineteenth century that the city dwellers of India were extremely resistant to the Christian message and were simply not converting in large numbers.

One area in which initial Protestant attempts at conversion were particularly frustrating was among the Telugu-speaking people of Andhra Pradesh. American Baptists had been evangelizing the region for nearly thirty years, and yet after all that time they had converted a mere thirty Christians. The mission almost closed down altogether until a young missionary named John Clough took it upon himself to attempt to convert the inhabitants of this region. After initial failures, Clough received word in 1866 that there was a dalit named Yerraguntla Periah who specifically requested to be baptized. As a dalit, Periah was lower than the lowest castes of Hindu society, an ‘untouchable’ with whom higher caste Indian Christians would not want to associate. Clough felt it was his duty to accept, saying that the issue “was not open to us to debate”, and baptized Periah shortly thereafter. Periah returned to his home and began to preach the Christian message from village to village, attracting thousands of converts. In 1870, eleven-hundred and three Christians were baptized. Six years later, more than three thousand were baptized as Periah’s newly adopted religion spread like wildfire through interwoven networks of family and clan. Clough kept the requirements simple for these waves of converts, requiring only that they refrain from the eating of carrion, the worship of idols, and working on

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7 Ibid, p. 93.
10 Webster, John. The Dalit Christians, p. 43.
This incident is tremendously important as it exemplifies the changing landscape of Christianity in India during the mid-nineteenth century. It is significant that it was Periah who sought out Clough and not the other way around. Periah had heard about Christianity from a relative of his who had converted and so he decided to find a missionary in order to be baptized himself.12

This kind of dalit initiative and leadership was one of the most common features of the mass movements of the nineteenth century and would forever change the makeup of the Indian church. Years before Clough’s astonishing success with Periah and the dalits of Andhra Pradesh, another dalit named Vedamanikam had led a mass movement of dalits into conversion in 1818. Similarly, in 1849 a converted robber named Venkayya prompted an explosion of Christian conversions in his district, with numbers that had reached twenty-nine thousand by 1901 and almost fifty thousand by 1911.13 While there were certainly exceptions to this pattern, it is important to note that many of the mass movements of this period were initiated by dalits rather than by missionaries.14 As such, accompanying the shift in emphasis from high caste Hindus to dalits, many missionaries also began to focus their attention on the training and education of newly converted Christian leaders.15 The Protestant emphasis on the translation of the Bible made it accessible to any dalit who wanted to read it, and this may account for the fact that throughout this period Christian dalits generally had higher literacy rates than their non-Christian peers.16 It is worth noting that while this rising prominence of dalit leadership in the church resulted in significant numerical growth, it was also a detriment to the conversion of high caste

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11 Ibid, 44.
12 Ibid, 42.
14 Webster, John. The Dalit Christians, p. 38.
15 Ibid, p. 61.
16 Webster, John. The Dalit Christians, p. 67.
Hindus, some of whom said “your religion is good, but you have spoiled it by giving it to Pariahs.” Nonetheless, there is no denying the fact that dalit initiative and leadership were key factors in driving the growth of Christianity during the nineteenth century. As such it is important to understand just what it was that motivated so many dalits to seek out the Christian message for themselves.

Perhaps the most important factor behind this initiative was the positive impression that surrounded Christianity during the late nineteenth century. In earlier periods, Catholics had often been unpopular among segments of the Indian population due to their dietary habits and their perceived association with the exploitative Portuguese traders. Throughout the sixteenth century, “the unholy lives of the Portuguese formed one of the main obstacles to the conversion of the natives”. However, by the mid-nineteenth century this perception of European Christians had changed drastically as Protestant missionary groups such as Anglicans and Baptists had shifted their emphasis to the lowest classes of society “to whom their message of love and equality were more attractive”. The Christians of this period proved themselves by putting their faith into practice, opening schools and hospitals for the poor and providing relief work during outbreaks of cholera or famine through the funding of Christian benefactors back in England. This pattern was not unique to Protestants – while Catholic emphasis had previously focused more on the upper castes of society, by the 1880s a shift of focus to the casteless tribes people of Chota Nagpur yielded impressive results.

18 Massey, James. Dalits in India, p. 87.
20 Gladstone, J.W. Protestant Christianity and People’s Movements in Kerala, p. 152.
21 Ibid, p. 97.
22 Moffet, Samuel Hugh. A History of Christianity in Asia, p. 430.
One important example of Christian charity during this period was John Clough’s response to the great famine of 1876. While Clough began by distributing financial aid and cholera pills to those in need, his most significant action was taking out a contract to dig a three and a half mile section of the Buckingham canal. Clough appointed his dalit preachers as overseers and was thus able to employ large numbers of dalit labourers who eagerly accepted the opportunity for wages, realizing that they would receive far better treatment at the hands of their fellow dalits than they would in similar projects run by high caste Hindus. These labourers received daily exposure to the Christian message of Clough and his preachers, and soon clamored for the chance to be baptized. As the famine abated in 1878, Clough baptized 1168 new Christians in the month of June, with another 7513 baptized in July. It seemed that Clough’s work had made a significant impression on the very people whom he had sought to help.

In addition to these acts of benevolence, Protestant missionaries’ apparent association with the British government was also attractive to dalits during this period. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, missionary activities were forbidden throughout the subcontinent by the East India Company, which was often a greater obstacle to evangelism than the local Hindu kings. This changed in 1813 when, in response to public outrage in England, the East India Company was compelled to grant missionaries in its territories new freedom to proselytize. This created a situation in which missionaries’ activities were neither encouraged nor prevented by the government. After the crushing of the Indian Mutiny in 1858, sovereignty of India passed from the East India Company to Queen Victoria, who continued to promote an official policy of

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religious impartiality which neither favoured nor opposed the work of missionaries.  
Some feared that the mutiny had been caused at least in part by earlier social reformers and by a fear of Christian conversion on the part of Hindus and Muslims. As such, it was important that the government was not seen to be imposing its Protestant religion on its subjects. However, many Indians were unaware of this fact, and so there was a popular misconception throughout the nineteenth century that missionaries had more political clout with the increasingly powerful British government than they really did. On the other hand, this perception was not completely without merit, as Protestant missionaries were generally willing to petition the government on behalf of dalit grievances. While these missionaries may not have had the official backing of the British government, their status as European Protestants made these grievances much harder for the government to ignore than they would have been coming from the dalits themselves.

This is made evident through an examination of the circumstances surrounding the abolition of slavery in Kerala in 1855. In the early nineteenth century, slavery was a pervasive aspect of society in Kerala. Slaves were owned both by the government and by local landlords and were treated worse than animals because, as dalits, they were seen as polluting. Slaves were worked brutally, tortured regularly, prohibited from the use of public roads and denied access to either education or the Courts of justice. Missionaries tried a number of different strategies to reform and improve the existing system, such as the adoption of some slaves into Christian boarding schools in an attempt to undermine the oppression of the slaves through education. These attempts were largely unsuccessful, however, perhaps because they failed to tackle the

25 Massey, S. Christian Missionaries in India, p. 274.
28 Gladstone, J. W. Protest Christianity and People’s Movements in Kerala, p. 203.
institution of slavery itself. Consequently, missionaries attempted to bring the plight of the slaves to the attention of the British public oversees and the British administration in India. The missionaries published a memorandum in 1847 requesting the abolition of slavery in Kerala, but this memorandum was denied after heated protests by the Travancore landholders. For the next two years, missionaries continued to lobby for abolition, eventually bringing the British administration to their side by 1849. A half measure was taken in 1853 when the local Maharaja signed a proclamation that children born of slave parents from that point onwards would be considered legally free. This was not sufficient for the British administration, however, and after putting further pressure on local rulers, slavery was legally abolished throughout Kerala in June of 1855. This incident demonstrates that while missionaries did not have the official backing of the state, they did have the ability to effect legal changes on behalf of dalits through determined appeals to the British administration. Additionally, it serves as another reason the Christian message was becoming increasingly appealing to Indian dalits, because, for many, it came to be associated with the opportunity for tangible social betterment and spiritual emancipation.

However, it is important not to overstate the impact of Christianity on dalit social improvement throughout the nineteenth century. In this period, both Christian and non-Christian dalits were developing a growing sense of self awareness and a willingness to fight for their own social betterment. Many who did not wish to convert to Christianity sought emancipation through other means such as gaining employment in the army or converting to other non-Hindu

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31 Ibid, p. 156.
32 Ibid, p. 158.
33 Ibid, p. 159.
34 Ibid, p. 75.
religions, particularly Islam or Sikhism. Nonetheless, many dalits saw Christianity as the most appealing opportunity for improving their lot. Christian missionaries contrasted the equality of their own religion with the hierarchical caste distinctions of Hinduism, and many dalits were won over by this message, seeing religious conversion as “a rejection of a hierarchy which kept Dalits down.” Conversion offered dalits a new identity, renewed self-respect, and the chance to improve themselves through education. Because of all of the factors mentioned above, there was a popular perception among dalits that becoming a Christian offered tangible benefits for bettering their own material lives, giving them the dignity to begin to resist their exploitation by the higher castes.

While the main emphasis of this paper has been the social and material motivations for conversion among the Indian dalits, it is essential to note that this process of improvement was by no means a linear progression. While converting to Christianity offered certain social incentives, it also carried a number of important risks. John Clough’s requirement to abstain from the worship of idols, for instance, often transformed Christian converts into outsiders within their own communities, unable to participate in many village or community ceremonies. As a result, new Christians were often exposed to varying degrees of ostracism, isolation, and in some cases outright persecution. Many landlords imposed crippling economic hobbles on converts in an attempt to stifle a religion which some feared was the first step towards a dalit rebellion. In one incident which occurred in Kerala in 1854, just before the abolition of slavery, a newly converted Christian named Devasahayam was arrested by local authorities for refusing to work without wages. Buoyed up by his newfound self-confidence, Devasahayam

35 Webster, John. The Dalit Christians, p. 55.
36 Ibid, p. 32.
37 Gladstone, J. W. Protestant Christianity and People’s Movements in Kerala, p. 77.
38 Webster, John. The Dalit Christians, p. 65.
defended his rights and was tortured to death as a result.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, while the prominence of British military authority throughout the subcontinent limited the ability of local rulers or landlords to engage in direct or organized persecutions, like those that had occurred in Japan or China in earlier periods, the decision to convert to Christianity still carried substantial risks for the dalits of India. Nonetheless, these persecutions failed to halt the advancement of Christianity in any significant way, and in some cases, as in so many other instances within Christian history, these persecutions almost seemed to accelerate rates of conversion. When Catholic missionaries were driven out of Chota Nagpur due to persecutions following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, they returned three years later to find that the number of Chota Nagpuri Christians had actually swelled to nearly ten thousand.\textsuperscript{40}

Overall, it is clear that the amazing success of Christian missionaries in India throughout the nineteenth century relied on a number of important and interrelated factors. The shifting emphasis of missionaries from the higher castes of Hinduism to the lower orders of society played a crucial role in making Christianity an attractive option for dalit liberation. However, it was not the European and American missionaries but the dalits themselves who were most instrumental in the rapid growth of Christianity during this period. Through a combination of local leadership and courage in the face of persecution, dalits became increasingly assertive in their desire for personal betterment. This desire was fueled by the encouraging message of Christian missionaries who proved themselves willing to work diligently and selflessly on behalf of the struggling dalits. While the specific circumstances of official British policy in India limited the power of these missionaries to wield significant political authority, they nonetheless provided an important link between dalits and the government which enabled the passing of

\textsuperscript{39} Gladstone, J. W. \textit{Protestant Christianity and People’s Movements in Kerala}, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{40} Moffett, Samuel Hugh. \textit{A History of Christianity in Asia}, p. 422.
important legislation on behalf of the oppressed classes, such as the abolition of slavery in Kerala in 1855. As such, the relationship between Christian missionaries and the dalits that they converted is inextricably intertwined with the dalit quest for spiritual and social emancipation which manifested itself so often in this period through mass conversions to Christianity.
Works Cited


