

HENRIETTE BUGGE



MISSION
AND
TAMIL
SOCIETY

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*Social and Religious Change
in South India
(1840-1900)*

Henriette Bugge



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Introductory Note

In this study I use a number of words and terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader. I try to explain these words as succinctly as possible the first time I use them. After that, please refer to the appended Glossary, which more fully explains the terms used in the text. If the profusion of unfamiliar terms obscures the meaning of the text, I can only apologize to the reader.

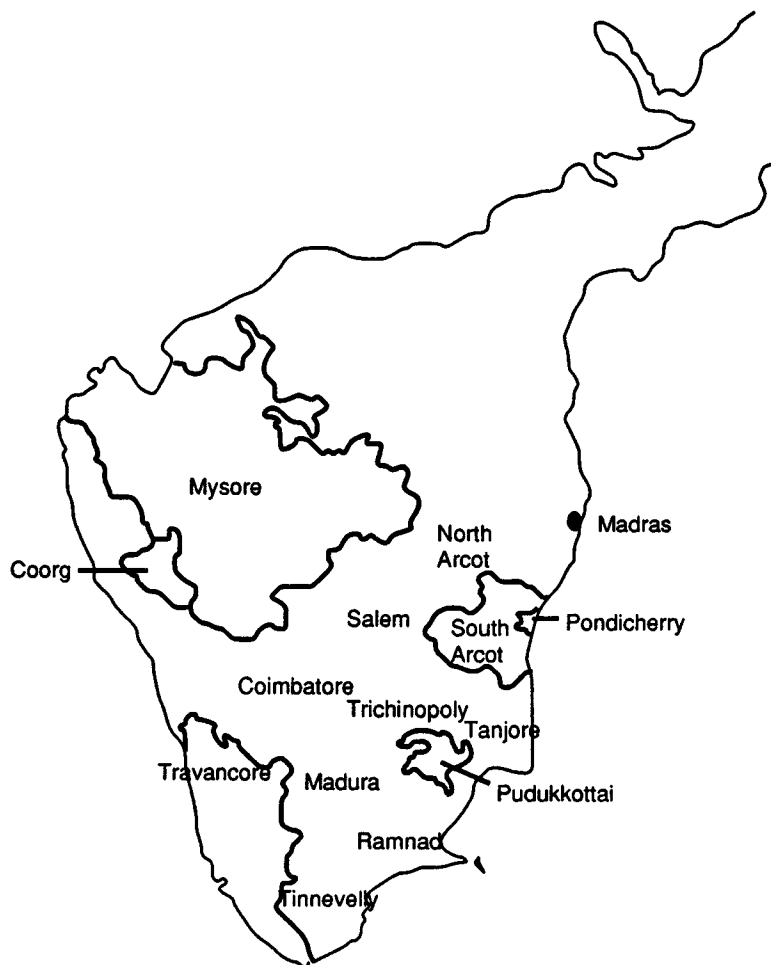
The transliteration I use for Indian terms may seem too simple in the eyes of readers familiar with writings on Indian history. I use no diacritical marks at all and take the liberty of appending an 's' to Tamil, Sanskrit and Arabic terms in their plural form. Generally, I retain the traditional English transliteration – such as *poligar* instead of *palaiyakkarakar*, *shakti* instead of *Cakti* – for no other reason than that these terms are more easily recognizable for the reader with a scant knowledge of Indian languages and of the specific administrative terms which were constructed in the early decades of the British Raj.

English conventions shall also be retained regarding proper names. The early Jesuit missionaries in India have thus been given their English names instead of the Italian, Spanish, French or Latin version, i.e. St. Francis Xavier, Robert de Nobili and St. John de Britto.

Quotations from French, German and Danish have been translated into English by me.

In the text, the names of the two missionary societies, the Danish Missionary Society and the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, are abbreviated DMS and MEP respectively.

Map 1: South India in the Nineteenth Century





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CHAPTER 1

Approach to the Study

Contemporary writings on Indian society often have difficulties in dealing with the relationship between religion, politics and economy. The areas of economy and politics have been the subject of keen discussions and pertinent analysis, as has the area of religion and religious identity, but attempts to combine the two approaches have been few and far between. In 1922 Mahatma Gandhi expressed the view that in India there could be no clear-cut distinction between religion and politics.¹ This was not a view invented by Gandhi himself. It was rather a view which was deeply rooted in the colonial understanding of Indian social mechanisms and political patterns. The British basically viewed all Indian political and economic behaviour as either conforming with or in opposition to religious identity or caste identity.² This view seems to have led to the popular belief among many contemporary Western writers that social and political problems in India can be ascribed to the inertia of the Indian religions. Indian religions are seen as reactionary political forces hindering 'progress'.³

More astute observers, specifically anthropologists and students of the sociology of religions, have in recent years argued for the dynamic and geographically diversified character of Indian religions. The close link between religious identity and political behaviour has received considerable attention but, in a significant departure from the Gandhian way of looking at things, the focus has been on religious identity and its significance for political action rather than the other way around.⁴ One of the areas where religion as a dynamic factor in Indian society is most apparent has however been much neglected in the scholarly debate. It is the area of missionary activity and conversion, the exchange of one religious identity for another.

Until recently, the study of this specific area has followed in the footsteps of traditional missionary writings.⁵ By this I refer to the concentration on single individuals and their work in establishing Christian communities and in building churches. Also, this kind

of writing tends to view the converts as separating themselves from their surroundings by the act of conversion and any remaining ties to their previous world of beliefs and social connections as evidence of unsuccessful conversion.⁶ Such a way of looking at conversions matches with the views found in the nineteenth-century missionary reports written for the home boards and the supporters. With the works by G.A. Oddie from the 1960s and 1970s, this picture changed and for the first time Christian conversions were seen in a broader framework of social and economic history.⁷ All the same, the writings by Oddie remained outside the 'mainstream' of historical and anthropological scholarship, as they are highly descriptive and only to a lesser extent analytical and theoretical. Furthermore, in Oddie's writings the main emphasis is on the disruptions between pre-conversion and post-conversion and the problems caused by adhering to Christian beliefs and practices in a non-Christian milieu. In 1980 another significant work appeared, namely Duncan Forrester's book on the attitudes of Protestant missionaries to the phenomenon of caste. Here, for the first time, the missionary perceptions of caste are seen in the context of the nineteenth-century scholarly and administrative views of caste and of the Indian society in general.⁸ The most astonishing, however, is that with very few exceptions all this scholarly interest in the history of Christian missions is concentrated on the Protestant missions. The Roman Catholic missions in India have aroused very little interest.⁹

Only with the work by three younger scholars did the study of Christian missions in India catch up with the theoretical and empirical findings of modern scholarship. Rosalind O'Hanlon's book on the low caste politician, Jotirao Phule,¹⁰ concentrating on one Protestant mission, convincingly shows how missionary writings and discourse had penetrated the Indian political debate in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Significantly, this did not necessarily lead to the baptism of the politicians who used the missionary language or were influenced by the missionaries' stands on political and moral issues. David Mosse's dissertation¹¹ on the social and religious history of a small village in Ramnad, South India, shows that the expectations of the Roman Catholic congregations were decisive factors in shaping missionary strategies. Further, David Mosse argued that the Jesuit mission with a very keen sense of the workings of the existing social system adapted itself and shaped its requirements and set-up

accordingly. Susan Bayly's book on Muslims and Christians in South India,¹² which attempts to cover both Protestant and Roman Catholic missions, also argues for the complex and adaptable character of South Indian society. According to Susan Bayly, both of the 'conversion religions', Islam and Christianity, were shaped and moulded to fit into the South Indian religious environment and into the social normative system, to the extent that the shifting religious identity did not signify a sharp break between orthodoxies but rather a form of syncretism. The significance of these works is that for the first time the emphasis is not on the missionaries, nor on what the missionaries expected from their converts, but rather on what the converts expected from the missionaries and how they used what they had learned from the missionaries in new and unexpected contexts. Another important difference from the previous studies on Christian missions is the emphasis Susan Bayly and David Mosse place on the missionary process as adaptation and mutual dependency rather than as breaks with previous relationships.¹³

In a way, however, the study of missionary activities has missed a link in the scholarly debate on Indian society. The neo-Marxist debates in the 1970s on the Indian mode of production, as well as the studies on revolt and rebellion as political action, influenced by Eric Hobsbawm, Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha, inspired only few working on Christian missions.¹⁴ The works by Rosalind O'Hanlon, David Mosse and Susan Bayly, on the other hand, belong to the new paradigm with the focus on literary theory, specifically inspired by Michel Foucault. In this paradigm, the emphasis is on the written and oral sources as texts, while the broader structural analyses of caste and class are given a secondary role. This is not to say that these three authors ignore the social and political context of the missions; David Mosse especially takes great care to explore the social networks and ties of dependency. There is in both of the other works, however, a strong emphasis on political structures: in Rosalind O'Hanlon's book on the role of the emerging caste associations during the political upheavals of the late nineteenth century, in Susan Bayly's book on the character of the pre-British state and the state under British rule in the nineteenth century.

What is missing in the study of Christian missions in India, then, is an analysis of religion as a dynamic factor in Indian society, seen in a social and economic context. The present study

is an attempt to fulfil this need. From an analysis of Christian missionary activity in a limited area of South India in the nineteenth century, three main questions will be asked and answers sought. The first question is: How did the missionaries view the society in which they were working? What is seen depends on the eyes that see is a truism that has carried great weight in anthropological research and in research on the non-European world. The encounter with the non-European societies which took place from the age of discoveries brought forth countless descriptions of these unfamiliar worlds, which remained 'strange' or were defined by their 'otherness'.¹⁵

What is sought to be answered here, then, is the question to what extent the missionary perceptions of Indian society differed from the views found in official records and anthropological surveys. Traditionally, missionary accounts have been seen as less reliable than anthropological surveys because the missionaries wanted to change the Indian religious structure (i.e. convert the heathen to Christianity) while the anthropologists just described things as they were. Lately, however, it has been appreciated that the line between the two is blurred: the anthropologist just as much as the missionary changes his object in describing it – and the missionary just as much as the anthropologist 'freezes' it.¹⁶ Furthermore, a number of nineteenth-century Christian missionaries were amateur anthropologists who contributed heavily to the official series on 'Castes and Tribes of India' and who as readily as anybody else measured noses and skulls in order to fit different groups of the population into a large evolutionary ranking system!¹⁷

Apart from the difficulty of separating the missionary from the anthropologist we also face the problematic character of the sources. As mentioned above, the missionaries wrote their reports either to the home boards or to missionary journals and magazines to be read by the public who by contributions financed the missions. The descriptions found in these reports and letters tend to be very repetitive, very simplified and very stereotyped. It is hard to avoid the feeling that the missionaries to a large extent wrote about selected events and used the specific terminology that would be most acceptable to their readers – and kept everything else in the dark. Nonetheless, as only few private letters from the missionaries have survived, the official reports are what we have and what we must work with.

The second question to be answered is: What were the actual social and economic conditions in the areas where the missionaries worked? The missionary reports, biased as they are, form a basic source material which has previously not been much used. From these reports we can get a glimpse of the way social, economic and religious relationships functioned at village level, which was where most missionaries worked. It must be stressed that the official and administrative reports, which usually form the backbone of studies of this kind, were often just as biased and unreliable and should be used with as much caution as the missionary reports. However, a combination of the two types of sources is conducive to a fruitful enquiry.

Unfortunately, we do not possess the material to make thorough analyses of individual villages. The missionary material only mentions a very limited number of villages and the information about individual villages is too scattered in the letters and reports to enable us to get an idea of continuum.¹⁸ However, even as it is, the missionary material enables us to glimpse the social networks and the changing economic relationships through the nineteenth century. The official reports by members of the British administration more often describe things the way the British officials wanted them to be rather than the way they were, and they are to a large extent biased by the official need to quantify and systematize a bewildering reality. This is most apparent in the census material, which attempted to classify the population of India in ranked orders of caste and occupation. Through the decades, the definitions of individual castes changed, as did the ranking of one caste in relationship to another; nor were the definitions of occupation consistent.¹⁹ This makes it extremely difficult to make comparisons over time but, as in the case with the missionary material, the official material can be used provided one is cautious and realizes the pitfalls.

The economic changes of the nineteenth century had a serious impact on the social and economic conditions in the South Indian villages. This has been the subject of a large amount of scholarly work, which forms the background for the discussions here. The question to be answered is first and foremost whether it is possible to substantiate a connection between economic change and the change in religious identity. Thus we come back to the perennial questions in the missionary letters of whether the converts wanted to become Christians in order to gain economic advantages (the

so-called 'rice Christians'). Another question, raised by G.A. Oddie, is whether the converts became Christians in order to raise their status or to get a social 'uplift'. Here I shall seek to answer the question at a slightly different level. Rather than attempting to prove individual motives I shall see whether the economic development and the general climate of change in different areas correlate not only to the number of converts but also to the opportunities offered to converts.

The third main question to be answered is: To which extent did the new Christians or the would-be converts use what they learned from the missionaries, and how did they change it? As mentioned above, this is a point which has been elaborated by Rosalind O'Hanlon, David Mosse and Susan Bayly but which still needs further clarification. The questions I shall raise here reflect my wish to throw light on the social and economic conditions in the villages rather than on the political impact of missionary enterprise. It means that I shall only in passing refer to the use of missionary discourse in the political debates of nineteenth-century South India – even though, as Irschick has shown, this discourse was of central importance for the formulation of Tamil revivalism.²⁰ The question of central importance to be answered then is: How were the missionaries placed in the power hierarchy of the villages? David Mosse has argued that the Jesuit missionaries in Ramnad took a position – or were given it by their followers – similar to the former kings': combining the supreme ritual and political power, deciding on ritual honours and thus on socio-religious ranking within the community.²¹ This is however only part of the picture. It shall be argued that the position of the missionaries in the power structure of the villages varied not only according to the economic, agricultural and social conditions of the villages but also according to the kind of mission we are talking about. Furthermore, the role of the missionary varied over time.

The situation of the missionary in the village will be investigated from three different viewpoints. The first is the ritual status of the missionary, the second is the economic one, and the third is what we generally may term the power status. While these three functions sometimes overlap they do not always do so and should, for the purpose of analysis, be kept apart. What will be investigated then, is the role of the missionary in the Christian rituals as well as the part of the Christian congregation in the non-Christian village festivals; the role of the missionary in economic

transactions such as money-lending; and the extent to which the missionary took on the role of the village leader, i.e. the landlord, the employer and the keeper of 'law and order'.

The present study is built up around the three main questions I have mentioned but they will not be answered one by one. Rather, they will form the backbone of what is to appear in the following pages. Before outlining the plan of this study, it is as well to emphasize its limits. I concentrate on only one district in the former Madras Presidency: the South Arcot district. Before the British took power this district had been under the dominion of the *nawab* of Arcot, i.e. it had formed a part of the Mughal empire, albeit a very peripheral and distant one. Nevertheless this singles out South Arcot (and North Arcot, for that matter) from other South Indian districts which have been under scrutiny lately. Unlike the areas studied by Washbrook, Ludden, Price and Dirks South Arcot was not under *poligar* rule (rule of military chieftains),²² there were no great landlords (*zamindars*) and no 'little kings'. Nor did South Arcot completely conform to the picture of the rice-growing river deltas with their rigid caste system. South Arcot encompassed both dry and wet areas, both zones of commercial expansion and zones of rigid high-caste dominion over production and ritual hierarchy. In comparison with the dry areas of the extreme south and with the wet core zones of Tinnevely and Tanjore, South Arcot presented a much more varied picture.

South Arcot differed from other South Indian districts also because it was the home of only two missionary societies. The French mission, organized by *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* (henceforth called the MEP), had been active in South Arcot since the late eighteenth century. Having its headquarters in Pondicherry, South Arcot was the obvious area of expansion for this society. The Danish mission, organized by the *Danish Missionary Society* (henceforth called the DMS), only became active in South Arcot in the 1860s when the society acquired both a mission station and a missionary from the German Leipzig Mission. A few German and Swedish mission stations, forming the outposts of these Missions' activities in Tanjore, were for a short period the only other Protestant missions in the area. South Arcot never became as famous as the districts in the south, where the missions flourished and the converts flocked to the mission stations in both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. However, the French mission did in fact acquire a large number of

converts over the years but somehow the French mission has remained a forgotten entity in the scholarly writings on South Indian history. The French mission has never received the same attention as the different Protestant and Jesuit missions in the southern districts.

Chronologically this study is limited to the years between 1840 and 1900. Before 1840 the activities of the MEP were severely restricted due to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Because of these events, missionary activities were not looked upon kindly by the French state and the mission of the MEP suffered from a lack of funds as well as a lack of missionaries. From the mid-1830s, however, the MEP's activities expanded and were better organized. The Danish mission, as mentioned above, only came to South Arcot in the 1860s. The terminal date, 1900, was chosen because it in many ways marks the end of an era. For both missions, the DMS as well as the MEP, the years of the so-called mass movements were all but over and the missions now had to establish the day-to-day life of the new congregations. For the DMS, the years after the turn of the century were years when young missionaries challenged the established Protestant views of Hinduism and Indian society, giving rise to what has been termed 'liberal missionary attitudes'.²³

The source material is to a great extent the reports and letters of the missionaries, found in the Danish National Archives and the Archive des Missions Étrangères in Paris. There is an important difference between the two archives, however. The archive of the DMS contains a wide range of material pertaining to the work of the DMS. This means that apart from the letters from the missionaries it also contains minutes from board meetings, discussions on the recruitment of new missionaries, letters to the missionaries, debates with supporting organisations in Denmark and with sister societies in other Scandinavian countries and schedules for the mission school, to mention but a few. There is still a large amount of untapped material waiting to be studied, both on the work of the DMS abroad and at home. The French archive is different from the Danish as almost exclusively it contains letters from the archbishops to the directors and letters from missionaries highly placed in the hierarchy. There are almost no letters from the single missionaries in the field and it is thus difficult to find the descriptions of the conditions at village level. At most, the letters to the directors contain abstracts of letters

from the missionaries to the authorities in Pondicherry. By this process the letters going back to Paris are often kept at a general level of discussion and the individual 'stories' they contain are there to make a point (either because the incident described has a generalizing value, or because it falls outside the accepted norm). We find no diaries or other kinds of material making it possible to follow a single village or a single congregation over a longer period of time.²⁴

The past history and the specific agricultural, economic and religious background of South Arcot is decisive in understanding the impact of Christian missions on society. Chapter 2 presents the history of South Arcot, placing it within the wider framework of South Indian history in the past centuries.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the establishment and character of the two missionary societies active in South Arcot, the MEP and the DMS. The main principles behind each society are outlined, specifically the different official views on Indian society. Further, the pattern of establishing mission stations is discussed and they are placed in the wider context of the history of Roman Catholic missions and Protestant missions.

The next three chapters analyse the interaction between missionaries and South Indian society in more detail. Chapter 4 is concentrated on the organizational aspects of the two societies. Instead of giving a description of the building of churches and the numerical strength of the congregations, the organization of the two missions is analysed through the institution of 'native helpers', i.e. catechists and native priests. These groups, acting as intermediaries between the missionaries and the congregations, have not hitherto – as far as I know – been treated in any detail in the scholarly writings on the history of missions.

Chapter 5 concerns the question of church discipline. By investigating the ways in which church discipline was maintained in the congregations, we get a clearer picture of the interaction between a village society and a mission. Similarly, through the lens of discipline it is possible to shed new light on whether the new Christians had distanced themselves from the society they lived in. Stated differently, we can begin to realize the ambiguous position of the new Christians between the moral and legal pressures from two different sources of power.

Chapter 6 focuses on the central issue of power. Here I shall attempt to tackle the question of how the missionaries were