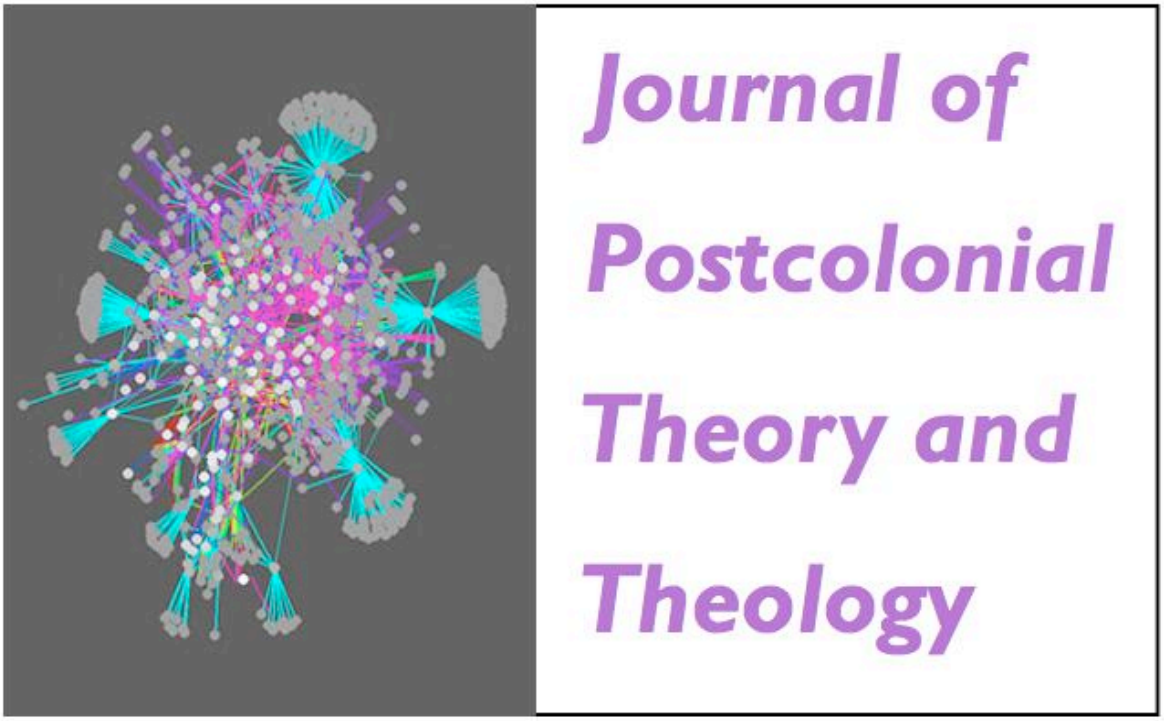

Advocates and Arbiters:

Travancore and Mysore Missionaries as Public Petitioners and Champions of Social Justice (1806-1886)

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Scholars of Indian history have devoted much time to exploring the interesting connections between Christian missions, social reform and imperialism during the 19th century. Many missionary historiographies have been written to celebrate the moral and social uplift evangelizing communities have brought to the subcontinent via their preaching and teaching, through the establishment of hospitals, churches, schools and

other Christian oriented institutions.[1] On the other hand, critics of empire have often labeled missionary groups, especially those like the London Missionary Society (founded in the late 18th century), as the "handmaidens of imperialism" – agents promoting racist and political agendas while attempting to "civilize" subject populations in Christ's name.[2] These critics have also noted, perhaps correctly, that missionary numbers were too small and that the success rate of their conversion efforts (in most regions) was too negligible to have much of an impact on Indian history at all. In this paper I have no intention of

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[1] See Rev. R. Caldwell, *The Tinnevelly Shanars: A Sketch of Their Religion, Moral Condition and Characteristics of a Caste with Special Reference to the Facilities and Hindrances to the Progress of Christianity amongst Them,* (Tinnevelly: SPGFP, 1849); C. M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore* (Madras: SPS Press, 1903); J. W. Gladstone, "The Social Impact of Protestant Missionary Work in South Travancore in the Nineteenth Century" Masters Thesis, United Theological College, Bangalore, 1979; John Jacob, *History of the London Missionary Society in South Travancore, 1806-1956* (Nagercoil: CSI, 1957); Rev. I. H. Hacker, *A Hundred Years in Travancore, 1806-1906: A History and Description of the Work done by the London Missionary Society in Travancore, South India during the Past Century* (London: H. R. Allenson, Ltd., 1908).

[2] There are many examples of scholarship, especially in the post-modern and post-colonial genres, which highlight the power inequities of conversion within the context of imperialism and critique western missionaries for their "white man's burden" civilizing agenda. For one of the earliest and most often quoted works see Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). See also John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Volume I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), for a discussion on how Christian conversion reformed rituals and altered indigenous material perceptions as part of the colonial project. Jeffry Cox's *Imperial Fault Lines Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002) discusses missionaries entanglement with imperialism and the complexity and the privileges bestowed upon them as beneficiaries of an imperial racial hierarchy. And in Anna Johnston's *Missionary Writing and Empire,1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), the author contends missionary texts focused on gender and domestic roles within the context of empire, and by so doing they rewrote imperial expansion as a moral allegory. Other historians who have critically examined the nexus of gender, empire and religion in recent scholarship include Eliza Kent, Lata Mani, Laura Stoler, Ann McClintock, Gauri Vishwanathan, and Mrinalini Sinha.

trying to support or disprove either characterization of the missionary role in India during the 19th century – even though I am certain there are kernels of truth in both. Instead I am interested in understanding the civic and political role missionaries undertook in the regions where they settled, as they established new communities and sought legal redress for the members of these communities who were adopting new political identities and rights in conjunction with new spiritual positions and religious roles.

Missionary Obligations and Political Power

It is evident, from the historical records that the missionaries themselves maintained, and in the administrative records of the kingdoms wherein they worked, that the missionaries felt an obligation to protect the public and political interests of their converts. The missionaries often framed these political concerns as humanitarian, as ethical, as "Christian" and as "enlightened" – and while doing so they often misrepresented ancient, local customs and ideologies as backward, demonic, cruel, and oppressive. This, in turn, usually led to an oversimplified and dangerous dualism: Christian = good/correct, and Hindu = evil/incorrect. In the eyes of early missionaries, like London Missionary Society's Tobias Ringletaube, European Christians had a duty to seek a more just, fair, and equitable society for all people who embraced Jesus Christ as savior.

Separating political and religious identity was not always easy for nineteenth century missionaries representing minority Christian populations in the Hindu Kingdoms in Southern India, as indeed their efforts to establish religious institutions and promote a

new spiritual world-view often required them to advocate for political and legal change in the communities they served. As outsiders with a poor understanding of indigenous customs, traditions and/or power hierarchies they frequently assumed positions of authority and declared themselves arbiters of what was moral, necessary, and just.

Many of the concerns missionaries had about the treatment that their convert communities experienced as minorities evoked necessarily pragmatic responses, as they dealt with concerns related to property rights, inheritance, family law, and disputes over public spaces. Missionaries, in their effort to promote and preserve their vision of Christian community in Hindu majority kingdoms like Travancore and Mysore, found it necessary to take on various public roles; from legal representatives, to political petitioners, to civil rights advocates, mediators of public conflict, and arbiters in private affairs. In adopting such roles that surpassed their pastoral ministry, missionaries frequently envisioned themselves as agents of political change and as social reformers whose religious duty compelled them to protect the civic rights of their converts. Missionaries sought ways to connect with influential personalities in local networks of power.

This was especially the case in Travancore where missionaries gained the personal support of the British Resident who held substantial power over regional politics. They also learned how to access seats of power directly in ways that would benefit their convert communities, as was the case in Mysore, where missionaries were able to gain representative positions in the state's Representative Assembly and hence, were able to participate in a forum where their concerns and desires were expressed

annually to the Maharaja's chief minister, the Dewan. By understanding the missionaries as political entities, skilled in network building and persistent in seeking public representation of their community's concerns, we can better appreciate them as historic actors making changes, both large and small, sometimes serving to stimulate social change in ways far exceeding the strength of their numbers, and at other times failing to introduce broad societal reforms but, successful in influencing the complex dynamic of social evolution via persistent and passionate engagement with power brokers and institution builders.

Christianity had a firm footing in South India long before the majority of people adopted Christianity in Europe.[3] That being said, Christian missionary activity in India takes on a completely different character after 1813 due to the fact that the British East

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[3] Though most of Western Europe was ruled by Christian Kings by 800, Eastern Europe was yet the site of much missionary activity. Bishops in the Malabar (South India) had been conducting Christian services in Syrian for over half a millennium by 800. For the most up-to-date and comprehensive histories of Christianity in India see Robert Fryckenberg's *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). While scholars debate the precise evidence which supports the St. Thomas tradition, the establishment of well-traveled trade routes by sea and land support the theory that first century converts visited India to proselytize and perhaps to settle. Historian Stephen Neill, in *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to Ad 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), discusses the various archaeological sources and court records which link Christian kings to Christians in India in the first century. By the fourth century, Christian merchants from Mesopotamia seeking refuge from Persian prosecution reported the arrival of hundreds of Christians and a bishop to Kodungullar (Malabar Coast) establishing the first Christian community for which there is continuous record according to historian Kenneth Scott Latourette. Other scholarship, such as work by Leslie Brown, discuss the growth of the Syrian Malabar Church in South India in the early period, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas. An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956/1982). The first Roman Catholics arrived in the early 16th century after Portuguese mariners landed in Calicut in 1498.

India Company opened its Indian territories to European evangelical activity only after this date. Syrian, or St. Thomas, Christian communities and Roman Catholic communities (French/Portuguese colonies) were prevalent along the Eastern and Southern coastal areas of the subcontinent long before the arrival of such groups as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) and the London Missionary Society (LMS) came to work among the Tamil and Mallayalee speaking peoples. With the expansion of British imperial power and an increased emphasis on the proud duty to expand the "civilizing mission" throughout the Empire, Christianity's scope and purpose took on new proportions in the 19th century.

Travancore and Mysore

Within the Hindu kingdoms of Travancore and Mysore, the London Missionary Society gained a foothold in 1806 and 1810 respectively. With the establishment of a church and school in Mylaudi by the Reverend Tobias Ringletaube, the LMS began its career in Travancore focusing primarily on converting caste Hindus from the shanar (*nadar*), pulaya, pariah, and ezhavas communities.[4] Ringletaube's early journal entries, and other subsequent missionary diaries from the end of the century, repeatedly express the missionaries' frustration with their converts' desires to "better their worldly condition and emancipate themselves from their social misery" above and beyond any sense of

[4] Dick Kooiman, *The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the Nineteenth Century* (Manohar, 1994), 16-19.

deep spiritual desire for salvation.[5] Despite this frustration, it seems that the missionaries were, themselves, keenly aware of the oppression of low-caste populations within the kingdom, at the hand of cruel landlords, under heavy government taxation, slavery, and high-caste discrimination which forbade them from even the most basic civil rights. Missionaries witnessed such conditions and were aware of the injustices faced by low-caste people, even after adopting the Christian faith, and thus were inspired to adopt what they perceived as activist strategies that attempted to minimize converts' suffering and promote visions of social justice. Such strategies often required strengthening alliances with the representative of the British Empire in the kingdom, the British Resident, and making alliances with landholding elites in the region. These alliances, though necessary, often provoked feelings of resentment, distrust and/or envy among others.

In Mysore kingdom, neighboring Travancore to the north, the LMS established their first station in Bellary (1810), on the border of the Madras Presidency, after failing to establish a mission in the capital of the former Muslim ruler, Tipu Sultan, in Srirangapatana. In 1820 they established a station in Bangalore but found it hard to gain permission to preach in the city *pettah* (market) or to erect a mission building. It seems there that the local people were not hostile to the evangelical efforts of the first Europeans

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[5] Maurice Phillips, *Report of Work in Madras in connection with the London Missionary Society for the Year 1896* (Addison and Co, 1897), 22. See also John A. Jacob, *History of the LMS in South Travancore, 1806-1956* (Nagercoil: Church of South India, 1956); and Rev. I. H. Hacker, *A Hundred Years in Travancore, 1806-1906: A History and Description of the Work done by the London Missionary Society in Travancore, South India during the Past Century* (London: H.R. Allenson, Ltd., 1908).

but they didn't take them very seriously, either.[6] The LMS eventually gave up street preaching and instead used halls and preaching rooms to spread the Gospel.

Interestingly, the LMS devoted much of their ministry to the large Tamil populations in the native army's cantonment station in Bangalore and later opened an English college (1824) with the Maharaja's endorsement. [7] Caste politics were not as oppressive in Mysore, as compared to Travancore, however, due to the fact that there was a much smaller landed nobility in Mysore and the land tenure system relied upon an unusually high-proportion of owner-cultivators.[8] Nevertheless, the missionaries were concerned with issues related to civil rights of converts and the modernization of the education system. They brought forth numerous petitions to the Government of Mysore via the Dewan and the Representative Assembly established in 1881 to advocate on the part of those they deemed their constituents. These petitions were also made public via the missionary presses they established throughout the kingdom. Missionaries sought political alliances with the British Resident and local European planters, gold miners, and

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[6] Edward Rice, *Benjamin Rice or Fifty Years in the Master's* Service (Bangalore: London Mission Religious Tract Society, 1890), 35.

[7] Rev. M. A. Sherring, *The History of the Protestant Mission In India from their Commencement in 1706 to 1881* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1884).

[8] For greater discussion on this point see chapter 8 "Debating Modernity: Cross Cultural Exchange in a Hindu Community" in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Mission to Modernity: Formation of a Historical Political Community in Late Nineteenth Century Mysore,* Dept. of History, Northeastern University, 2004. Historians Donald Gustafson and Vijay Kumar also suggest there were fewer landed aristocrats in Mysore after the reign of Haider Ali and Tipu, and because of ryotwari reforms implemented during the period of British Commission rule in Mysore (1831-1881) which reduced differences of wealth and power. Gustafson, *Mysore: the Making of a Model State*, University of Chicago Ph.D. dissertation, 1969; and Vijay Kumar, *Ecumenical Cooperation of the Missions of Karnataka*, dissertation, 1996.

millers who were numerous in the state, and who also held representative seats within the state's Assembly. Thanks, in part, to Mysore's 50 years under British rule, these Europeans held significant positions of influence within the network of power. Their power declined only marginally after the 1881 Rendition which returned the kingdom into the hands of the Wodeyar king. The power of the British Resident was more greatly diminished with the return of the monarchy's ancestral authority, as embodied in the position of the Dewan, which the state used to re-shape the discourse on the politics of public welfare and religious representation in Mysore.[9] Rendition did not decrease the political activism of missionaries and their allies who lobbied on public welfare issues impacting converts. Chief among these issues was the extension of the Christian Disabilities Removal Act (XXI) to Mysore soon after it was passed in the British territories.[10] This decades long campaign to protect convert's civil rights was a prime example of how missionaries mobilized resources and public interests both in Mysore and abroad.

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[9] See chapter 3 and 4 in my doctoral dissertation for a complete discussion of the Wodeyar fight for Rendition and how the return to the throne invoked new state policies in order to regulate religion and public spaces within the Mysore polity.

[10] *A Statement Connected with the Disabilities of Native Converts in Mysore* (Bangalore: Higgenbotham and Co.); Independent Files, LI, No. 2, Papers Regarding Disabilities of Christians in Mysore, 1889-1907, UTC Archives, Bangalore. Several case studies of this law available in the United Theological College Archives, "Papers Relating to an Application to the Government Regarding Removal of Legal Disabilities of Native Christians in Mysore State, 1874-1898" Bangalore: UTC Archive). For full discussion of this topic as it relates to the extension of civil rights to Christian converts in Mysore, see chapter eight "Debating Modernity: Cross-Cultural Exchange in a Hindu Community," in my unpublished dissertation (Howarth, 2004).

Political and military interactions between these two states shaped the nature of missionary activity within these kingdoms, as Europeans repositioned themselves within the shifting power structures of expanding empires. In 1766, the Muslim rulers of Mysore attacked Calicut and occupied Malabar in 1784, threatening British interests there. The British went to war with Mysore (four times, in fact, between 1781 and 1799) in order to contain the expansionist power of their mighty neighbors. The Raja of Travancore opted to form an alliance with the increasingly powerful British in order to preserve the integrity of his state. However, not all inhabitants of Travancore were pleased with the treaties that made them British allies, as Travancore was forced to pay an annual subsidy (in pepper mostly) to help pay for the Mysore wars. Increased British control of the region and economic instability undermined the supremacy of the Nayar caste in the region. A rebellion in 1808 led by the Dewan, Velu Thampi, followed a violent insurrection by Nayar warriors in 1805. This set the stage for the arrival of the LMS missionary, Ringletaube, to the region. The British took advantage of the shifting political winds to create a cash-crop colonial economy in the region and many local farmers found themselves dislocated by shifting market expectations.[11]

[11] Kooiman, *The London Missionary Society in South Travancore*, 22.

Economic Matters

Scholars such as Duncan Forrester have argued that it was such economic dislocations and changes to the traditional productive labor systems (*jajmani*) that caused restlessness among the lower-caste cultivators in Travancore – thus, explaining why such large numbers of low-caste people converted in mass during this period. [12] Economic decline and persistent disintegration of traditional social networks may have created social pressures that left people desperate for new support systems. LMS missionaries arrived at a time when British interests were expanding in Travancore, low-caste people were faced with fewer economic opportunities to raise their status, and state power

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[12] The shifting and complex definition for the terms "upper" and "lower caste" in this particular region is subject to much debate. In South India, caste's role in determining division of labor, in shaping resource access, and in the social ritual of interaction underwent great shifts after Europeans arrival. Many Nadars today, however, claim association with ancient royalty and the warrior caste. By the time Protestant missionaries established permanent church in the region, Shanar (or nadar) caste members, many associated with palm toddy production and similar palm products, were generally ranked low within the social hierarchy and hence became the subject of missionary conversion efforts. They rose rapidly as a group due to expansion of the market economy and their commercial activities. Nayars, on the other hand, have long been associated with the kshatriya class or with ruling families prior to the migration of the Varna system from north India. The origins of the Nayars is enshrouded in myth also, however, by the middle ages they were land holders dominating administrative and military positions in Travancore. Nayar dominance weakened rapidly during British expansion into the region. A thorough analysis of the power hierarchy and shifting meaning of caste is not possible here in this short article, thus, I have chosen to use broad terms such as "upper" and "lower" caste to generalize a much more complex situation. I refer readers who are interested in the dalit history in South India to John Webster, *The Dalit Christians* (ISPCK, 1999), and also to Richard Hardgrave's classic work *The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (Manohar, 1969). *The Northern Nadars of Tamil Nadu: An Indian Caste in the Process of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) by Dennis Templeman focuses on the dynamics of hierarchy and counters previous assumptions about the rigidity of the caste system in this region. See also J. W. Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity and People's Movement in Kerala* (Trivandrum, 1984).

brokers, like the British Resident, sought to strengthen missionary engagement with the population to increase British control.[13]

Indigenous conditions, distinct and separate from Western imperialism, shaped the context for this mission field as well, since caste injustices, forced labor and tax burdens severely impacted large numbers of the population. This was apparent to missionaries almost immediately upon their arrival to the kingdom, and early missionaries (including Ringletaube) petitioned the local Magistrate and Resident to remove undue burdens from low-caste converts who faced unbearable tax burdens and unfair labor practices. Although missionaries held different opinions about whether or not it was ethical ("Christian") to promise temporal relief to low-caste Hindus in exchange for their conversion, most missionaries recognized the importance of maintaining good relations with the British Resident in power in Travancore in order to obtain concessions for the Christian community. For example, Ringletauble refused to baptize 5000 shanars who rushed to the mission in 1810 when they heard that Christians were to be exempt from the horrible poll tax obligation – but missionary Meade happily accepted 3000 shanars who convert in mass in 1818 after hearing the missionary had been appointed Christian Judge in Nagercoil by the Rani Lakshmi Bai.[14] Converts were obviously hopeful that

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[13] John Webster, *A History of the Dalit Christians in India* (University Press of San Francisco, 1992), 54, claims that Forrester does not prove his thesis because there is little evidence to show the disintegration of the jajmani system lead to social upheaval or dislocation. He claims dalits did have more opportunities for advancement and attributes mass movements of conversion to charismatic leaders who understood low-caste populations' need for improved social status, dignity and freedom from oppressive bondage under the land owners.

[14] Hacker, *A Hundred Years in Travancore, 1806-1906*, 27-35.

missionary Meade's newfound power position could work in their favor if they had legal cases pending. Later the LMS Board of Directors would ask Meade to resign his post because they recognized this conflict of interest. Nevertheless, during the early years of the mission, the Resident helped the mission acquire permission to construct churches and schools, as well as to gain poll tax exemptions, rice paddy grants and revenue rights that helped to keep the mission financial soluble.

In 1835, the Rajah visited missionary Mault at Nagercoil and gifted the mission Rs. 2000 and 20 teak trees. Many applications for conversion were received shortly after this visit and Mault recorded his suspicion that applicants expected his influential connections could help them in redress of grievances.[15] Mault made clear that it was not his intention to interfere with politics, nevertheless, missionaries were perceived rightly as well-connected power brokers within the system. Throughout the 19th century missionaries filed court cases on behalf of their converts who were forced to work illegally on Sundays and also submitted petitions on their behalf against the treatment of cruel landlords. If not always victorious in their efforts, missionaries were at least persistent in their endeavors, as they modeled a citizenship of social activism and one embracing political engagement with the state.

Right to Property

In Mysore, the power of missionary petitions took on a different character as the influence of the British Resident was not as significant within the Hindu monarchy after

[15] Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India*, 75.

1881. Christian missionaries represented their constituencies from their seats in the Representative Assembly, petitioning for more English language schools and calling for greater Grant-in-Aid appropriations for education. Missionaries fought to pass the Christian Disabilities Act in Mysore in the 1880's, petitioning the state and making the debate public via the mission press for several decades. The Act, passed into law in Brtish India in 1850, would guarantee all converts in Mysore the right to property, inheritance and child custody despite their conversion – rights otherwise denied to Hindus who lost caste. Missionary efforts to enact this law in Mysore were unsuccessful despite their efforts to appeal to higher authorities – in 1897, 2000 Indian Christians signed a petition to the Maharajah and in 1898, senior missionaries sent a petition for the Act to the Viceroy of India himself. Such lengthy battles and epic defeats did not diminish the litigious enthusiasm of missionaries who continued to advocate in court and in the Assembly for greater social equity and justice in their community.

Issues defined by the Hindu state as questions of religious tradition and custom were re-defined by missionary opponents as questions relating to basic civil rights within the context of a modern state. Wesleyan missionary Reverend J. Hudson published a series of papers in the missionary journal, *Harvest Field*, promoting the idea that missionaries needed to be political advocates for native Christians and help them to "assert their full rights as citizens." Partial or temporary surrender, even in the interests of peace, was not possible said Hudson, not when the spirit of the Lord's teachings

supported the assertion of political rights.[16] Missionaries were not only invested in the assertion of political rights at the local or individual level, they aspired to see legislation created that would preserve civil rights throughout the country of Mysore. One case that exemplifies the intensity of the missionary campaign for wide-spread civil rights recognition concerned the usage of a public well by Christian converts in a town called Siddlhaghatta. Here, missionaries won the battle but lost the war as the Hindu polity of Mysore rejected their argument that one family's well usage rights translated into well usage civil rights for all Christian coverts in Mysore.[17]

During the course of the Siddlhaghatta well usage controversy in 1886, the government initially viewed the matter as an isolated case – a noisy and minor breech of public peace. As the investigation of the case proceeded, the state saw the denial of Christian converts' access to public wells in historic context but declined to see the issue as a concern requiring state-wide regulation. To the Dewan and others, this appeared to be a private dispute over public space, but certainly not a civil rights issue. Since the state officials preferred to limit state interference in such local disputes, the government declined to pass legislation about caste and convert well usage rights. The Maharaja's Council did not legislate civil rights early in Mysore's post-Rendition history, and they

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[16] Rev. J. Hudson, "The Native Church," *The Harvest Field*, WMMS periodical (October 1886). Found in UTC Archives, Bangalore, India.

[17] *Letter of Deputy Commissioner C. Sooba Row of Kolar to Mr. Benjamin Rice of the London Missionary Society, July 17th 1886.* File No. 17 o f1886, Serial 1-6 G.M. "Fresh Water Well at Siddlaghatta and the Use of Wells by Native Christians, 1886-1887. Karnataka State Archives, Vidhana Soudha, Bangalore. Note: the section for the Siddlahagatta case study has been adapted from the text of chapter seven in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Mission to Modernity*, Northeastern University, 2004.

also declined to introduce codes that might prevent future disruptions involving religious disputes in public spaces. European missionaries, who petitioned for broader regulation of Christian civil rights, as existed in British India, were disappointed by the state's response. Up until 1892 they petitioned for a Mysore code protecting water usage rights but received no grants from the state.

In arguing for the rights of converted Christians to have access to 'caste' wells, Mysore missionaries were challenging the state's "rights rhetoric" by questioning whether this issue was indeed a mere breech of public peace (as the local authorities described it) or whether it was a violation of religious freedom. By re-constituting the language in this debate, Missionaries did not see themselves as inventors of new customs but as advocates for justice in a system already established by the state. Furthermore, it wasn't just the rights of Christian families in Kolar at issue here, it was the rights of subjects throughout Mysore, or so they claimed. Their letter to Dewan Sheshadri Iyer noted that a state-wide order on this matter was important because "from time to time difficulties arise in various town of the Province [Mysore] owing to objections being made to Christians drawing water from public wells."[18] The missionaries feared that this local ruling against the Christians might set a precedent for the entire country. It was thus in the name of universal justice that the missionaries appealed to the higher authority of the Dewan. They petitioned for the reversal of this order in hopes of protecting the rights of all subjects in the state but the Dewan, firm on his point that this was a local caste

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[18] *Letter to the Dewan to His Highness the Maharaja of Mysore, Bangalore August 2nd 1886, signed by ten members of the Bangalore Missionary Conference, the LMS and WMMS, etc.* File No. 17 of 1886. KSA, Bangalore.

conflict and not a civil rights issue, gave usage rights to this one family (who turned out to be high-caste converts) but refused to support any further action.

Local caste conflicts involving converts in Travancore were arguably more violent, organized and wide-spread than those recorded in Mysore. Retaliation against Christian converts during the time of the upper cloth riots in 1822, 1828, and 1858 was driven by economic factors and fears of increased imperial power. LMS missionaries viewed the controversy as one stemming from a question of decency and modesty in dress, however much larger factors related to shifting caste hierarchies and power dynamics shaped the unfolding of events. As the shanar community gained wealth, social mobility, status and education, communities like the Nayars felt their social status was threatened. New competition from the shanar converts lead other caste communities to re-emphasize the importance of age-old caste traditions, like the covering of breasts as a sign of caste status. Missionaries advocated for the right of Christians to cover their nudity but such challenges to dress customs were seen as a direct assault on the caste hierarchy by nayars who were already feeling vulnerable in the shifting system. After 1858 when East India Company rule was dissolved and Queen Victoria proclaimed that the Crown would respect the ancient customs and practices of the indigenous people, Hindu upper-castes threatened by the advancing assault of Western values in Travancore took their outrage out on Christian communities attacking, robbing, looting, murdering Christians (both native and European) and burning Christian schools, churches and homes. Missionaries petitioned the government to protect themselves and their converts and to punish the assailants but they did not receive immediate response to their pleas,

despite the brutality of the attacks. Such systemic violence at all levels in response to expanding Christian power was further evidence that caste hierarchies were threatened by shifting economic policies and broader national politics. Eventually, the missionary petitions were received by the Secretary of State of India and the Governor of Madras gave orders to the Raja that mandated reforms in the existing dress rules under threat of military intervention. The Raja agreed to abolish rules prohibiting some castes from covering themselves but would not allow such communities to imitate the higher-castes mode of dress while doing so. This seemed a fair resolution to the immediate conflict but did not give credence to the larger issue of shifting caste tensions, evolving economic structures and/or the resultant insecurities within the caste hierarchy.

The Role of Petitions in Public Discourse

While it may be true that missionary petitions were drawn up to effect social change at a grass-roots level, to resolve individual disputes and to promote wide-scale recognition of citizen's rights, the composition of such petitions were defined by narrow interpretations of a foreign minority community who were in many ways unable to analyze the broader issues of imperialism or understand the complexity of social hierarchies within the local arena. Despite such misunderstanding, missionary efforts did catalyze meaningful change. Whether petitions concerned water usage rights in Mysore, customs of dress in Travancore, or the expansion of Christian civil liberties in regards to property, education, inheritance, and custody suits. Missionaries were successful at promoting public discourse on questions of representation, power, and equity. In

representing those that they deemed an oppressed population, unable to speak for themselves, missionaries also claimed a certain moral authority in the context they inhabited. This moral authority was, in their eyes, indisputable because it was based on a Christian ethos, both universalistic and holistic. Missionaries believed that their religion compelled them to take a public and political stand against that which they viewed as immoral, unjust and inequitable. Such political humanism was made all the more potent in the context of the Hindu political communities in which they functioned. And as a result, tensions arose here where Hindu culture was subject to colonial and Christian interpretation. In the end, efforts to resolve religious tensions were realized through political activism.

In Mysore and Travancore, Christian converts, European missionaries and Hindu communities were constantly re-evaluating individual and collective identities under the regulatory authority of the state. While European missionaries made a conscientious effort to frame questions concerning religious identity in the context of civil rights, rather than supporting a religiously defined political agenda, they could not escape the very political impact that the raising of such questions had on the communities they claimed to represent.