

## **Hinduisms, Christian Missions, and the Tinnevelly Shanars: A Study of Colonial Missions in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India**

DYRON B. DAUGHRITY, PHD  
*Written During 5<sup>th</sup> Year, PhD Religious Studies*  
*University of Calgary*  
*Calgary, Alberta*

Protestant Christian missionaries first arrived in south India in 1706 when two young Germans began their work at a Danish colony on India's southeastern coast known as Tranquebar. These early missionaries, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Pluetschau, brought with them a form of Lutheranism that emphasized personal piety and evangelistic fervour. They had little knowledge of what to expect from the peoples they were about to encounter. They were entering a foreign culture with scarcely sufficient preparation, but with the optimistic view that they would succeed in their task of bringing Christianity to the land of the “Hindoos.”<sup>1</sup>

The missionaries continued to come and by 1801, when the entire district of Tinnevelly (in south India) had been ceded to the British, there were pockets of Protestant Christianity all over the region. For the missionaries, the ultimate goal was conversion of the “heathen.” Vast resources were contributed by various missionary societies in Europe and America in order to establish churches,

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2000, an important work by D. Dennis Hudson entitled *Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706-1835* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000) brought to light this complex and fascinating story of these early missionaries encountering for the first time an entirely new culture, language, and religion. This story sheds significant insight on the

schools, and social institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, and food-distribution centres.

However, the story is not that simple. There was resistance, often bitter, on the part of certain Indian communities. Before long, it was clear that the missionaries were converting almost exclusively low-caste Hindus. Some low-caste communities soon found that they could improve their social status by receiving the new faith. They could acquire financial support and protection by these new people from the West. It was becoming obvious that there were clear, tangible benefits to conversion. But when viewed by upper-caste Hindus, the complex caste system was deeply interrupted by the changes brought to south India by these missionaries, virtually uniting upper castes in their resistance to conversion. Even European trading organizations such as the Dutch and British East India Companies, which existed to turn a profit and preferred not to disturb culture through fragmenting castes, opposed the missionizing taking place.

---

relationship between India and the West, particularly regarding religion and culture, and serves as a backdrop for the present research.

This paper grows out of dissertation research conducted in 2003. My research of a prominent Anglican bishop in the Tinnevelly region of south India made me aware that this was an area of scholarship largely unexplored. That bishop's name was Stephen Neill, and his tenure as Bishop (from 1939-1945) in south India is often looked upon by Indian Christians of the region as the high point of their diocesan history. In studying Neill, a 20<sup>th</sup> century figure, I became aware that research into the turbulent 19th century could shed considerable light on the present status of cultural issues in south India. During my time in India, I was able to make connections with local historians and others who see the need for researching these and related issues; they were, and are, particularly eager to assist in this research. Issues arising from cultural interactions in the previous two centuries are very much alive in the south Indian context today. Recent research by scholars such as Judith Brown, Robert Frykenberg, Nicholas Dirks, and Andrew Porter demonstrate just how important the missionary and Indian cultural interactions could be. For example, Frykenberg points out that in the past it was often assumed "... that missionary movements need not be taken seriously and that they have had relatively little to do with the general history of events in modern India."<sup>2</sup> Today, he argues, this is changing.

Studies of cultural interactions between these early missionaries and the

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Frykenberg, ed., *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500 with Special Reference to Caste, Conversion, and Colonialism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 8.

peoples of India are increasing for several reasons. First of all, there has been a tendency since Edward Said offered his original critique of colonialism in 1978 to dismiss Christian missions as the arm of British imperialism. Said provided no analysis of Christian missions in the seminal text *Orientalism*. Rather, he simply dismissed them as "... openly joining the expansion of Europe."<sup>3</sup> This paper shows that the discussion is not so simple. Missionaries were certainly eager to convert the "heathen," to bring their Western medicine, and to implement things valued in Europe such as modern science, reading and writing. But it is also important to recognize that missionaries could be quite sophisticated and nuanced in their understandings of Indian culture, language, and religion.

*The Tinnevelly Shanars: A Sketch of Their Religion, and Their Moral Condition and Characteristics, as a Caste; With Special Reference to the Facilities and Hindrances to the Progress of Christianity Amongst Them*, was the title of a book published by Robert Caldwell (1814-1892) in 1849.<sup>4</sup> Caldwell's study is thorough and is respected to the present day, in spite of its tone of superiority towards Indian peoples. Caldwell was an historian of south India, an archaeologist, and a well known Tamil-language scholar. He coined the term 'Dravidian' for the peoples of south India and to this day he is credited with beginning the 'Tamil Renaissance.' He eventually became a bishop in 1877 (co-bishop of Tinnevelly, along with Edward Sargeant). He was in India from 1838

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 100.

to 1892. It is an important fact that when the Dravidian party in 1967 was voted into power in the Tamil country, the Tamil government erected a statue to Robert Caldwell in the state capital of Madras, in appreciation of his contribution to the Tamil culture. South Indian scholar Samuel Jayakumar wrote,

[Robert Caldwell's] works are still considered authoritative in the study of Dravidian culture, history, and languages. Caldwell has been praised as the pioneer of the Tamil renaissance with his remarkable work. . . . By his researches he gathered a large number of carefully verified and original materials such as no other European scholar has ever accumulated in India.<sup>5</sup>

While it is clear that Robert Caldwell was a missionary, his study of the people of deep-south India illustrates a tremendous breadth of understanding. He presented intricate nuances in his descriptions of the local inhabitants, their language, and their culture. Caldwell's study is *most* striking in its assessment of the religion of a particular caste of people in Tinnevely: the Shanars.

At the time of Caldwell's study (1849), the Shanars were “. . . the most numerous class amongst the heathens in the southeastern parts of Tinnevely.” The Shanars are a caste that “. . . occupies a middle position between the Vellalers and their Pariar (Pariah—now an English term) slaves.”<sup>6</sup> Caldwell described the social context of this group of people:

Their hereditary occupation is that of cultivating and climbing the palmyra palm, the juice of which they boil into a coarse sugar.<sup>7</sup> This is one of those occupations which are restricted by Hindu usage to members of a

---

<sup>4</sup> Madras: Christian Knowledge Society Press, 1849.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate* (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 1999), 160-162.

particular caste. . . . The majority of the Shanars confine themselves to the hard and weary labour appointed to their race; but a considerable number have become cultivators of the soil, as land-owners, or farmers, or are engaged in trade. They may in general be described as belonging to the highest division of the lower classes, or the lowest of the middle classes: poor, but not paupers; rude and unlettered, but by many degrees removed from a savage state.<sup>8</sup>

Caldwell went on to describe their history. He claimed they emigrated from the northern coast of Ceylon, based on similarities in language and customs between the Shanars and the Shandrars of Jaffna (city in North Sri Lanka). Caldwell believed the Shanars entered Tinnevelly via Ramnad (in modern Tamil Nadu), bringing palmyra seeds for planting.<sup>9</sup>

It was a strong belief of Caldwell's that the Shanars were not descendants of Brahmanical Hinduism:

The Shanars [are] not of the Brahmanical or Sanskrit-speaking race. . . . their connection with the Brahmanical systems of dogmas and observances, commonly described in the mass as Hinduism, is so small that they may be considered as votaries of a different religion. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Rather, he believed their history went back to a Tamil-speaking, aboriginal race.

Expounding on their religious background, he wrote:

It does not throw much light upon the Shanar religion to describe it as a form of Hinduism. In Tinnevelly, amongst a population of more than 800,000 [Shanars] . . . there are not to be found eight individuals who know so much of Vedantism as may be picked up by an European student in an hour from the perusal of any European tract on the subject. . . .<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Caldwell, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Caldwell, 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Caldwell, 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Caldwell, 6-8.

Caldwell's description of this people's religion is surprisingly sophisticated for 1849, although there are occasions when he struggled to make sense of them and their way of life. Caldwell was reluctant to classify all of the different religions he encountered as "Hinduism." Indeed, he was aware that the indigenous peoples knew no such category. He wrote, "The fact is that in many cases they belong to totally different religions, in the estimation of the votaries of the rival divinity."

Caldwell's revealing statements accentuate the difficulty with labelling the religions of India "Hinduism." His study shows that not only do different gods rule over different territories in the minds of the devotees, but also it is only the occasional ". . . wandering devotee or book-learned mystic who asserts that all deities . . . are one." In other words, Caldwell believed it was a rare case when a Hindu imagined himself to be part of an overarching Indian religion that encompassed most of the subcontinent.

On occasion, Caldwell's study is pejorative, outrageous, and somewhat paternalistic. But on the whole his studies represent a pioneering effort to understand religions completely foreign to the British mind. Caldwell's caution against categorising all Indian religion within the rubric of "Hinduism" is a lesson that resonates today. For example, the prominent scholar of Hinduism, Richard King, in his *Orientalism and Religion* (1999), has argued that Hindus in colonial south India were more inclined to describe their religion as their caste, rather than

as an abstract notion such as “Hinduism.”

Caldwell's early explorations of the varieties of Indian religion also illustrate a rich, complex tapestry of religion contained within the geography of south India. What is surprising is that Caldwell was aware of these issues in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, well before this analysis was to become a standard thesis in Orientalist scholarship.

Caldwell was also particularly sophisticated in his understanding of Indian languages. His *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*<sup>3</sup> was pivotal in the rise of a distinctly Tamil identity. Nicholas Dirks has recently studied this historical episode in his *Castes of Mind* (2001). Dirks begins his argument by looking at the 1857 revolt by Indian sepoys that led to Queen Victoria's takeover from the East Indian Company and her outspoken opposition to cultural interference by Christian missionaries in 1858. Dirks then argues that the revolt was perfect timing for Caldwell's goals, as his grammar was published two years prior in 1856, and had already begun to receive notice for his linguistically-based argument that Dravidians were not related to the Brahmins nor Aryans, thus, were in no way obliged to consider themselves a part of Brahmanical culture and religion. In other words, the Indians involved in the revolt, which was a northern phenomenon, were very different from the southern Indians. The implication was that Europeans had no need to fear the southern

Indians, as they were distinct from their mutinous countrymen in the North.

It must be kept in mind here that Caldwell's primary concern was to convert the south Indians to Christianity, thus he needed to somehow establish a break in the relationship between the high-caste Hindus and the largely lower caste peoples in the south, in particular the Shanars, who were low on the social scale. Caldwell supported his argument by claiming that the Brahmanical system was elitist and exploited Dravidians. He argued that Brahman worship and Shanar religion had very little in common, thus Shanars were released from their obligatory loyalty toward the higher castes. Just to reinforce his thesis, he began to develop a history which asserted that the indigenous Dravidians had been subdued and colonized by the Brahmanical Aryans.

Caldwell's first edition of the grammar book in 1856 met firm resistance by the Shanars, who did not like the idea of being divorced from Brahmanical civilization, and thus, Aryanism. In Caldwell's second edition of the grammar however, published nineteen years later in 1879, he had altered his argument somewhat to meet his evangelistic ideals. He began to describe the Tamil language as "the most highly cultivated of all Dravidian." He began to craft a case that the Tamil language could exist and flourish without Sanskrit. He argued that the Tamils had occupied south India well before the Aryan invasion and subjugation of them, thus, they were free from the cultural dominance that had

---

<sup>3</sup> London: Trubner, 1856.

loomed over them from time immemorial.

Caldwell's ideas of race were not entirely novel. Max Muller, in the 1840's and 1850's had argued an elaborate theory of Aryanism. Muller, however, reached a different conclusion than did Caldwell. Muller praised the Aryans for their peaceful conquest of India. British Orientalist scholars, by and large, concurred with Muller on his Aryan theory.

Ironically, Caldwell, a British missionary, was among the very first to articulate an opposition to cultural imperialism. However, he was arguing against Brahmanical domination over the indigenous peoples of India. Here was an individual, seemingly complicit with British rule in India, railing against Indian superiority over other Indians. Effectively, Caldwell was complicit with a project of replacing one hegemony with another, and he did it with flattery towards all things Dravidian.

Caldwell, however, was not exclusively an Orientalist scholar; he was very much a missionary. His successes would be evaluated in terms of "souls saved." Like almost all Protestant missionaries of the 1800's, Caldwell despised the idea of caste. He believed it ran contrary to Christian teaching. More importantly, however, he viewed caste as the largest obstacle to winning the Dravidians to the Christian faith.

In the end, Caldwell was quite successful in his attempts to develop a Tamil identity, culture, pride, and eventually, a "renaissance." His advocacy of

a distinct civilization unique to south India, particularly the concept of Dravidian heritage, would work against a nation-wide Indian nationalism that was beginning in the mid to late 1800's—precisely the time Caldwell was articulating these ideas. Caldwell's attempt to divorce Tamil civilization from that of the Brahmins increasingly isolated the two cultures, leading many Tamils to acquire a rather different view of British imperialism and, in Caldwell's design, Christian missions. Caldwell achieved what he set out to do, namely, to exorcise Brahmin privilege from Dravidian categories of thinking. He challenged pre-existent ideas of the Tamils in order to rebuild his design for new, distinctly "Tamil" ways of thinking. The new identity that he was trying to build in the Tamil mind was one that would be far more open to Christian, and Western, categories of history, language, race, and religion.

Caldwell arrived in south India in 1838 and served until his death in 1892. After 54 years of work among the people, he opted to be buried amongst the Shanars, an insightful fact in itself. Caldwell's study and writings of the peoples of south India illuminate the difficulty of depicting the missionary in exclusively "Orientalist" (in the Saidian sense) terms. While cultural hegemony may well have been part of what Caldwell was up to, it is certainly an incomplete picture. The evidence indicates that the cultural interactions and interpenetrations were not so monolithic; rather, they were highly complex and variegated.

A linguistically-based Tamil nationalism began to arise in the late 1800's.

This nationalism never did contain the acerbic tone which characterized many forms of nationalism in northern India. One could argue that Caldwell spearheaded Tamil nationalism, as he was an important part of the construction of the Tamil identity. Nicholas Dirks has claimed that Caldwell's grammar book was "the most important missionary contribution to 19<sup>th</sup> century Tamil intellectual history," and "the most influential of all European constructions of south Indian culture and civilization."<sup>4</sup>

Caldwell lived to witness the fruit of his labours. A large proportion of the Shanars were eventually caught up in the mass conversion movements of the 19th century and today they constitute the largest Christian population in India. Their mission work to other parts of India, particularly through the Indian Missionary Society, is well-known among scholars of south India. Today, Tinnevely is the largest Protestant diocese in all of Asia. (The diocese became so large that it split in 2004; it is not clear whether it is still the largest in Asia due to that event.<sup>5</sup>)

Caldwell's ideas of Tamil identity live on, particularly in the Chennai region, where his views are still taught. For example, in the year 2000, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Madras wrote the Foreword to a reprint of Caldwell's grammar. In this Foreword, he praised Caldwell:

---

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 144.

<sup>5</sup> For the most current information on the Tirunelveli diocese, see their website:

The great contribution to the world of Tamil thought in language and grammar came from Dr. Caldwell, a missionary practicing in Tirunelveli (Tinnevely). His work, 'A Comparative Grammar of Dravidian Languages in English' is a monumental work in the field of comparative linguistics. Among the Dravidian scholars there is still a good demand for this volume. I hope this monumental work would enjoy popular welcome and wider usage among scholars.

### **Conclusion**

Early British missionaries in south India struggled to understand and represent the newfound religions they encountered. A case can be made that their representations must not be taken simply as Orientalist misrepresentations. A study of Robert Caldwell illustrates what immense knowledge could be obtained by European missionaries living among the indigenous peoples, acquiring their languages, and understanding their ways of thought. It shows that European missionaries could not only gain knowledge for themselves, but their researches could cross-pollinate and eventually take root amongst the people they studied—leading to new developments, new identities, and even social uplift. It also defies the standard depiction of the Orientalist scholar, mis-representing and even exploiting his “subjects” for study.

Similarly, however, some Indians—for example the Shanars of Tamil Nadu—were able to increasingly understand their colonizers, as they learned the language, customs, and history of the European missionaries. They also experienced many benefits accorded to them by the Western missionaries: literacy, medicine, and even improved social standing. By better understanding

their interlocuters, Shanars were able to maneuver the unfortunate situation of being colonized towards their own advantage in many occasions.

At times the interaction of missionaries and Indians proved to be fraught with difficulties. At other times, however, the interpenetration proved favourable to all involved. A significant outcome in nearly all engagements between the two parties was mutual understanding of culture and religion.

### **Bibliography**

- Caldwell, Robert. *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*. London: Trubner, 1856
- Caldwell, Robert. *The Tinnevelly Shanars: A Sketch of Their Religion, and Their Moral Condition and Characteristics, as a Caste; With Special Reference to the Facilities and Hindrances to the Progress of Christianity Amongst Them*. Madras: Christian Knowledge Society Press, 1849.
- Dirks, Nicholas. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Frykenberg, Robert, ed. *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500 with Special Reference to Caste, Conversion, and Colonialism*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.
- Hudson, D. Dennis. *Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706-1835*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Jayakumar, Samuel. *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*. Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 1999.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.