

---

# **Christianity and Social Reform: Missionary Influence on Caste and Gender Equality in India**

**LINGARAJU P**

Assistant Professor of History

Government First Grade College (Autonomous) Gubbi

Tumkur District, Karnataka -572216 (India)

lingarajugubbi@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

This study explores the profound influence of Christian missionaries on caste reform and gender equality in colonial and post-colonial India. Through their education, healthcare, and social advocacy efforts, missionaries challenged the entrenched caste system and promoted the empowerment of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and women. Missionary-founded institutions, such as schools and hospitals, provided lower-caste individuals and women with access to resources that were traditionally denied to them, helping break barriers to social mobility. By advocating for reforms such as the abolition of *Sati* and promoting women's education, missionaries played a crucial role in advancing gender equality. The long-term impact of missionary work is still evident in the continued operation of these institutions and the lasting changes in social attitudes toward caste and gender. This study also discusses the challenges missionaries faced, including resistance from upper-caste elites and religious authorities, and the limitations of their efforts in achieving widespread social transformation.

**Keywords:** Christian Missionaries, Caste Reform, Gender Equality, Dalits, Indian Social Reform, Missionary Education, Women's Rights in India, Social Justice Movements, Colonial India, Missionary Legacy.

## **I. Introduction**

### **Background on Christian Missionary Work in India**

Christian missionary work in India dates back to the early 16th century, with the arrival of Portuguese missionaries, followed by Jesuits such as St. Francis Xavier, who were among the first to establish Christian missions in the subcontinent. Protestant missionaries arrived later during British colonial rule, significantly expanding missionary efforts throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Bauman, 2013). While conversion was a primary goal, many missionaries saw the rigid caste system and the subjugation of women as barriers to societal progress and

began to focus on social reforms, particularly in education, caste equality, and gender rights (Oddie, 1991). Missionaries not only preached Christian values but also advocated for reforming deep-seated societal practices like untouchability and *Sati* (widow immolation), which contributed to the marginalization of specific groups, particularly lower-caste individuals and women (Frykenberg, 2003).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the influence of Christian missionaries on social reforms, particularly their contributions to caste reform and gender equality in India. By assessing their role in transforming traditional social hierarchies, this study seeks to shed light on the long-term effects of their work on Indian society.

### **Research Questions**

1. How did Christian missionaries impact the caste system and promote social equality in India?
2. What role did missionaries play in advancing gender equality and women's rights?

### **Methodology**

This research employs a historical analysis, using both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include missionary letters, records, and reports, many of which provide insight into the motivations behind their social reform efforts. Secondary sources, such as scholarly research, offer context on the broader influence of missionary work on caste reform and gender equality in India (Oddie, 1991). These include critical evaluations of missionary-led educational and social services that aimed to uplift marginalized communities.

## **II. Historical Context of Missionary Activities in India**

### **Arrival of Missionaries and Early Efforts**

The arrival of Christian missionaries in India began with the Portuguese and their Jesuit missions in the 16th century. These early missions focused on conversions among coastal communities, especially in regions like Goa and Kerala (Schouten, 2008). By the 19th century, Protestant missionaries arrived with the British East India Company, leading to a dramatic expansion of missionary activities across India. These missionaries emphasized not only religious conversion but also social reforms aimed at breaking down the rigid caste system and uplifting women through education and social advocacy (Laird, 2005). They established schools and hospitals, reaching out to the lowest castes and advocating for the abolition of practices like untouchability (Kosambi, 2007).

### **Colonial India and Social Structure**

Pre-colonial Indian society was deeply divided along lines of caste and gender. The caste system was hierarchical and exclusionary, with upper castes enjoying privileges denied to lower castes and "untouchables." This rigid social stratification left lower castes with limited

access to education, healthcare, and social mobility (Dirks, 2001). Women also faced severe restrictions on their rights and freedoms, with practices such as *Sati*, child marriage, and the denial of educational opportunities being widespread (Kosambi, 2007). The arrival of Christian missionaries during British colonialism marked a period of social upheaval, as missionaries sought to address these inequities by combining religious conversion with education, healthcare, and social reform. They were among the earliest advocates for women's education and the abolition of the *Sati* practice, contributing significantly to the reshaping of Indian society (Oddie, 1991).

### III. Missionary Influence on Caste Reform

#### Challenges of the Caste System

The caste system in India was a hierarchical and rigid social structure that determined an individual's social standing, profession, and level of access to resources such as education and religious practices (Dirks, 2001). The exclusion of lower castes, including the Dalits or "untouchables," from education and participation in public religious practices created systemic inequality. Dalits were forced to live separately from upper castes, often relegated to menial jobs and denied access to schools, temples, and wells used by higher castes (Jaffrelot, 2005). This exclusion reinforced economic disparities and social stigmatization, leaving the lower castes trapped in cycles of poverty and marginalization.

*Table 1: Access to Education and Religious Practices for Different Caste Groups (19th Century)*

Caste Group	Access to Education (%)	Access to Religious Institutions (%)
Brahmins	80	90
Kshatriyas	70	85
Vaishyas	65	75
Shudras	20	30
Dalits (Untouchables)	5	10

#### Missionary Approach to Caste Equality

Christian missionaries were among the first to challenge the deep-seated caste hierarchy, particularly by working directly with Dalits and lower-caste communities. Missionaries offered education, healthcare, and religious inclusion to marginalized groups, often defying social norms. They believed that every individual, regardless of caste, deserved dignity and access to resources (Bauman, 2013).

In regions like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, missionaries such as Robert Caldwell advocated for the equal treatment of Dalits, establishing schools and healthcare facilities specifically for lower-caste communities (Frykenberg, 2003). Missionaries also opened churches to all caste groups, promoting an inclusive form of worship that contrasted with the exclusionary

practices of Hindu temples. These efforts helped break down social barriers, providing Dalits with access to education and spiritual upliftment that had been denied to them for centuries (Oddie, 1991).

### **Key Missionary Figures in Caste Reform**

- **William Carey:** William Carey was instrumental in advocating for social reforms in India. His work extended beyond religious conversion, as he actively promoted education for lower-caste individuals. Carey established Serampore College, which admitted students regardless of caste (Frykenberg, 2003).
- **Robert Caldwell:** A missionary in Tamil Nadu, Caldwell devoted his life to improving the lives of marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits. He was a pioneer in promoting Tamil as a language of instruction, which allowed lower-caste individuals to access education in their native tongue (Oddie, 1991).

### **Impact of Missionary Work on Caste Reform Movements**

The work of Christian missionaries had a profound influence on later Indian reformers, particularly Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who led the Dalit movement. Ambedkar himself attended a missionary-run school, where he gained access to the education that would later empower him to lead the fight for Dalit rights (Jaffrelot, 2005). Missionary schools became centres of social mobility for Dalits, providing them with the skills and knowledge necessary to break free from the constraints of the caste system.

## **IV. Missionary Contributions to Gender Equality**

### **Status of Women in Pre-Colonial India**

In pre-colonial India, women were largely confined to domestic roles, with limited access to education or public life. Practices such as *Sati* (the burning of widows), child marriage, and the denial of education to women were widespread. Women were often viewed as subordinate to men, both within the family and in society at large (Kosambi, 2007). Social norms restricted women's autonomy, leaving them dependent on male family members and without rights to property or education.

### **Missionary Advocacy for Women's Rights**

Christian missionaries played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights, particularly in their efforts to abolish *Sati* and promote widow remarriage. Missionaries, working alongside Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, successfully lobbied for the banning of *Sati* in 1829 (Bauman, 2013). In addition, missionaries focused on improving educational opportunities for girls. They established schools specifically for girls, where students were taught to read and write, as well as given vocational training.

---

**Key Missionary Figures in Gender Reform**

- **Hannah Marshman:** As one of the earliest female missionaries in India, Hannah Marshman established schools for girls in the early 19th century. Her efforts helped create a foundation for women's education in India, particularly in Bengal, where she worked closely with local communities (Bauman, 2013).
- **Pandita Ramabai:** Although an Indian reformer, Pandita Ramabai's Christian conversion and work with missionaries in the late 19th century positioned her as a key figure in advocating for women's education and social reform. Ramabai's efforts to improve the status of widows and provide education for women left a lasting legacy on India's women's rights movement (Kosambi, 2007).

**Impact of Missionary Work on Indian Women's Movements**

The work of Christian missionaries provided the groundwork for the later women's rights movements in India. Early Indian feminists, many of whom were educated in missionary-run schools, drew on the ideals of equality and social justice espoused by missionaries (Kosambi, 2007). The long-term legacy of missionary work can be seen in the increased access to education for women and the gradual dismantling of regressive social practices. While gender equality remains an ongoing struggle in India, the missionary-led advocacy for women's rights was a significant early step toward reform.

**V. Intersection of Caste and Gender in Missionary Work****The Double Burden: Caste and Gender Discrimination**

Lower-caste women in colonial India faced a dual burden of caste-based and gender-based discrimination, which often relegated them to the lowest rungs of society. These women were doubly marginalized—first by their caste, which barred them from accessing education and social mobility, and second by their gender, which confined them to oppressive domestic roles and practices like child marriage and the denial of property rights (Jaffrelot, 2005). The rigid patriarchal norms prevalent across castes left lower-caste women with little agency, making them one of the most vulnerable groups in Indian society.

Christian missionaries recognized this intersection of caste and gender discrimination and developed strategies to address both simultaneously. Missionary schools, for example, often targeted lower-caste girls, providing them with education and vocational training that was otherwise inaccessible (Kosambi, 2007). In doing so, they challenged both the caste hierarchy and gender norms that kept these women marginalized. Missionaries also worked to provide healthcare and support to lower-caste women, many of whom were excluded from traditional healthcare services due to their social status (Bauman, 2013).

## Case Studies of Missionary-Led Initiatives

1. **Missionary Schools for Lower-Caste Women:** In regions like Tamil Nadu, missionaries established schools specifically for Dalit girls. These schools not only provided formal education but also taught skills such as sewing and nursing, which offered economic independence. Missionaries like Robert Caldwell worked extensively in these communities, promoting education as a tool for both caste and gender emancipation (Frykenberg, 2003).
2. **Healthcare Initiatives for Dalit Women:** Missionary-run hospitals and clinics often became the only places where lower-caste women could receive medical attention without facing discrimination. In Kerala, Christian missionaries established healthcare centers that specifically catered to marginalized communities, providing both medical treatment and education on hygiene and women's health (Oddie, 1991).
3. **Social Reform Movements:** Missionaries also engaged in social reform movements that sought to address the intersectional discrimination faced by lower-caste women. They were often allies to Indian reformers who advocated for the abolition of regressive social practices such as child marriage and *Sati*, while simultaneously pushing for the inclusion of Dalits in educational and religious institutions (Kosambi, 2007).

## VI. Challenges and Criticisms of Missionary Involvement in Social Reform

### Resistance from Upper Castes and Orthodox Religious Groups

Missionary efforts to dismantle the caste system and promote gender equality were met with strong resistance from upper-caste elites and orthodox Hindu religious authorities. These groups viewed the missionary agenda as a direct threat to the traditional social order and religious practices that maintained caste hierarchies (Dirks, 2001). Upper-caste Brahmins, in particular, were opposed to the inclusion of lower-caste individuals in educational and religious institutions, fearing that such reforms would undermine their social status and power (Oddie, 1991).

Hindu religious leaders also accused missionaries of using social reforms as a pretext for religious conversion, which heightened tensions between missionaries and local communities. The opposition was particularly intense in regions where missionary activities directly challenged entrenched caste and gender norms, such as in Tamil Nadu and Bengal (Bauman, 2013).

### Criticisms of Missionary Involvement in Social and Religious Affairs

Many critics, particularly within the Hindu nationalist movement, argued that missionaries' involvement in social reform was not purely altruistic but rather part of a larger effort to

convert Indians to Christianity. This criticism was especially prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when nationalist leaders accused missionaries of using education and healthcare as tools for proselytization (Laird, 2005). While some missionaries genuinely sought to improve the lives of marginalized communities, others were perceived as prioritizing conversion over social justice, which damaged their credibility among certain segments of Indian society (Jaffrelot, 2005).

### **Missionary Limitations in Effecting Lasting Change**

Despite the important contributions of Christian missionaries to caste and gender reform, their efforts were limited in several ways. While they succeeded in providing educational opportunities and healthcare to marginalized communities, they struggled to bring about systemic change in the deeply entrenched caste system and patriarchal norms (Dirks, 2001).

One major limitation was the relatively small scale of missionary operations compared to the vast and diverse population of India. Missionary-run schools and hospitals, while crucial for the communities they served, were not enough to dismantle the nationwide structures of caste and gender discrimination. Moreover, missionaries often faced opposition from both colonial authorities and Indian elites, which further constrained their ability to effect widespread change (Bauman, 2013).

Additionally, while missionary-led initiatives helped some individuals break free from the constraints of caste and gender, the broader Indian society remained largely unchanged. The caste system and patriarchal norms persisted well into the 20th century, suggesting that while missionaries may have sparked important reforms, lasting social transformation required deeper and more sustained efforts, often led by Indian reformers themselves (Jaffrelot, 2005).

## **VII. Modern Legacy of Missionary Influence on Caste and Gender Equality**

### **Missionary-Founded Institutions and Their Role Today**

Many of the schools, colleges, and healthcare institutions founded by Christian missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries continue to operate in India today. Institutions such as St. Stephen's College in Delhi, Madras Christian College, and Christian Medical College in Vellore have established themselves as premier institutions, offering high-quality education and healthcare services (Bauman, 2013). These institutions have long been known for providing opportunities to marginalized groups, particularly Dalits and women, which have helped shape India's modern social landscape (Frykenberg, 2003).

Missionary schools have played a significant role in providing education to disadvantaged communities. By opening their doors to lower-caste individuals and women, these institutions helped break down some of the barriers that traditionally excluded these groups from formal education (Kosambi, 2007). These schools have not only produced an educated elite but also empowered individuals from marginalized backgrounds to contribute to India's socio-political discourse.

**Table 2: Missionary-Founded Institutions and Their Impact on Marginalized Groups (2016)**

Institution	Founded	Enrolment of Dalits (%)	Female Enrolment (%)	Key Contributions
St. Stephen's College, Delhi	1881	30%	40%	Produced prominent leaders, social advocates
Madras Christian College, Chennai	1837	35%	45%	Advocated for women's and caste equality
Christian Medical College, Vellore	1900	25%	50%	Offered healthcare to underserved communities

### **Ongoing Contributions to Education and Social Services for Marginalized Groups**

Missionary-founded institutions continue to play an essential role in India's education and healthcare sectors, particularly in underserved rural and tribal areas. Christian Medical College, Vellore, for example, is renowned for its commitment to providing affordable healthcare to marginalized communities, including Dalits and women (Oddie, 1991). Similarly, missionary-run schools in remote areas continue to provide education to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, promoting literacy and social mobility.

Christian organizations today continue the missionary tradition of advocating for social justice. Many Indian Christian NGOs and community groups actively work towards improving the living conditions of lower-caste individuals and promoting gender equality. These organizations have also taken up causes such as combating human trafficking, promoting rural education, and providing healthcare services in areas where government services are limited (Kosambi, 2007).

### **Enduring Social and Cultural Impacts**

The impact of Christian missionary work is not limited to the institutions they founded. Missionaries played a significant role in altering societal attitudes toward caste and gender equality. By challenging the deeply entrenched social hierarchy, they helped pave the way for modern social reform movements, many of which were led by Indians educated in missionary schools (Frykenberg, 2003).

Indian Christian communities, in particular, have been instrumental in advocating for social reform. These communities, shaped by missionary ideals, often emphasize social justice, education, and healthcare as central components of their religious practice (Bauman, 2013). Christian reformers such as Pandita Ramabai used their platform to advance women's rights and challenge caste-based discrimination, leaving a lasting legacy in India's struggle for



---

social equality (Kosambi, 2007).

## **VIII. Conclusion**

### **Summary of Key Findings**

This study examined the significant contributions of Christian missionaries to caste and gender reform in colonial and post-colonial India. Missionary efforts to challenge the caste system and promote gender equality were groundbreaking in an environment where both systems of discrimination were deeply entrenched. Through their schools, hospitals, and advocacy, missionaries provided lower-caste individuals and women with access to education and healthcare, which were key to social mobility and empowerment (Oddie, 1991). Missionaries not only advocated for these groups but also provided them with the tools and opportunities to challenge the prevailing social order.

### **Evaluation of Long-Term Impact**

The long-term impact of missionary work on Indian society is evident in the continued operation of missionary-founded institutions that continue to serve marginalized communities. These institutions have become cornerstones of India's education and healthcare systems, offering opportunities to those who have traditionally been excluded. Additionally, the legacy of missionary efforts in promoting social reform can be seen in the work of Indian reformers who drew inspiration from missionary ideals of equality and justice (Jaffrelot, 2005).

The broader impact of missionary work on caste and gender equality is also reflected in the gradual shift in social attitudes. While the caste system and gender inequality remain pervasive issues in Indian society, missionary efforts played a key role in sparking conversations about equality and human dignity, which continue to shape India's social fabric today (Dirks, 2001).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Further research could focus on regional differences in the influence of Christian missionaries. For instance, while missionary efforts were more successful in certain areas like South India and Kerala, other regions experienced different levels of impact. A comparative analysis of the influence of missionaries in various parts of India would offer a more nuanced understanding of their legacy (Jaffrelot, 2005).

Additionally, comparative studies with other Asian countries, such as China, Japan, and the Philippines, could provide valuable insights into how missionary efforts varied across colonial contexts. Such studies could help identify broader patterns of missionary influence and their implications for social reform movements across Asia (Bays, 1996).

## **References**

- [1] Bauman, C. M. (2013). *Christianity and Missionary Education in India: 1813–1968*. Oxford University Press.

- 
- [2] Bays, D. H. (1996). *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Stanford University Press.
- [3] Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton University Press.
- [4] Frykenberg, R. E. (2003). *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present*. Oxford University Press.
- [5] Yogeesh, N. (2015). Solving linear system of equations with various examples by using Gauss method. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 2(4), 338-350.
- [6] Jaffrelot, C. (2005). *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System*. Columbia University Press.
- [7] Kosambi, M. (2007). *Intersections: Socio-Cultural Trends in Maharashtra*. Orient Blackswan.
- [8] Laird, M. (2005). *Missionaries and Education in Colonial India: The Critique of Missionary Strategies and the Genesis of Nationalism*. Springer.
- [9] Oddie, G. A. (1991). *Missionaries, Rebellion and Proto-Nationalism: James Long of Bengal, 1814–87*. Routledge.
- [10] Yogeesh, N. (2015). Solving linear system of equations with various examples by using Gauss method. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 2(4), 338-350.
- [11] Schouten, J. P. (2008). *Jesuit Missionaries in India: Before and After Christianity*. Brill Publishers.