

P. Sanal Mohan

Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala. New Delhi: Oxford University, Press, 2015, ISBN 9780198099765, 368 pages, GBP 62.00.

P. Sanal Mohan's *Modernity of Slavery* is an outstanding contribution to an emerging body of interdisciplinary scholarship on Christianity and caste relations in modern South Asia. It is based on a wealth of new historical evidence on the social impact of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore in southwest India. Sanal Mohan shows how these Protestant missions took up the cause of men and women in agrarian servitude in this part of modern-day Kerala, and in turn, how the slave castes crafted new selves in the cauldron of colonial modernity with and without the aid of their missionary patrons. Besides bringing new evidence to bear on the relationship between colonial modernity and socio-religious change, the book offers a novel anthropological understanding of this relationship by reading archival sources against the grain and in the light of the lived experiences of ex-untouchable or Dalit castes such as the Parayas and Pulayas. By doing so, it shows how, after the formal abolition of slavery in 1855, these ex-slave castes remade themselves in their everyday lives and sought equality in a social field shaped by Protestant missions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Christianity and the politics of caste in modern India are connected intimately, though scholarly and public discourse has typically failed to acknowledge this. To be sure, Sanal Mohan is careful to distinguish between landowning Syrian (Nestorian) Christians from dominant castes and those historically oppressed and landless groups whose struggles he documents. British Protestant missions made their deepest impact in southern India on the latter, whose enslavement by dominant landowning castes had stripped them of their humanity over centuries. It mattered, of course, that the new Anglican churches shared affinities with the British Raj, but that fact cannot be taken to imply that the Raj was particularly keen to overturn what it saw as "traditional" social hierarchies. Indeed, the missionaries themselves were divided on agendas of social reform. Accordingly, there is no necessary relationship between conversion to Christianity and Dalit emancipation, though they came to be linked in contingent circumstances in Travancore in the late nineteenth century.

The historical specificity of missionary discourses and their reception by ex-slave castes thus lies at the heart of the book. As elsewhere, Anglican missionaries prescribed personal hygiene, a monogamous family, and a disciplined life free from sin. In the context of Travancore, however, these prescriptions came

to be reworked by ex-slaves, regardless of whether they converted to Christianity, into a new consciousness that claimed equality in the public sphere after removing all markers of servitude. This process of reworking missionary discourses, the book argues, ought to be seen as one of modernization, but it was far from seamless: older ritual practices that invoked spirits and magic persisted alongside the new lessons taught by missions. In other words, we cannot assume a one-to-one correspondence between the aims of the missions and the world that the ex-slaves remade. Christianity revitalized the ritual lives of Dalits and paved the way for modern emancipatory politics, but it neither set out to do so nor dictated the eventual historical path taken by Dalits in Kerala.

Arguably, the deepest influence of Christianity may be seen among those who did not remain within the fold. Sanal Mohan traces the career and influence of Poykayil Yohannan, who created his own hybrid religious sect at the intersection between popular Christianity and pre-Christian Dalit beliefs and practices. Yohannan's religion, which spread through the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), bore the imprint of the teachings of the Protestant missions in Travancore: he, too, urged his followers through passionate sermons to purify their bodies and souls, to acquire the habits of thrift and hard work, and to claim equality in both material and non-material senses. Yet he critiqued the Bible as irrelevant to Dalits because it did not refer to them, and presented himself as the sole source of genuine revelation. Unsurprisingly, Anglican missionaries denounced Yohannan as a heretic and a false prophet. Undeterred, he devised new rituals for his sect, most notably the *rakshanir-nayam* for initiating new members via sermons and prayers. The author refers to these new rituals and the sect in toto as 'millennial', a term often used for so-called 'tribal' or 'indigenous' religions as they are dramatically transformed in the course of their encounters with modern Christianity. This is, in my view, a misunderstanding of both millenarian religion and indigenous revitalization movements. The former promises heaven on earth for the elect following the coming of the millennium, which inspired chiliastic sects in Roman Judea or medieval Europe, whereas the latter is concerned with new socio-religious formations that blend the old and new in creative ways. Yohannan's PRDS is of the latter kind, and the manner in which it has survived the death of its founder suggests a long history of social struggle interspersed with religious innovations and pragmatic adaptations to an evolving political context. Indeed, PRDS has progressed much in the same way as Christianity after the death of its founder. Self-appointed guardians, dissenters, and negotiations with state power have continued to shape the historical trajectory of the sect. But neither has the millennium arrived, nor do most believers expect it to come anytime soon.

The single most important lesson of Sanal Mohan's finely-crafted book is to rethink the nature of colonial modernity and its implications for historically subordinated groups in ex-colonial territories. We can no longer assume with Subaltern Studies that ex-untouchable castes simply experienced colonial modernity as a more intense period of exploitation and degradation than before (or at least relative to dominant caste groups). Instead, colonialism may be better understood in terms of opportunities for mimesis and hybridity, which have, paradoxically, been central to the efforts of Dalits and other subaltern groups to overcome the historical conditions of their subordination, remake themselves as individuals and groups, and to make claims to equality in the modern public sphere.

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