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Repainting Religious Landscape: Economics of Conversion and Making of Rice Christians in Colonial South India (1781-1880) by M. Christhu

The ‘rice Christian’ of the Orient goes through the very same steps, when he is after rice and the missionary is after him—Mark Twain

Missionaries believed that calamities and famines were opportunities to make more ‘believers’.

During the eighteenth century, few British writers and missionaries compared the economically-challenged Roman Catholics in England with that of rice Christians in India.

The colonial administrators noted that the Dutch missionaries in India, who established schools for religious instruction, denominated the converts as rice Christians.

Catholic as well as Protestant missionaries employed various strategies to convert the deprived sections, the Protestants continued to criticize the Catholics publicly for using ‘unjustifiable means’ for conversion.

The Protestant missionaries alleged that their Catholic counterparts distributed much alms, and asserted that they had no money to ‘purchase’ the heathens for conversion and pay them rice.

As to the poorer sort of natives,&such as have no caste, to value themselves upon,they are so vile a people,that, for a little rice,they will be of any religion,&for as small a consideration, leave it again,&it is out of these that the Romish Priests chiefly make their proselytes

In Bombay,it was the bubonic plague which drew a great number of people to Christianity. As Chad Bauman shows,many people accepted the missionary religion in Central Province during the famines & became rice Christians,but returned to Hinduism once they came out of the miseries

The term ‘rice Christians’ gained popular currency after the SPCK missionary in Tanjore, Christian Frederick Swartz (1726–98), who was considered by many as an adventurer, a politician and a missionary who used famine as the tool to reap the ‘heathen’ souls.

Swartz utilized this material assistance in his favor later on, as soon around 1,500 Hindus and 500 Muslims embraced Christianity on his instruction.

After having satisfied themselves by having continuously encouraging experiences with the Nadars, the missionaries in the1820s made it clear that the Nadars were less attached to idolatry and were more inclined to embrace Christianity than any other caste groups.

The relationship between the Raj, the missionaries and conversion is a complex one. The missionary endeavor can be seen as an extension of colonialism, on the one hand, and as a benevolent mask, on the other hand, though on occasions it acted on both levels.

The post-famine period further accelerated the number game as the missionaries could easily draw in more and more of the famine-ridden masses by distributing two measures of rice and a coconut.

Robert Caldwell, linguist and a historian noticed that the converts, on the one hand, were sneered at by the white officialdom as rice Christians and, on the other hand, were disdained by the Brahmins and educated Hindus as a new low caste, begotten of ignorance and hunger.

there were 120,000 converts and identified them as rice Christians as they embraced Christianity to get rice from the missionaries. Yet, missionaries avoided using the term once the converts showed that they were no longer embracing Christianity for material benefits

While the great famine saw a large number of the Nadars, Pariahs and Paravas embracing Christianity, the post-famine period saw a wave of anti-missionary sentiment emerging among elite Hindus by the 1880s.Accordingly, Hindu organizations such as the Our Aryan Forefathers Society,

Aryan Missionaries for Alvar Tirunagari, Vibuthi Sangam and Chatur Veda Siddhanta Sabha among others began to openly protest against the missionary religion. Payne’s Age of Reason , Strauss’ New Life of Jesus , Bennett’s Truth Seekers’ Tracts and Anti-Christ ;

Clifford’s Supernatural Religion , Braudlaugh’s Free Thinkers’ Textbook and Ingersoll’s Anti-Christian Pamphlets , among other writings became a great source of strength for these Hindu leaders to interrogate missionaries and the rice Christians. As a result, the missionaries

became cautious about the methods they adopted for evangelization and decided not to make ‘non-Christians’ read the Bible at missionary schools, apart from desisting from baptizing the youth.

Christians once used to be proud to be identified as ‘Veteran Soldiers of the Army of Messiah’, now became silent. Missionaries appealed to the converts not to have debates and discussions with Theosophists

While the native Christians were excluded from government employment citing lack of adequate intelligence during the early phase of the British Raj, they were employed during 1870s and 1880s as the government asserted that all government offices were open to the converts.

Some missionaries asserted: ‘Truly they are rice Christians because they work industriously and produce the finest rice crops. They are largely of the peasant class and peasant proprietors, who cultivate the land they own.

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