Sex, Gender and Christian Conversion in Nineteenth-century South India

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This paper is the result of research conducted for an undergraduate thesis. I had access to source material from two separate missions in South India. These two missions, located in the British administrative region known as the Madras Presidency, were the Telugu mission of the London Missionary Society (LMS) established in 1805 and the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Madura district of the Tamil region, which was established in 1834.[1] I also made use of general missionary literature. My research covered the nineteenth century, 'the great century of missions'. The bulk of converts in both missions came from Hinduism. The majority came from the low castes, many in the mass movements in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

In this paper I am going to discuss firstly the impact of sex and gender on the representation of Protestant Christianity in India and upon the Indian experience of Christian missions. In the second part of the paper I want to examine the material and social processes of conversion to Christianity in India, and to suggest a number of ways in which sex, gender, and patriarchy in Indian and western cultures had an important impact on conversion.

A discussion of conversion needs to be located within the framework of the family. The significance of caste, in terms of both advancing or obstructing the spread of Christianity in India, has long been recognised. There were also, it seems, certain significant patterns of communication and conflict within the family that shaped the process of conversion.

Like caste the family was perceived by missionaries to be a major force of resistance to Christianity. India was not one of the great successes of the

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1 Annual Reports and some letters from the LMS mission were available in manuscript form. Only selections from the letters and reports from the Madura mission that were published in the *Missionary Herald* (*MH*), the journal of the ABCFM, were available.

Religious Change, Conversion and Culture, ed. Lynette Olson, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, 12, Sydney, 1996.

Protestant missionary enterprise. Frustrated missionaries explained to the missionary societies that there were many individuals who were

> probably ready ... to profess themselves outwardly Christian and would do so did not that mighty power, the Hindu family system, octopus like hold them in its tentacles.[2]

Relations between converts and their Hindu relatives were difficult, in some cases impossible to maintain. It is not surprising then to find that many 'believers' preferred to maintain their relations with their families where economic, emotional and social support networks were located and refrained from formal conversion. Neither is it surprising to find that other family members attempted to prevent them from being baptised.

At the same time it was recognised that family networks facilitated the spread of Christianity. As individuals were generally unwilling to be baptised on their own they attempted to influence the rest of their families, and delayed their own conversions until others were prepared to join them. Analyses of mass movements in particular have drawn our attention to the way in which group identity and group mobility is the norm rather than the aberration in India. Because low castes had less to lose and hoped instead that they had much to gain by conversion it was easier for individuals not wishing to be baptised alone to convince others to convert as well.

As could be expected a considerable amount of family politics surrounded conversion. Missionary reports are full of accounts of the baptism of whole family groups together, but this does not necessarily indicate an absence of conflict. It seems more likely that missionaries were not always aware of or did not think it necessary to record the family politics that may have preceded such conversions. These could well have been the families of individuals who, after introducing Christianity into the family, were prepared to wait until other family members were willing to be baptised at the same time.

The main point I wish to establish in this paper is that women and men faced conflict within the family from quite different positions. Men had both greater power and autonomy. Whereas women's choices were circumscribed by social conditions which limited female autonomy, men exercised relatively greater social and economic independence. Indian

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2 Dr Washburn, Letter, 8th November, 1893, in *MH*, February, 1894, p. 71.

women relied upon relations with their male kin for material survival and social status. The sexual division of labour and inequitous wage structures in India, as elsewhere, operated to ensure female economic dependence. This meant that an individual's experience of conversion was largely determined by sex.

I am aware of the limitations of this paper. A major problem with a text-based analysis is that a knowledge of the operation of local agenda is missing. With this in mind it is important to state that I aim to do little more than demonstrate that certain questions about conversion need to be raised. There are also limitations on the resources available to an undergraduate. As a consequence this paper is necessarily general. Due to the invisibility of women in the source material it was just not possible to concentrate upon one mission, or locality, or to pay detailed attention to the sexual politics of conversion in relation to other important factors such as region, local politics, caste, or social and economic change.

On the other hand what struck me most when I did my research were the consistencies in the sexual politics of the process of conversion that were evident in the material from the two missions studied and indeed in material from all over India. Similar patterns of conversion seem to have persisted throughout the nineteenth century and transcended geography and caste.

Before I go on to discuss the sexual politics of conversion in greater detail I want to provide a brief description of the sexual politics of the missionary enterprise in India, both in order to sketch something of a background for my later argument and also to demonstrate that as a result of sexual segregation and the subordination of women in both western and Indian cultures, the male and female experiences of Protestant missions in India were quite different.

The Female Mission

Both the structure and agenda of the missionary enterprise were organised on the basis of sex and gender. There was a high degree of sexual segregation in the representation of Christianity by missions in India. Missionary societies adhered to a strict sexual division of labour. Women

involved in the enterprise performed what was labelled 'Woman's Work for Woman' or the 'Female Mission'.

It is a commonplace in the history of Christian missions in India that sexual segregation and the seclusion of women in zenanas, women's quarters, meant that it was necessary to send missionary women to reach their 'heathen sisters' in India. The significance and the extent of the seclusion of women were exaggerated in the missionary texts. Only wealthier families could afford to keep women secluded, and the practice was less common in the south of India. Still, all Indian women were bound by similar restrictions on their mobility and social and familial intercourse, in what was a purdah of behaviour if not physical confinement. Hindu constructions of femininity meant that these restrictions were required to maintain family honour by ensuring women's sexual purity.[3] When women moved around outside their homes they did so along circumscribed feminine routes in space, time and occupation, working or performing familial functions such as purchasing food or collecting water and fuel. Women did not associate freely with men in public or with men outside their families.

Yet the idea of a female mission had more to do with the needs of middle-class western culture. Within the framework of nineteenth-century western notions of separate spheres and the complementarity of the sexes, masculinity was associated with the public world and femininity with the private, domestic sphere, the home, a world populated by women and children. When women engaged in activities outside the physical boundaries of their homes they did so in occupations that could be understood as an extension of their domestic roles. Women worked almost exclusively among their own sex and children in evangelical and philanthropic endeavours in the west, and missionary women were sent specifically to work among women and children in the 'foreign field', whether or not the women in the country of destination were secluded, and

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3 Michael Allen and S. N. Mukherjee (eds), *Women in India and Nepal*, Canberra, 1982; E. Harper, 'Fear and the Status of Women', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 25, 1, 1969, pp. 81-95; Leela Dube, 'On the Construction of Gender; Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's Studies', 30th April, 1988, pp. WS11-19; Nur Yalman, 'On the Purity of Women in the Castes Of Ceylon and Malabar', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, no. 93, 1963, pp. 25-58, are just some of the many studies that deal with these issues.

even in places like Hawaii where missionaries considered a little more sexual segregation would have gone a long way.[4]

The female mission was understood to be 'a distinct branch'[5] of the enterprise; it was also a subordinate one, commanding a smaller share of mission resources.[6] The limitations on the female mission were many. For most of the nineteenth century western women could only leave for the field as wives. The marriage rule was enforced on an almost equal basis for both sexes but it had completely different implications for men and women. Women, for whom marriage had been the only means to fulfill their missionary ambitions, found the scope of their work severely limited once in the field. While men could not do without their wives' assistance in taking 'domestic charge' of the stations so they remained free to carry out 'the more important duties of the mission',[7] a woman's first duty was to her own family. The degree of mission work wives could undertake in the towns where they were stationed was dependent upon their familial circumstances and large families were the norm. Male missionaries 'toured' extensively but for most of the nineteenth century women's movement outside the boundaries of the mission premises was not encouraged.

Many saw a need for the employment of more single women who could devote all their time to 'the work' and this was discussed from the earliest years of the missionary enterprise in India. But although it was felt that Indian women were not being reached by male evangelistic efforts it was only after more than half a century of rejection of single women candidates by missionary societies on both sides of the Atlantic that women established their own organisations or committees of existing missionary societies,

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4 Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty, American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth Century Hawaii*, Honolulu, 1989.

5 LMS Annual Report, cited in R. Lovett, *The History of the London Missionary Society 1795-1895*, vol. II, London, 1899, p. 175.

6 There seems to have been little written on British missionary women but there are a number of excellent studies of American missionary women that deal with issues of the status of women in the missionary enterprise: Robert Pierce Beaver, *All Love Excelling: American Protestant Women in World Mission*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968; Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn of the Century China*, New Haven, 1984; Patricia Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Women's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation 1870-1920*, Michigan, 1985; P. Grimshaw, *op. cit.*

7 LMS Archives in the School of Oriental and African Studies Archives, London, William Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 3rd October, 1829.

which sponsored single western and 'native' women workers, and a variety of institutions for women.[8]

In comparison to the LMS the American Board occupied a relatively advanced position in regard to the employment of women. There was a small presence of single American women teachers from the earliest years. The Woman's Board of Missions was formed in the United States after the retirement of Rufus Anderson in 1868, who as secretary of the ABCFM had so long opposed women's employment in foreign missions.[9] The Ladies Committee of the LMS was formed in 1875. Single 'ladies' were sent out by the LMS during the 1870s and 1880s. The bulk of these women worked in the north of India, a marked rise in the number of single women sent to South India occurred in the 1890s.[10] With the influx of single women a feminisation of the enterprise occurred. As the vast majority of mission men were married, women soon outnumbered men.

The lower status accorded to the female mission was also reflected in the lack of attention paid to the provision and training of a 'Native Female Agency'. From the missions' inception men were trained to take leadership roles in the churches and to fulfill a variety of evangelical functions. The wives of 'native' mission staff were expected to serve the mission in a voluntary capacity but make their domestic duties their first priority and other women worked for missions in earlier years, mainly as teachers and matrons of girls' boarding schools; yet it was only from the 1870s that systematic efforts were made to recruit and train Indian women as mission agents. This was part of the growing professionalisation of women's mission work.

The employment of Indian women in the missionary enterprise was circumscribed by a combination of the social prescriptions of both cultures. Female participation in the work force was not highly valued in India, quite the reverse. Women's withdrawal from the work place was a sign of wealth and prestige. Western missionaries complained that high caste women converts, especially, could not be induced to take up mission service.[11] For converts from the low caste groups female seclusion had

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8 R. Pierce Beaver, *op. cit.*, p. 63; E. Stock, *One Hundred Years. Being the Short History of the Church Missionary Society*, London, 1899, p. 97.

9 W. E. Strong, *The Story of the American Board*, Boston, 1910, p. 311.

10 Lovett, *op. cit.*, pp. 738-41, List of Missionaries.

11 Miss Thornburn, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference 1882-3*, Calcutta, 1883, p. 193.

never been an option and the entry into mission work that was non-manual and more importantly non-polluting was an avenue of upward social mobility.

The other major constraint upon the employment of Indian women was the fact that marriage was almost universal in India. Marriage was considered essential for the respectability of both Indian women and their families. Single western women who had 'sacrificed' marriage and maternity themselves lamented the constant loss of educated Christian girls to marriage.[12] Prior to marriage young Christian women were employed in the protected occupations of teaching and, by the turn of the century, nursing where they could be kept under careful surveillance in schools and hospitals.

The kind of work undertaken by women in missions in India expanded after the strengthening of the female mission by single western women. Prior to this women's mission work was largely restricted to educating children and gathering Christian and non-Christian women together for various meetings, similar to church women's meetings in the west. From the 1870s women undertook 'zenana visiting', providing secular education and religious instruction to women in their own homes.[13] These activities conformed to contemporary western concepts of femininity. The care and socialisation of children, receiving or visiting and teaching other women was an extension of western women's domestic and social roles. It did not take them far from their homes, and indeed was more often than not conducted within their own homes or those of Indian women.

From the mid-1870s women took up 'direct evangelical work'. Groups of women began to tour, targetting women wherever they went. Wives and unmarried daughters also began accompanying their husbands and fathers.[14] To a lesser extent some women began to preach in public.[15] The

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12 Miss Keay, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference 1882-3*, p. 218.

13 The word 'zenana' was not used in the south of India; 'zenana visiting' was a generic term used by missionaries all over India.

14 Miss Taylor, Letter, September, 1869, in *MH*, March, 1870, p. 93; Miss Pollock, Letter, September, 1869, in *MH*, February, 1870 p. 61; Review Madura Mission, in *MH*, January, 1874, p. 24; Miss Rendall, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, May, 1876, p. 166; LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1886 and 1896; LMS, M. Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1904.

15 Miss Swift, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, February, 1895, p. 63; M. Christlieb, *An Uphill Road in India*, London, 1929, p. 59.

employment of Indian women in evangelical work was largely restricted to older women, who were allowed more mobility in Indian society. Miss Thornburn, translating from an Indian saying, pointed out that older women

> having 'brought up children' and 'entertained strangers, and washed saints feet' they earned the right to go where they will.[16]

Western women also preferred to engage 'elderly widows or matrons free from family cares'[17] as Bible women and zenana teachers. This work required considerable mobility and commitment and was not thought to be compatible with the duties of wives and mothers.

When they encroached upon this formerly all-male domain western women encountered resistance from western male missionaries. Indian women withstood a certain amount of antagonism and abuse from the Indian community but they also earned a great deal of respect for their commitment to their faith.[18] Bible women were acknowledged as religious leaders and some developed a strong personal following.[19]

The expansion of women's work in the last decades of the century is reflected in the larger numbers of Indian women employed and the wider scope of their employment. Even though the number of Indian women working for missions grew quickly there were always far fewer Indian women employed by Christian missions than men.[20] Ironically the

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16 Miss Thornburn, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

17 Mrs C. Longhurst, *Zenana Mission Work in Madras*, Madras, n. d., pp. 6-7.

18 Christlieb, *op. cit.*, pp. 93, 163, 244; E. Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals; Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe*, New York, 1899, pp. 124-5; LMS, Miss Haskard, Annual Report, Bellary, 1902; LMS, Mrs Thomas, Annual Report, Vizianagram, 1886 and 1892.

19 LMS, Mr Leighton, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1903; LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1899 and 1903.

20 In Madras in 1881 there were 731 Christian, and 14 non-Christian women teachers employed, double the number employed in 1871. In the same year there were 235 ordained Indian preachers, 1,444 unordained preachers, 2,502 Christian male teachers, and 850 non-Christian male teachers (J. Dennis, *Centennial Survey of Foreign Missions*, New York, 1902, pp. 62-4). By 1890 the number of female agents in Madras was still comparatively small at 1,061 (*Statistical Tables of Protestant Missions in India Burma and Ceylon 1890*, Calcutta, 1891, p. 60).

feminisation of the western mission coincided with the growth of a male-dominated Native Church.

Due to the degree of sexual segregation in the Indian encounter with Christian missions and also perhaps partly because of these limitations of the female mission, it could be argued that the Indian female and male experiences of Christian missions differed greatly, both in extent and nature. Men and women came into initial contact with Christian missions in quite different and sex-specific activities. The degree and nature of women's exposure to Christian proselytisation was further determined by caste, age and residence.

In the nineteenth century missionary societies employed two main strategies, preaching and teaching. Male missionaries carried out their preaching in streets and bazaars. They commonly met with audiences that were eighty to ninety percent male.[21] Male 'inquirers' followed up their interest by seeking out missionaries, often travelling long distances to do so. Male missionaries made themselves available to these inquirers and their reports abound with accounts of the long discussions and religious debates they had with these men. Indian women's mobility and freedom of association was much more restricted.

Women were not, of course, totally untouched by male missionaries' activities, but their experience of preaching was of a different nature.[22] The Rev. Hawker from the LMS wrote that he preferred village preaching because he felt he was able to reach more women:

> While I am preaching to the men in the street I see women skipping into neighbouring homes and sometimes they make remarks or ask questions from their hidden places of hearing.[23]

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[21] S. Immanuel David, 'A Mission of Gentility: The Role of Women Missionaries in the American Arcot Mission, 1839-1938', *Indian Church History Review*, vol. XX, no.2, December, 1986, p. 148.

[22] There were several reports of women approaching and conversing with male missionaries, western and Indian: LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1880 and 1881; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1874; LMS, Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1886.

[23] LMS, Annual Report, Belgaum, 1881.

Even though women were also involved in preaching by the end of the century this does not seem to have changed the nature of the audiences. In the Madura mission Ruby, a Bible woman, reported that

> when ... we gave up evening meetings and met by daylight. Some Hindu women complained ... that thereby they lost the privilege of hearing the preaching; for in the evening they could stand in the shadows as they returned from the water fountains and listen without being driven off by the men.[24]

When women were contacted by missions in any direct and sustained way it was usually by other women within the female mission. Education may have been the most important form of contact with Indian women for most of the century, but rates of female participation in education in India were low. The prohibitions against female education in India are well known.[25] In simple terms of numbers missionaries came into contact with far fewer girls than boys for the course of the nineteenth century.[26]

Expressions of outrage at the prohibitions against female education formed part of a rhetoric of denunciation of Indian society and the assumption that women were entirely uneducated is questionable but there is no doubt that there were much higher rates of illiteracy among women. This in itself would have limited women's exposure to Protestant Christianity. Huge amounts of time and effort were expended by men on the translation, production and dissemination of evangelical literature. In a

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[24] Sixty-Fourth Annual Report of the Madura Missions, June, 1899, in *MH*, August, 1899, p. 332. Mr Elwood (Letter, 8th October, 1897, in *MH*, January, 1898, p. 23) expressed disappointment that village women and children would not even come near for the lantern pictures.

[25] J. Dawson (LMS, Letter, Vizagapatam, 30th August, 1825) reported that women were kept uneducated because it was thought that 'for a woman to be able to read, the speedy death of herself or others in the family will be secured, in addition to which it is thought for a wife to be able to read or converse it would make her of too much importance in her own eyes and detract from that sense of servility which all females ... are taught is their proper feeling'.

[26] In 1881 the 'grand total' of girls under instruction in mission institutions and their own homes was 56,408. The total number of boys was more than double at 131,244 (*Statistical Tables*, pp. 65-70).

number of accounts men describe first being stimulated into inquiry after coming across and reading scripture or tracts.[27]

There were greater restrictions on the mobility of high caste women and girls who also needed to maintain caste purity by avoiding contact with lower polluting castes. In response missions established separate 'caste schools'. Although there were some successful attempts earlier it was not until the end of the 1870s in the Madura and LMS mission that sufficient numbers of high caste families were willing to have their daughters educated in mission schools in order to maintain these schools.[28]

At the other end of the spectrum girls of the lowest castes were perhaps less likely to come into contact with missions through education. Children of the untouchable castes only began attending mission schools in large numbers after the mass movements in the two missions studied, and then in schools specifically established for them. The LMS for example set up a number of schools for Malas and Madigas in the early 1890s. It was only after a decade of operation that girls began to attend these schools.[29]

Zenana visiting became an increasingly important feature of women's work in the towns. Part of the purpose of this type of work was to follow up ex-school pupils, the other was to reach older women, especially high caste women who were not being reached by other means. Systematic visiting did not begin in earnest in the Madura mission until the early 1870s and later in the 1880s in the LMS mission, with the increase in the numbers of single western women and Indian women mission agents.[30] Although there was some growth in zenana work numbers of zenana pupils remained small.[31]

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[27] LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 8th October, 1836; W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', written in 1846 as part of the Annual Report, this incident occurred in 1844; LMS, G. Cran and A. Des Granges, joint letter, Vizagapatam, cited in Lovett, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-5.

[28] LMS, Mrs Thomas, Letter, Vizagapatam, n. d., in *News of Female Missions* (Journal of the Ladies Committee of the LMS), April, 1884, p. 25; Mr Chester, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, April, 1869, p. 272. Mr. Chandler, Letter, 20th May, in *MH*, December, 1871, p. 391.

[29] LMS, Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1899; LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1902 and 1903.

[30] 1870 Review, in *MH*, April, 1872, p. 113; LMS, Mrs Jagannadhan, Annual Report Girls School, Vizagapatam, 1884; LMS, Mrs Campbell, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1886.

[31] In 1871 there were 1,997 zenana pupils of Protestant Missions in all India, 121 of them in the Madras Presidency. The figures for 1881 are 9,132 for all India and 1,920 in

Visiting was confined initially to women of the higher castes, Brahmans and Sudras.[32] While low caste women were simply not 'at home' to visitors as they were out working, the gentility of western mission women was more responsible for keeping them away. Initially Indian Bible women too were protected from

> the poor, the rough, and coarse; they enter more generally the houses of the better classes.[33]

Much was made of the inaccessability of high caste women but it was poor low caste working women who, despite being the most mobile group of women, were the least likely to come into contact with missionaries. One woman missionary recognised this when she said,

> we have often overlooked the largest class of women in India, the working women. They are free from restraint, but they have the shadow of deep poverty over them, and the necessity of constant hard labour is the obstacle in the way of their regular instruction. They cannot be gathered into schools, they can spare no time in their busy day for teachers and lessons.[34]

In the last decades of the century low caste women or women employed specifically for the purpose were engaged to contact low caste women.[35]

Caste prejudice had to be catered to, for women who had been in contact with the lower castes were not admitted into high caste homes for fear of the pollution they would transmit. It is possible that this missionary was correct in saying that these women had little time for missionaries. Poor working women may have presented missionaries with the most

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Madras. In 1890 the numbers had risen to 32,659 for all India, 7,090 in Madras (*Statistical Tables*, p. 60-1).

32 A generic term westerners applied to non-Brahman but non-polluting castes.

33 Miss Sisson, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, June, 1876, p. 194. Geraldine Forbes also discusses this issue, 'In Search of the "Pure Heathen"; Missionary Women in Nineteenth Century India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's Studies', 26 April, 1986, p. WS7.

34 Miss Thorburn, *op. cit.*, p. 190; LMS, Stringfellow, Report of Women's Work, Vizagapatam, 1903.

35 LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1893 and 1889; LMS, Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1899.

resistance. One of the women employed by the LMS reported that she was often challenged by the women she worked amongst, asking her if teaching would bring them food.[36]

Generally, women in villages at any distance from the stations too were rarely contacted by mission women until mission women began to tour. Missionary parties on tour generally camped in some open spot with access to one or more villages, and local women felt free to approach missionary women, coming to the camp in groups, often simply out of curiosity. Men came to see mission women too but it was novel for village women to approach missionaries in this way.[37] Ruby reported to Emma Stephenson that when she was itinerating in the surrounding villages

> In several places the women said 'Oh see here! *Women* have now come to teach us. For some time past men have been coming to preach to our men but now *we* can learn.'[38]

Some of the implications of the sexual segregation in the representation of Christianity in India will emerge in the following discussion. The full implications of sexual segregation and of the possibility that women may have experienced comparatively less direct contact with mission agents are issues that remain to be examined in further studies.

Family Politics — Home Despots

Opposition to Christianity in the family came from all directions but the family politics surrounding conversion were represented by missionaries as sex-specific. According to missionaries' accounts much of the conflict over conversion in the family was between men and women, and most often in the form of female resistance to male baptism. Just as the family was represented as a force of religious conservatism women were identified as

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[36] LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1889, 1903 and 1904; I. Barnes, *Between Life and Death*, London, 1901, p. 23.

[37] LMS, Christlieb, Annual Report, Anantapur, 1904; Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 60.

[38] LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report of Woman's Work, Gooty, 1893 (her emphasis).

the most conservative element within the family. Mrs Lewis, a British missionary wife, perceived women to be

> the greatest hindrances in the way of their husbands and sons following what they believe to be the right way.[39]

According to the evangelical rhetoric Indian women were at once the greatest upholders of heathenism and its most pitiable victims. While on the one hand women were represented as the most oppressed, on the other they were most powerful members of society, as a publication of the Ladies Committee of the LMS pointed out:

> The women of India have been held for generations past in tyranny and degradation ... the idea of woman has for ages past been steadily sinking lower and lower, their rights have been more and more assailed ... More cruel and demoralising customs than exist in India in regard to women can hardly be found among the lowest barbarians, and yet we are told she rules in India; as everywhere in the home, that the family life is the stronghold of Hinduism and that woman superstitious and conservative keeps the key.[40]

This is typical of the commentary about what was described as 'the degradation of Indian Womanhood'. As scholars such as Mrinalini Sinha and Lati Mani have pointed out, discourses on 'the condition of women' in India were an important feature of the British moralisation of colonialism.[41] Confident that British women were 'the most honoured in the world',[42] an argument that the position of women in any culture was a test of civilisation was maintained. It followed that the spiritual, social and moral decay of heathenism was mapped out most clearly in the condition of

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39 LMS, Mrs Lewis, *Report on Zenana Work*, Bellary, 1883.

40 *News of Female Missions*, April, 1884, p. 24.

41 M. Sinha, 'Gender and Imperialism: Colonial Policy and the Ideology of Moral Imperialism in Late 19th Century Bengal', in M. Kimmel (ed.), *Changing Men*, Sage Publications, 1987, pp. 217-31; Lati Mani, 'The Production of an Official Discourse on Sati in Early 19th Century Bengal' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's Studies', 26 April, 1986, pp. WS32-40.

42 Anon., *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, Journal of the LMS, February, 1837, p. 98.

heathen womanhood. The litany of 'abuses' against women in India was frequently recited. Heading the list was sati, closely followed by child marriage and prohibitions against widow remarriage and the austerities imposed upon widows. Other 'abuses' included female infanticide, polygamy, the seclusion of women and prohibitions against female education.

The 'elevation' of womanhood was a prominent theme in the debates about the social reform and moral regeneration of India which, the colonisers insisted, were necessary before political independence could be considered. For evangelicals conversion to Christianity was integral to this reform. Spiritual salvation and social liberation were perceived to be complementary and inseparable projects that required complete cultural transformation modelled, of course, upon western cultural forms. Missionaries aspired to transform both gender and relations between the sexes. They attempted to instill the values and attributes of 'True Christian Womanhood' and self-reliant masculinity into converts and Indian culture. Western missionaries also hoped to re-form the Indian family, focusing on marriage in particular.

But while evangelicals expressed much pity for 'degraded and oppressed' Indian womanhood, she was feared as religiously conservative not simply because she was kept in seclusion and ignorance but also, and conversely, because she was believed to possess almost too much power. This power attributed to the women of India was not unique but belonged to them by virtue of their sex. According to essentialist notions about femininity all women were thought to be empowered with an innate feminine influence, which was exercised within the home. The women of India were also believed to share two other essential attributes of femininity: a natural religiosity and a tendency towards conservatism. Thus Indian women were perceived to be a formidable force of resistance to Christianity:

> In India, as all over the world, it is the women who have the strongest instinct for religion and cling to the old worship.[43]

Women, wives, mothers and grandmothers were labelled the 'home despots' of India. They were accused of being the main props of idolatry

[43] M. Butler, *Hindu Women at Home*, Bangalore, 1921, p. 23.

and caste, 'checking all reforms and scrupulously preserving all absurd and ridiculously stupid superstitions.'[44]

This fear of the power wielded by the women of India in their own households was compounded in the missionary imagination by the seclusion of women. Missionaries may have exaggerated its significance but the zenana came to signify the fact that Indian women were out of reach, beyond control. Protected from the colonial gaze women could continue to carry out their 'immoral and idolatrous' practices and pass them on to their children in 'the most inaccessible stronghold of heathenism, the home.'[45]

But at the same time as Indian women were feared as the greatest hindrance they were also viewed as the greatest hope for Christianity. The power of feminine influence could retard but it could also accelerate the spread of Christianity, as Miss Greenfield of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East so passionately reminded her audience at one of the major Decennial Missionary Conferences:

> I believe that the heart of Hinduism is not in the mystic teaching of the Vedas or Shasters, ... not even in the bigoted devotion of its religious leaders; but enshrined in the homes, in the family life and hereditary customs of the people; fed preserved and perpetuated by the wives and mothers of India ... Let us in our Master's name lay our hand on the hand that rocks the cradle, and tune the lips that sing the lullabies. Let us win the mothers of India for Christ and the day will not long be deferred when India's sons also shall be brought to the Redeemer's feet.[46]

It would be facile to dismiss this concept of female religious conservatism merely as a theme of colonial discourses intent on demonstrating the relatively advanced position of women in Christian society. The notion of female religious conservatism in India needs to be addressed as it has found its way directly into scholarship.

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[44] J. Murdoch, *The Women of India and What Can Be Done For Them*, Madras, 1888, p. 17.

[45] Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[46] Miss Greenfield, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference 1882-3*, p. 210.

That women have been excluded from supposedly general histories of religious change in India is demonstrated by the few references to women that can be found. To give some examples: Julius Richter, in his comprehensive history of Christian missions, refers to Indian zenana women as 'the most zealous adherents of traditional heathenism'.[47] Richard Eaton, in his research on tribal conversion in the North of India, records the missionaries' observation that 'it was the women who were most resistant to Christian teachings, remaining devoted to local crop deities'.[48] In their joint study into the church in Andhra Pradesh conducted in the 1950s, Luke and Carman found that women were 'the most entrenched traditionalists' and formed 'the basis of ... resistance to change'.[49] Yet these studies make surprisingly little comment about what appears to be a recurring theme in missionary and scholarly accounts of conversion in India.

Family Politics — A Trial to Him

As already mentioned, because conversion presented a threat to family unity, the family was the site of a considerable amount of conflict over conversion to Christianity. The material from the LMS and Madura missions actually contains many accounts of female resistance to conversion, usually following the introduction of Christianity into the family by males, that appear to validate the notion of female conservatism. There are reports of female opposition causing men to delay baptism.[50] Some men were never baptised for this reason.[51] Some waited till their wives, who may also have brought their children, were persuaded to join them.[52]

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47 Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, London, 1908, p. 329.

48 Richard Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1871,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XXI, no. 1, January-March, 1984, p. 21.

49 P. Luke and J. Carman, *Village Christians and Hindu Culture*, London, 1968, pp. 7, 111.

50 LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 10th April, 1835; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Chicacole, 1844; LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 13th August, 1845; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Vizianagaram, 1869 (refers to the opposition of a 'fond though heathen mother'); LMS, Goffin, Letter, Kadiri, 5th October, 1893.

51 Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413.

52 LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 13th August, 1845.

It would be dangerous, however, to rely upon accounts that were written largely by and about men. The problem with missionary records is not only the general invisibility of women but that when women were mentioned it was usually only in their relations with men. Women emerge as incidental, usually nameless, figures in narratives about the conversions of their male relatives. It is clear that many women did attempt to prevent the baptism of their male relatives. But the evidence also indicates that families were perhaps more successful at obstructing the formal conversion of women.

When their male relatives had decided to convert to Christianity women had to chose between maintaining their existing religious beliefs or their closest family relations, and these choices had to be made in the context of social and economic circumstances that made it difficult for women to live outside of marriage and the family. This meant that women often converted for reasons in addition to or other than religious conviction and that women who had initially chosen to remain Hindu often later decided to join their husbands or other male relatives in the Christian community. Wives were often reunited with their baptised husbands after separations of varying lengths, up to many years.[53]

Women were also torn between conflicting family loyalties. In following their relatives women, like male converts, risked forfeiting other familial relationships. The difference was that in such situations women often may not have had a commitment to or even much understanding of Christianity, and may never have actually 'converted' themselves. I am not suggesting that men did not also convert to Christianity in order to maintain family relationships or for social reasons but I would argue that the pressures on women from family and society were greater and that women's choices were more closely tied to those of their male relatives.

While women's interests lay in the maintenance of the family unit, women as well as men were prepared to sacrifice family unity for faith. Just as converts had to pay a price, those who refused to consider conversion also maintained steadfast adherence to their original faith at

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[53] LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 10th April, 1835; LMS, Porter, Letter, Cuddapah, March, 1846; LMS, Gordon, Annual Report, Vizagapatam, 1846; W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846, records a number of such cases; LMS, M. Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1902.

great personal cost. Many families were permanently separated after men were baptised.[54]

High caste women may have been more likely to attempt to prevent their husbands' and sons' conversion because they had more to lose. Missionaries made a point of insisting that converts demonstrate their sincerity by transgressing or ignoring caste practices. Among the higher castes this meant that contact with Hindu family members was severed or they would also lose caste. High caste women and men endeavoured to prevent the conversion of family members of either sex for the same reasons, but in addition to this there were a number of circumstances that provided women with particular motivations for obstructing the conversion of male relatives.

A high caste Christian convert was considered to have died. For a mother the 'death' of a son would have been a great loss both emotionally and in terms of expected support in old age. Missionary women recognised this and expressed some sympathy.[55] Children of a convert could be outcaste and husbands might never be found for unmarried daughters.[56] High caste wives were faced with a choice of conversion or 'widowhood', with all the consequent deprivations and no option of remarriage. While the lot of a high caste widow is far from a happy one, the alternative was relinquishing their own religious faith, loss of caste and other family relations and an uncertain future. Women's resistance to conversion and men's reluctance to leave their families is understandable.

While high caste women may have had more to lose low caste women also opposed male baptisms. Low caste women are less economically dependent and have the options of divorce and remarriage. However, divorce is not unaccompanied by shame and dishonour for low caste women.[57] Neither does the fact that low caste women work make it possible

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[54] W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846, records a number of such cases. Others were recorded in LMS, Porter, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1845; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Chicacole, 1845; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1869.

[55] Weitbrecht, *The Women of India and Christian Work in the Zenana*, London, 1875, p. 49.

[56] LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1869; Mr Cane, Letter, 10th April, 1840, in *MH*, March, 1841, p. 138.

[57] This is evident in the recent biographical literature of untouchables, e.g. Leela Gulati, *Profiles in Female Poverty; A Study of Five Poor Working Women*, Oxford, 1982; J. Freeman, *Untouchable*, London, 1979.

to achieve economic independence. Women commonly earned only a third to a half of male wages.[58]

On the other hand continued intercourse between Christian and non-Christian family members was not uncommon among lower caste groups. It was in fact a constant worry for missionaries who would have preferred that converts be protected from 'heathen home influence'. Still there are many accounts of low caste women opposing their husbands and sons when they had decided to convert to Christianity.[59] If families stayed together when men of the lower castes were baptised relationships were strained and some baptised men later returned to Hinduism due to pressure from their families.[60]

One of the earlier conversions of the LMS in South India is a classic example of this pattern of initial female resistance to male introduction of Christianity into the family followed by separation then reunion. It is also a good example of the way in which greater male mobility and literacy meant that men often came into contact with Christianity in quite different ways to women in their families. The man concerned was employed as a hospital peon where he was given some Christian literature by an Indian Christian colleague. This man convinced him to change his faith. His wife eventually joined her husband at the mission. However she resisted at first, because, the missionary believed, she was reluctant to break caste. She was described as 'a trial to him' in her opposition.[61]

Wifely opposition could be vehement indeed. The wife of one man, a goldsmith, who was planning to convert had declared that she would not leave her husband if he became a Christian, but when the ceremony was about to commence she did her best to prevent it. As the missionary described it she displayed 'the most uncontrolled grief and passion. She had beaten her head till the blood was streaming down her face. She repeatedly expressed her purpose of jumping into a well.' The ceremony was

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58 J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, New York, 1933, p. 94.

59 Mr Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413. One man told him: 'I know the Christian religion is true, but my wife renders my life simply unbearable, and unless she comes I cannot'. Cf. Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, *passim.*

60 Mr Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413; LMS, W. Dawson, Annual Report, Chicacole, 1845; Journal of Mr Chester, 6th September, 1843, in *MH*, April, 1844, p. 122.

61 W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846. This incident occurred in 1844.

postponed indefinitely and she barred the door at the missionaries' approach in future.[62]

Missionaries expressed much sympathy for men whose affections for their families and domestic comforts hindered their baptism[63] and they were not happy to expose male converts to the temptations of bachelorhood.[64] Missionaries attempted to persuade wives to join their husbands and pressured husbands to do so as well. If wives would not be persuaded, however, missionaries encouraged men to leave their families,[65] and male converts sometimes took Christian wives.[66]

Accounts of wives being baptised some time after their husbands are common and not only because they might have resisted initially. Protestant missionaries would not readily baptise candidates until they could demonstrate a certain level of what they called 'Christian knowledge'. Perhaps due to women's lower levels of education and exposure to missions, wives of baptised men who were keen to be baptised as well were sometimes kept 'under instruction' for longer periods than their husbands.[67]

The rules could be bent, however, when expedient. In one instance the wife and child of a man, who had been working as a 'native assistant' for the LMS, joined him after many years separation just when he was about to be sent to another station. The woman and child were baptised immediately even though they were described as being 'totally ignorant' of Christianity.

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62 LMS, Hawker, Annual Report, Belgaum, 1881. A similar incident was reported in LMS, Goffin, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1891.

63 LMS, Porter, Annual Report, Vizagapatam, 1844; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882: 'Home ties are as binding to the Hindu as to the English man and we could give him our full sympathy'. This report carried two cases of Bacon attempting to influence wives.

64 LMS, W. Howell, Letters, Cuddapah, 8th January and 10th April, 1835; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882.

65 W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846.

66 LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 15th July, 1825.

67 LMS, Porter, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1846; W. Dawson, 'A Short History of the LMS Chicacole Station', 1846, this incident occurred in 1840; LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 18th January, 1836; LMS, Howell, Letter, Cuddapah, 10th April, 1835; LMS, Porter, Letter, Cuddapah, March, 1846; LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 6th December, 1851.

The husband, as spiritual guardian, was 'to furnish them with the means of Christian instruction' at their new home.[68]

Missionaries were gratified by such family reunions.[69] But it is important to distinguish between these kinds of reunions and conversion. Women returned to their marriages for a variety of reasons and not all women who joined their Christian relatives were baptised.

Many forces in addition to pressure from husbands and missionaries would have influenced women, both to be baptised with their male relatives or to join them later. Wives may have followed their husbands out of affection or proper Hindu wifely devotion, like the Telugu women who was reported to have, Sita-like, declared to her husband, 'Where you go, I shall go too. Why should I stay where you are not?'[70]

The question of economic support or rather material survival may have been of most significance. Older women were especially dependent and were sometimes baptised along with younger couples upon whom they depended.[71] Mission agents also suggested that men leave their mothers who were opposed to their baptism. Some men certainly did but others refused.[72]

In one family there were three brothers who all eventually converted to Christianity. When the eldest brother, who was baptised first, returned to his village his mother cursed him:

> I brought you forth and cared for you, in the hope that in my old age I should be cared for by you. You have gone on a road on which we shall not follow you. Henceforth I shall not eat food that comes from your hands. Go away! You are to me as though who are dead!

This woman remained steadfast in her adherence to Hinduism but when her other sons were baptised too 'she dared not repeat her curse'. The two oldest went to the mission station for education and employment, 'the youngest stayed at home to support his mother' until her death.[73]

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68 LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 18th January, 1836.
69 LMS, Porter, Letter, Cuddapah, March, 1846.
70 Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, pp. 193, 191.
71 LMS, Howell, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1825.
72 Letter from Ceylon mission, in *MH*, October, 1828, p. 323.
73 Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-8.

The politics of the extended family are an important consideration. Wives were pressured by the rest of the family to use their influence over their husbands in order to prevent them converting.[74] Women who failed to do so were sometimes blamed for the loss to the family of a son, just as widows were held responsible for their husbands' deaths. Families fears of, and anger at, the loss of their sons and brothers to Christianity were taken out on wives of all castes. Some 'baptismal widows' decided to join their husbands because of the persecution they received from their husbands' relatives.[75]

Within the extended family high caste women, especially, were subject to strict controls and greater surveillance. The story of Anandarayer, the first Brahman converted by the LMS, and his wife illustrates the influence of the family on women's choices. Anandarayer met a Roman Catholic convert when returning home after a long but, according to the LMS missionary, unsatisfactory religious pilgrimage. This man gave him some literature which we are told he 'admired'. He was able to follow up his initial interest by travelling in order to seek out several priests and ultimately the LMS missionaries. To test him one of the priests sent him home to his family. He returned, declaring

> that he preferred the salvation of his soul to all worldly considerations; and even left his wife behind him, who was neither inclined nor permitted to accompany him.

He did not see her again until she joined him some months later, explaining that she had decided to find him because she had 'suffered much among her relations'.[76]

Pressures from the extended family varied. One woman had to face opposition, not only from her natal family but from the whole village when she decided to join her husband after many years separation. The residents of her village, where she had been staying, came out in force in an attempt to physically prevent her leaving with her husband when he came to collect

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74 *Ibid.*, pp. 91-3, 228.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 191-6, 228; LMS, G. Cran and A. Des Granges, joint letter, Vizagapatam, cited in Lovett, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-6.

76 *Loc. cit.*

her. Her mother even took her child hostage, but when this did not weaken her resolve the child was returned.[77]

The question of the sexual politics of mass movement conversions deserves some special attention because the nature of the movements and the representation of them in missionary and scholarly discourses tend to obscure diversity and conflict. Both missionaries and scholars have concentrated on the recording and analysis of male missionaries' contacts with caste and village leaders and male heads of households. The same is also true for a number of earlier, low caste, group conversions. For instance the first Mala conversions in connection with the LMS in Cuddapah occurred in 1840, after the release of a Mala prisoner whom the missionary had visited in jail. When released this man was baptised and proceeded to bring in several families, including his own.[78]

Both mass movements and smaller low caste group conversion emerge from missionary and scholarly accounts as a series of contracts between local male power-brokers and male representatives of the mission.[79] At one level, this is probably just what they were. Decisions regarding conversion during mass movements were often made at the village or community level, by processes that excluded women, either by what missionaries called elders or the all-male caste councils. Stephenson, one of the LMS missionaries, noted that Malas

> move altogether or not at all ... If the elders take the decision the whole community comes and even, if the elders take the decision the whole community goes back to idol worship.[80]

Most importantly, a greater desire among males to be baptised in general was recognised. In his report of the massive India-wide study of mass movements Pickett wrote:

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[77] LMS, J. Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 18th January, 1836; Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

[78] LMS, W. Mawbey, 'Short Chronology of the Cuddapah Station', in Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1874.

[79] Mr Cherry, Extract from Journal, 6th September, 1843, in *MH*, April, 1844, p. 123; Mr Capron, Letter, 25th April, 1868, in *MH*, September, 1868, p. 279; LMS, MacFarlane, Letter, Cuddapah, 26th March, 1894; Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

[80] LMS, Stephenson, Annual Report, Nundial, 1879; another headman was described as 'the means of his people coming over' (LMS, Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1904).

> We do not find resolutions stating that men will not be baptised unless their wives join them in professing Christianity, but we find this condition quite commonly enforced.[81]

No mention was made of wives wishing to be baptised without their husbands. There was clearly some concern about female resistance to baptism in missions and churches dealing with mass movements all over India.

Missionaries have left little record of the female experience of mass movements. One exception is a book written by Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough who was an American Baptist missionary wife involved in the mass movement among Telugu Madigas after the famine of the late 1870s. Throughout her book she too represents the conversion movement in a series of anecdotes where women react to the male introduction of Christianity into the family. But Clough writes with rare understanding of Madiga women's resistance to their male relatives' decision to convert. For instance Thatiah was one of the first Telugu Madigas to introduce Christianity to his village. He first came into contact with Christianity when he met John Clough while travelling in his business of trading in hides. When Thatiah was baptised the whole village isolated him.

> But the grief that was deepest in all his sore trials came through the desertion of his wife Satyamah. She did not stand by him. Perhaps she was not greatly to blame; for she had not been with Thatiah when he opened his heart to the religion of Jesus Christ ... [and] she felt she was losing her husband. Her former care for his comforts was turned to neglect. His food was late or unsavoury, and sometimes he had to go hungry. When he wanted a drink there was no water.

Apparently Satyamah withheld her domestic services until Thatiah threatened to leave her and 'eat with the Christians'. She relented and was baptised and later travelled with him on preaching tours teaching women.[82]

The extent of Christianisation of mass movement converts was always a matter of concern and women were identified as the least Christianised of

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81 Pickett, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

82 Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-8.

all. Pickett's survey found that all over India there were lower rates of credal knowledge and church attendance among women.[83] The same social conditions that limited women's initial exposure to Christianity also shaped women's religious lives after conversion. Women were less exposed to missionaries and teachers after, as well as before, baptism. Working women were not able to read and did not have any spare time. Women involved in mass movements resisted mission agents, they told them things like, 'We are like cattle and cannot learn - baptise us as we are, why make us learn so many things'.[84]

This feature of lower levels of Christianisation among women was not confined to the low castes. Missionaries in Andhra Pradesh also noted that among higher castes 'the women were sometimes more ignorant of Christianity and less well educated than their husbands'.[85]

In addition it seems that women of all castes were often actively excluded from full participation in Christian public life. The proportion of women who attended church services was commonly cited as evidence of 'improvements in community attitudes'.[86] Missionaries felt that it was necessary to encourage male converts to educate women in their families and allow them to come to church.[87] One American in Madura went so far as to threaten to dismiss employees if they did not bring their families to church services. He wrote:

> When the proposition was made it met with much opposition. All declared they would sooner lose their places than comply; that it was against all custom for women to come into the presence of men in public; that they should lose caste etc ...

Only after one man lost his position did the others comply with the missionary's demand.[88]

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83 *Ibid.*, pp. 170-4.

84 LMS, Mrs Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1904.

85 G. A. Oddie, 'Christian Conversion Among Non-Brahmans in Andrah Pradesh', in Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia*, London, 1977, pp. 82-3.

86 General Letter, ABCFM Ceylon Mission, in *MH*, October, 1828, p. 298;
Mr Noyes, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1860, p. 306; Mr Chester, Letter, 14th August, 1897, in *MH*, November, 1897, p. 467.

87 Annual Report, Madura Mission, 1860, in *MH*, June, 1861, p. 186.

88 Muzzy, Letter, 6th April, 1843, in *MH*, November, 1843, p. 370.

Female Revival

Given the degree of segregation common in Indian culture it is no wonder that rates of women's church attendance remained low but it may well have been women who most resisted pressures to attend mixed services. Continuity in the form of religious expression has been recognised as an important facilitator of religious change. Christian women attended their own meetings for worship and prayer, just as Hindu women did.[89] In these meetings women could pray out loud and speak without embarrassment. Women's meetings were not initiated to accommodate Indian but western social forms, yet they provided Indian women with venues for religious activity with which they had been familiar.

Other aspects of Indian women's religious lives were preserved. Existing methods of supporting religious institutions were appropriated by the missions and churches. Fund raising was a feature of Christian women's culture as it was in the west. What was known as the 'Women's Contribution' was collected at the weekly women's meetings in the Madura mission. As many converts were poor and as women especially had little access to cash, Christian women maintained their old practice of laying aside a handful of grain each time they cooked for religious offerings and brought this along to their meetings.[90]

Singing was another important feature of religious expression for women in both cultures. Missions developed a strategy of using songs and lyrics to attract women in particular.[91] Traditional songs were adapted and special efforts were made to replace obscene songs traditionally sung by women. Pickett commented upon the popularity of song among women mass movement converts in the Telugu area. Apparently action songs based on parables and miracles were very popular.

> Many have been composed by Bible women and taught to the Christian women of their villages, who sing them at gatherings ... especially at

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89 Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 246.

90 Noyes, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, February, 1874, p. 50; Miss Taylor, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, March, 1872, p. 94.

91 Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 92-3; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882.

> weekly gatherings of women. Some of these action songs have been expanded into dramas in which a dozen or more women participate.[92]

Women also devised their own public celebrations like those planned by 'coolie' women in Madura:

> Their plan was to have a procession ... they were to go from street to street singing and each woman ... was to join the procession as it came past her house ... then singing together they went up and down some of the streets and so came to the church and there they held their simple exercises of various kinds and made their offerings.[93]

If in general, then, women converts were, or were perceived to be, less Christianised it seems that some were actually creating their own forms of worship, even a separate female religious culture that was quite independent from male-dominated churches. Maybe Pickett did not ask the right questions about levels of Christianisation among women.

As the mass movements demonstrate Christianity travelled along indigenous paths of communication, irrespective of missionary activity. The family was one of these paths and it would seem that women's culture was another. Perhaps because women and men did not mix freely in public and perhaps because women and men were usually exposed to Christianity in predominantly male or female environments, it was possible for religious enthusiasm to thrive especially amongst one sex of a community. Cases of women displaying interest in Christianity or religious enthusiasm as a group were certainly noted.[94]

In the mission girls' schools there were often what the Americans labelled revivals amongst the students.[95] It could be argued that female

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92 Pickett, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

93 Anon., Letter, in *MH*, December, 1907, pp. 602-3. Another such women's festival was described by a retired missionary who had worked in Tamil Nadu: G. Burkhardt, 'Tamil Women and the Danish Mission Society: Danish Women Missionaries' Accounts', in *Indian Church History Review*, vol. XXI, no. 2, December, 1987, p. 128.

94 Annual Report, Madura, 1849, in *MH*, June, 1850, p. 193; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1874; LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1881; LMS, Miss Haskard, Annual Report, Bellary, 1902.

95 General Letter from Ceylon mission, n. d., in *MH*, May, 1838, p. 157; Miss Swift, Letter, 20th September, 1886, in *MH*, December, 1886, pp. 502-3; Miss Noyes, Letter, in *MH*, July, 1899, p. 294.

education is the clearest manifestation of the impact of segregation in the encounter with the missionary enterprise. In mission schools and zenanas women and girls could become interested in Christianity while the men of their households may have had no contact with missionaries.

In some circumstances the fact that women occupied the same social and physical space as a sex meant that caste boundaries could be crossed. In Cuddapah for instance low caste women converts had been singing hymns in the place of traditional work songs as they worked in the fields. Bacon, the LMS missionary, was pleased to report that hearing the songs the Sudra women too had 'learned to sing them and to understand Christianity'.[96]

Mr Noyes of the ABCFM was taken aback by a 'female revival' in one of the small villages he regularly visited. 'Having been accustomed to expect nothing of these ignorant persons' he was most surprised when they exhibited a new-found enthusiasm for Christianity by 'singing harmoniously in a very earnest manner'. This group of women followed Noyes to another village five miles distant, where he organised a prayer meeting with the catechist's wife for their benefit. Not having changed his opinion of these women, Noyes was again surprised to find this revival still prospering when he next visited the area some months later.[97]

Indian women's agency was undoubtedly underrepresented in missionary records but even isolated instances of women's leadership such as this one present an important challenge to ideas of female conservatism. Just as women used their influence to prevent conversions women and girls were active and effective agents of conversion to Christianity. Women were successful agents of religious change in a variety of environments: the immediate and extended family, and the local community.[98] Women converts and in some cases unbaptised ex-pupils disseminated Christian

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96 LMS, Bacon, Annual Report, Cuddapah, 1882.

97 Noyes, Letter, June 30th, 1861, in *MH*, December, 1861, p. 398. Other cases of women displaying enthusiasm as a group: Mr Taylor, Letter, 8th February, 1870, in *MH*, August, 1870, p. 257; Miss Taylor, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, March, 1872, p. 94; Mr Herrick, Letter, 23rd September, 1873, in *MH*, January, 1874, p. 25.

98 Gordon, Letter, Vizagapatam, 6th December, 1851, in *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle*, September, 1852, p. 556; Extract Annual Report, Bellary, in *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle*, July, 1841, p. 366; LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1874.

teachings often without the knowledge let alone support of mission agents.[99]

Women displayed leadership in their communities. During the mass movement among the Madigas one low caste widow was described as the bravest member of her village. In the midst of debates she took a decisive step and went into the heathen temple, removed the idols and gave them to the missionary.[100] One other woman who had been taught in the mission school exercised no little 'influence' over her husband and her neighbours. She instituted and led regular 'family worship'.[101] Not all women were as successful as this, however, and many faced some very effective opposition to their own formal conversions.

Family Politics — Secret Believers

The family shaped the form of both men's and women's reception of Christianity, but it did not do so equally. Women and men were reluctant to be baptised alone for the same reasons of family, caste, support and protection, but the situation was quite different for women who wished to convert to Christianity independently of their families. Due to the social and economic conditions that tied women more intimately to the family, women found it more difficult to be baptised independently. As an Indian woman's status and material well-being so largely depended upon her marital and maternal state, it would not be surprising to find that women postponed baptism when it meant risking marriages and children. There are few instances of wives being baptised before their husbands.

The same structures of sexual inequality disadvantaged women from all castes in regard to joining Christianity independently, but caste, age and marital status further determined levels of female autonomy. High caste women with wealth and status were the most dependent and had more to lose. Zenana women, who had become 'secret believers', presented missionaries with a major problem.

Opposition from within families clearly had a different meaning for women and men. While women may have attempted to manipulate others

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[99] Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 92.
[100] LMS, Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1904.
[101] LMS, J. Dawson, Letter, Vizagapatam, 22nd September, 1839.

by withdrawing their domestic services,[102] or through self-mutilation and threats of suicide,[103] men had the ability to withhold the very means of survival and women could be placed under serious threat of violence from men. In old age women were most vulnerable. One of the American missionaries wrote of

> One aged heathen woman, a widow, [who] became interested in what she had heard of Christianity. Though ready to cast in her lot with the Christians, she said she must ask her son, with whom she lived. He became very angry at her, and threatened not only to deprive her of food, but to kill her if she persisted in her purpose.[104]

Instances of physical threats and violence to prevent women being baptised are hardly likely to be rare. A most striking example was related by Thatiah, when a preacher. The husband of one woman

> began to ill treat her ... He insisted that she must forsake the new religion; he tied her to a tree and beat her; he dragged her about the ground by her hair, so that bunches of her hair remained in his hand.

This conflict was never resolved, the husband remarried and the woman went to live in the mission boarding school.[105]

Young wives and girls in their natal homes were at the bottom of the family hierarchy. Missionaries were both pleased and saddened to relate many accounts of current and ex-school pupils who read the Bible and prayed in secret because their husbands and families would not allow it.[106]

Not all young women interested in Christianity resorted to secrecy and deception. One high caste girl, for example, who had been a school pupil in the Madura mission was hastily married during the school holidays to her elder sister's husband, because she was considering conversion. However the missionary was delighted to report that when installed in her new home

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[102]General Letter, ABCFM Ceylon Mission, August, 1827, in *MH*, October, 1828, p. 323; Mr Jones, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, October, 1893, p. 413; Oddie, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
[103]LMS, H. Goffin, Letter, Kadiri, 5th October, 1893; LMS, Smith, Annual Report, Belgaum, 1881.
[104]Mr Rendall, Letter, n. d., in *MH*, March, 1874, p. 86.
[105]Rauschenbusch-Clough, *op. cit.*, p. 299.
[106]Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, p. 128.

she made 'no little disturbance in the family by her opposition to idolatry'. She was 'permitted to have her way for fear that she will take a young wife's revenge of running home to her mother'.[107]

This case may be the exception. The relatively weak position of young brides in family politics was also evident in the mixed marriages that were common among the castes involved in mass movements. Missions and churches tried to enforce a rule against these mixed marriages, though they were prepared to let the rule pass if Hindu girls were brought under the influence of a Christian family.[108] Stephenson, an LMS missionary, met with one young Christian woman who had recently married into a non-Christian family. He wrote, 'she told us she could not help worshipping idols as her husband and his relatives forced her to do so. This case is not a solitary exception', he lamented.[109]

In direct contrast to their relations with men, missionaries had little more to offer women in such situations than moral support. Missionaries rarely intervened in family politics on behalf of women or encouraged women to leave their homes. Mission texts may be full of condemnation of the Indian family and Indian religions as institutions of female oppression, and missionaries may have represented conversion to Christianity as a form of both social and spiritual liberation, but women who viewed entry into the Christian community as a means of escape from miserable family circumstances were given no encouragement.[110] The evangelical agenda was to reform Indian marriage not to emancipate women from it.

But more importantly even when they were convinced of the religious legitimacy of their motives missionaries were reluctant to baptise women independently of their families, for ideological and practical reasons. Missionaries' willingness to baptise women 'believers' depended upon their marital and maternal status. Missionaries were most reluctant to draw wives and mothers away from what they understood to be their rightful place in their homes. They felt less compunction about baptising widows and other women with few domestic obligations.

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[107]Mr Tracy, Letter, 15th May, 1886, in *MH*, September, 1886, p. 344.
[108]LMS, Johnston, Annual Report, Nundial, 1875.
[109]LMS, Stephenson, Annual Report, Gooty, 1889.
[110]Christlieb, *An Uphill Road*, pp. 89, 191, 193-4.

> Women with sad histories and widows with no ties to keep them back have come out boldly for Christ ... But ... women with husbands and children cannot come out and desert them to confess Christ outwardly. If they believe they must do so secretly ...[111]

> We all agree that in no case should wives and mothers be urged to break family ties in order to publicly confess Christ by baptism ... We think such converts should be advised to confess their faith first in their own homes by deed and word, fulfilling in a Christian spirit all their conjugal and motherly duties, and to seek to win their husbands and children for Christ.[112]

Anecdotal evidence indicates that a large number of women who were baptised independently were widows.[113] Webster, too, has noted that zenana missions in North India found that only women in a marginal place in families or with strained relationships left their homes.[114] The propensity of detached individuals or groups to seek new alliances through religious change has been noted in other studies.[115] Women such as widows may have had little to lose by leaving their families. They also might have been offered more encouragement from missionaries.

For some women widowhood may even have provided them with the opportunity to convert. William Moses wrote about a high caste woman connected with his church who had given up 'idol worship' some time ago, but 'like many in her position she had delayed baptism for many years'.

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[111]Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

[112]*Report of the Fourth Decennial Missionary Conference; Held at Madras, 1902*, London, 1902, pp. 99-100.

[113]Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 172; LMS, Gordon and J. Dawson Reports, Vizagapatam, January, 1825 and January, 1824; Sketch of Female Mission Work, paper of the 10th Annual Meeting of the Ladies Committee of the LMS, 1885, p. 20; LMS, Mrs Thomas, Report of Woman's Work, Vizagapatam, 1892; LMS, Miss Haskard, Letter, Bellary, 22nd February, 1894; LMS, Ure, Annual Report, Kadiri, 1904.

[114]J. C. Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India*, Meerut, 1976, p. 144.

[115]G. B. Forrester, 'Depressed Classes and Conversion to Christianity, 1860-1860', in Oddie (ed.), *Religion*, p. 36; G. A. Oddie, 'Christian Conversion in the Telugu Country, 1860-1900: A Case Study of One Protestant Movement in the Godavery-Krishna Delta', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XII, no. 1, January-March, 1975, p. 70.

Since her husband's death she had been baptised and commenced giving her children 'Christian instruction'.[116]

Yet missionaries were often reluctant to baptise widows, because these women were unlikely to be able to support themselves. Economic disadvantage was the most commonly recognised obstacle to the baptism of women. Mrs Phoebe Thomas, who took a very active role in the female mission at Vizagapatam in the 1880s and 1890s, wrote that one widow whom she visited would never be baptised. She explained,

> she is now supported by some relatives who would at once cease to do so were she to become Christian ... We have several others who tell us they would join us if they could find means of livelihood.[117]

Men occupying marginal places in the family were in a similar situation. For instance one of the LMS missionaries was in contact with a crippled Muslim man and a blind Brahman man who were both interested in conversion. However, these men 'held back' because they were totally dependent upon their families who would withdraw support if they were baptised.[118]

Missions were reluctant to take on dependents. A Miss Joseph who worked among high caste women spoke at the 1882-3 Missionary Conference:

> Many of my widow pupils have said 'We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we are Christians we wish to be baptised, but what after that? We have no independent means where shall we live and how shall we be supported?' ... Indeed [she continued] we are quite at a loss to know what to do with them, so that instead of advising and encouraging them to come out and openly confess Christ ... we discourage them if we do not actually hinder them.[119]

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[116]LMS, William Moses, Native Pastor, Annual Report, Gooty, 1881.
[117]LMS, Thomas, Annual Report, Vizagapatam, 1892.
[118]LMS, W. Dawson, Report for 1871, 1872 and 1873, Vizianagaram.
[119]Miss Joseph, BMS, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference; Held at Calcutta 1882-3*, Calcutta, 1883, p. 216.

Miss Joseph went on to appeal for the establishment of widows' homes. Such institutions offering women alternate support networks, providing accommodation, training and employment for female converts and their children were established from 1880 onwards. At the turn of the century there were forty-eight of these institutions in India, some of them specifically for widows.[120] The American Board built a Widows Home in Ahmednagar, in the Marathi mission in 1897. The LMS established a home for widows in Bellary in 1896.[121]

Contrary, then, to ideas of female conservatism standing in the way of male conversions, family opposition to female baptism could be more effective. Unlike men who frequently left their families to join the church, many women who wished to convert formally to Christianity were unable to do so, and women who were baptised on their own were more likely to be those for whom ties to the family were already weak.

The family both obstructed and facilitated conversion to Christianity but within the family women were less likely to be able to act upon their own beliefs if they conflicted with those of more powerful members of the family. Clearly the issues of sex, gender, structures of sexual oppression and religious change are many and varied. In this paper I have only attempted to raise them in a preliminary manner. The main point I want to make is that constructions of gender, sexual politics, economic and social inequalities should be considered in any analysis of conversion.

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[120]*Report of the Fourth Decennial Missionary Conference; Held at Madras, 1902*, p. 101.

[121]J. Dennis, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-8. The twentieth century may have provided different conditions and a different generation of missionary women such as the terribly forthright Marie Christlieb, who following the First World War, after many years in South India established a home for women and girls in her own compound to provide protection for women. In some situations she advised 'frank revolt' (*An Uphill Road*, p. 242).