

## THE DYNAMICS OF MISSIONARY TRANSACTIONS IN THE KANARESE REGION

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### **Abstract**

*The Kanarese region, which roughly includes the present day Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka state, was the hub of Basel Mission activities in India from 1834 to 1914. Mission advent in the region triggered a series of new developments such as the introduction of English education, establishment of industries as well as hospitals administering modern medicine. Aforesaid missionary spaces were also the sites of evangelisation. Missionary transactions with the indigenous people in these spaces and elsewhere were quite dynamic usually shaped by factors important to both the parties. This research paper probes into the dynamics of missionary interactions with the indigenous people of the region and analyses the nature of these interactions in the background of the primary missionary agenda of evangelisation.*

**Keywords:** *missionary, transactions, Kanarese, culture, indigenous*

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Basel Mission set foot on the west coast of India in the first half of the nineteenth century. Then onwards, Mangalore, the then headquarters of Kanara under the British rule, became the epicentre of mission activities. Although the mission embarked on service activities by establishing many schools, industries and hospitals in Mangalore and all over the Kanarese region, the primary aim of Basel Mission enterprise in Kanara was evangelisation. Rest of the mission endeavours merely complemented this primary agenda. In order to spread the Gospel to the 'heathens', a serious study of the indigenous culture and religion was thought essential. Hence, the Mission was more interested in knowing the indigenous religion and cultural practices. To excavate the indigenes' past, it was necessary for the missionaries to study their social and religious practices, culture and traditions, rituals and beliefs, customs and habits. It was considered imperative to catalogue their religious structures, the Gods and the Bhutas they worshipped. The missionary gaze fell on everyone involved in the indigenous worship modes and ceremonies such as the priests and the Bhuta impersonators, the drummers and the trumpet blowers, the flag bearers and the palanquin carriers and so on. Vital information about the land, people, natural resources, flora and fauna, as well as the artefacts used by the common folk was also collected and analysed. An understanding of the region, its climate and diseases was quintessential for the missionaries to survive in the torrid zone of their field of operation. Therefore, keen and scientific study was carried out in this direction as well.

Missionary enterprise in Kanara initiated constant and continuous interactions with the indigenous people. Transpiring at different levels and spheres, these interactions resulted in the exchange of ideas, thoughts, beliefs, opinions, knowledge and world views impacting both the parties. The Basel Mission tile factories, schools and hospitals along with the mission compounds were the spaces of close encounters between the missionaries and the local people. Missionary zeal to 'educate' the 'heathens' to 'civilize' and transform them into 'true Christians' enthused them to engage the local people in dialogues on various topics which often culminated in showcasing the missionary religion and culture as superior and inevitable. Missionaries impeded by their preoccupation with the primary agenda of evangelisation could rarely appreciate the worth of indigenous cult practices such as the Bhuta worship. Hence, quite often missionary encounters with the indigenous people led to discussions, debates, objections and rejections of the missionary ideas and ideologies. But there were also acceptances and adaptations of missionary beliefs, ideas, worldviews and ways of living. Altogether, these East-West encounters were stamped with apprehension as well as conviction, attention as well as apathy, accusation as well as approval, humiliation as well as veneration.

During these inter-racial, inter-cultural, inter-faith and inter-continental interactions the missionaries pursued the indigenes, lent their ears to the voices of the indigenous cultures, applied their minds to their languages, initiated 'dialogues' and exchanged worldviews, probed deep into the indigenes' mind and strove to fill them with the gospel at fairs and festivals, temple squares and Bhuta shrines, houses and bazars, mission compounds and school yards, workshops and dispensaries. In the process, they confronted the curious and the apathetic, seekers and rejectors, inquirers and interrogators, the rich and the poor, high class and low class, wayfarers and by standers, believers and non- believers, the haughty and the humble. These complex inter-cultural interactions between the two parties often led to new experiences, knowledges, understandings, and happenings hitherto unseen and unknown in the region.



The observations, dialogues, narratives, compilations, encounters and interactions between the missionaries and the indigenes was not only shaped by the cultural milieu of both the parties but also in turn it shaped their cultural perceptions. The interactions were reciprocal in nature. The cross-cultural experiences of the new converts and the 'mixed feelings' missionaries had towards them, the constant efforts of the missionaries to break the 'old habits' of the converted indigenes, the encounters at mission schools and industrial units, orphanages and churches, streets and bazars were complex and mutual.

In their attempts to 'educate' the indigenes, the missionaries had learnt much about the indigenous culture, in their efforts to reform the 'heathens' the missionaries in turn had to re'form' themselves, in their labour to make the converts 'think' 'talk' 'feel' and 'behave' like Christians, the missionaries had to learn the local tongue and the ways of the indigenes. In the process missionary scholars such as Ferdinand Kittel and Hermann Mogling not only became the masters of the local tongue but also strived to live an 'Indianized life' as long as they stayed in India.

The Mission also resorted to one more mode of communication and interaction - writing and printing. The missionaries drafted letters, composed hymns in the local languages, documented rituals, translated and authored books, recorded diaries, compiled reports, published journals and so on. Clad in different roles as evangelists, preachers and teachers, mentors and confidants, aliens and allies, the missionaries entered into dialogues with the local people and documented, reported and narrated the same. Their narratives were a product of the different cultural, social spheres in which they operated. These narratives were about the indigenes' culture, religion and religious outlooks, the way they perceived their Gods, the concepts like sin, heaven and hell. These transactions carried out within the colonial context and the evangelic framework had significant impact on both the parties which also shaped their perceptions. The transactions through missionary evangelic, educational, industrial, medical projects led to social and cultural changes, modifications, adaptations and alterations at the individual as well as the societal levels. The slow but steady transformation of the indigenous society

due to the involvement of the missionaries in these spheres led to new cultural experiences for the missionaries as well as for the indigenous people.

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