

## S2E08 Transcript

# How did missionaries in colonial India communicate with the people they were trying to convert?

Ask a  
Historian

 Department of History  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

**Emily Tran:** From the University of Wisconsin–Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*. I'm Emily Tran.

Today on the show: How did evangelical missionaries in India communicate with the people they were trying to convert? Professor Mitra Sharafi talks with Professor Mou Banerjee about the history of evangelical missionaries in colonial India.

As Mou explains, missionaries developed polyglot dictionaries that translated English words into 39 Indian languages. In India, however the colonial and evangelical enterprises never fully overlapped because colonial administrators banned public preaching.

Mou and Mitra also talk about the longer history of Christianity in India. Mou says that, contrary to narratives that cast Christianity and Christians as not belonging in the Indian nation, the history of Christianity in India is nearly as old as Christianity itself.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

**Emily Tran:** The conversation we're listening to today was inspired by a question submitted by our listener, Moinak.

**Moinak:** Hello, my name is Moinak Banerjee, and I'm from Calcutta, India.

My question is, how did the missionaries talk to the people of different cultures or countries, overcome the societal barriers, and convert them without knowing their language? Likewise, how did the people who got converted understand what the missionaries were asking them to do? Were they just blindly following the orders under force?

**Emily Tran:** To answer Moinak's question, Professor Mitra Sharafi talked to Professor Mou Banerjee.

**Mitra Sharafi:** My name is Mitra Sharafi and I am a legal historian. I'm a professor at the UW Law School, and I'm also a part of Legal Studies and affiliated with History. I work on South Asian legal history.

**Mou Banerjee:** I am Mou Banerjee. I'm an assistant professor at the History Department at UW–Madison. I, like Mitra, work on South Asia but my work is more focused on the intersection of religion and politics, and my research for my first book is on the history of Christian conversions in India in the 19th century.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

**Mitra Sharafi:** It's a real treat to be able to talk with you today, Mou, about conversion which is an area where you do research.

So, I wonder if we could just start by talking a little bit about this communication question and how missionaries communicated with the populations they were trying to convert.

**Mou Banerjee:** This is a very interesting question. I think Mitra, and it goes to the heart of the evangelical enterprise, especially in India.

I specialize in the late 18th, early 19th century, and the missionaries that I focus on are a group of Baptist missionaries who settled somewhere near Calcutta, where Moinak is from, and they come to India and the very first thing that they realize—and William Carey, who is the head of this Baptist mission, writes it in his biographical notes—they realize that unless and until they know the language of the people they're trying to convert, they're not going to go for.

What do they do? They immediately get a number of Indian interlocutors to help them. So, for example, Carey has a community near the Danish colony of Serampore, and he brings in, you know, an Indian pundit—or a Munshi as they used to be called—called Ramram Basu, and the first thing that the missionaries do there in Serampore is create what they call a polyglot dictionary.

And you can still see it if you go to Serampore College today; it's this huge bound vellum volume. And there are 40 columns stretched across the left and the right leaves, and there is one English word, which is important for, you know, translating the Bible, translating the message of the Bible, and then in the rest of the 39 columns there are 39 Indian languages, and the word that might come closest to it.

So, obviously there is a very early recognition that they have to know the language, and I don't think it comes as a surprise to anyone who works on, you know, missionaries, works on conversion or evangelical process. A lot of very early dictionaries in any language in the millennium starting from 1080 to the present day has been done, was done by missionary interlocutors. The very first ethnographic works were usually undertaken by missionary interlocutors.

The Baptist missionaries near Calcutta come in pretty late in the game, but again, William Ward, who is essentially the printer for the Baptist mission, has this multivolume work which is essentially one of the earliest studies of Hindu culture, ritual, and religion in the Bengal province, and that becomes a template from which both British administrators and later evangelical missionaries learn.

So, it's not a question of not knowing the language, it's a long, sustained project of translation.

**Mitra Sharafi:** I will say, I mean, if you go into UW Memorial Library and just browse through the stacks, you'll find all kinds of these early missionary dictionaries, grammars. I discovered some really interesting ones for Gujarati a couple of summers ago that are in our library. And you also notice that those early missionary printing presses were also really important, weren't they, for, just, the history of publishing.

**Mou Banerjee:** Absolutely, absolutely, because it's often the missionaries who actually have the know-how, the technical know-how. And often they're doing it at a much lower cost than actually getting the local population, for example, to learn a completely new technology.

So, as I was saying, William Ward, for example, is at the head of the printing press at Serampore. And before it burns down in 1811, for the time period between 1793 and 1811 they have a prodigious output of publication, including—it's not limited to only their missionary work or pamphlets—they are printing almost all the gazetteers, almost all the law records. Everything official that the East India Company's government needs is being printed from the Serampore Press.

And it's absolutely astonishing that on one hand, in this period, missionaries are not allowed to preach openly in the British Empire, right? On the other hand, they are so completely intertwined, entangled if you will, with the project of colonialism.

**Mitra Sharafi:** Well and I, I love the role in your, in your own work, the story of the Serampore Baptist missionary group is so interesting, isn't it, because they are banned by the East India Company from operating in British territory. And so, maybe you can tell us a little bit about how the whole thing gets started and how this small group kind of lodges themselves, and then becomes a model for missionary activity in India.

**Mou Banerjee:** I mean the, you know—Mitra, you know this but, you know, just for our audience—the accepted date of the beginning of colonialism in India is 1757, when the last independent ruler of India is defeated, Bengal is defeated by the East India Company. And by 1765, they have taken all, all administrative and economic functions of the state, the East India Company is merrily on its way.

One thing that they're aware of from a very early period—and we find this regularly in letters and pamphlets written by the early officers of the East India Company if you will—is that they are aware that Indians, as they call them, the Gentoos, the Hindus, are very, very deeply invested in their religion, that it is a way of life for them, and any effort of conversion might do away with whatever fragile trust is built up between this new ruler and their newly subject population. So, for the old East India Company administrators, religion can never ever enter into the question.

It all starts changing from around the 17— late 1780s, early 1790s with the second great wave of Methodist reformation that happens in England, spreads all over the European continent, and there is a sense then that something must be done to uplift the people who are living in superstitions, by which they mean Hinduism or Islam.

But again, the official line is nothing should be done to disaffect the Indian subjects. As a result, until 1830, anyone who puts down in the ship's ledger their occupation as missionary is not allowed to disembark at any port that belongs to the East India Company.

So, Carey, William Carey, who comes in 1793 finds that when his ship docks at Calcutta, he is not actually allowed to get down from the ship. He takes a boat, goes upriver, goes to Serampore which is a Danish colony, and he settles in there. Officially, he cannot continue any of his evangelical work. Unofficially, as a result of his linguistic adventures, let's put it that way, he slowly becomes very very important to the British government.

He becomes a teacher at the Fort William College in Calcutta, which is set up to train young civilians, as they used to be called, British officers in the art of ruling India. He writes the first primers in the Bengali language for British officers to learn from. He oversees the first Bengali

grammar. You are completely correct in saying that the first lexicons, the first dictionaries, are actually being prepared by missionaries. And essentially, they are allowed to do everything but preach openly.

And this kind of relationship just essentially ties up the colonial enterprise into the civilizing mission in a completely different way than the way it's happening in southern India for example with Catholicism, which has a longer history, or anywhere else in the world.

What else do they? What else does this Serampore group do, which is absolutely astonishing? They steal the first Bengali printmaker, a man called Panchanan Karmakar who worked for an evangelically minded British officer called Nathaniel Halhead, who wrote the Code of Gentoo Laws, which is the first attempt by the East India Company to compile a code, a lexicon of sacred texts which they could then parlay as Hindu personal law in the newly evolving Anglo-Indian courts. They take Panchanan Karmakar to Serampore, where he cuts out the very first Bengali font and starts printing in Bengali.

So, again, the explosion of printing in Bengali language and the formation of the Bengali language itself is first and foremost indebted to this missionary group, the Serampore missionaries, before other people, other innovators like Vidyasagar or Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and the others come along. It's an absolutely fascinating history.

**Mitra Sharafi:** Yeah, it really is.

Let me just jump— That's sort of how it all starts. Let me just jump to the other end of colonialism and just get a sense from you about what happens when India and Pakistan become independent in 1947. What happens to missionary activity in South Asia after independence?

**Mou Banerjee:** That is a very very interesting story, and I know the history of India better than I do that of Pakistan, so I'm going to more or less focus on India as a whole.

One of the things— Let me just jump back a little bit in time, not 1947 but 1935, and the Government of India Act is passed in 1935 which is more or less, you know, in a completely unchanged form incorporated within the Constitution when India becomes independent.

In the preceding roundtable conferences that lead up to the Government of India Act, the Indian Christians take a stance that they don't want to be counted as a minority, and that they don't want a separate electoral representation, so that—and this was objective, you know, the rationale produced for this kind of decision—was that they wanted to integrate better into the mainstream of Indian national life.

The result of this after independence is that they have certain protections in the Indian Constitution, but not as extensive as they could have had. And one fallout, one unintended consequence of this is there is a mass exodus of the group called Anglo-Indians who are of mixed racial heritage and these people essentially migrate all over the Commonwealth world: Australia, England, everywhere, New Zealand. And as a result, you know, a substantial and very distinctive cultural demographic is already sort of draining away from the Indian political life.

The second part of this equation is that as soon as the Constitution, people start thinking about it, as soon as there are Constituent Assembly debates, anti-conversion laws are tabled over and over and over again. And there are multiple anti-conversion laws that happen, for example, in the 1950s, in the 1970s. It's a continuous process. And these are being tabled by Hindu-majority states which used to be princely kingdoms who want to actually have—or protect, they say—a particular kind of Hindu religious political identity.

None of these, which are tabled at the center, are actually passed into law by the center because there is never enough support for them in this early part of, of independent India. However, when this passes over into the hands of the states, a number of freedom of religion bills are passed, and at the present, there are about nine Indian states which have bills like this, which are essentially anti-conversion laws.

What does anti-conversion law mean? It means that the rhetoric that is presented is—again, I will talk about the prehistory of this in my own work—the conversion that has been carried out by missionaries, the evangelical work that has been carried out by missionaries, is not spiritual in nature, it's, it's material in nature, meaning there are material benefits that are being offered to people who would convert. And to put an end to this "fraudulent conversion" as it is called, there are these laws in place.

What is the penalty for any of this? Well, not really too much, either in money or in terms of imprisonment. The longest period of imprisonment is one year, the highest fine was for a very long time around 700 rupees. So that's not what is frightening.

What is frightening is it creates an atmosphere of distrust and it gives the political institutions in the states the ability to maneuver and use particular kinds of rhetoric to make the minority communities feel very very unsafe.

Even with all of this, between 1950 and 1990, there are around 40 violent incidences of communal tensions or communal riots between Christians and other Indian religious groups, largely Hindu. With the coming of the Bharatiya Janata Party to power in the 1990s, this changes. In 1998-99 alone, there are around 34 incidents or so. The number of incidences in a 40-year time period is equaled in a one-year time period.

One of the most horrifying incidences that happens during this period is the burning alive of a missionary Graham Staines, along with his two children, two young sons, both beneath the age of 10, in their car by a man called Dara Singh, who was a member of a fringe right-wing Hindu group allied to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the RSS, the ideological font of the BJP if you will. And this just creates this immense condition of absolutely traumatized horror in India's minority religious communities because this kind of horror not been seen before.

It has continued. Even though violence against the Muslim community are so much more in the media these days, violence against Christians has continued unabated. One of, again, the most virulent cases of it was the Kandhamal riots in Orissa, where a nun was gang raped, and then paraded naked around and there were threats that they would be killed the same way that Graham Staines was killed, by setting them on fire.

So, there is a growing gathering consensus that Christianity is alien to India, which is certainly not the case. And there have been very violent right-wing reprisals against missions.

The opposite side of this is also very interesting. The RSS has instituted a number of so-called Ghar Wapsi programs or "return back home" programs, if you will, where, you know, within tribal populations, indigenous populations, they create, carry out exactly the same sort of programs that, you know, missionaries were supposed to have carried out in the colonial period. They set up educational institutions, they offer food, they offer jobs. And then they have these huge ceremonies in which converted Christians are sort of purified and brought back within the fold.

And this is another, you know, way of kind of discrediting the spiritual nature of Christian conversions, which is to say, if just providing certain opportunities is enough to bring someone back home, obviously their conversions were not heartfelt or were not spiritual in nature.

What this kind of takes out of the equation is the nature of poverty in many of these places. The states where this kind of Ghar Wapsi programs happen, the states where, you know, these anti-conversion laws are in effect, are also some of the poorest states in all of India. Orissa, for example, has poverty levels comparable to—as used to be the fashion to say this in the 1990s and early 2000s—comparable to sub-Saharan African countries. Kalahandi, where a huge number of these kinds of religious riots have broken out, reprisals against Christians that broken out, is one of the places where malnutrition for children below the age of five years is absolutely some of the worst, the numbers are some of the worst in the world.

So, essentially, just making that idea of material benefits a, you know, kind of weapon, to weaponize that—Poverty is being weaponized by right-wing groups to, to kind of advance, you know, a narrative of suspicion about the genuineness of Christian conversion in India.

So, as you can see, India has a history of Christianity almost as old as Christianity itself. Legend says Thomas the Doubter, the apostle, sets foot in Kerala in 52 A.D. which means Christianity in India is almost as old as Christianity anywhere else in the world. But that rhetoric—one, you know, that suspicion that it's not heartfelt, it's not spiritual; and two, weaponizing poverty to talk about Ghar Wapsi—both have essentially propagated a particular kind of narrative where Christians are seen as not belonging to the mainstream of Indian politics, of the Indian nation.

**Mitra Sharafi:** Yeah, thank you. And like you say, the history of Christians in India, South Asia, is very, very long, isn't it? I mean, Syriac Christians and then there's Catholics in Goa, and in French colonies like Pondicherry, and your own work is, is later and it's looking mostly at Protestants, but not only at Protestants also, so it's a very, very long and a very rich and complex history. Absolutely.

Let me just jump right into the second question that our listener Moinak has asked us, which is really about—and you've been kind of circling around this in many different ways—like, this question of why people converted. And you might firstly remind us of the actual numbers: did a lot of people convert to Christianity in South Asia overall would you say? And then what are some of the reasons why they may have done so and some of the perceived reasons, perhaps, which may not have may not really have been what was happening but Christian converts were, you know, accused of converting for those reasons? And, and Moinak also asks, like, were they converting under force?

**Mou Banerjee:** It's more or less clear, at least with the history of Christianity, if we don't look at about six or seven years around 1498, with the first foray of Vasco da Gama into India, that the history of Christianity and the history of conversion in India has not been one of force. There has been a known legible historical evidence that force was ever used. Instead, as I was trying to, you know, convey, even with the British Empire, essentially, evangelism is something that is viewed with a great deal of suspicion both by the administration and, and by the Indian subjects themselves.

So, at no point does force enter into the question, especially because it's very very clear to everyone that it's not going to work. And instead, the backlash and the unintended consequences of any attempt at forcing conversion would do away with any benefit—if there were any political benefits to be had from this—would essentially swamp out any, any, any sort of benefit. So, the history of Christian conversions and even the history of Islamic conversions in India is not one of force. That I want to be very very clear about.

The second is a question, you know, what were they doing, why did they convert? That is a more complicated issue to answer.

The very very first conversions that we know about—you brought up the question of the Syrian Christians or the Nazarene Christians—it's not clear what is happening there, but there is a certain kind of understanding that this is one more religion that has come to India and it is accepted. And the Syrian Christians or Nazarene or Nazarene Christians as they are called, are very early on given 72 rights by the Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut, which is on par with the honors that are offered to the most exalted of the aristocracy within the Zamorin's kingdom.

Susan Bayly, who used to work on India now works on Vietnam, writes in her book about pushing conversion in southern India. She's very, very clear that at least until the late 1780s, there are constant intermarriages, there are kinship ties, and there is a free movement of Syrian Christians and Hindus and Muslims in southern India within each other's religious spaces, within churches and temples and mosques, and in terms of public rituals of worship, public holidays. It's only after the 1780s and the coming of Protestant evangelism to southern India that those contours of older Christian traditions start changing and hardening. That is what happens.

What happens with the coming of Catholicism? There, the question is slightly different. So, for example, one of the first mass conversions that happens is in the 16th century. It's performed by a man called Jordanus Catalani. It is happening because the Paravar community, which is a fishing community which converts wholesale, actually requires protection from pirates in the Indian Ocean, and that requires protection from the Portuguese vessels, and they also need protection from the Mughal vessels which are patrolling the area. So, one way to do that is essentially to adopt Christianity, so that instead of being harassed by the Portuguese, they are actually getting some protection for themselves from them against Arab traders and the Mughal vessels. It is not so much a question of force used, rather a tactical decision made.

Some sort of tactical political advantage accrues to this question. Am I trying to say that there have been no believers who, who had a spiritual awakening? No, that is not what I'm saying. But Catholicism admitted of syncretism much easier than Protestantism, and in some ways, when entire communities converted in southern India, they could bring their entire kinship matrix with them to this new religion, and they could bring the kind of social and religious hierarchies present within Hinduism, translating it very easily to Catholicism.

So, again, Susan Bayly and Geoffrey Oddie, Kawashima, many other researchers in southern India have made this point. In southern Indian churches, in buildings, you would have Brahmins, converted Brahmins, sitting at the very front of the church, and Shudras at the very back of the church and only standing. So, there is a kind of co-option of particular kinds of religious hierarchies, caste-based hierarchies within this new religion itself.

What else happens? With the coming of Protestantism, with the spread of the British East India Company, and with the spread of certain kinds of ideals about enlightenment governance even within princely kingdoms, there is an idea of upward social mobility that comes in.

From 1864, which is the unofficial beginning of census-taking in India—and it's official in 1872—from that period onwards, more and more, the census questions asked people to identify themselves in terms of a singular religious identity. What many of the groups want—especially those identifying as "untouchables" or Shudras or Dalits, as we would call them—want a particular kind of social mobility, upward mobility. And the only way they think they can get it is by converting so that they have extra maneuverability within some of the protections that they think might come to them from a government which at least had evangelically minded that officers and its employ, even if it officially did not want to do anything with religion.

So, there are a huge variety of complicated reasons as to why conversion to Christianity happens everywhere in India. In Bengal, again, numbers are very very low. Upper caste, elite conversions are in single, and then later, double digit numbers. In the, in the censuses that I see from the early 20th century, for every million Hindu inhabitants, million Muslim inhabitants there are only about 10,000 Christians, and that number grows very very slowly.

So, in India, it has remained stable between 1.5 to 2% of the population over the last 200 years. At the present moment that's about 30 million people but given that India's population is slowly reaching 1.3 billion, that is not too large a number, anyway.

So, numbers don't rise. It's not forced. There are complicated reasons, political, spiritual, personal. It is not possible to pigeonhole the history of Christianity in India within any neat box at any moment in its recorded history.

**Mitra Sharafi:** Let me ask you a bigger question that's gonna sort of take us to more of a global scale, let's say, about history of missionaries because missionaries can be a very polarizing topic, and often a person's kind of associations with missionaries and missionary history reflects their own religious affiliations and commitments.

So, let me just ask you about a divide that I often encounter in North America, at least. On one hand, there are people who associate missionary activity with, to be honest cultural arrogance and disruption.

I grew up in a small town in British Columbia in western Canada. And where I grew up there had been these residential schools for indigenous or First Nations people in the late 19th and early 20th century and those schools were run by missionaries. And just in the last decade or so, Canada has had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and process, and they produced this multivolume report written by a lot of historians who use the term "cultural genocide" to describe the effect of

the residential schools on indigenous peoples. And they're talking about things like language bans, the forced cutting of children's hair, physical, psychological and even sexual abuse that we know happened. And this is a story that you see in Canada and you also see it in the U.S. The U.S. has its own residential school kind of counterpart. So, on the one hand, you might encounter people with those kinds of associations when you talk about the history of missionaries.

On the other hand, you meet other people who associate missionaries with things like rise in material standards of living, perhaps with better medical care, even sometimes with a kind of equal rights consciousness. And so, they might be thinking of situations where converts were impoverished before a conversion, or where the missionaries follow this medical missionary model in India. People on this side of the debate, you could say, might note that missionaries sometimes defended the interests of converts against the economic exploitation of European traders, right, people in the East India Company for instance.

So, I guess my question for you is, what do you say when people come to you with very, very different ideas about missionaries, and the effects that they had historically? What do you have to say to these two polar opposites on the spectrum?

**Mou Banerjee:** I think Mithra, the answer is, it's complicated.

Both of these points of view have logical reasons behind the kinds of positions. They are taken by people who have experienced colonialism and Christian conversions, Christian evangelism in very very different ways. And again, both are, I think, true to a very large extent. It's not an either-or situation.

Just as I was talking to you, you know, I suddenly remembered in very late 2019, there was this case of a young man, American young man called John Chau, who tried to take a boat and go up to one of the conserved, off-limits islands in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India, with the view that he was going to convert the indigenous population there. He was shot out with the arrows and unfortunately killed.

**Mitra Sharafi:** Yeah, I still remember that case.

**Mou Banerjee:** Yes. And, you know, there was, there were two ways in which this event was perceived.

One was, of course you know, it was like, what was he doing, he was going against the laws of the Indian government. He did not listen to the, to the indigenous peoples when they tried to warn him off multiple times. He spent one entire night in a boat when he couldn't land and tried it again the next morning when he was killed.

And the second was from the perspective of those who were horrified by the potential of this man going into this region, coming in contact with people who have had no contact with the outside world in many years, and thereby just essentially decimating them by getting them into contact with new kinds of illnesses which would just essentially burn through a population which has no immunity.

And in some ways, it was fascinating because it encapsulates a very, very 21st-century phenomena, the kind of debates that were going on around. It kind of encapsulates a number of arguments that we have seen carry on from, like, the last 500 years beginning with the Spanish invasion in South America to the present day in, in colonial India and then in Canada and Australia, for that matter.

It is true that in some places, Christian converts undertook conversion because they thought they might have protection. And this is the case I have seen in some of my own research as well. How much it actually, this belief was actually upheld in the actual world is up to some debate. It is equally true that some of the tactics undertaken by missionaries, for example, led to complete, as you said, genocide. There is no way to like, beat around the bush and say that was not the case. That *was* the case. That has historically been proven to be the case.

But there is another function that missionaries carry out which, again, is targeted in the present in India by right-wing Hindu groups, for example, and that is the question of medical missions. So, I come from a very small town in West Bengal, and the world's second largest leprosy hospital used to be in that, you know, out of the way place, at least under the first decade of the 21st century. The largest was in, in Australia. And you might ask, why did that happen? Who knows about Purulia? No one does. It happened because there were German Lutheran missions coming in, and American missions coming in with a medical objective, and they were providing indispensable services to indigenous people, impoverished people in areas where government institutions were actually not making too much of a difference. And we cannot discount that some of the impulses towards conversion might have come out of this kind of really beneficial outreach.

We know for a fact that a number of indigenous and tribal revolutions that take place in India in the last decade of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century, again in and around where I was born, essentially comes out of indigenous populations who go to these missionary schools and suddenly start arguing back against landholders, Hindu landholders, and against the British government, demanding the right of the forest land for themselves because there is an understanding and the perception of their own rights, which they hadn't had before.

So, as I said, both of these issues are entwined together, that coming to, you know, an understanding of both of these positions is important. Because, as I said, Christian missionary entanglement in colonial perspectives is a deeply, deeply complicated affair.

**Mitra Sharafi:** Thank you. Let me let me ask you another big kind of global question and that is just how the story of missionaries in South Asia, how that story looks different when you look at missionaries in other parts of the world, like, you know, missionaries, Christian missionaries in Africa or in Latin America. This is a very obviously very big broad brushstroke kind of question, but how would you characterize the key differences?

**Mou Banerjee:** I think there are two component parts to this. And one is of course that there is already a very well-established and long tradition of Christianity present in India, even by the time that the Portuguese and the Padroado managed to make their landfall in India. Vasco da Gama and, and his followers, essentially the 18 missionaries come with him, are completely taken aback when they encounter the Syrian Christians in the southern, southwestern coast of India because this is unprecedented.

The second issue of course, with first, you know, the Portuguese empire and then the Mughals, and then with the British, is that the relationship between the colonial mission and the evangelical Christian mission never quite line up in the same way as they do elsewhere in the world. There is always a certain conflict of interests and there is a certain kind of essential tension in the way in which relationships formed within the Indian subcontinent. So, whether it is a princely kingdom, whether it is that southernmost part of India where Catholicism has a long footprint, or whether it is in Bengal or in Punjab where Protestant Christianity comes pretty, pretty late in the game only with the late 18th and the 19th century, everywhere there are established institutions, established cultural and religious roles and established political entanglements between Indians and missionaries, and Indians and the ruler in that place, which complicates the ways in which evangelism occurs within India.

The third thing to remember here is for a very long time, this kind of balance of missionaries acting as middlemen for colonial enterprises is not true for India. In India it is Indians, usually from upper caste Hindu families or aristocratic Muslim gentry families, who provide that service class. It is not missionaries who provide that service class for the colonial rulers. And as a result, it is in the interests of the colonial rulers to look after any sort of religious grievance that these middling classes, middlemen might have.

And again, in the Indian case for example, one of those create examples of a go-between between the British government and the Indian peoples, Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan, when he writes his "Reasons for the Revolt of 1857," he very clearly says that evangelism was unchecked, and as a result Indians were very very suspicious of the British government. And that loss of trust had essentially decimated information networks, which is why the British government was so taken aback when revolutions sprung up in central and northern India. As soon as the transfer of power happens from the East India Company to the Crown, the proclamation of Queen Victoria says the religious rights of Indian subjects is not going to be disaffected.

So, there is always that tension. It's never a clear-cut mapping on the way in which it is in many other places. And I think that is what makes the Indian case such an extraordinary microcosm in and of itself of evangelism and colonialism and how they are coeval, but they are not congruent.

**Mitra Sharafi:** I think a lot of people are surprised to learn that about the history of India during the colonial era. There's kind of an assumption that all of the Europeans would be working tightly together but it's really much more complicated than that. I agree with you. It's a very interesting aspect of South Asian history.

We're almost out of time here but I thought, for our final end point here, let me just ask you if you have a key takeaway about missionary history for our current moment.

**Mou Banerjee:** I think, I mean, you know, a key takeaway for missionary history is to remember that the history of Christianity in India is as old as Christianity. It's, it's not a religion that comes with conquerors, it's not a religion that comes suddenly only in the 18th century. It is a part and parcel of Indian culture.

What happens also in the 19th and 20th century is that side by side with the medical mission, there's a pedagogical mission, meaning the East India Company and then the Crown essentially finds it's cheaper to give over the task of educating young Indian men—and later on women—to missionary

institutions than to than to, you know, provide money for education through the government itself, which means a lot of Indians grow up learning English and learning about, you know, best in modes and manners if you will, only through missionary presenters.

And there is a long history of peaceful coexistence and a kind of fascination, an ethical fascination if you will, with the precepts of Christianity, which I think tend to be essentially washed out when we only have the perspective of conversion in mind, if you only have the perspective of this kind of terrible communal violence in mind or that really pernicious rhetoric about, about, you know distrust and insincere conversions based on material benefits.

I think that is not only as old as, you know, the 19th century. Many people who are interested in the Mughals for example, are often surprised to hear that Akbar's second son Daniyal was born from a Christian mother and that, you know, Akbar himself had very open conversations with Jesuits to begin with, and that he allowed particular forms of rhetoric around, around Christianity to actually find open argumentation in his court.

So, there is a very long history of this peaceful side-by-side existence and many of the indigenous churches, especially where I am from, you will often find the figure of Mary, she's wearing saris, you know, a very indigenized version. That are paintings and jewelry [indistinct] comes to mind, for example, from Goa, where the story of the Bible has been completely indigenized. Joseph, Mary and Jesus are in Indian garb. In Calcutta, Jamini Roy, who is often called India's Picasso, one of the great modern painters, has this entire series which is based on indigenous local folk motifs, but telling the story of the Bible including the flight to Egypt.

So, there are these other histories. There are these other kinds of peaceful coexistence. There are entire generations, for generations before my generation, who were educated at missionary institutions and remain just as patriotic and just as invested in Indian nationalism and Indian development, and at the same time just as fascinated with different religions and different, you know, multiple identities.

And we should not forget them when we are thinking about Christianity in India today at this particular crucial and deeply sad moment when it seems like Indians can only have one identity and can only exist within certain defined parameters of what it means to be a good citizen.

**Mitra Sharafi:** So, even if the number of people who have actually converted to Christianity, let's say, you know, today in India is really relatively small, the influence, the impact, the story of education and print culture in India is— and Christianity is, is a much bigger story, and with very long history, so we should sort of broaden our field of vision, broaden the time period perhaps that we look at and keep in mind just how complex and rich that history is.

I think that's a good place to end our conversation today.

**Mou Banerjee:** I could not have said it better. Absolutely.

**Mitra Sharafi:** Thank you so much, Mou. This was a real pleasure.

**Mou Banerjee:** Thank you so much, Mitra, for your absolutely wonderful questions.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

**Emily Tran:** Listeners, do you have an idea for an episode? Send your questions for historian to [outreach@history.wisc.edu](mailto:outreach@history.wisc.edu).

This episode of *Ask a Historian* was produced and edited by me, Emily Tran, with editorial consulting from Christina Matta.

Major funding for *Ask a Historian* comes from the Department of History Board of Visitors at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Special thanks to John Leibowitz, Peter Hamburger and Rick Kalson.

Thank you for listening.