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Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, xix + 346 pp., US\$65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-809976-5.

The central issue in this book is the social transformation of Dalits under colonialism. The role of protestant missionary work among slave castes was instrumental in this transformation. Under colonial modernity there emerged a variety of Dalit social movements, the experiential dimension of which has been intricately explored and superbly woven into Kerala's historiography. The author makes an implicit choice to use colonial modernity and not vernacular or alternative modernity, which contemporary scholarship has found more suitable for analyzing post-colonial political economies.

Britain formally abolished slavery throughout its empire in the nineteenth century. In Kerala, slavery was an ancient phenomenon integral to the caste system. Influenced by abolitionist ideology, British colonial officials in Kerala started to collect information on slavery. Their findings and writings intertwined the problems of caste and slavery, thereby making caste slavery an international problem, which needed policy intervention in order to eradicate it. The author, a self-proclaimed archive addict, has combined history and ethnography to research the missionary writings in order to comprehend how the missionaries made an effective case for equality through a critique of the caste system prevalent in pre-colonial and colonial Kerala. Central to his narration and analysis is the experiential dimension of the marginalized sections of the population which attempted multiple negotiations made possible by the interface of Christianity and colonialism. The transforming power of the "Word of the Lord" provided agency to slave castes and their new understanding of sin and repentance had a disciplining effect on their individual and social lives. Their desire for deliverance from suffering and their quest for salvation were central to them and their social world from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. They struggled between their economic reality of slavery and their religious belief of salvation. The missionary discourses and practices were instrumental in introducing the concept of equality. Backed by missionary run schools and churches, there emerged a feeling of millennial transformation where achievement of equality with the larger society was central. The slave castes came to know about the emerging discourses of citizenship, judiciary, executive and legislature, political power, etc., which enabled them to negotiate a claim to public spaces, like roads and markets, to lay claim on administrative and natural resources and create an opening up of the legislative space.

In this well-formulated interdisciplinary book, rich in archival sources, usage of oral traditions and ethnographic fieldwork, the author combines methods and approaches of history and ethnography. The introduction opens with micro-history: three individuals and their process of accepting Christianity. It leads to the problem of how the protestant missionaries and subsequently Dalit social movements imagined and articulated notions of social and political equality in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Kerala: the Dalits experience of colonial modernity.

Chapter one is an analysis of missionary discourses and practices and their agency in introducing the concept of equality: how did a critique of the prevalent social structure develop in Kerala? The economic changes, particularly in the agrarian sector in the twentieth century, is described. This demonstrates the changes in the structure of ownership of land. The complex relationship between the slave castes, traditional Syrian Christians and new Protestant missionaries and their work leads to what the author describes as colonial transformations. Due to a judicial redefinition of their (slave) status in the state of Travancore, the slave castes undergo a change but extra-economic coercion ensured that they did not automatically become free wage laborers. Yet, the author argues, they were transformed in their inner domain. Organizations like Church Missionary Society (CMS) and London Missionary Society (LMS) changed the social world of these communities. Through conversion which encompassed encountering the Bible, it is argued that their “interiority” was transformed. A new space for the slave castes was created which helped them establish new relationships, acquire a modern language and emerge in the public sphere. The social difference between Dalit Christians and Syrian Christians of Kerala became crystallized.

Chapter two focuses on the issue of equality as conceived by the missionaries of CMS and LMS. One reads about the voices of the suppressed and the silenced. This is a powerful chapter, difficult to stop reading yet provoking many a thought on history writing. The chapter critiques the discourses and constructions of slavery in histories of nineteenth-and twentieth-century Kerala. It contrasts and compares slavery in Kerala with slavery in the Atlantic world. The concept of “modernity of slavery”—title of the book—is explained. Here is where the human experiences of the individuals comes forth and are contextualized in the changing discourse. The missionaries constructed new categories, wrote letters to King of Travancore requesting a change of status of slaves. The reader meets the protagonists of change and the intensity of their efforts. One also encounters the intimate knowledge of the everyday living conditions and family structures of the slaves that the missionaries had. One reads about the process of change brought about by the missionaries from polygamy

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