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**Redeeming Indian “Christian” Womanhood?:
Missionaries, Dalits, and Agency in Colonial India**

Chad Bauman

Note: This is a late but pre-publication version of the article. For the final, published version, please see:

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First prize winner of the 2008 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza New Scholar Award

Abstract: This study of dalit Christians in colonial North India suggests that women who converted to Christianity in the region often experienced a contraction of the range of their activities. Bauman analyzes this counterintuitive result of missionary work and then draws on the work of Saba Mahmood and others to interrogate the predilection of feminist historians for agents, rabble-rousers, and gender troublemakers. The article concludes not only that this predilection represents a mild form of egocentrism but also that it prevents historians from adequately analyzing the complexity of factors that motivate and influence human behavior.

Much of the literature on the history of Christian missions in India, particularly that which missionary societies themselves produced, assumes that Western missionaries were agents of change who injected what contemporary liberal Westerners would consider “progressive” values into a cultural context otherwise behind the times.¹ In particular, this literature takes for granted that missionaries were a force of positive change with regard to what, in the literature of the time, were called “women’s issues.” Certain aspects of the lives of Indian women who converted to Christianity certainly improved. But conversion to Christianity cannot be said without qualification to have achieved or even furthered the “emancipation” of India’s Christian

women. The community examined in this article, the Satnami caste of colonial Chhattisgarh (a state in central India), radically transformed its attitudes and actions concerning the proper treatment and behavior of women.² Nevertheless, these transformations were not unidirectional. In fact, Satnami women who converted to Christianity in this context experienced more often than not a contraction of the range of their activities and of their spheres of influence.³

A number of reasons account for this counterintuitive result. At the end of the nineteenth century, according to a number of important indicators, Satnami women took part in and influenced a wider range of activities in their community than missionary women did in theirs. Additionally, missionaries' Victorian-era norms regarding women's proper treatment and behavior, although restrictive in some ways when compared to that of the Satnamis, were to a surprising degree similar to the influential norms of upper-caste Hindu communities in the region. For example, the idea of "separate spheres" encouraged women's domestic work, an idea which corresponded well with the upper-caste Hindu practice of confining women to the home (to protect them from the advances or gaze of unrelated men and thereby to preserve their sexual virtue). Because of this, becoming Christian offered Satnamis the possibility of laying claim to certain customary markers of upper-caste status. Not surprisingly, the Satnami-Christian community enthusiastically embraced elements of the Christian life (as American missionaries presented it to them) that were consonant with the norms of upper-caste Hinduism. This, in turn, often reduced the scope of "acceptable" female behavior.

The context of this study is limited and the conclusions I draw from it are tinted in significant ways by the peculiarities of Chhattisgarh and the Satnampanth (the Satnami community), as well as by the unique social, theological, and historical characteristics of the American missionaries who worked among them. One should not generalize my observations to

other parts of India, given the many linguistic, social, and cultural differences found around the country. However, the findings Eliza Kent presents in *Converting Women*, based on research in South India and discussed below, correlate consistently with my own. This suggests that Satnami-Christian women's experiences might reflect more general patterns of encounters among missionaries and Indian *dalit* women.

Feminist scholars of history and religion often describe their academic task as involving three steps: Retrieval, that is, uncovering and preserving women's lost or ignored voices in historical texts and archives. Reconstruction, which involves retelling the story of history in a more inclusive fashion and attending to all communities and all peoples, but with special care to include the stories of women and other marginalized groups. And retheorization of both history and of historiography.⁴ Having analyzed and found much prior historical work wanting, feminist scholars seek to correct earlier scholars' skewed and myopic views, to unsmooth the rough edges of prior historical storytelling, and to develop an appropriately complex (and therefore more practicable) historiographical theory. In recent years, this has led feminist scholars to reexamine feminist theory itself, and to reject theories employing gender as a central, organizing theme, in favor of others that analyzed gender in the context of its relationship with other potentially oppressive cultural constructs, such as class, ethnicity, and race.

Here, I participate in each of these three steps, especially reconstruction and retheorization. Accordingly, after first establishing the historical context in which the interaction of missionaries and Satnamis occurred, I analyze the effects of their interaction, adumbrated above, in more detail. Ultimately, I consider the implications of this study for feminist scholarship. Drawing on the work of Margaret Miles, Saba Mahmood, and others, I interrogate the preference feminist historians have shown for historical figures who demonstrate agency, that

is, for so-called rabble-rousers and gender troublemakers. I suggest not only that this predilection represents a mild form of self-centered egoism but also, and more important, that it prevents us from adequately analyzing the complexity of motivations that drive human behavior, and the varied but interrelated social and cultural factors that limit and shape it. In particular, I argue that a too-limited conception of human agency conceived as activity that challenges or contests gender oppression has the potential to blind us to the imbrication of gender, class (or caste), ethnicity, and race, and to the fact that “agents” who act to combat one form of oppression may at the same time be preserving and validating another, as did the Satnami-Christian community I describe below.

Historical Context

Early in the nineteenth century, an illiterate farmer named Ghasidas embarked on a pilgrimage to a famous temple at Jagannath. He began from his home in Chhattisgarh, a part of the British-controlled Central Provinces at the time, which is now a separate state. Ghasidas was a Chamar, member of a *dalit* tanning caste that upper-caste Hindus reviled for their association with the skins and bodies of dead animals. Though exactly what happened during Ghasidas’s pilgrimage is uncertain, he returned to Chhattisgarh with a message for his fellow Chamars similar to that of Hindu reformers who had come before him. He told his followers, for example, to adopt a vegetarian diet, to replace Brahman functionaries with Chamar priests, and to abandon their worship of images and statues of various Hindu deities in favor of devotion to the one and only formless (*nirgun*) deity, whom he called *Satnam* (the True Name). Ghasidas, now Guru Ghasidas, gathered around him a substantial following, which numbered around 250,000 by his

death in 1850. By the end of the nineteenth century, nearly every Chamar in Chhattisgarh had joined his society, and members of the community had begun calling themselves Satnamis.⁵

The first missionaries in Chhattisgarh were sent by German immigrant denominations in the United States that would eventually join the (German) Evangelical Synod of North America.⁶ In 1868, they arrived in Raipur, now the capitol of Chhattisgarh, and later established their central mission at Bishrampur. Some time later, the Disciples of Christ missionaries joined them. By this time in the history of missionary work in India, lower-caste Hindus seemed more likely to convert to Christianity than did Hindus from other castes, so the missionaries naturally expected that many Satnamis, the largest of Chhattisgarh's *dalit* communities, would soon become Christian. Only a small percentage of Satnamis ever did convert, however, yet still the vast majority of Christians in central Chhattisgarh can trace their ancestry to the Satnampanth and thereby to the Chamar caste.

Beginning in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Western Christian women became much more involved with mission work in India than they had been before, although often informally. Most Protestant mission societies working in India believed that those seeking appointment as missionaries should be ordained, greatly limiting the number of official female mission workers until midway through the nineteenth century.⁷ Because they had not been appointed officially, women (typically accompanying men) to the field frequently had to raise independent funds to support their work. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, women on the mission field outnumbered their male counterparts, provoking increased evangelical interest in "women's issues."⁸ Women were involved in both the Disciples and German Evangelical missions from the start. The Disciples mission to India was, in fact, cosponsored by

the denomination's Christian Woman's Board of Missions and they chose India over other countries in part because of the "needs of India's women."⁹

Patricia Hill has argued that most women involved in the late-nineteenth-century foreign missionary movement did not enthusiastically support the contemporaneous women's rights movement, and the evidence suggests that this was also true for American missionaries in Chhattisgarh.¹⁰ These missionaries, and to a large extent, their husbands, were inspired by Victorian notions of femininity and domesticity, which considered women "guardians" of the home and subordinated them to their husbands as "helpmeets." At the same time, these notions emphasized the importance of companionate marriage, emotional intimacy, and mutual respect between a husband and wife.

Few aspects of Indian culture scandalized missionaries so much as the perceived maltreatment of Indian women, which not only invigorated mission societies but also, to some extent, became a justification of the imperial project itself.¹¹ Missionary reports abound with censorious accounts of child marriages, polygamy, temple prostitution, widow abuse, and the occasional (but infamous) *sati* ceremonies in which a widow immolated herself, or was immolated, on her husband's funeral pyre. Disciples and German Evangelical missionaries considered it their duty to overturn these and other of Hinduism's "age-old" gender injustices and improve the treatment of women.

A sense of what missionaries believed they were doing in India can be gleaned from a set of photos in a 1932 advertisement for the United Christian Missionary Society (UCMS) with the headline, "Paganism or Christianity: Which?" In the first picture stands a young, naked, Brahman girl with tussled, matted hair, looking sullenly downward, who was, as the caption states, referring to the rare and by this point waning practice of temple prostitution, "ready for

dedication to the Temple.” The other photo depicts a young, smiling, sari-wearing girl with her head covered, who, the caption indicates, is a “Christian child dedicated to a life of love, happiness and service for Christ.”¹²

For many missionaries, the desire to improve the lot of India’s women took the form of visiting those who were secluded under the system of *purdah*.¹³ The practice of visiting women in their homes, called *zenana missions* after the Persian word for the secluded women’s apartments in some Indian homes, was well established when the Disciples and German Evangelical missionaries began their work in Chhattisgarh. *Zenana missions* declined toward the end of the century, primarily because the idea of female education began to take root among India’s elites, but also because many mission agencies began to focus more on rural and lower-caste India, where the seclusion of women was a much less common practice (*purdah* was most common among Muslims and upper-caste Hindus).¹⁴

Disciples and Evangelical missionaries worked primarily among Satnamis, who rarely secluded their women; nevertheless, they continued to view the “plight” of Indian women, as did most missionaries in India, through the lens of their experience with the women in *purdah*. When comparing Satnami-Christian attitudes and behaviors toward women with those of Indians in general, missionaries often took the *purdah* to represent the average Indian woman’s experience. Based on this asymmetrical assessment, they believed that they had achieved great gains for “their” Satnami-Christian women who did not suffer under the “refined vices” of the upper castes. Satnami women who became Christian did in fact enjoy certain benefits, but just as often, as I discuss below, conversion to Christianity curtailed the already narrow range of behaviors and vocations considered suitable for women.

The missionary goal of “civilizing” Chhattisgarhi attitudes and behaviors regarding women according to the Christian Western, white, middle-class norm most often associated with various iterations of the “cult of true womanhood” coexisted with the Satnami-Christian community’s desire to improve their social status according to traditional criteria.¹⁵ This symbiosis resulted in a fluid, synthetic amalgam of values and practices that Eliza Kent has called, in the context of her work on the Nadars of South India, a “discourse of respectability.”¹⁶ Satnami-Christians did not merely accept missionaries’ notions of femininity and domesticity, but assimilated them selectively and in a way informed by upper-caste Hindus’ own notions of “respectable” womanhood. These dual ideals were in many ways compatible. Kent argues, for example, that both Western and elite Indian sensibilities “privileged women’s enclosure over mobility, self-restraint over spontaneity, and self-denial over self-indulgence.”¹⁷ There was thus a pronounced affinity between Western and upper-caste Hindu notions of female propriety and respectability. While Satnami-Christians clearly assimilated many of the values and practices missionaries introduced, they appear to have much more quickly embraced those attitudes and behaviors that reflected both heterogenetic and orthogenetic notions of social refinement and respectability. By appropriating the signs of Western domesticity and femininity, Satnami-Christians were at the same time appropriating the symbols of upper-caste Hindus, and thereby establishing, asserting, and manifesting their improved social status vis-à-vis the Satnami community.

In Chhattisgarh, as in other regions of India structured by feudal landowning arrangements, a family’s status was in many ways related to its ability to protect its women from difficult physical labor and from potentially dangerous contact with unrelated men. Thus families wishing to indicate or assert their higher social status veiled or secluded their women. Among

less wealthy families, however, financial considerations required women to work outside the home. Women of the mostly agricultural Satnami community, for example, generally worked alongside men in the fields. In fact, women in Chhattisgarh were more likely than women in almost any other region of North India to work outside the home, in part because of the prevalence of rice harvesting—an especially labor-intensive enterprise—and in part because of the large number of *dalit* communities in the region.¹⁸ Although fieldwork afforded Satnami women physical mobility denied to secluded women, it symbolized their low social status and exposed them to unstructured interaction with men, which had its hazards. Lower-caste women were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence at the hands of higher-caste men because their community's subordination made the social price of redressing such crimes prohibitively high.

As the economic situation of Satnami-Christians improved, obviating the need for women to work in the fields, Christian women began more frequently to confine their labors to the home. This pleased the missionaries, whose goal was not simply to convert Indian women to Christianity, but to “convert” them as well to the Christian ideal of a loving, competent, and dedicated homemaker.¹⁹ But it also satisfied certain traditional criteria of upper-caste Hindu status by indicating that Christian men were now capable of protecting (and controlling) their wives.

Satnami-Christian Conjuality: Weddings, Widows, and Divorce

To suggest that Satnami-Christians may have been responding not only to missionary but also to upper-caste Indian ideals of “respectable” womanhood is not to suggest that those who became Christian in Chhattisgarh remained unchanged. On the contrary, the behaviors and attitudes of Satnamis who became Christian were transformed in a variety of significant ways.

The most appreciable of these transformations pertain to the community's conventions of conjugality.

Satnami weddings generally followed the patterns of those of other Hindu communities, involving extravagant three-day ceremonies and following the prescriptions of village exogamy and subcaste endogamy. The primary difference between Satnami and other Hindu weddings was that Satnamis substituted Satnami functionaries for Brahman priests and astrologers. Following missionary ideals of propriety and restraint, Satnami-Christian weddings tended to be much simpler, involving only a short Western-style ceremony in the church, during which rings were sometimes exchanged. Unlike in Satnami and Hindu weddings, there was no application of *haldi* (turmeric paste), no ceremonial tying of the couple's garments, and only a rare exchange of dowry or bride-price.²⁰ The 1890 "Special Rules of the Bishrampur [Evangelical] Congregation," for example, declare in Hindi, "We will not sell our daughters for money, nor will we accept a sum [*mol*] for them." "If a girl desires some clothing," however, "then no more than 10 rupees worth of clothing should be given or taken."²¹ Although child marriage remained common in the Hindu context, it was remarkably infrequent among Christians and generally led to the excommunication of those who arranged them (and were caught).²² Many Christian girls did, however, marry just after the onset of puberty. Especially in the nineteenth century (but even into the 1930s and 1940s), Satnami-Christian families felt and responded to pressure from their friends and relatives to marry their children, especially female children, at the more traditional, early age.²³ Nevertheless, by the mid-twentieth century, a perceptible difference existed between the two communities, at least according to Christians, who attest that they married on average between ages eighteen and twenty, whereas Satnamis married between ages twelve and fifteen.²⁴

(The *Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1864* stipulated that Christian grooms be at least sixteen years old and that brides be over age thirteen at the time of marriage.²⁵)

In this context, we can clearly discern Kent's "discourse of respectability." On the one hand, Satnami-Christians accepted a marriage ceremony designed according to missionary values of restraint and propriety in public services. Similarly, some Satnami-Christians altered their conjugal practices by getting married later (or arranging for their children to marry later). On the other hand, the upper-caste Hindu ideal of an early marriage continued to influence the community, and for those seeking (or having achieved) social advancement, this influence was sometimes stronger than that of the missionaries, or of Indian Christian marriage laws, for that matter.

Upper-caste Hindu widows in Chhattisgarh, as in other parts of India, generally were forbidden to remarry. Considered the conduits of community purity, upper-caste women (far more than upper-caste men) were expected to lead a life of monogamy and extramarital chastity, which extended beyond a husband's death. Conversely, Satnami widows, like those of other *dalit* communities, commonly remarried in an attenuated wedding ceremony during which their new husbands presented them with the fashion accessories forsworn by widows (such as bangles or other pieces of jewelry).²⁶ Levirate marriage was common if the deceased husband had available brothers. In part because of the possibility of remarriage for widows, *sati* was extremely rare.

While the possibility of remarriage for widows appears at first glance a great advantage, this was not necessarily the case. In a patrilocal society such as Chhattisgarh's, deceased husbands' families generally determined widows' remarriage possibilities. Levirate marriage—which allowed for accumulated wealth or children to remain within the family—was often the only option widows had, and it was not always appealing. Furthermore, according to Hindu

conjugal laws, which the British consolidated, widows who remarried lost any rights they had to dead husbands' property. The only way for them to retain their property (and sometimes even their children) was to accept a levirate remarriage or to remain unmarried.²⁷

Christian inheritance laws allowed widows to retain possession of their goods and children upon the death of a husband.²⁸ Informants suggested that like Satnamis, Christian widows were allowed to remarry, and those with no children frequently did.²⁹ Here at least, it appears as if the Satnami-Christian community was following the norms of its own pre-Christian tradition, which was in many ways consonant with the missionaries' prejudices. The Satnami-Christian community does not appear to have begun, for example, restricting widows' remarriage as a community attempting to improve its social status according to indigenous Hindu criteria might do. Rather, evidence suggests that Satnami-Christian widows frequently remarried, and there is some indication that their ability to determine their own marital fate actually increased.

Divorce was common among Satnamis, though the term implies a more formal marital arrangement than was actually the case. The community had a reputation for adulterous liaisons, and many men and women simply abandoned their spouses and took up residence with another. Frequently, women who had thus strayed were welcomed back by their husbands, who allegedly sometimes said, "If my cow wanders and comes home again, shall I not let her into her stall?"³⁰ A man wishing to make a more formal arrangement and wanting to marry an already-married woman could, upon the consent of the woman's husband, simply repay the first husband for expenses incurred in his wedding. The woman and her new husband were then joined in a new, simplified ceremony, called *churi pahanana* (to put bangles on one's new wife).

Unlike the more tolerant Satnamis, the Satnami-Christian community strenuously opposed divorce among its members. As a result, the divorce rate among Satnami-Christians

plummeted relative to that of the Satnami community.³¹ Although the increased stability of Christian marriage may reflect the health of Christian relationships, it also reflects the strong social pressure against divorce brought to bear on members of the Christian community. According to upper-caste Hindu norms of conjugality, only men could seek divorce. According to Indian Christian conventions and law, neither men nor women could seek the dissolution of a marriage, except in extreme circumstances. The rarity of divorce among Chhattisgarh's Satnami-Christians, therefore, may be interpreted in several ways: It could, for example, indicate that Christians had assimilated the conjugal prejudices of their missionary interlocutors. Conversely, it could be an indication that the Satnami-Christian community was using conversion as a pretense for appropriating certain symbols and practices of upper-caste Hindus, as cover for their claims to higher social status. My own sense is that the apparent enthusiasm with which the Satnami-Christian community embraced the missionary ideal of monogamous and lasting marriage demonstrates the fact that Satnami-Christians remained at all times attuned both to the prescriptions of their missionary leaders and—especially as their economic and social situation improved relative to that of the Satnamis—to the traditional insignia of upper-caste status.

It is worth noting here that conversion to Christianity actually led to restrictions on women's conjugal options. The ease with which Satnami women could leave their husbands—and evidence suggests that Satnami women abandoned their husbands more frequently than their husbands abandoned them³²—conferred upon Satnami women the social leverage necessary to manipulate or rearrange their relationships with men. Save for the possibility of recanting (or being excommunicated), Satnami-Christian women lost the advantage bestowed upon their Satnami sisters by the possibility of second (*churi*) marriages.

Satnami-Christian women found their behavior restricted in another way as well. The Satnami-Christian community attempted, with apparent if not complete success, to eradicate the use of foul and abusive language for which Satnamis—especially Satnami women—were well known. One Muslim informant explained: “Satnamis spoke in a hot, angry way. Every word was *gali* (abuse). But when they became Christian, . . . they came to speak in a respectful way.”³³ Satnamis had a reputation for skill in the raunchy and vulgar arts, and for encouraging such asperity among their children. In particular, Satnami women were renowned *galidene-walis* (givers of abuse, users of foul language).³⁴ Although the freedom to use abusive language is perhaps more symbolic than real, it arguably fulfilled an important subversive function, a coping mechanism in the repertoire of women dealing with their own subordination that allowed them to voice dissent and express frustration. Through such language women could mock authority and ridicule those who could not be confronted directly.³⁵

Although Satnami women who became Christian gained some conjugal security relative to their unconverted counterparts, the gains appear to have come with a diminished ability to express their disagreement with men, whether directly or indirectly. Several Christian informants suggested that one of the biggest differences between Satnami and Christian women was that whereas Satnami women said whatever they wanted to their husbands, Christian women said nothing to theirs.³⁶ Christianity does appear to have bred a greater willingness among women to submit to their husbands’ will in part because of strong biblical pressure for women to do so. Here again, Western Christian ideals regarding “respectable” women’s restrained speech resonated with traditional Indian notions of upper-caste conjugal decorum, which entailed, among other things, that wives be submissive, restrained, and self-controlled.

Women's Education and Professionalization

When missionaries first arrived in the early nineteenth century, rural Chhattisgarhis did not consider it important to educate girls. For that matter, they rarely educated boys. Around 1900, Disciples missionary Bertha Lohr reported the reaction of a group of rural Chhattisgarhis to the idea of her starting a girls' school in their village: "At first, they seemed rather startled, and began to make all sorts of excuses. 'There are very few girls here,' they said, and when I told them that I saw quite enough right there for a small girls' school, they made other excuses. 'They will have to go to their father-in-law's house soon [i.e., get married],' or, 'What will be the use for girls to learn? They cannot earn their living by it.' Some of them said, 'We can not spare them from the housework.'"³⁷ Despite these prejudices, the value of educating girls and women seems to have caught on rather quickly among Satnami-Christians, though for some time the duration and topics of their education differed from those of boys. At least by the 1930s, however, Christian women near Evangelical and Disciples mission stations were receiving roughly the same education as men, though in smaller numbers. In the popular imagination, in fact, women's education, in part, seems to have defined Christianity. When asked by a Disciples missionary what the difference was between her life as a Satnami and as a Christian, Mungia Bai replied: "In those days, when the [Satnami] gurus or other important men came to our house, my husband would say, 'Don't show your face around here. This is a men's meeting.' Now when you come, they say, 'The women must come to learn. You women are God's daughters.'"³⁸

When given the opportunity to gain an education, lower-caste women appear to have responded with enthusiasm. Higher-caste communities in India had traditionally perpetuated the notion that

women were incapable of learning, or that a woman's education might threaten her husband's health.³⁹ Few such preconceptions existed among lower-caste women.

If Satnami-Christian girls received much the same education as their brothers, however, it was not toward the same goal. Informed by the nineteenth-century "separate spheres" sensibility, missionaries sought to train Indian men for purposeful and gainful employment, and Indian women for efficient, informed, and pious homemaking.⁴⁰ The system was self-perpetuating in a way, for greater professionalization of Christian men allowed for the greater domestication of Christian women.⁴¹ No longer needed in the fields, those who did not pursue professional training themselves—and even many who did—entered the home, leading to an abundance of relatively highly educated Christian housewives. Unlike previous Satnami-Christian transformations discussed in this chapter, women's education appears to have had little precedent in the practice of upper-caste Hindus.

Although the main goal of female education, as noted above, was competent homemaking, a small but significant number of Chhattisgarhi Christian women were trained for employment as teachers, nurses, and Bible women. In many ways, the professionalization of these women undermined both Western Christian and upper-caste Hindu ideals, which agreed that the home was the most appropriate sphere of female activity. Bible women, in particular, embodied a certain ambiguity in the Chhattisgarhi Christian community's views regarding the proper behavior of women.⁴² The education of Bible women, for example, mingled topics like "the Bible," "Christian faith," and "hygiene" with sessions on the "art of teaching" and "social problems."⁴³ While being trained by missionary women to propagate the evangelical ideal of "civilized" domesticity, Bible women themselves represented a different model. They were *professional* purveyors of *domestic* propriety. These occupations required women to move about

extensively and conduct social intercourse with a wider range of people. Given the traditional association of such behaviors with lower-caste status, and even sexual impropriety and prostitution, one might expect that the itinerations of Bible women were met with suspicion by members of other communities. In fact, evidence suggests that Bible women were respected and admired wherever they went, despite the fact that their unsupervised perambulations challenged traditional notions of female propriety.

Eliza Kent has suggested that Bible women working in South India “went to great lengths to de-emphasize all traces of their sexual desirability or availability: They removed their jewels and wore white saris, drawing on widely recognized markers of virtuous widowhood in its ascetic and asexual mode.”⁴⁴ Like their counterparts in South India, Chhattisgarh’s Bible women (and other Satnami-Christian women, such as nurses) appear also to have drawn upon widely understood signifiers of pious and chaste widowhood to project an image of chastity and asexuality. Like their South Indian sisters, they eschewed jewelry and frequently wore entirely white outfits. By doing so, these and other Christian women were able to announce that they were “off-limits.” Their peregrinations and social engagements did not, therefore, arouse suspicion.

If Satnami women who became Christian came more frequently to work inside the home, however, the Satnami-Christian community did not, it appears, embrace indigenous notions associating the segregation of women from men with higher social status. Perhaps in part due to their education, Christian women related to both men and other women with greater confidence than their Satnami counterparts, a shift in behavior noted by Christians, Satnamis, and even members of other communities.⁴⁵ One Muslim former *malguzar*, who had witnessed the conversion of some Satnamis to Christianity in his village in the late 1930s and 1940s, said that

whereas the “jurisdiction” of Satnami women ranged no farther than the walls of their home, Christian women moved about with confidence and interacted with everyone “courageously.”⁴⁶

The greater “courage” of Christian women may have been related to the fact that the Christian community had succeeded in changing other communities’ perceptions about their women. Though the topic has not been systematically studied, evidence suggests that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, upper-caste Chhattisgarhi men, particularly those whose families wielded economic power in addition to their social status, frequently took advantage of lower-caste women’s sexual vulnerability.⁴⁷ As discussed above, a community’s ability to protect the chastity of its women was generally considered a mark of high social status. Given their low social (and often economic) position, Satnami (and other *dalit*) families in Chhattisgarh could do little about the exploitation of their women; this, in turn, perpetuated their low social standing.

The Satnami-Christian community, however, appears to have succeeded in indicating, in a variety of ways, that its women were sexually unavailable. Their success in this regard may have had something to do with their association with socially and politically connected missionaries, a fact that assured Satnami-Christian women the social and even legal support necessary to redress incidences of sexual violence. It may also have had something to do with Christian sartorial choices, which both American missionaries and Indians would have considered more modest and thus indicative of chastity.

Evidence suggests, however, that the Satnami-Christian community defended its women from the perceived threats of “outsiders” (even Christian outsiders) in more active ways as well. In the early 1930s, rumors circulated among members of the Bishrampur congregation that Boas Purti, whom the missionaries had given responsibility for the everyday supervision of village

affairs, had seduced and impregnated an unmarried Christian Bishrampur native named Rebekka. In what missionaries considered a “poorly conducted trial,” the Immanuel Church Council (ICC) (which Indians dominated) considered the matter, declared Purti guilty, and removed him from church membership.⁴⁸ Missionaries disagreed with the ruling, and Purti appealed the matter to the India Mission District (IMD). The IMD, still firmly under missionary control, ruled that the church council’s declaration of guilt had been both rash and inadequately supported by evidence. Accordingly, the IMD retained Purti as its representative in Bishrampur and declared that he was not to be put “out of caste,” as the ICC had ruled he should be.⁴⁹

Immanuel congregation leaders responded by breaking with the missionaries and forming a schismatic body. The missionaries retaliated in turn by locking the schismatic group out of the church building at Ganeshpur, forcing them to find other facilities; removing them from mission employment; and preventing them from accessing the church’s assets.⁵⁰ Though rancorous, the dispute was resolved through a mediator two years later, in 1935, when the two sides agreed to reunite.

A number of issues caused this controversy. One element was the missionaries’ paternalist attitude toward Indian Christians and their willingness, through the IMD, to overturn a decision the ICC had arrived at legally. The Satnami-Christian community’s desire for autonomy had been growing, reflecting calls for independence on the nationalist stage. A year or two before the Purti scandal erupted, for example, missionaries found a notice Christians had posted on an *imli* (*tamarindus indicus*) tree near the Bishrampur bungalow demanding *balwa* and *swatantrata* (revolution and independence).

In addition to calling for greater autonomy, the notice requested the removal of all non-Chhattisgarhi mission employees from the institution. Bishrampur’s Christians had long been

frustrated that Christians from other parts of the country were often imported to take leadership positions in their own mission. Purti, for example, had been imported for work in the mission, and many of the schismatic leaders had previously been ousted from positions they once held there.⁵¹

Nevertheless, evidence also suggests that another important element in the story was the Bishrampur community's desire to protect its women from perceived "outsiders" and "aliens." The Purti scandal arrived on the heels of another in which a mission worker imported from outside Bishrampur, Kenswar, was found guilty of adultery with Naomi, a Bishrampur native, and excommunicated.⁵² The Bishrampur community, it appears, understood itself as having boundaries worth defending. One way of defending those boundaries was to encourage and enforce the practice of endogamy, as did other communities in the region. For example, the "Special Rules of the Bishrampur Congregation," which church leaders wrote with the help of missionary Lohr, prohibit marriage with members of other communities. The rules state: "We will not give our boys and girls in marriage to outsiders [*anyadeshiyom*: literally, people from another land, foreigners, or aliens]."⁵³ The rules, however, do allow for marriage to "outsiders" if they first become Christian.

During the Purti controversy, members of the rebel congregation wrote to P. A. Menzel, who was at the time secretary of the mission, asserting that, "In American Mission Station Bishrampur there are servants as doctors, masters and clerks who have been called from other parts of India (outside mission) by your missionaries. Many of these have spoiled the character of our young Christian ladies."⁵⁴ Here, the Bishrampur community's concern about job scarcity coalesced with their desire to defend the chastity of the community's women.

More important, however, the statement reflects the influence of both missionary and upper-caste Indian attitudes and ideals. Knowing (and presumably having to some extent assimilated) the missionary abhorrence of adulterous liaisons, the schismatic community attempted to draw sympathy from the mission secretary by raising the specter of spoiled virginity. At the same time, given that in India the apparent purity of a caste was related to the chastity of its women, the Bishrampur community's fiercely vindictive attitude toward Kenswar and Purti suggests that it was concerned not only with the chastity of its members but also with the maintenance of its communal borders. Such maintenance required, among other things, the protection of women from the perceived predations of alien men. By protecting its women from outsiders, such as Kenswar and Purti, the Bishrampur community staked a claim to higher communal purity and thereby higher ritual and social status according to indigenous criteria.

Conclusions and Implications

Christians in Chhattisgarh considered their treatment of women far more admirable than that of their neighbors, and their behavior in this regard became one of the most significant signs of the group's identity and difference. Not surprisingly, in interviews and testimonials found in missionary sources, Satnami-Christians attribute their "improved" behavior toward women to their spiritual "regeneration," to strong teaching on the "Christian" treatment of women, to vigilant monitoring by village evangelists and missionaries, to education, and to prohibitions against polygyny. Without a doubt, Satnami-Christian women enjoyed certain social and sexual protections unavailable to their Satnami sisters, and one is therefore tempted to say that the differences between Satnamis and Satnami-Christians on matters of conjugality and female

education indicate the assimilation of Western, white notions of femininity, gentility, and domesticity.

Good reason exists, however, to conclude that the transformation of Christian attitudes and deportment represents not only a simple rejection of traditional Satnami values and behaviors in favor of new Christian ones but also the appropriation and reconfiguration of preexisting upper-caste Hindu mores and mien. Could it be mere coincidence that the innovations the Satnami-Christian community most readily embraced were consonant not only with missionary conceptions of female “respectability” but also with those of upper-caste Hinduism? The evidence suggests that while couching their appropriation of the marks and signs of respectable womanhood introduced by missionaries in terms of religious conversion and spiritual regeneration, the Satnami-Christian community never lost sight of indigenous notions of female decorum.

Both of these ideals valued restraint, self-control, and sexual chastity among women, and both agreed that women’s most appropriate sphere of activity was in the home. Therefore, while there were certain advantages for Satnami women in becoming Christian, some of the changes that conversion to Christianity initiated entailed greater restriction of women’s behavior and a contraction of their sphere of influence. Assuming that Christianization is tantamount to women’s emancipation therefore falls flat on the available evidence for Northern India.

This study provides a number of implications for feminist scholarship on religion, the most salient of which involves the notion of agency and the tendency of much feminist history, especially that of the past, to focus (despite its criticism of “great men” historiography) on women who were movers and shakers, on rebels against tradition, and on those women who resisted oppression at the hands of men. If feminist history is about agency and if agency is

equivalent to resistance of (gender) oppression, then the story of Satnami-Christian women is not one feminist historians should like to tell. I would argue, however, along with a growing number of feminists, that the intense historiographical focus on agency and those perceived to be agents must be examined and exposed as an instance of cultural myopia that says more about us as Western scholars than it does about the history we purport to interpret. Furthermore, focusing on agency implicates us in the construction of a new historical metanarrative (though admittedly, from my perspective, one better, more complete, and more politically useful than those that have come before).

The tendency of Western feminist scholars of religion to focus on women who have demonstrated agency has much to do with their own cultural context, with what they privilege, value, and—most important—with what they *seek* for themselves. Their predilection for agents derives from and fuels the tension implied by the admission that feminist scholarship involves both an analytical method and a prescriptive social vision. Drawing on the work of Irit Rogoff, Margaret Miles suggests that “feminist historians’ practice of seeking historical women on the basis of current sympathies, sensitivities, and projections, . . . is ‘narcissistic and self-referential,’” and that empathy should not be privileged “as the primary principle of historical analysis.” Feminist historians tend to seek historical women who resisted victimization and found ways to achieve distinctive subjectivities and authorization for their work—individualists, in the context of their societies. In other words, we seek historical women characterized by those qualities that we—rightly or wrongly—believe ourselves to possess.⁵⁵

The feminist focus on agency is a needed corrective to the often implicit historiographical assumption that women were just along for the (historical) ride, so to speak, an assumption that seems more prevalent the farther the subjects of research are, geographically, temporally, and

culturally speaking, from the putatively monolithically white liberal modern West. Nevertheless, focusing on agency leads not only to certain elisions and historical blind spots but also increases the danger that one will read agency, resistance, and rebellion into circumstances and communities where passivity or docility were the dominant behavioral mode.⁵⁶

Moreover, the feminist conception of women's agency has often been overly narrow. Much feminist scholarship defines agency, implicitly or explicitly, as action or behavior that challenges women's oppression at the hands of men. The assumption, therefore, is that those women who can or will act will act to free themselves from gender oppression. In a theoretically provocative essay on women's education in Egyptian mosques, Saba Mahmood argues that this assumption problematically naturalizes and universalizes "the desire—central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes—to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination."⁵⁷ This "normative subject of feminist theory as desirous of freedom," Mahmood contends, must be "parochialized" as a product of white liberal modern Western culture.⁵⁸ Asserting that a particular ideal emerges within a specific cultural location is not the same, it should be obvious, as suggesting that it is for that reason illegitimate or undesirable. The problem lies not in having a social vision, but in assuming as historians that people in other times and places necessarily shared it.

The point I wish to make is ultimately not about whether all people share a basic desire to resist oppressive social structures to the extent possible in their situation. Rather, I wish to discuss the ways in which a focus on agency narrowly defined as resistance to oppression and subversion of restrictive norms may prevent us from analyzing the experiences of women—particularly women uninformed by contemporary liberal discourse—in all their complexity.

While, according to Mahmood, Western poststructuralist feminism has adequately relativized its own social vision, particularly after assimilating nonwhite feminists' critiques over the last quarter of the twentieth century, the "the incarceration of the notion of agency to the space of emancipatory politics . . . remains intact."⁵⁹

If agents are the only important subjects of history, and if agency is defined by subversion of social norms that limit "freedom," then the story of Satnami-Christian women is uninviting and uninteresting. Judged according to the standards of contemporary Western feminism, the restriction of Satnami-Christian women's spheres of activity and influence described above undeniably represents a disappointing regression (particularly when we remember that Western missionaries provoked the changes). If, however, feminist scholarship is conceived of as an interrogation of women's behavior and experience within the complex tangle of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and race, then this story remains important because of the way it demonstrates that "agents" who act to combat one form of oppression (as judged from a Western feminist viewpoint) may at the same time be perpetuating and reinscribing another.

In their encounter with Western missionaries, Satnami-Christian women appear to have acquiesced in the contraction of their accepted activities and in the reduction of their realms of authority. Little evidence suggests that they resisted these changes. Yet their acquiescence occurred in the context of a community's effort to improve its social standing by claiming the markers of higher-caste status. If agency entails the subversion of restrictive norms, then there is no agency here. But if agency can be conceived of as acting within the realm of culturally and socially given possibilities in one's perceived best interest (whether individual or communal), then surely the Satnami-Christian community exercised agency.

The pertinent historical question, therefore, is not whether Satnami-Christian women managed to improve their lot as women (according to our own possibly anachronistic standards of improvement), but how context-specific operations of power manifested themselves in the interrelated sites of gender, caste, and religion to affect Satnami-Christian women's ideals and goals as well as their ideas about how most appropriately to embody those ideals and achieve those goals. According to Mahmood,

if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but [must be] allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency.⁶⁰

Is it possible, for example, that Satnami-Christian women assented to their domestic semiconfinement because communal (that is, caste-based) social advances seemed to them a more “natural” goal than gender equity, and claiming the marks of high-caste status (among which was the confinement of women) seemed to them a more “natural” means to that end than a direct attack on the caste system and its complicated symbolic underpinnings? I believe that this is not only possible but in fact, the most likely explanation for why Satnami-Christian women (and men) acted as they did.

According to R. G. Collingwood, progress is “gain without corresponding loss.”⁶¹ If this is so, then from a white Western liberal perspective the improved social status Satnami-Christians enjoyed from converting to Christianity and adopting missionary/upper-caste Hindu

ideals represents “progress” only for Satnami-Christian *men* and we would be led to suspect that Satnami-Christian women were forced to accept the greater restriction of their activities by domineering Satnami-Christian (and missionary) males. Yet even if we replace the term *progress* with *gain*, as in Collingwood’s formulation, historians are left to ask, “According to whom?” Given the social stigma associated with the relative “freedoms” (from a white Western modern feminist perspective) Satnami-Christian women had “enjoyed” before their conversion, Satnami women themselves might have understood the “restriction” of their activities as a gain, especially since with that restriction came, as indicated above, relatively greater safety from sexual violence, greater confidence in their interactions with unrelated men, and prohibitions against child marriage. We must therefore leave open the possibility that according to their own standards, the conversion of Satnami women to Christianity represented social progress (indeed, ancestors of Satnami converts to Christianity would describe it as such today). Of course, we need not accept colonial-era Satnami-Christian women’s standards as our own. But approaching the material in this fashion saves us from two other equally distasteful methodological options: accusing Satnami-Christian women of working against their best interests under the influence of “false consciousness,” or ignoring them altogether because they were not, according to some rather narrow definition of the term, agents of their own emancipation.

¹ Although those who make this assumption would use the word “*progress*” without hesitation or caveat, I have nevertheless added the qualifying quotation marks here and elsewhere when using such words to note the fact that they are problematic when applied cross-culturally or imposed on bygone historical eras. Despite their utility, such words are always semantically imprecise because they imply a comparison in which the comparer determines the hierarchy of value and desirability and that may make no sense in the cultural context of those compared. Yet if feminist scholarship, as Ursula King and others have put it, is both historical method *and* social vision, then it does employ a certain standard, a certain vision against which it makes value judgments. The difference, as I see it, is that although the implied standards and judgments of much scholarship remain unprobed and unacknowledged, feminist scholarship admits and embraces its own. Therefore, as I discuss in the concluding section of this article, while the feminist social vision may be somewhat parochial (in other words, white, Western, liberal), feminists have made explicit its operating hierarchy of value (unlike many other forms of scholarship). King, “Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion,” in *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 18. On the

problematic nature of notions of *progress* and *development*, see Margaret Miles, “Mapping Feminist Histories of Religious Traditions,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 45-52, esp. 46.

² I was drawn initially to the Satnamis and Satnami-Christians because of their intriguing disagreement about the nature of early nineteenth-century Satnami reformer Guru Ghasidas (discussed below). Whereas Satnamis portrayed Ghasidas as an orthodox Hindu reformer, Christians depicted him, and his message, as a *praeparatio evangelica* in order to frame conversion as a natural choice for Satnamis who venerated the guru. As I began conducting research in missionary archives and through interviews with elderly Chhattisgarhis (conducted in 2004) I was struck by how frequently the Satnami-Christian community signaled its difference from the community of Satnamis that did not convert by referring to Christians’ “better” treatment of women. My analysis of this salient Satnami-Christian rhetorical theme as it relates to public symbols of caste differentiation—important given the low status of the Satnami community—led to this article.

³ Located in north central India, Chhattisgarh was a rather isolated and unknown region of the Central Provinces in the colonial period.

⁴ The language used to describe these steps differs from one scholar to another. Anne Carr describes three steps: “deconstruction” of error, “reconstruction” of history from the perspective of feminists, and the “construction of theory.” Similarly, June O’Connor writes of the “three R’s”: “rereading,” “reconceiving,” and “reconstructing.” See Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 63-94; and June O’Connor, “Rereading, Reconceiving, and Reconstructing Traditions: Feminist Research in Religion,” *Women’s Studies*, 17, no. 1 (1989): 101-23. Both are discussed in King, “Introduction,” 13-15.

⁵ Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 50.

⁶ The Evangelical Synod of North America merged with the Reformed Church in 1934 to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church (which later joined the United Church of Christ).

⁷ Rosemary Fitzgerald, “‘Clinical Christianity’: The Emergence of Medical Work as a Missionary Strategy in Colonial India, 1800-1914,” in *Health, Medicine, and Empire: Perspectives on Colonial India*, ed. Biswamoy Pati and Mark Harrison (Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2001), 92.

⁸ Jane Haggis, “‘Good Wives and Mothers’ or ‘Dedicated Workers’?: Contradictions of Domesticity in the Mission of Sisterhood, Travancore, South India,” in *Maternities and Modernities: Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Kalpana Ram and Margaret Jolly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 88.

⁹ Nelle Grant Alexander, *Disciples of Christ in India* (Indianapolis: United Christian Missionary Society, 1946), 4.

¹⁰ Patricia R. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman’s Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870-1920* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 35.

¹¹ Eliza F. Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10.

¹² United Christian Missionary Society, “Paganism or Christianity: Which?” *World Call* (April 1932): 47 (it’s not an article, just an advertisement of sorts, so it’s only one page). The UCMS, formed in 1920, was a merger of the Disciples Foreign Christian Mission Society, the Christian Woman’s Board of Missions, and the American Christian Missionary Society.

¹³ *Purdah* literally means “curtain,” a reference to the drapery in certain homes that divided women’s domain from men’s domain. By extension, the term came to refer to the system of seclusion itself.

¹⁴ Kent, *Converting Women*, 141, 157.

¹⁵ For more on the cult of true womanhood, see Barbara Welter’s groundbreaking article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74. For analyses of the impact of Welter’s work on women’s history, see the contributions by Leila J. Rupp, Mary Louise Roberts, Nancy A. Hewitt, Tracy Fessenden, and Donna J. Guy, in “Women’s History in the New Millennium: A Retrospective Analysis of Barbara Welter’s ‘The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,’” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 149-73. [OK as added? CB: Definitely—thanks for making me look more well-read than I am!]

¹⁶ Kent, *Converting Women*, 141, 157.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ On the relatively greater mobility of tribal and lower-caste women, see Peter Anderson and Susanne Foss, “Christian Missionaries and Orientalist Discourse: Illustrated by Materials on the Santals after 1855,” in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, ed. Robert Frykenberg (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 305; and Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 9-11.

¹⁹ On similar goals of missionary women in Hawaii and China (respectively), see Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989); and Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

²⁰ On the gender-oriented ramifications of dowry and bride-price, see Prem Chowdhry, *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana, 1880-1990* (Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70-72; and David G. Mandelbaum, *Women's Seclusion and Men's Honor: Sex Roles in North India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 66. The existence of bride-price (rather than dowry) can be seen either as an indication that women are considered property, chattel to be bought and sold, or that they are valued for their ability to contribute to a family's economic situation. The two interpretations are not, of course, mutually exclusive. On this topic, see Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*, 109.

²¹ "Bishrampur kalisiya ki vishesh ajnayem," 1890, Archives of the Evangelical Synod, Eden Seminary (AES), Saint Louis, MO, 83-3 Bis54.

²² On similar changes among Christian women in Portuguese Goa, see Pratime P. Kamat, "From Conversion to the Civil Code: Gender and the Colonial State in Goa, 1510-1961," *Indian Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (2003): 61-86, 68.

²³ Missionaries tended to cling to female boarding school students and orphans until a later age in the knowledge that returning them to their families or letting them leave would most often result in their early marriage.

²⁴ Vijay and K. K. Kumar, interview by Chad Bauman, Baitalpur, CG, March 24, 2004; and Shushi Lal, interview by Chad Bauman, Baitalpur, CG, March 2, 2004.

²⁵ The age of consent for Christians in India is now twenty-one for men and eighteen for women. The *Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1872* (a revised version of the *Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1864*), is available online (with all its subsequent amendments) at www.indialawinfo.com/bareacts/indchris.html#_Toc502305912.

²⁶ After a husband's funeral ceremony, a widow broke her bangles as a sign of bereavement. Widows were sometimes also tonsured, and they were expected to forswear wearing colorful *saris*. Widows who did remarry were forced to relinquish control of their possessions and sometimes lost their children to their previous husbands' families.

²⁷ Chowdhry, *Veiled Women*, 82-87.

²⁸ Martin P. Davis, *India Today and the Church Tomorrow* (Philadelphia: The Board of International Missions, Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1947), 62.

²⁹ Group interview with Bishrampur Christians, interview by Chad Bauman, Bishrampur, CG, February 2, 2004.

³⁰ Robert Vane Russell, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1916), 2: 412.

³¹ Both Satnamis and Satnami-Christians agreed on the relative infrequency of Christian divorce.

³² Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre*, 11.

³³ Nabi Baksh, interview by Chad Bauman, Takhatpur, CG, March 31, 2004.

³⁴ Some examples of popular Chhattisgarh abuses, which I have translated as insipidly as possible (the reader can imagine more colorful renderings), are *bhasari ke* ([you are] from a vagina) and *buramari ke* ([you are] from a penetrated vagina). Satnami women also might call their husbands *bhara* (pimp) or *berra* (bastard).

³⁵ Compare with Chowdhry, *Veiled Women*, 18-19.

³⁶ Bishrampur Christians, interview; and Reynold Edwin Benjamin, interview by Chad Bauman, Bilaspur, CG, April 3, 2004.

³⁷ Bertha F. Lohr, "Bits of Talk from India, Bilaspur," *Missionary Tidings* (June 1900): 57.

³⁸ The idiom suggests some redaction by the missionary, but there is no particular reason to doubt the accuracy of the sentiments expressed. Donald A. McGavran, *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990), 66.

³⁹ A. S. Altekar argued that in the Vedic period, upper-caste Hindu women were educated in much the same way as men, and that it was not until child marriage became more popular—a development he traced to the first three centuries BCE—that education of Hindu women declined. Both Altekar and I. Julia Leslie suggested that until the first or second century CE, higher-caste Hindu women even underwent the *upanayana* ceremony, which qualified them for study in the Vedas. See Anant Sadashiv Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation, from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* (Benares: The Culture Publication House, Benares Hindu University, 1938), 11; and I. Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman according to the Strīdharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 37. For a more critical view of upper-caste Hindu

educational practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (especially as they relate to women), see Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Philadelphia: Press of the J. B. Rogers Printing, 1888), 131.

⁴⁰ Barbara Ramusak argues that British women in nineteenth-century India might properly be called “maternal imperialists” because of their desire to socialize “immature” Indian daughters according to what they considered more “advanced” Victorian ideal of womanhood. Barbara N. Ramusak, “Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945,” in *Western Women and Imperialism*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 120, 133.

⁴¹ The same was true among Tshidi Christians in South Africa. See Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa,” *American Anthropologist* 13, no. 1 (1986): 1-22, esp. 13.

⁴² As it did elsewhere. See Haggis, “Good Wives and Mothers”; and Mrinalini Sebastian, “Reading Archives from a Postcolonial Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19, no. 1 (2003): 5-26.

⁴³ On the curriculum of Bible women on the Evangelical mission field, see Helen Süger, “Report of the Committee on Biblewomen’s School Curriculum and on the Revision of the Old Course of the Biblewomen,” 1925, AES 82-14 Qu2, Süger, Mrs. Helen Enslin, Quarterly Reports, Articles.

⁴⁴ Kent, *Converting Women*, 155. For an overgeneralizing but still intriguing account of the “de-eroticization” of Indian women, see Anne Dondapati Allen, “No Garlic Please, We are Indian: Reconstructing the De-eroticized Indian Woman,” in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 183-94.

⁴⁵ There were limits, of course, to the freedom of Christian women, and one Christian resident of Parsabhader was asked by his congregation to keep his daughters from roaming about after sunset. M. P. Davis, “A Fallen Pillar,” ca. 1934, AES 82-14 Qu2, Davis, M. P., Quarterly Reports, Articles, Newsletters, 1916-1935. Chhattisgarh remains a place where the interaction of men and women is very restricted and controlled. For example, the so-called *majmun* (the Indian equivalent of Romeo) squads regularly monitor the interaction of unmarried males and females in Raipur’s parks, restaurants, and hotels for any sign of illicit relations.

⁴⁶ Baksh, interview.

⁴⁷ Dube, *Untouchable Past*, 106.

⁴⁸ M. P. Davis, “A Report of the Bisrampur Church Trouble,” 1934, AES 83-3 Bis54).

⁴⁹ For a fuller discussion of this controversy and its many layers of potential interpretation, see Saurabh Dube, *Stitches on Time: Colonial Textures and Postcolonial Tangles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 60-73.

⁵⁰ Davis, “Report of the Bisrampur Church Trouble.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “Bishrampur kalisiya ki vishesh ajnayem,” 1890.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Dube, *Stitches on Time*, 64.

⁵⁵ Miles, “Mapping Feminist Histories,” 51.

⁵⁶ Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202-26, esp. 206.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 203.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 211.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 212.

⁶¹ Quoted in Miles, “Mapping Feminist Histories,” 46.