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978-1-107-48754-3 - Race, Religion, and Law in Colonial India: Trials of an Interracial Family

Chandra Mallampalli

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Race, Religion, and Law in Colonial India

How did British rule in India transform persons from lower social classes? Could Indians from such classes rise in the world by marrying Europeans and embracing their religion and customs? This book explores such questions by examining the intriguing story of an interracial family who lived in southern India in the mid-nineteenth century. The family, which consisted of two untouchable brothers, both of whom married Eurasian women, became wealthy as distillers in the local community. When one brother died, a dispute arose between his wife and brother over family assets, which resulted in a landmark court case, *Abraham v. Abraham*. It is this case which is at the center of this book, and which Chandra Mallampalli uses to examine the lives of those involved and, by extension, of those 271 witnesses who testified. In its multilayered approach, the book sheds light not only on interracial marriage, class, religious allegiance, and gender, but also on the British encounter with Indian society. It shows that far from being products of a “civilizing mission” who embraced the ways of Englishmen, the Abrahams were ultimately – when faced with the strictures of the colonial legal system – obliged to contend with hierarchy and racial difference.

Chandra Mallampalli is Associate Professor of History at Westmont College. His publications include *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863–1937* (2004).

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Chandra Mallampalli
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Maps and Figures</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>xvii</i>
Introduction	I
<i>From Curry Pot to Salad Bowl</i>	10
<i>Chapters</i>	23
1. Remembering Family	25
<i>Bellary’s Bazaar Workers</i>	27
<i>The Early Years</i>	37
<i>Charlotte Fox and the Platchers</i>	42
<i>Conclusion</i>	49
2. Embodying “Dora-hood”: The Brothers and Their Business	51
<i>Acquiring Skill and Wealth</i>	54
<i>The Distillery’s Pedda Dora</i>	61
<i>After Matthew</i>	73
<i>Conclusion</i>	77
3. A Crisis of Trust: Sedition and the Sale of Arms in Kurnool	79
<i>The Siege of Kurnool</i>	81
<i>Matthew’s Kurnool Agency</i>	86
<i>Conclusion</i>	98
4. Letters from Cambridge	100
<i>Situating Charles Henry Abraham</i>	101
<i>Leaving Home</i>	105
<i>In Need of an Ally</i>	114
<i>Charles Responds</i>	120
<i>Conclusion</i>	127

5.	The Path to Litigation	129
	<i>Setting the Stage for a Showdown</i>	131
	<i>A Native Pleader Defines Whiteness</i>	138
	<i>Conclusion</i>	148
6.	Litigating Gender and Race: Charlotte Sues at Bellary	149
	<i>Conversion and Assimilation</i>	150
	<i>Becoming an East Indian</i>	159
	<i>Subordinating Francis</i>	166
	<i>Francis Exploits His Catholic Roots</i>	169
	<i>Francis and the Abraham Household</i>	176
	<i>The Decisions at Bellary</i>	179
	<i>Conclusion</i>	182
7.	Francis Appeals: The Case for Cultural Continuity	184
	<i>Hindu Law and the Sadr Adalat</i>	186
	<i>Pandits, Texts, and Women</i>	192
	<i>Pleaders and Proceedings</i>	200
	<i>The Decree</i>	204
	<i>Conclusion</i>	212
8.	Choice, Identity, and Law: The Decision of London's Privy Council	214
	<i>Personal Law at the Margins</i>	216
	<i>The Decree of Abraham v. Abraham</i>	228
	<i>Conclusion</i>	238
	<i>Conclusion</i>	241
	<i>Bibliography</i>	249
	<i>Index</i>	263

Maps and Figures

MAPS

1.	Map of South India	<i>page</i> 11
2.	Map of India	12
3.	Map of Bellary	14

FIGURES

I.1.	Sketch of Bellary Fort	13
I.1.	Abraham family tree	47
4.1.	Sketch of life at Cambridge	126
8.1.	Portrait of Thomas Pemberton Leigh (Lord Kingsdown)	229
C.1.	Tombs of Matthew and Charlotte Abraham	246
C.2.	The tomb of Charlotte Abraham	247

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-48754-3 - Race, Religion, and Law in Colonial India: Trials of an Interracial Family
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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-48754-3 - Race, Religion, and Law in Colonial India: Trials of an Interracial Family
Chandra Mallampalli

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-48754-3 - Race, Religion, and Law in Colonial India: Trials of an Interracial Family
Chandra Mallampalli

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

xv

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Glossary

<i>abkari</i>	intoxicating substances over which the East India Company maintained a monopoly
<i>adalat</i>	court of law
<i>agraharam</i>	a part of a town or village in which Brahmins reside
<i>amma</i>	mother
<i>arrack</i>	a liquor made from the extract of palm trees
<i>bada</i>	big or prominent
<i>bada sahib</i>	a big man, or gentleman holding a position of authority or official rank
<i>bhang</i>	a product made of hemp leaves, which can be consumed through eating or drinking
<i>chinna</i>	small (Telugu or Tamil)
<i>chota</i>	small (Hindi)
<i>dharmashastras</i>	ancient Hindu legal texts
<i>dora</i> (also <i>thoray</i> , <i>doray</i>)	a person holding higher status, official rank, or title; a gentleman; the south Indian word for <i>sahib</i>
<i>ganjah</i>	hemp leaves
<i>maulvi</i>	an interpreter of Islamic law
<i>mofussil</i>	the countryside or non-Presidency towns
<i>munsif</i>	A subordinate or small claims judge
<i>nawab</i>	a regional governor of a Muslim regime
<i>pandit</i>	an interpreter of Hindu textual law

<i>paraiyar</i>	a member of a particular south Indian untouchable community
<i>pariah</i>	a generic, colonial word for untouchable
<i>pedda dora</i>	a local big man, or a big white man (the south Indian equivalent of <i>bada sahib</i>)
<i>qazi</i>	an Islamic judge or notary
<i>qaul</i> [Cowl]	an agreement or contract
<i>ryot</i>	land cultivator
<i>Sadr Adalat</i>	appeals court
<i>sahib</i>	Hindustani designation for a person holding higher status, official rank, or title
<i>sepoy</i>	Indian member of the colonial army
<i>sharia</i>	Islamic law
<i>taluk</i>	a subdivision of a district; a unit of revenue collection
<i>toddy</i>	the fermented sap of several kinds of palm consumed as a liquor
<i>vakil</i>	a native pleader
<i>zamindar</i>	a hereditary landholder
<i>zillah</i>	district