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 inter-racial 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 structures of the colonial legal system – obliged to contend with hierarchy and racial difference.

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Trials of an Interracial Family

CHANDRA MALLAMPALLI
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amma-ki
Suseela Bendapudi (1934–2009)
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Glossary

abkari  intoxicating substances over which the East India Company maintained a monopoly
adalat  court of law
agrabaram  a part of a town or village in which Brahmins reside
amma  mother
arrack  a liquor made from the extract of palm trees
bada  big or prominent
bada sabib  a big man, or gentleman holding a position of authority or official rank
bhang  a product made of hemp leaves, which can be consumed through eating or drinking
chima  small (Telugu or Tamil)
chota  small (Hindi)
dharmashastras  ancient Hindu legal texts
dora (also thoray, doray)  a person holding higher status, official rank, or title; a gentleman; the south Indian word for sabib
ganjah  hemp leaves
maulvi  an interpreter of Islamic law
mofussil  the countryside or non-Presidency towns
munsif  A subordinate or small claims judge
nawab  a regional governor of a Muslim regime
pandit  an interpreter of Hindu textual law
paraiyar: a member of a particular south Indian untouchable community
pariah: a generic, colonial word for untouchable
pedda dora: a local big man, or a big white man (the south Indian equivalent of bada sahib)
qazi: an Islamic judge or notary
qaul [Cowl]: an agreement or contract
ryot: land cultivator
Sadr Adalat: appeals court
sahib: Hindustani designation for a person holding higher status, official rank, or title
sepoy: Indian member of the colonial army
sharia: Islamic law
taluk: a subdivision of a district; a unit of revenue collection
toddy: the fermented sap of several kinds of palm consumed as a liquor
vakil: a native pleader
zamindar: a hereditary landholder
zillah: district