CAMBRIDGE SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES

SAINTS, GODDESSES AND KINGS

South India, often portrayed as a society of entrenched Hindu orthodoxy, is actually a region in which three great 'world religions' came to overlap and interpenetrate over many centuries. Using a combination of archival materials, interviews and sources such as shrine histories, ballads and popular miracle literature, this book investigates the social and religious world of the large and influential groups of south Indians who came to identify themselves as Christians and Muslims, while retaining powerful links with the religion and culture of the wider society. It shows how Christianity and Islam spread along the military and agricultural frontiers of southern India, pushed forward by traders, by the patronage of kings, and by the charismatic example of warrior saints and holy men. Many of the beliefs and practices of Christians and Muslims derived their force from an ambiguous relationship with the worship of Hindu goddesses, that is with the most important deities of what was becoming 'Hindu' south India. Dr. Bayly's book therefore throws light not only on the meaning and history of religious conversion and the nature of community but on wider processes of social and political change in the Indian sub-continent and in other colonial societies.
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SAINTS, GODDESSES AND KINGS

Muslims and Christians in South Indian society
1700–1900

SUSAN BAYLY
## CONTENTS

List of plates .......................... vi  
List of maps ............................ vii  
Preface ................................... ix  
Note on transliteration ................. xiii  
List of abbreviations .................. xiv  

Introduction ............................ 1

### Part I

1 South Indian religion and society 19
2 The development of Muslim society in Tamilnad 71
3 The Muslim religious tradition in south India 104
4 The south Indian state and the creation of Muslim community 151
5 Warrior martyr pirs in the eighteenth century 187
6 The final period of nawabi rule in the Carnatic 216

### Part II

7 South Indian Christians in the pre-colonial period 241
8 The collapse of Syrian Christian ‘integration’ 281
9 The Christian Paravas of southern Tamilnad 321
10 Christian saints and gurus in the poligar country 379
11 Christianity and colonial rule in the Tamil hinterland 420
12 Conclusion ............................ 453

Select glossary .......................... 464
Bibliography ............................ 466
Index .................................... 492
PLATES

between pages 272 and 273

1. The goddess Durga defeats the ‘demonic’ buffalo Mahisasura (modern south Indian lithograph)

2. Giant terracotta horse and rider at a shrine of the warrior horseman god Lord Aiyanaar (photographed 1983)

3. A couple praying for offspring at a shrine of lingam stones bearing the naga (serpent image) emblem. Photograph (pre-1906) by Edgar Thurston (Royal Anthropological Institute, London)

4. The god’s ceremonial chariot (ter) in a festival procession near the Mylapore Sri Kapaliswar temple, Madras (photographed 1983)

5. Domed tomb shrine (dargah) of the Trichy cult saint Nathar Wali (photographed 1984)


7. The eighteenth-century Walahiah mosque, Madras; and, to right, tomb shrine of the north Indian Sufi Bahr al-Ulum (photographed 1983)

8. Trumpeters at Trichy proclaiming the end of the Muslim fast of Ramadan (photograph (c. 1902) from the Hildburgh collection, Royal Anthropological Institute, London)

9. Worshippers surrounding the ceremonial chariot bearing the statue of Our Lady of Snows in the Golden Car festival, Tuticorin (photographed 1977)

10. Senhor Senhor Dom Manuel Luis de Cruz Anastasius Motha Correra, the last officially recognised Parava caste headman, at his installation in 1926 (courtesy of the Motha family, Tuticorin)

11. Mar Dionysius IV, metran (chief prelate) of the ‘Jacobite’ St Thomas Christians (from Edgar Thurston, Caste and Tribes of Southern India, vi: Madras, 1909)

12. Tamil divers fishing for pearls off the coast of Ceylon (c. 1925–29) (from E.L. Pawsey collection; Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge)
MAPS

1  India in 1765  
   page 20
2  The Madras Presidency showing district boundaries  
   24
3  Muslim religious centres and associated sites  
   26
4  Major Christian religious centres and associated sites  
   242
PREFACE

This book arose out of an attempt to resolve a range of paradoxes in the religious and social life of southern India. Even the most casual visitor knows that the south Indian worshipper inhabits a world of spectacular colour and vitality. In every city and every village, shrines abound and elaborate rituals are an everyday occurrence. Most striking of all is the fact that in the Tamil and Malayalam-speaking regions of south India, powerful and dynamic variants of the three major ‘world religions’—Hinduism, Islam and Christianity—have grown, developed and overlapped, all within the comparatively recent historical past, and all within a setting of remarkably rapid social and political change.

The result, much commented upon by early travellers and still apparent today, is a society in which warlike Muslim and Christian saints and indigenous divinities of blood and power came to be revered and worshipped by professing Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Everywhere in the south, ‘people of the Book’, self-professed adherents of the so-called convert religions, join their Hindu neighbours in ceremonial chariot processions modelled on those of the region’s great Siva and Vishnu temples. In the region’s pre-colonial states and kingdoms, Hindu and Muslim rulers stood as sponsors to the shrines and ceremonies of Christian Virgins and indigenous Tamil and Malayali warrior goddesses; men of every origin and affiliation still fight fiercely over flags, banners and other tokens of ceremonial ‘honour’ and precedence, and cults of vegetarian abstinence flourish in close association with ferocious rites of blood-letting and supernaturally inspired ritual head-severing.

What, if anything, is the meaning of all this colour and drama? What can it tell us about the relationship between religious ideology and social practice, and about the links between state power and the origins of formally constituted religious communities and caste groups? What can be learned about the capacity of the foreign ‘conversion’ religions to transplant themselves into societies possessing their own rapidly evolving religious cultures?

One assumption that has guided my work from the beginning is that it is possible to make sense of this mélange of cults, rituals and conflicts through historical analysis. I sought to understand how Islam and
Preface

Christianity first took root in south India, and how Tamils and Malayalis came to perceive and assimilate the new teachings and divinities that were presented to them. I hoped to discover how the so-called ‘convert’ groups came to fit into the wider society of these regions, and how the missionaries and other bearers of foreign religious teaching understood the tasks they had set themselves and the alien cultures which they encountered.

The study itself began on a much smaller scale, as an historical study of popular Christianity in southern Tamilnad and Kerala. In my Ph.D. dissertation I stressed the depth and resilience of south India’s indigenous religious traditions in these encounters with the faiths of foreign missionaries. Converted Christians were never isolated from the world of indigenous cult devotion and conflicts over ceremonial ‘honours’. As the new adherents learned to tame and domesticate the power of their missionaries and the supernatural pantheons which they brought with them, local forms eventually joined and invigorated the new teachings, producing a dynamic and creative religious synthesis.

This account of Tamil and Malayali Christians might have stood on its own. However, when the award of a Research Fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge made it possible for me to undertake further research in India, it became clear that the study would be much more useful if the treatment of converts, conversion and the indigenous society could be expanded to include an account of Islam in south India as well. The appeal of a comparative study was very powerful. There were parallels as well as sharp contrasts in the experience of the two ‘conversion’ religions in south India, and although the task was bound to become much more ambitious and time-consuming, it was impossible to resist the challenge involved in trying to set the Muslim saint-martyr next to the Christian Virgin, to compare the rise of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Muslim trader, warrior and ruler with the origins and development of the Christian ‘convert’ groups of the pre-colonial and colonial eras.

In carrying out this study, I had the good fortune to find much rich and hitherto unused historical source material. My attempt to understand south Indian Muslim society was enhanced by the use of Tamil ballads, devotional poems, shrine histories and biographical texts. I sought to illuminate these often difficult works with material drawn from more conventional Indian and British archival collections, and to compare and contrast them with the missionary records and unique caste documents which I had used in my study of south Indian Christians. In addition, I attempted to supplement the written record with visits to Muslim, Christian and Hindu shrines, cult centres and festivals, and through
Preface

discussions and interviews with worshippers, devotees, priests, missionaries and shrine officiants in many localities.

It was never the intention to produce a standard history of Christian missions or a comprehensive account of Muslim expansion throughout the south. Such exhaustive coverage would be beyond the scope of a single volume, even if the sources were available to discuss both religious traditions in every region of south India or at the same level of detail for both the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Nor was it the intention to deal directly with technical problems of theology: the work is concerned with religious ideas only in so far as they affect social organisation and practice.

It is hoped that the work will provide a distinctive south Indian contribution to debates about the nature and origins of religious conversion and the status of religious minorities which have absorbed historians of all societies from late Roman Europe to colonial and post-colonial Asia, Africa and the Americas. As conflicts between religious and ethnic groups persist and even widen in the modern age, it is natural that historians will turn increasingly to that most intractable of problems in the social sciences, the relationship between religious identity and social action.

There are many people to thank for their assistance during the making of this book. The British Academy Small Grants Research Fund in the Humanities provided generous support during two of my extended periods of archival and field work in India. I am also grateful to the Smuts Memorial Fund, the Worts Travelling Scholars Fund, the Cambridge Historical Society, the Sir Ernest Cassel Educational Trust and to Clare Hall, Cambridge, and New Hall, Cambridge, for additional finance. For access to books, records and manuscripts and for much courteous help I am grateful to the directors, librarians and staff of the India Office Library and Records; the Tamilnadu Archives; the National Archives of India; the Kerala Secretariat; the Tirunelveli Collectorate Records Office; the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge; the Cambridge University Library; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Connemara Library, Madras; and the Muhammadan Public Library, Madras. I owe special thanks for the use of materials at the Hazarat Makan, Vellore, and in the Library and Archive of the Jesuit Madura Mission, formerly at Sacred Heart College, Shembaganur. Grateful acknowledgement is also due to the Malayala Manorama newspaper, Kottayam; United Theological College, Bangalore; the MD Seminary and Mar Thoma Syrian Seminary, Kottayam; the University of Madras Library; the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies; the Houghton Library, Harvard University; and the archives of the Church Missionary Society, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Salvation Army.
Preface

In India many individuals gave munificently of their time, energy and patience. A complete list would occupy many pages, but I must single out Mr V. Sundaram, IAS; Dr J. Rajamohamed; the late Mr Ahmad Parpayya; Professor F.X. Miranda; Professor J.X. Arachi; Mr M.K. Gomethagavelu, IAS; HH the Prince of Arcot; Professor Mehboob Pasha; Sri Satyapal; Professor S. Gopalan; Mr S.V. Maruthavanam; Mr A.D. Jayaveera Pandian; the late Mr A.H. Muhammad Ghaus Sahib; Haji P.A. Mohideen; Dr S.O.S. Ahamed, and Mr K. Chokkalingam, IAS. The Miranda family of Tuticorin and Manapad were amongst those who opened their homes to me when I first arrived in south India; they helped me to take my first steps towards an understanding of their society. My special thanks are also due to those who gave me access to family records and other documents, especially Professor Hasrat Suharwardy of Jamal Mohamed College, Trichy and Mr Britto Motha of Tuticorin.

I have profited greatly from conversations with Marc Gaborieau, André Wink, Professor Jan Heesterman, Stephen Dale, Frank Conlon, Francis Robinson, Christopher Baker, David Washbrook, Anthony Low, Sanjay Subrahmanyan and David Mosse, whom I must also thank for permission to quote from his unpublished D. Phil dissertation. My thanks to David Reynolds for his valuable comments on the manuscript; I must also mention Dharma Kumar, Gordon Johnson, David Fieldhouse and Christopher Pinney. Eric Stokes was a sparkling, inspiring and generous Ph.D. supervisor; together with so many other south Asian scholars, I continue to mourn his loss.

My thanks also to Clare Hall, Cambridge; I am fortunate to have had such a long and happy association with this unique institution. Warm acknowledgements are also due to the Master and Fellows of Christ’s College, Cambridge; my Fellowship at Christ’s has provided me with a particularly welcoming and stimulating environment in which to complete this volume. All these individuals and institutions contributed much to its creation; its faults are mine alone.

Finally special thanks must go to my parents and my brother Richard, from whom I have derived support and encouragement of every kind. And above all there is my husband Chris who has listened, cheered and exhorted and who has undoubtedly heard far too much over the years about shrines, saints and severing. His own scholarship has always been a source of inspiration, and it is to him, with loving gratitude, that this book is dedicated.
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The system of Tamil transliteration used in this volume follows that of the Madras University Tamil Lexicon. The use of diacritical marks has been kept to a minimum. Conventional English spellings have been used for proper names and for terms such as bhakti, varna and Brahman where the equivalent Tamil forms would give rise to confusion. Transliteration of most Arabic and Persian names and terms follows common south Indian usage and is not therefore consistent.
ABBREVIATIONS

Bahar Bahār-ī-A’Zam Jāhī of Ghulam ’Abdu’ll-Qadir Nazir (Trans. S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar), Madras, 1950
BC Board’s Collections (Documents prepared for Board of Control, London)
BOR Board of Revenue (Government of Madras)
CIS Contributions to Indian Sociology
CM Record Church Missionary Record
CMS Church Missionary Society
CMSA Church Missionary Society Archives
CO Colonial Office (Records)
EP Edavaka Patrika newspaper
IA Indian Antiquary
ICHHR Indian Church History Review
ICHA Indian Church History Archives, Bangalore
IESHR Indian Economic and Social History Review
IOL India Office Library, London
JT Jati talaivan (Parava caste headman)
KSS Kān Sāhibu Sandai (‘Khan Sahib’s War’, a Tamil ballad)
LMS London Missionary Society
MAS Modern Asian Studies
MJLS Madras Journal of Literature and Science
MMA Madura Mission Archives
MNNR Reports on Native Newspapers, Madras
MJP Madras Judicial Proceedings
MPP Madras Political Proceedings
MS Mill Papers of the Rev. Dr W.H. Mill, Bodleian Library, Oxford
MSSR Madras States Residency Records
NAI National Archives of India, New Delhi
PCD Parava Caste Documents collection, Tuticorin
PRO Public Record Office
QJMS Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society, Bangalore
SPG Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts
TCR Tirunelveli Collectorate Records
Abbreviations

TGER  Travancore Government English Records
TJCR  Tanjore Collectorate Records
TNA  Tamil Nadu Archives, Madras
TSA  Kerala Secretariat Archive, Trivandrum
UTC  United Theological College, Bangalore