

The Female Gaze: The Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7 as a Lens for Exploring Missionary Women and Their Work in Local Communities

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Introduction

In colonial India, especially during the British Raj (1858-1947), the interplay of gender, religion, and social transformation is evident in the work and travels of female missionaries. This paper examines the 1930s in Aurangabad, where missionary women - British missionaries and their Indian counterparts, known as Biblewomen - carved out new spaces of influence and autonomy within a traditionally patriarchal society. Analyzing a female missionary photo album from 1935, *Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7*¹, I explore how English missionary women navigated cultural boundaries, provided essential medical care, and facilitated education through their work. The story of these women reveals the evolving role of women in missionary work and highlights the complex power dynamics of colonialism, religion, and gender in early 20th-century India.

The photo album imagines an opportunity for local women who had been routinely marginalized to reclaim their autonomy. English women provide a new vision of local women through the *female gaze*, a literal and symbolic perspective captured through photos of local women and communities.

Alternatively, the idea of the *male gaze* was developed from film theory. The *male gaze* refers to how the camera lens in Hollywood movies routinely objectifies women:

“She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized. But as the narrative progresses she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her showgirl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation

¹ The Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7 is currently located in the University of Colorado - Boulder's library, but is part

of a collection at the University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library.

in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too” (Mulvey, 1975).

While this principle was developed in contemporary history, similar attitudes have existed for centuries. Laura Mulvey’s² work on the male gaze laid the foundation for understanding how visual culture has historically framed women as passive objects of desire. The *female gaze*, however, reclaims the female visual of autonomy, agency, and respect. This phenomenon can be seen by closely examining *The Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7*, a female missionary photo album documenting areas of colonial India in the mid-1900s. By analyzing women’s activities and accomplishments in these images, we can begin to restore the dignity and respect that they deserve.

The *Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7* is a short black-and-white photo album compiled by Ruth Marion Grace Manning. Ruth Manning (1900-1981) served as a missionary in Western India from 1930 to 1945, stationed at the Pachod Hospital, Aurangabad. From 1934, Manning was the Guide District Commissioner and served in Nasik from 1946 to 1966 (Cadbury Research Library). The 21 photos in this album focus on the Deccan Plateau region in India, including the towns of Aurangabad, Adul, and Pachod. The

photo album features British Church Missionary Society (CMS) members Reverend W. H. Bishop, Mrs. Bishop, and Mary Barker, who actively provided medical care and spread Christianity in March 1935.

Missionary Work in Colonial India.

The map below illustrates the extent of British control and the distribution of religious populations in India. The British Raj³ established control of India by creating the East India Company, which was approved by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 (BBC, 2022). The East India Company began trade in Southern India and fought with locals and other competing empires for trading rights with India. By the 1700s, India was split into many principalities (or states) fought over by numerous powers (BBC, 2022). The East India Company’s success in India helped fund Britain’s Industrial Revolution, further establishing Britain as a power in the Western world. Aurangabad, located in Maharashtra, India, was part of the Bombay Presidency during British rule. Under the British Raj, a range of foreign representatives—including soldiers, scholars, and missionaries—were deployed across India to extend colonial influence.

² Laura Mulvey is a British film theorist who invented the concept of the “female gaze”

³ During this period, the British government directly ruled India and became known as the British Raj

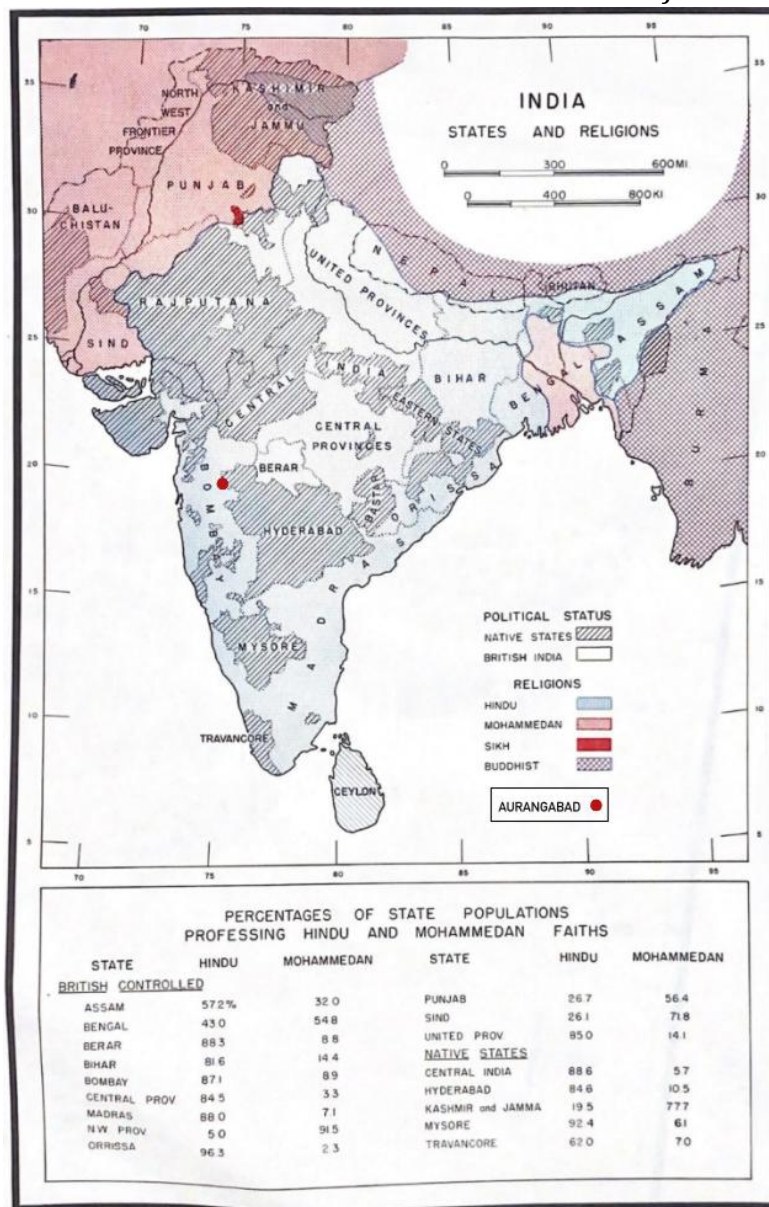


Figure 1. India states and religions with Aurangabad marked in red, April 1, 1943.

Missionary societies hold some of the most extensive knowledge archives on colonial expansion. Missionary work was well documented and consistent; the correspondence between missionaries and administrative bodies was primarily conducted through letters, postcards, and photo albums.

The *Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7* is an example of a photo album correspondence

between missionaries working in India and administrative CMS members in Britain.

The Church Mission Society is one of many missionary societies. Founded in Britain in 1799, the society was initially named the Society for Missions to Africa and the East and later renamed to the Church Mission Society for Africa and the East in 1812 by the Church of England (Britannica). In the 200+ years since its founding, CMS has had over 9,000 male and female

Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Malek Alloula's⁴ *Colonial Harem* provide valuable perspectives on the relationship between missionaries and locals evidenced through photography.

In his book, Edward Said elaborates on his interpretation of Orientalism. He argues that the division between the "East" and the "West" is not a geographical concept but a man-made construct—the Orient as colonized countries, and the Occident as colonizer countries. Said argues that these identities were created relationally, rooted in a persistent imbalance of power. "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts [the Occident] in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said, 2021). Historically, members of the Occident created narratives that distorted perceptions of the Orient, effectively delegitimizing them from global affairs. The narratives were often produced and reinforced through images of foreignness circulated by colonial agents through postcards, letters, and missionary photo albums like the one I detail here. Concerning the experience of the missionary, Said states:

"The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he could be there, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part" (Said, 2021).

missionaries serve. The Church Mission Society defines its values as pioneering, evangelistic, relational, and faithful, stating that "we exist to make disciples of Jesus at the edges, but crucially, we are also disciples ourselves" (Church Mission Society). These types of societies were essential in funding and equipping missionaries during their time abroad.

While short-term missions are much more common now, long-term or "career" missions were the predominant opportunity to serve overseas in the 1900s. At the turn of the 20th century, the shift from long-term to short-term missions occurred (Fanning, 2009). At this time, the number of long-term missions stayed steady, and short-term missions skyrocketed. This shift can primarily be attributed to the greater accessibility and reduced cost of international travel. For this reason, the missionaries of 1935 likely lived in India for most of their lives and had limited visitation between Britain and India. In the past 50 years, however, short-term missions have shifted the focus away from long-term integration into a society's culture and instead focus on having the most significant impact in the shortest time. Both types of missions have become critical for conversion and missionary goals.

A full understanding of female missionaries' contributions requires engaging with key frameworks for interpreting missionary attitudes.

⁴ Malek Alloula is an Algerian poet, writer, editor, and literary critic. His work on *The Colonial Harem* is used to

analyze the use of photography to perpetuate stereotypes and visuals of colonial populations.

Even the well-intentioned missionaries furthered these ideas through their photography and writing. The notion that the Occident had a “right” to be in the Orient created an unequal power dynamic between the two.

While letters and photographs helped demonstrate successful missionary work in colonized countries, this methodology showcased intentional and unintentional biases due to the nature of photography. Malek Alloula’s scholarship is dedicated to how postcards created false perspectives about the Orient. Alloula describes the postcard as the “poor man’s phantasm,” a dream bought for just a few pennies. Anyone could imagine a life of novelty and adventure in a single image. He explores how postcards shaped the experiences of the photographed subjects, reflected the intentions of the photographers, and influenced the imaginations of the recipients.

Alloula examines Algerian women to highlight male photographers’ inequitable treatment of women. Many Muslim Algerian women practice the *haik*, a white veil covering the entire body. These women became the subjects of many photographs and, later, postcards. At a glance, the photographer and the postcard recipient appear to hold significant power due to their possession of her images. However, reexamination of the veil is necessary. Malek Alloula describes the woman’s viewpoint behind the veil as “concentrated by the tiny orifice for the eye, this womanly gaze is a little like the eye of a

camera, like the photographic lens that takes aim at everything” (Alloula, 1986). Alloula alludes to the idea that a veil allows one to see outwards while preventing others from seeing in. By claiming the private space (behind the veil), these women defend their right to an independent perception of the world. The concept of veiling serves as a means to transition from being viewed through the male gaze to embodying the female gaze. This shift emphasizes women’s perspectives and experiences rather than conforming to how they are traditionally seen by men, which we can also think of as the *female gaze*.

English Women as Missionaries

Like race, religion, and other social constructs, gender has shaped human experience in obvious and less obvious ways. Patriarchal systems - where men hold primary power and privilege - have dominated most cultures since nomadic hunter-gatherer societies shifted into settled agricultural communities. The origins of patriarchy originate from an unequal control of resources and an implied and expressed pressure on women to reproduce (Peluso, 2023). Within this dynamic, religion has played a complex role: while some religious practices have celebrated women’s unique contributions, many religious practices have also reinforced patriarchal systems (History.com, 2018). This power imbalance extends to how history has been recorded, as men have traditionally controlled historical narratives. However, investigating missionary photo albums such as the *Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7* can

reveal women's stories that have often been overlooked.

Historically, women served as the wives of missionaries, valuable counterparts to their husbands. Rather than missionary men, missionary couples became the groundwork for missionary work globally (Midgley, 2006). At the time, women's value was measured by their "possess[ing] a tenderness of feeling, a depth of compassion, a quickness of perception, and a forgetfulness of self, which are commonly found less extent elsewhere. They also appear generally to manifest a greater facility for the acquisition of languages, as far as the mere power of conversation is concerned; and they can sooner adapt themselves to the prejudices and win their way to the hearts of those on whose welfare they are bent" (Midgley, 2006).

Beyond their "softer touch," wives also proved themselves skilled at managing households, learning local languages, and building relationships with local women. Their success in this area challenged the prevailing notion that mission work was exclusively masculine territory. These women became

unintentional pioneers for single women who would later become missionaries.

The perception that women had a distinct role in missionary work was beneficial for those who had previously been excluded from the mission field. However, it also imposed strict limitations on single women who wanted to engage in missionary activities. Instead of being recognized for their capacity to handle challenging situations and share the gospel, traditional "feminine" qualities often defined them. This perception reduced their capacity to participate in leadership roles and to impact unreached populations, which men were allowed to pursue freely.

Further, there has been continued controversy over women's authority in preaching roles. To combat this, delineations between preaching and teaching roles were established. Generally, preaching referred to large, formal gatherings, while teaching was used in more intimate, informal settings. Often, women thrived in the latter settings by deepening relationships and encouraging dialogue.



Figure 2. Crowds listening to the preaching.⁵

The transition occurred slowly, but single women became increasingly crucial in the mission field. By the late 19th century, mission boards could no longer ignore the evidence that married and single women made unique and valuable contributions to evangelical work. The wives' achievements thus opened doors for a new generation of female missionaries who could serve independently without needing the legitimacy of a missionary husband. The mid-1800s characterized a shift in social norms, including a slightly less rigid understanding of gender roles. In the late 19th century, societies began recruiting women as missionaries (Midgley, 2006).

Ruth Manning and her companion, Mary Barker, exemplify individuals who took advantage of this change, serving as single women in the

mission field. Manning and her company also demonstrate some push-and-pull factors influencing religious conversion.

Push factors are elements of evangelism that are introduced into a potential convert's life without being actively sought. Some examples of push strategies in missionary work are publicly preaching and openly evangelizing. Female missionaries employed more targeted push strategies, such as teaching in the *zenana*⁶ and the women's space in some Indian homes.

In contrast, pull factors illustrate how potential converts actively seek out missionaries. A significant example of these pull factors is healthcare. By establishing hospitals, missionaries created vital spaces that attracted locals for reasons beyond religious affiliation.

⁵ In order to preserve the language of the photo album, all captions are listed exactly as they are written by the author.

⁶ The meanings of *zenana* and *purdah* will be explained in further detail in the following pages

These hospitals treated ailments and injuries while also contributing to the conversion process.



Figure 3. Bricks for the hospital in their raw state.

Access to healthcare in rural parts of India was notably difficult. Hospitals were few and far between, and when they did exist, they often faced shortages of supplies and medical professionals. In this context, missionary hospitals have been essential to providing accessible healthcare in India. However, the introduction of these facilities also meant the introduction of Western medicine.

Indian healthcare was and is still rooted in traditional medicine practices such as *Ayurveda*. *Ayurveda* is a centuries-old holistic medicine practice that stems from the idea that each person has *doshas*, or life forces, and that all living things are connected (Johns Hopkins Medicine). Implementing scientific, clinical-trial based Western medicine in areas where traditional medicine practices were standard presented

significant challenges. While Western medicine may have proven more effective in treating common diseases such as malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis, it often struggled to gain the confidence of local communities. Understanding the influence of these various factors is crucial when exploring the establishment of new hospitals.

Hospitals were not only places of physical healing but also often places for missionaries to spread their faith. The nurses and doctors in the hospital were able to provide valuable medical care to the locals and regularly used that as an avenue to reach potential converts. Typically, medical care was offered free of charge or at a significantly reduced rate, made possible by the funding provided for the missions. This approach

reflects missionary values of charity and service. However, there are also unseen aspects of this exchange.

First, the hospital was, in part, a religious institution. For those from traditional religious backgrounds, seeking medical help from those of another religion could be unorthodox. Christian hospitals also posed an unsaid obligation; those needing medical help might feel pressured to be open to conversion in situations where they had no desire to be converted.

This unspoken agreement highlights the importance of ethical behavior among

missionaries. Women, who often served as nurses, had a duty to uphold these ethical standards as they typically had significant direct patient interactions.

Ruth Manning, pictured below, was a missionary who worked as a nurse. While her training and skillset were not explicitly described, many women fulfilled similar nursing roles. Missionary women could utilize their characteristic “softer skills” and technical nursing skills to exhibit their value as missionaries.



Figure 4. Myself⁷ irrigating a patient's eyes in camp.

In addition to nursing, women significantly contributed to teaching roles abroad due to their unique ability to access obscured parts of the home. In some parts of India, the *purdah* and *zenana* practices created significant barriers for male missionaries. Sometimes used

interchangeably, *purdah* and *zenana* have slightly different meanings. While *purdah* refers to the traditional practice of female seclusion and segregation, *zenana* is the physical space in the household where *purdah* is carried out.

⁷ “Myself”, as in the author of the photo book, Ruth Manning

The practice of *purdah* exists in both Hindu and Muslim households; it aims to separate the private and public spheres. Elements of Indian culture argued that men and women are naturally suited for work in distinct areas of life (Kent, 1999). This separation implies that men occupy the public sphere, resulting in a single-earner model. This model puts money, and therefore power, in the hands of men alone.

Perspectives on the practices of *purdah* and *zenana* differ widely. For some women, these practices represent solidarity with kin, signal modesty, and identify one person as part of a cultural group (Reed, 2022). Moreover, practicing *purdah* can be seen as a sacred act. As Alloula argued previously, concealing their bodies and limiting public visibility allows women to protect themselves from being photographed and misrepresented.



Figure 5. A Moslem purdah family in Pachwad who are very near to the Kingdom of God. These women are visited and given teaching by the Biblewomen or ourselves.

Conversely, *zenana* has also been perceived as a tool of oppression used by traditional patriarchal societies to restrict women's autonomy by limiting their access to the public sphere. The conventional "Western" perspective emphasizes the importance of women having

equal control over their financial and social lives. It suggests that the practice of *zenana* can have detrimental effects, such as enforcing age-based and gender-based differentiation, controlling women's sexuality, and limiting their social power (Reed, 2022). Recognizing diverse viewpoints is

as these missionary women had to maintain ethical standards.

Despite their education and access, English missionaries faced serious barriers: linguistic differences, cultural adaption, and limited local resources. These barriers meant that their reach, while well-intentioned, was incomplete. Local women were able to cross these boundaries. As residents of India themselves, they could navigate language and cultural barriers in ways that English women could not, making them essential allies in religious outreach.

The Biblewomen

Local missionary women known as Biblewomen helped bridge cultural gaps between English missionaries and potential converts while working within the Church Mission Society—their male equivalents, referred to as *catechists*, aided in Christian conversion in other ways.

Some of the first contributions of English women missionaries to the field were the creation of these Biblewomen (INFEMIT 2021). Biblewomen were the product of the developing female relationships mentioned earlier and the establishment of schools for young Indian women.

Jane Haggis describes this complicated dynamic: “Relationships between missionary women and Indian women in the writings of the British Protestant missionary societies facilitated this process of professionalization in a path of convention which brought missionary women out of the home and into work” (Haggis, 2025). Below,

essential for transparency, even if no single perspective is universally applicable. These varying viewpoints are also reflected in the diverse experiences of female Christian missionaries, who all led lives that were considered unconventional at the time.

The above photo displays a *purdah*-practicing Indian family that Manning encountered during her travels. Missionary women were essential for interacting with similar families and entering the *zenana* space. Female missionaries could go into households under invitation to speak with and teach the women. This access was difficult to attain but had the potential for a profound impact on those who practiced *purdah*.

Female missionaries, like Ruth Manning, were typically educated women capable of providing valuable education to the local women. Missionaries would use the access they gained to teach local women how to read and interpret the Bible. Due to the often-isolated circumstances of Indian women’s lives, barriers to educational opportunities and literacy were prevalent. As a result, the teachings that female missionaries were able to provide became both unique and valuable. While many missionaries came with good intentions, there was disproportionate power in these relationships. Since those in the household had minimal access to external sources, local women could not verify the validity of the missionary women’s teachings. Like medical care, education was a contentious issue,

some of the Biblewomen who worked with Ruth Manning's company are shown.



Figure 6. The Biblewomen; Lenabai, Rahelbai, Dyabai, Mariabai, Ruthbai, Malenbai

As their name suggests, the primary purpose of Biblewomen was to sell Bibles, just like the *colporteurs*. However, local distribution of Bibles was almost entirely in the hands of women (Altholz 1994), as women were entrusted with more responsibility in visiting households than the men were. While selling Bibles was the root of their role, many Biblewomen used their education to educate others and become nurses.

Undoubtedly, Biblewomen were dedicated to gaining access to *zenana*. "As the persons held chiefly responsible for the nature and quality of "home life," Indian women came to be regarded as particularly formidable obstacles to progress; but, because of the norms of gender segregation that prevailed in almost every region of India, they were virtually inaccessible to male missionaries" (Kent, 1999). Their and the female missionaries'

purpose was so great that the Zenana missions were created in 1854. Many women devoted their lives to reaching the Muslim and Hindu households that practiced *zenana*. This task would have been impossible without the Biblewomen.

Education and conversion to Christianity were valuable pathways to other roles in society. By separating from traditional Hindu values of caste limitations, Indian women could choose their careers and lifestyles more freely. While societal expectations still existed, the same norms and rules did not hold, making conversion an appealing opportunity for many young women.

This spread of education can be tracked from middle- and upper-class women in Britain to locals interested in spreading the Gospel, and

even further to those women isolated from society due to *purdah* and *zenana* practices.

However, the role of Biblewomen was not entirely uncomplicated. Though there were many opportunities for those involved, those benefits paled compared to those of their English and male counterparts. Biblewomen were paid less than Indian preachers and a fraction of what English female missionaries were paid.

Due to native women's lack of social mobility in their current constraints, missionary societies could pay them minimally with little resistance. These women had limited access to salaries, so these unjust practices went largely unchecked. These unfair wages have been sources of discontent throughout history and demonstrate a theme of wages being determined by social situations rather than merit. The complex position of Biblewomen—both as agents of change and as subjects of continued inequality—reveals how even efforts framed as liberators were deeply shaped by the colonial structures and biases that this paper seeks to uncover.

The Missionary Legacy

This vision of British and Indian women missionaries is not simply one of spiritual outreach but of negotiated agency and quiet resistance within a colonial and patriarchal structure. Their work in education and healthcare profoundly impacted what it meant to be a female missionary. The records found in the *Aurangabad Photo Budget No. 7* serve as more than simply a record of missionary interactions - they represent

a shift in narrative. By capturing women not as passive subjects but as active participants, the album affirms women's capacity for success in the mission field and beyond.

Today, female missionaries inherit this legacy. While the format and context may have shifted, women still operate at this complex intersection. Recognizing the history of female missionaries in colonial India reminds us that missionary work has had a controversial history but has also made a significant impact. By viewing past and present missionary activity through the lens of the female gaze, we reframe our understanding of mission work not as domination but as relational and transformative.

The photographs taken by Ruth Manning offer more than colonial spectacle - they provide a window into how these women learned about foreign cultures, understood their role, and related to the people they served. Though embedded in the structures of a vast British empire, the lens of British women was not synonymous with male authority or objectification. Instead, their unique viewpoint invites us to consider the possibility of an alternative gaze grounded in empathy and service. As Malek Alloula reflects, "I attempt here, lagging far behind History, to return this immense postcard to its sender" (Alloula, 1986). Likewise, our responsibility today is to critically reexamine colonial imagery to restore the voices of women who helped shape the imperial narrative.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could further illuminate how
missionary work both challenged and reinforced
colonial structures by focusing on several key
areas. These include the influence of caste on
religious conversion, differences in conversion
strategies for Hindu and Muslim communities,
and the agency and ethical complexities
surrounding local converts such as Biblewomen
and catechists. Investigating the limitations posed
by language and translation, local responses to

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