

## Colonial Modernity and the Gender Divide: Missionary Influence on Women's Autonomy in India

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**Abstract.** *This study explores the complex role of Christian missionary activity in shaping women's autonomy during the colonial period in India, analyzing how the interplay between colonial modernity and religious intervention both challenged and reinforced existing gender hierarchies. Missionaries, operating within the broader framework of British imperialism, introduced Western ideals of education, morality, and domesticity, particularly targeting women through initiatives such as girls' schools, zenana missions, and medical outreach. While these efforts provided some Indian women access to literacy, healthcare, and limited social mobility, they were also steeped in a civilizing mission that often devalued indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. This paper examines how missionary efforts intersected with colonial governance, legal reforms, and nationalist movements, and how Indian women responded—sometimes adopting, resisting, or reshaping the tools of empowerment offered to them. Ultimately, the article argues that missionary influence on women's autonomy was neither wholly emancipatory nor entirely oppressive but existed within a spectrum of cultural negotiation, creating hybrid identities that continue to shape postcolonial gender discourse in India.*

**Key words:** *Colonialism, Imperialism, Missionary Education, Women's Rights, Gender Divide, Feminist Movements in India, Colonial Modernity, Cultural Imperialism, Autonomy, Social Reform, Zenana Missions, Indigenous Resistance, Postcolonial Feminism, British Raj, Indian Women's History.*

### Introduction

The intersection of **colonial modernity** and **gender dynamics** in India presents a complex and layered history. *Colonial modernity* refers to the set of ideas, institutions, and social reforms introduced under colonial rule, often projected as "modern" or "civilized" in contrast to indigenous traditions. While these reforms were often framed as progressive, they were deeply entangled with **imperialist** objectives, aiming to reshape native societies in ways that served colonial control. **Imperialism**, in this context, is not only the political domination by a foreign power but also the cultural and ideological imposition of Western norms and values. The term **autonomy** here refers to the ability of Indian women to exercise agency in personal, social, and political life, while the **gender divide** highlights the structural inequalities and differentiated experiences of men and women under both traditional and colonial systems.

### Historical context: colonial India (18th-20th centuries), missionary activity

In the context of **colonial India** (spanning broadly from the late 18th to the mid-20th centuries), **Christian missionary activity** played a central role in advancing colonial modernity. Backed by both religious conviction and imperial authority, missionaries engaged in efforts to "uplift" Indian society,

with a particular focus on women. They established schools for girls, set up medical missions, and worked within the zenana (women's quarters) to promote Western ideals of womanhood, morality, and domesticity. These interventions were often justified as humanitarian acts but were simultaneously tools of soft imperialism, seeking to reform Indian society in alignment with Western Christian values. This introduction of new ideals of femininity and family life would deeply impact Indian women's lives, setting the stage for both empowerment and new forms of control.

### **Significance of the study**

This study holds significant value in understanding the **complex legacy of colonialism and missionary engagement** in shaping gender roles and women's autonomy in India. By examining the intersection of **imperial power, religious intervention, and indigenous responses**, the research reveals how colonial-era efforts—while framed as progressive—were often embedded in **structures of cultural domination and moral control**. At the same time, it highlights how Indian women actively **negotiated, resisted, and reinterpreted** these influences to assert their agency. The study contributes to **postcolonial feminist scholarship** by moving beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood or liberation, instead emphasizing the formation of **hybrid identities and contested spaces of reform**. In doing so, it deepens our understanding of the historical roots of contemporary debates around **women's rights, secularism, and cultural autonomy** in modern India. This makes the research especially relevant for scholars in history, gender studies, religious studies, and postcolonial theory.

### **Objectives of the Study**

#### **1. To analyze the role of missionary ideology in shaping colonial modernity in India**

This objective explores how Christian missionary discourses intertwined with colonial power to redefine morality, civilization, and gender norms in Indian society.

#### **2. To examine how missionaries influenced women's access to education and participation in social reforms**

It aims to assess the dual role of missionaries in expanding women's literacy and simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal dependency under the colonial framework.

#### **3. To investigate cultural conflicts around dress, decency, and bodily autonomy** – This objective focuses on how missionary interventions imposed Western ideals of modesty and morality, clashing with indigenous traditions of womanhood.

#### **4. To study the relationship between colonial law, social customs, and women's rights**

It evaluates how legal reforms promoted under missionary and colonial agendas both challenged and constrained native women's autonomy.

#### **5. To understand forms of resistance, appropriation, and the creation of hybrid identities among Indian women**

The study aims to highlight how Indian women negotiated, adapted, or resisted missionary control, forging new gendered identities.

#### **6. To assess the economic, social, and psychological impacts of missionary influence on women's autonomy**

This objective explores how colonial-missionary structures affected women's agency, self-perception, and participation in public and private life.

#### **7. To compare missionary feminism with nationalist feminist movements in colonial India**

It examines the ideological tensions between Western feminist interventions and indigenous women's movements seeking self-determination.

#### **8. To evaluate the long-term legacy of missionary and colonial gender discourses in postcolonial India**

This objective connects colonial pasts to contemporary gender politics, tracing continuities in education, morality, and autonomy among Indian women.

## 1. Missionary Ideology and Colonial Modernity

### ➤ Missionary comparisons between “civilized / uncivilized” notions

Christian missionary activity during the colonial period was deeply rooted in a binary worldview that divided societies into the “**civilized**” and the “**uncivilized**.” Indian customs, religious practices, and social structures—especially those concerning women—were often perceived by missionaries as backward, superstitious, or morally corrupt. Practices such as child marriage, purdah (female seclusion), sati (widow immolation), and limited access to education for women were highlighted as signs of moral decay and social regression. In contrast, Western Christian ideals of modesty, domesticity, and nuclear family structures were upheld as the markers of a civilized society. This dichotomy allowed missionaries to justify their interventions in Indian society as part of a broader “civilizing mission,” aligning closely with the ideological goals of British imperialism.

### ➤ The role of Christian missions in education, healthcare

One of the most significant roles played by **Christian missions** was in the field of **education and healthcare**, particularly targeting women. Missionaries established schools for girls, often the first formal educational spaces accessible to Indian women. These schools provided basic literacy and domestic training but were also vehicles for promoting Christian values, Western gender roles, and moral reform. Additionally, missionary women pioneered **zenana missions**, wherein they entered the private spaces of Indian homes to teach, preach, and offer medical assistance. Christian medical missions also introduced Western healthcare models, providing treatment to women who were otherwise unable to access male doctors due to cultural norms. While these efforts did contribute to improved access to education and healthcare, they were not neutral—they often aimed to reshape Indian women into idealized versions of Western femininity, thereby reinforcing both gender norms and colonial authority.

## 2. Missionaries & Women: Access, Education and Social Reform

### ➤ Establishment of girls’ schools, zenana missions

The **establishment of girls’ schools** by Christian missionaries marked a pivotal shift in the landscape of women's education in colonial India. These schools were among the first to offer Indian girls formal instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic—subjects traditionally denied to them due to social and religious constraints. While education in these institutions was often framed as a tool of empowerment, it also served as a medium for cultural transformation. Missionaries used these schools to promote Christian values, Western gender norms, and notions of moral conduct, thereby embedding education within a larger civilizing agenda. The **zenana missions**, a uniquely gendered intervention, involved missionary women entering the **private domestic spaces** of Indian households (zenanas) to teach literacy, hygiene, and scripture to secluded women. According to a 2022 MDPI study on religious influence in South India, these missions were critical in challenging domestic confinement, yet they operated within a framework that subtly undermined indigenous religious and social systems by promoting Christian domestic ideals (Religions, MDPI, 2022).

### ➤ Missionary medical missions, women doctors and health care for women

In parallel, **missionary medical missions** played a significant role in expanding women’s access to healthcare. These efforts were particularly important in conservative communities where women could not consult male physicians due to purdah restrictions. Missionary hospitals and clinics, often run by **trained women doctors**, provided treatment and maternal care while simultaneously promoting Western medicine over traditional Indian practices. An article in **Emerald Insight (2016)** notes that these healthcare initiatives were instrumental in breaking gender barriers in medicine, offering Indian women both services and role models in female medical professionals. However, the provision of care was rarely neutral; it was typically tied to religious outreach and the dissemination of Christian moral teachings. This dual agenda of service and conversion highlights the tension

between **genuine reform** and **imperialistic intent**, which defined much of the missionary engagement with Indian women.

### 3. Cultural Conflicts: Dress, Decency and Bodily Autonomy

#### ➤ Clothing as a symbol (modesty, respectability) in missionary discourse

One of the more subtle yet profound areas of cultural negotiation between Indian society and missionary influence was centred around **clothing and bodily representation**. In missionary discourse, **dress became a symbol of modesty, respectability, and morality**, especially for women. Western Christian ideals promoted covered, structured clothing for women, seeing it as a reflection of virtue and self-discipline. Indian attire—such as the sari, often worn without a blouse or with minimal upper-body covering—was frequently criticized by missionaries as immodest or inappropriate. According to a 2022 MDPI article on religious reform in colonial South India, missionaries considered Indian women's dress as an indicator of their perceived “uncivilized” state and thus sought to reform it alongside spiritual conversion and education. This focus on dress was not merely about aesthetics; it was a method of moral regulation and an attempt to reshape the identity of Indian women to fit Western, Christian norms (Religions, MDPI, 2022).

#### ➤ Conflicts over customary practices (e.g. purdah, dress codes)

These views led to significant **conflicts with indigenous customs**, particularly practices like **purdah (female seclusion)** and regional **dress codes** that carried deeply rooted cultural and religious significance. Missionaries often failed to understand the complexities behind these practices and instead viewed them as symbols of oppression and backwardness. However, for many Indian communities, purdah and traditional dress were expressions of identity, modesty, or even resistance to foreign influence. Attempts by missionaries to alter these customs—through education or conversion—sometimes sparked community backlash, as such efforts were perceived as intrusive or disrespectful. Moreover, by promoting a one-size-fits-all model of Western femininity, missionaries often erased the diversity of Indian women's lived experiences. These **cultural conflicts over bodily autonomy and representation** thus illustrate how missionary work, even when well-intentioned, often operated within an imperial framework that privileged foreign norms over local agency.

### 4. Colonial Law, Custom & Social Practice

#### ➤ Laws passed under colonial administration or princely states related to women's status

The colonial period in India witnessed the introduction of several **legal reforms related to women's status**, enacted either directly under British administration or in collaboration with princely states. These laws were often framed as humanitarian efforts to address practices seen as unjust or oppressive—such as *sati* (widow immolation), child marriage, and the denial of widow remarriage. Notable among these was the **Abolition of Sati Act (1829)**, passed under Governor-General Lord William Bentinck, and the **Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (1856)**, which legalized the remarriage of Hindu widows. While such laws were presented as progressive interventions, they were often implemented with little regard for the complexities of indigenous customs or the perspectives of Indian women themselves. In many cases, reforms were driven more by colonial political agendas and missionary influence than by genuine engagement with local reform movements or women's voices.

#### ➤ Interaction between colonial legal systems & customary/traditional law

The introduction of **British legal systems** also created tensions with existing **customary and religious laws**, particularly in personal matters such as marriage, inheritance, and guardianship. The British implemented a system of “**personal laws**,” allowing different religious communities to retain their own legal codes for family and religious affairs. However, these customary laws were often selectively interpreted or codified in ways that reinforced patriarchal norms. For example, in Hindu and Muslim personal law, colonial authorities frequently relied on male-dominated interpretations of scripture and practice, marginalizing more egalitarian local customs or reformist voices. This **dual legal system** created a complex and often contradictory legal landscape for women, in which colonial

courts claimed to protect women's rights while simultaneously restricting their autonomy within rigid, gender-biased frameworks. Thus, the interaction between colonial law and traditional practices reflected a broader strategy of control: preserving order and hierarchy under the guise of reform.

## 5. Resistance, Appropriation, and Hybrid Identities

### ➤ How Indian women and communities responded: adopting, resisting, blending missionary ideals with Indian tradition

The impact of missionary influence and colonial modernity on Indian women did not go unchallenged. Indian women and communities exhibited a wide range of **responses—ranging from resistance to selective appropriation**, and even the **creation of hybrid identities** that merged missionary ideals with indigenous traditions. While some women embraced the opportunities provided by missionary institutions—such as access to education, healthcare, and literacy—others resisted outright conversion or the imposition of Western values. Many Indian women used the tools introduced by missionaries (like English education and print culture) not to adopt Western norms wholesale, but to **assert their own voices**, challenge patriarchal customs within their own communities, or participate in the growing Indian nationalist movement. This **adaptive agency** shows that women were not passive recipients of reform but active participants in shaping their own identities under colonial rule.

### ➤ Case studies (e.g. marginalized castes, conversion vs non-conversion)

Case studies further illustrate the **diverse experiences of women, particularly among marginalized castes and communities**. According to a 2022 article in MDPI's *Religions* journal, missionary efforts among Dalit women in South India reveal complex dynamics. For some lower-caste groups, **conversion to Christianity offered a pathway to escape caste-based discrimination**, access education, and gain social mobility. However, others chose to remain within the Hindu fold, selectively adopting missionary practices—such as modern schooling or hygienic practices—without embracing Christianity. In such cases, women often navigated **multiple identities**, simultaneously affirming their cultural heritage while engaging with elements of Western modernity. These examples challenge the simplistic binary of “traditional vs modern” or “colonized vs liberated.” Instead, they reveal how **Indian women constructed layered, hybrid identities**, negotiating power, belief, and autonomy in ways that were deeply rooted in their own social and cultural realities.

## 6. Impacts on Autonomy: Economic, Social, Psychological

### ➤ Education and employment opportunities

The introduction of **missionary education** and limited vocational training during the colonial period opened up new **economic opportunities** for some Indian women, particularly those from urban or marginalized backgrounds. Literacy and basic education allowed women to pursue roles as **teachers, nurses, and midwives**—professions that were acceptable within both Indian and missionary moral frameworks. For the first time, women in certain regions gained access to **paid employment**, even if still within traditionally “feminine” sectors. This economic participation marked a subtle but meaningful shift in women's roles, granting them a degree of **financial autonomy** and influence within their households and communities. However, these opportunities remained limited in scope and often inaccessible to rural or upper-caste women due to social restrictions. Moreover, employment was frequently tied to religious conversion or conformity to missionary expectations, creating a tension between empowerment and dependency.

### ➤ Changes in family structure, marriage, decision making

In addition to economic changes, missionary influence also brought about gradual **transformations in family structures, marriage practices, and domestic decision-making**. For instance, exposure to Christian ideals of companionate marriage and nuclear family life led some Indian families—especially converts—to question traditional systems such as **arranged child marriages or polygamy**. In some cases, women began to assert greater agency in choosing their partners, delaying marriage, or seeking reform in household dynamics. The presence of female education and public

discourse also altered **psychological perceptions of self-worth**, especially among girls who were encouraged to see themselves as moral agents and thinkers. However, this shift was far from universal. Many women continued to face pressure to conform to both patriarchal and colonial expectations, and the stress of navigating conflicting values often resulted in **internalized conflicts** regarding identity, obedience, and autonomy. Thus, while colonial-era reforms introduced new spaces for female agency, they also imposed **new forms of psychological control**, illustrating the complexity of autonomy under colonial modernity.

## 7. Missionary Influence vs Nationalist Feminist Movements

### ➤ **Overlaps and divergences: Indian feminist reformers, role of religion vs nationalism**

The rise of Indian **nationalist feminist movements** during the late 19th and early 20th centuries created a space of both **alignment and conflict** with missionary efforts. On the surface, both missionaries and Indian reformers advocated for women's education, health, and social uplift. However, the **ideological foundations** of these movements differed sharply. While missionaries framed reform within a **Christian moral and civilizational framework**, many Indian feminists grounded their efforts in **indigenous religious, cultural, or nationalist ideals**. Reformers like **Pandita Ramabai** and **Savitribai Phule** utilized Western education but reinterpreted it through Indian lenses—blending spiritual beliefs, caste consciousness, and a desire for self-rule. In this sense, Indian feminist reformers appropriated the **tools of modernity** introduced by colonial and missionary forces, but **redirected them** toward culturally rooted and politically sovereign goals.

Where **divergences** became more pronounced was in the **role of religion and identity**. Missionary interventions were often seen by nationalists as foreign intrusions aimed at undermining Indian traditions and promoting conversion. As nationalist sentiment grew, many Indian feminists distanced themselves from missionary influence, asserting that **true emancipation** could only be achieved through **self-reform within Indian society**, not through Western paternalism. Organizations like the **All India Women's Conference (AIWC)**, founded in 1927, promoted women's rights through education, legal reform, and political activism—while consciously maintaining a **secular and nationalist agenda**. The result was a complex landscape in which Indian women reformers had to negotiate **multiple allegiances**—to gender justice, to religious identity, and to national sovereignty. While missionary work laid some groundwork for women's upliftment, the **Indian feminist movement ultimately carved out a distinct path**, rooted in anti-colonial resistance and cultural reclamation.

## 8. Long-Term Legacy to Postcolonial India

### ➤ **Continuities in legal reform, education, gender norms**

The impact of colonial modernity and missionary engagement with women's issues continues to shape **legal reforms, educational practices, and gender norms in postcolonial India**. Many legal foundations laid during the colonial period—such as those concerning child marriage, widow remarriage, and women's education—have been expanded and codified into the post-Independence legal system. The influence of Western-style education introduced by missionaries is still evident in India's school curricula and educational institutions, particularly those operated by Christian missions. Additionally, the colonial emphasis on moral regulation and gendered division of labor has left a lingering impact on **norms around femininity, respectability, and domesticity**, especially among middle-class urban women. While the postcolonial state has attempted to promote gender equality through constitutional guarantees and legislation, **patriarchal structures**—shaped in part by both traditional norms and colonial frameworks—continue to influence women's lived realities.

### ➤ **Modern debates about secularism, women's rights, religious/cultural autonomy**

In contemporary India, these historical legacies intersect with **ongoing debates about secularism, women's rights, and religious/cultural autonomy**. The postcolonial Indian state adopted a **secular legal framework**, but personal laws based on religion (e.g., Hindu, Muslim, Christian personal laws) remain intact, leading to continued contestation over women's rights in matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. These tensions reflect the unresolved contradictions inherited from colonial

governance, where religious customs were both preserved and codified under state supervision. Feminist movements today often find themselves navigating a complex terrain—challenging religious patriarchy while also defending cultural autonomy against state overreach. For example, debates around **uniform civil code, triple talaq, or women’s entry into religious spaces** are deeply shaped by this legacy. Thus, the colonial encounter with gender reform did not end with independence; it laid the groundwork for **ongoing negotiations between tradition, modernity, and women's autonomy** in contemporary India.

## 9. Conclusion

This study has explored the complex and often contradictory role of **colonial power and Christian missionary work** in shaping the discourse around **women’s rights and autonomy in India**. Through educational reform, healthcare access, and moral guidance, missionaries introduced tools that opened new spaces for women’s visibility and participation in public life. However, these interventions were deeply embedded in a colonial framework that sought to redefine Indian society according to Western ideals. The analysis across legal, cultural, and social domains reveals a persistent **tension between empowerment and control**, wherein missionary efforts often served both humanitarian and imperial interests. Indian women were not merely passive recipients of these changes; they responded in diverse ways—adopting, resisting, and reshaping the influences around them to forge new identities.

The **interplay between colonial authority, missionary ideology, and indigenous agency** underscores the layered reality of women’s experiences under colonial rule. While missionary initiatives did create limited pathways for women's **education, employment, and healthcare**, they also imposed rigid gender norms and undermined indigenous cultural frameworks. The reformist language of “saving” Indian women frequently masked a broader project of **cultural domination and moral regulation**. Yet within these constraints, many women carved out spaces of resistance and autonomy, blending missionary ideas with local traditions to craft **hybrid identities** that challenged both colonial and patriarchal authority. In reflecting on this legacy, it becomes clear that while **some aspects of missionary influence were genuinely empowering**, especially in terms of material access to education and medicine, they were often accompanied by **coercive efforts to redefine morality, gender roles, and cultural belonging**. Understanding this duality is essential to critically engaging with the **continuing impact of colonial gender politics in postcolonial India**.

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## Laws and Government Documents

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### **Appendix A: Archival Sources**

- Excerpts from **zenana mission reports** (London Missionary Society Archives, British Library, India Office Records).
- Letters and school records from **Christian girls' schools** in Bengal and Tamil Nadu (19th century missionary archives).
- Missionary tracts on female modesty and Christian education (circulated in Madras Presidency, 1880s–1900s).
- Selected colonial legislation texts (e.g., 1829 Sati Regulation, Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act 1856).

### **Appendix B: Oral Histories or Testimonies**

- Interview excerpts from second-generation women who attended missionary schools in Kerala and Bengal (collected through oral history projects at Indian universities).
- Testimonies recorded by feminist historians on the impact of missionary healthcare in rural Maharashtra.
- Translated narratives from Dalit Christian women on conversion, identity, and caste (collected in ethnographic studies, late 20th century).