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THE BASEL MISSION WEAVING ESTABLISHMENT IN MALABAR: WORK DISCIPLINE AND RESISTANCE C. 1840-1910

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ABSTRACT

Although Switzerland never had a formal empire, it was integrated across national boundaries into larger processes of western European imperial expansion. Various Swiss mercenaries, plantation owners, entrepreneurs, traders, as well as missionaries, had a significant presence in British, Dutch, French and other empires. Scholars have termed the case of Switzerland as that of 'colonialism without colonies'; while Swiss had limited political influence in the empires, they nevertheless benefitted from and aided governance of the colonised.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the case of the Basel Mission in Malabar and South Canara in South India during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Basel Mission was a peculiar Protestant Missionary Society – it set up and engaged in various economic activities in its mission stations, such as printing, weaving, tile-making. This paper examines the Basel Mission's weaving factories. It shows that the workers in the Weaving Establishments perceived their work more for livelihood than for adherence with an imposed religious lifestyle, in contrast to the missionaries who expected gratitude and conformity from the workers. Missionaries imposed supervision and hierarchical management in factories which caused tensions between them and the workers. By examining such instances which were often exacerbated by famine conditions, the article explore the limits of the Basel Mission in regulating labour.

Keywords: Basel Mission, Weaving, Labour, India, Colonialism.
JEL Codes: F54, N30, J52.

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Introduction

The Basel Mission Society, whose missionaries belonged mainly to regions of present-day Switzerland and Germany, was active in colonies of the British empire during the nineteenth century. It had mission stations on the Malabar coast in the Indian subcontinent, Gold Coast in West Africa, as well as Borneo, China, Cameroon, among others. The Basel Mission also set up its own trading company emanating from its industrial branches, called the *Basler Handelsgesellschaft* (Basel Trading Company, BHG hereon) in 1859.

The historiography on the Basel Mission has so far focused more on the region of West Africa, while relatively fewer studies have looked at the region of South-West India. This is despite that the German-language yearly financial reports of the Mission, called the *Jahresbericht*, show that the Indian stations were much larger at least in terms of financial investment.[1] This paper adds to the historiography of the Mission's history on the Malabar coast (Fischer 1978; Prabhakar 1988; Raghaviah 1990, 2018; Schär 2017; Shetty 2008; Stenzl 2010; Wittwer 2012), and alludes to the entangled history of the 'civilising mission' between the Malabar coast and Basel in the nineteenth century. It provides a background of the Basel Mission in India and labour employment in its weaving establishment.

The labour of indigenous populations was an indispensable resource upon which colonialism relied for commodity production. In order to draw profits from the trade of these commodities which included grains and raw material for textiles, low cost of production and hence low cost of labour was necessary. Taking the case of the weaving industry, this paper shows the Basel Mission's attempts at 'civilizing' the indigenous employees through labour into so-called 'productive' ways of living. In this approach, productivity implied producing profit for the employer, complying with the imposed time-work discipline, and judging efficiency and industriousness according to such compliance and output of work. These aspects for the Mission were essential to the Protestant way of life. Failing this, indigenous workers were deemed 'lazy' or 'indolent'. The semantics of productivity informed the rationale behind disciplining of labour in various colonial labour regimes in the nineteenth century, including those under the Basel Mission.[2]

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[1] The annual financial statements for 1847 and 1851 show that expenditure by the Basel Mission in India was more than double than that of Africa (*Jahresbericht* 1847 and 1851, KTC Archives).

[2] The relation between various Christian mission societies and imperialism is a rich

The paper argues that while the Basel Mission viewed its economic enterprises as a philanthropic endeavor, expecting the converts to be grateful and accept the imposed conditions; contrarily the workers perceived their employment with the Basel Mission as primarily for livelihood. Moreover, for the Mission, work discipline was connected to consistent religious practice such as attendance in congregational prayers. The difference in approach of both parties resulted in tensions at the weaving work site. In support of this argument, this paper uses sources from the Basel Mission Archive (BMA) in Basel and the Karnataka Theological College (KTC) in Mangalore. Both yielded records from the Mission's perspective.[3] It is thus imperative to read available sources critically to bring out the perspective of the workers. The Mission published separate reports in English and German, which differed in their content because they catered to British and German-speaking audiences, respectively. The German language reports, namely the *Heidenbote* and the *Jahresbericht* reflected and quoted the quarterly reports that the missionaries stationed in India (and elsewhere) sent to Basel regularly. The English reports, when read analytically to challenge the Mission's narrative, provide details of subversion by labourers. These sources have been supplemented by some primary sources found in BMA and the Harvest Field journal found in KTC to understand how other mission societies perceived the Basel Mission and how it defended its industrial undertakings.[4] Using this material, the paper first provides a background of the Basel Mission. Then, the weaving industry is outlined, followed by evidence that sheds light on labour regulation, disciplinary and supervisory issues. The paper concludes with broader insights and implications of the Basel Mission's history within the colonial context.

1. Basel Mission and its Industrial Establishments on the Malabar Coast

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the canton of Basel was controlled by patrician elites like bankers, jurists, church members or merchants. Located on the border of Switzerland with France and Germany in a strategic position for communications on the Rhine River, Basel was

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historiographical field. See Alden 1996; Barnett 2013; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Porter 2004; Yelle 2013.

[3] This was also the case for the limited sources in Kannada and Malayalam.

[4] All English reports include a section on industries which also mentions weaving, but not all contain details about worker resistance.

one of the richest towns in Europe due to its role in global trade of cotton and silk. Its patriciate remained in power until the early 1900s, shaping not only the city's politics, but also through control of their own mission society, labour and trading relations in India and West-Africa (Schär 2015: 38-126). The Basel Mission Society was set up in 1815, and was supported ideologically and financially abroad by the Basel elite.[5]

The Basel Mission established its first mission station in British India in 1834 in Mangalore. The first three missionaries were Samuel Hebich, Johann Christoph Lehner and Christian Leonard Greiner. Mangalore was part of the Madras Presidency under British colonial rule, situated on the western coast of the Indian subcontinent. Peninsular India before British colonisation was active in global cloth-trade, termed as the 'workshop' (Washbrook 2009: 135). Therefore, weaving was a major occupation, and trade was carried out with the presence of merchants (*mahajans*). During the nineteenth century, the British placed the Madras Presidency under the *raiyatwari* system of revenue collection in which land revenue was collected from the individual cultivator (*raiyat*). The rate of revenue in Madras was higher than any other province in India, ranging between one half to one third of the total produce (Kumar 1992: 7). While this gives the impression of small holdings owned and worked by the peasants, in most districts there were 'inferior' and 'superior' rights in land which created hierarchies within the peasantry (Kumar 1992). There was eventually a large pool of hired agricultural labourers and, socially, caste rigidities persisted and defined labour relations.

Most of the population in the Madras Presidency depended on agriculture for livelihood. Cultivation was dependent upon rainfall and animal power, as well as family labour. The fertile regions were inhabited by powerful land-controlling rulers who organized themselves as caste categories such as the Nayars of the Malabar coast (Bayly 2003: 19). The Ezhava and Tiyyans, being involved in toddy tapping (producing country liquor), were the disadvantaged castes in the region. The Cherumans, Paraiyas (more numerous on the south-east coast) and Pulayas formed the so-called 'untouchables' and were part of 'agrestic servitude' under landlords of dominating castes. The Cherumans were cultivators of rice lands and plantations. The term *adimai* meaning slave was used for some agricultural castes in Malabar, such as Parriars, Cherumans, Vullams, Canacums and Erilays (Joseph 1984).

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[5] As Ratschiller (2023: 55) puts it "most Basel patricians were devout Protestants who believed in liberal trade and business but supported conservative values and policies". On conservative-liberals in Switzerland, see David and Schaufelbuehl (2010).

Missionaries found it easier to convert those looking to escape the inequalities of the caste system.[6] Besides agriculturists belonging to the disadvantaged castes, fishers, toddy tappers like the Billavas and the Badaga tribe of the Nilgiri hills were among the majority of those that the Basel Mission converted in Malabar and South Canara.[7] It also appears that 'coolies' formed a significant number of those converted.[8] The geographical reach of conversion was limited to those residing around the towns and villages where mission stations were set up and where missionaries could easily travel by foot or carriage. In order to encourage conversions and provide economic security to the converts who lost livelihoods after conversion, missionaries began engaging in agriculture and weaving. Heinrich Hofmann, General agent of the Basel Mission industries, asserted caste as the main reason behind its industrial establishments in a 1913 publication on the Mission's history. He claimed that after conversion people became "wholly dependent for their livelihood on the missionaries" as they became outcastes and lost their employment (BMA C-108D: 4).

Holding the caste system accountable was the main justification presented by the Basel Mission for commencing industrial activities in response to criticism by other mission societies. For example, in an article dated 9th November 1887, in the monthly periodical called 'The Harvest Field' published by the Wesleyan Mission, the Basel Mission was critiqued with regard to the education of orphan boys "for the purpose of making money for itself" than settling them for life (The Harvest Field December 1887: 194). Its industrial establishments were also compared to the Basel Mission being a "commercial firm and a large employer of labour and that the Christians become the servants of that firm".[9] Raghaviah (2018: 27) has also contended that over time, the Mission "considered its industrial activities as religious activities", and conversion gradually became a means of labour mobilization for its factories.

Besides 'disciplining' the converts into Protestant way of life through labouring, the beginning of industrial enterprises had a financial reason as well. The efforts of the Mission were dependent on extensive financial

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[6] See Viswanath 2014 on caste and the role of missionaries in defining Dalits.

[7] In fact, Badagas were employed as labourers on coffee plantations in the region.

[8] Marriage records from the Basel Mission church in Bokkapatna (Mangalore) registered the majority of the members as 'cooly' (*sic*). (BM-33, KTC Archives). This was also the case in Codacal.

[9] The lengthy article was written by missionary E. Diez of the Basel Mission in response to an article by the Wesleyan Mission. He defends the industrial activities as being for the benefit of the converts, and the profits being invested in "different charitable objects" (*The Harvest Field* December 1887: 194-197).

support mainly obtained through donations. But once mission stations started, expenses also increased. After initial financial success, the Mission saw six annual accounts close with a deficit in the 1840s (Tschudi-Barbatti 1992). When financial solutions were sought by the Mission committee in Basel, it was realized that to pull out of India would cause more loss. Therefore, in the 1840s, the Basel Mission started industrial activities in India, among which weaving, printing, and later tile-making had much success.

The organization of the Basel Mission in India was formalized only after 1852 when the inspector of the Basel Mission committee, Friedrich Josenhans, visited India. Thereon, each station had several 'brothers', a school inspector, cashier, and after the start of the industrial mission, a few 'industrial brothers' who managed economic activities and work in factories in each station. The same year Basel Mission created a separate commission with its separate fund for industrial activities, headed by Karl Sarasin, a wealthy businessman and member of the council in Basel. In 1855, Sarasin also introduced the *halbbatzen-kollekte* (collection of 5 cents every week) to raise money for the Basel Mission, which later became a successful method of raising finances for the mission society within and beyond Swiss borders (Tschudi-Barbatti 1992: 59). In 1859, the BHG was set up as a limited trading company registered in Switzerland with a capital of 200,000 Swiss francs, with the Mission Society's share amounting to 30,000 Swiss Francs (15%) (Chapatte 2013). The director of Basel Mission was also the inspector for the Industrial Commission from then on. In 1882, the industrial activities of the mission merged with the BHG. The Mission Society was an integral part of the BHG; it not only appointed the directors of the BHG, and it also shared half the profits of the company after paying the 6% interest on shareholder capital and reserves. In 1869, the shareholder interest was reduced to 5% and in 1880, any additional profits were accumulated by the Basel Mission Society (Wanner 1959: 227; quoted in Chapatte 2013).

Industrial work was justified by an ideological reason as well; the missionaries believed that inculcating habits of productive work were integral to the process of conversion and civilization. In Protestantism, profit-making in the present life was a form of godliness. Christian diligence, integrity and respectability was tied to this idea which justified the industrial mission of the Basel Mission. This was affirmed by the missionary L. Johannes Frohnmeyer who, during the Decennial Missionary Conference of 1892-93 in Bombay, defended the industrial enterprises of the Basel Mission against implicit criticisms of other mission societies (BMA C-113: 4). Frohnmeyer justified the industries by placing blame on the "strong caste feeling" in India that allegedly prevented converts to

attain employment. He asserted that Christianity "sanctified labour" but in Hinduism "exertion is looked upon as an evil, which is undergone only as far as it is absolutely necessary" (BMA C-113: 5).[10] This assumption led the Basel Mission to believe that the converts "lack all energy" and were not accustomed to work, thereby justifying its industrial establishments as a way to 'civilize' Indians into labouring.

Missionaries thus brought a certain idea of freedom in the colonies which was not without conditions, it included a conceptualization of unfreedom first: slavery, caste-based inequalities, servitude, agrarian dependencies, etc. and then the mode of liberation from this condition, the mode which had to be taught by Europeans. This often included a certain type of education, household and family management, and work-time discipline. Each aspect imposed market and capitalist influences on the colonized society, accompanying the idea of modernity in a linear eschatological path.[11] Viewing indigenous labourers as inherently lazy and in need of disciplining justified both conversion as well as the industrial endeavor of the Basel Mission in Malabar. At the same time, claims of laziness of indigenous labour demonstrated the inability of the manager to regulate labour for its own envisioned purposes. Claims of disciplinary problems with the workforce then also show that European working regime or conditions were not blindly accepted but were actively resisted. For this, it is important to critically understand the strategies of the Mission and the labourers' silences in the sources. The case of the Basel Mission Weaving Establishment is used to explicate these arguments.

2. The Basel Mission Weaving Establishment

Traditional weaving existed in the region of Malabar and South Canara for centuries before the arrival of Europeans. The Chaliya caste in Malabar and the Salia caste in South Canara practiced it as their traditional occupation, using pit looms (Raghaviah 2018: 123). The material called 'calico' named after the town of Calicut was especially popular. Weavers in the Indian subcontinent belonged to certain specialized castes that restricted type and quantity of production to maintain quality and competition (Desai and Kumar 1989: 355-356). In nineteenth century South India, the majority of

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[10] The report reads as a response to critics of the industrial mission, or the engagement of a mission society in economic enterprises.

[11] Yelle 2013 has linked the impact of Enlightenment ideas of rationality and modernity on Protestant Christianity, which was an intrinsic part of capitalism and British colonialism.

coarse cloth was produced by part-time weavers of the 'untouchable' castes in rural areas, whereas fine cloth was more centralized in larger villages and towns (Wielenga 2020: 10). Weavers could obtain raw material from the customer, from local markets, or from merchants who gave weavers cash advances (*ibid.*). Raw material like thread and yarn as well as coarse cloth was exported from the Coromandel Coast or the Deccan to Malabar, but cotton was also planted alongside paddy in Malabar (Wielenga 2020: 28-29). Merchants called *sahukars* would sell raw material to weavers.

Weaving was the most profitable activity throughout Basel Mission's presence in India, besides tile-making. In 1844, the Basel Mission started small weaving activities, and in 1846, weaving was formally set up with the help of an indigenous weaver who trained newly converted apprentices. The Mission's weaving industry was supervised by Rev. Metz who was based in Mangalore (BMA C-108D: 6). He was succeeded in 1851 by missionary Johannes Haller who aimed to expand the industry, but the community in Mangalore did not welcome it, petitioning the visiting inspector to shift the focus to arts, crafts and agriculture over weaving (Schlatter 1916: 159). Haller brought the European fly-shuttle loom to Mangalore to make the industry profitable, to ensure that the industry could withstand competition with English goods, and to encourage the converts to have only one employment. Dyeing also became popular after the success of the 'khaki' (from Hindustani '*khak*' meaning dust or dirt) with the British police and army who used the material for their uniforms. The Weaving Establishment in Mangalore later under Brother Digel also supplied the 'Webster's Shikari' cloth, named after its purchaser, an Englishman Mr. Webster, to the British Government's Forest department (BMA C-108D: 7; Rennstich 1985: 136). After the introduction of jacquard looms, various materials such as table cloths, towels, napkins, damask linen and clothes were produced. In 1902, an embroidery department was added to the weaving industry (BMA C-108D: 11). The three main weaving establishments were based in Calicut (since 1859), Mangalore (since 1851) and Cannanore (since 1852). Each of them had their own branches, which served the purpose of training apprentices in basic weaving, while the main factories dealt with specialized weaving (Raghaviah 2018: 126). They were combined into the Basel Mission United Weaving Establishment in 1911, with the head office at Calicut. The products were supplied to "all parts of India from Ceylon and Cape Comorin to the Panjab, Assam and Burmah, occasionally even to China, and once to Mombas (*sic*) in Africa" (BGEM 1876: 72).

Each department was managed and headed by a European missionary, a male for managing male converts and female missionaries for female converts. The so-called 'industry brother' was a European typically from Germany or Switzerland whose skills could be used in the Industrial

Department. In a rare exception, a branch of the Calicut Weaving Establishment in Codacal once had an Indian foreman as the superintendent (BMA C-108D: 14). Some schools of the Basel Mission were closely associated with its industries; many young boys and girls in schools would join as apprentices for weaving, tailoring or dyeing. According to Hofman's report (BMA C-108D: 13), apprentices in tailoring joined for about three or four years, few of them starting their own tailoring shops or working in other shops in towns.

Once the finished products were ready for sale, the 'industry brother' traded them by either relying on local traders or by establishing sales with firms based in Bombay or Bangalore. The BHG set up shops selling the products, the main one being in Mangalore. The introduction of mechanization in weaving allowed trained weavers in BHG to compete with British imports of cloth in the subcontinent, or as Frohnmeyer in his 1892-1893 speech at the Decennial Missionary Conference Bombay considered "gradually bringing them (tools of Indian weavers) up to a more European standard" (BMA C-113: 6), but both competed with independent artisanal work. By 1912, the Basel Mission faced both emigration of labour to plantations within India and outside, as well as competition from British goods, deeming it necessary to introduce power-looms to supplement hand-looms (*The Harvest Field* August 1913: 315).

Women formed an integral part of the weaving industry. Besides performing twisting and winding of threads on bobbins, they also assisted in tailoring, lace making and embroidery. According to Jenkins (2014), Julie Gundert, the first missionary wife in the Indian stations of the Basel Mission, introduced lace-making to girls in school around 1839, a skill she knew from her home canton Neuchâtel. Julie's students learned reading, writing and Bible study during the morning, and handwork such as knitting, sewing and crochet in the afternoon (*ibid*: 41). Such work would bring income to the families and partially pay for the expenses of the schools. In general, work was considered an important part of the young converts' upbringing; the missionaries believed that "the devil finds work for idle hands to do" (*ibid.*: 42). Some women were also trained as weavers when it was difficult to employ sufficient men, but when the supply of male weavers picked up again, female weavers were no longer mentioned in the reports (Fischer 1978: 152).

Usually, weavers depended upon additional employment to supplement wages. Weaving was taken up by agricultural workers in non-harvest season. But the Basel Mission considered geographical and personal distance with non-converts important in order to retain converts and thus coaxed them to have a single employment. Workers in weaving factories, nevertheless, included both converts and few non-converts if the labour of the converts

was insufficient for yielding profits. The missionaries hoped and expected that the non-Christian workers would eventually be converted, with few results. Some missionaries noticed that for some weavers, conversion was only a reluctant but necessary choice in order to obtain work (Fischer 1978: 94).

Missionary supervisors would often complain about the negative influence of the non-converts on the Christian workers, but these were mostly claims that showed the prejudice of the missionaries towards the so-called 'heathen workers'. In his 1892-1893 report mentioned above, Frohnmeyer claimed that a good European missionary manager in the industrial establishments had to ensure that there was no "idleness, filthy language or drunkenness". For this reason, he reiterated the importance of keeping the number of non-converts low and "any considerable number of non-Christians in these establishments ought to be avoided; if they are not inquirers, their influence on the Christians will in most cases be pernicious; however, a small number, properly supervised will do no harm" (BMA C-113: 14). Nevertheless, the European managers came into conflict with indigenous Christian workers, as is shown below.

3. Conflicts and Negotiations in Weaving Factories

At the peak of its operations in 1880s, Basel Missions' industries coincided with the rise of industrial operations in the textile industry, such as those of cotton and jute in the main cities of the Bombay and Bengal Presidencies which started around the late nineteenth century and thrived gradually into the twentieth century. Some comparisons are of note by way of situating the position of the Basel Mission in the wider context. Existing historiography has dealt with issues of class consciousness among labourers in textile mills run under the aegis of the colonial state, as well the role of the Indian intermediary in aiding recruitment, since labor was difficult to obtain and was not necessarily easily mobilized in all areas (Chakrabarty 1989; Chandavarkar 1994; Joshi 2003; Sarkar 2018). The Basel Mission industries' recruitment differed in that it did not require a jobber to recruit labour; instead ample converts and nearby population were available as labourers even if some were not sufficiently skilled. As far as class consciousness is concerned, cultural identities and rural ties were important in industrial mills (Chakrabarty 1989); yet, new ties were built and community identities were reconfigured in new settings, despite a diverse group of workers faced difficulties in organizing against Indian businessmen or colonial officials (Chandavarkar 1994; Joshi 2003; Sarkar 2018). In the Mission's weaving factories, solidarity among workers was

forged due to similar class or caste and language backgrounds of the workers, the fact that most of them resided around the mission station, to an extent due to their position as members of the congregation, and because of the directed focus against the manager, in this case a German or Swiss missionary called an 'industry brother'. The profit-oriented aims of the factories aimed at increasing productivity and efficiency of the workers made the approach of managers similar in both cases. Nevertheless, the peculiarity of the Basel Mission industries lay in its primary aim of conversion and its association of efficiency and industriousness with religious zeal. It demanded compliance to both imposed work discipline and religious life from workers but, simultaneously, subversively served to reshape collective consciousness among labourers.

Basel Mission industries, like other contemporaneous weaving mills, involved hierarchical supervision by a European manager, for overseeing techniques and for supposed 'disciplining'. Discipline implied working at the hours set by the Mission, prioritizing the set timings and expected output, and exhibiting productivity and industriousness for hard work. Deviation from this behaviour, such as different perceptions of time, lateness or low productivity was denounced as laziness by the missionaries. Additionally, the workers were expected to attend prayers regularly, considered a marker of their diligence and honesty. In the industrial establishments, work began daily with a prayer in the morning by the Superintendent, the Lay Brother in-charge or by his "native maistry" or the Indian convert who was Assistant to the Superintendent (BGEM 1873: 70).

The Mission associated qualities of thrift and industriousness with regular prayers and church-going. This was evident in the ways the Mission perceived work of weavers financially independent from the Mission. The 1903 annual report (BGEM 1903: 61) recounted favorably an instance when one of the converts set up his own weaving establishment where morning and evening prayers were held regularly. Simultaneously, the report mentions that in Cannanore, the church-members who were employed in private weaving establishments were irregular in their attendance in church and had become 'lazy and indifferent' to God. The same report later affirms that for the Mission, "the relations between the industrial department and the spiritual department are and should always be" intricate and close (BGEM 1903: 71).

One of the reasons for this association was that the missionaries assumed that spiritual activities could 'maintain peace', implying that workers' spirituality would deviate them from challenging the Mission. During the famine year of 1900 for instance, Mr. Risch, the missionary in-charge of the station Honnavar, reported that the converts had accepted Christian faith after "some disturbers of peace" left the congregation,

perhaps referring to members not readily conforming to the missionaries' prescribed way of life. Therefore, he remarked that when weavers felt the impact of the famine and had to wait for their wages, they did not complain or protest (BGEM 1900: 67).[12] Faith was thus used to push compliance to the needs and expectations of the Mission. Additionally, the 'disturbance' element might have signified resistance against late payment of wages. The short reports of the missionaries about these instances were meant to present a favorable picture to the readers of the reports in order to maintain donations, but at the same time obscures information about the composition and motivation of the workers. Hence, much remains to be unpacked in such passing references.

Yet, imposition of worktime or expectation to attend prayers was not always accepted by the workers. The Mission saw the economic opportunities for the converts as an assistance rather than a 'right'. That is, the industries were considered a philanthropic endeavor to 'civilize' the converts into Christianity, for which the employees had to be grateful. The annual report for the year 1898 includes a short report to Mr. H. Kühner, Superintendent of the Industrial Mission at Calicut and its branches at Codacal and Palghat. 1896-1898 were famine years in most areas of the Indian subcontinent, impacting all livelihoods including the industries of the Basel Mission. The Superintendent of Establishments in the south of Malabar reported that the Weaving Establishments were particularly hit by the distress during the year, leading to reduced work hours and consequently less earnings by the workers. His statement below reflects an attitude of the missionaries that viewed labourers and their work as a contribution towards the church first and second to their own livelihoods, whereas for the workers the industries were potentially a deserved right as part of the conversion, viewing their work primarily for subsistence.

> …Such as are Christ's own will be drawn nearer to Him by the troubles of this life and to all of them an opportunity was given to become more thankful for all the assistance they had received so abundantly through many years. It was often very painful to see, how so many of our people looked upon the work and help, given to them by the Mission, as a right (BGEM 1898: 116).

Disruptions such as famines exposed the priorities of the workers vis a vis their missionary employers. For example, the annual report for

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[12] The Indian subcontinent witnessed a series of famines (1873-74, 1876-78, 1896-97, 1899-1901, and various scarcities) caused by a combination of harvest failures, export of grain and prioritizing cash crops, heavy taxation policies of the British government in India, poor management of relief when famine conditions were suspected, among other reasons.

1891 included an account from Mr. F. Stierlen, Manager of the Weaving Establishment in Mangalore, who acknowledged that the weavers found it difficult to survive the distress due to high prices, but assumed that "they *must have been the more thankful* (*sic*; italics mine) to have found regular employment in the establishment" (BGEM 1891: 36). This reflected the attitude of the missionaries towards converts, the belief in having saved the so-called heathen, generally poor and often of disadvantaged caste, for which the indigenous had to express thankfulness and conformity to norms. Moreover, prayer served as a way of keeping workers from retaliation and instead redirecting their efforts to the upkeep of the Mission. The following account from the Weaving Establishment at Chombala station attests to this argument:

> Owing to stagnation of trade, the working time had to be reduced to five hours a day for two months; consequently many of the weavers found it hard to make both ends meet. But they learned to pray, and when better times came they did not forget to pay their thank-offerings to God, contributing more than Rs. 300 towards their church expenses, the mission and other benevolent objects (BGEM 1891: 66-67).

During conditions such as famines and general economic distress, the Mission attempted to support the weavers in their congregation through relief funds collected in Germany and Switzerland. According to the 1878 report addressing the distress during 1876-1878 Madras famine, in Bettigerry and Hubli the weavers received advances from the Mission for buying thread, who then bought the finished product and sent it to the Mercantile Establishment for sale (BGEM 1878: 23-24). The plan eventually did not succeed due to competition from other producers in the region. But, the report also places blame on the workers for the failure of this measure, claiming that the weavers were dishonest "…who by several tricks endeavoured to sell inferior cloth as good". The same report reiterates the poor quality of the woven products without explicating the reasons behind the quality of cloth (BGEM 1878:31). In the same statement, it is noted that weavers attempted to join Roman Catholics in the hope of receiving more assistance from them but without success. It is possible that the advances given by the Mission may not have been sufficient for purchase of thread or part of the advance may have been used by the weavers for addressing distress of the family. The 1894 report includes an account by Mr. Frohnmeyer, a missionary from Germany in-charge of the Tellicherry station, that sheds light on this aspect. Frohnmeyer reported that "…most, if not all, of our weavers are indebted to the heathen from whom they buy their provisions" (BGEM 1894: 49). He claimed that the weavers were forced to "buy all their provisions at a disadvantage and to accept goods of inferior

quality or insufficient measure at high prices". Therefore, the allegation of weavers' dishonesty by the missionaries appears to not acknowledge the wider chain of indebtedness that the Mission was unable to break.

The missionaries' bias of Indians being inherently 'lazy' fed into its narrative of workers being dishonest and dependent upon the Mission for providing work. The annual report for the year 1897 further includes an account from an Indian pastor called St. Chandran's from Cannanore who lamented the demand of weavers for receiving higher wages, "… But I cannot refrain from saying, that some set their hope entirely on the Weaving Establishment and seek by far more the wages there than the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (73-74). In 1854, Haller also complained about Balmatta mill workers' dissatisfaction with their wages, calling their demand 'arrogance' (*Jahresbericht* 1854: 10-11; quoted in Fischer 1978: 142). It was also reported that those who were 'skillful and diligent' could earn more wages that they could not imagine in their previous circumstances.

The latter claim that the wages paid to the weavers were generous in comparison with prevailing conditions in the market was based on the fact that employees were pieceworkers. Rennstich (1985: 121) noted that as per Haller's estimates the average income of a weaver in early 1850s was about 4-4 ½ Rupees a month, rising to a maximum of 5-6 Rupees. Haller expected higher wages for converts once mechanization was introduced. Wittwer (2012: 44) however points out that in 1857, weavers were still being paid piece rates, that is, they were paid according to the outturn of work. The Mission claimed that even the 'generous' piece rate was not accepted by the workers, " …a few lazy people who always complain because they are not paid according to time but according to work…" (*Jahresbericht* 1856: 5, quoted in Fischer 1978: 144). Payment by piece rate were intended to increase productivity while keeping costs low. The intention of the Mission was to ensure that the industries had no loss but generated profit.

The 1872 annual report stated the average earning of a weaver employed by the Mission to be about 9 Rupees per month (BGEM 1872: 48), which rose to about 12-15 Rupees a month by 1909 (BGEM 1909: 71). According to Fischer (1978, quoted in Raghaviah 2018: 142), until 1882 the Mission's factories paid weavers higher wages than the prevailing rate. But after the separation of the industrial branch of the Mission from the BHG in 1882, it was considered incompatible with market principles to pay higher wages to converts in the Mission's factories (Raghaviah 2018: 142). By comparison, a weaver of ordinary cotton in Tamil Nadu would earn about 11-12 rupees per month in 1925-1927; while fine cotton or silk might earn them between 26-30 rupees (Roy 1999). In comparison with other regions, the average

wage seems to be indeed 12-15 rupees in 1920s which was comparable to the wages of a field labourer or an unskilled non-agricultural labourer (Roy 1999). Since much of coarse weaving in rural areas was usually a part-time employment for agricultural workers, perhaps the earnings per month could be more, depending upon class and proximity to urban areas (*ibid.*: 67-68). While there is no data available for the Malabar Coast, the rates of wages in other areas give the impression that the wages given by the Mission were according to market rates in the early 20th century and not necessarily much more generous, and perhaps instead could make the converted weaver worse off since they were not allowed to take up a second employment to supplement wages.

Moreover, any deviation from the prescribed norms was viewed by the missionaries with disdain and imposition of strict regulation of work. For the workers, the industrial establishments represented work as any other, which also meant that deviating from rules at workplace was less about religious compliance than about financial need. Frohnmeyer (C-113: 8) noted that converts still ran into debts despite the Mission considering its wages to be plentiful, which might imply that the Mission's wages, even if higher than those provided elsewhere in the region as claimed, were still insufficient for the workers given fluctuating costs of living. However, Frohmeyer blames laziness or lack of exertion and "leading a careless" life as reasons for this.[13] Similarly, in a letter to the Committee of the *Evangelische Missions-Gesellschaft* in Basel dated 21 October 1880, a missionary named Julius Sieg in Calicut reported about the difficulty of "keeping the appetites of our workers (?) under control who are disturbed by all the desirable things they have to deal with" (BMA C-01,072).[14] At the same time, he observed that the people in the region were poor, but there is little information in the letter about the wages and conditions of work for the weavers. These examples show that the missionaries assumed Indian converts to be unused to work, thereby justifying control over workers. In another case, Sieg described how an old weaver skipped work to care for his ill wife, but was then convinced by Sieg that the expense of a nurse offset the financial trouble of leaving work altogether. His conviction was that most people were in need of supervision and guidance in order to work diligently. Supervision in this particular case nevertheless meant intervention in the private sphere of the converts.

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[13] One of the concerns expressed by Frohmeyer was that at times both the man and the woman needed to work, leaving infants in the care of non-Christian relatives, which made the Mission consider setting up infant schools as part of an 'interior mission'.

[14] Thanks are due to Ahmet Koeken for transcription of old German handwriting.

Furthermore, the missionaries sought to dictate hierarchical modes of supervision in its industrial establishments. J. Ostermeyer, one of the missionaries in-charge of the weaving and mercantile establishments of Calicut, wrote to the Committee of the *Evangelische Missions-Gesellschaft* in Basel on 19 January 1881 that the foreman of the weaving mill had "lost all authority and sometimes let the apprentices treat him like their equals", implying that the Mission desired a hierarchical, supervisory relationship, which was not always possible in practice (BMA C-01,072). He continued to describe how the foreman had to be dismissed from work when they found out that "he had already falsified the bill for several months by having one to two rupees paid out to him each week than he had to claim…". The dismissal of the foreman, Ostermeyer claimed, had served as a disciplinary example because "…not only in the old master himself, who has bowed and been shaken out of his sleep of sin, but also in weavers in general on whom this action has exercised a very salutary terror". Frequent instances of disputes with European managers demonstrates that the time and manner of working differed between European missionaries and Indian labourers, the latter challenging the imposition of strict supervision.

Hence, supervision was not uncontested. Tensions between workers and industry brothers over stern discipline are exemplified by the management of the Balmatta mill in Mangalore by Thomas Digel, who succeeded Haller in 1865. The evangelical *Heidenbote*, the Basel Mission's newsletter which started in 1828 for European readers, published a report by Digel dated 9 July 1866 on how a day at the Mangalore weaving mill in Balmatta was spent (*Heidenbote* 1866: 145-147).[15] It exalted Digel's own role in supervising each aspect of production. The mill had about 90 workers, 48 males and 40 females (*Heidenbote* 1867: 138). It had been in existence for 18 years and had 52 looms (*Heidenbote* 1866: 112). He reported that the work started very early, and due to heavy rain only six to ten workers came to work that day. Since many lived far from the weaving mill, Digel was unable to insist on workers coming on time during rainy season. Female workers worked to spool threads for warping, something they could do along with their housework. The 'better' female workers, implying either those females producing more output and/or those conforming to mission discipline, were paid 1 Rupee and 6 *annas* per week,[16] which according to Digel was higher than those who earned a daily wage. Monday, the day

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[15] Digel was a weaver from Neuffen, Württemberg. My gratitude to Christoph Hawlitschek for transcribing.

[16] 1 Rupee = 16 annas.

of the report, was the day that workers received their wages. Monday was chosen as the day of payment instead of Saturday, the last working day of the week, because Sunday would be the day of 'temptations' to spend the wage, whereas on Monday they could "still have the full wages for their maintenance in their hands". Digel mentioned how 'industrious' workers' output per day was to finish a large piece of two smaller ones of *dhodhra* (traditional clothing worn around the body by men) cloth measuring between 5-8 English cubits. Then the goods had to be delivered in the afternoon. He ensured that each item was measured, weighed and registered so that "the workers are not so easily tempted to dishonesty". Digel gave each weaver a notebook to enter all information about delivery and wages, which he could then tally later with his records and investigate any errors.

Digel introduced various measures in the weaving mill at Balmatta that caused discontent among the workers. Fischer (1978: 145) notes that the *Jahresbericht* had more frequent mentions of disciplinary problems with the workers once Digel took over. Two of the measures are of note. One was the introduction of a roll call during the morning Christian prayers. The Weaving Establishment began work every day with morning prayer conducted one week by Digel and the following week by his assistant Leonhard Shiri (BGEM 1872: 49). The pieceworkers had so far been exempt, but the measure was supposedly introduced to control absenteeism (Fischer 1978: 145).[17] The Mission expected working hours to be between 7 a.m. to 12 noon and 2 p.m. to 6 in the evening. Digel introduced a measure according to which the workers had to gather at 7 a.m. for work, including a prayer service held right before 7.30 a.m., failing which they were fined 1 *anna* (*Jahresbericht* 1870-1872: 8, quoted in Fischer 1978: 146). This incident substantiates the argument about industriousness, hard work and spirituality being intertwined in the Mission's perspective. Another measure that Digel introduced was to introduce a set hour for lunch between 1-2 p.m. The workers resisted against this, since everyone had a different personal situation. Some would go home for lunch, others would have someone bring their food, but at timings convenient to the family members. Since Digel was not fluent in the local language, he had to postpone the decision by six months (*Heidenbote* 1867: 138). He then held a meeting with some older workers to negotiate, after which the hour between 1 and 2 p.m. was set for eating (Wittwer 2012: 41).

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[17] Fischer 1978 deals with issues of supervision and discipline in the Mission's industries from a strictly economic perspective.

The result was that in the years between 1872-1874, the profits and production rates showed an upward trend. At the same time, cost of living had increased over the years, leading to pieceworkers working harder (Fischer 1978). However, since this period was without increase in wages, the yearly report of 1878-1880 noted that many of the workers were under debt (Fischer 1978: 147). This impacted the situation in the mill. Since some workers would still arrive late, the roll call would take place after the prayer service instead of before, but Digel would close the door several times during the service which was not taken well by the workers (*Jahresbericht* 1882-84: 6-7, quoted in Fischer 1978: 147). In the early 1880s the discontent culminated in a strike by the weavers lasting a few days during which only the apprentices came to work. The situation was resolved through the mediation of the missionaries from Mangalore (*Jahresbericht* 1882-84: 6-7, quoted in Fischer 1978: 147). After some discussions within the Mission evaluating the situation, it was acknowledged that the measures introduced by Digel were too strict and contentious. Eventually, Digel resigned from his position from the management of the mill in 1884-1885 (Fischer 1978: 148). His management of the Weaving Establishment nevertheless demonstrates that obtaining profit from weaving led to coercive work conditions, which were regularly challenged by the workers.

Conclusion

The setting up of industries has been framed as a philanthropic endeavor in the Basel Mission's sources. The factories, once established, had to at least avoid losses if not produce profit. Therefore, any shortage of labour meant that the industries were opened up to non-converts in the area. In this sense, the Mission's industries followed the logic of capitalism, and mission stations were a way of retaining and attracting converts. This paper demonstrated how the allegations of laziness by the missionaries led to hierarchical management of the Weaving Establishment mills and at times over-disciplining of the workforce. The resulting contentions signified a different approach and method between the European missionaries and the Indian workers. The Mission's supervisory approach was informed by its stereotypes about Indian 'laziness'. The 'industry brothers' insisted on gratefulness and prioritizing the mission as well as complementing work with prayer, while the workers considered employment and fair wages a deserved right meant primarily to earn a livelihood. As a result, the Indian workers contested the missionaries' approach and negotiated their demands. It is thus important to challenge the narrative presented in the Basel Mission's sources about the necessarily positive intention and impact of their industries on the local population.

If one were to view Basel Mission's industries as not only a way to convert but also to settle the financial issues of the Mission itself, then it can be argued that profit-making and cost-cutting could also impact working conditions in the factories. On part of the workers, cases where conversions were refused, or the mission and its industrial work was abandoned were not uncommon, showing that the Mission's economic opportunities were not attractive enough to forego personal tradition or daily habits. The same could be argued for modes and times of working in the establishments. Demands of the workers and any consequent conflict with missionaries were exacerbated in times of famines. The claim of generosity of the Mission's wages is also open to question. These issues enabled solidarities on common problems among workers, who often came from similar backgrounds.

Missionaries were important agents in the exchange of imperial ideology, western superiority and colonial capitalist institutions to those they considered unexposed civilizations. This is not to deny that indigenous agents were important in the conversion process, in fact Basel Mission depended upon them extensively. The role of 'industry brothers' is also peculiar in evidencing its capitalist approach. The presence of Swiss or German 'industry brothers' and missionaries in India represented their entrepreneurial motivations as much religious ones. They were thus not devoid of urges to pursue profit in the increasingly globalizing world of the nineteenth century.

Switzerland as a 'nation' may not formally have had an empire, but it does not discount the fact that its 'citizens' had their own versions of expansionist impulses. Studies have already shown that Swiss society contributed to and was impacted by material sustenance of empires through trade, as well as ideologies of racism, civilizations and colonialism.[18] In addition to this historiography, this paper demonstrated that non-British, continental European actors and institutions profited from the spaces and opportunities opened up by "British" imperial rule. Moreover, these actors were complicit in imposing Protestant work-ethics that complied with liberal approach to colonial governance of indigenous labour in the colonies. In fact, the disciplinary measures of the managers in the Mission's industries were comparable to coeval weaving factories. Yet, the power of these actors was not limitless – on the contrary, it was constantly contested. Labourers used the contradictions between the moral and the economic demands of the Basel Mission to negotiate their own demands. Lastly,

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[18] See David and Etemad 1998; Eichenberger 2022; Purtschert *et al.* 2016; Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015.

given the continental European origin of the Missionaries, this paper is not only relevant to historiographies of labour resistance and weaving in colonial South Asia, but to a still largely unwritten connected history of (liberal-)bourgeois labour regimes in Protestant German speaking Europe, Britain and colonial India.

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