Akshardhara Research Journal
Single Blind Peer-Reviewed & Refereed International Research Journal
E ISSN -3048-8095 / SJIF Impact- 5.16 / October 2026/ Special Issue 05 Volume I

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Church Institutions as Inland Routes of Cultural Exchange in Colonial Ahmednagar District

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DOI. https://doi-ds.org/doilink/10.2026-96518286/ARJ/2026/V1/SI05/101026A003

Abstract
The paper examines how, in the nineteenth century, Christian missionary organizations expanded throughout the inland Ahmednagar district of the Bombay Presidency (modern-day Ahilyanagar). In India, coastal areas and maritime trade routes are frequently highlighted in Christian histories. This study, on the other hand, examines the interior of the Deccan to understand how Christianity spread through common institutional networks as opposed to ports and trade. The study highlights how churches, schools, and welfare centres significantly influenced local social life by drawing on missionary reports, district records, and existing research on caste and religion in colonial Maharashtra. These establishments served as more than just centres of worship, and also served as places for employment, aid with food, education, and new kinds of social interactions. Missionaries and local communities engaged in daily interactions through regular contact in congregations, classrooms, and relief efforts. Therefore, rather than a sudden religious transition, conversion was quite methodical and pragmatic. Dalit communities, who interacted with these institutions for material and social reasons, are given special attention in this paper. Mission centres developed into crucial hubs of networking and support in an agrarian district characterized by dispersed villages, inadequate infrastructure, and sporadic shortages. They connected people living in rural areas to larger networks of resources and ideas. This viewpoint builds in our comprehension of how caste dynamics and local society were impacted by religious change outside of the coastal centers of western India.
***Keywords**: Missionary Networks; Cultural Exchange; Dalit Christians; Christianity in Maharashtra; Church Institutions*

Introduction

Introduction of Christianity in India has mostly been linked to Portuguese imperial expansion and marine channels, which made coastal areas like Goa, Cochin, and Calicut centres of missionary activity and settlement (Neill 1984: 87-93). Despite the importance of paying attention to these areas, it frequently portrays them primarily as political and commercial routes for the spread of religious ideologies. Although these approaches have produced valuable insights, they run the risk of ignoring inland areas where Christianity spread through slower, institutionally embedded processes rather than just commercial trade routes. This paper therefore explores that these institutions functioned not merely as sites of worship but as spaces of sustained interaction between missionaries and local communities. Rather than treating conversion as a singular religious act, this paper tried to explore everyday institutional encounters. It also argues that mission schools, churches, and welfare activities created repeated and routine forms of engagement through which Christianity entered local social life and how Dalit communities encountered Christianity primarily through these institutional spaces.

Ahmednagar and the Colonial Interior

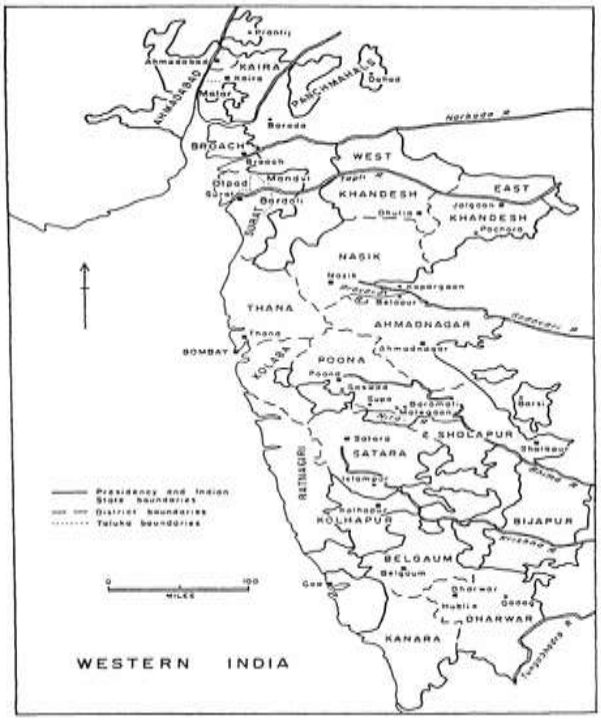
As an inland administrative, military, and agricultural area, the Ahmednagar district held an important position in the Bombay Presidency during the nineteenth century. The area, which is located on the Deccan plateau, is far from important sea lanes, but it is connected to coastal hubs by road networks that connect Bombay to the western Indian heartland. Its semi-arid climate, seasonal rainfall, and primarily agrarian economy centred on village settlements were the defining features of its terrain (Government of Bombay 1884).

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During the Maratha era, Ahmednagar was a part of a larger political environment run by the Peshwa, where caste hierarchy and agrarian ties played a major role in social life. However, after the Peshwa's defeat in 1818, the British East India Company took control of the region (Hiraman 2022). This administrative restructuring transformed the district's governance from traditional Maratha patterns to modern colonial frameworks. Post-1818 restructuring of Ahmednagar not only changed the district's political structure but also drastically shifted its social and religious environment. By 1831, the American Board had successfully transformed Ahmednagar district into a key location for inland proselytization by establishing a permanent mission station there, exceeding its initial coastal area in Bombay (Pathak 1964: 56-59).

However, the success and strategies of this institutional expansion into this area was highly dependent on the pre-existing social structures in the area. As a result, the mission's interactions with the local population were influenced by the demographic, geographic composition of Ahmednagar in the nineteenth century.



Source: Ian Catanach, Rural Credit in Western India (Berkeley, 1970), reproduced in D. Hall-Matthews, Famine Process and Famine Policy (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2002).

The devastating famines of 1896-1900 turned these mission stations into the main locations of international aid; as Pathak points out, the mission's establishment in the Deccan interior offered the essential 'permanent footing' for large-scale social engagement, which Joanna Simonow claims enabled the American Marathi Misson to rise to the forefront of US-sponsored famine assistance. Missionaries efficiently converted their spiritual stations into logistical hubs for food distribution and orphanages by leveraging the same routes and administrative networks that connected Ahmednagar to the rural interior. This transition marked a significant shift in the district's 'institutional routes,' as the mission's role grew beyond religious activities to onboarding landless labourers mainly Dalits and other marginalized people throughout these periods for their labour (Pathak 1964: 56-59; Simonow 2022: 1-4).

Ahmednagar's selection as a missionary base must therefore be understood as the result of several factors, including its incorporation into the colonial administrative framework after 1818, its geographical proximity to surrounding villages, and its social composition, which is characterized by widespread educational exclusion. The missionary movement from Bombay to the Deccan interior was not coincidental but rather guided by opportunities offered by colonial administration and the evident receptiveness of inland communities. By the mid-nineteenth century, these factors had resulted in a network of missionary institutions throughout western Maharashtra. Schools, churches, and charity projects built in the interior district of Ahmednagar provided major channels for Christianity to spread beyond coastal areas, integrating itself in local realities.

Missionary Institutions and Inland Expansion

While the previous section centred on the district's physical geography and demographic makeup, this section will look at how Ahmednagar, as an inland agrarian hub, became the specific ‘routes’ via which missionaries and Christian culture integrated the region into a larger civil-society context. From 1818 onwards, Protestant missions, particularly the American and Scottish boards, acquired a prominent presence in the Deccan interior, guided by a program that

emphasized the establishment of a broad vernacular school system (Simonow 2022).

The American Marathi Mission became one of the most powerful Protestant groups in the Bombay Presidency, owing to its strategic emphasis on the Marathi-speaking interior. The 1847 Bible translation and adaptation of local devotional melodies helped to establish a 'Marathi Christian' identity (Tschurenev 2019). By developing this system, Protestant missions transformed the social geography of the Deccan by building schools in areas with little government presence, transforming isolated rural villages into interconnected nodes of a growing colonial educational network. This helped to establish the mission's presence in the district's cultural life. In this perspective, schooling was considered not only as a prelude to conversion, but also as a long-term tool of social reform.

Along with American Marathi Mission, the pedagogical atmosphere for Ahmednagar district was further influenced by Scottish missionaries, which focused on schooling and teacher training to the region. Despite having a lower institution in Ahmednagar region than its American counterparts, the Scottish model of education shared a Protestant belief in their curriculum. This shared ideological platform between American and Scottish Protestants formed a unified front of educational action aimed at redefining the intellectual life of the Deccan. The new institutional network connected these inland areas to larger transatlantic evangelical and social reform movements (Strong 1910).

This method successfully developed a class of local teachers and intermediates who played crucial roles. These institutions became a 'contact zone' where Western pedagogical methods intersected with the socioeconomic ambitions of the local community (Pathak 1964: 67-72).

The strategy of Catholic missionary effort was distinct from that of Protestant missionaries. Catholic institutions have historically been more deeply established along the western coast, remaining highly concentrated in regions like Kerala, Goa and the North Konkan that have had a long history of Portuguese influence. Due to the absence of the network of vernacular schools that was prominent among Protestant missions, Catholic penetration into inland districts such as Ahmednagar remained relatively limited during the nineteenth century (Neill 1984: 234-240; Pathak 1964: 354-358).

As a result, Protestant denominations played a significant role in Ahmednagar's social and educational reforms. While caste inequalities persisted in these settings, the ‘institutional’ approach provided a rare possibility for engagement across traditional social barriers.

Everyday Institutional Encounters

Even with these societal barriers, the missionary schools and churches in Ahmednagar served as interconnected institutional centres through which Christianity infiltrated everyday social life. These establishments of institutions, unlike with occasional preaching or short-term evangelistic programs, established long-term patterns of contact that influenced societal practices.

By distributing food or material relief during emergencies, holding regular prayer assemblies, and keeping attendance records, mission institutions became embedded in everyday village life. In addition, a unique teaching approach, which was uncommon at the time, introduced Marathi reading and basic numeracy to the historically disadvantaged people seeking education at these institutions (Tschurenev 2019: 87- 90).

These populations' regular involvement in mission organizations frequently mirrored practical factors like their availability to material support and literacy, which are otherwise prohibited in a caste society. This indicates that integrating religion into daily activities was a gradual and negotiated process.

Caste, Institutions, and Dalit Engagement

In the Ahmednagar district, Dalit experiences with Christianity were influenced by ongoing interaction with mission institutions. The pragmatism of these encounters was deeply influenced by the specific socio-economic positions of different groups.

Say within the Dalits, the Mahars were by far the largest group interacting with the American Marathi Mission. The Mangs and Chambhars, who belonged to the Dalit castes and were

frequently more economically reliant on village crafts like leatherworking and ropemaking, engaging more in skill-related institutions (Government of Bombay 1884: 60-65).

The 'Counter-Public' space that mission schools and wells offered Mahars actively contested Brahmanical hegemony. Since the mission offered egalitarian resources before the official Dalit movements of the 20th century, these interactions can be seen as early stirrings of Dalit intellectual agency (Zelliot 2005: 35-52).

Participation in Christian institutions frequently coexisted with continued involvement in local devotional traditions. This pragmatism is most visible in practices that blurred the boundaries between belief and social practice. The popularity of the Haregaon Mat Mauli (Mt. Mary) yatra illustrates how Christian sacred spaces became incorporated into local religious life as sites of pilgrimage (Ghadage 2015: 92). This showcases that Dalit religious life in colonial India was often plural and situational.

Future Scope of Study

The work of Protestant missions is well-documented, but a more detailed archival reconstruction of individual 'village stations' and smaller local-led congregations would shed light on how these ‘routes’ operated at the most remote levels. Furthermore, further ethnographic research is needed to track the emergence of syncretic practices and discover how Christian sacred places were integrated into larger regional devotional communities.

Conclusion

This paper argued that missionary organizations in colonial Ahmednagar served as interior routes of cultural interchange that allowed Christianity to penetrate daily social interactions outside of the realms of trade mobility and maritime trade. By placing Ahmednagar in the context of the political shift that followed 1818, the article discussed how Ahmednagar's geography, population, and administrative restructuring all worked together to create an environment that was favorable to the establishment of institutional forms of religious participation. The social realities of caste-based discrimination, colonial rule, and infrastructure access all shaped missionary expansion into the area. This approach contributes to broader discussions on religion, mobility, and cultural exchange by demonstrating how religious movements reshaped local social worlds through everyday institutional practices.

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