

The mission in India

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In 1834, the Basel Mission began work on the Malabar coast of southwestern India, in the region of Mangalore, then part of the British Madras Presidency. It expanded along the coast and into the interior, to Kerala and Karnataka, founding churches, schools and institutions in a region where Hindu, Muslim and older Christian communities lived side by side.¹

In India, the mission faced a particular problem. Converts to Christianity from Hindu families often lost their caste, their family support and their livelihood, which left them in need of new means of subsistence. The mission responded by founding industrial enterprises that employed converts: weaving establishments, printing presses, carpentry workshops and, most successfully, tile factories. The first tile factory was founded in Mangalore in 1865. The red clay tiles it produced, known as Mangalore tiles, became one of the most characteristic building materials of southern India, used on houses, churches and public buildings throughout the region.²

The weaving establishments of the mission produced textiles for local sale and for export. One of their products has become part of the global vocabulary of clothing. According to a widely repeated tradition, a Basel Mission weaver in Mangalore, John Haller, developed in the mid-nineteenth century a dye that produced the brownish colour known as khaki, which the British army adopted for its uniforms in India.³ Although the attribution is disputed and khaki cloth was produced in several places, the tradition shows the significance that the mission industries acquired in the economy of southern India.

1 Notes

1. On the Basel Mission in South India (from 1834, Mangalore and the Malabar coast), see the literature on the history of the Basel Mission in India. To be verified. ↩
2. On the tile factories of the Basel Mission in Mangalore (from 1865) and the Mangalore tile, see the literature on the Basel Mission industries in India. To be verified. ↩
3. On the tradition that the khaki dye was developed at the Basel Mission weaving establishment in Mangalore by John Haller in the mid-nineteenth century, see the literature on the Basel Mission industries; the attribution is disputed and to be verified. ↩

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