

Krzysztof Jacek Bekieszcuk

ORCID: 0000-0003-2281-3830
University of Wrocław

Ines G. Županov, *Jesuit Missions in Coastal and South India (1543–1773): Between Mission and Empire* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2025), 133 pp.

The monograph by Ines G. Županov, *Jesuit Missions in Coastal and South India (1543–1773): Between Mission and Empire*, published in 2025 as part of the series *Brill Research Perspectives in Jesuit Studies* (vol. 23), offers a synthetic account of the history of Jesuit missions in coastal and South India from the mid-sixteenth century until the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773. The author, affiliated with the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, attempts a comprehensive treatment of a phenomenon that has most often been addressed in a fragmentary manner in the historiography – either within the framework of colonial history or in studies of Catholic missionary activity. The volume comprises 133 pages and is available in both print and electronic formats. Despite its relatively modest length, it represents an ambitious attempt to present a multifaceted account of Jesuit activity in a region that played a crucial role in the early modern globalization of Christianity.

The primary aim of the study is to trace the development and transformations of Jesuit missions in India from the arrival of Francis Xavier in Goa in 1543 to the suppression of the order by Pope Clement XIV in 1773. Županov seeks to demonstrate the complexity of missionary processes unfolding within the context of intense interactions between European

colonial empires and the local social and religious structures of the Indian subcontinent. Particular attention is devoted to the tension between evangelizing activity and colonial interests, especially Portuguese and French, showing that Jesuit missions operated in a space where religion, politics, and economy were inextricably intertwined. At the same time, the author reflects on the transformation of Christianity from a religion firmly rooted in European cultural practices into a global religion capable of adapting to diverse cultural and social contexts. One of the central interpretative premises of the study is the understanding of missions as a kind of cultural laboratory in which new forms of religious identity were shaped and existing social categories reinterpreted. Missionaries operating in South India were required to navigate continuously between the expectations of European ecclesiastical institutions and the realities of local societies, characterized by complex caste structures and diverse religious traditions. In this context, Županov convincingly argues that Jesuit activity did not consist merely in the straightforward transfer of European models of religiosity, but rather in the creation of new forms of Christian practice emerging from a process of negotiation between doctrinal norms and local social conditions.

The structure of the volume is synthetic in character and is organized into seven chapters, which guide the reader from a theoretical introduction to an analysis of specific aspects of missionary activity. The introduction establishes the chronological and methodological framework of the study and introduces the key analytical concepts employed throughout the book. The following chapter is devoted to the historiography of Jesuit missions, tracing the evolution of scholarly approaches from early apologetic narratives to more recent interpretations informed by global history and postcolonial studies. Subsequent chapters focus on particular issues related to the functioning of the missions, including relations between Church and state within the Portuguese system of royal patronage (*padroado*), missionary activity at religious and cultural frontiers, the development of French Jesuit missions in Puducherry, and the Jesuits' contribution to the expansion of scientific knowledge about India. The final chapter addresses the suppression of the order and subsequent attempts to revive missionary activity.

One of the central arguments of the book is that Jesuit missions in South India constituted an important model of apostolic activity that influenced missionary strategies employed in other parts of the world. The author demonstrates that the experiences gained in India – particularly in adapting to local cultures and languages – were subsequently applied in Jesuit work in East Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In this

sense, South India may be viewed as a space of pastoral experimentation, in which various evangelizing strategies were tested and refined. In Županov's interpretation, Jesuit missionaries emerge as highly adaptable actors, whose activity may be metaphorically described as that of "spiritual entrepreneurs." This term underscores their ability to make use of existing social and cultural structures in order to extend the reach of Christianity. As they moved further away from the centers of European colonial power, missionaries displayed increasing flexibility in interpreting religious norms, adapting them to local conditions. Such pragmatism was particularly evident in their approach to the caste system, which in many cases was not rejected but rather incorporated into the structures of local Christian communities.

A particularly insightful aspect of the analysis is the interpretation of the process of conversion within the framework of the Indian caste system. Županov demonstrates that the success of many missions, for instance among the Parava fishing communities, resulted from the effective embedding of Christianity within existing social hierarchies. As a result, communities emerged that the author describes as "Christian castes," which retained certain earlier privileges and social distinctions. This phenomenon suggests that conversion did not entail a complete rupture with pre-existing social structures, but rather their partial transformation. An important theme of the study is also the role of the Jesuits as intermediaries in the transfer of knowledge between Europe and Asia. The author emphasizes that missionary activity was closely intertwined with the production of scholarly knowledge, encompassing fields such as linguistics, cartography, botany, and astronomy. Operating in distant regions of Asia, missionaries gathered information on local languages, belief systems, and the natural environment, which was subsequently transmitted to European centers of learning. In this way, Jesuit activity contributed to the emergence of new forms of knowledge about the non-European world, while simultaneously shaping the development of early modern science.

Particular attention is also given to the analysis of jurisdictional tensions between the Portuguese *padroado* system and the Roman Congregation of Propaganda Fide. The conflict between these institutions constituted a persistent feature of the history of Jesuit missions in India, shaping both the organization of missionary work and the relations between missionaries and local ecclesiastical authorities. Županov demonstrates that these disputes were not merely administrative in nature, but also ideological, as they reflected differing conceptions of the role of the Church within the context of European imperial expansion. From

a methodological perspective, the book is conceived as a historical synthesis based on the analysis of a wide range of sources. The author draws on Jesuit correspondence, theological treatises, inquisitorial records, and early modern scholarly works produced by the missionaries themselves. The use of materials in several European languages as well as in Tamil allows for a more nuanced perspective on the phenomena under study. At the same time, Županov combines a historiographical approach with elements of ethnographic analysis, enabling her to capture the relationship between global processes and local forms of social life.

Against the backdrop of contemporary historiography, the book constitutes a significant contribution to the study of Jesuit missions and the processes of globalization in the early modern period. Particularly noteworthy is its departure from a simplified interpretative framework in which missionary activity is portrayed solely as an instrument of European imperialism. Županov advances a more nuanced perspective, in which missionaries emerge as actors operating within a field of tensions between imperial interests and the dynamics of local societies. Such an approach allows for a more refined understanding of the multifaceted nature of contacts between Europe and Asia from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. At the same time, the author draws attention to the significance of Jesuit activity for the development of European knowledge about India. The analysis demonstrates that many early modern conceptions of the history and culture of the subcontinent – including proto-Indological hypotheses – originated in the reflections of missionaries, who sought to interpret local religious traditions through the lens of European intellectual categories.

Despite its many strengths, the publication is not without certain limitations. The author herself acknowledges that the book is intended as a synthetic overview of key issues rather than a fully exhaustive monograph. As a result, some topics are treated rather briefly, particularly in the case of regions for which fewer source materials have survived. The uneven distribution of emphasis means that certain missions – for example in Mysore or the Portuguese missions of the seventeenth century – are discussed in less detail than others. An additional limitation is the relatively modest length of the volume, which constrains the possibility of a more in-depth analysis of many significant issues. Nevertheless, Županov's book remains a valuable and stimulating synthesis that presents Jesuit missions in India as a key component of early modern globalization. The analysis demonstrates that, although the project of fully Christianizing the Indian subcontinent was not realized, Jesuit activity led to the emergence of enduring Christian communities embedded in

local social structures. This legacy survived the suppression of the order and continued in the educational activities of the Jesuits in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Ultimately, the monograph under review presents the encounter between Jesuit missionaries and the cultures of South India as a process whose significance extends beyond the history of religion. It constituted an important moment in the formation of a modern European understanding of Asia, as well as a key stage in the history of global cultural exchanges. By combining a synthetic approach with the analysis of selected case studies, Županov's book offers a valuable contribution for scholars of mission history, global history, and early modern contacts between Europe and Asia.

