

The Protestant legacy: missions and literacy in India

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The Protestant Legacy. Missions and Literacy in India

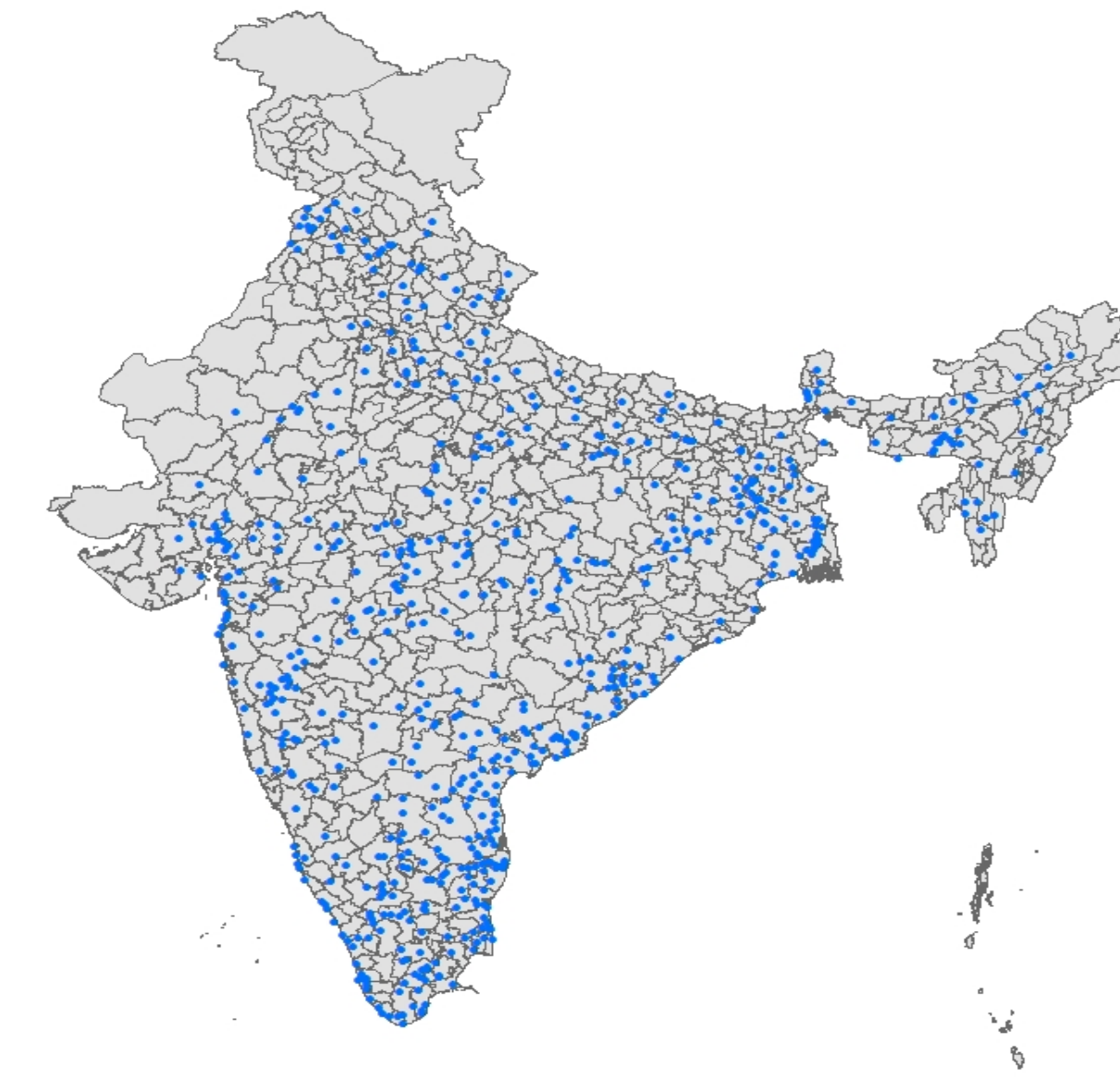
- Federico Mantovanelli -

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the long-term impact of Protestant missions on literacy rates in India. One of the theological pillars of Protestantism is the principle of Sola Scriptura according to which any interpretation of the Bible is not as powerful as the Scripture itself. In the words of Martin Luther “a simple layman armed with the Scripture is more powerful than the mightiest pope without it.” Since the origin of the Reformation, Protestants advocate the individual ability to become closer to God by simply reading the Scripture without the need of any interpretation by clergymen (“The Scripture interprets the Scripture”). Quite obviously, if one wants to read the Bible, one has first to be able to read. Hence the importance given by early Protestants to universal education. The main activity of Protestant missionaries was that to establish schools so to teach the indigenous population to read and introduce them to Christian morals via the reading of the Bible. This happened in India too, where Protestant missions developed from the second half of the 19th century. Combining current district level data and historical information about the location of Protestant missions, I investigate the long-term impact of Protestantism on literacy. Data about the Indian districts’ literacy rates come from the 2001 Census of India. Information concerning the historical location of Protestant missions come from maps contained in the *Statistical Atlas of Christian Missions*.

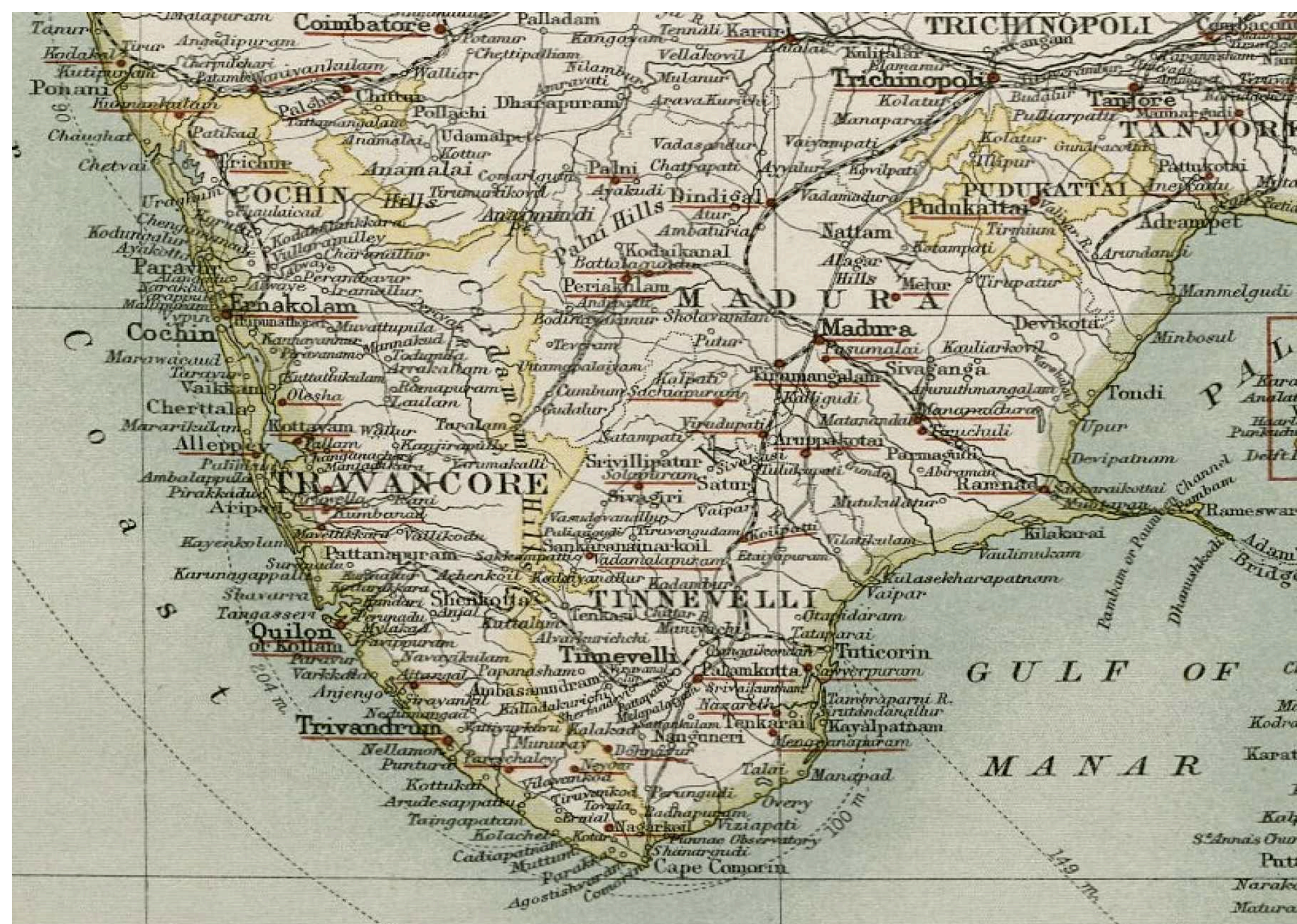
I find that Protestantism has a positive and persistent effect on literacy. Moreover this impact is particularly beneficial for the female population. Through literacy, Protestant missions affect also other aspects of socio-economic development. A larger number of historical Protestant missions determine a decrease in the fertility rate and in the infant mortality rate and an increase of female labor force participation.

Fig. 2: Historical missions in 2001 India’s districts



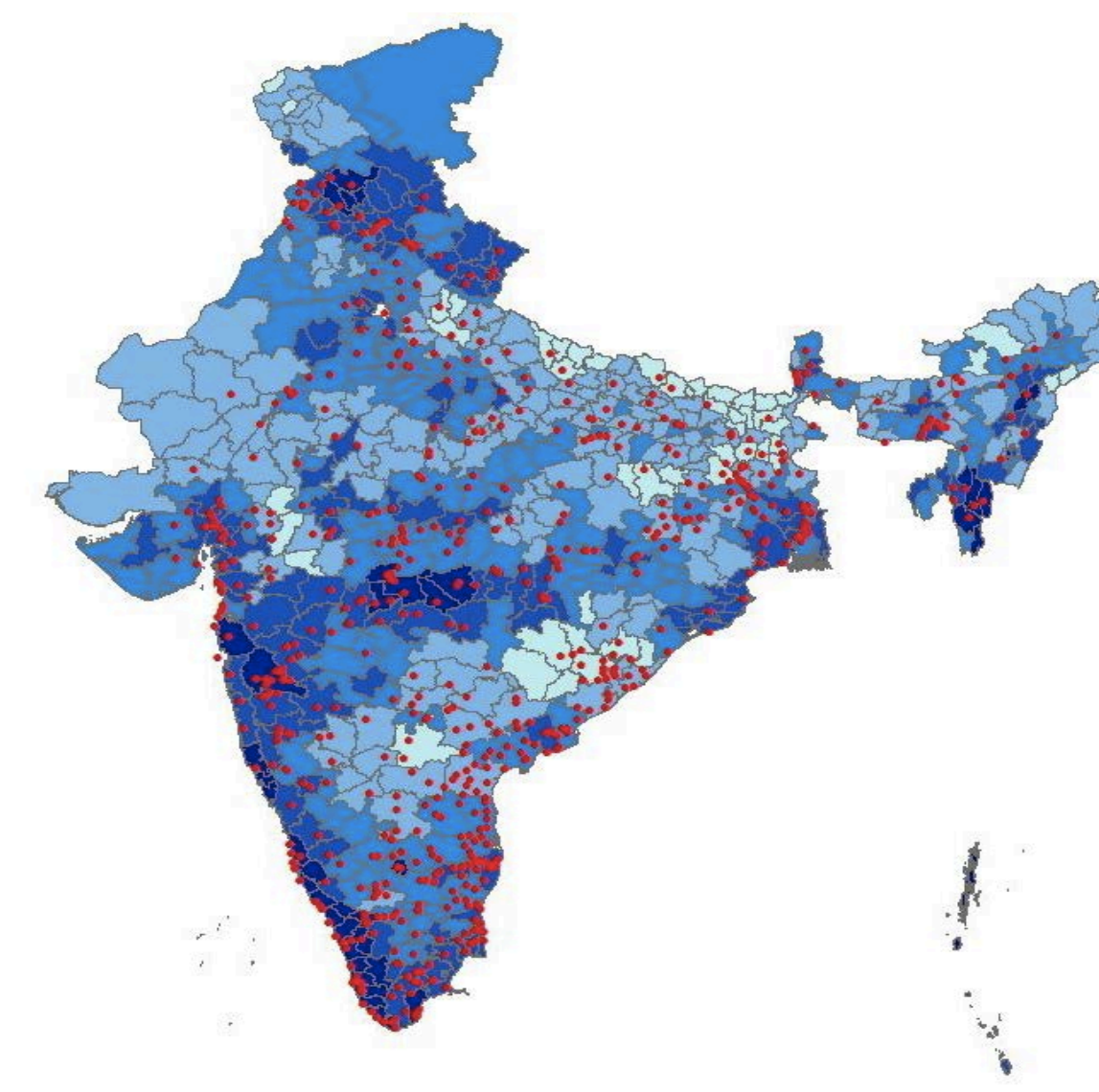
Using geo-referencing techniques I combine the historical maps with an administrative map of India in 2001. That allows me to derive the number of missions in each district’s boundaries

Fig. 1: Protestant Missions in India in 1908



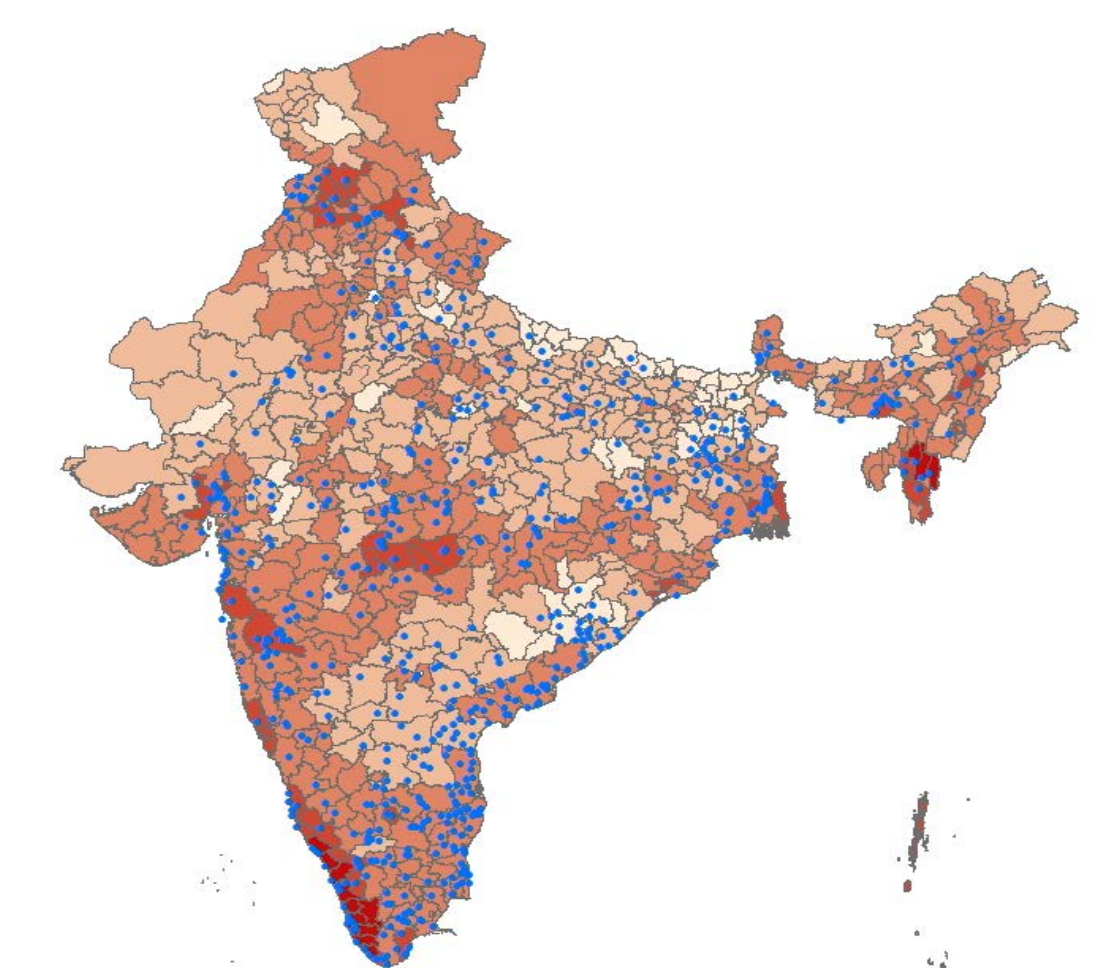
Detail of a map contained in the *Statistical Atlas of Christian Missions* (1910). Towns and villages with a Protestant mission as of 1908 are underlined in red.

Fig. 3: Missions and Total Population Literacy Rate



The location of historical missions is indicated by a red dot. A darker shade of blue indicates that the district has a higher total population literacy rate in 2001.

Fig. 4: Missions and Female Literacy Rate



The location of historical missions is indicated by a blue dot. A darker shade of red indicates that the district has a higher female literacy rate in 2001.