

There were several missionary organisations that were active in 18th- and 19th-century colonial India. These were missions from not only England but also Europe (Germany and the Czech Republic), Scotland, America, Canada and so on. As part of their civilising mission of the Empire, missionaries disseminated their evangelical aims, alongside which they also imparted the learning of domestic skills amongst ladies and girls. In this paper, I will be specifically looking at the learning of the craft of hand-knitting.

Moravian Missionaries, from what is present-day the Czech Republic, were an active missionary element in North India, specifically Ladakh and Tibet. By 1862, the wives of missionaries began to organise knitting classes for the local women (Bray, 1985). Wilhelm Heydes, one of the first Moravian missionary families in the region, set up the first knitting school there (Chodon, 2017). The classes, which included the learning of Bible verses, mainly taught the women to make woolen socks and gloves knitted German-style. The socks were sold elsewhere in the Indian Himalayas, mainly to the British army (Hyede, 2005), and it is said that the women were glad to have an extra source of income. Before long, they were producing 1,100 pairs of socks a year, a sizeable cottage industry by Lahauli standards of the time.

High up in the mountain regions, Ladakh and Uttarakhand, knitting is linked to the rural economy, catering to local needs, making Kangshuk (socks), Langshuk (gloves) and Shia (cap). Sheep and goats are reared to procure wool locally. Their knitting influence can still be observed in the colourful socks hung in bundles and sold in the markets of Lahaul and other hill stations in Northern India (Kaur, 2022). In common parlance, these socks are also referred to as Tibetan or Ladakhi socks. The shape of the sock and rows of intricate patterns - enmeshed with abstract geometric motifs - closely resemble the European Fair Isle patterns.

The paper aims to map these lesser-known contributions of Moravian Missionaries in North India (as opposed to contributions of British missionaries to the craft) and how they propelled a wave of learning of the craft, as witnessed in present-day India. To this end, I will study the disparate archives at Fulneck Museum (Pudsey, UK), Moravian Church Archives (London), Unity Archives (Herrnhut, Germany), and Memorial University (Newfoundland).



Figure 1: Bhotia female, Buddhist, near Lhasa, Tibet. Source: The New York Public Library



Figure 2: The Moravian missionaries' knitting school in Leh, c. 1900. Source: ABU, Herrnhut. In Bray (2019)