

## **Native Assistants as Counter Hegemonic Voice - An Archival Study**

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### **Abstract**

The missionaries from the early eighteenth century toiled tirelessly for the uplift of the marginalized in India. The tools of the missionaries, such as education, health care, freedom from the oppression of slavery and tax, uplift of women, were in combat with the forces that worked against egalitarian and harmonious society. Antonio Gramsci developed the theory of 'cultural hegemony'. The term 'cultural hegemony' describes the domination in a culturally diverse society by the ruling class over the subalterns. The ruling class manipulates the culture of the society – customs, beliefs, practices, values, etc., so that the manipulated culture imposed by the ruling class becomes the accepted cultural norm. The missionaries initially trained the native assistants to be catechists, school-masters and medical evangelists, who served the society. Since the native assistants were accustomed to the culture, beliefs, customs and practices, they were able to influence the natives towards social transformation that would emancipate them from the 'cultural hegemony' that oppressed them. This paper attempts to expose the 'counter-hegemonic' influence of the native assistants with the tenets of Christianity on the dominant 'cultural hegemony' garbed with Indian Culture that oppresses the subalterns, prevailing for ages in the terrain of Indian society.

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**Keywords:** Missionaries, Native Assistants, Cultural Hegemony, Counter Hegemony, Subaltern Emancipation.

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The early eighteenth century saw the rise of Protestant missionary societies in India. The missionaries toiled tirelessly for the uplift of the marginalized in India. Their contribution in various fields was a dawn on the Indian horizon to gradually transform the prevailing darkness into light. The missionaries initially contributed in the lives of the native assistants; the natives who assisted in the personal needs of the missionaries were transformed into native assistants, equipped by the missionaries to serve the society at large.

The native assistants being from among those accustomed to the culture, beliefs, customs and practices, were able to respond to the endeavours of the missionaries. The native assistants were not only able to hear the voices of the natives but they were also able to influence the natives towards a social transformation that would emancipate them from the social constraints that their own society had placed on them.

Antonio Gramsci<sup>1</sup> developed the theory of 'cultural hegemony'. The term 'cultural hegemony', describes the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class, who manipulate the culture of the society – customs, beliefs, practices, values, etc., so that the manipulated culture

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was an Italian writer, politician, political theorist, philosopher, sociologist and linguist. He was a founding member of the communist party of Italy. In his writings he has analysed culture and is renowned for his theory of cultural hegemony.

imposed by the ruling class becomes the accepted cultural norm. For Gramsci, “hegemony implies a situation where a ‘historical bloc’ of ruling class functions, exercises social authority and leadership over the subordinate classes.”<sup>2</sup> However, hegemony in relational terms can never remain stable, since hegemony is subtly developed as a dominant force. To remain dominant, hegemony needs to be constantly monitored, maintained and negotiated in society. Therefore ‘cultural hegemony’ undergoes a series of changes governed with social power. In the words of Gramsci, hegemony is “a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria ... between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups ... equilibria in which the interest of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point.”<sup>3</sup>

Since hegemony needs to be constantly monitored, maintained and negotiated in society, it is prone to challenges from the ‘counter-hegemonic bloc’ developed by the subordinate groups and classes.

This paper attempts to expose the ‘counter-hegemonic’ influence of the native assistants with the tenets of Christianity on the dominant ‘cultural hegemony’ garbed with Indian Culture that oppresses the subalterns, prevailing for ages in the terrain of Indian society. The facts presented in this paper are from the records of missionary societies such as the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, Church Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society.

## I. Missionaries and Natives

The Protestant missionaries started coming to India from the early eighteenth century. The governance of the British East India Company in India was never receptive to the missionaries. The British government took cautious decisions in maintaining religious harmony, which would maintain distance from strife and facilitate trade - the paramount objective of the British. The missionaries had to get proper permission, applying for passports before they settled in their respective stations to discharge the duty of their mission and were restricted by the issue of license that confined them to boundaries.<sup>4</sup> Thus the religious policy of the British Government was never evangelical but hegemonic in nature.

### Natives with Missionaries

In the above scenario the missionaries tried to establish themselves among the natives. The missionaries employed native teachers to learn the native languages; they also employed natives to do their domestic work. Thus the missionaries’ relationship grew with the natives. The missionaries, through their exemplary lives and hard labour, won the hearts of the natives. The natives became friends of the missionaries and some of them stayed with the missionaries and helped them in transforming the society, since they were cast out of their house for embracing Christian faith.

Pasupuleti Venketaragam, a *Naidu* by caste, sixteen years of age was cast out of his home as he received baptism at the hands of the missionary Rev. James Mackintosh. When Venketaragam decided to stay with the missionary, his relatives tried to take him away, bringing a charge of proselytization against the missionary. Venketaragam declared in court that he was a Christian

<sup>2</sup> Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies –Theory and Practice*, New Delhi, Sage Publication, 2008, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 2006, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Archival Record of Ecclesiastical-Consultations, Vol. 4, p. 148.

and that he would live with the missionary. For sixteen years Venketaragam stayed with the missionary until he went to Madras to join the library staff of the Free Church Institution – the parent of the Madras Christian College.<sup>5</sup>

The Missionaries trained the native assistants to transform the society through missionary work and social service. Thus the missionaries were in close relationship with the native assistants.

### Native Assistants

The European missionaries from 1706 to the beginning of the nineteenth century employed about five hundred Indians to assist them, which included nine priests who were ordained, two hundred catechists, schoolmasters and other assistants.<sup>6</sup> The native assistants can be classified into two different groups. One group consisted of those who were involved in work not related with institutions and were termed as ‘workers in external institutions’. The other group was termed as ‘workers of the word’, such as country priests, catechists, schoolmasters and other assistants, who were intellectuals and contributed more to the transformation of the society.<sup>7</sup>

Not only were the native assistants able to hear the voices of the natives but they also were able to influence the natives towards a social transformation of their interest that would emancipate them from the social constraints that their own society had on them. In this process of relating with the natives the ‘workers in external institutions’ played a vital and autonomous role than the ‘workers of the word’, since the ‘workers of the word’ were under the direct administration of the missionaries who were already taking care of many responsibilities.

In the process of transforming the lives of the natives and the society the missionaries had to face hardships and persecutions from those natives in whose eyes the missionaries were a taboo.

## II. Christian Influence on Indian Culture

‘Cultural hegemony’ garbed with Indian Culture prevailing for ages in the terrain of Indian society oppressed the subalterns in various spheres of life. Through ‘cultural hegemony’ only the high caste had the privilege to education. Proper health care and paramedical services were only available to the rich and the elite in a caste-based society. The subalterns were forced to slavery, to serve the high caste continuously for generations. The subalterns were also burdened with taxes that oppressed them heavily. In the name of ‘cultural hegemony’ women were also denied modesty in public space and were a prey to the high caste men.

The hands of the missionaries were strengthened by the native assistants, who were trained by the missionaries in various capacities as they worked towards the transformation of the society.

### Christian Influence on Education

Education in India was considered to be a privilege only for the elite class. Education remained with the affluent and the majority of society remained illiterate. In India education was considered the birthright of the *Brahmins*, who were the only ones that were allowed to read the

<sup>5</sup> Reports from the Church Missionary Society, *List of Converts with a few Short Sketches*, 1837-1880, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Eric Frykenbery (Ed.), *Christians and Missionaries in India*, Google Books, p.70.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

holy-scriptures and perform worships. Even among the privileged education was considered the birth right of the male children and not that of girls. The door of education was kept shut for the marginalized, who also longed to study.

### Gurukul vs Mission Schools

Children of the high castes were educated in *Gurukuls*,<sup>8</sup> where the teacher belonged to the high caste. This teacher never permitted the children of the low caste to join his *Gurukul* and be educated with the rest of his students.

In this scenario, when the missionaries with the help of the native assistants opened schools for children belonging to every class and caste, considering education as the key for social transformation, the subalterns joined the schools to be educated and to help their own community to reach higher grounds in their lives. This was a 'counter hegemonic' Christian influence on Indian society with respect to education.

### A Statement of the Cochin Free School Showing the Number of Boys Admitted therein from the 21<sup>st</sup> May 1817 (When the School was Opened) to the 21<sup>st</sup> December 1818.<sup>9</sup>

Remarks	Day Scholars				
	Protestants	R.C.	Mal. Rite Catholics	Hindus	Total
Admitted	23	57	3	17	100
Discharged on some situation or other	3	12		5	20
Absent without leave	2	7	2		11
Absent on leave and gone to Allepey, Calicut, Quilon, Madras	3	2		2	7
Total	8	21	2	7	38
Remaining in the School	15	36	1	10	62

**Total boys in the School on this date ----- 62**

Schools were started exclusively for girl children, which was a challenging task for the missionaries as educating girls was considered to be a social stigma. As the task of maintaining the schools was enormous, it was not possible for the missionaries to do it by themselves; therefore the missionaries trained the natives as schoolmasters and catechists. The missionaries also felt that illiteracy was a hindrance to the teaching of the Gospel.

Missionary Ringeltaube<sup>10</sup> while informing his directors about their activities wrote: "The labours of these schoolmasters are of great advantage to the rising generation, not only as to their respectability and temporal good, but also as conducive to their spiritual prosperity. For it

<sup>8</sup> *Gurukul* - *Guru* refers to "teacher" or "master"; *Kul* refers to the teacher's residence, from the Sanskrit word *kula*, meaning extended family.

<sup>9</sup> Consultations, Ecclesiastical Department, Vol. 2, p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> William Tobias Ringeltaube (1770 - 1816) a missionary of the London Missionary Society reached Tranquebar, S. India on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1804 and laboured in South India for twelve years.

is vain to print and distribute Bibles if there are none who can read them."<sup>11</sup> The schoolmasters, who were trained by the missionaries, got hold of the objective of the missionaries and committed themselves to educate the children and the youth in their respective hometowns and villages.

### Catechists and School Masters

The missionary Ringeltaube who laboured in South Tamil Nadu, India, concentrated much on education. During 1812, he trained six native schoolmasters and also a number of youth underwent training to become catechists and schoolmasters. They accompanied Ringeltaube on his preaching tours and others were sent into the villages to teach Catechism.<sup>12</sup>

One, among the natives trained, was Ambalavaknan who worked as a schoolmaster in an English Free School at Comibatore. In his letter dated 26 July 1816, Ambalavaknan has mentioned that Rev. Dr. John helped him to come out of poverty. Ambalavaknan also mentions that he was given the knowledge of Tamil and English languages in school, which lifted him up to a comfortable situation in life. Later Ambalavaknan moved to Coimbatore, where he worked in an English Free School, according to the wish of Rev. Dr. John.<sup>13</sup>

The service rendered by the catechists and schoolmasters to the field of education cannot be ignored. The schoolmasters caught the vision of the missionaries to transform their society by educating the natives. Ambalavaknan, in his letter dated 10 February 1817, wrote, "Before God I most solemnly promise that I go with a sincere resolution to instruct the children and youth that will be entrusted to my care on the same plan on which I was instructed."<sup>14</sup>

### Christian Influence on Health Care - Medical Mission

#### Paramedical Service

The catechists and the schoolmasters who were educated served the society at large also in Paramedical field. It was through the native assistants that the missionaries were able to administer vaccines, for small pox, to the natives for the first time. The natives, who did not have any knowledge about the vaccines, were not willing to trust the European missionaries, nor were the missionaries able to explain to the natives about the vaccines properly. So the catechists and the schoolmasters played a significant role in promoting the vaccines to the natives.<sup>15</sup>

#### Medical Evangelists

Dr. W. C. Bental served as a medical missionary from 1902-1907. He took special interest in the training of Medical Evangelists. As a result of his service many natives were trained to be Medical Evangelists. Among whom was Dr. R. P. Packianathan (1836-1892). He was a trained catechist and schoolmaster and was serving at Kannangulam. He was found to be a suitable student for the Medical School, which was to be formed at that time. The first Medical School,

<sup>11</sup> *Histories of London Missionary Society work in South Travancore*, Roll No. 97, p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> *Histories of the London Missionary Society work in South Travancore*, Roll No.97, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Church Missionary Society, Early Correspondence to South India, 1815-1817*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Resource gathered from an in-depth interview with Prof. Dr. Sivasubramanian, Rtd. Head of the Department of Tamil, V.O.C. College, Tuticorin, on 09.05.09

where the natives were trained was established in 1861. After the graduation of the first batch, Dr. R.P. Packianathan was posted to Neyyor Hospital.

Dr. G. James (1853–1901) of Kotticode was trained in the Nagercoil Seminary. Afterwards he studied in the Neyyor Medical School under Dr. Thompson. After his graduation he served in the Medical Mission for twenty-five years. Y. Henry (1847–1934) also trained in the Nagercoil seminary, was working in the Public Department of the Government when Dr. Thompson requested him to join the Medical School. He stood first in the Medical School and was appointed to the branch dispensaries and finally at *Nagercoil*, where he worked from 1890 till his retirement in 1920. He was a prince among Medical Evangelists.<sup>16</sup> The missionaries trained the natives to be Medical Evangelists who served the people in villages and towns.

### III. Christian Influence in Redeeming Slaves

#### Slave Trade

In the present state of Kerala, before the year 1853, there were 1,65,000 slaves. They were bought, sold and mortgaged. Some were given as presents, and gifted to temples. Thus owners treated the slaves as cattle and commodities. During the transfer of ownership of slaves, one of the usual clauses of the deed was, “you may sell him or kill him”<sup>17</sup>. The price of a slave was from six rupees to nine rupees. In some parts of the country slaves were sold for eighteen rupees. The slaves were forced to do agriculture labour in the fields that belonged to their owners. As the slaves were involved in agriculture, they were forced to stand for long hours in water. The slaves were subjected to fever, cholera, rheumatism and other diseases that made their lives short. The masters cruelly tortured the slaves who attempted to escape and some were even put to death. The slaves who ran away from their masters shared their tragic experience with their own people.

A slave who made his escape from his master because of intolerable cruelty shared his experience. After his conversion to Christianity, when he went to visit his former master with few presents to avert his anger, he was immediately seized. He was soundly beaten, covered with hot ashes and confined to the cellar of a granary. He spent three days in the cellar groaning and praying in pain. When he asked for water he was given a filthy compound from the cattle shed. He died of wounds and starvation and was buried in secret to hide the whole matter.<sup>18</sup> A native took the issue to the local king. The king informed the police. H. Baker of the Church Missionary Society, narrated this incident, and wrote that the owner of the slave had to pay five hundred rupees in bribes ‘to settle the trouble’.<sup>19</sup>

Even though the natives were not able to punish the slave owner, the missionary empowered them to voice out against the atrocities of slavery practiced by the dominant class, which had never been done by the subalterns earlier.

<sup>16</sup> Histories of the London Missionary Society work in South Travancore, Roll No. 97, p. 276.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.163.

<sup>18</sup> Histories of London Missionary Society work in South Travancore, Roll No. 97, p. 163.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

#### Efforts to Abolish Slavery

The missionaries took various measures to abolish slavery. Missionaries like Mrs. Mault, taught the slave girls to make lace and through the earning purchase their freedom.<sup>20</sup>

#### Facilitating Industriousness and Self-Support

Lace and Embroidery Industries were started in Nagercoil, South Tamil Nadu. There were more than two thousand women employed in these cottage industries. Many lived in the town but a majority were from the surrounding villages. All the workers were committed to Mrs. Mault of the London Missionary Society. The workers were well paid and also advance payments were made from the wages they were to receive. For many women, the Cottage Industries were their only source of income.

This cottage industry indirectly helped to eradicate cholera. To avoid the lace material from becoming dirty, the women employed in these cottage industries were asked to wash their hands frequently. This frequent washing helped to eradicate cholera in the villages.<sup>21</sup> The mission also benefited from the Cottage Industries as the profit of these industries went a long way to support the Girls’ Schools and the other women labourers.<sup>22</sup>

#### Incentive for Slave Children in Schools

Slave children were admitted in school by paying incentive of one *fanam* (2 *annas*)<sup>23</sup> to schoolmasters for every slave boy admitted in school and a half *fanam* for every slave girl admitted. Through this more than one thousand slave children were collected and brought into Christian education centres.<sup>24</sup>

#### Memorandum for Emancipation of Slaves

In 1847, Rev. Mead and Mrs. Mault of the London Missionary Society in the South, approached the Travancore Government in South India, with a memorandum pleading for the entire emancipation of the slaves in Travancore and Cochin (presently in the state of Kerala). The memorandum contained the following proposals: i) No traffic in slaves should be permitted; ii) Slave traffic should be made penal in British India by the act of 1843; iii) Slaves should be free to acquire and possess property like other classes; and iv) The hereditary practice for perpetuation of slavery should be done away with.<sup>25</sup>

As to the memorandum, the *Rajah* (local king) and the British Resident promised to take effective measures and suggested that the slaves would be freed gradually. In 1853 the Government slaves were set free and in 1855 a proclamation was announced to liberate all

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Personal notes taken from Dr. Veda Sagaya Kumar, Retd. Reader in Tamil, University College, Trivandrum in the University of Madras on 13.03.2012

<sup>22</sup> Histories of London Missionary Society work in South Travancore, Roll No. 95, p. 1165.

<sup>23</sup> Sixteen annas make one Indian Rupee.

<sup>24</sup> Histories of London Missionary Society work in South Travancore, Roll No. 97, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

slaves held by the Government and by the private owners. It was estimated that about 1,36,000 slaves were set free.<sup>26</sup>

The people of the higher caste who owned slaves became irritated by the proclamation of liberation of their slaves. They were angry to see the slaves liberated, embracing Christianity and becoming more intelligent and industrious than others. The economic condition of the slaves gradually elevated. Therefore, the people of the higher caste wanted to exterminate Christianity from the land.<sup>27</sup>

### Untouchability, 'Cultural Hegemony' and Taxation

By the first quarter of the eighteenth century, untouchability, a tool to perpetuate 'cultural hegemony' had taken root in South India. First, the lowest castes like the *Pulaya*, *Paraya*, *Kadan*, *Koodan*, *Ulladan* and *Nayadi* were barred from using public highways and forbidden from entering a radius of two kilometres around the temples. Yet the money and corn they offered to the temples were collected covetously by sprinkling holy-water to purify them as the offerings by the low castes were considered polluted. They were forbidden from wearing cloths except for a small piece of rag. They lived in small huts in the outskirts of the village in absolute poverty.<sup>28</sup> The *Sudras*<sup>29</sup> were made the watchmen for social policing of the lower castes, arming them with power to the extent of carrying out executions at their own will. The *Sudras* were given the duty to collect taxes from the other lower castes.

### Crippling the Untouchables

"Discriminat[ion] and blood-sucking taxation was to cripple financially, the socially disabled communities so that they would not rear any ambitions or hopes of tomorrow."<sup>30</sup> Taxes were squeezed out of the lower communities like the *Ezhava*<sup>31</sup> community for socially controlling them.

In addition to various taxes, small amounts of money were collected on compulsion from the *Ezhavas* and lower castes, which were known as *Kuppakazhcha*. In 1862, 4089 *panams*<sup>32</sup> were collected from the *Ezhavas* and 4492 were collected from the *Parayas*.<sup>33</sup> During the reign of Rama

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> S. N. Sandasivan, *A Social History of India*, Google Books, p. 385.

<sup>29</sup> Early Indian texts like the *Rigveda*, *Manusmriti* and the *Puranas* speak of Varna, which means order, groups the human society into four main types, 1. *Brahmins* (scholars, teachers and priests), 2. *Kshatriyas* (warriors, Kings and soldiers), 3. *Vaishyas* (merchants, agriculturists), 4. *Sudras* (workers, service providers). Still worse than the *Sudras* are the Dalits (also called Untouchables) who fall outside the caste system and are therefore the worst in the social hierarchy, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shudra>, (Accessed 10/05/2017).

<sup>30</sup> S. N. Sandasivan, *A Social History of India*, Google Books, p. 394.

<sup>31</sup> Ezhava is the name of a caste (religious sub-group) in the Northern parts of Kerala, southern India. Sociologically, Ezhava caste has never found a place in the four-tier caste system of the Hindu community. Therefore, they were considered to be outcaste, <http://www.ezhava.org/>, (Accessed 10/05/2017).

<sup>32</sup> One *panam* approximately equals to one seventh of a rupee.

<sup>33</sup> The community is classified as a depressed community as its members were considered untouchable until recent times and economic and educational privileges have been denied to them for centuries. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that their position must have been reasonably good in older times. In archaic Tamil, the word "*parai*" meant "drum", a reference to the kettle drum often used to make announcements. They are attested to in the earliest Tamil literature as bearers and players of the *parai*. - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraiyar>, (Accessed 10/05/2017).

Varma another tax, known as *rupavari* (rupee cess), was collected to manage the financial crisis developed due to Tipu's invasion. Out of the total amount of rupees seventeen thousand five hundred collected from the weavers including the *Ezhavas*, rupees fifteen thousand was collected from the *Ezhavas* alone.<sup>34</sup>

The poorer class in the district of Tirunelveli and its surroundings, particularly the *Nadar* community groaned under heavy poll tax or the capitation tax that was cruelly imposed on them. The *Nadars* had to pay poll tax not only for the young and the elderly but also for the dead. Besides, women were burdened with oppressive taxes like *Tali Erai* - a tax for wearing *Tali*<sup>35</sup> by married women. Tax was imposed on fishermen who owned nets for fishing. Taxes were collected also from oil mongers, weavers etc. There were other kinds of taxes<sup>36</sup> levied in general upon the poorer classes.

### Taxes that Crippled the Subalterns

1. *Ulk* or *Chunkam* (Customs Duty)
2. *Kuppakazhcha* (House Tax)
3. *Kannalakkanam* (Tax on Vehicles)
4. *Talayara* or *Talappanam* or *Talakkaram* (Poll Tax)
5. *Rakshabhogam* (Protection Tax)
6. *Purshantakam* (Succession Duty or Inheritance Tax)
7. *Kozha* (Payment against getting things done)
8. *Meniponnu* (Cess on Ornaments)
9. *Kazhacha* (Presentation or Tribute)
10. *Ezhaputchi* (Excise on bringing down toddy from Palm)
11. *Kappalvari* (Shipping Levy)
12. *Taraku* (Commission)
13. *Andakkazhcha* (Tribute for Holding Titles)
14. *Neerkkooli* (Cess on Irrigation)
15. *Angadipattam* (Market Rent)
16. *Tariyira* (Cess on Handloom)
17. *Dattukazhcha* (Fee for Adoption)
18. *Mechikaram* (Cattle Rearing Tax)
19. *Vivahakkaram* (Tax on Marriage)
20. *Mulakkaram* (Tax on Breast)
21. *Meenpattam* (Fishing Tax)
22. *Alkashu* or *Adimappanam* (Slave Tax)
23. *Chakkira* (Tax on Oil Press)

<sup>34</sup> S.N. Sandasivan, *A Social History of India*, Google Books, p. 394.

<sup>35</sup> A pendent in a chain put by the bridegroom around the bride's neck during the wedding ceremony. It is similar to that of a wedding ring. It is a symbol of covenant and has high sentiment values for the people of Tamil Nadu.

<sup>36</sup> S. N. Sandasivan, *A Social History of India*, Google Books, p. 393.

24. *Tattarappattam* (Tax on Goldsmith)

25. *Kusakkaram* (Tax on making Earthenware)

26. *Mannanpara* (Tax on Washerman)

Those who failed to pay the taxes, even when they had no means to pay it, were tied up, lashed and tortured, even to the point of death.

### Efforts and Protests to Abolish Oppressing Taxes

In addition to the taxes the male members of the *Nadar* community were compelled to render grievous *Ooliam* – service to the *sirkar* like *Yanai Madal* – free supply of coconut leaves to *sirkar* elephants. *Yelutholai Erai* – supply of Palmyra leaves to *sirkar* for writing purposes.<sup>37</sup> Through the efforts of the missionaries and through the petitions to the governor, the men were given rest from performing *ooliam* on Sundays. This enabled them to attend Church Services and rest once in a week.

An *Ezhava* woman reacted in the most brutal manner that even history cannot diminish her violent behaviour. Unable to tolerate the harassment she suffered for failing to pay tax for her breasts - *Mulakkaram*<sup>38</sup>, as a protest she cut her breasts and threw them before the tax demanding *Sudras*, in order to be free from their harassments.<sup>39</sup>

### Modesty: Mark of Respect or Mark of Humiliation?

Till the nineteenth century, 'cultural hegemony' in the regions of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar allowed no females, except the Brahmin women to cover their upper part of the body in public; since, bearing of chest to higher status was considered a sign of respect.<sup>40</sup> It was the socio-religious custom, a 'cultural hegemony', that was observed by all women of the lower castes, they were supposed to take off the cloth covering their breasts in the presence of the higher castes such as *Nampootiris* and the members of the princely families.

In the book *Voyage to the East Indies*, published in 1762, Grose narrates about the social evil that oppressed women. The *rani* – Queen of Attingal got offended by the presence of a woman who was covering her breast. The offended *rani* at once ordered to chop off both breasts of the woman to make her modest.<sup>41</sup> Such were the atrocities that were committed against the lower caste women.

### Efforts and Protests for Modest and Decent Living

Another incident is about a *Nayar* girl, from a respectable family, who had entered the Sreepoornatrayeesa temple at Tripunithura with her breasts covered, while the princess of Cochin was about to worship in the temple. The temple guards demanded the *Nayar* girl to expose her breasts in the presence of the princess. On her refusal, the guards violently tore her upper garment, making her semi naked in the presence of everyone assembled in the temple.

<sup>37</sup> Histories of London Missionary Society work in South Travancore, Roll No.97, p. 96.

<sup>38</sup> The breast tax was levied as soon as a woman of the *Ezhavas* and of the castes lower to them attained puberty. The amount of tax fixed was directly proportional to the beauty of their breasts.

<sup>39</sup> S.N. Sandasivan, *A Social History of India*, Google Books, p. 394.

<sup>40</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper\\_cloth\\_revolt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper_cloth_revolt)

<sup>41</sup> S.N. Sandasivan, *A Social History of India*, Google Books, p. 372.

She and her father, who were influential people of the society, submitted a written complaint to the *raja* – King of Cochin, about the outrageous behaviour of the temple guards. In reaction to the complaint, the *raja* only passed an order, that no women of the lower castes should enter the temple with their breasts covered, without taking any action against the guards who humiliated the girl in public.<sup>42</sup> This incident makes it clear that the subalterns were now able to voice out against the injustice against them, even though they were crippled with force by their oppressors.

Subsequently, the subalterns expressed their protest by breaking the social constraints, and were prepared to face the consequences without giving up their stand. Eshakee, wife of Poothathankutti, who belonged to the low caste, started wearing upper cloth to cover her breasts against the norms of the society, after she and her husband got converted to Christianity. Poothathankutti became a catechist under a missionary. Eshakee's courageous stand to fight against the social norm brought the wrath of Madan Pillai, the landlord for whom Poothathankutti was labouring as a cultivator. Eshakee with the support of the missionary continued to use the upper cloth, in spite of the *diwan* – prime minister's efforts to issue a royal proclamation on February 3 of 1829 that the ancient practice should be respected, referring to the bearing of the breast. The missionaries strongly represented to the government of Madras presided over by the Governor Lord Harris that the proclamation was a gross violation of human dignity and must be revoked.<sup>43</sup>

In 1813, Colonel John Munro, British *Dewan* in the Travancore court, issued an order granting permission to wear upper cloth to women converted to Christianity. The order was downgraded to the wearing of *kuppayam*, a type of jacket worn by Syrian Christians upon pressure from the *pidakkars*, the king's ruling council in 1829. But the Christian women continued to wear the upper cloth according to the order of John Munro to appear modest and decent in public as most of the Christian women had received good education in Christian schools and were expert workers in the cottage industries. The *sudras* began to openly attack the *Nadar* women who joined the Christian women in wearing the upper garment. As the *sudras* were a majority having the government on their side, they came up declaring that an order has been issued by the government to strip the women of their jackets.<sup>44</sup>

In October 1858, a Christian woman was assaulted in the public market at Neyyattinkara and her jacket was stripped off forcibly by the *sudras*. Crowds in the market hustled the Christians, spat and threw earth on them. They stripped the jackets of women and hung them on treetops. On 4 January 1859, more than two hundred *sudras* and others entered the houses of Christians at Talakudi, armed with clubs and knives, attacked the inhabitants, and stripped the jackets of women, tearing their clothes and cruelly beating them and kicking them. Three days after this, about five hundred came to Kumarapuram armed with clubs and swords, forcefully entered the houses of Christians, dragged the defenceless women out of the doors almost naked, tearing their cloths and jackets and committing the most insulting acts. Similar attacks were made on the Christians at Armbozhi and Sembanvilai.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>44</sup> Histories of London Missionary Society work in South Travancore, Roll No. 97, p. 169.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

The breaking of the social constraints by the subalterns resulted in violence and riots against the subalterns in the efforts to suppress their actions of protest. This led to the birth of movements that began to transform the society. The movements that were responsible in transforming the society were the upper cloth movement, the land reform movement and the conversion movement. It is worth researching the role of these movements to understand Christian influence in bringing social transformation.

The natives, whose lives were transformed, not only committed themselves towards their progress in their newness of life, but also committed themselves to assist the missionaries in various capacities. The service rendered by the catechist and schoolmasters in the field of education cannot be ignored. The schoolmasters carried the vision of the missionaries to transform their society by educating the natives forward. If not for the vision of the missionaries and the dedication of the native assistants, education in India would have been reserved only for the high caste and would have been out of reach for the others, especially the subalterns. Thus, in the field of education the native assistants with the guidance of the missionaries, with Christian influence overcoming 'cultural hegemony', provided education for all irrespective of caste, class and sex.

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion the question could be posed as to whether in a globalized world, we have overcome 'cultural hegemony' with respect to education? Referring to a statement from the introduction, 'cultural hegemony' undergoes a series of changes governed with social power. Today 'cultural hegemony' with respect to education can be felt in the rise and growth of private educational institutions without ethical values in our country. The focus of private educational institutions is fixed on profits rather than ethical values. This will bring disastrous effects to our society. In the words of Vishal Mangalwadi<sup>46</sup> referring to private institutions and universities, "goddess Saraswathi has been changed to goddess Lakshmi."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, educators those who respect ethical values, especially institutions started with a missionary vision, have to challenge the 'cultural hegemony' by providing quality education to all, irrespective of class and caste, inculcating ethical values in our younger generations, to serve the subalterns in our nation in various fields, such as education and medicine, as the missionaries had taken special interest in training the natives as Medical Evangelists, who served in towns and villages healing and bringing health and welfare.

The missionaries who heard the slaves groan and cry took various measures to abolish slavery. Cottage industries were initiated to enhance the income of the women and the profit of these industries supported girls and women workers. The efforts of missionaries to emancipate the natives from the burden of various taxes and the efforts to earn the right for women to wear their upper garments, to provide a life of dignity that every human deserves, resulted in firm protests. These protests transformed to reform movements against the atrocities of the oppressors bringing transformation in society. Another form of 'cultural hegemony' present in our society today is the workload forced upon those who work, especially for multinational companies.

<sup>46</sup> Indian Christian philosopher, writer, lecturer and social reformer.

<sup>47</sup> From lecturer notes of Dr. Vishal Mangalwadi, on the topic, *Can 21<sup>st</sup> century bring back truth to universities?* Lecture delivered at Madras Christian College, Tambaram, Chennai on 19 November 2012.

These corporate houses that offer attractive salaries, extract a lot of work with constant pressure for long working hours, deteriorate the health of our people. This corporate culture of extracting heavy work is a transformed form of 'cultural hegemony' of slavery of the past.

Thus, Christianity influenced Indian society in the past by providing education, health, and liberty with modesty and dignity - irrespective of caste, class and gender. Today Christianity has great challenges to face still and has to influence our society with its tenets to overcome 'cultural hegemony' and to promote a rich Indian culture, free from discrimination.

