

Protestant Mission and Feminist Movement in Tamil Nadu (1870-1920): A Study of Sources

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Abstract

The paper takes a close look at the contribution of missionaries towards education and medical care in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how it paved the way for the emergence of a feminist movement in and through the protestant community development activities.

Keywords: Women's Education, Medical Care, Feminist Movement, Social Reform, Hygiene

The significant contribution of missionaries towards education and medical care which – paved the way for the upliftment of the fortunate, is well known and well researched. Nevertheless, the present work on Protestant mission and feminist movement in Tamilnadu 1870-1920 attempts to highlight the path breaking work done by women missionaries of the protestant missions in activating women's movement in Tamilnadu.

The women's movement in India had its beginning in the early eighteenth century due to the initiation and the earnest attempt of Hindu social reformers of the north and the men missionaries backed by British government officials. This movement, which had a very humble beginning got invigorated when it was taken over by missionaries who established themselves all over India, particularly the southern-most part of India. Around five hundred women missionaries who had represented eight prominent protestant missions left their indelible footprints almost in every aspect of social life of Tamilnadu and virtually in every sphere of the life of Tamil women during the very crucial period of these fifty years. As one reads research writings on education, health and hygiene and famine relief, positive contribution made by missionaries always get some mention. While some of them are very positive and highlight the role of women missionaries, some give them only cursive remark. A careful study of Indian history with reference to social reformation projects 1800-1860 as a period of renaissance. Then there is a long period of silence. Subsequently, the National Movement spear-headed by Mahatma Gandhi stands out. This makes one inquisitive to look for missing links in the chain of social evolution of women. This goes on to prove that the missing link is undeniably the role, played by women missionaries.

Arrival of Women Missionaries

Until 1858 mission work had been regarded primarily as work for men and women's work was not given much importance.¹ Still the wives and daughters who were regarded

¹ Nora Brockway, *The Larger Way for Women*, Madras, Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 47.

only as associate missionaries made faithful and self-sacrificing efforts to uplift Tamil women since the dawn of protestant missions in India.² Their work had been carried on privately or quietly and innocuously. Hence their work never found a place in mission reports. Being helpmates of their missionary husbands or fathers they were never paid and their work was unacknowledged almost until 1870 or more specifically since the arrival of single women as missionaries with independent status.³

Due to this missionary zeal, the women's movement activated itself with the formulation of women organisations within the protestant mission societies. This resulted in the arrival of more women's missionaries both through the women missionary organizations and through the women's auxiliary of the missions.

The increased number of independent women's organizations led to the increase in women missionaries who exceeded the number of men since 1870. In 1911, out of 3124 missionaries 1800 were unmarried women.⁴ Single lady missionaries arrived in large numbers well qualified as graduates and professional doctors. Initially they did have a number of difficulties.

They were often affected by illness and other environmental problems and could not survive for more than five years in many cases.⁵ Many of them succumbed to sickness and disease and due to this some of them went back. Most of the women missionaries during the first year in the mission field, strongly felt loneliness and longing for loved ones at homes.⁶ Missionary societies mostly resolved to send the missionaries for the first furlough after five or eight years of continuous service in India and furlough was for just a year as the travel was quite expensive and risky.⁷ This again caused a lot of anxiety for, they had to cope with their loneliness and feeling of separation and sickness for a period of five to eight years depending upon the norms of societies through which they had come as missionaries. Only a handful of single women missionaries in each society succeeded in staying for ten or more years and earned a distinction for their service. Many among them were indeed second-generation missionaries and already acclimatized to the Indian climatic and poor hygienic conditions. Others either returned mentally weak⁸ or physically sick. Some of the married women missionaries lost their children or had to send them away to their homeland for education and for other reasons. Yet to a larger extent they managed to stay for longer periods as they had either full or

² Arthur Judson Brown, *The Why and How of Foreign Missions*, Church Mission House, Canada, 1908, p. 78.

³ Singh Maina Chawla, *Gender, Religion and Heathen Lands*, New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 45.

⁴ Robinson, Charles Henry, *History of Christian Missions*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1915, p.142.

⁵ Church of England Missionary Society, *India's Women*, London, Office of the Society, (October 1893), p. 456.

⁶ Mrs. Emlyn, L.M.S Missionary in Pareychaley said that she was excited when she saw after two years an English lady in her mission (Mitchel Murray, *In South India*, Piccadilly, 1885, p. 230.

⁷ Ibid, 1910, p. 53.

⁸ Ms. Charlott Elizebeth married Thornton B. Benfield, A.M.M., Missionary in 1866; but retired to her country in 1871 as a young widow with three children, her story of hardship, privations and loneliness is being narrated sadly. (A.M.M.122, Folder No. 6)

part of the family with them.

Primary Education for Women

The missionaries of the Protestant mission first ventured into the task of promoting primary education among women. The modern education of women in India formed a phenomenon of nineteenth century was entirely due to the initiation and execution of Christian missionaries. Instruction for women was quite foreign to the tradition and usages of the people.⁹ Indigenous education of the population was found in play school (thinnai pallikoodam),¹⁰ a most ancient institution where only boys learnt.¹¹ Education to women was non-formal, which barely made them literates and it had no government sanction. Hindu views, public opinion and immemorial customs alike were opposed to the education of females. In Hindu opinion the only respectable position of a woman was that of wife and the only education required by her in that status was the knowledge of the duties of a household.¹²

Resisting all these socio-cultural and religious obstacles, the missionaries swam against the current and tried to achieve the Herculean task of educating the Hindu girls with the help of a few naïve converts who were trained as teachers. The resistance against female education among the Hindus remained strong almost until 1870. This socio-religious attitude underwent some change due to western influence and government measures. As early as forties of the nineteenth century women missionaries began to arrive and they initially showed concern mostly in promoting basic education among girls in spite of the well-known obstacles. A.M.M opened the first girls' school in 1835, which became a boarding school in 1840. Mrs. Thomas of the C.M.S established Elliot Tuxford School for Girls at Meignanapuram in Tirunelveli in 1841.¹³ U.F.C.S.M started its first school in Madras for caste girls in 1843 and by 1846 there were 400 caste girls attending school.

The L.M.S., C.M.S and S.P.G. invariably established boarding schools mainly for their converts, while the Church of Scotland Mission and A.M.M started schools for all Tamil girls of any religion. However, these schools came to be predominated by Christians for want of awareness of education among the Hindus until 1860.

The government of India assigned an annual sum of Rs.12,000/- for five for the support of government female normal schools at each of the three provincial towns on

⁹ Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, Vol.I, 1872, p. 196.

¹⁰ Pyal is a mud or stone platform along the front of a house or around a tree. Here boys learnt for five years or until he was 14 or 15. The pupils were taught writing and reading popular versions of Tamil religious works and light literature, the Ramayana, the Bhagavad gita and panchatantra, Baliga B.S., *Studies in Madras Administration*, Vol. II, Madras, 1960, p. 62.

¹¹ *Manual of the Administration of the Madras presidency*, Vol. I, Part III, 1885, p. 572.

¹² *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, June 1875, p. 268.

¹³ John Braidwood, *True Yoke-Fellows in the Mission Field: The Life and Labours of the Rev. John Anderson and the Rev. Robert Johnston, Traced in the Rise and Development of the Madras Free Church Mission*, London, Nisbet, 1862, p. 431.

an experimental measure. In 1870 the government opened its first Normal school in Madras with Mrs. Isabel Brander as its Superintendent.¹⁴

This modern education of the mission was carried on under two systems-boarding schools (day and night) and the day schools. The purpose of these boarding schools was to provide a favourable atmosphere to the converts children who were encouraged to continue their education up to the teachers training in normal schools, so that they could help the mission to solve the problem of inadequacy of female teachers. The day schools included caste-Hindu schools, which were started to accommodate the title of 'caste-Hindu primary school'. In the vernacular schools the mission imparted education only through the medium of native dialect of Tamil. The vernacular schools attracted both the caste-Hindus and Brahmins studied. In the Anglo-vernacular schools both English and vernacular language were used as medium of instruction. By 1881 the missionary efforts in education reached a place of eminence with 155 boarding schools, spread over both in towns and villages.¹⁵ As per the report of the Director of Public Instruction for 1892-93, out of seventeen training schools for women in the presidency with 3423 pupils, except four of these, which were under Governmental management, others were maintained by the missions.¹⁶

The American Arcot Mission (A.M.M) was the pioneer of female education in the districts where they had their mission establishments and maintained schools at great expense because of the general apathy of the local population on the education of their daughters.¹⁷ While in most of the mission stations caste-Hindu schools were started by 1870, it took more than a decade or two to start Mohammedan schools. Since these schools were vernacular, there was a need for Hindustani speaking teachers in Muslim schools.¹⁸ Mrs. E.L.Oxley's Mohammedan Girls School of C.E.Z.M.S. flourished in Madras as the school provided conveyance for the pupils.¹⁹ English was also taught here as a subject which was of main attraction for parents to send their children, though the medium of instruction continued to be in vernacular language. The mission also opened orphanages at different places particularly in the drought-affected areas. The children received into orphanages during the famine were in a terrible condition of filth, weakness and disease. With a spirit of love and service the missionaries and their wives performed the acts of nursing and caring for these children. Although the contribution of missionaries in the promotion of female education brought in a number of changes in the society, the most significant was the removal of caste discrimination. In 1893, out of the total of 808 primary schools for girls, 111 were government schools among

¹⁴ Sathianandam.S, *History of Education in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1894, p. 172 (Reprint by Forgotten Books Publishers, 2015).

¹⁵ Murdoch J., *Indian Missionary Manual*, London, 1889, p. 524.

¹⁶ Nora Brockway, *A Larger Way for Women: Aspects of Christian Education for Girls in South India, 1712-1948*, Madras, Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 83.

¹⁷ Thirty ninth annual report on the Arcot Mission, 1892, p. 25.

¹⁸ One hundred and eighteenth report of the L.M.S, London , 1913.

¹⁹ Barnes H. Irene, *Behind the Pardah*, London, Marshall Brothers, 1898, p. 157.

which local bodies or municipalities managed fourteen, 501 were aided and these were chiefly institutions maintained by missions and 182 were unaided.²⁰

To study the beginning and the progress of women's education under each mission, the annual reports and the journals of the missionary organizations give a clear account, which gives chronological details and statistics. The government records like report on the results of educational census and the report on the public instruction from 1871-1890 are also referred to infer the mission role in primary education. The correlation between the mission reports and the government reports prove the authenticity of the private records. The secondary data like the published books of the later period and paper clippings of Native Newspaper Report (NNR) further confirm the existing data. The primary and secondary data often complement constant monitoring of the government came out in the form of reports. Thus both private and public records back the contribution of missionaries in the primary education and the credibility is ascertained.

Zenena Mission

The missionaries were not satisfied with the minimum education given as the Hindu and Muslim children withdrew from the school at a very early age to be married. Once married, the high caste and rich girls were confined to the 'Zenenas'²¹ and were in seclusion. Zenena mission was started to reach and to teach women who work confined to Zenena. This mission often applied very loosely to all forms of work among the higher classes of women, carried on in their own homes through women missionaries.²² In the South the missionaries started the Zenena mission after 1860. In fact, in all mission stations the missionary societies as well as native zenena workers who were also called Bible women²³ to carry out zenena education. The zenena missions had mostly textbooks and materials for teaching needle work in their homes, while the Bible women carried with them only the Bible. Thus the women in zenenas were taught reading, writing and other branches of study on a nominal charge but Bible was taught freely.²⁴ Later the zenena teaching came to be recognized as a proper charge on public funds and obtained substantial aid for secular education.²⁵ The British government sanctioned grants-in-aid to the missionary and other agencies engaged in the work of home training, Mrs. Branders, the first inspectress of schools said that the examinations were

²⁰ Sathianandam S., *History of Education in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1894, p. 223.

²¹ 'Zenena' is compound of two Persian words 'Zenan' and 'Khana' which means the house of the women or women's apartments, *Missionaries Herald*, August 1880, p. 350.

²² Thoburn J.M, *India and Malaysia*, New York, Hunt & Eaton, 1893, p. 360.

²³ Bible women were locally recruited Christian converts. These indigenous women were useful adjuncts to missionary work as interpreters or as helpers at schools and dispensaries, Singh Maina Chawla, *Gender, Religion and Heathen Lands*, New York, 2000, p. 32.

²⁴ Report of the Missionary Conference, South India & Ceylon, Madras, 1879, pp. 174-175.

²⁵ Report of the Indian Education Commission, 1882, p. 650.

satisfactory in the zenenas.²⁶ The contribution of Church of England Zenena Mission Society (C.E.Z.M.S) the auxiliary of the C.M.S. is to be highlighted here for, its unique achievement in the promotion of education of women of different sections. C.E.Z.M.S with its head quarters in Madras, had its missionary stations at Coonoor, Ootacamund, Dohnavur, Palayamkottai, North Tirunelveli and Madras in Tamilnadu.

Originally this society aimed at promoting the Gospel, but slowly branches of its work extended among Christian women, basic education for Hindu and Mohammedan women, education of tribes and the handicapped children, C.E.Z.M.S was the pioneering organisation in promoting higher education among Christians. The C.M.S established the Sarah Tucker Female Training Institution²⁷ at Palayamkottai in 1858 as the first training school for women teachers. It was named after Sarah Tucker, the sister of John Tucker, the C.M.S missionary.

To realize the enormous quality service rendered by these women missionaries in Palayamkottai, Ooty and Madras source of information was obtained from government orders of the educational and public department and on the census reports and the reports on the Public instructions. Since the church missionary society worked in closed contacts with the then ruling British government, enough information has been gathered from government records itself. One political issue here is all the missionaries who served in C.M.S & C.E.Z.M.S were British and this could be a reason for the uninterrupted patronage got from the British Indian Government. Still a few primary and second hand records of private publications are also used to find out some missing links and omissions in the information collected. This part of the feminist movement was supported substantially by Government records which are primary in nature.

Industrial Arts for Women

Industrial art was initially introduced in the primary schools for girls as well as in zenena education for women in order to create more interest among the pupils in education and to introduce vocationalisation. The missions had the following industries successfully tried and the items found to be remunerative are ice making, crochet edging, woolen caps, grass and rope mats, webbing for beds, durries (carpets), bead chicks, macaroni and vermicelli. Besides, plain needle work, dress making, phul kari work and drawn thread work had employment generating potential.²⁸ In 1835 the wives of missionaries particularly Mrs. Mault introduced these industrial arts in Tamilnadu for the first time. She taught lace making, sewing and embroidery to the Christian girls in the boarding schools at Nagercoil.²⁹ The purpose of the mission's industrial training for girls was two fold, to train for economic support and to develop a more practical idea of education.³⁰

²⁶ Report on the Public Instruction of the Madras Presidency, 1887-88, Madras, 1889, p. 192.

²⁷ Sarah Tucker Institution (S.T.I) became the first Women's college in South India in 1896.

²⁸ Report of the fourth Decennial Indian Missionary Conference, Madras, 1902, p. 107.

²⁹ Firth C.B. *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, Madras, 1961, p. 9.

³⁰ Orville A. Pretty, *Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry Fact Finders Report India Burma*, London, 1933, p. 497.

The government and the National Indian Association conducted exhibition in order to encourage these arts and to promote proficiency in the arts of plain and ornamental needle work.

The raw materials like thread or linen were brought from abroad and only European missionaries always supervised the students, for it improved the quality of the product.³¹ This was in contrast to the English East India Company which exported cotton from India to England and brought back textile products for profit-making which in turn appeared to have ruined the cottage industries in India. Most of these finished products were sold abroad, in order to get profits, particularly in Europe, where there was greater demand.³² The European women in greater cities and hills in India also bought these products.³³ When there was a scarcity of food in 1901 at Ikkadu, these women helped their husbands by lace making.³⁴ Through these schools, the missions exerted a definite influence in the economic standards of these village women. The industrial art achieved the primary objective of providing a means of livelihood to the economically backward communities and at the same time inculcated character of craftsmanship.³⁵

It is obvious that for the training of industrial art the missionaries depend upon more support from their home countries rather than depending upon the British India government. Some of the Industrial schools were even self sufficient. So the government records a scanty source while the annual reports of the missions remain major primary source. Moreover the major contribution in the Industrial schools was made by American missionaries and the British India government had least involvement. The researcher had to depend mostly on the minutes and reports of the missionary organisations. Few books published by the Christian leaders give clear records of the history. The Criticisms raised by the non-Christians help to understand the impact and the intensity of the service to women of all categories with no distinction of caste or creed.

Medical Service

The popularity of industrial arts in schools and the accessibility into the homes of women of all sections enhanced the mission activities. In this venture the missionaries got into closer contacts with females of all categories: the rich and poor, the upper and lower castes, house wives and widows, destitute and divorced. The industrial art, though catered to the recreational and economic needs of these women, the greater need i.e., the health and hygiene of women and children remained a big question due to the formidable beliefs on superstitions and ignorance. Hence, the medical mission got a special care and attention from the missionaries.

³¹ *In and Around Madras*, 1911, p. 45.

³² *Ibid.*, 1910, p. 53.

³³ Povl Wandall, *The Origin and Growth of the Arcot Lutheran Church*, Madras, 1978, p. 40.

³⁴ Eighth report of the South India Provincial Synod, Madras, 1901, p. 59.

³⁵ Firth C.B., *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, Madras, 1961, p. 207.

Medical mission had four objectives to give medical care to the missionaries, to give medical assistance to the natives, to aid evangelistic work by disarming prejudice and thereby bringing the Gospel to those who were not attracted by other evangelist methods of teaching or preaching the Bible and to train the native physicians and nurses.³⁶ Each mission extended the medical services especially among women with the help of women missionary doctors and nurses and the missions were spread out all over Tamilnadu. Though some missions had begun medical services for women at a primary level by the 1870s itself, only by 1890s the work got a strong footing in many places. The American Madura Mission started its medical programme much earlier in Madurai and others followed suit. Overcrowding in cities, zenena practices, religion superstitions, poverty and epidemics were the real eyesore and such issues got the attention of medical missionaries. The medical mission expanded from Tirunelveli and Ramnad in the south of Tiruvallur and Madras in the north through different mission groups at places of their choice and the people's need.

The medical mission also considered serving the leprosy patients as a special field of work. Vinoba Bhave remarked that missionaries set the example in leprosy work, that it remained a model to others in India.³⁷

The first and foremost impact of the medical mission was that it promoted harmony and solidarity among women of different faith that both caste-Hindu and Mohammedan women began to be together in the same ward. These women found the hospital a great contrast to the narrow, monotonous life at home.³⁸ In many cases, the nurses who belonged to a lower community treated the patients belonging to upper caste with care and sincerity and often awarded gratefully. It became mandatory for the missions to start some institutions. For example, In Madurai Women's Hospital the deserted children were taken care of in the Bird's nest attached to the hospital. The prejudice against nursing was fast dying down and many Indian girls took up nursing as their profession. As a result, well-trained, professionals, nurses and doctors took the place of native quacks or untrained midwives.

Finally the medical missionaries and the missions helped the Government and the people in ameliorating the horrors of various epidemics like plague, cholera, small pox etc. In this process many missionaries themselves have also become the victims. In fact, the Medical Mission, which was started amidst skepticism and resistance, slowly gained momentum in which the native women, who were helped at the early stage, began to be of help to others. The entire mission, which had western doctors and nurses were slowly substituted by Indian women doctors and nurses. In a land of abject poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, there was no existence of awareness about health care thinking on scientific lines the medical mission attained a place of eminence.

³⁶ Report of the Ecumenical Missionary Conference, Vol.I, New York, 1900, p. 243.

³⁷ Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, New Delhi, Harper Collins, 1994, p. 5.

³⁸ *In and Around Madras*, 1913, p. 19.

Medical mission was at the initial stage carried on by the missionaries only at an informal manner. Hence, most of the primary data are the annual reports of the missions and minutes of the committees. When these missions aspired for governmental aid or grants, a few government orders of the public department were passed and it adds to the primary data. Published books and research thesis contribute to the secondary data of the work. Though personal records remain as the major part of the primary data its recognition at a later period by public records prove the validity of the data.

Mission for the Marginalized Women

In the process of the social upliftment of women through education, skill development an entrepreneurship, care was also taken to fight for the cause of marginalized women like Devadasis and widows. Pearleyes (Muthukannu) was the first temple girl saved by Amy Carmichael, a Christian missionary in 1901. She established an institution called Dohnavur fellowship mainly to accommodate temple girls and also a few orphans. In 1913 she had 140 children. She also made of these matters are recorded in any official primary sources because since, this issue was a very sensitive one which could have caused tension of made public.

Much before Muthu Lakshmi Reddy's effort the Christian missionaries tried to abolish this practice. When Amy Carmichael was interviewed by her she said that to maintain confidentiality and to avoid problems initially she left much information unrecorded. Her services were not even minuted or reported in the official form. Yet her movement was successful. The researcher had to depend largely on secondary data like books published at later periods. Amy Carmichael's writings at a later period are considered the primary data.

Many welfare schemes were introduced to improve the plight of widows. Census reports give a clear picture on the intensity of this crisis even in the twentieth century. Since the service rendered to the widows was mostly personal, it did not get government support. Many widows had to convert themselves to Christianity in order to get relieved from their social bindings. Even these services are often reported only in personal records of the missions and they serve as primary data. Taking the widows to the main stream of services was introduced only by the mission initially and there are a number of secondary sources, like books and newspapers, that highlights on this area.