

**Socio Educational Condition Of Women In The Period Of Christian
Missionaries In Tamil Nadu**

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ABSTRACT

The Danes sent the first protestant mission to India in Tranquebar, an insignificant locality which they possessed in India. Zeigenbalg, the first missionary who reached India in 1706, candidly confessed that his mission had little success. Only a few poor or destitute persons were converted, and they had to be fed and maintained by the mission. Rev. Ringletaube was the first European Missionary came to South Travancore, landed at Mylaudi near Nagercoil, in 1806 April 25 and founded the London Missionary Society. When he came to Tamil Nadu, there was full of problems like social injustice, superstitious beliefs, women slavery, uneducation of women and prohibition of women from wearing upper cloths. He worked hard for ten years and built seven Churches. But he became ill because of his hard work. So he handed over the responsibilities to one of his assistants Vedamanikam of Mylaudi and left for his motherland. Christian missionaries worked more than 200 years for the upliftment of the education of women. Tamil and Kannada were taught in the Christian schools. Tamil literatures like Tirukural, Tiruvasagam were translated by them into English. So the Tamil language grew up. Many caste people studied and worked together in the schools. So brotherhood and equality increased.

KEY WORDS

protestant mission, Tranquebar, Zeigenbalg, London Missionary Society, Bishop Caldwell, Coopayam, Thol cheelai, Madura Mission.

The Danes sent the first protestant mission to India in Tranquebar, an insignificant locality which they possessed in India. Zeigenbalg, the first missionary who reached India in 1706, candidly confessed that his mission had little success. Only a few poor or destitute persons were converted, and they had to be fed and maintained by the mission. Rev. Ringeltaube was the first European Missionary came to South Travancore, landed at Mylaudi near Nagercoil, in 1806 April 25 and founded the London Missionary Society.¹ When he came to Tamil Nadu, there was full of problems like social injustice, superstitious beliefs, women slavery, uneducation of women and prohibition of women from wearing upper cloths. He worked hard for ten years and built seven Churches. But he became ill because of his hard work. So he handed over the responsibilities to one of his assistants Vedamanikam of Mylaudi and left for his motherland.²

Rev. Charles Mead came to South Tamil Nadu to do ministry in 1818 instead of Ringeltaube. He came to Colachel port of Kanya kumari district. Ringel taube's assistant, Vedamanikam met him and took him to Mylaudi.³ A big crowd was waiting there to see him. Most of them were women. They did not wear upper cloth. When he saw them, he grieved for them. He determined to change this situation and changed his office from Mylaudi to Nagercoil.⁴ Bishop Caldwell the Scottish missionary arrived in Madras on June 8, 1938 as a missionary of the London Missionary Society and later joined the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Mission (SPG). Caldwell served as the Bishop of Tirunelveli and gave more importance to the development of women folk and did much original research on the history of Tirunelveli.⁵

Upper Cloth Disturbances

The low caste women were not permitted to wear the upper cloths like the high caste women. They were banned from wearing dress above the hips and below the knees. One who did not follow this rule was tortured and their upper cloth was torn. The depressed class females were denied the right to cover their breast, which was the exclusive social and civil rights of the upper castes.⁶ Women were roaming without upper cloths in festivals, markets

and roadways.⁷ They were not permitted to use costliest dress, jewels, shoes, and umbrellas. They were prevented from living in homes with tiled roof, rearing the cows and using vehicles. The women were not permitted to carry water pots on their hips. They were permitted to take the water pot on their head with support of their two hands. So Missionaries like Mead and Mault struggled for the low caste people's rights and made them wear upper cloth above the hips.⁸

The lady Missionaries like Mrs. Mead and Mrs. Mault did not like the native Christian women moving with their breast exposed like their non-Christian friends. Therefore they decided to end such barbarous behavior. So they devised a plain loose jacket with loose sleeves and advised them to wear it. This loose jacket was called 'Coopayam'.⁹ Missionary Mead's wife trained the Christian women to stitch the dress coopayam. From these the Christian women used to cover their upper body with coopayam and used to go to church programmes and churches. The upper caste people became very jealousy of this. Because of the motivation of the upper caste men, Queen of Attingal, ordered to cut off the breasts of women when they appeared in her presence with covered breasts.¹⁰

In later days, because of the struggles of Missionaries and the low caste women, Col. Munro, the Dewan of Travancore issued an order in 1812 that the Christian women had the right to cover bosoms. So the customs of coopayam wearing Christian women were increased.¹¹ The Christian women, who were wearing coopayam were not satisfied with coopayam itself. They started to wear a kind of upper cloth on coopayam like the high caste people. But some women started to wear only 'Thol Cheelai' (shoulder cloth) and not wearing coopayam. The high caste people opposed this and it was called as upper cloth Riot.¹² This kind of dress code of the Christian women earned the enmity of the upper class Hindu people. More than coopayam, the thol cheelai made this kind of opposition. Because thol cheelai, the dress was worn on the shoulder only differentiated the upper caste women from the lower caste people. In consequence, they gave a lot of troubles to the Christians.¹³

They gave many false complaints against the low caste men and imprisoned them. The high caste men tore the dress of low caste women in the streets. They prevented the

Christians participating in the church services and burnt many churches and schools.¹⁴ On the effect of this problem, Travancore-Dewan, Venkata Rao passed a bill in 1829. This bill instructed the low caste women not to wear the thol cheelai like high caste women except the coopayam. After this order, Muthu Kutty Swamigal, a Hindu revolutionary leader, instructed the Hindu low caste women to wear coopayam. So the coopayam wearing women's number increased.¹⁵

When rioting was at its peak, the Missionaries John Cox, Russel, Lewis and Baylis jointly complained to the British resident of Travancore.¹⁶ They wrote and met the king directly and explained to him the sufferings of the Christians.¹⁷ As the Missionaries could not get any solution from the king of Travancore, they sought the help of the British Governor at Madras, Charles Trevelyan. On 6 May 1859, Trevelyan wrote a letter to the British Resident in Travancore, General Cullen expressing his dissatisfaction over the unlawful customs and traditions followed in Travancore. He asked General Cullen to impress upon the Maharaja regarding the painful dress regulations adopted against the traditions of Christians and others.¹⁸ On the compulsion of the governor of Madras, the Dewan and Maharaja had half a mind to agree to the demand of the Nadars. Accordingly on 26 July 1859, the Travancore Government permitted all the Nadar women to wear coopayam like the Christian Nadar women. The Nadar women of any religion were permitted to cover the upper part of the body by any means excepting the style of the Nair women. Even though this order was not satisfactory to the Nadars, this privilege was not granted to the other low castes.¹⁹

Missionaries were not satisfied with the 1859 order of the Government. As the other low caste women were not permitted to cover the breasts, the Missionaries expected clash in the future. Hence, regarding the dress, they again wrote a letter to the Governor of Madras condemning the attitude of the Travancore Government. The Governor advised the Resident, Rev. Mault to use all his influences on the Maharaja to remove all dress restrictions imposed on all castes. Rev. Mault reported the wish of the British Government to the Maharaja.²⁰ Maharaja felt that if he did not oblige, there would arise strained relationship between Travancore and the British. Hence in 1865 an order was released permitting all low castes to

wear dress like the Nadar women. Even then the low caste women were not permitted to dress like the Nair women.²¹

As time passed by, all the restrictions imposed on the low castes vanished one by one. However, the enmity that arose between the Nairs and the Nadars remained unresolved. It re-emerged after century and the low caste had to fight again during the middle of the twentieth century to reclaim their liberation. This liberation is neither the gift of the Travancore kings nor the generosity of the Nairs and Vellalas but was the prerogative attained by the sustained efforts of the oppressed community, the Nadars, unrestrained support of protestant Christian Missionaries and the unrestricted co-operation of the British Residents in Travancore.²²

Missionaries and Women's Education

The Christian missionaries, who came to India to spread their religion, came forward to give education to the women to abolish women slavery. The first Christian mission which was started by the Jesuit priests under the leadership of father Fernantas in 1552 under Nayakas rule in Madurai with the name 'Madura Mission'. In 1610 he built a church with the permission of King Veerapa Nayak at Madurai. There they planned to teach the women. The Hindu society did not allow anybody to learn. Then in 1606, Robert-De- Nobili, a Roman Catholic missionary from Italy came to Madurai. He introduced himself as a Brahmin, wore the sacred thread made of five strings, and wore saffron dress with sacred ash on his forehead to attract the Hindu people. He adopted the Hindu culture. He came forward to convert the people into Christianity and gave them education.²³

Missionaries found educational institutions with the churches. The shed attached with the church came to be known as 'Pallikoodam'.²⁴ In the Nayakas period, most of the Tamil kings supported Christianity. Because of this, churches and schools were built in Madurai, Trichy, Tanjore, Nagai, Tutucorin, Tirunelveli, Vellore and Tranquebar. Kings generally gave subsidy for this.²⁵ The Tranquebar missionaries (Danish) established many schools. Ziegenbalg and Plutarch were the first Danish missionaries to contribute much for the cause

of native education. Soon after their arrival they opened a charity school at Tranquebar to educate the slave Christians of the region. In the charity school, children were given food, clothing and books free of cost. Within a short period, the Christian Missionaries started many charity schools on the Coromondal Coast.²⁶

On 21 November 1707 as per the request of the Ziegenbalg and Plutarch started a Danish Portuguese school under the superintendence of Plutarch. A teacher who could speak German, Danish and Portuguese languages was also appointed in this school. In addition to the Portuguese school, the missionaries realized the need of Tamil Schools to educate the native children. Accordingly, in 1707 Ziegenbalg opened a Tamil School and also appointed a qualified native teacher.²⁷ In 1708 Ziegenbalg started a boarding school at Tranquebar. There after such schools were started in the place of Thirukkadaiyoor, Seerkali, Chidambaram and Caddalore. In 1709 Ziegenbalg started a school for girls at Tranquebar. It was the first girl's school all over India. In addition to the academic subjects, the girls were instructed in vocational like sewing and house keeping.²⁸

After giving basic education to the Tamil Children, the Missionaries wanted to help the poor of them to find a job of their ability and taste in life. To achieve the same, Ziegenbalg started a craft school at Tranquebar in 1716. In 1717 the Mission opened two charity schools in the city of Madras to help the poor children and also opened a school at Cuddalore for Tamil Portuguese children.²⁹ In 1778, Missionary Frederick Schwartz started an English school in the Fort of Tanjore exclusively for the European children. He also started one Tamil school for the benefit of the Tamil children in 1780 at Menambuchavadi. In 1784 on the request of English East India Company, Schwartz started the first provincial school in Tanjore. This was the first school in India to teach English to the Indians.³⁰

In 1800, a Tranquebar Missionary J.C. Kohlhoft stated a charity school in Tirunelveli. In 1806 William Tobias Ringle Taube an LMS Missionary started the work of the society from one of the southernmost villages of South Travancore known as Mylaudi. He started six village schools around Mylaudi. His successor Rev. Charles Mead also started many schools like English schools, Vernacular schools, Day schools, Night schools, Charity schools,

schools for the untouchables, Boarding schools and Training schools.³¹ In 1817 James Hough opened one school at Palayamkottai and another one at Tirunelveli in 1818. He requested the English East India Company's administrator to sanction a monthly allowance of 25 pagodas for these schools. Hough was also interested in the promotion of girl's education. He started one girl's school at Nazareth in 1819 and another at Mudaloor in 1820 respectively.³²

The lady missionaries also did many things to the women's education. Among them Mrs.Mead and Mrs.Mault contributed very much. Mrs. Mead started a school with boarding near the seminary built by Mead. This school was started with 14 girls. Free education was given to the students with food, dress and accommodation. Those who studied here were very intelligent. So, many parents voluntarily came forward and made their children study. Because of this, girl's schools were started in Neyyoor, Santhapuram, Parasala and Marthandam.³³ Lately Mrs. Mead gave some vocational Training to girls to fulfil their economical needs. They were lace making, embroidery, crochet and spinning. There were thousands of women in their homes doing lace and embroidery as a cottage industry in many villages and other areas such as Nagercoil, Neyyoor and Marthandam.³⁴

Lady missionaries ministered to the women education and against women slavery, without caring their lives also. They are Mrs.Dennison, Mrs.Thomson, Mrs.Lewis, Mrs.Mabbs, Mrs.Annie Lee Duthie, Mrs.Newport, Miss.Beatrice Duthie, Mrs.Foster, Mrs.Sinclair, Mrs.Blanchard, Mrs.parker, Mrs.Marsden, Mrs.Towel, Miss.Hayes, Miss.Mummery, Miss. Mclroy and many other missionary women gave their time and talents to this department of the work among women which is now being superintendent by Tamil women.³⁵

Christian missionaries worked more than 200 years for the upliftment of the education. Tamil and Kannada were taught in the Christian schools. Tamil literatures like Tirukural, Tiruvasagam were translated by them into English. So the Tamil language grew up. Many caste people studied and worked together in the schools. So brotherhood and equality increased.

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