

SOCIAL SERVICES OF ROBERT CALDWELL

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ABSTRACT

“Excelling as a scholar and philologist intimately acquainted with the Tamil people, their history, language and customs and elegant writer. He attained a wide reputation, bringing honour thereby to the missionary's calling and strengthening the cause of missions in the church at home. But all his attainments and fame did not divert him from his great purpose and the simplicity of his missionary life. He trained many native agents, brought thousands of heathen in to the church of Christ, raised the character and status not of the Christians only and won their attachment and reverence.”

INTRODUCTION

Robert Caldwell was one of the renowned scholar and important Missionaries of South India. He was not only a religious priest, but also a multilinguist, historian, and a social scientist. He knows eighteen languages including Greek, Latin, Hebrew, English, Irish, Scottish, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Sanskrit and Malayalam. In his own words “I was born in Ireland, educated in Scotland, enlisted myself in London Mission Society. He lived in India for a pretty long time and indulged in Indian life style, and became one among the Indians”.

Caldwell was born at Ireland on 7th of May 1814 to poor Scottish Presbyterian parents. His family on returning to Scotland took up their abode in Glasgow. So, he inculcated the habit of reading books and not scriptural books. His acquaintance with the priests made him think of God and thereby he committed himself to the Lord in 1830 at the age of sixteen. He devoted himself to the congregational church of London Mission Society (L.M.S). The society decided to send him for higher studies in Glasgow. At Glasgow he

learnt Greek, Hebrew and Latin with much effort. He fared well in Logic, Philosophy, Home Science and Greek in an excellent manner. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Glasgow University in 1837. The L.M.S ordered him as a clergy and sent him to Madras in 1837. At the age of twenty he embarked on voyage to Madras in the ship called Mary Ann in 1837. During his voyage he made good and useful friendship with one of his fellow passengers namely Charles Philip Brown of the Madras Civil Service and learnt Telugu and Sanskrit and many things about India.

The missionaries and the government servants, who have come to serve at Madras have to learn the local language. The college has undertaken the study and extended financial support to scholars to write lexicon, grammar and language translation. One of the founders of this college was the great Tamil scholar linguist and Francis Whyte Ellis, the other was the great Telugu scholar A.D. Campbell Ellis had already made beginning in the linguistic study. On reaching Chennai, Caldwell stayed for three years since 1838 and prepared himself for the work. The well known Tamil scholars, distinguished educationalists, missionaries and studious Government Servants became his friends in Chennai.

When Caldwell stayed in Chennai, he understood the traditional Tamil learning method and the modern learning process, and the kind of the desire of the people to provide education for their children. The nature of Tamil and Tamil people were known to Caldwell through printed books and his contact with scholars. Caldwell soon felt an inclination to join the Church of England and decided to take orders and enlist himself in the service of the Society for the Propagation of Gospel. Tinnevely was the field which he chose to work, and in July 1841, he set out on foot from Madras to find the country of his choice. He felt that by walking leisurely, he could understand the language and culture of the people with whom he had to work. On his way he could meet all kinds of people and learn their dialects. Infact

dialects varied from place to place. In the border areas the spoken dialect is different from the written dialect. Similarly in Madras region and the South Travancore region dialects differed. Dialects differed from the Adi-Dravidians and the Adivasis. Likewise dialect differed among the Brahmins themselves.

He travelled morning and evening and putting up generally in native rest houses. On the way he visited Pondicherry, Kumbakonam, Tranquebar, Trichinopoly and Metupalayam by foot. On leaving the Nilgri Hills, he purchased a horse, intending to ride on it to Tinnevely. He gave up the idea of looking for a horse, and continued his journey in this fashion through the three districts of Coimbatore, Madurai and Tinnevely, right on to Idaiyangudi. On November 28, 1841, an advent Sunday, he preached his first sermon in Tamil in Tinnevely in Cammerer's Church. Caldwell built a small church at Idaiyangudi. He set himself at once to buy up the whole site together with a few adjoining fields. Caldwell was well aware that unless it was a planned township life here would be very miserable. Hence his plan to develop it into a beautiful model village. He decided to build few houses and then to ask the villagers to copy that to build houses for themselves. At first, he climbed up a palmyra tree and imagined the intersecting streets and houses, to be built, wells to be dug, school, Bungalow and a church to be raised. Then he implemented his plan in such a way to beautify the village. As a result the entire villages accepted Christ. Churches and schools were started. The Bishop of Hongkong visited Tinnevely in 1853 pronounced Idaiyangudi to be a kind of '*model Christian settlement*'.

Caldwell built a church of Gothic style at Idaiyangudi. In 1868 Lord Napier the Governor of Madras who spend more than a week with the Caldwell's, saw the Idaiyangudi church under construction. He admired the skill of local sculptors and carpenters who faithfully produced copies off the models which Rev. Caldwell made out of clay. Holy

Trinity Church took place on the 6th of July 1880. St Peters church o Kodaikanal was also built by Caldwell in 1886.

Caldwell married Eliza on March 20th, 1844. Mrs. Caldwell was an excellent colleague to her husband in all undertakings. Caldwell himself praised her that his wife was a confident friend, a good adviser of the opportune moment. He was the master of the house and his wife was the general of the house. Within a very short time of her arrival to Idaiyngudi she started a Girls Boarding School and taught the girls to read and write. She thought in terms of the economic well being and upliftment of the people and decided to enhance the heads of the families through the efforts of their womenfolk, with that intension she introduced lace making among women which was to become a permanent branch of Industry.

At Idaiyangudi Mrs. Caldwell and opened schools for boys and girls in 1844. He was one of the pioneers in giving free mid-day meals to 171 students of his schools. His schools at Idaiyangudi served as a feeder institution for the seminary at Sawyerpuram. To meet the growing needs of the Christian population and congregation Arch Bishop of Calcutta made Rev. Caldwell as the Bishop of S.P.G. of Tinnevelly on 11th March 1877 at the historic consecration ceremony held at St. Pauls Cathedral, Calcutta. In the consecration Sermon Bishop Gell referred to Bishop Caldwell as one of the double stars, the other one was Rev. Sargent who was made Bishop for C.M.S. church in Tinnevelly. He carried on other educational works and propagation of Gospel. His wife started Victoria Girls School to commemorate the 50th regnal year of Queen Victoria. Caldwell helped the shifting of the Caldwell College to Tuticorin.

Caldwell began his missionary work largely amongst Shanars (Nadars) which was the largest downtrodden group in the Tinnevelly district. The Shanars were agricultural workers.

They climbed palmyra trees and extracted toddy and also made jaggery. The Vellalars and Maravars who were landlords and owners of palmyra trees exploited the poor Shanars. Caldwell studied the habits, customs and practices of Shanars. He successfully converted whole Shanar families and even villages to Christianity. As a philanthropist he has moved by the pathetic condition of the Shanars and wanted to do good to their community in and around Idaiyangudi to redress their suffering. Besides, the humiliation helped upon them and illtreatment they were suffering under the high caste people. He wrote all those in a small book, “The Tinnevelly Shanars”, in 1849, having a ring of truth in it. He did it with good intention to improve, the lot of Shanar Community.

He preached Christianity, but also played the role of a doctor, philanthropist, and a magistrate. He felt that it was his duty and loving service to establish more schools to educate and civilize not only Christians but also other sects of the community. He started to educate the illiterates. South Tinnevelly was badly affected by cholera. The people of Tirunelveli believed in the efficacy of *Mantras and Tantras*. They attribute every disease to the wrath of some god or goddess. People sacrifices, even human sacrifices for getting relief from the disease. When Caldwell came to that village and prayed, deadly cholera stopped. Seeing that the Hindus too asked him to pray for them. In 1869 when Tinnevelly experienced a flood never known before, Caldwell and his wife went from village to village and met the people. He shared their sufferings, comforted them. In this juncture the hospital he established at Idaiyangudi in 1870 with the help of Lord Napier, the then Governor of Madras. In 1877-78 when Tinnevelly witnessed severe famine and outbreak of Cholera. Caldwell addressed himself to relief work among the entire community irrespective of caste and creed. This earned for him the affection and regard of all and accounted for as many as 24,000 Hindus and Muslims embracing Christianity.

All the time the scholar and researcher mind in Caldwell was busy, producing several books. Amidst Gospel service, Caldwell wanted to give shape to his acquired knowledge about Tamil grammar, which he learnt from native scholars, pundits and European scholars. His Comparative Grammar of Dravidian or Family of South Indian Languages (1856) is still an irreplaceable classic on the subject and adoration and further researches until today. Caldwell felt all the time to know about the general history of the country where he is doing his religious service. However, he could not find a complete work on Tinnevely. He felt sad that there were very few historians in Tinnevely. From the very beginning of his arrival, he started reading the history of Tinnevely, from various sources. Most of the information on ancient India was, at that time, available in German which was learnt by Caldwell for that purpose. The collected materials for the “*History of Tinnevely*” was published in 1881 with the support of the Government of Madras.

He also wrote the *Records of the Early History of the Tinnevely Mission* of the Society for Promoting Christian knowledge and the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. He played a vital role in the translation work of The Bible and translated many hymns and also a prayer book. In addition, Caldwell found time for numerous pamphlets, the best known of which are those relating to demon worship in Tinnevely. Caldwell was also a research scholar of Archaeology. He wanted to excavate atleast one place noted by the Greek geographers. He selected Korkai and Kayal and did a bit of digging. Since the lack of enough facilities he could not succeed in these attempts. Following Mr. James the archaeologist, Caldwell too undertook Archaeological excavations in Korkai. He was the pioneer to reveal that Korkai was a harbour, Trade was carried out and Buddhism was prevalent there.

CONCLUSION :

Robert Caldwell lives in the heart of the Tamils through his famous work hardly ever known to the Dravidian Languages. His name and fame are still ringing not only in the ears of the people of Tirunelveli but also of India and the world in a wider sense. The hospital at Idaiyangudi as well as the Caldwell Higher Secondary School and the newly opened Caldwell College at Tuticorin revealed his contributions to Society, Language, History and Religion. Robert Caldwell was described in 'The Hindu' as "*a pioneering champion of the downtrodden*" and "*an active social reformer*". The government of Tamilnadu honoured his historic contribution to Tamil with a memorial and issued a stamp in his name. He is still remembered his statue, erected eighty years after his death, stands near the Marina Beach at Chennai.

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