

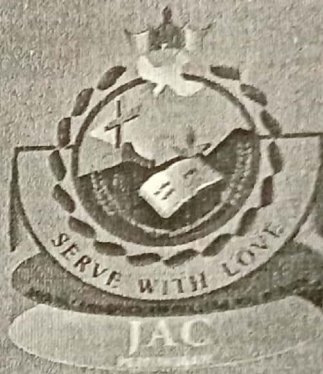
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## HARRIET ELIZA PARKER - A WOMAN MEDICAL MISSIONARY

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### Abstract

*Medical work was one of the marked features of American missionary activities in India, between 1870 and 1910. Though the missionaries came for preaching, they could not countenance the difficulties of the natives who suffered from various diseases. Realizing the situation women medical missionaries initiated the medical work for women and children. Some of the lady medical missionaries were the first to open hospitals for Indian women and attend to their physical sufferings in the Madurai region. Harriet Eliza Parker one of the women medical missionaries rendered meritorious service for the welfare of the women in and around Madurai. This paper makes an attempt to highlight the health services of the American Women Missionary Harriet Eliza Parker.*

**Key words:** Women Missionary, Leper Asylum, Bird's Nest,

### 1. Introduction

The American medical missionaries became well-known for their professional skill and compassionate disposition. In the year 1833, when Lord Hastings was the Governor-General of India, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) began to send American missionaries to South India. It founded their first missionary station in Madurai in 1834. It was named the American Madura Mission (AMM). The women in India hesitated to get treatment from the male physician. They preferred death than the treatment from male doctor. Harriet Eliza Parker one of the women medical missionaries rendered meritorious service for the welfare of the women in and around Madurai.

### 2. Arrival of Harriet Eliza Parker

In 1895, Harriet Eliza Parker MD came and offered her dedicated medical service. She helped the neglected, uncared and poorest women of Madurai and Ramnad



Districts. She was helped by her husband, Rev. Vaughan, in her struggle against illiteracy, superstitions, suppressions and customary and traditional oppressions.<sup>1</sup> Before she took charge of the Women's Hospital, she passed the Tamil Examination. She trained a young married woman as compounder and the newly appointed woman learned much and she was very much helpful to Parker.<sup>2</sup> In 1904, Miss. Pitchaimuttu, daughter of one of the pastors connected with the Mission, who had been trained as a Hospital Medical Assistant in the Madras Medical School, took her place in the hospital and had become the most valued assistant.<sup>3</sup> A young widow studied Pharmacy and took the place of a male compounder.<sup>4</sup> Parker and nurses visited the patients' houses because the native women experienced fear, superstition, ignorance and dirt. But the educated men in their families wanted the European treatment for their families. One woman in a distant village tried many doctors and many gods and finally, hating her life, put a noose around her neck and tried to end her life. Her faithful friends brought her to the Women and Children's Hospital and a minor surgery was sufficient to restore her life.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Parker worked a lot for the patients during night times. She was gentle in her manner and won the confidence of the patients and love of her colleagues. In spite of poor equipment and insufficient help, she led her assistants with enthusiasm and unselfishness. She did all works with the help of the native nurses and compounders. Dr. Parker visited the wards during early morning even before the hospital opened for the outpatients. She went from cot to cot and kindly gave counsel as well as medical advice to the patients. Hospital was opened at eight o' clock usually. Women and children from weary miles assembled in the verandah to consult the doctor. The nurses gave numbers to the patients one by one and they allowed consulting the doctor during their turn. Each patient received some prescription from the doctor and got medicine from the drug room. Some of the native women were able to read and they were given medicines in bottles. A paper indicated the number and size of the doses to be taken was pasted in these bottles. Dr. Parker's work was not restricted to the hospital itself and she had many calls to visit the homes of the native women in and around Madurai. The Hindu women still did not allow the male doctors to their homes for treating the women patients. Dr. Parker was the only woman physician in Madurai. J. Rutter Williamson recorded that,

*"All doctors know hours of hard work, skill, and every resource of instruments and delicate handling. Her hospital work is a night and day task, and yet she is never too busy or too tired to answer a call of distress and emergency, even if it means a thirty-mile Jutka ride without food and without sleep. Usually the missionary in charge of the station, to which her trip leads her, facilitates her work by sending out word of her arrival through the village catechists, thus having all in readiness for her coming. Perhaps through some woman who has been cured in her hospital, her fame has spread before her and the lame and the diseased come for miles to the village appointed for her visit, to be examined and to receive the healing medicine. Often there are cases of prolonged or desperate character and Dr. Parker usually prevails upon these to return with her to the hospital where, under the special care there given, they may recover".<sup>6</sup>*

### **3. Visit of Her Excellency**

His Excellency, the Governor and Lady Amphill visited Madurai in March 1902. Her Excellency Lady Amphill was interested in visiting the Women and Children's Hospital. Her Excellency stayed in the Teppakulam Bunglow and she was accompanied by Mrs. Gosling and Mr. E.L.R. Thornton, Collector of Madurai, to the American Mission Hospital for Women and Children. Parker received Her Excellency and took her to the consulting room where she spent nearly half an hour in minutely inspecting every detail of the hospital equipment. She also went round the various wards, inspecting both outpatients and inpatients concerning whom she made many kind and sympathetic enquiries. Parker gave Her Excellency a photograph of the hospital. Before leaving the hospital, Her Excellency made the following remarks in the visitors' book:

*"I have been much interested in my visit round the American Hospital for Women and Children which is being so admirably managed by Dr. Parker. I wish her every success in her good work".<sup>7</sup>*

### **4. Enlargement of the Hospital**

In 1902, the hospital was in need of enlargement, new roof, instruments, improved modern appliances, furniture and linen and more efficient helpers. At the end of that year, the hospital was in charge of Dr. Annie Young and her services both in the hospital and outside were of great value. An effort was made by her to secure funds for



repairs and improvements in the hospital. Two single rooms, *Greenfield Gift* and *Smith* 89, were prepared and equipped by the aid received from friends in Greenfield mass and from former classmates in Smith College. The equipments were also improved by the grant from the Mission.<sup>8</sup> In the upper floor of the hospital, five rooms were constructed for patients and nurses. Most of the rooms of the nurses were availed to the patients because of the crowd in the wards. In 1906, Zamindar of Ettiapuram donated Rs.1,000 towards the new quarters for the employees.<sup>9</sup> The hospital needed small rooms for the patients of contagious diseases and they were in the general ward, which was dangerous to other patients. Because of the rapid growth in the number of patients, the demand for trained nurses had also increased. Therefore, two young women from the mission were trained as compounders. Three nurses completed their two year course of training in Madras Medical School.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Scott from America and Miss. Ruth C. Heath, a trained nurse from England, came to help Parker.<sup>11</sup> Miss. Ruth C. Heath wrote that

*"I confess I am a little tired; it is over ten weeks since I had one whole night in my bed and the worst of it is Dr. Parker is tired too; but we both keep at it and daily strength is always given to meet the day's work. Apart from my hospital work, I find in adding up my out calls for this year (1916) that they number nine hundred and seventy-seven. This in itself means quite a fair amount of time and work."*<sup>12</sup>

### 5. Visiting of nearby Villages

Parker used to visit the nearby stations like Aruppukottai, by bullock cart and she lodged in the mission building. It was a small village and from early morning to the night, nearly 215 patients came for consultation and most of them walked miles to see the doctor. The mission medical group gave the patients best remedies and certain cases were referred to the Madura hospital for further treatment. In some of the villages, leprosy prevailed. A Brahmin woman was brought in with a foot badly crushed by falling into a well. At first it seemed a case for amputation but a persistent effort was made to save the foot. She had a dream, in which Jesus came and touched her foot. She woke up and said confidently that He had healed her. After a long care, she recovered.<sup>13</sup> Parker arranged for a medical itinerating in Melur Station. She visited two villages near Melur where mission work was well established and she visited a Hindu town of thousand houses. A medical camp was arranged in the market place.<sup>14</sup>

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17. Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, New Delhi, 1994, p.5
18. Harriet E Parker, A.M.M. Missionary, Madurai, 30 October 1922, letter to Friends, America.
19. Annual Report of the A.M.M., 1913, p.84.