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MISSIONARY ENDEAVOURS OF EVA MAY SWIFT IN MADURAI 1884-1943

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Abstract

The ancient Tamil Society suffered due to social evils like caste system, dowry problem, devadasi system, superstitious beliefs and suppression of women. Rural women could not enjoy the fruits of education as it was given only to men. American Missionaries who came to Madurai for preaching Christianity, engaged in educational, medical and social services. One of the women missionaries, Eva May Swift came to Madurai and worked for the development of women especially widows and destitute women. She was able to educate them and teach employable skills like sewing, weaving, embroidery, needle work and agriculture at Rachanyapuram in Madurai. Thus she served for the empowerment of women and her institute became a refuge for suppressed women.

Keywords: American missionaries, Women empowerment, Madurai, Eva May Swift.

Introduction

Madura country, one of the largest regions of the Madras Presidency was subjected to varied political fortunes in the hands of Pandyas, Muslims, Nayaks, and the British. Though, known well for its Sangam literature, its society underwent deterioration because of the social evils like caste system, superstitious beliefs and the suppression of women. Education, being restricted only to the children of upper castes and that too for the boys alone worsened the situation further. The American missionaries, who came to Madurai during 1834, toiled for alleviating these perils by offering the good news, education, medical service and social work. Among them, Eva May Swift who came in her young age developed reformatory measures in her own way with the principle of women for women's work.

Missionary Call

Born in Huntsville, Alabama on 3 May 1863, Miss Eva May Swift tasted the sufferings as her widowed mother had to look after a small daughter and two sons when her father died at the end of American Civil War.¹ She prepared for teaching, by attending public schools in Atlanta, Georgia and a woman's school at Sherman, Texas.² Though she was not a Christian in her early days, she met with a conversion experience during a Bible reading in Dallas, Texas led by Scofield. As Doe records, "She simply received God's word-unquestioningly; it was the end of controversy with her- and that is the secret of

her striking growth in knowledge in God's word."³ Convinced of a call to missionary work, she joined the American Madura Mission (AMM) in 1884.⁴ She reached India on 12 July 1884 and arrived at Madurai on 16 July which were later celebrated as Rachanyapuram Days.⁵ Historically she records as, "My grandfather was born the year the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was established. My mother was born the year the American Madura Mission was founded. Just after the Jubilee of the mission I set sail for India".⁶ She left her home in Texas for India in March 1884⁷ at the age of twenty two and she was the youngest missionary ever to be sent to a foreign field by the ABCFM.⁸

Mission Field

Immediately after her arrival, she could engage herself in preparatory duties including learning the Tamil language and leading some Sunday school classes.⁹ As Swift observes, "The greatest disability under which a young missionary labours is his want of the language. And possibly, if the opinions of a large number of the older workers could be voiced, they would still say "the language is the greatest barrier between us and the people".¹⁰

Mission Schools

In the Girls' High and Training School, Swift organized the normal department by which the Middle school classes were included as normal classes and the lower classes as the practicing school which made the school to be

recognized as the Madura Female Normal School by the Government. In 1886, it was established as a separate department under the control of Swift.¹¹ The School had three departments, the normal, middle and primary with twenty seven girls in 1888 and in 1890, when Swift went on furlough, she handed over the charges to Miss Bessie Noyes. She recorded as, "We believe that the time is come when we must heed the call for higher female education, and the almost imperative demands of parents by adding higher classes."¹² In 1885, the AMM voted to manage the four elementary schools for Hindu girls, the Girls Boarding School, and the new Normal Training School by Swift.¹³ She opined that the preaching of the Gospel, the salvation of the unsaved and the instruction of the church as the first stages of missionary enthusiasm.¹⁴ She was able to show great wisdom and foresight in materializing her plans for the missionary work.¹⁵ Her first goal was to favour the conversion of heathens to Christianity and to accept them in the church community.¹⁶ Swift writes as, "We are trying by these meetings and by personal work with individuals to do the good ... to accomplish the great work for which as I have said the educational work is but a means".¹⁷

Mission Bible School

Later, Swift went on a furlough from 1890 to 1892, during which she could reflect on her work and absorb current theological trends in America.¹⁸ In September 1892, after her return to Madurai, she took charge of the city Bible-Women, whose work included house-to-house visiting, teaching, preaching and singing the Gospel in the homes of the people.¹⁹ When she felt about the need of training them as they establish personal contact with all classes of people, she started the Lucy Perry Noble Bible School (LPNBS) in December 1892.²⁰

The school was named after the wife of the pastor of Union Park Church in Chicago who had the wish of not spending the money for flowers at her death but to donate it for human lives. The women of Indiana had also given some fund which made the building possible.²¹ The main objective of the school was to train women in Bible for two years so that they can preach the Gospel to the suppressed women of the Madurai region. Initially four students were enrolled in this school.²² Swift emphasized personal contacts by the missionaries and the Bible women either individually or in small groups since the social customs and religious belief prevented most of the women from attending public meetings.²³ She also wanted the building of the school to be located in a place which offers easy access to heathen women.²⁴

The Bible women students used to teach about eighty to two hundred and fifty Hindu women annually as a part of their preparation and some of them preached the gospel to sweeper caste people during evangelistic campaigns. In the pavilion of such campaigns, Hindu women of all castes entered to hear the Gospel especially the story of the Samaritan woman.²⁷

The students of the school entered the profession of nurses, matrons of schools or teachers while most of them became Bible women. They got employment in and around Madurai and some of them joined the Church of England, Wesleyan, Scotch and London Missions.²⁸ Swift considered church membership for converts as a desirable one but not absolute when she discovered hundreds of hidden Christians in Madurai. When mentioning about the Brahmin women having faith in Christ, Swift writes, "I shall not mention Paraganayagi as confessing Christ in the East-Gate church, but I believe I shall meet her in heaven".²⁹ Fearing persecution, Hindu women were reluctant to make public confession and entry into the church since it required renouncing of caste, hereditary duties, societal status, occupation and livelihood. Loss of place in the family and society was very difficult for women as, women were inexperienced, uninformed, easily intimidated. Family relationships marked the boundaries of their life and thought. The mother's heart was bound up with her children; her will was subjected to her husband. Her father or brothers were the acknowledged authorities.³⁰ She records, "The losses, trials, and difficulties, even the dangers that confront many converts in this country are not unknown to you. I myself have suffered trouble and turmoil, perplexity and expense and no small degree of danger; but I feel all three could be more easily borne were there some adequate provision for the care, protection, training and employment of such women as are called upon to incur loss and face dangers because of their confession of Christ."³¹ She kept the moulding of the characters of individual girls as a priority and stressed the upbuilding of the Christian character of girl students.

Mission at Rachanyapuram

In 1912, Swift tried for moving the Lucy Perry Noble Bible School (LPNBS) Rachanyapuram in the outskirts of Madurai with the addition of extension work department. As the existing place of the school was in unsanitary conditions and limited space, Swift located about thirty one acres near the horizon of the Alagar range and bought it with the benevolent donations from converts and friends in

America.³² The new place named as Rachanyapuram, meaning place of salvation, was situated in the middle of the Kallar country, an area dominated by a caste group known for its robbery.³³ Swift, due to her effective management cultivated their own paddy and vegetables, made their own clothes and furniture and ran a school and a dispensary for the neighbouring population. In due course, the school became a refuge for abandoned women, widows and recent converts. The single school had four departments viz., academic, industrial, home-life and Bible School and disseminated knowledge and skills for both earthly and spiritual life.

In this, the women were taught on employable skills of sewing, weaving, embroidery, needlework and agriculture.³⁴ She started the Industrial Department at LPNBS in June 1912. It continued lace making, prepared jams, jellies and marmalade and equipped the desperate women with industrial skills to lead a social life with confidence. The land for a separate Industrial school was purchased near Rachanyapuram campus with the money donated by Women's Board of Missions of the Interiors (WBMI) and the first industrial school was started with sixteen pupils in 1916. As it is recorded, "Some heard Collector Mr. Knapp say that three-fourths of what was worth showing or seeing in Madurai was the work of missions."³⁵ Swift decided to undertake this large project after observing the depressed state of women in Tamil Nadu especially that of women converts.

Mission for Destitute

Swift could recognize the problems of women and hence took efforts to provide refuge for widows and destitute women. When Hindu women embraced Christianity, her family members or relatives will not help her and she will be left alone. Hence she had to look after her needs of food, clothing, shelter and care during sickness by her own. But if she remained in the family as a secret Christian, she can't worship the family idol, evening lamp and her mind would rouse against many of the practices and customs of Hinduism. Commenting about their desperate state, Swift records, "The women must live, but there is no shelter for them; they must not be idle, but there is no work for them. Were there work they still need training. They are often in serious danger and need protection."

Birdsnest

As the Tamil society was filled with superstitious beliefs and evil customs the people especially the women

and children were much affected. Hence they established an organization called 'Birdsnest', which served as an abode and refuge for the destitute women and children. 'Birdsnest' picked up abandoned children from gutters and from the floors of courts and hospitals as unclaimed properties, left in the streets and crowded market places or brought in by friends and good Samaritans. Usually the children didn't know their parentage. Some of the girls even witnessed their mothers murdered by their own fathers on infidelity. Some of them had their parents as beggars, coolies, bonded labourers, prisoners, tribals and repatriates.³⁶ The orphan babies and children of the hospital were maintained in the 'Birdsnest'.⁴⁰ In 1921, when the whole town of Madurai was ravaged by the incidence of plague, 'Birdsnest' gave protection to newborn babies found alive in drainage.⁴¹ Through this compassionate service the missionaries stood witness for the Gospel they preached and this kind of acts helped them reach the people, which made their work effective and easier.

In spite of her busy schedule in teaching and supervising, acting as architect and contractor of buildings, Swift could find time for writing a number of books. She brought her mother who was of eighty years of age during her final furlough and took efforts to caring her mother. Her services to the community especially to women caught the attention of the Government of India, which presented her with *Kaiser-I-hind* medal. As she loved the people of Madurai much, she desired to receive the medal from the District Collector in Madurai instead of receiving it from the Provincial Governor in Madras. The valuable services rendered by her to the women of Madurai and Ramnad districts proved much useful which improved the health of women in physical, mental, social and spiritual realms.

Eva May Swift, the youngest missionary came to India as a missionary and dedicated totally for the upliftment of women in a unique manner by establishing school for Bible women, industrial department and extension classes. Her institute served as a refuge for destitute women, widows and new women Christian converts.

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