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Social Emancipation brought out by American Missionaries in Madurai

- Dr. Delphin Prema Dhanaseeli

The Tamil society in the eighteenth century experienced a degraded state due to the changing political fortunes, wars, negligence of the rulers, illiteracy, ignorance and social problems like caste discrimination and poverty. Practice of unnecessary rituals, customs and superstitious beliefs attached to their religion paved way for its devastation. When majority of the people depended on agriculture for livelihood, famines, failure of rains and the outbreak of epidemics added much to the turmoil. When the American missionaries worked in India, they had the chance of acquiring first-hand knowledge about the people and their social practices and developed the confidence that by their cultural superiority and the uniqueness of their spiritual message, the benighted India could be raised. When the American

missionaries visited Madurai, they found it a suitable field for their proselytisation activities to serve God and people through educational, medical and social services.

The missionaries of American Madurai Mission (A.M.M) had the aim of developing men and women with



Pial school

qualities of reverence, god fearing, clean, genuine, self-sacrificing and trustworthy and aspiring which were rare in those days. These missionaries, who came primarily for

propagating the Gospel, contributed significantly to the formation of a new social order in Tamil Nadu through their diverse activities by establishing schools, hospitals, dispensaries, leper asylums, churches, orphanages and vernacular schools. They were able to highlight the injustices of the caste system which suppressed the lower

classes and the implications of untouchability in Hindu society and pernicious customs like widow celibacy, child marriage and pilgrimages. They spared no pains in condemning the caste system, which was the root of social evil by their preaching, teaching and writing. Though the A.M.M. missionaries had kept evangelization as their prime objective, they worked equally for social upliftment and hence their services to the Tamil society are given a special attention.

Nineteenth century Tamil Nadu moved towards a new pattern of life style and social transformation. In the existing socio-political environment in Tamil Nadu predominated by exploitative and traditional customs and practices, the people at the lower rungs of the society were subjected to undergo socio-economic neglect. However, the present study is restricted to the influence wielded by the missionaries in establishing new social order in Madurai.

Social Setting

The social setting reflected the caste system, socio-economic condition and concepts of the native society in Tamil Nadu. As the land was overstocked with cattle and other resources available abundantly, it could satisfy the natives and attract foreigners. The people mostly belonged to the Dravidian stock comprising Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The Tamil communities fallen to social

oppression were mainly the Maravars, Kallars, Padayachis, Nadars, Paravas, Pallas and Parayars who experienced inequity and injustice. The American missionaries recorded, "there is in every part, the ever present and very much oppressed out-caste community". Baierlein records, "The Tamil people are, therefore, very divided and cut up, for each man first looks at his neighbour's caste-marks and asks regarding his caste before he will have anything to do with him".

The caste system became an inseparable part of the Tamil society.

Among the depressed classes, social evils like irregular marriages, polygamy and divorces were so commonly prevalent. They used to consume intoxicating drinks and eat the flesh of dead animals. Divorce was common among certain communities and it was said that a man dismissed his wife by giving her some money and calling her his sister. Concubinage was prevalent among the people especially in the nobility and the rich. People attached much value to funeral ceremonies where the women wept in the most noisy manner. They also had the custom of casting horoscopes for their children. Blood feuds were common among the communities of weavers, hunters and Kallars. In certain castes for economic reasons, people resorted to female infanticide. Both royalty and nobility practised *sati* while the Brahmins and other castes practised it rarely. Ultimately the society practised all kinds of social evils in the form of

customs filled with superstitious beliefs.

Social Emancipation

The American missionaries, by their preaching, stimulated the spirit of enquiry of the natives and pointed out the negative aspects of Indian social system. They openly challenged the validity of the religious customs like widow celibacy, child marriage, pilgrimages, caste system, idolatry and priesthood. Though they could not succeed immediately in removing these social evils, they achieved success in making them look ridiculous and anachronistic to the educated sections of the society. The Tamil society suffered due to famine, murders, high way robbery, house breaking and theft which were very common. Even in prisons, prisoners had quarrels due to caste discrimination and in the society it imposed a constraint upon social mobility and economic progress. Even the children of the high caste members were left to eat and learn with those of the low castes in Mission schools. When traditional schools maintained caste system in its purest form, the Mission schools were the first to venture into the abolition of castes inside the portals of their schools, which set a wave of motion towards caste reforms. Though the higher castes hesitated initially to join in Mission schools, later they joined; but they rejected their religion. The caste ridden Tamil society began to loose its noose due to the efforts of the A.M.M. missionaries.

Measures to Create Social Harmony

The missionaries found that local beliefs and narrow social approach were responsible for people's poverty and miseries and hence they served to expose the society to new spiritual thoughts and beliefs. People of Madurai experienced poverty due to extravagancy, ignorance, illiteracy, lavish spending during festivals and ceremonies, wasting resources due to customs and practices and the negligence of hygiene and public health. The rural poor had a temptation for intoxicating drinks and drugs which led to violence and crime, thus bringing misery to the family and society. Christian missionaries played a major role in stimulating social reform movements and social changes. Without any compromise, the missionaries worked for social reforms. Before evangelizing the natives, the missionaries tried to impart social change among the Tamils. The missionaries visualized an improved Tamil society filled with culture and social justice.

Missionaries aimed at social progress comprising Christianization that affected social relationships, economic condition and personal spirituality. They firmly believed that when a person becomes a Christian, immediately he becomes progressive not only in religious matters but also in industrial and intellectual aspects. The old and traditional customs did not bind him as he had experienced freedom, liberty and advancement. Through their services, the missionaries attempted to attract the natives.

When the natives were filled with superstitious beliefs and traditional practices, the American missionaries tried their level best to remove such social evils from the society. In Madurai district, an evil practice called hook-swinging was prevalent and the missionaries took much effort to fight against it. People also had superstitious beliefs that human sacrifices were necessary for the completion of large buildings. When Missionary Lawrence was erecting a chapel in Dindigul, the workers of the building wanted to cut the ear of a man which was prevented by the missionary. Yet, in his absence they carried out this practice. He commented that no reasoning, no persuasion and no ridicule could conquer their invincible prejudices. The missions were directed to bring about moral reforms in Tamil society and to emancipate the natives from the superstitions and the tyrannical power exercised by the local and ignorant practices. When the missionaries were engaged in this work, they faced opposition from the natives especially from the caste Hindus.

Problem of Caste

The Tamil society, filled with the evils of caste discrimination caused much hindrance to the reformative measures of the A.M.M. missionaries. In spite of much setbacks in their activities, the missionaries stood firm in the abolition of caste from the society in general and the Christian church in particular. Until 1847, the Pallars were mainly

agricultural slaves; but later they made much progress through the efforts of A.M.M. missionaries and enormously represented the mission. Unlike other missions where caste offered an advantage for the conversion of a sect or caste of people, A.M.M. did not get any such chance and hence worked for all castes including a majority of the middle castes and lower castes. They did not allow any distinction of the caste in their churches and demanded the renunciation of caste. The native Christians even mingled with foreigners and attended church services sitting near the side of people from lower castes and participated in the communion.

Even though inter-marriages were encouraged by the missionaries, caste maintained itself in other ways like social customs and marriage relationships. To deal with this problem of caste, the A.M.M. missionaries had a meeting in Dindigul on 6 July 1847 and unanimously adopted the following four resolutions. They were: (i) Readiness to eat with any Christian of any caste, (ii) testing any person for renouncing caste before administering any sacrament, (iii) accepting catechists after he renounces caste and (iv) the right to employ Pariah cooks in the boarding schools. The A.M.M. missionaries were successful in making the new Christian converts to renounce caste.

Understanding the problem of caste conflicts even among the catechists, native helpers and seminarists, the missionaries wanted to

remove the evil of caste from all its roots. Hence they initiated arranging 'love feasts'. The missionaries took much effort to remove caste conflicts among the catechists and native assistants. The native Christians practised caste discrimination even in the church which was vehemently opposed by the missionaries who wanted to bring social harmony among the Tamils. The outcastes were not allowed to take water from the common well and they had to wait for a long time away from the well t i l l compassionate high caste person poured water in their pots. They felt happy when the missionaries of A.M.M. dug a well for them in 1912 with the money donated by Annamalai Chettiar, an Indian Banker. Dr. Scudder suspended a large number of native helpers and seminarists from the church in 1850, on account of their adherence to caste. He was directed by the Mission to request the native Christians and inform them that all who practice caste discrimination and those who would not unite with their fellow members of the church in coming to the social repast (like *samapandi*) which was arranged in the house of Missionary Chandler



Women's Hospital

would be suspended from the privileges of Lord's supper. When they declined doing this, and one of their members defended the need of caste, Dr. Scudder announced that all who would not come to the repast were suspended from the privileges of the Lord's Supper. When they directed the native converts to have dinner with men of all castes as 'love feast', they met so much of opposition which often resulted in the attack on the missionaries.

By emphasizing equality, they created a sense of belonging among the untouchables and lower classes. Some of

the orthodox Hindus openly objected to the Christian methods and even ridiculed their principles. In 1919, during the baptismal service, J.E. Jeffery, one of the American missionaries observed the mingling and co-mingling of the representatives from sixteen different castes. When the caste Hindus got converted, they gained equal status and commanded equal respect. During these times, the patronage and support shown by the British officials, especially that of the then Collector, of Madurai, Blackburne brought consolation. The A.M.M. missionaries strongly condemned the practice of caste discrimination.

Attempt towards Social Elevation

The A.M.M. missionaries could realize the emergence of a new dream of national unity, a new passion for political liberty, a new enthusiasm for popular education, a new desire for social and religious reform and a new antagonism to caste as a result of the new awakening. They, along with the police officials in 1918 started a special class for *Kurava* children for their social upliftment and to preach the gospel among them. Their wandering children willingly came forward to accept the rules and regulation of the school life. But a lot of patience had to be exercised with those students who ran away to their parents. Even then a few gypsy students were fully reformed and some of them were appointed as Mission workers. R.A. Dudley, one of the A.M.M. missionaries spent his major portion of energy for the work among the *Kallars* of the Madurai district. Their children, maintained at the boarding school, progressed marvelously in sewing, weaving and carpentry work in addition to reading and writing. The change of environment gave a vision of a broader life. Many women of the silk weaver caste started attending

Christian meetings and churches. They even freely visited the Mission houses, developed a character of independence and began to enjoy freedom. The missionaries also wanted the native Christians to be independent with the sense of equality and freedom when receiving the responsibility and power from them. They also wanted the women self-sufficient and hence they taught them employable skills. In spite of all these efforts and social progress, the missionaries observed the domination of caste in Tamil society.

The work of the American Missionaries significantly contributed to the establishment of newer trends in Tamil society. Their service through social reforms imparted a considerable impact on Tamil people especially the destitute and depressed classes who lived in poverty and ignorance. The reformative measures of the American missionaries came like a light to remove the darkness of the society. The role of American Madura Mission in bringing up the Tamil society served as a force towards establishing a new social order with reference to changing political scenario.

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