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SR. ROSE BENEDICT BENOIT - THE LADDER OF WOMEN IN AND AROUND MADURAI

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In 19th century, when Madurai was still primitive, women were a very secluded lot. For them early marriage was the rule and education something unimaginable¹. Sir Thomas Munro who was the then Governor of Madras started a statewide educational enquiry with the view to improve education. It is equally true that as a result of this enquiry a few government schools were established in Madurai district. The educational statistics and information collected in 1823 in consequence of Munro's enquiry show however that the district was by no means backward in education, when compared to other districts of Madras state. A department of Education was organized in 1855; the post of a director of public instruction was created. It was in this background that education began to make progress in Madurai.²

Arrival of Missionaries

Christian missionaries came to India to spread Christianity and they also worked for the growth of education. Among them Segan Paul (1683-1719), Constantine Beschi (1680-1747), G.U. Pope (1820-1908), Dr. Caldwell (1815-1891) were important missionaries. Segan Paul was sent by Frederick IV, the ruler of Denmark to Tharangampadi. For the first time he printed books in Tamil with the help of printing press. Constantine Beschi was popularly called as Veeramamunivar who belonged to Italy. In 1711, he came to India and he called himself as Thairiyannathar. He was the first person to write dictionary (*Sathuragarathi*) in Tamil. *Thembavani* was one of his best works. He also wrote *Paramarthagurukathai*, *Vethiyar Ozhukkam*, *Vetha Vilakkam*, *Thonnul Vilakkamum Uraiyum*. He translated Thirukural into Latin language. He sang Thirukavalur Kalambagam. G.U. Pope came to Tamilnadu in 1839. In 1844, he constructed a school at Sayarpuram in Tuticorin. He preached in many European languages. He published *Thirukural* in English in 1886. He also translated *Naladiyar* in 1893 and *Thiruvagasam* in 1900. Dr. Caldwell who stayed in Idyanakudi in Tirunelveli district published the History of Tirunelveli in English in 1881. *Thiravida Mozhigalin Oppilakkanam* was one of his best works. Thus Christian missionaries had worked for the development of education.³

In 1924, into this setting, entered a young dynamic Sister of St. Joseph of Lyons, was Sr. Rose Benedict. Aflame with the spirit of the Foundress, she discerned the signs of the times and the needs of the people, especially of women. Endowed with a radical personality, great inner freedom and undaunted courage, this "flame of God" committed her life to the liberation and empowerment of women. At the start, it was a lonesome and unwelcome struggle for this tall American woman in traditions-bound Madurai. But soon her sincerity of purpose, spirit of dedication and organizing capacity won the confidence of all.⁴

Early Life of Sr. Rose Benedict

Sr. Rose Benedict popularly known as Mother Rose, born Marie Ange Benoit, professed 53 years. Marie Ange was born on 24th August 1898 at Le Conte De Drummont (Canada). Her parents were Ernest Alesandrina Cyr. She lost her parents at a tender age and so she was brought up by her aunts in America. Just like St. Teresa of child Jesus, she nurtured a desire to dedicate her life to God at the age of 15. For this purpose Marie Ange went to Canada to spend a few weeks with her grandparents. In Canada she received a letter from Mother Marie Benedict asking her whether she was desiring to enter religious order. There upon Marie Ange wrote to her aunts in America to come and take her back. On the way she informed the aunts of her decision to enter as a postulant at South Berwick. She became the first American Postulant of St. Joseph of Lyons in Marne. The entry into postulancy took place on 29th November 1913 and Marie Ange made her first vows on 14th July 1915.

Arrival of Sr. Rose Benedict to India

Sr. Rose spent a few years at St. Paulen Jarez in France. Sr. Rose Benedict and Mother Marie Benedict arrived in India in November 1924. She forced the rich people to help their lease fortunate brothers and sisters to give them some job, to help them to develop their intellectual and physical capacities etc. She had free and easy access to the rich and influential people because she was "great and simple".⁵ Her talents were varied. Sr. Rose was a fine musician. She could play the Piano and the organ beautifully. She was good at writing short stories for children's magazines and she did that to collect funds for her growing institutions.

Sr. Rose in Madurai

Sr. Rose was a born teacher and she found pleasure in enlightening the young mind. Her advice to co-workers was always "Never give up teaching. It is our direct link with the young mind and it's our sacred duty to guide them when they need". Sr. Rose was remarkable for her qualities of leadership, but it was her personal charm of manner and her sincere love



understanding that made her unique.⁶ She had an extraordinary taste for music. She was also an artist and a builder of St. Joseph's Convent, Madurai, Holy Family Convent, Gnanaoivuparam, Assumption House and Fatima College.⁷

The idea of girls' education caught on. Sr. Rose was one of the pioneers in the field of women's education. She liberated the girls from the cruel customs of the day. Sr. Rose went on and told the fathers of the girls that they cannot play fancy games with the lives of their children and that a girl must be mature. Sr. Rose won over most of the parents in Madurai.⁸ As a great visionary she saw the critical need for education for the academic and cultural growth of women. She saw education as a way out of poverty. She was an able administrator. She was the spokes woman between the Government and the people. She was called the "Man of Madurai". Sr. Rose Benedict had a great devotion and love to Blessed Virgin Mary. She was having a great devotion to Don Bosco. Just like him she became the educator of the girls who remained within closed doors. It had been a herculean task for Sr. Rose to get these girls out of the house and bring them to school. Sr. Rose had interesting methods of teaching and she was popular among the school children. Her sincerity and words of love appeal to the parents. Many of them sent their girls to school. Thus the gates were opened to women's education.⁹

Mother Rose had the heavy responsibilities of bringing up big institutions like Fatima College and St. Joseph's school, both in Madurai.¹⁰ Now, parents came in hundreds to Sr. Rose and clamored for seats for their daughters in her schools. Unable to refuse them, Sr. Rose took the only possible course she expanded the school. In 1935 the school was upgraded and that meant more buildings. Sr. Rose took up the building work as well. Unmindful of heat and dust, she would stand near building site with parasol supervision, at the various sites in and around Madurai. She would take short holidays to visit the States but hasten back to Madurai.¹¹

Now, St. Joseph's school was immensely popular and in 1950 the strength stood at 3000. Times had changed. People of Madurai wanted their girls to have higher education as well as under her guidance. This meant that girls continue to study till they are twenty or twenty four and also choose a profession and turn out to be a doctor, a professor or teacher.¹²

In Madurai, the chances of getting collegiate education for girls after completing high school studies in Madurai was inadequate. In 1948, Rev. Peter Leonard the Arch Bishop of Madurai conceived the idea of starting a college for women in his Episcopal city. He conveyed this wish to the sisters of St. Joseph's of Lyons. Sr. Rose a member of the congregation took the needed initiative which resulted in the formation of Fatima College. Sr. Rose was instrumental in establishing the Fatima College, which came into being on 2nd July, 1953 when Rev. Peter Leonard declared it open. Founding of this college marked an epoch in the history of women's higher education in Madurai district.¹³

With farsighted vision and seemingly 'Impossible dreams', she devoted her entire life for the cause of women's education and empowerment.¹⁴ Sr. Rose got busy. She laid out plans for the different courses in college education. It was one of her long cherished dreams to open up avenues for higher studies right in Madurai by her remarkable skill and oneness of purpose, she raised beautiful buildings for the college, dedicated it to Lady Fatima. Sr. Rose helped the girl-child to gain knowledge and respect in society.¹⁵ As a recognition for all her services, Madurai town people wanted to present her with a medal which she refused.¹⁶

Sr. Rose lived her religious and never thought of preaching it. Many a catholic wondered when she found time for her inner life of prayer and meditation. She was nurtured by her deep faith and spent long hours her keens at night when no one saw her, she helped, "to make a undying music in the world, Breathing a beautiful order that controls with growing sway the growing life of man.

Her shrewd ways led her to take the right decision. She believed in concrete help to the poor. None went away empty handed from her door step. Sr. Rose was showered with gifts by her innumerable old students and friends. She found joy in re-distributing these in an effort to cheer up a lonely soul on one who had never received a gift in life. She held the least of the things for herself and lived in the tradition of the proven kind "cure of Ard".

She found time for everybody, the ordinary and the simple. She was counselor beyond compare. She was living symbol of purity and Godliness to them. She would sit with the dying and pray for the departing soul. Old students visited her often. She was a qualified teacher respected by men and women alike.

After arduous years of work her health failed and late November 1968 she had to be hospitalized. Myriad old students kept a constant vigil and rushed necessary medicines by plane. But these were her last days. She took leave of the entire nuns and quietly slipped away to be forever with the Lord. Her's was a life matchless beauty and courage.

to show her that she had done what she knew her duty to do. The expression of her desire to give her an amount of money for the school, but she would have none of it. "I have done my duty in Christ," she said
In the cross of Christ I glory,
Triumphing o'er the wrecks of Time,
All the light of Sacred Story,
Gathers round its head sublime.

By her side we find a lamp, a shining Ray in down the figure's broadening way, that gives out the fragrance of a Rose.
The Rose has an air of fragrance
Let your life be scented too
With the sweet perfume of kindness
Which draws out the best in you.

The people of Madurai honored her by erecting a Doot of St. Rose Benedict and installed it in the old Madurai Roman Catholic Church.

Conclusion

St. Rose Benedict a woman with soul and kind heart for the needy, especially for women was the cause for establishing a school and the Fatima College in Madurai. She had won the love of people in and around Madurai. So she was popularly known as 'The Mother of Madurai'.

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