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Contribution of Swedish Missionaries, Rev. Nordmark and Esther Peterson for Women's Development in the Field of Social Recognition in Tamil Nadu (India)

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Abstract:

The Indian Society has been in a condition of backwardness for many centuries. Women lived in a backward condition even within such a down trodden society. Though we hear about women's rights during the Tamil Sangam Age, we cannot be absolutely sure that women enjoyed a high place in society. Sense of slavery was not even felt by the local Indians and so the fact that the society was reeling under heavy depression was not even realized. The condition of the women was pathetic. The agony of the situation of slavery of women was not self imposed. It was not thrust upon them just by the family members alone. It was a result of the 'age old practice of religious values' which on the one hand hailed women as goddesses - and on the other hand, did not allow their women even to touch or worship or enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temples, exactly where the idols of highly respectable 'Women Goddesses' were kept and worshipped. It was strange for the CSM Missionaries when they observed that the Indians worshipped women in the stone form but they were not willing to treat them with minimum respect and dignity in the real form.

1. Introduction

Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Henrich Pluchaeu arrived at Tranquebar on 9 July 1706 AD. This is the day of the birth day of the Protestant Mission in India.¹ From this day many protestant missionaries came and served in Tamil Nadu. And started many orphanage and Widow Rehabilitations centre in Tamil nadu. Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission took the charge of the Danish Mission in 1848 in Tamil nadu. Church of Swedish Mission also joined with LELM packet. This Article deals about the contribution of the Swedish Missionaries for Women's Development in the field of social Recognition.

The Tamil Society has been in a condition of backwardness for many centuries. Women lived in a backward condition even within such a down trodden society. Though we hear about women's rights during the Tamil Sangam Age, we cannot be absolutely sure that women enjoyed a high place in society. Even in those days' child marriage and 'Sati' (wife committing suicide in the funeral pyre of her dead husband) were prevalent. Opportunities for education were not given to women except for the royal families. The 'Khalapirar Age' was the darkest period in the history of Tamil Nadu. The superstitious beliefs like, child marriage, Sati, Reluctance to widow remarriage, Refusal to girl's education, Refusal to women's property rights, were strictly maintained and adhered to in the reigns of 'Pandiyar', 'Cholan', Muslim Kings, 'Naickers', the Vijaya Nagar Emperors etc. A woman, as a child is controlled by her father, as a wife she is controlled by her husband, and as an old lady she is controlled by her son/children. Womanhood itself was considered to be a cursed birth by almost everyone in the society, both men and women. The social structure and its values did not accept the possibility that women also can think all by themselves and take reasonable decisions. Not only in Tamil Nadu but the whole of India this situation was the same.

Even though many Europeans visited India and the British ruled India, Schools and welfare administrations were not part of the agenda for them.² They were also selfish and business oriented. In contrast to this, the Christian missionaries observed the society deeply and wanted to bring up the women from their wretched state of being and redeem them in to a civilized society where they can be accepted as creation of God and equal to anybody else. The strategy they believed in became the root cause for establishing strong and permanent educational institutions. They were not just dreaming or planning but were attempting to do things in a pragmatic way.

It is true that Catholic missionaries like Robert De Nobile, Francis Xavier, 'Veera Ma Munivar' who came long after Apostle Thomas, not only preached the Word of God, but also practised social welfare values which resulted in genuine social transformation. The early Catholic missionaries from Portugal established schools for girls in Southern India.³ After the Reformation Movement of Martin Luther, missionaries from the Protestant group also started coming to India. On the 9th Day of July in the year 1706 AD,

¹ V.Ramachandran, Gender and Women Development Issue, Delhi: Abhijeet publication 2009, p115.

² Alka Srivastava, Associate Editors, Sandali, Women's Link, Delhi: Mahila Kalyan Samiti, 2007, p24.

³ John Murdoch, Indian Missionary Manual, Hints to young Missionaries in India, Archives, 275. 4M97.p69,70.

Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg landed on the east coast of Southern India and soon after in 1707 he started a school for women in Tranquebar, Tanjavur District. Lutheran Missionaries started coming to India more in numbers. The religious and social activities of these people grew more and more in strength and stature and eventually it came to be recognized as The Tranquebar Mission. Leipzig Mission accepted responsibility for the whole of the Danish Mission in the year 1849. The Church of Swedish Mission collaborated with the Danish Mission and together they looked after the activities of the mission field all over Tamil Nadu, which continued effortlessly and efficiently even during the times of the two major world wars in the early and middle of Twentieth Century.⁴

The humble beginnings of the work of Protestant Missionary Ziegenbalg in Tranquebar spread quickly all over Tamil Nadu. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Society for Propagation of the Gospel in foreign Part and Church Missionary Society sent their respective missionaries and made them work in the Danish Halle Mission. The works of this Danish Halle Missionary were taken over completely by the Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission in the year 1849 and thus the LELM spread its work all over Tamil Nadu. Elementary schools, High schools, Teacher Training Schools, Hostels, Home for Widows and Hospitals were established in many places. Church of Swedish mission started its activities officially in Cuddalore in 1740. But it joined the Leipzig Mission in 1948. Its monthly Tamil Magazine 'Arunodhayam', (meaning the Rising Sun) was started in the year 1853.⁵ An Eye Hospital was started in Tirupattur. During the First World War between 1914 and 1918 and also during the Second World War between 1939 and 1945, this Leipzig and the German Missionaries were kept under the British government and all their works were also looked after by the

1.1. Church of Sweden Mission

A new organization under the banner of Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church was established in 1919, which after running the show for several decades, ultimately handed over all of its responsibilities to the Tamil People in 1950. Under its able supervision all the activities are done till today. The Bishopric system was introduced and Swedish Bishops themselves were governing and leading the institutional and pastoral aspects of the church in Tamil Nadu.⁶

Even though the Leipzig Mission and the Church of Sweden Mission were sincerely working together, there were difference of opinion between these two mission boards. Because of this problem a new area called the 'Swedish Circle' was carved out for separate handling by the CSM Missionaries. The thaw to work among the women in Tamil Nadu was felt by the people who were leading the Mission Board in Sweden.

2. Insightful Intervention of the CSM Missionaries

2.1. Condition of Women

When the CSM missionaries came to India what they saw was really shocking. The country was governed by the British Queen. Sense of slavery was not even felt by the local Indians and so the fact that the society was reeling under heavy depression was not even realized. The pathological condition found expressions in the absence of the traditional values of the culture.⁷ People had no self dignity or self respect. Survival of the fittest was the norm of the day. Equality among people was not believed to be a necessity at all. Because the then government was only a Police State (and not a welfare State) the necessity to work for the welfare of the people was not felt to be a necessity.

The Tamil culture which had been influenced by the strong Hindu religious values treated people based on the origin of their birth. The birth of an individual decided the caste to which he/she belonged. The caste was based on hereditary lineage. Untouchability was practised among people because of the caste system.⁸

Among these painful realities the women were treated as a curse in a family. Women born in socially low class and lowest classes and those who were born to social outcast were twice alienated. First, because they belonged to the low caste, and then – within the low castes, the women were considered to be the lowest of the lowly. The men from the lowest classes treated their women lower to them. Thus the condition of the women was unbelievably low.

The condition of the women was pathetic. The agony of the situation of slavery of women was not self imposed. It was not thrust upon them just by the family members alone. It was a result of the 'age old practice of religious values' which on the one hand hailed women as goddesses - and on the other hand, did not allow their women even to touch or worship or enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temples, exactly where the idols of highly respectable 'Women Goddesses' were kept and worshipped.⁹ It was strange for the CSM Missionaries when they observed that the Indians worshipped women in the stone form but they were not willing to treat them with minimum respect and dignity in the flesh and blood form.

All these factors found reflections in the everyday life of the women whom the CSM missionaries met in the villages. While history could show eminent personalities like Velu Nachiar who presided wars and the Rani Mangammal who ruled the country, the contextual reality was that women's living conditions were so bad to the extent that many people preferred to kill the 'female foeti' and the 'just born female babies'. This female infanticide is a direct result of the dowry system that prevailed in the society, especially

⁴ S. Manickam, Studies in Missionary History Reflections on a Culture-Contact, Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1988.p65.

⁵ Samuel Iyer, History of the Tranquerbar Mission in Tamil A.D.1706-1953, Madras: The Tranquerbar printing & publishing House, 1955, pp187-189

⁶ J.N. Lenker, Lutheran in All Lands (The Wonderful Work of God, Vols,1,2.) Newyork: J.A.Hill & Co, Easteran House, 1894.p

⁷ M.M. Srinivas, Social change in Modern India, Bombay: Allied publishers, 1966, p.75 S.B.

⁸ R. Muthulakshmi, Female Infanticide its causes and solution, New Delhi: Discovery publishing House, 2003, p.7

⁹ A.Sundra pandian Dowry – The reason for female infanticide, Junior vikatan (a Tamil Weekly)

among certain caste based communities in the Usilampatti Area in Madurai district.¹⁰ It was also prevalent in Salem, Dharmapuri districts also. Specifically, what was called as the CSM Pioneer Board Area, the Usilampatti Taluk, and this practice was high among the (Piramalai) Kallar Community.

2.2. Widows Fund

There was a genuine need for some kind of social, psychological and financial support for the widows who had lost their face in their own family and society were living as mobile dead bodies without any hope for the present or future. When they join others for worshipping God, the conscience of those who worship with them became filled with the spirit of God. And they realized the need for doing something for these widows as early as possible. That way, the kind of pragmatic theology believed by these missionaries were practiced. Hence they organized widows fund which gave financial assistance to these poor widows. The age of these widows varied from a young age to very old age.

4. Conclusion

Women in the down trodden most backward Kallar communities and the untouchable Dalit communities were twice alienated. They suffered from the outside society and they also suffered from within their own families. Illiteracy, ill health, poverty and civic inertia could be cited as the basic reasons for this condition of women in society. This means that they were not educated, they did not have health and medical facilities, they did not have any income generation and economic development activities and they did not know how to fight for these things and get what is their right for themselves. There was no organized service provider to guide and help them in all these things. But a dedicated research into the events of history, related to the life and works of the Missionaries from the Church of Sweden Mission reveals an unimaginable abundance of dedication and sacrifice on the part of the missionaries which has become the root cause for the fantastic social change and social mobility on the part of the women of Tamil Nadu.

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¹⁰ Geraldine Forbes, The New Cambridge Histroy of India ,Newyork: Cambridge university Press,1996,p13.