



Contributions of Christian Missionaries in Eradicating Social Evils from Kerala Society

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ABSTRACT :

The pre-modern Kerala Society had been infested with multifarious social evils that had affected almost all aspects of social life. The majority of these social evils were imposed by the privileged classes of the society upon the less or least privileged communities. The Christian missionaries who came to Kerala since the arrival of the Portuguese have endeavored to eradicate these evils and were successful in many cases. The purpose of this paper is to focus upon certain social evils that had 'reigned' over the Kerala Society, the Christian missionaries raised their voices against.

INTRODUCTION :

Even before the arrival of the Portuguese, many Christian missionaries had visited the land of Kerala with the sole purpose of propagating Christianity. They never interfered in the social life of the people of Kerala, who ever had been living in this land. But the missionaries who came to Kerala after the Portuguese arrival, were taken aback by observing many evil practices, as part of the social system. They tirelessly endeavored to educate the masses about the evil involved in these practices and tried hard to eradicate those social evils and were successful to a great extent.

1. Infanticide: One of the superstitious evil practices that was prevalent in Kerala was infanticide. "The children who were born on inauspicious stars were considered a curse for the family. So, they were either killed or sold to the vagabonds. The missionaries vehemently fought against this evil and wicked practice."¹ Though male infanticide was occasional, female infanticide was quite common. Male infanticide was generally done as a sacrifice to please the gods for better harvest or prosperity. In some cases, if the male child was born on inauspicious days, in such cases also male infanticides were done. But female infanticide was quite common. It was done not only as a sacrifice for better fortune, or because the child was born on inauspicious days, but it was also done because the parents did not want to have a girl child mainly because of the burden of dowry to be given at the time of the girl's marriage. Since the daughters of the day were not given any share of the family property as a custom, the dowry system was the order of the day. The situation would be worse if the daughters were born to poor parents as they would not be able to give a decent dowry, even if they were willing, when they send her away in marriage. This situation created a great cause of concern for them and so they indulge themselves in committing the evil deed of infanticide. The missionaries fought against this social evil, which was eventually done away with.

2. Untouchability and Unapproachability: One of the worst social evils in those days, practiced even by the Christians, was untouchability and unapproachability. According to this social system, certain communities among the population were considered as upper castes and others as lower castes, based on the *Kuladharm* system introduced by the Namboothiri Brahmins. The so-called low caste people were untouchable and unapproachable to the forward castes, including the St. Thomas Christians who, according to Christianity, should have been free from all caste barriers. As such, they (the so-called low caste) were not allowed to walk along the main roads, touch or even cross beyond a restricted distance from a member of the forward community. If this rule was violated the offender could be beaten or even killed. In order to recognize a low caste person, the rule was that he or she should not wear clothes above the waist, including the girls and women. "The lower castes, particularly the *pulayars* were not even allowed to breathe the same air as the other castes or use a public pathway. A lower caste person could pollute a higher caste person by merely coming within a certain distance from him, or in extreme cases, the pollution is transmitted even by simply seeing a lower caste person"²

The Christians, who were privileged to be considered a higher caste right from the beginning, always wanted to maintain that respectable position in the society in tune with the other forward castes. So, they "did not allow the lower classes to get baptized and join their fold, as they feared that their class status would be hampered. Instead, they sent them to the Portuguese to get baptized. Such Christians would not be accepted by or admitted in the church of the St. Thomas Christians. They would wash themselves, like the Brahmins, in the event of touching a lower caste man or woman. They strictly kept the laws of untouchability and unapproachability, even towards the baptized members of the lower castes, like the other high caste Hindus."³ Rev. Hormis C Perumalil says, "Except these (Brahmins, Nairs, and the Christians), no one from any other castes, who formed the great majority, were not able to lead a decent life, or get proper education, or to walk along the public roads, or even to wear a decent dress. If anyone tried to live according to the provisions of natural human justice, he/she would be treated as a rebel or unpatriotic."⁴ In such cases he or she would be severely whipped or even killed.

The Christian missionaries vehemently opposed this evil practice. But their clamor could not pierce the deep-rooted caste-ridden society to begin with as the rulers did not dare to interfere as it would invite the displeasure of the Brahmin community who were the priests and the counselors for them, as they

had vehemently opposed any such move. However, in course of time the efforts of the missionaries bore fruits and untouchability and unapproachability were wiped out from the face of Kerala society. “It is to be remembered with gratitude that it was the foreign missionaries like the LMS, and CMS, who gave a comprehensive leadership in this regard. When they started the initiative, the local Christians also cooperated with them, and then as a collective force endeavoured until they achieved the expected result.”⁵

3. Slavery and Slave Trade: Slavery was another evil practice prevalent in Kerala during the period, and it was practiced by the Syrian Christians as well. “There were a special class of slaves called *pulayas* whose task was to till the land of their lords, who had the right of life and death over their slaves.”⁶

Even during the beginning of the 19th century, slavery was practiced in Kerala. The *janmis* (landlords, who were mainly the Namboodhiris) kept as many slaves as they wanted to work in their large farms and estates. Even the government had maintained slaves for menial jobs. The owners of the slaves freely sold their slaves in the open market just as they sold cattle, exchanged them in the form of barter system, and mortgaged them whenever they wished to do so. Auctioning of slaves in the open market was a usual practice. It was also a common scene that the slaves were paired with oxen or buffaloes to plough the field, or to pull a bullock cart. They were beaten or whipped along with their companion animals when ploughing or pulling carts. The law had permitted the owners of the slaves to whip or even kill them, and there was no question asked. In short, the slaves were treated as though they had no right to live.

The missionaries were shocked to witness these inhuman activities done to these poor folks. It really touched them to realize that this system separated wives from their husbands, and children from their parents or their siblings, never to see one another in the rest of their lives. “It is a matter of shame that, though the Christians, who had firmly believed in the equality and fraternity of the humans, were here from the beginning of the century, had not raised their voice against this social injustice.”⁷ However, the missionaries submitted a huge memorandum to the Maharaja of Travancore pleading to do away with this inhuman practice from the society. They also send petitions after petitions to the British government. Finally, as a result of their untiring lobbying, the Travancore-Kochi governments emancipated slaves by law, though step by step. First the children of government slaves were freed, followed by granting freedom to the adult government slaves, and finally all the slaves of the landlords were also freed.

4. Law against Covering Bosom: In the Namboothiri centered caste ridden Kerala society, the women and the girls were not supposed to cover their bosom in public. Wearing a jacket or blouse over the bosom was forbidden by law, and the lawbreakers would be severely punished. Even the *eezhava* community was not an exception in this degrading system. Though the *eezhavas* were superior to *pulayars*, they were also considered as low castes. In the event of a woman of the lower caste coming into contact with a forward caste, she should remove her *melmundu* (a shawl that was used to cover the upper part of the body), in order to show respect.

When the missionaries converted the local people to Christianity, irrespective of caste and community, they (the missionaries) treated all the converts equally, unmindful of whether they were forward caste or backward caste. They did not appreciate these converted women coming to church without covering their bosom. So, they persuaded the women and girls belonging to the lower castes to come to church with their bosoms covered. As a result, the *channar* women and girls (*channar* is a sub-caste among the *eezhava* community) started going to churches and schools wearing blouses, thus covering their bosom. This created widespread agitation from the upper-class communities and the government had no other option but to support the demands of the upper-class. “On February 3, 1829, the government declared that covering of bosom by the *channar* women was a violation of law and that the ones who got converted to Christianity should give due respect to the forward castes as had been doing before.”⁸ The declaration made it clear that all the lower caste women and girls should be going to church or schools without covering their bosom as before.

But the missionaries did not give up. They continued their fight against this violation of human justice. And, with the support of the missionaries, the *eezhavas* as a collective force, protested against the implementation of the law. They demanded the withdrawal of the declaration. As they continued the protests, the women continued to wear blouses. This *eezhava* protest is known in history as the *channar lahala*. This protest by the was supported by the missionaries. The *channar* girls who were studying with the Christian children in the mission schools started wearing blouses in spite of the strong and bitter opposition by the forward communities. This further angered the influential forward communities, and they started persecuting the *channar* women by whipping and stripping them. The atrocities let loose by the forward communities could not be stopped by Diwan Sir T. Madhava Rao, though he had favored modern civilization. Though the missionaries continually pressurized the Travancore government for justice, it was of no use. Thus, they were forced to lodge a complaint to Sir Charles, the Madras governor, who conducted an enquiry into the matter and found that the complaint was justified. Thereafter, he wrote a strong letter to the Madras Resident, General Kallen, condemning the royal proclamation that affected the dignity of women of certain communities. “This letter opened the eyes of the Travancore Maharaja and his government. Though reluctantly, the Maharaja issued a declaration permitting the women of the backward communities to wear blouses, on July 26, 1859”⁹.

5. Emancipation of the Dalits and the Underprivileged: The Dalits and the underprivileged in Kerala society were leading a very miserable life. “For centuries these unfortunate ones were exploited by the higher classes of society socially, economically, physically and even sexually. The missionaries were committed to remove these vices from the society and bring about a drastic change in the life of the downtrodden.”¹⁰ The missionaries’ work among the Dalits in Kerala, for liberating them from their miserable life, is praiseworthy. Their work in Kerala was welcoming and laudable to the Dalit community, who were in the low rungs of the social ladder. What appealed to the Dalits the most was the wholehearted endeavor of the missionaries for their upliftment with sympathetic and friendly approach towards them, and their willingness to accept anybody to Christianity without any caste or community barriers. As a result, many a number of Dalits were converted to Christianity. These newly converted Dalit Christians enjoyed much freedom which was deprived to their counterparts who remained as *avarnar* (low caste). Now they could freely walk along anywhere without fearing the *theendal* and *thodeel* (unapproachability and untouchability) practiced by the *savarnar* (forward community) towards them for years. There were no restrictions for them from going to church and for their children from going to schools, and other social and public establishments. This newfound freedom enjoyed by these new converts attracted many other backwards also to Christianity. Thus, a general awareness of individual freedom surfaced among the Dalit

community. The Syrian Christians' attitude towards the backward classes also underwent an appreciable change. Earlier the Syrian Christians also had practiced untouchability and unapproachability.

6. Discrimination in Education: Before the arrival of the Portuguese, and even long after their arrival, the system of education in Kerala was caste based. Only the children of the rich upper caste were allowed formal education, even that only traditional type of education, i.e., learning of only the alphabet and a few Sanskrit *slohas*. Since the gurus were from the high castes, the low caste Hindus, including the Sudras, were not able to approach them or to learn anything. Thus, when even the Sudras were kept aloof from these gurukuls, it is not wonder why the members of the lower classes, who were considered as slaves, were not permitted to be admitted in any of the learning centers. Even when the government started schools, it did not dare to do anything in favour of the Dalits, giving them access to educational centers. It was the missionaries who put an end to this pathetic situation. It is a fact that could not be denied that “the Christian missionaries were the ones who paved the foundation for the modern education in Kerala.”¹¹ Only after their arrival and because of their efforts that formal education became a common program, allowing every child irrespective of caste or community, to learn at these centers. It is because of their long and hard struggle that effected revolutionary changes in the system of education in Kerala.

In 1806, in 1816, and in 1834 respectively, the LMS, CMS, and the BMS missionaries came to Kerala. What they did first was to start village schools and shed the light of education among the people. Their objective was to start a school at the premises of every church (pally). These schools came to be known as *pallikoodams* (church schools). Children of all classes and communities were given admission to these *pallikoodams*. The missionaries gave special consideration to those who were poor, socially, and economically. They encouraged the education of the deprived and the downtrodden by providing them free food, clothing, and books along with fee exemption. In this respect, the Christian missionaries had done a selfless service to the Kerala society, especially the Dalits and the downtrodden.

(7) Women Empowerment: As of now, Kerala is in the forefront when it comes to female education. This outstanding achievement in the field of female education and empowerment was the result of the tireless efforts of the Christian Missionaries.

In those days, the social condition of the women, whether of high caste or low caste, was pathetic. Just as the low caste communities were not permitted to get a formal education, women in general were also not allowed to acquire knowledge by attending a formal school. Rev. Daniel says, “In those days sending girls to schools was unthinkable for the ordinary parents of Kerala. Though the women had enjoyed much freedom during the period of Sangha kings, in the Middle Ages women were not permitted to have access in the mainstream society.”¹²

Because of the absence of proper education, the women in general were in spiritual darkness and with full of superstitious beliefs. They believed that the misery in life was because of the anger of the evil spirits. When somebody died young, they believed that it was the devil who killed him/her. To prevent such deaths and other unfortunate happenings in life, they tried to appease the evil spirits by giving offerings in the form of money or other things. It is also a common practice among them to conduct pujas and black magics to be safe from the wrath of evil spirits.

The missionaries played a vital role in eradicating such superstitions from the minds of the people by bringing the women also in the limelight of education. To begin with they encouraged the converted women to attend schools. Seeing the change in those educated girls/women, others were also encouraged to attend schools to get formal education. In fact, the most outstanding contribution of the missionaries in the field of education was the introduction of girls' schools. Rev. Samuel Mateer says, “The contributions of London Mission and Church Mission in the field of female education were immense. It was the efforts of the wives of Christian missionaries that brought in great change in the outlook of the Hindu and Muslim communities towards female education.”¹³ He further states that during his life in Kerala those who could read among Nair community in Thiruvithamkur was just 1%. The percentage of Brahmin ladies was slightly above this. Among the 2 lakhs of *eezhava* women only 93 were able to read. Among the low castes like *pulayas*, and *parayas* not even a single woman knew how to read. This tells that including the higher castes, the women who could not even read were above 98%. The outlook of the men in those days was that a woman only needed to know the way to the market to buy the necessary items for the kitchen. The practice of polygamy and ban on widow remarriage made the condition of women more miserable. In the orthodox families, women were not allowed even to appear in public and there was a deep-rooted prejudice among Hindus against the education of women. The majority of women spent their time mostly within the four walls of the kitchen. In such scenario only, the dedicated contributions of the Christian missionaries became the channel of social change, especially changing the life of women by uplifting their social and educational status. “The contributions of London Mission and Church Mission in the field of female education were immense. It was the efforts of the wives of Christian missionaries that brought in great change in the outlook of the Hindu and Muslim communities towards female education.”¹⁴

CONCLUSION:

Thus, we find the social service activities of the missionaries created a radical change not only in the life of the Christian community but as a whole in the social structure of Kerala. These changes had their influence on every aspect of life in Kerala. Their efforts were concentrated not only on conversion to Christianity but to uplift the life conditions of the socially downtrodden and to bring them to the mainstream of the society. As already stated, the Christian missionaries had taken a very strong stand against slavery, untouchability, and exploitation of the weaker section of the society, and in their contribution to Kerala society is highly laudable.

In fact, on the one hand the missionaries propagated Christianity in Kerala and on the other hand brought about substantial social changes through the medium of western education. They thought of themselves as God's agents to work among the poor and the marginalized to rescue the people from the clutches of sin and Satan. They considered it their in-bound duty, commissioned by God, to save humanity from the clutches of superstitions, false religious practices, illiteracy, and ignorance, and from oppressive social customs and practices.

¹ Daniel, Rev.

- ² Caste System in Kerala. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_Kerala
- ³ Thekkedath, Dr. Joseph. *History of Christianity in India*. Vol. II., (From the middle of the 16th century to the end of the 17th century.), St. Peter's Seminary, Bangalore, 1982, p. 22.
- ⁴ Perumalil, Rev. Hormis C. (Ed.), *Kraisthava Vinjana Kosham* (Christian Encyclopaedia), Prakasham Publications, Alapuzha, Kerala, 1975, p. 188.
- ⁵ Ibid p. 189.
- ⁶ Thekkedath, Dr. Joseph. p. 21.
- ⁷ Pulikkunnel, Joseph. *Kerala Kraisthava Charithram, viyojana kurippukal* (History of the Christians of Kerala, Notes of Disagreement), Bharatheeya Kraisthava Padana Kendram, 1999., p. 14.
- ⁸ Perumalil, Rev. Hormis C. p. 191.
- ⁹ Ibid. p. 192.
- ¹⁰ Daniel, Rev. Dr. Mathew p. 122.
- ¹¹ Ibid. p.117.
- ¹² Ibid. p. 121.
- ¹³ Mateer, Rev. Samuel, Njan Kanda Keralam (The Kerala that I saw, The Malayalam version of "Native in Travancore" first published in 1883 in London, and in Kerala on 24 December 1890), Kerala Bhasha Institue, Trivandrum, 2010, p. 317.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.

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6. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: Caste System in Kerala. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_Kerala