

Struggle Against The Social Evils In Modern Tamilnadu

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The Christian Missionaries and their educational institutions tried to expose the mythological concepts that governed the caste restrictions. The missionaries took interest in the welfare of the country and the future of the Christianity in the land. They were very active to spread the Gospel among the Depressed and the Backward classes.

When the British period started, the position of women in the southern part of the country was worst in its history. Child marriage was the general rule among all respectable castes of Hindus. Sati was also practiced throughout Tamil Nadu. Feminine literacy was regarded as a source of moral danger since only dancing girls could normally read and write. When the Rajah of Tanjore died in 1801, the Queens quarreled for precedence in self-immolation. As a rule it was the privilege of the senior most queen to be burnt with the dead body of her husband. On December 4, 1829 Lord William Bentinck abolished Sati through the regulation.¹

Because of the non-existence of any provision of widow marriage in Hindu society, many widows became converts to Islam or Christianity. In the year 1896 the India Divorce Act was passed to give legal validity among the Indian Christians. Acts relating to Christians marriage have been passed from time to time and amended. The Indian Christian Marriage Act was passed in 1872 during the British rule. It provided certain conditions for a valid marriage. According to this Act, the boy and girl must have attained the age of 16 respectively.² At the time of marriage, the spouse of neither of the party must have been living. Two witnesses were necessary for a valid marriage. A person performing marriage without license was liable to be sentenced with an imprisonment of ten years.³ The native converts' marriage Dissolution Act was enabled a spouse who have been converted to Christianity to obtain a divorce if the other spouse refused to cohabit with the converted partners. This act was applicable to persons who were converted to Christianity alone, and not to other faiths. In some parts of South India girls were dedicated to temples. These girls were known as 'Devadasis'. Which meant servants of God. This practice had led the girls, (so dedicated) to a life of prostitution. All these evil practices were abolished

and declared to be unlawful through special legislation. The nineteenth century witnessed the growing impact of western ideas and civilization in the East. The development of printing press, the work of the missionaries and the improvement of communication were the notable elements that led to the social change.⁴

The Church Missionary Society of England was appealing for an emergency fund of \$ 25,000 to enable extra grants to be made during the five years where the movement was taking place and the society appealed to the whole church to support it in the effort. For the sake of thousands of souls, they combined the spiritual life and social upliftment through the Gospel. The 'big movement' referred about the conversion of Harijans. The movement among the outcasts was spreading to the caste-people and with in the period of five years it was estimated that not less than 30,000 caste-people from fifty-one different castes become Christians. This was a movement of such far-reaching consequences that the missionaries dared not to refuse help.⁵

In the letter, W.W.Cash remarked that the missionaries convened a great conferences of out-caste who decided to break away from Hinduism. They hear about the mass movement toward Christianity and of baptisms of thousands of converts In recent years. The missionaries followed with growing interest in the development of the young churches in the rural areas.

There had been repercussions all over the country from the country from the conference of untouchables. Gandhi had previously carried on a campaign for the removal of untouchability, but he had significantly failed because he clung to the Hindu system which had been the cause of the trouble. In the C.M.S areas the village people were asking for baptism. The Bishop reckoned that probably about a million people in his diocese were moving christward. A Christian friend wrote to Gandhi that, in Travancore the Ezhava community was a superior type of the exterior caste. Many of them were educated, some were land owners, others lawyers, doctors, officials and teachers but they were excluded from the temple and suffered from the disabilities of the outcaste community. So they waited for the arrival of the Bishop of Travancore to convert them to Christianity. These circumstances led to the growth of the conversion among the out-caste people.

The Salvation Army was essentially a religious body with aggressive evangelism as its main characteristic. The Social work of the Army has been from the beginning regarded by the Army leaders as an organised warfare against social evils in order to clear the way of evangelisation. It further said that it was realized that the physical and the environmental condition of many of the people, especially in great cities, made it extremely difficult for them to apprehend the spiritual message which the army had to deliver. Therefore, various social activities arose. They were different in character but all actuated by the same purpose. In a letter the general of the Army mentioned that 'the social work was the bait of salvation.'⁶

The object and the work of this mission according to its founder was to seek the conversion of the neglected crores of people who were living without God and without hope. So they were converted to Christian Fellowship. Every soldier was considered as a soul-winner. Each one was responsible before God for the salvation of others. The Christians were interested in the welfare of the country and the future of Christianity in the land. The missionaries were called upon to give utterance of certain convictions which were forced by propagation.⁷

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, as revealed in the first missionary descriptions of the community, the Nadars appeared to have occupied a social limbo somewhere between the sudras and the outcaste untouchables. Caldwell described that the Nadars belonged to the highest division of the lowest classes or the lowest of the middle classes; poor but not paupers; rude and unlettered but by many degrees removed from a savage state.⁸

The Nadars shared a common position in the hierarchy of ritual rank, but within the community itself, there were variations of status that were significant with the Nadars as with all castes. There were rich and poor, high and low, intelligent and ignorant, masters and servants and proprietors and labourers. Their employment was chiefly the cultivation of the palmyra tree. Many of them lived by agriculture, others by merchandize and the poorer by carrying burden.⁹

In the eyes of the missionaries, the Nadars were a community who lived in long sufferings and in darkness. One missionary wrote that the Nadars were as a class, timid, deceitful and ignorant." Another one reported to the society for the propagation of the Gospel in 1854 that the character of the Nadars was very worst of the human family. A people more abandoned to

lying more practiced adepts in perjury, deception and the worst features of vice it would not be easy to find.

Other Christian settlements also followed by the London Mission, from Bethlehem and Nazareth. After that more than five thousand Nadars were converted to Christianity in the southeastern Tinnevely. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K) was responsible for the spread and activities of the Tinnevely Mission.¹⁰

In 1824, the S.P.C.K. transferred the responsibilities of its mission in Tinnevely to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in foreign parts (S.P.G). In 1836 the S.P.G sent its first English Missionary to Tinnevely. After that the S.P.G and the C.M.S. sent their missionaries regularly. Though C.M.S occupied a greater area, the S.P.G. received the regions of greatest Nadar concentration in Tiruchendur, Nanguneri and Srivaikuntam. In 1841 a young Scottish missionary, Robert Caldwell was sent to Tinnevely by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Until his death he lived and worked with the Nadar community. He became the first Bishop of Tirnevely in 1877. Caldwell established his first encounter with the Nadars at Madurai in 1841.

Caldwell wrote that the Nadars had always been found more willing to be guided, controlled and moulded by principles than any other class. They had placed themselves under Christian instruction. They were greater than that of all the other converts in the country. In connection with all Protestant Mission, there were nearly 40,000 souls in Tinnevely alone.¹¹ The 'mass movement' among the Nadar community came from the middle range of the community, primarily from among climbers who lived at a near subsistence level. However they were neither destitute, nor slaves.

The advantages of Christianity became rapidly apparent to the Nadar climbers, as the material conditions of their Christian neighbors began to improve their life. The establishment of British rule in Tamil Nadu was a real boon to this community. One missionary wrote that Christian knowledge and education opened their eyes and raised their character. Though the Nadars were poor, they promoted their education and enlightenment. Their position had been greatly improved and many spheres of useful, remunerative and honourable labour which were

formerly closed against them were now almost as open to them as to any other class in the society. The opening of sugar refineries at Cuddalore and elsewhere brought an increased price for jaggery and the opening of the coffee estates in Ceylon brought new money into Tinnevely as the poorer Nadars responded to the opportunities for profitable labour.¹²

The Ceylon plantations attracted a sizeable portion of laborers from the Nadar community. The response was initially slow, but it soon escalated. Systematic migration to Malaya and the straits settlements for plantation work began in 1863. Between 1843 and 1867, nearly one and half million emigrated from Madras to Ceylon and of these, more than half returned to purchase lands or shops in Madras.

Regarding the Christian converts, they were fearful of the missions and with their wealth and influence often sought to deter poorer members of the castes from joining the movement. Some of the Hindus gave their support to the Vibuthi Sangam, the Sacred Ash Society which was founded in Tiruchendur during the 'mass movement', of 1840 to put an end to the wholesale conversion. Each one received into the society, composed predominately of Brahmins and Vellalas, took an oath of allegiance to the God to oppose the spread of Christianity. As disturbances broke out and charges were leveled from all sides against the Tinnevely missionaries from among the converts there arose in 1844 a short nativity reaction to Christianity in their areas.¹³

In 1844, a number of coffee estates were laid out in the Nanguneri hills and as they developed, they drew large numbers of labourers from the surrounding places. A substantial number of the emigrants to Ceylon and to Malaya were Tinnevely Nadars. It was from the unproductive regions of Nangunery, Tiruchendur and Srivaikuntam, that a number of the labouring classes migrated in thousands every year to the tea and rubber estates of Ceylon. Of these migrants, the greatest number were drawn from the Christian community.

In South Travancore the mission field was dominated by Nadars. The Nagercoil Church consisted of three thousand people who had placed themselves under instruction. All were Nadars.¹⁴ The mission had provided an organizational base for unity among the Nadar

community which extended beyond the Christian fold. With the efforts of the mission, the Nadars for the first time formed an association to struggle against the upper class.

The continued intimacy between Christians and the Hindus within the lower castes served increasingly to draw the Hindus within the sphere of mission influence. Many Hindu children attended the mission schools. They shared with their Christian brothers an awakening consciousness of caste.¹⁵ The upper cloth controversy served as the initial catalyst of increasing community self-consciousness. As the first movement for social uplift it brought to the Nadar community, the awareness and solidarity of an emerging integrated culture. During the period around 1860 the opposition of the Nadars to Christianity began to wane. They found that the benefits of the faith improved the lot of the climbers and some of the poorer among the responded favorably to the missionaries. Caldwell said that a considerable portion of Nadars embraced Christianity in 1860, especially from the higher division.

By 1871, a British settlement officer wrote to the Collector of Tinnevely that, many Nadars had nothing to do with climbing and that through the increased wealth and comfort of the Nadars as a class, owing to the spread of education among them and remunerative means of subsistence, it became every year more difficult for owners of palmyras to get people to climb trees.¹⁶

A few years later, a native pastor informed the change in Muttam, a village of backward community, which had long given the mission great difficulty. He reported that a great improvement was going on among the backward community. Those who disliked to converse with Christians were now very willing to admit them into their houses. Although few of them actually converted to Christianity, their opposition declined as the responsibility and standing of the emergence of the Christian community. In the southern part of Tamil Nadu, most of the Nadar community were palmyra climbers. In the eastern regions of Tinnevely district the Vellalas were the landlords, and in the western side it was the Nairs. Charles Mead, Father of the South Travancore Mission, described that, there was a great abundance of the good things of life. He was much respected for his peaceable behavior by all classes. His wealth consisted of lands and cattle and his holdings was considered "very extensive for a person of his caste."

In the traditions of these families the lands were bestowed by the kings in return for the Nadars for their services.¹⁷ Many of the Nadar families claimed that they had come at the initiation. Report by G Paranjothy Taruvel, in Report of the Madras Diocesan Committee of the S.P.G, 1877-1878, Madras, 1878. of the king and considered themselves socially superior to the larger community. Which had surely migrated into the southern taluks of Tamil Nadu in economic need. They were severely depressed economically and suffered the social degradation of a low caste in the rigid hierarchy of ritual purity.

Persons of low castes in Tamil Nadu were not permitted to approach those of higher castes and fixed distances were prescribed for each caste. A Nadar must remain thirty-six paces from a Namboodiri Brahmin and must come no closer than twelve to a Nair. The degraded castes were prohibited from carrying an umbrella and from wearing shoes or golden ornaments. They were not allowed to milk cows. Nadar women were not permitted to carry pots of water on their hips, as was the custom among the higher castes; nor were they permitted to cover the upper portions of their bodies.

The Nadars were humiliated by heavy taxation while the Paraiyas were enslaved. They were forced to perform corvee labour in service to the state. Their economic condition and the dependence on the high caste bound them to the lowest levels of society. To the climber the alternate Palmyra seasons of Travancore and Tinnevely offered seasonal migration to Tinnevely for employment. Writing to the London Missionary Society, a missionary in Nagercoil proclaimed that, the whole Nadar community, amounting together about 1,50,000 was open to Christianity". With regard to the progress of the mission among the long degraded and despised body, he wrote that, "if the Nadars continued to grow in mind, intelligence and character, they must gain influence and that influence must be felt and felt for good." Already other castes were beginning to be jealous of the advantages the Nadars were gaining from their connection with Christianity.¹⁸

When the high caste people adopted the oppressive policies over the low caste people, they were brought under the protection of the missionaries, but the progress was not always viewed so favorably. In 1851 Charles Mead wrote, that the missionaries raised them in a civil point of view-delivered them from unjust taxes and oppressive customs and a grievous poll

tribute, the cause of much cruelty in its collection but as to mind they were generally as debased as ever. The best instructed had often turned out the worst characters.

John Abbs wrote about his 'twenty-two-years' experience in Southern Travancore. According to him, The Nadars, although in an oppressed and degraded condition had many proud references to a noble ancestry and were not only capable of mental improvement, but also exceedingly ambitious to hold positions of importance, and take a part in the Government of the country. The more wealthy members of this class would assert that they were originally the ruling powers of the kingdom. In consequence of this opinion would rule over the lower castes with an authority and an assumption of superiority which would be tamely submitted to by those whom they oppressed. In their turn, the Nadars however rich or influential in their sphere, would submit to the Nairs, addressing them by the same term of object servility by which they themselves were accustomed to be called by the degraded Paraiyas.¹⁹ The Nadars however, as a class, were not satisfied with their position and how far this circumstance had induced them so readily to give in their adherence in large numbers to a profession Christianity in the early days of the mission.

With the aid of the missionaries, the Nadars, extricated themselves from many of the burdensome taxes and from the corvee labour demandad by the Government. After that they began to advance economically.¹⁹ Some of them turned to trade and secured sufficient wealth to purchase their own lands. Others purchased land with the help of the missionaries.

All the lower caste people were strictly forbidden from covering their breasts at any time. The manner of dress prescribed for these males and females alike not lower than the knee nor higher than the waist. This style of dress, after some years a missionary described that "was of course incompatible with the modesty and decorum of Christian women many of whom had received a good education and were taught to appear decent in public. Some of the Christian women were so far advanced.²⁰ Further he wrote that they won prizes in the 'Great Exhibition of 1851' for the pillow lace. The Christian women thus appearing in decent dress displeased their neighbours, especially the Sudras who began to mock, abuse and ill-treat them in various ways in markets and way sides.

In 1823 at Padmanabhapuram in Kanyakumari District, a complaint was made against some Christian Nadars, for not paying the arrears of their toddy-rent and for their women to wear upper cloth. The court inquired of the missionary Charles Mead as to whether Christians were required by their religion to wear an upper cloth and receiving an affirmative reply, the court decided, in favour of the accused on that point. The missionaries advised the converts to wear the jackets rather than the upper cloth and they got little success.

In the meantime the high caste people began to terrorize the Christian converts. At first threatening language was used by the heathen to deter the people from attending Christian worship, wrote Mead in his report to the London Missionary Society. Moreover the Nadars were esteemed a low caste and before their acquaintance with Christianity were in general depraved in their morals and filthy in their habits. Christianity has affected a considerable alternation in both these respects.

General Cullen, resident of Travancore began to receive petitions from Hindu Nadars concerning the use of the upper cloth, but the British Government declined to intervene, as the matter was one of local caste usage. The missionaries believed that Cullen was the enemy of the Church and the opponent of the native Christians. The missionaries denied any connection with the changes in heathen apparel and stated that the adoption of the upper cloth among the Hindu Nadars was the consequence of their seasonal migrations into Tinnevely. In Kanyakumari it had become "the rule and not the exception" to wear the upper cloth. Many of the missionaries worked actively against the ruling people. John Cox petitioned the government of Madras in regard to the outrages of slavery, torture and Christian persecution and also appealed for the Governor's direct intervention and the supersession of princely authority. This pamphlet of John Cox was printed at the mission press at Nagercoil.²¹

When the agitation was revived between the Nadar and the Nair communities, General Cullen wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras in 1859. He said that the Sudras asserted that the Nadar women were constantly assuming the privilege of covering the upper part of the person and thereby preventing a recognition of the caste. After the riots of November, 1858, in October the Queen asserted that it was the royal will and pleasure that move should be molested or persecuted in the name of caste or religion.

Robert Caldwell wrote that the proclamation was "almost universally interpreted by the natives as a declaration in favor of custom and caste against proselytism in every shape. The purpose of it was supposed to be Christianity for the Queen and English alone, Hindooism for the Hindoos". In a letter to General Cullen, one missionary wrote that, ever since the reading of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's proclamation, the Sudras had taken into their heads that they were at liberty to do whatever they liked with the lower classes. They began to close the bazaars' and only sell to such persons as they pleased.

In an order of January 27, 1859 General Cullen was instructed to be careful to give no countenance to the idea that the British Government of which he was the representative, recognised any exclusive distinctions or the right of any set of men to prevent others from following, in all matters of social or domestic life, such course of they may see fit, provided it be not repugnant to public decency and morals. Cullen was reminded that it was his duty to impress these views on the Rajah and to point out that in the view of the British Government, the prohibition on the use of the breast cloth were unsuited to the present age, an unworthy of an enlightened prince.²²

The works of the missionaries enhanced the social status of various communities. So they formed organizations and united themselves to protest against the high caste people. No wonder, the last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed an awakening of the lower communities. They voiced for the right of worship and the social equality in the Tamil society.

End Notes

1. Maine Quoted in K.Singh, *Indian Social System*, P.117
2. G.R. Madan, *Social Change and Problems of Development in India*, p. 1.
3. R.N. Saksena, *Sociology and Social Policy in India*, p. 65.
4. George Pettittu, *Tinnevelly Mission of the Church Missionary Society*, p.478.
5. M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions their place in India*, p. 55.
6. Letter from the Salvation Army to the 'Hanjan', dated 12 June 1937, p.67.
7. R.L. Hardgrave, *The political Culture of a Community in Change*, p. 21.

8. R. Calwell, *The Tinnevelly Shanars*, pp.4-5.
9. J.F. Kearns, *Moodaloor Mission Report*, 1824.
10. H.R. Pate, *Madras District Gazetteers*, (Tinnevelly), p.94.
11. R. Caldwell, *Op. cit.*, p.47.
12. Ponniah, *Christian Community of Madura, Ramnad and Tinnevelly*, p.38
13. *Disturbances in Madura and Tinnevelly*, p.6.
14. GT. Mackenzie, *Christianity in Travancore*, p.51.
15. Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 230.
16. V. Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II, p.393.
17. Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, p.32.
18. John Abbs, *Twenty-Two-Years; Missionary Experience in Travancore*, pp.151-152.
19. The Missionary Magazine and Chronicle, Vol. XX, August 1856, p.166.
20. C.M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore*, pp.780-782.
21. Royal Proclamation, Quoted in Donald E. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, pp.71-72
22. Minute by the Governor, C.E. Travelian, dated February 28, in copies of the official papers . pp. 10-11.