

Dalit Women Reform Movements with Special Reference to Reform Movements by Christian Missionaries in Travancore

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Abstract

Historically Dalit women were actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. Today they are the strongholds of the Dalit Movements in thousands of Indian villages. They continue to play a crucial role in the movements for land rights and movements against liquor in many parts of the country. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world and visionary leaders in the Panchayati Raj institutions.

In recent years a sea of change has taken place and Dalit women have started asserting their rightful place in Indian society. In this process of being empowered they have paid heavy prices too, but their resilience is tremendous and quite laudable. At every level of the caste hierarchy and patriarchal system, the Dalit women's movement is quite active in mobilizing the unheard voices and in turning them into a powerful agent of change. This paper seeks to focus on the reform movements that have taken place in Travancore in order to uplift the Dalit Women.

Key words: Dalit, Women, Reform Movements, Empowerment.

Introduction

The study of Dalit women becomes important because the problems of Dalit women vary from one social stratum to another, one cultural group to another and also from one economic stratum to another. It can be said that not enough attention has been focused so far on the life condition and problems of women belonging to the Scheduled castes. For this, there is a need for proper understanding of their problems specific to time and place so that relevant development programmes can be made and implemented. The most deprived section of society comprises Dalit women who are poor, illiterate and easy targets for sexual harassment. They face not just caste violence inflicted on them by the dominant castes, but also state violence.

Dalit Women's Movement can be characterized in one sense as the rebellious child of two movements existing prior to it namely Dalit and women's movement. The impetus for forming an autonomous Dalit women's movement finds its root largely in Dalit women's experiences with both movements.

Reform Movement under Missionaries

The credit of initiating the movement for the elevation of the dalits during the modern times, goes indeed to the Christian missionaries who came to India. While proselytization was their chief aim, the Indian social conditions gave them full scope for using humanitarian work and education was their chief aim. However, education and humanitarian work resulted in arousing Indians of the need for social reforms. The missionaries thus became pioneers in eradicating many a social evil. One such evil was untouchability.

London Missionary Society work had begun as early as the 17 century and with the close of the 18 century it had made great progress in South India primarily due to the work of the protestant missionaries from Denmark and Germany, supported by Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) funds from England.

London Missionary Society

The missionaries had no faith in untouchability. They mixed freely with the dalits and tried to improve their lot socially as well as economically. Education being the most effective method, they started imparting it to the depressed classes, especially to Nadars and tried to make them conscious of their rights and position in society. By starting schools for boys as well as girls, they took the first effective action for their social elevation.

It was only in schools established by Missionaries, the Dalits got chance to get education. In fact, they tried to open schools wherever possible for the benefit of the Dalits. They were also pioneers in starting schools for girls and establishing teacher training institutions. The education imparted to the people helped them to know their social degradation and made them to fight for the right of equality in the society.

Breast Cloth Movement

The low class people were subjected to glaring disabilities. Their women were compelled to keep the upper part of their bodies bare as a token of submission. Women missionaries like Mrs. Mead and Mrs. Mault did not like the women of South Travancore to move here and there with their bodies exposed. Therefore they decided to end such barbarous behavior. So they devised a plain loose jacket with loose sleeves called Kuppayam and advised them to wear it. Col. Munro, the then Dewan of Travancore also issued an order in 1812 that the Christian women obtain equality among Christians in other countries. Thus the reforms introduced by missionaries had a far-reaching result, women in large number came forward to wear upper cloth similar to that of upper class women. It is considered as the first step in founding social equality in the district.

The low class women had their right to wear only "Kuppayam". But some of the Christian women in addition to the jacket, they wore an additional cloth or scarf over the shoulder called the upper cloth as worn by the women of high class. These pretensions were resented by the caste Hindus. This dispute eventually led to a serious Human Rights Movement in South Travancore.

Upper Cloth Riots

Ringeltaube got them permission to wear clothing above the waist. This was sanctioned by an order of the Government in May 1814. Accordingly, the female Nadar converts wore jackets. Mrs. Mault made three kinds of jackets like *kuppayam*, *ravikkai* and plain jacket with loose sleeves for women. The missionaries encouraged even the older women to wear such blouses when they went to Church, to the market and the shops. This was resented by the upper castes. Their attempts to stop the Nadar women from using the upper cloth resulted in riots. Such riots continued for about 37 years in Kalkulam and Eraniel Taluks. Christian Dalit women decently dressed were ill-treated on their way to church by Nairs in Kalkulam. They stood in groups and scoffed at the women, called them names, tore their blouses, hung them on trees and insulted them.

Yesudial of Kalluvilai who agitated against that was dragged to Maruthurkurichi, beaten naked, and hanged upside down from a jack tree. She died of humiliation. Rev. Mead appealed to the Resident, Colonel Newell, describing the illegal acts of the Sudras. The Resident ordered an immediate enquiry. As a result, the Christian Nadars got a favourable decree from the Padmanabhapuram court in 1823. It confirmed the Proclamation of 1814.

The Sudras become a threat to the Nadars. On 23 December 1828, a large number of Nairs assembled at Attoor. Several Dalit Christians were caught and dragged with ropes tied to the trunks of elephants.

In Vilavancode, Mallan Pillai and others stripped the jackets off Savariyal Ganappu and Anna. Mead and Mault wrote letters to Colonel Morrison seeking protection for the Protestant Christian women. Accordingly the Dewan Venkata Rao visited the places and held his court at Padmanabhapuram to conduct investigations. Only a few women accompanied missionary Ashton to meet the Dewan. But they were prevented from passing the gateway of the court with their bosom covered. They were cruelly beaten up and their upper garments torn by the sepoys. Their attempts to stop the depressed class women from using upper cloth resulted in riots.

When the violence perpetrated by the caste Hindus began to spread, the Nadars mounted encounter attacks on the Sudra women. The Nadars of Agesteeswaram proposed combined and systematic resistance to governmental authority. At Kottaram a Sudra village, four miles north of Kanyakumari, the high caste hooligans tore the upper cloth of a Nadar woman on her way to the market. Her tali was cut. She reported this matter to the village people of Illanthayadivilai; and they beat up the Sudras and the government officials. In commemoration of this incident, the people of this locality call this market, '*Thali Aruthan Santhai*' even today.

At Kottar, Nairs stripped the jackets of the Nadar women and beat them up. They entered the houses of poor Christians with knives, ripped the jackets of women, tore their clothes and kicked them. Finally the matter was referred to the Madras Government. The Missionaries represented the matter to Sir Charles Trevelyan, the Governor of Madras.

Accordingly Uthram Thirunal Maharajaja issued a Proclamation on 26 January 1859. It declared that there is no objection to Shanar women either putting on a jacket like the Christian Shanar women or to Shanar women of all creeds dressing in

coarse cloth (Kattissila) or covering their bosoms in any manner whatever but not like women of high caste.

This Proclamation empowered the Nadar women alone to enjoy the right to cover the upper part of the body, but the women of other low castes were denied the right to wear upper cloth. The missionaries thought that it would lead to serious disturbances and complaints in future. Hence the missionaries requested the Governor-in-council to take the affairs in to serious consideration and in order to carry out the needful reforms to institute a strict inquiry or adopt such measures as may be deemed most suitable. Thus Travelyan, the Governor directed the new Resident F.N. Maltby to adopt a decisive course to remove the existing restriction on the dress of the females of Travancore. He wrote, “. . . Nothing short of an entire removal of all restrictions, leaving the female to dress as they think fit will satisfy the government both here and at home.”

In response to the representation from Sir Charles Wood and Charles Trevelyan, Maltby took the matter to the Raja of Travancore. Ayilyam Thirunal Maharaja (1860-1880 A.D.) issued a Proclamation in 1865. It permitted the women of the Ezhava and other low castes to wear upper garments. Thus the continuous efforts of the missionaries helped the Dalit women of Travancore achieve the basic right to wear decent clothes.

Education of Dalit girls

Missionaries took interest in the education of women. Mrs. Mead was responsible for the women education in Travancore. She took interest in women education and started a women school near the Seminary in Nagercoil. Mrs. Mault was very helpful to her in this service. It was very rare to have female children in this school. The parents hesitated to send their daughters to this school because of poverty and caste controls. But the missionaries admitted some low caste girls and slave girls in this school. This school was started with just 14 students. Free education and free food were given to these girls. Seeing the development of these girls, many parents voluntarily came forward to admit their daughters in this school. Due to the success of this school, new schools were opened in Neyyoor, Shanthapuram, Parassala and Marthandam for girls. Separate schools were opened for low caste people in their areas. The Government physician Dr. Warring and Rev. Mead started a school for Pulayars in 1861. Charity meals were freely given to them.

Education to Higher Caste girls

Dr. Thomson's wife started a school for high caste girls. So a school was opened in Eraniel for higher caste girls on 1872. After this, many schools were opened for them in Thuckalay, Thiruvithancode, Thalakulam, Neyyoor, Kottar, Vadassery, Krishnancoil and Nagercoil.

Medical Training for Women

Miss. Macdonnal came to India in 1892, who was a trained nurse from England. She felt the need of nurses for this medical mission. So she started a training school for nurses and gave training to them. But it was difficult for her to get women for such training. But due to her tireless attempt many Dalit nurses got training in the centre. Missionaries created social awareness among the women of Travancore.

Education to Slave girls

Rev. Mead took many attempts to remove slavery in the society. He believed education was the only instrument to relieve the people from slavery and bondage. He encouraged the teachers to bring the slave girls and slave boys by paying money for them. Money were given to the teachers and preachers to encourage them for bringing more and more slave girls and boys. So many slave children came to schools.

Industrial Education to Slave Girls

They were landless cultivators, yet they constituted the economic basis of the society. The slaves were sold like cattles in the markets. The price of a slave was Rs. 7 and 50 paise. On seeing the deplorable plight of the downtrodden people, Mrs. Mault took pity on them and wanted to free them from their bondage. She realized that industrial education was one of the means to liberate the people from economic and social bondage.

For these children she started a boarding home at Nagercoil in 1821. Mrs. Martha Mault also started giving training to the girls in lace making. Mrs. Mault taught the slave girls to make lace and thus paved the way to purchase their freedom. Mrs. Mead taught the children sewing, spinning, while Mrs. Mault taught them embroidery. She introduced pillow lace making also. She used to teach this skill to young girls and slaves. She also taught knitting to the boarders after their noon meals.

The finished materials of the Lace Industry were sent to different parts of the country. Lady Muir of Allahabad, Mrs. Cordy of Poone were also very helpful in marketing the products. Beautiful lace and embroidery items produced by the industry earned a good name in the market.

Salvation Army in the Dalit Reform Movement

Though empowered by London Mission Society, the Dalits specially, the Sambavars were not liberated fully. Caste was still firmly embedded in the Indian mind. Hence the Salvation Army came forward to undertake missionary enterprise towards Dalits in Kanyakumari District.

The Army has undertaken several welfare measures and as a result, the Harijan communities in the district have been greatly benefited especially in the field of education and medical relief. The Army has opened sizeable number of schools and imparted training to many teachers. Women are encouraged to participate in industries particularly in lace and needle work industries and book binding. There are two boarding schools and one English higher secondary school and a middle school at Nagercoil run by the Army.

Medical Services of the Salvation Army

The Salvation Army in India has many mission centres for the Dalits. The South Eastern territory has much involvement in the field of medicine. They are interested in medical work. Medical work was done in Kanyakumari district among the lower caste community called Sambavar. The people of the community at that time were badly in need of the help of healing mission. So the Army started medical mission in the district with the help of missionary doctors from abroad.

Catherine Booth Hospital, Nagercoil

The Salvation Army Catherine Booth Hospital is situated at Vadassery, Nagercoil, which is 24 kilometers from Kanyakumari. It was started in 1895 when missionary Harry Andrews treated the first patient in a tiny bathroom. Since then it has grown into a 300 bedded general hospital with department of medicine, surgery, obstetrics, gynecology, paediatrics, orthopedics, ophthalmology and E.N.T. with well-trained, dedicated medical doctors and nursing and allied health staff.

Nursing skills are taught to very carefully selected students in the Catherine Booth Hospital School of Nursing. The school was opened in 1939 and prepares students for the examinations of the Madras Nursing Council and the Nursing Board of the Christian Medical Association of India. Over 1200 nurses have graduated through the school of nursing and today they are serving in many parts of the world.

The medical training classes helped the Army to expand its healing mission towards the needy places and the depressed sections of the society. Such trained persons often went out of the campus to work as medical personnel everywhere. Dr. Noble took special care to make provision for 100 women to get treatment in the hospital.

Duckar Women Home

The missionaries of the Salvation Army gave due importance to take care of the Dalit female children in the society. Female child was considered as a great burden in many families and communities. The result was that female infanticide became prevalent in many parts of the country. As a result, the mission opened the Duckar women home at Thuckalay in the year 1993. Many female children are admitted in this home every year. Food and accommodation were provided to the women candidates staying in these homes. In addition, the mission would take care of the educational expenses of the candidates staying in this hostel. It promoted the education of the students from downtrodden community of that locality.

Women Handicapped Rehabilitation Technical Training Centre, Nagercoil

As a part of social service, a technical training centre was established in the year 1970 at Nagercoil to care for the welfare of the women handicapped candidates of the downtrodden community. Dr. Haari Williams, the then Chief Physician of Catherine Booth Hospital took the initiative for establishing the concern. In this institution, training was provided tailoring, embroidery, stitching pillow covers, table cloth, and similar other products. This training programme was exclusively meant for the handicapped women of the depressed class. Finished goods from these centres were exported to the Modern Art Gallery Private Limited, Mumbai and a considerable income was earned by them. By providing training exclusively for the women of the depressed class, it enabled them to learn with more confidence and they felt free to learn without much hardship.

Conclusion

Many progressive steps are being taken to uplift the Dalit women and to empower them in all aspects. Today, one can see Dalit women very successful in society.

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