



Research article

**CHRISTIANITY AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS LIFE AND WOMEN SOCIETY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHURCH OF SWEDISH MISSION IN TAMILNADU**

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**ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this paper is to analyze critically the major contribution of missionaries of Church of Swedish Mission (CSM) in Tamilnadu during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The century witnessed for female infanticide, early marriage, pardha system, denial of widow remarriage, denial of property rights, denial of basic education, denial of equal rights. These evil practices based upon the traditional systems and slowly worsened the development of women in all aspects of their daily life and future. The Swedish missionaries identified that poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, age-old traditional customs and conventions had affected women's progress hence they worked for the eradication of the evil practices with the support of many organizations and some techniques. Their grand success against the obstacles based upon some important attitudes towards various types of people in the society and that only helped to gain more, wider and sustainable nature of success.

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**INTRODUCTION**

From ancient period, the status of women was not reputed and was lower than men were in Indian society particularly in Tamilnadu. Evil practices such as feticide, infanticide, child marriage, and dowry system, low status of widows and denial of rights affected the upliftment of women. European East Indian companies had their trade stations at several places in India without disturbing and intervening in the Indian traditional practices still the arrival of Christian missionaries. They arrived for conducting sermons in the church for the soldiers, officials of their trade companies, at the same time they involved in spreading Christianity among heathens. In many of the evangelical works, missionaries observed deeply the wretched condition of all categories of women in Tamilnadu and it led them to establish strong and permanent social institutional changes according to the teaching of Jesus Christ in their working places.

The two-protestant missionaries, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Henrich Plutchaeu arrived in 1706 to Tranquebar, which was leased to Danish East Indian Company. It paved the way for the establishment of Tranquebar mission based upon the principles and guidance of Danish Halle mission. From 1849, the Church of Swedish Mission (C.S.M) especially in the area of Madurai, Coimbatore and Pattukottai in Madras presidency carried out missionary work.

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***The Status of Women During the Arrival of Church of Swedish Missionaries In Tamilnadu***

Early missionary Rev. Carl Jacob Sandegren from Sweden to Tamilnadu, he started his work in Coimbatore area. He observed many social injustices done to women through the practice or child marriage, female infanticide, female infanticide, pardha system (forced covering of head in public) dowry for marriage, refusal for widow remarriage, high rate death during childbirth etc. He wrote about the injustice to head quarter in Sweden with the words of the important work to be taken up in India was that of working among women. The C.S.M acted Sandegren's recommendations to send women missionaries to India.

In general, the missionaries practiced the value of true Christian, hence, they attempted to remove the ignorance and spread of new knowledge among the women, in their missionary area. Particularly they wanted to include the concept of liberation of women from the clutches of the unchallenged Indian traditional systems. Hence, working for the welfare of women became the foremost key and primary concern and activity for them. CSM got its fields at Tranquebar, Porayar, Mayiladuthurai, Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, Dindugul, Coimbatore, Madras, Villuppuram, Cuddalore, Chidambaram, Sirkali and Bangalore. To achieve the success, they had followed general attitudes towards public and government in various capacities as it is taught by the Jesus Christ.

### ***Attitudes Towards The Local Elite***

The nobles, princes and the local elite had been instrumental in the success of missionary work of CSM in Tamilnadu. No wonder they chose Tirupattur in Sivagangai district as the contact point and head quarters for their medical mission in Tamilnadu. This was one of the most backward areas at that time. They got lands when the cost of land was heavily subsidized and Raja of Sivagangai gifted the major portion of land after seeing and impressed with the services. In some cases, the local elite developed personal friendship with the missionary workers. Whether it was money, land or friendship, the local elite had been very crucial to the development of mission work of CSM.

The missionary hospitals, dispensaries and orphanage came up with the monetary contribution of the local people. The local elite did not come up openly for help. There was initial apprehension on the part of elite to approach missionaries for medical. In most of the cases, the missionaries were successful in establishing good will with the local elite. On hearing the wonderful and humanitarian service of the missionaries from local elite, Gandhi visited the hospital in 1927 and registered his deep appreciation by shaking hands with Swedish missionaries in the hospital. Slowly, they were able to impress the people especially women by their work and they were being called for medical assistance.

Even elite people enjoyed the medical services rendered by the missionaries meant for the poor. The rich community called Nattukottai Chettiar or Nagarathar lived and still live in and around Tirupattur area. They requested Dr.Kugelberg to start a separate ward especially for women called chetti ward in 1927. They donated huge amount of money not only for the improvement of the particular ward but also the hospital in general. They came to help missionaries only after they had the opportunity to avail of the services offered by the missionaries. They became friendly and in some cases, it became a long lasting friendship.

### ***Attitude Towards The State***

Missionaries and the British rulers had many interests in common issues in general. "They both shared a deep sense of concern for the well being and prosperity of the people of India". The two groups as far as possible kept out of one another's way. "They worked parallel rather than on convergent lines. Yet the separation could never be complete; the destinies of Church and State were intricately interwoven with one another. Missionaries needed the support and permission of the state to continue their work in India and the State banked upon them for projecting humanitarian image of the west. Yet missionaries were not very happy with the way government took up their concerns. There are clear indications that spreading of Christianity was upper most in their mind. However, the services run by them were had great sense of dedication and commitment.

There was some change in the attitude of British Government towards the missionaries after the 1857 rebellion in India. The missionaries believed that rebellion had made English statesman recognize the value of missionary enterprise as most important agency in the social and moral elevation of India. With the support and recognition from the government, the missionaries were able to expand their activities.

The support and patronage from the Government after 1857 gave confidence to the missions in India and the relationship between the two was rested upon mutual respect. In some cases, the missionaries were able to influence government and dictated their own terms. This was possible only in those cases where missionary workers had individual influence over the government, or had exceptionally outstanding work record in India. Otherwise government did not interfere much in missionary activities, and remained their silent supporter. The missionary worker with outstanding record and exceptional work were recognized by the state and in some cases were given important assignments. For example, in 1927, the Governor of Madras presidency Stenely visited the hospital on the ground of humanity and human healing service, during and after the world wars, the British government used the Indian army. The medical treatments and medicines were needed to treat the wounded people. The American mission hospitals were located in Trichy and Madurai, but the English people did not like to go there. They rather chose the hospital run by Swedish missionaries at Tirupattur.

### ***Attitudes towards Christians***

The missionary activities were started for the local people. At the same time, these activities were very much concerned with the welfare of native converts and with their Christian students from the west. Native converts, Christian students and the local people got different kind of treatment from the missionaries. Similarly, there was also great anxiety about their safety and security. They feared that the Christian students were not safe in the company of local girls. Religious and moral superiority of Christian students had to be maintained and it was feared that the Christian girls were vulnerable to bad influence in the company of local girls. This led to the establishment of schools and homes for Christian girls students.

Occasionally some of these women beneficiaries were able to go for getting higher education in foreign countries and for gaining the international exposure among the countries, which supported their education. Visiting foreign countries and their experience is remarkable observation in studying women's upliftment in foreign culture motivated them to identify their backwardness in India and it reflected in their approach with their own people in Tamilnadu. In some occasions, the educated Christian girls were sent to attend the international conference on women issues and challenges, at that time converted Christian girls attended the conference to enhance human rights and women issues to increase the standard.()

The school of nursing at Tirupattur was known as the best school in the Madras presidency. Many of the newly converted Christian girls were admitted in it based on poverty and helplessness. Inter exchange training programs were arranged to students in collaboration with Christian medical college, Vellore and American mission hospital, Madurai. It not only provided medical training but also gave opportunity for the trained teacher to earn more money by attending to the rich private patients.

The Christian medical students or other missionary workers who were under training lived in a much-protected environment. There were special schools with hostel facilities and there was an elderly missionary woman to look after these students. It is essential that they should be under distinctly Christian influence during the period of training. However,

the teaching institutions had non-Christian students also, but the Christian girls had better facilities as compared to non-Christian students. The missionary students were considered innocent and pure who needed to be taken care of and were discouraged to mix up with others. Even while these girls started to work in new locations within India, they had remained under the charge of senior missionary women that invariably was a middle-aged woman.

#### **Attitudes towards Women**

In general, the missionaries observed that many social injustices done to women through the practice of child marriage, female infanticide, *pardha* system, dowry for marriage, refusal for widow remarriage, high rate death during childbirth etc. At the critical situation, they practiced the value of true Christian; they attempted to remove the ignorance and the spread of new knowledge among women. Particularly the missionaries wanted to include the concept of liberation of women from the clutches of the unchallenged Indian traditional systems. Hence, working for the welfare of women became the foremost key and primary concern and activity for them.

Missionaries frequently and personally visited the poor mothers who had girl children at their homes. The local women gradually become the affectionate and respected followers of affluent western women missionaries. Their humble and simple interaction in Tamil words among poor and illiterate women slowly developed personal intimacy and relationship, which was the major foundation for their success in villages around Usilampatti. Missionaries' efforts in promoting awareness and timely intervention brought success in minimizing the crucial killing of infants. Sister Esther Peterson's personal approach and her use of education as a tool to eradicate such a social evil gave good result in forthcoming years.

During that time, the child widows were in high numbers, in order to protect the young widows, missionaries opened widow's rehabilitation centers. The missionaries offered facilities to these women for income generation, which they did with a spirit of involvement and commitment to produce handicraft things with quality, and they helped them to import to the Christian countries in Europe.

Apart from that, the sick persons especially women were given financial assistance to treatment themselves. Sudden epidemics like cholera, malaria, typhoid took away the lives in large numbers especially the weaker section women. The sick fund aimed to help these poor helpless victims to recover from the diseases as timely intervention. Similarly, another poor fund was given to those who are suffering to meet their everyday life need for food, clothing and shelter. Death fund was issued for burying the dead, those who died without parents or without relatives and it was very useful to poor at that time.

#### **Attitudes Towards Child**

During the year of 1890s female infants were thrown on the streets to be run over by the wheels of the chariots, Sister Esther Peterson took up nearly hundreds abandoned children and brought them up. At the same time, she decided to work for the upliftment of female child. Similarly, there was a custom that after getting puberty, the child had to get marry; in some cases out of the fear of sexual harassment by men

outside the family and they were no longer safety even at the home and it drained the dreams of a mother to send her girls to schools.

Instead of interfering into the personal and family affairs of individuals regarding the social evils, missionaries opened new schools especially for girls in Thanjavur (1856), in Anaikkadu (1864) in Usilampatti (1914). The sincere efforts of missionaries changed the mind of mothers and thought that sending girls to school was no more an evil. Abandoned children, widow's children, physically challenged children were given preference in admission. Miss Nordmark was an active missionary in motivating both parents and girls; she took initiatives to go out into the villages, meet the women on their households and streets and became friendly with them in motivating both parents and girls. Her efforts for girl's education enhanced people's respect towards her and public proudly referred to her as 'veerammal' (the lady of courage).

When missionaries started educational institutions, they found that most of the girl children were forced to work to earn money and in some cases they were unable to meet out the expenditures of fees, books etc. After realizing the need of homes for girls, they started homes at Porayar, Thanjavur, Trichy, Pothanur, Mayiladuthurai, Anaikadu, Pandur, Sengaraiyur, Sattur, Kamuthi, and Tirupattur. Girl children received not only food, clothes and shelter at free of cost but also received training and facilities for income generation by preparing qualitative handicrafts which were in high demands in Sweden, Germany and other European countries. The admission was given to the children of the most deserving families, orphans, and semi orphans, children from over populated families without seeing cast, creed and religion.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Indeed, the missionaries of CSM only came forward to accept women as equals in the society, they took the first initial step and India followed in later. The missionaries walked that one extra miles and womanhood was honored and lifted. The missionaries looked at the women society and the plight of women in a holistic manner and the fate of the women in the whole of India including tamilnadu was transformed. No one could deny the fact that the church sponsored mission schools were the backbone of the educational and health system of Indian and Tamilnadu even at the time of the British rule. It was neither touched nor changed until long after the independence of India. The holistic approach and attitude of the CSM missionaries in education, health and social development of the women in rural areas paved the way for the continued, sustainable growth and development of women in this area.

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