

ELIMINATION OF DISPARITIES: CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND THEIR ASSISTANCE TO THE MARGINALIZED IN TAMIL NADU

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17616125>

Published Date: 15-November-2025

Abstract: In the 19th century, it became more and more evident that Christianity was to stand up to agnosticism and materialism, which were becoming more prevalent among Tamil Nadu's educated youth. These young people valued new ethical and social issues due to religious motivation, which was partially a result of Christian influence. A pronounced awareness for the need of social change and uplift in terms of reforms rather than revolution can be discovered in Madras as early as 1852. With democratic developments the majority of Adi Dravidars in many churches gained for themselves opportunities of leadership up into Episcopal ranks. But that cannot belittle the tremendous liberation which some of their class experienced through Christianity and which received an irrefutable place in history.

Keywords: Missionaries, Untouchability, Education, Tiruvannamalai district.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 19th century, it became more and more evident that Christianity was to stand up to agnosticism and materialism, which were becoming more prevalent among Tamil Nadu's educated youth. These young people valued new ethical and social issues due to religious motivation, which was partially a result of Christian influence. A pronounced awareness for the need of social change and uplift in terms of reforms rather than revolution can be discovered in Madras as early as 1852. C.V.Ranganada Sastri took up the fight against child marriage in 1865, but his efforts were unsuccessful due to Veda Samaj influences. His efforts to promote widow marriage through the Madras Hindu Widow Marriage Association, established in 1874, were unsuccessful, but he was successful in the field of female education.

Maratha Brahman Bahadur Raghunatha Rao, a former diwan of the Maharaja of Indore and current deputy collector in Madras, took up the widow remarriage case. He advocated for a return to Vedic life, believing that the Sastras did not forbid Brahmans from traveling across the sea, did not approve of child marriage, and permitted Hindu women to remarry. After studying both Christianity and Islam, Raghunatha Rao concluded that the New Testament's teachings should be incorporated into his own religion. The association's two main demands were the recognition of women's civil rights and the abolition of caste. The "anti-nautch movement," which called for the abolition of the institution of temple girls, was one of the first movements that the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association backed. In 1893, that movement began.¹ Under the direction of "Hindu Christian" O. Kandaswami Chetty, the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association was supported for a while by the Social Reform Advocate in Madras, with contributions from both Indian and missionary theologians. Following the

¹ Arthur F.Cox, *Manual of the North Arcot District in the Presidency of Madras, 1881*, (Madras, 1881), p.144

Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, Gandhi's political parties and Madras Christians persisted in raising public awareness of contemporary issues. Despite making up one-twelfth of Madras' workforce and sharing many Adi Dravidars' substandard living conditions, Indian Christians opposed the Madras Labour Union's first major strike at Binny's Mills.²

Missionaries did contribute to the abolition of slavery. But before 1950 a direct official protest was hardly heard on the part of the Church against the extraordinary high interest rates demanded by moneylenders, not to speak of legislation urged against that kind of exploitation. In Tamilnadu medical missions had been singularly neglected throughout the 19th century by most Protestants. When Christian medical work made leeway in the 20th for overcoming superstitious practices and the reluctance for surgery, for medical examination of women and for proper care of mothers before, during and after child-birth, for overcoming ignorance of hygienic habits, for fighting malnutrition, and, last but not least, for breaking the ostracizing character of leprosy as a 'curse of God'. In the second half of the 20th century a beginning was made to carry schemes of preventive health care to the rural districts by Christian hospitals and dispensaries along with government and other private institutions of competitive excellence. In all this wider context three realms of definite Christian impact on social change stand out: the education of children, the status of women and the treatment of the depressed classes of Indian society.³

2. EDUCATION SERVICE

The advancement of education was the primary driver of social change in Tamil Nadu during the 19th and 20th centuries, as it was in the majority of the world. It's not as if "missionaries were the first to open schools."ols" is not accurate. Every larger Hindu village had a school on a pial (verandah), and each mosque had its own teachers. When B. Ziegenbalg in the early 18th century founded schools at Tranquebar, Cuddalore and Madras, and other German missionaries at Thanjavur and Tiruchchirappalli had little difficulty in adapting the strong educational tradition of their spiritual mentors. Three concepts, however, were new: the emphasis on the formation of faith and character over the acquisition of skills in reading, writing, arithmetic and application of law further the universal offer of education regardless of caste, religion and sex; and finally, the attempt to make the government responsible for that universality of education.⁴

In Madras and other military stations, schools for Eurasians abounded, Tamil schools were run by the SPCK. Andrew Bell, at the end of the 18th century developed the Male Orphan Asylum in Madras on the basis of Tamil methods what he brought to Britain as the 'Madras System of Education', a system elder children monitoring younger ones, which played a large role in the European educational renaissance of the early 19th century and was revived in Madras by Bishop Middleton in 1819-20. All that happened while a dispute was going on in Britain between evangelicals and for improving the education of the "Native Inhabitants of the British Dominions in India". After the defeat of the evangelicals at the revision of the Company's charter in 1793, the duty of introducing "useful knowledge" and "religious and moral improvement" among the Indians became recognized in the revised charter of 1813, a duty for which annually no less than one lakh of Rupees would be provided. It was only in 1822 that the government acted on the provisions of 1813. The controversy which was fought out in the Committee of Public Instruction at Calcutta over the issue of education in the classical Indian languages versus English had no parallel in Madras. William Bentinck, governor-general of India, issuing the famous Resolution of 1835 which decided the use of the government funds in favor of English education. Penny, the church historian of the East India Company in Madras, believed indeed that through Bentinck "the Madras system of English schools was adopted for the whole of India."⁵

In the mean-time, the plea for English education at Madras had been strengthened by the Hindu Literary Society, which opened its first English school in 1834. In 1839 leaders of society endorsed the Madras government's plan to establish a high school free of interference with the religious faith of the people. The plan was executed in 1841. The high school was to be the first step towards a university. Anderson had been called by the Scottish Mission to serve at St. Andrew's School at Egmore was opened in 1835. He founded what came to be known as the Central Institution in Armenian Street. New Hindu institution founded in 1842, which became a match to Anderson's school: *Pachaiyappa Mudaliar's* Preparatory School. The rivalry between Hindu schools and Anderson's school made itself felt in various ways. Anderson too had to offer education free of charge. The optional instruction in Christian Scriptures in government schools as proposed by J. F.

² G.O.No:860 Public, 11 July, 1913.

³ Mary Pauline Jeffery, *Ida S.Scudder of Vellore*, (Mysore, 1951) p.191.

⁴ G.O.No. 135 Public, 5 November, 1912.

⁵ *Annual Medical Report of the American Arcot Mission, 1866*, Madras. 1867, p1.

Thomas in 1851 was rejected. The Roman Catholic Church had joined them by 1850 with schools at Madras, Pondicherry, Tiruchchirappalli, Madurai, Thanjavur, Palayankottai and other places. The Propaganda had issued the instruction that members of all sections of society ought to be admitted. Comparable to Anderson's school at Madras was their high school at Nagappattinam (St Joseph's), which started in 1844 with European pupils. A striking rise can be observed in 1933: 22.5% of the B.A. degrees obtained at Madras University were received by Christian Indians, 7.3% of the B.Sc. degrees, 36.7% of the M.B.B.S's, 37.5% of L.T.'s and 19.1% of the M.A.'s. As to the professions entered by Christians after education, a survey for St Joseph's College, Tiruchchirappalli, for 1908 presents a glimpse. Of the 800 members of the Alumni Association of that college, 107 were priests or members of religious orders, 292 government officials (among them a secretary to the government of Madras), 21 medical doctors, 74 railway officials, 73 teachers in higher education and 12 lawyers most of them risen from the lower ranks of society⁶.

3. EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

Female literacy in Tamil Nadu in 1971 amounted to 31 less than in Kerala, but more than in any other Indian state. Of all B.A. degrees obtained at Madras University in 1933, Christian Indian ladies had a share of 56%, of the B.Sc of 33%, of M.B.B.S. degrees of 66.7% of M.A. degrees of 55.6%. The advanced position of Tamilnadu (Madras presidency) in the field of female education over against the rest of India was striking in about 1885, when the portion of girls at schools was 7.5% here, compared with 3.6% in Bengal and 5.9% in Bombay presidencies. Thomas Munro observed in 1822 that the education of women in the country was "unbecoming the modesty of sex, and fit only for public dancers. It was a long way to break through prejudices even among Christians against female education, until it became generally accepted and widespread, but Christians formed the avantgarde. B. Ziegenbalg pioneered with a girls' school at Tranquebar (recorded as early as most probably the first in Tamilnadu. B. Schultze at Madras instructed girls around 1732. After 1813 small schools for girls were opened by widows of Protestant missionaries. Most of those schools were short-lived, some developed into renowned schools like Bentinck High School at Madras. Also number of girls at schools in Madras city where made in 1821 not without "presents in money and cloths occasionally bestowed. That proportion had risen to nearly a half in the city by 1838, whereas in the whole of Tamilnadu the proportion lay between one seventh and one eighth. Considering that a very small proportion were caste girls, the dimension of the social revolution reflected in these early figures can hardly be overestimated.⁷

At Kanachapuram in Tirunelveli Dt the spadework was done for the training of school mistresses by way of a 'normal school' with a girls' boarding home attached. Soon it had branches all over the district: Daughters of Brahmans and Vellalars were sent to teach at newly formed day-schools for caste girls, thus becoming missionaries in places where there was no church or chapel. Because this training school was the best and largest of its kind in South India, teachers were requested for work at Madurai, Thanjavur, Madras and abroad. A Christian Female Training School with a similar outreach developed at Madras. To be a teacher was becoming the ideal for a Christian lady, and the profession of teacher was for some time almost a monopoly of Christians among the ladies of Tamilnadu. Out of 289 recognized trainees for that profession in the Madras presidency, 216 were Christians in 1890. The women orders of the Catholic Church, were to a large extent teaching orders, and their attraction consisted largely in that fact. University courses by women were at first taken at the Sarah Tucker College, Palayankottai, at the Northwick High School (of the UFCM) in Madras and at the Presidency College of the government of Madras. The Roman Catholic Church matched this Protestant enterprise with Stella Maris College at Madras (1947) and established in quick succession Providence College at Udagamandalam, Nirmala College at Coimbatore (1948), Fatima College at Madurai (1953), Auxilium College at Katpadi (1954), Jayaraj Anna Packiam College at Periakulam, Holy Cross College at Tiruchchirappalli, St Mary's College at Tuticorin, St Ignatius College at Palayankottai and Justin B.Ed. College at Madurai, whereas the Protestants added only one College for women: Lady Doak College at Madurai (1948), apart from St Christopher's Training College, Madras, for lady teachers (1923).⁸

At Vellore, Ida Scudder against great odds, but through the cooperation of several missions created a separate Women's Medical College in 1918, which in 1945 developed into the famous coeducational Christian Medical College,¹⁴⁶ whereas the Medical College in Madras had opened its doors for women already around 1875. Not only were Christian women for a long time the most literate group of women, but also most of the Tamil lady doctors and college professors came from their community.⁹

⁶ Ibid.,p.222.

⁷ G.O.No.729, Public Health, 20 July, 1866.

⁸ World Missionary Conference 1910, Vol.III, p. 366.

⁹ Dorothy Jealous Scudder, *A thousand years in thy sight* (U.S.A. 1984) p.125

4. THE UPLIFT OF WOMEN

The pronounced aim of female education by the missions and churches was originally to give women the capability to fulfill their new role in a changing society. The starting point of many a discussion of that matter was the general neglect, seclusion and rightlessness of women. The whole situation of half of the population was at stake, not only the future of the younger generation. Among the main topics discussed in the columns of *The Native Herald* soon after its first appearance was "the state of the Native female". The first unmarried lady missionary in Tamilnadu was Miss C. C. Giberne who joined the CMS at Tirunelveli in 1844. While spinning, they were brought to a high level of knowledge by their male counterparts. Whereas girls' schools regular visiting of homes, called zenana teaching, was in Tamilnadu commenced by Indian Christian women. It was organized by the wife of Indian pastor, Mrs. Bauboo. Mrs. Sathianadhan. Zenana work encountered its own limitations when a lady was ready for baptism. Secondly, for Christian widows a large field of religious activities was opened by the Sisters of St Anne or Annammals, an order exclusively for widows. The Annammals built up a center at Adeikalapuram. The needs of female education and the wish to admit virgins into the order led to a change of their constitution in the 20th century. In 1960 they founded the college at Periakulam. In 1981 they had a membership of 773. Child Marriage Restriction Act of 1929 was welcomed by Christians as raising the status of women. In the same way the stepping stone towards that Act had been hailed: The Age of Consent Bill of 1891 which fixed the minimum age for the consent to consummate the marriage. It had been a victory of a small group of social reformers and had been largely opposed by public opinion in Tamilnadu.¹⁰

The fight for the abolition of devadasis in Tamilnadu, which succeeded in 1947 (in KanniyakumariDt in 1930), was preceded by Christian. The dancing girls in the temple of Srirangam at Tiruchchirappalli were approached with the Christian message and some became Christians. The zenana missionary Amy Carmichael made the rescue of small girls, dedicated to become devadasis. Out of her activities the Dohnavur fellowship of women arose in 1920. In 1828, during which women were stripped of their upper cloths, beaten in the bazaar, prevented from going to church, and their husbands imprisoned. This time they lost their case: The rani (queen) Travancore herself intervened with a proclamation, in which she strictly forbade Christian converts to change their dress, to give up humility and obedience and to appeal to missionaries. Apparently the Nadar women gave in. But now the Hindu Nadars joined the Christians in their struggle. This was largely due to the leadership of Muttukutti who was influenced by Christianity and organized the SamattvaSamajam (Society for Equality). After petitioning the government to no avail, Christian Nadar women, encouraged by the abolition of slavery in 1855 and by their missionaries personally and supplied with jackets by mission schools, took courage again in 1858 to go to the markets with their bodies fully covered. A breakthrough was achieved, however small, on which further legislation could improve and by which, considering the mobility of Nadars, women all over Tamilnadu could be encouraged, provided they identified their own cause with that of a whole caste which had successfully defended itself against the attempt of the higher castes to recover lost authority by concentrating on the 'weaker sex'.¹¹

PARIAH MAGNA CHARTARAM

"Pariah Magna Charta" was four-fold: 1. Waste lands in possession of the government were to be distributed to Adidraavidars; 2. The collector was to represent them before court in all relevant transactions; 3. Any contract of slavery or bond-service was to be regarded as null and void, and missionaries were asked to bring to notice any violation of the law in this regard; 4. Special schools for 'Panchamas', the 'fifth varna' or outcasts of the four fold Manushriti's Varna System, as Pariahs were to be called henceforth, were to be established with stipendiary help from the government and with missionary support. At the Missionary Conference at Bombay December 1892/January 1893, at which for the first time "The Social Condition of the Lower Classes" was a major topic, as was also the "Work Among the Depressed Classes and the Masses", the importance of the action of the government of Madras was not yet fully realized. But it was followed up by a further order of 1 February 1893.¹²

The education of Adidraavidars received a momentous stimulus. Above all, they were filled with a new sense of self-esteem. In 1908 the Madras Depressed Classes Conference met at Chidambaram for the first time. Catechist Israel of Pandur (LELM) was its secretary. At the following conferences of that kind, 1911 at Madras and 1913 at Mayiladuthurai, more than

¹⁰ *Annual Medical Report of the A.A.M. 1868*, pp.40-41

¹¹ W.I.Chamberlain, *Fifty years in foreign fields (1857-1925)* (New York, 1925) p.103.

¹² Dorothy Jealous Scudder, *The story of the Scudder missionaries of India*, (U.S.A. 1985) p.111

four fifth of the speakers were catechists and teachers of the same Mission. Chairman in 1911 was the Brahman G. A. Natesan, editor of *The Indian Review*. The tone was: Not swaraj (independence), but radical social reform will help us. The fifth conference pleaded, among other things, for the abolition of the labour contracts in Thanjavur and South Arcot districts and of the system of indentured labour.¹³

Leading missionaries of the LELM supported the Adiravidars in the two centers of their movement, Madras and Mayiladuthurai, as well as in the central bodies of the Church. But leading Vellalars of the TELC and other Protestant Churches came out in 1937 with an Indian Christian Manifesto on their duty to the depressed classes which could only be considered by them as condescending. The manifesto sympathized with Gandhi's criticism of 'Harijan' mass conversions to Christianity. It took the view that as a whole community they indeed should be integrated into Hinduism rather than permitted to lower the standard of the Church without having undergone proper spiritual change.¹⁴

Gandhi's fast-to-death, the religious-political recognition of the Harijan community as Hindus in 1932, and his struggle for their temple entry and the abolition of untouchability were certain to have a more dramatic effect on the Roman Church. In the broader context of caste conflicts, the open conflict in the churches of Dharmanathapuram (Lady of Seven Dolours) at Tiruchchirappalli in 1936 and Kumbakonam has already been mentioned. The walk-out by caste Christians from the cathedral at Kumbakonam served for Gandhi as sufficient proof that "a Harijan remained a Harijan" even in a religion other than Hinduism. On the banks of the river Cauvery the AdiDravida Christians' Welfare Association, in a public meeting in December 1936, called in old promises of equality. The AdiDravida Catholic Christian Conference at Kumbakonam in April 1937 also threatened to have Adiravidars marry before the registrar, if they continued to be prohibited from standing close to the altar at church weddings. The Adi-Dravida Catholics' Conference at Thanjavur in June 1937 stressed the solidarity of Hindu and Christian Adiravidars.¹⁵

5. CONCLUSION

When independent India wrote the abolition of untouchability into the constitution of its secular state, many of the disabilities of Adiravidars in Tamil Nadu, most conspicuously in RamanathapuramDt, remained unchanged because no plaintiff was found. "Harijans remained Harijans" in depression and uplift. Their group affinity asserted itself in political life as well as in church life. With democratic developments the majority of Adiravidars in many churches gained for themselves opportunities of leadership up into episcopal ranks. The order of the president of India of 1950, however, which excluded Christian Harijans from governmental reservations and concessions to which Hindu Harijans were eligible (as 'Scheduled Castes'), could not but produce the impression of religious discrimination against the Christian Adiravidars in the prevailing system. In the interest of continuing uplift for their own group against the pressures of the entrenched caste system, they had to plead backwardness. But that cannot belittle the tremendous liberation which some of their class experienced through Christianity and which received an irrefutable place in history.

¹³ Dorothy Clarke Willson, *The Torch of Life* (U.S.A., 1976), p.51.

¹⁴ G.O. No. Ms. 2033, Health, 16 June, 1959..

¹⁵ St. Louis, *Service in India Medical Missions*, Concordia Publishing House, pp.26-27