



# Protestant Missionaries and Female Education in Kerala

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## Introduction

Today the women of Kerala have distinguished themselves in various sectors of public life in India and abroad. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, the situation was entirely different. In fact the birth of a girl was not usually a welcome event. It was definitely a patriarchal society and women had no freedom either at home or in the society. Women were totally subject to men. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala woman was very much bound by the rules and customs of society. Kerala was in the cusp of social evils and practices during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many social evils like child marriage, sati, smartha<sup>1</sup>, pulapedi and mannapedi<sup>2</sup>, dowry etc. tortured the women folk of Kerala. Their economic condition was also deplorable. They had no share of the family property. They were married off at an early age and dowry given to her become the property of the husband. She was supposed to do the duties at home, be a good wife and mother. She had no right to go for a job and earn money. Education of women was considered as profane and immoral.

This paper is an attempt to analyse the educational initiatives of Protestant Missionaries which contributed largely to the social awakening of Kerala. When the traditional Kerala society denied fundamental rights to its women members, the Christian missionaries strived hard to attain these rights for them. Even though they were led by some selfish motives, their efforts proved beneficial to the womenfolk of Kerala. They wanted to improve the social position of the girls, provide them with knowledge and skills. They attempted to give employment opportunities through vocational education and to eradicate the social evils prevailed in the society. They used education as the main instrument to attain all these goals. So they started educational activities for the upliftment of women in Kerala. Girls' schools were opened with the aim of giving girls enough general knowledge along with training in piety, etiquette, morals and home management techniques.

## Educational Initiatives of Protestant Missionaries in Kerala

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a number of Protestant missionary organizations were formed in Europe. They derived their inspiration from the Pietist movement<sup>1</sup> and Calvinism. These missions gradually followed paths of colonial expansion and established centres of activity at various European colonies. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself Protestant Christian Missionary organizations were established in Kerala. The London Mission society and the Church Mission Society worked in Travancore area and the Basel Mission Society concentrated its attention on Malabar and South Canara<sup>2</sup>.

## London Missionary Society (LMS)

The London Missionary Society or L.M.S. was the first Protestant Community which sent missionaries to Travancore. The London Missionary Society began its work in South Travancore in 1806 and the first L.M.S. missionary to reach Travancore was Rev. William Tobias Ringletaube. The L.M.S. Missionaries started different types of institutions such as girl's school, boarding schools, bazaar schools, day schools, caste girl's schools, English schools, village schools, evening schools, vernacular schools, Anglo-vernacular schools, training schools, and a college. In 1809, the first English school of Trivandrum was opened by Ringletaube at Mylady in South Travancore.

Ringletaube was followed by Rev. Charles Mead, who was an educator, builder, economist and social reformer. He was assisted by his wife, Mrs. Johanna Mead in his efforts. She had the honour of laboring with Rev.Mead as the "First Missionary Lady in South Travancore". Rev.Mead did marvellous works in South Travancore in general and Kalkulamtaluk in particular. He was appointed the superintendent of education. He introduced several educational reforms. He frequently toured the state and visited most of the schools. Under his direction, several vernacular schools were merged with the English schools. Mead's educational schemes accelerated the educational policy of Munro. A seminary or boarding school for boys was opened at Nagercoil. Mead used the income from the paddy fields which were granted by H.H. the Rani to the mission in the time of Rev.Ringletaube for the support of the Nagercoil Seminary.

The first school for girls was established in 1819 in Nagercoil by Johanna Mead. Rev. Charles Mead started a commercial school in Nagercoil in 1820, where printing, book binding, leather making, paper making, weaving, silk worm rearing etc. were taught. He also started a bazaar school, an industrial school, and a printing press. He built a Christian village in Nagercoil. He fought against slavery and Oozhiyam<sup>5</sup> and worked for the right to wear upperclothes for avarnas. Rev. Charles Mead was the architect of Nagercoil Seminary of the L.M.S. Mrs. Mead assisted by Mrs. Mault wife of another missionary, rendered valuable service in organizing the first girls' school with boarding facility where embroidery and pillow-lace making were introduced. Mrs. Mault, along with Mrs. Mead rendered meritorious service to the cause of women's education in South Travancore. Mrs. Mault made special efforts to bring poor girls to school. She patiently collected the slaves and orphans for attending the school. A few girls picked up by her were provided with boarding and clothing. For meeting the expenses Mrs. Mault received funds from her friends in England towards the maintenance of the school. She had received support from the Maharani (Parvathi Bhai) and the British Resident. In the girls' school, Mrs. Mault taught the children cleanliness and sanitation along with Christian religion. Besides these, she taught them to read and write and trained them in spinning, knitting and sewing, so that they could earn money. In an attempt to raise the economic status of the women, Mrs. Mault started the Lace Industry in 1820. The Nagercoil Lace Industry is the oldest of the Mission Industries in this part of South India. In course of time this industry became a source of support to the institution. The South Travancore mission lace is widely known in India and abroad.

Rev. Mead, set up a printing press in his own house at Nagercoil. This was the first printing press ever introduced into Travancore, preceding the Kottayam press by about a year.

Then they started schools in several places in Neyoor, Trivandrum, Parassala, Quilon, Vakkom, and Attingal. By 1827 there were forty four schools in Travancore. The Neyoor Girls Boarding school was established in 1828 under the Neyoor Mission which was situated in an ancient Nadar area. The starting of separate schools for girls and the introduction of co- educational system were two important contributions of the missionaries to the development of women's education. For higher education Scott Christian College was established at Nagercoil and it provided higher education to women also. The college started its career as a school in 1805 and evolved into a full-fledged college in 1817. It was the first college in the princely state of Travancore.

The missionaries showed particular interest in the development of female education, irrespective of caste or creed. Free boarding, food and clothing provided at the beginning was a blessing to the slaves and poor girls. LMS missionaries were the first to appoint lady teachers in schools to attract girls. In the selection of teachers the missionaries paid utmost possible attention to their religious and moral fitness along with other academic qualifications. They imparted vocational education along with general education. The lace industry started by the missionaries helped the slave girls to become independent economically. It also provided employment to many and prevented them from going back to their traditional professions, thus helped to enhance the status of women in the country. The zenana<sup>6</sup> work done by the Bible women helped the spread of education, especially among the women in high caste families. Some of the women in the zenanas were able to read and write. A notable contribution of the mission for the development of women's education in Travancore was the establishment of South Travancore Medical Mission. Through the YWCA the missionaries were able to instruct the people regarding village economy and cottage industries such as bee-keeping and poultry keeping.

### **Church Missionary Society (CMS)**

Rev. Thomas Norton, the first missionary of the Church Missionary Society arrived in Alleppey in 1816. Following Norton, many other CMS people came as missionaries to Kerala such as Bishop Speechly, Henry Baker and Benjamin Bailey. They identified the need for a formal education for all, including women, and this realisation resulted in the foundation of institutions such as CMS College, CMS Press and Industrial School and CMS LP Schools.

The missionaries of the CMS opened schools along with churches. They established different kinds of institutions for the development of education. Parochial schools, seminaries, Syrian girl's schools, boarding schools, village schools, grammar schools, training schools and colleges were some of them. Norton started his first school with 40 children in the Alleppey Mission Compound in 1817, and in spite of stories circulating that he would convert the children and shift them to England, eleven other schools were opened at Alleppey with a total of 301 boys and 57 girls. Norton also started separate schools for both girls and boys in the same compound.

The first school for girls was started by Amelia Baker in Kottayam in 1820. The C.M.S. did not confine their activities to Travancore alone. Thomas Dawson and then Samuel Ridsdale stayed at Cochin and organized educational and evangelical activities there. As more missionaries came, the C.M.S. extended its activities to the other parts of the Cochin state. In 1840, Henry Harley began to build a church at Trichur and made it a Mission Centre. He established Mission Schools and Churches in and around Trichur. Then, C.M.S. missionaries like J.R. Wilkinson, J. Wilson, W. Smith, RoR. Maddox and F. Bower organized evangelical and educational activities with varying success. From Kottayam, girl's education expanded to several places in Cochin, Alleppey, Mavelikkara, Trichur and Tiruvalla. The earliest pupils were the children of Syrians and high caste Hindus. After 1836, the CMS missionaries admitted pupils in their schools irrespective of caste and creed. The Baker Memorial Girls' school, the fort school, Christava Mahilalayam and the Buchanan Institutions were some of the famous girl's institutions established by the missionaries of the CMS and these schools had

rendered remarkable service for the development of women's education in Kerala. The missionaries included three R's in the curriculum. Besides, girls had to learn English, History, Natural Science, Mathematics, Music, Needle Work and Embroidery. Modern higher education in Kerala was started by the CMS missionaries. The CMS College was established at Kottayam in 1838. Rev. Benjamin Bailey was the first principal of the College. Lady students were also admitted in this college. For the higher education of women, union colleges were started in Madras. Sarah Tucker College, the women's Christian College, St. Christopher's Training College, and the Missionary Medical College for women in Vellore were some of them.

The missionaries combined formal education with vocational education and appointed lady teachers in the schools. They imparted education to both men and women by various means including Bazaar preaching and lantern lectures, medical activities, general instruction classes, training programmes such as leader's training and saving habit training.

### **Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (BEMS)**

Hermann Gundert, the first Missionary of the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society in Malabar arrived in 1839. The missionaries of the BEMS established various kinds of institutions such as boarding schools, day schools, seminaries, preparatory schools, Elementary vernacular schools, infant schools, normal schools, Schools for Non-Christians, Parochial schools, Orphanages (Boarding School), Night schools, Agricultural School, Middle School, Training School, Nurseries and Sunday Schools and the College.

The first school of the BEMS for girls was established by Julie Gundert in 1839 in Tellicherry. Later schools were established in different places in Cannanore, Chombala, Calicut, Palakkad, Manjeri, Codacal and Vaniyankulam. The missionaries of the BEMS opened schools for Christian and non-Christian boys and girls and admitted students irrespective of caste or creed. They introduced compulsory education among the children of their congregations. Christian parents were bound to send their girls and boys to schools and to educate them till they were about 14 years old. They admitted girls along with boys from the beginning of their endeavours and introduced fees in their schools. In boarding schools, the forenoon was dedicated to lessons, whereas the afternoon was employed for field and garden work in the boy's institutions and for sewing, knotting and crochet work in the girls' institutions.

The Mission granted loans in addition to free scholarship, to deserving Christian students. For this, the mission had a special stipend fund, with a capital of Rs.2000000. it seemed to be a part of evangelization that non-Christians would be attracted to Christianity. In these schools also the study of Bible had a prominent place. There were discussions regarding caste, Marumakkathayam, idolatry and other institutions of Hinduism and the schools provided places for pupils belonging to several caste groups to come and study together.

The Basel Mission encouraged Female Education. But it was a slow process. In 1912 the institution of the Basel Mission had given training to 18 Christian ladies as elementary school trained teachers. But there was none from the non-Christian communities. This absence reveals some sociological problems of women education in a traditional society. The orthodox sections of Hindu society were also against women education.

The mission laid the rule that all Christian boys and girls were bound to attend parochial schools. Julie Gundert started a Boarding school at Chirakkal, Cannanore which was for girls where manual labourers of women were taught. At Calicut there was another one which was started by Fritz in 1867. The Calicut boarding school had 69 girls from 1867 to 1878, the girls received were increased to 136 of whom 60 were non-Christians. The girl's school in Calicut had a training class and nine girls went up for the teacher's examination of whom eight passed very creditably in the third degree in the year 1878. The free school established by Edward Brennen in 1862 was raised to the status of a second grade college in 1890. It laid foundations to the Brennan College. Mrs. Julie Gundert devoted much of her time to the girls school in Tellicherry. The girls of the boarding school in Tellicherry were instructed Malayalam and English reading and writing and were also taught geography, arithmetic as well as singing with the additional labour of Mrs. Mook who was the first agent sent by a special committee that came into existence in Switzerland in 1901 for the education of the female sex in India.

The aim of Basel mission educational work in Malabar was to disseminate the Christian message and to train local assistants. While attempting to achieve the goal, the missionaries also involved in establishing schools, promotion of the vernacular and the literature. Thus the Basel Mission established various types of schools not only to spread the Christian faith, but also aimed at imparting basic education to all converts. According to the rule laid down in the Basel Mission, the parents of the Christian children were bound to send them to school till they were about fourteen years old.

During the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The non-caste Hindus, especially the prominent members of the Tiyya community were beginning to feel the need of an institution which would provide collegiate education for them. Unfortunately, the only college in Calicut, the Guruvayurappan College was not opened to them. They, therefore looked up to the German missionaries for opening at least a second grade college which would cater to the educational needs of their community and ultimately to their social and financial advancement. In 1907, an application was forwarded to the Madras University for the affiliation of the Boys High School as a second grade college. The affiliation was granted in 1908 and the Malabar Christian College was formed at Calicut in March 1909 with Rev. W. Muller as principal. The class consisted of 15 students of which two were women.

## Conclusion

The introduction of English education and western liberal thought among women by the Christian missionaries and the consequent efforts of the local rulers and social reformers in the field of female education went a long way in shaping the modern women of Kerala. As a result of their efforts, women retained their self-esteem and honour from a stage of dependency, slavery and insecurity. Western liberal ideas of nineteenth century such as humanitarianism, egalitarianism and rationality created awareness in society about the oppressed condition of women and the need to modify the traditions concerning them.

It also prompted the native Government, especially in Travancore to take initiative towards female education. The Travancore Government started its first school for girls at Karamana in Trivandrum in 1859. Vernacular schools separately for girls were organised in 1867. Separate schools for girls removed the hesitation on the part of the parents to send their daughters to mixed schools. Government abolished the fees for girls in all grades of schools leading to the popularity of girls' schools. The opening of a number of vernacular girls schools every year and the raising of the Girls High School at Trivandrum to a second grade college were the other steps in this direction.

Before the arrival of Christian Missionaries educational institutions were practically non-existent in rural areas. Absence of educational institutions in the near vicinity of remote villages made it impossible for the villagers to send their wards to schools. Their parents were unwilling to send them to school as they feared that female education would endanger their culture and civilization. Hence, the lady missionaries of the London Missionary Society came forward to uplift by encouraging women's education. They were responsible for bringing to light the existence of slavery in Travancore and laid the foundation for their freedom by introducing self-earning schemes.

It can also be argued that it was largely the challenge posed by Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century that provoked the contemporary social reform movements in Kerala. Missionary efforts made an impact on the attitude of the society towards female education. They tried to influence public opinion by exhorting people to send their girls to schools. The early missionaries laid a strong foundation to create a sense of social awakening in the minds of the depressed classes. Upon this foundation, the fight for social identity was slowly built under the leadership of pioneer missionaries. The missionaries who came after them too worked hard to create social awakening. They educated the people to fight for the social identity of those who suffered from want of it. Rev.Mead was instrumental in starting the first upper cloth revolt in 1822.

## Notes

1. Orthodox Hindu family tradition composed of Brahmins, which follows Panchayata.
2. On particular days in a year if a Brahmin women happened to see men belonging to low castes, they will be thrown out of their family and become slaves.
3. Movement within Lutheranism that lasted from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. It greatly influenced Protestantism.
4. One of the three districts of the Madras presidency under the British Empire. It was renamed as Dakshina Kannada in 1947.
5. Free services that were rendered by the low castes to the government as and when required.
6. The Zenana missions were established in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to send women missionaries into the homes of Indian women to convert them to Christianity

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