

Indigenous Movements and the Growth of The Home Missionary Society in India

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Abstract

The Great Commission of evangelism is sharing the Good News of salvation, forgiveness and grace to all. Christian missions have been in the forefront of evangelisation, in obedience to the command of the Master. The Church exists to give witness to the Gospel. Though the task of Evangelism began in the Kerala-Kanniyakumari region right from the time of St.Thomas the Apostle of Jesus Christ in the first century and after the coming of St.Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary in the 16th century, it was vigorously activated at the advent of the missionaries of the London Missionary Society who proclaimed the Gospel from the early 19th century and through major part of the 20th century. The awakening of the social and cultural consciousness of the country has led the educated Christian leaders to search for self-identity among the western mission societies. This awakening has resulted in the formation of a number of indigenous missions in India and the liberation of the once depressed and oppressed classes to find the true path to Salvation and Liberation. When the need for an indigenous mission was felt in the Travancore region, the South Travancore Church Council initiated missionary works by actuating the Home Missionary Society in this region in 1900 A.D. The HMS since then has grown and developed into an expansive and resourceful organisation bringing thousands of souls to the fold of Christian faith.

Key Words

Indigenous Movements, Evangelism, Conscientisation, Oppressed Classes, LMS, CMS, HMS, Zenana Mission, IMS, NMSI, Emancipation, Empowerment etc.

Introduction

The first half of the 20th century witnessed a significant growth in the Indian Church. The awakening of the cultural consciousness of India has led the educated Christian leaders to search for self-identity among the western mission societies. Missions needed to be developed with the help of local funds and finance. Besides, the early leaders of the Church who adhered to the Christian faith began to realise the importance of evangelism by the local church themselves, as the indigenous faith leaders were brimming with the consciousness of evangelism. It was the outcome of the fire burning in the consciousness of these early believers which brought forth indigenous mission societies which became great endeavours for prodigious missions and massive social changes.

Advent of Indigenous Missionary Organisations

The main thrust of the missionary organisations is building up of basic human communities, which should ultimately transform to basic Christian communities. This is achieved through animation and conscientisation. Conscientisation model deals with the root causes of the oppression existing and removes them by educating and emancipating the individual to realise his/her state. This model can be applied to any society to bring liberation in socio, political and economic contexts of the oppressed people. The indigenous movements have developed into different home missions and emancipated the once oppressed classes of the Indian society.

Zenana Mission

The Zenana missions were outreach programmes established in British India with the aim of converting women to Christianity. They started to send female missionaries into the homes of Indian women from the middle of the 19th century, including the private areas of houses, known as Zenana where male visitors were not allowed. The Zenana system of education along with day schools and orphanages was the third most significant form of education which the Christian missionaries promoted in all the presidencies. This kind of education was meant for the upper caste women who due to social customs could not receive formal schooling.

Zenanas were the most private rooms in a home where girls upon marriage (normally the age of 12) were secluded, never to be seen again by any male except for family. In that insulated world the mother wielded considerable influence over her children and to some extent even over her husband. To reach these otherwise inaccessible women and girls, Christian missionaries established Zenana schools and hospitals and recruited women Bible workers to reach into the Zenanas.

The Zenana centres yielded wonderful results and the Zenana Mission got engaged in visiting and teaching women in their homes. It opened schools exclusively for the girls. The chief objective of their mission was to enlighten the women. In the beginning, the work was carried on by the wives of the missionaries. The missionaries were assisted by Indian Bible women, the elderly widows, matrons and native Christian teachers. The Zenana missionaries and the wives of the missionaries opened schools for girls in their residences. They were the pioneers of women's education in modern India. The Zenana missionaries worked for the abolition of social evils like child marriage, slavery, caste system and Devadasi system. Miss Amy Carmichael and her associates redeemed the girls who had been offered to the temples as Devadasis. It also led to the foundation of special societies for this purpose, such as the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission.

Indian Missionary Society (IMS)

The Indian Missionary Society is an indigenous missionary congregation of priests and evangelist brothers. This congregation was founded by Rev. Father Gasper A. Pinto in the year 1941 in Varanasi, the holy city of Hindus, in Uttar Pradesh, India.¹ The IMS was born in the southern soil on 12th February, 1903.² Rev. V.S. Azariah while working as Secretary of YMCA visited Jaffna in Srilanka where he came to know that the Srilankan Church has sent missionaries to Thondi in Tamilnadu. Influenced by this Bishop Azariah became zealous in spirit and after arrival in India he met the prayer warriors in Palayamkottai and shared the need of a missionary organisation to evangelise India. Their vision has led, in God's providence, to a massive mission through the Indian Missionary Society. Prayers got intensified and eventually on 12 February 1903 the Indian Missionary Society (IMS) has had its beginning in Chathiram where the Tirunlveli Diocese Printing Press is located now. Eight priests and twenty laymen along with Azariah formed the Indian Missionary Society. Their modum of operation is:

- To work in close cooperation with local churches, promoting and assisting them in their missionary enterprise.
- To promote local leadership
- To proclaim the Gospel of Christ
- To teach the Word of God to the enquirers
- To build schools where there is a requirement
- To build churches and prayer houses in neglected sectors with no motive of becoming a Church.
- To build hostels for tribal students
- To help and rehabilitate the poor

The Indian Missionary Society as the first indigenous missionary movement has a mission to fulfill among the most oppressed and downtrodden communities in the tribal belt of India. The Society offers gospel to those communities with love, both by words and deeds. It uplifts the poor in their 90 mission fields spread

over 15 states in India by giving them schooling and medical care. The Congregation is spread in 5 regions and undertakes preaching and missionary work in the rural areas of India. The IMS at present has 218 religious priests who takes care of 65 parishes.³

National Missionary Society of India (NMSI)

Formation of the National Missionary Society of India (NMSI) dates back to 25 December, 1905, on Christmas Day, when a meeting of the church leaders held in the historic library of William Carey the Baptist missionary at Serampore. It was then decided to form a National Missionary Society, adapting the following principles.

- The work of evangelization shall be done by Indians
- That its expenses should be met by Indian money.
- They must choose mission fields in areas where Western Missions were not working
- The society should not form a church or denomination.

Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah was associated with young men in YMCA, where Sherwood Eddy of YMCA and K.T.Paul were his friends. Inspired by divine love for the people of their country, these spiritual leaders founded the National Missionary Society of India in 1905 with some more friends in Serampore, Calcutta. The founders decided to work with Indian men, money and methods. In 1909 Azariah went as a missionary to Dornakal and later became the Bishop of Dornakal Diocese.

Rev.Azariah is a dedicated and conscientious minister hailing from Tirunelveli who worked for church union and was instrumental in the formation of the Church of South India (CSI). He worked for the upliftment of the depressed classes. So he is remembered as the Apostle of Unity and also as an Apostle of Outcastes. The Church of South India, The Indian Missionary Society, Madras, and The National Missionary Society of India jointly celebrated the birth centenary of Bishop Azariah, the First Indian Bishop and Founder of The Indian Missionary Society and the National Missionary Society, on 5th and 6th October 1974 in Madras.

Missionary Societies in India

Just as the London Missionary Society (LMS) was in South Travancore, it was the Church Missionary Society (CMS) which brought about reformation and renaissance in the lives of the people belonging to North Travancore. The people of the State of Travancore were met with the Gospel by the selfless and dedicated works of these missionaries which brought a great number of people to the fold of Christianity, which was followed by social upliftment in all walks of life. Many churches were built, and schools and colleges were also started for the educational upliftment of the people of Travancore.⁴ Other gospel mission services who worked for the propagation of the Gospel and spiritual upliftment in the Indian land were the Society for the

Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), Wesleyan Methodist Mission Society (1813) and Scotland Church Mission Society.

Home Missionary Society in Travancore

Protestant Christian faith was brought to the Travancore soil first by the London Missionary Society Rev. William Tobias Ringeltaube, the first LMS missionary who landed in Kanniyakumari, also known as Cape Comorin.⁵ He propagated the Good News to the people of this region and gained a great number of people for the kingdom of God. Many more LMS missionaries, who included Charles Mead and Charles Mault, came to this land and continued to work with the mission begun by Ringeltaube, with the result, a great number of churches came up in this place which was once a land of people who lived in ignorance and obscurity.⁶

A New Beginning

The London Missionary Society was the progeny of the evangelical revival in England, who organised evangelisation activities in India, on whose model the Home Missionary Society (HMS) was fashioned in Travancore. It was one hundred years after the advent of the LMS in Travancore in 1806 A.D. that the HMS took shape in this region in the year 1900 A.D. thanks to the persistent and devoted works of the native spiritual leaders. The administration, maintenance and other features like finance of the LMS mission were managed by the Travancore District Committee (TDC) which had European missionaries as its active members. When it was perceived that more than 80 percent of the people of this region were still living outside the limits of the Gospel of Salvation, the TDC felt that it would be good that the native Christians take part in the propagation of the Gospel with their own funds. The formation of the South Travancore Church Council (STCC) consisting of native evangelical minds in 1874 became a reality in this manner.

Thus in the year 1874 a meeting of representatives from all the churches of South Travancore Diocese was held at Neyyoor. The object of the Council was “to bring about mutual acquaintance, sympathy and union amongst all the churches, to discuss with freedom the feeling of all our native people on all matters affecting the prosperity of themselves and their churches, and to produce brotherly feeling amongst all the churches connected with our mission”, writes I.H.Hacker.⁷ The South Travancore Church Council decided that such a society was needed in the interests of their own church life as much as for the propagation of the Gospel. Rules were drawn up and a committee was formed, and in 1901 the Society began its work. Since then other small causes have been formed and the future looked full of promise.⁸

Formation of Home Missionary Society

The proposal and plans of TDC and STCC could see the light of the day and in the meeting of the STCC at Thittuvilai on 22nd and 23rd March of 1899, the proposal to start a mission to work among the unreached in Travancore was brought to the notice of the committee. It was also proposed to give the name of

the new mission as South Travancore Native Evangelical Society (STNES). Rev.I.H.Hacker was the LMS missionary most involved in this project who raised the question of starting a Home Missionary Society in Travancore which would work for the glory of God and gain many souls for the kingdom of God.⁹

It was also decided to name the new society as South Travancore Native Evangelistic Society (STNES). Indigenous missionaries were appointed for the great task, with endorsement from Travancore District Council comprising European missionaries, with the resolution that funds for this Gospel work will be generated from inland people who have already gained knowledge of the Saviour for two or three generations. This started a new era of evangelization after the trials of the LMS in this place for more than 90 years.

The newly conceived organisation was named South Travancore Native Evangelistic Society (STNES). Rev.J.Joshua was elected unanimously as the first President and Rev.C.Sathianathan as the first Secretary of the evangelistic society. The South Travancore Native Evangelistic Society's name was changed to "His Majesty's Service" (HMS), which is also interpreted as Home Missionary Society. Rev.I.H.Hacker and Rev.James Duthie were the early LMS missionaries who were ardent supporters of this new mission.

From the commencement of the mission, wherever there was an earnest church, voluntary work for the extension of the kingdom of Christ was carried out. In the year 1901, the Church Council decided that such a society was needed in the interest of their own church life as much as the propagation of the Gospel. The mission developed rapidly which functioned for gathering the heathen godless people to the folds of Christianity. The Society was launched in an unevangelised portion of the Quilon district, among the backward classes of the Malayalam country which was trailed in many other centres of Travancore. Churches were built for people to worship the living God, and these sweats worked for the betterment of the downtrodden communities with many social upliftment programmes mooted by the native missionaries.

Nagercoil Elite in the Society's Mission

Mr.Paul Daniel, Headmaster of Scott Christian High School, served as the Chairman of HMS for many years. Mr.M.D.Daniel, who was the President of the Travancore Church Council for one year, has also served as the President of the HMS for a few years. G.N.Nehemiah served as Sirestha for 10 years. Rev.C.Sathianathan passionately worked for HMS for 15 years, as Sirestha and Pastor. Dr.S.Ambrose of Neyyoor Medical Mission, after his retirement from medical service, was visiting the Society's churches and working in unison with the Society's office bearers to enhance the financial growth of the society.

Mr.V.Sathianesan, Headmaster of Marthandam Teachers Training School was appointed as Honourary Superintending Minister. Then in 1944, Rev.J.N.Ambrose, long time Pastor of Nagercoil Home Church, filled that place. He worked for the HMS in the capacity of Treasurer, Vice President, Secretary, Pastor and more for

36 years. He started the Men's Educational Movement and made the ministers to look after that work. He used to stress the importance of family prayer and made the church families to abide by that convention.

Mr.C.E.Yesudian strove hard to improve the financial status of the society and helped in the extension of the mission. He instituted the monthly tax collection. Rev.M.V.Vedaraj who was working in Burma served as the Superintending Minister of HMS and revived the mission. He worked for 28 years in the HMS. Mr.M.Sathiadhas who was Magistrate in the Nagercoil Munsif Court, has served as executive member, Vice President, and President of the Society for 20 years.¹⁰

Mode of Operation by the HMS

The ministers from the Society were sent two by two to the villages. These people used to travel by bullock carts. Revival meetings were conducted among the people of non-Christian background. When a mission field was identified, they conducted Sunday School and prayer meetings at the house of one of the believers. It was followed by trials to acquire land for building a church at that place.

As the members of most of the churches of the Society were poor, support was provided to the very poor among them in cash and kind from the Society's fund and also from the special contributions collected from different people. This mode of support in the form of clothes and gifts came mainly from the Nagercoil Home Church, Marthandam Lace and Embroidery Industries, Neyyoor Women's Aid Society, believers from Srilanka, Devikulam and Munnar. One Sunday of the year was observed as 'Dorcal Sunday' and the offering collected on that day was distributed to the poor.¹¹

The mission of evangelization commenced beginning from Quilon district and the first church was established at Mugathalae in Quilon. Since then it was a dauntless task with missionaries girdled up for the great mission and going from village to village two by two, some time on foot and some time on bullock carts, when they proceeded in groups. People living in remote places in the Travancore region eagerly responded to the Gospel and a vast majority was gained for the kingdom of God in this land. Churches were built at these places with funds from the benefactors living in places where the Gospel had already had a firm footing.

Different modes and methods were applied for collecting funds for the expansion of the Gospel in the mission. The life members of the evangelistic society paid two rupees every year as membership in the S.T.Native Evangelistic Society. The HMS activities were concentrated mainly in the erstwhile State of Travancore which have now been divided into C.S.I.Kanyakumari Diocese and South Kerala Diocese respectively. Contributions were collected in different forms; Sales cum Exhibitions were conducted at different centres of the HMS when believers worked enthusiastically and gathered good amount of money for the missionary works related to the HMS.¹²

The mission had its three branches respectively in Munnar, Madras (Chennai) and Madurai, where vigorous activities were undertaken for collecting funds for the establishment of churches in the newly developed mission fields in Travancore. The Home Missionary Society works were dispersed along the Travancore region and the Good News was propagated enthusiastically at many unreached corners of the land. When the country became independent in 1947, the Church of South India was formed, and later the former South Travancore Diocese was bifurcated as Kanyakumari Diocese and South Kerala Diocese in 1959. In 1971, the Home Missionary Society was also separated as Kanyakumari HMS and Kerala HMS. Subsequently, the developed churches were handed over to the C.S.I. Kanyakumari Diocese and South Kerala Diocese, respectively according to their locations.

Marthandam has been chosen as the headquarters of the HMS mission, where the HMS Administrative Office building has been constructed. A good number of benevolent supporters are inspired by the Almighty to extend their support in the form of cash, material and land for the works like missionaries' salary, transport charges, building cost and the like. Honourarium for the missionaries is a major part of the expenses incurred by the Society, which by the wonderful grace of God is provided by the monthly contributions granted by the well-wishers of the mission.

Churches and Statistics

Trials for building permanent churches were made at all the mission fields. Those prompted by the Spirit of God were offering land or fund for building the church at a particular place and a good number of churches came up this way. In this way, a number of churches have been established and the HMS organisation has been giving the Reports and Statistics occasionally. According to the report provided by the HMS in December 2020, there are 41 churches under HMS, with 24 missionary fields without having a church building as yet. More churches are under construction. So far 102 churches have been given to the diocese, with more in line for completion and surrendering to the diocese. Prayers are conducted on the last Friday of every month at the HMS head office in Marthandam.

Accomplishment by the HMS

The Home Missionary Society which began its journey at the dawn of the 20th century, was the first indigenous mission organisation in the whole of the country, with more such missions following the model. The HMS has a unique place among the missionary societies, as a pioneering service to indulge in evangelism without foreign help.

The Home Missionary Society has been growing by leaps and bounds and gathering thousands of people to the flock of Christ. Many hundred churches have been established and many thousand souls have been won for Christ. The Golden Jubilee (50 years) celebration of the HMS was commemorated in 1956 and

the Platinum Jubilee (75 years) was commemorated in 1975. Souvenirs were released on these occasions. The Centenary Celebration of the Home Missionary Society (1900-2000) was observed in great style with the Souvenir named 'Home Missionary Society, Kanyakumari Diocese, Centenary Special Release'. In this publication all details of the HMS, describing its origin, formation, the missionaries, the supporters, the churches and the prevailing trends and modes of operation, are found.

HMS is proud of its accomplishments during the past 122 years. Beginning from 1900, more than 100 churches have been established and many of them have been given to the rule of the dioceses. The churches are handed over to the Diocese soon after they are able to stand on their own legs. In this way the Diocese has been blessed by the Society.

Acclamation

So many of the despised people have found a home under Christ's Gospel, and so many have found in Christ a refuge and strength which enable them to confront life in faith and courage, filled with the mighty hope that make for them men in India, as elsewhere; men and women through the power of the Gospel rise out of much mental and moral darkness into purity, enlightenment and liberty, and it is surely not without reason that Christian workers when they see a scattered and despised people developing into Christians, find a very strong proof of the divine nature of the Gospel entrusted to them. In the words of Rev.I.H.Hacker, the LMS missionary who had given his full support for the formation and expansion of the Gospel through the Home Missionary Society, "Here in Travancore during the last century, a miracle has been performed, the miracle of the first century, and a people who were not a people, are being made the people of God".¹³

Conclusion

Evangelisation, in addition to its primary task of soul winning, has wrought social upliftment as well as economic progress. It is an undeniable fact that the struggle and sweat of the pioneer loyalists of the indigenous missions have brought emancipation and empowerment to the once oppressed and marginalised classes. The Home Missionary Society is the first indigenous mission in India to work among these beleaguered people and to win socio, political and economic freedom for these people. It has proved to be a true conscientisation model. They have found the Way to the Truth; they are standing testimonies for the progress made in the lives of those depressed and ostracized people living in remote and unreachable corners of the land. They have made the uncivilized a civilized, devil worshippers to worshippers of true God, and produced enlightenment out of ignorance. This is the accomplishment that was desired and aspired by the servants of God. It has been done, and will continue to be done. It is a mighty commission, accomplished sacrificially with a good will for human upliftment.

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