

SOCIAL SERVICES OF ZENANA MISSIONARY SOCIETY IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Social service and reforms have always been intertwined with religious thought and effort in every land. India saw religious activism leading to various reformist movements in the 19th century. In the process of social evolution, the Protestant missionaries played a vital role. Tirunelveli district was the garden of Protestant Missions. The missionary societies, S.P.C.K., S.P.G, C.M.S. and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (C.E.Z.M.S.) did selfless and devoted work in Tirunelveli district for many years. The Zenana work formed an important part of the missionary work of the Protestant Missions. In Tirunelveli, the women missionaries of C.E.Z.M.S., S.P.G. and C.M.S. were involved in the Zenana mission work with its head quarters at Palayamkottai. The Zenana missionaries took care of the sick and the suffering. They taught them the values of neatness, punctuality, discipline, service, manners and character. The Zenana centres yielded wonderful results and the Zenana Mission engaged in visiting and teaching women in their homes. It opened schools exclusively for the girls. Zenana teachers were given training by the missionaries for three days in a week. The Zenana girls were given education in vernacular and English in rented buildings. The Zenana missionaries instituted training programmes for women in general and children in particular. The Zenana Missionaries strongly condemned the devadasi system and vehemently opposed the immorality and obscenity perpetuated in the name of religion. Amy Carmichael attacked the evil system of keeping temple prostitutes and rescued many girls who were dedicated to the temple gods. The Zenana missionaries fought against this evil practice. Child marriage was not limited to the upper castes alone the depressed classes too practiced it. This evil system was vehemently attacked by the Christian missionaries. In their attempt to have child marriage abolished, they took recourse to by the Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1872. To uplift the widows and the poor, the women missionaries introduced lace making, sewing, embroidery, spinning, and basket making.

Key Words: Social service, reforms, S.P.C.K., S.P.G, C.M.S., C.E.Z.M.S., Palayamkottai, Zenana Missionaries, Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1872.

Introduction:

The Indian social movement is a direct outcome of the exposure of the average educated Indian to the Christian missions and western influence. Social service and reforms have always been intertwined with religious thought and effort in every land. India saw religious activism leading to various reformist movements in the 19th century. In the process of social evolution, the Protestant missionaries played a vital role. When they came to India, the Indian society was deep rooted in superstition and ignorance. With the limited resources available, the Zenana missionaries attacked social evils connected with women and

casteism and worked for the emancipation and uplift of women from the morass of tyranny, slavery, backwardness and dependence

Tirunelveli district is one of the southern most districts of Tamilnadu which has a unique place among the districts of Tamil Nadu. A large proportion of the inhabitants of Tirunelveli district belonged to a single caste called Shanars or Nadars. The Nadar community formed nearly one-fifth of the total population of the Tirunelveli district. Tirunelveli district was the garden of Protestant Missions. The missionary societies, S.P.C.K., S.P.G, C.M.S. and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (C.E.Z.M.S.) did selfless and devoted work in Tirunelveli district for many years. The Protestant missionaries served through these missions in the district.

Zenana Mission

The Zenana work formed an important part of the missionary work of the Protestant Missions. This work was undertaken by the lady missionaries in order to reach the womenfolk of the non-Christian families and to teach them primarily, reading and writing. The word, Zenana means 'the women's apartments'. The orthodox women of India were shut up within the four walls of their homes and used to sit behind the curtains. They had no communication with the outer world. In 1852, the Zenana work was first started in Bengal by a woman missionary, Mrs. Mary Jane Kinnaird with the support of the Government of India. The growth of Zenana visitation by the missionaries' wives induced the missionary societies to send more women missionaries to India. It also led to the foundation of special societies for this purpose, such as the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (C.E.Z.M.S.).

The C.E.Z.M.S. built hospitals for women and children indifferent parts of India. The women missionaries maintained affiliation with the Church Missionary Society. The Zenana missionaries conducted occasional meetings and conferences for united action. In Tirunelveli, the women missionaries of C.E.Z.M.S., S.P.G. and C.M.S. were involved in the Zenana mission work with its head quarters at Palayamkottai. The C.E.Z.M.S. missionaries and pastors' wives visited the women in their homes. Regular visits by the women missionaries and the Bible women brought tremendous change in the life of orthodox Hindu women.

Important Zenana Missionaries

The Zenana mission work in Tirunelveli was carried out by the Indian Female Instruction Society, the forerunner of the present Church of England Zenana Mission. It co-operated closely with C.M.S. in its

work among women. Mrs. Annal Arokiam Sathianathan, wife of Rev. W.T. Sathianathan, Pastor of Tirunelveli opened a small Boarding School in her house for girls. She was the only daughter of Rev. John Devasagayam of the C.M.S., Kadachapuram, the first native clergyman of the Church of England in South India. She carried on Zenana work all through her life in association with the C.E.Z.M.S. She was a notable Tamil writer who wrote books in Tamil and distributed them in the Zenanas. Her book, *The Good Mother* was very popular among the Christians and Hindus. When her husband was transferred to Madras in 1864, she continued her Zenana work in a village, Choolai at Madras. Her friends who were employed as Zenana teachers founded a home for orphan and destitute children. After her death in 1890, the Zenana work was continued by her daughters, Anna Johanna, Hensman Katherine and her daughter in laws, Krupabai Khisty and Kamala Krishnamma. Together with a group of educated ladies, Krupabai Khisty started the *Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1900. Kamala Krishnamma was the first woman who obtained post graduate degree from the University of Madras and the first Woman's Auxilliary President of the National Missionary Society of India (N.M.S.) which was established in 1905. Zenana missionaries persuaded the village girls to join the lace school as day scholars. The women missionaries taught the girls the technique of earning while learning. In 1872, Mrs. Jesudasan John, wife of Jesudason, Tirunelveli pastor visited many zenana homes. In 1876, Mrs. Emily Lewis from Australia was the head of the Zenana work in the Tirunelveli town. She was a fluent Tamil orator and a most earnest worker.

She built a mission house, which she called *Home of Rest* in Tirunelveli town and stayed there with her colleagues and a street was named after them as Punithavathiyar street. Her fellow workers were Miss. Macdonald, Miss. Genricli, Miss. Ridsdale, Miss. Boyton, Miss. Bourn, Miss. Buee, Miss. Max, Miss. Rose, Miss. Hedge, Miss. BIytlie and Mrs. Foster. At Tuticorin, Zenana world was under the care of Miss Wliite, Miss Rix and Miss. Boyton. Monthly leaflets were issued under the care of Mrs. Azariah, the wife of Bishop Azariah. Miss. New carried on the Zenana work at Idayangudi, Sathankulam, Suvishapuram and Christianagaram and Miss Bauliah worked in Mudalur. Mrs. Eliza Caldwell was responsible for the Zenana Mission at Kuttam, near Idayangudi. Kuttam was inhabited by wealthy Hindu Nadars whose women were kept in strict seclusion. A Bible woman was appointed at Kuttam and was paid from the donations received from Mrs. Fitzroy of England. Consequently twenty-six young women and girls received instruction. Due to the Zenana work in Kuttam, a girl from a respectable family of Nadars was given education by Mrs. Caldwell in the Boarding School, Idayangudi. Then she was trained in the Victorial Normal School,

Tuticorin. In 1890 at Kuttam, forty five students received tuition under the Bible women. Bible women in Tuticorin visited the Hindu women in their houses and taught them reading and sewing. Mrs. Caldwell visited the women and girls in their houses and convinced them about the need for education. Mrs. Caldwell appointed two Bible women to meet the native women in and around Idayangudi. They visited and instructed the Hindu women of high caste who were too old to attend the schools. Miss. Arputham Daniel engaged in Zenana work among the non-Christian women of Kudankulam and the neighbouring villages. Mrs. Strachan, the wife of Bishop Harriet Nicholson Strachan rendered financial help to the poor and sick women of the Nazareth mission district. She visited houses in Nazareth, teaching about the importance of hygiene and sanitation. She made Nazareth a model village.

A grant was given for planting trees in barren lands. The Zenana missionaries took care of the sick and the suffering. They taught them the values of neatness, punctuality, discipline, service, manners and character. They started Mothers' Unions to spread Christianity among the Hindu women, to create awareness about women education and to liberate them from their bondage. This was a major break-through in the emancipation of women in Tirunelveli. Mrs. Eleanor Carr visited the circles and conducted meetings for women. Mrs. Hodge Walker involved in Zenana work by organising Sunday schools at Pannaivilai, Nallur and Dohnavur. The Pannaivilai mission sent Bible women among the non-Christian women in 168 villages. The C.E.Z.M.S. was involved in medical and welfare work among the women and children. Miss. Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur Fellowship co-operated with the Dohnavur Circle which had done Zenana work by helping non-Christians and Christians. Miss. C.J. Elwin and the Bible women rendered valuable help to the women at Sivakasi and its neighbourhood. Zenana Missionaries visited 244 villages and 862 girls received instruction.

Work of the Zenana Missionaries

The Zenana centres yielded wonderful results and the Zenana Mission engaged in visiting and teaching women in their homes. It opened schools exclusively for the girls. The chief object 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. In exceptional cases, unmarried girls and young widows were sent for Zenana visiting. Zenana teachers were given training by the missionaries for three days in a week. Zenana trainees were selected on the basis of the following qualifications: a thorough knowledge of the Bible, the customs and superstitions of

the Hindus, the ability to sing songs and pray for others, good character and spiritual life and a good knowledge about the magazines and tracts published by the mission.

The Zenana teachers were expected to submit their reports to missionary ladies at the end of every week. In organising Zenana work, the lady missionaries faced many difficulties because the non-Christian women considered the missionaries' visits to their homes as an attempt to drive away their gods and goddesses. Undaunted by such difficulties, the missionaries made frequent visits to the Zenanas and started Zenana centres. While engaged in the Zenana work, the Christian women could also observe the position of purdah women and of the caste restrictions concerning food and utensils. The girls in their charge could not appear in public unveiled. For this reason, separate schools were opened for Hindu and Muslim girls and every effort was made to avoid giving unnecessary offence to their orthodox Hindu and Muslim parents. The Zenana girls were given education in vernacular and English in rented buildings. Their education enabled them to question the validity of superstitious beliefs and social practices. They taught both secular and religious subjects. Besides religious instruction, the teachers followed the schedule of courses approved by the government department of education. The teachers taught the girls reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, languages, music, food preparations, spinning, weaving, needle-work, sewing and other handicrafts. The methods and means of imparting education to those under tuition in Zenanas were different from those employed in schools. In a school, the pupils were totally under the control of the teachers and were disciplined. But in the homes, the circumstances were entirely different. The pupils were more or less under home influences. This distracted their attention it might be a call from an older member of the family, or a cry for help from anyone lying ill in the house or any other domestic duty. Tracts and handbills about the Zenana teachers and Bible women were printed and circulated among the people. In the beginning, the Hindu women treated the Zenana missionaries as outcasts and were suspicious of their motives. Later, after receiving guidance and counseling they found them a source of consolation in their life of hardship and difficulty. They came out of their homes to work, to play and meet together.

Social Evils:

Social evils like untouchability, the practice of sati, female infanticide, purdah, devadasi system, polygamy, restriction on the marriages of widows, child marriage and illiteracy were practiced in the name of religion. The Muslim women suffered because of illiteracy, polygamy and purdah. On their arrival in Tirunelveli, the Zenana missionaries found that the non-caste Hindus were neglected and considered as

untouchables. In the beginning, the wives of the Zenana missionaries were sent by the Church Missionary Society to work as women missionaries. In course of time unmarried women missionaries came to India to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were allowed to visit the poor and the sick. To eradicate the social evils, the women missionaries started Girl Guides, Y.W.C.A. and literacy programmes. They did commendable work during famines. They educated those who had hitherto been thought unworthy of education. The small schools which the missionaries' wives started, in course of time, grew into day schools, boarding schools, industrial schools, Sunday schools, orphanages and the Zenanas. Many of the lady missionaries remained unmarried. From time to time, the sisters and daughters of the missionaries also became involved in social service. Sometimes, the widows of the missionaries from abroad were also sent by the different Christian societies. The Zenana missionaries instituted training programmes for women in general and children in particular. They started institutions for the disabled, handicapped and the mute. With much help, the beneficiaries could slowly learn to take care of themselves and achieve the required social upward mobility.

Devadasi system

Devadasi system, one of the major evils of Indian society existed in Tirunelveli district, especially in and around Pannaivilai, Alwar Tirunagari, Srivaikuntam, Kalakad and Dohnavur. The Zenana Missionaries strongly condemned the devadasi system and vehemently opposed the immorality and obscenity perpetuated in the name of religion. Amy Carmichael attacked the evil system of keeping temple prostitutes and rescued many girls who were dedicated to the temple gods. She nursed them in the orphanage at Dohnavur and educated them. She was not only a woman missionary, but also a social worker. Though Dr. Muthulekshmi Reddi has been credited with the abolition of devadasi system, it was, in fact, Amy Carmichael, the great social worker, who was the first to take up the cause of the devadasis. She studied their lives and submitted her findings before the government. Amy Carmichael formed a Women's Band in 1898 at Panavilai. She and her team used to travel in bullock-carts, camp near a cluster of huts and visit the neighbouring villages. From dawn to dusk, they visited huts and met women and children. When she was involved in such social work in Pannaivilai, she came to know about the obnoxious devadasi system in the society of Tirunelveli. Young girls of six to eight years were sold to the temples. They were married to god before the idol at an early age. This practice was prohibited by the introduction of a law by the Magistrate of Tirunelveli in 1826. Any human society is structurally based on several customs and practices from time immemorial. The custom of

dedicating girls to Hindu temples was in vogue in the remote past. Little girls were offered by their parents at the age of six to eight to serve the village gods and goddesses. A dedicated girl then became the bride of the gods of the temple and therefore she was barred from marriage. The girls so dedicated were assigned certain duties in the temples, such as fanning the deities and cleaning and lighting the oil lamps. But their major function was to entertain the devotees through singing and dancing at the temple ceremonies. As per the system, several beautiful women were kept as devadasis. A separate apartment was allotted to each woman. In return for their services, they received tax free lands and cash allowances out of the rich endowments of the temple. The adoption of a devadasi by a temple was marked by a lengthy ceremonial process.

The marriage to God was effected privately by the temple priest at the temple with the usual marriage ceremonies. The children had to be married to gods before they reached the age of ten. Then they became the property of the temple priests. When the girls refused to go to the temple, they were either beaten up or brought back branded to the temples. Children who were affected by this social evil from Kashmir, Puri, Orissa, Maharashtra, Travancore, Bangalore, Tanjore, Madras, Trichy, Kanchipuram and Tiruchendur were rescued by Amy Carmichael and her associates. In Madurai, Mrs. Muthambaram Dairiyam, a woman lawyer, helped Amy Carmichael to rescue such girls. By 1923, there were thirty nurseries in Dohnavur which gave shelter to such girls. The Government of Madras became aware of this evil system. Dr. Muthulekshmi Reddi and Miss. Amy Carmichael maintained close touch with each other which resulted in the abolition of the Devadasi system, by the Devadasi Act of 1947 and the dedication of girls to the temples was made illegal in the Madras Presidency.

Female Infanticide

Like in other districts of the Madras Presidency, Tirunelveli too, had the evil practice of female infanticide. The Zenana missionaries fought against this evil practice. Amy Carmichael saved children from several states and gave them shelter in the Dohnavur Fellowship. While the birth of a son was welcomed with great jubilation, the birth of a girl was viewed with disfavour. As the girl child was viewed as an economic burden and social responsibility, she was unwanted and her arrival was not considered as a matter of joy. The birth of a male child was a happy occasion for women. Many methods were adopted to kill the female child. Some children were simply neglected and they died out of starvation. Other female children were killed soon after birth by having their mouth filled with cow dung or by administering a small pill of

opium or by not feeding. Female babies were secret victims in many homes. Various superstitious beliefs were also connected with the female infanticide. Mothers thought that if they sacrificed the child by throwing it into a temple-pool, they would deliver male children. If horoscopes did not tally with that of the parents, they were killed. In some cases, the mothers hid the children in the rocks in order to save them from death. Then they informed the Zenana missionaries in Dohnavur Fellowship about the babies. Moreover, when a mother died in child birth, the husband invariably wanted to re-marry. The step-mother did not touch the child, born to the first wife. The father hated it saying that it killed the mother. Amy Carmichael saved such children too. The scavengers in the government hospitals buried female children as the parents refused to take the girl children with them. Sometimes, these scavengers bought the children for rupees 50/- from the mothers and gave them to Dohnavur Fellowship. The Dohnavur Fellowship thus saved many children from female infanticide in different regions of Tamil Nadu.

Child Marriage

Early marriage of girls and boys was one of the important customs followed from days of yore in the Indian Hindu society. It was closely associated with the caste practices, superstitious beliefs, social taboos and the anxiety to protect the chastity of women. In the orthodox families, the girls were not allowed to appear in public and there was a deep-rooted prejudice among Hindus against the education of women. Lack of female education in turn contributed to the early marriages. Marriages were arranged by the parents after following Hindu religious practices like consulting omens and horoscopes and also auspicious physical practices. It is true that the practice of endogamy forestalled their chances of marrying normally. Child marriage was performed at the age of eight, nine, ten or before the age of puberty. The Madras Presidency report of 1891 informs that the total number of married girls between ages one and nine years was 166,544. Child marriage was not limited to the upper castes alone the depressed classes too practiced it. This evil system was vehemently attacked by the Christian missionaries. In their attempt to have child marriage abolished, they took recourse to by the Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1872. It made such marriages illegal and made polygamy a criminal offence.

According to this Act, the boy and girl must have attained the age of sixteen and thirteen respectively to be eligible for marriage. However the child marriages continued in spite of the legal prohibition. This led to early pregnancies and put pressure on the child to play adult roles. The Zenana missionaries condemned early marriage and polygamy. They fought for equal status for women and carried on social reforms along

with conversions. By giving education to girls, they reduced child marriages to a great extent. Zenana workers prevented early marriages for both girls and boys. Mrs. Morley, the wife of Bishop Morley worked to prevent irregular marriages, remove superstitious customs and reduce caste feelings in Tirunelveli. Miss. Amy Carmichael fought against child-marriage and admitted destitute in the Fellowship. The young girls who were in danger of being given in marriage early were given shelter, education and training for useful service to the society. The women missionaries created an awareness among the women to fight against polygamy. Consequently, the Government of India passed an Act against this evil practice in 1872. It reduced the ratio of the evil practice of polygamy.

Emancipation of Widows:

Widows in general lived under miserable conditions. They were forced to live either with the relatives of their parents or their deceased husband's relatives. The custom of elderly men marrying young girls led to a large number of them being widowed early. A widow had to live a life of isolation and seclusion. She had to tonsure her head every month and was required to wear white clothes. Her forehead had to be bare of kum kum, a red powder on the forehead symbolic of wifehood. She was not allowed to wear jewels and had to avoid social gatherings. Above all, she had no legal right for her deceased husband's property. The loss of a husband usually resulted in a significant decline in household income and in social marginalization leading to poorer health and nutrition. When a man died, his widow was forced or induced to commit suicide in the funeral pyre of her husband.

Widows who did not mount the pyre had to live a life of serious asceticism. Women missionaries Miss. White, Miss. Grove, Miss. Blyth, Miss. Ridsdale, Miss. Boyton, Miss. Bourn, Miss. Buee, Miss. Rix, Miss. Max and Mrs. Foster of Tirunelveli worked among the widows and the aged. Mrs. Sargent, the wife of Bishop Sargent organised classes for widows and poor mothers every Wednesday at Palayamkottai and provided them material help. She emphasised the need for cleanliness and hygiene among them. Every year, she gave new clothes to them. Amy Carmichael joined this noble team to uplift the status of the widows. She admitted them into her family and educated them. Many widows looked after the nurseries in the Dohnavur Fellowship. On 9th July 1834, Mr. and Mrs. Rhenius established the Widow Fund for the widows of catechists and schoolmasters. This was also known as the Friend in Need Society. Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs started a widow class at Sattankulam in 1836 and instilled in them the spirit of social awareness. They taught the widows to learn, read and write and to become teachers and assistants in the schools. The Zenana

missionaries celebrated Widows' Sangam on second Wednesday of July every year. To uplift the widows and the poor, the women missionaries introduced lace making, sewing, embroidery, spinning, and basket making. The education and training brought employment opportunities to women. Thus the women missionaries created a silent revolution in the position and life of the women of Tirunelveli district.

Untouchability:

The most striking feature of a caste-ridden society was the predominance of the upper castes over the lower castes. The Zenana missionaries noticed the rigidity of the caste system and the practice of untouchability. The movement for the uplift of the depressed classes and womenfolk was initiated by the missionaries. They raised their voice against such social inequalities. The Zenana missionaries and the missionary wives helped them to break the fetters of tradition. They mingled with the downtrodden and worked to raise their status. The Zenana missionaries thought that their objective could be achieved fully only through educating the depressed classes. Therefore they started schools all over Tirunelveli district. Establishment of schools hastened the process of social emancipation. Caste system was prohibited in schools and students of different castes were admitted in the schools and industrial schools. They taught the low caste people and brought up the destitute children in their orphanages. The Zenana missionaries had devised a loose jacket for the women of the mission. The Christian women were taught to appear decent in public. The girls and the women began to use umbrellas. Through education, the Christian Nadars began to occupy very high positions in various parts of India, South Africa, Ceylon and Burma. Many educated men and women of the socially neglected sections found employment as teachers and Professors in Christian schools and colleges. The proceedings of the C.M.S. of 1901 shows that in Tirunelveli, Paraya and Brahmin students were walking together for the first time in the Brahmin streets exchanging their ideas due to their western education. Inter-dining was adopted in the marriages and feasts of the Christians. They gave up their caste ceremonies regarding marriages and burials. Amy Carmichael eradicated the caste system in Dohnavur Fellowship. Different caste students were admitted in the Dohnavur Fellowship.

Conclusion:

The enthusiasm displayed by the Zenana missionaries in the development of female education is really praiseworthy. 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. After 1840, the number of schools grew. Not only schools were established at the head of the mission stations, but great effort was made to establish and develop schools in villages. As a result, women all over Tirunelveli district became aware of the benefits of education and grew more and more eager to send their girls to the schools run by the mission. In the girls' schools, the Zenana missionaries trained the children in knitting, stitching, embroidery and lace making. 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.

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