Chapter VII

BASAL MISSION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Though the goal of the Basel Mission was conversion of people there were not much direct conversions as such. The Basel Mission held the view that they should not attempt mass conversion. In the schools of Basel Mission almost every community was represented but the bulk of the students were from the Tiya community. This particular community who had no caste inhibitions on them utilized this occasion for English education. The same developments had taken place among the communities like the Billavas in South Kanara.1 The Mission gave non-Christian pupils free education as well as scholarship for their high school and college studies. Moorkoth Kumaran, speaking on the occasion of the Basel Mission Centenary Celebration in 1934 at Tellicherry said: “I studied as a free scholar here right up to the matriculation class. . . . there are significant number of men who were similarly benefited by me, holding high positions in official and social life.”2

The rising economic group in the Tiya community utilized the limited educational facilities available and a good number of the matriculation in the region came from that community. They were

recruited in several services of the government on the basis of merit and this job opportunity gradually led to the emergence of a group of salaried people. The inferior caste-status of the Tiyas, never came in the way of employment under the British Government though in Travancore, the native government put certain restrictions on this community on account of this inferior caste status.

Since caste grievances of an individual who belonged to an inferior community could be removed to a great extend by a job in the government service in Malabar a job in the government service was much desired. The affluent salaried persons under the government services sent their children to Madras, the centre of the presidency, for university education, and many received higher education. Tiyas of Malabar became magistrates, sub-judges and other officials in the government.

Murkot Kunhappa enlists the persons who held high positions in the government service who had studied in the Mission schools. The first Indian Principal of the Victoria College Palghat (1916-1922) was P. Sankunny and a product of the Mission school. P. Kannan kutty who studied in the Basel mission school passed the matriculation as second in the Madras presidency and became a supervisor of school retiring in 1916. Moorkoth Kumaran who was the first Hindu and probably the only one to be appointed as Headmaster of the St. Joseph’s European and

Anglo Indian School Calicut from 1900-1902 at the time when the British Empire was at the height of its power was also, as is evident from his speech quoted above, a student of a Basel Mission school.

During the twentieth century, there were more members in the emerging professional group of this community. Chief Justice C. Krishnan (Madras High Court), chief Justice Kunhiraman (Cochin High Court), Kalandi Ramakrishnan (ICS) and C.K. Lakshmanan (Major General) were some among them. Thus the seeds of English education sown by the Missionaries and nurtured by the Government in the European centers began to grow as a flowery plant and it also bore fruits for the future. According to Murkot Kunhappa the higher caste Brahmins were reluctant to serve under the government unlike them the low caste Thiyas were ready to work and at the same time they were educated as well. This was possible because the Basel Mission provided chances for them to be educated. Hence the ultimate reason behind their progress lays on the Basel Mission educational work.

Female Education

Female education was promoted by Basel Mission. Julie Gundert opened Boarding Schools for girls in 1839. This school was established at Nettoor in Tellicherry. This was the first girls school of the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society in Malabar.  

Julie Gundert was a Swiss missionary lady, she married Hermann Gundert and worked for the education of women till her death. At the time of opening a girls school in Tellicherry by Julie Gundert girls education had ceased to be a novelty. During this time opposition against girls education decreased in Travancore and Cochin. Girls education spread in Malabar with the arrival of the Basel Evangelical Missionaries. Julie Gundert established an English School and a Female Day School in Tellicherry in 1840. In 1841 the number of girls in the English School was 25.\textsuperscript{6} In 1842 the total number of scholars in Tellicherry was 165 including girls.

Cannanore was one of the principal military stations of the Madras Presidency. A considerable number of people were Hindus, Christians soldiers of native regiments and servants of Europeans. Samuel Hebich a Basel Evangelical Missionary started work in this place in 1841. He did not have much difficulty in opening schools there and the total number of pupils under instruction in 1842 was 80.\textsuperscript{7} In 1842 John Michael Fritz another missionary started work in Calicut and his wife Margret Fritz opened a school for infants. Soon it became a girls school and by 1847 there were 27 girls in this school.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{7} Basel Mission Report 1842, p.62.
When Miss. Carolina Mook, an educational missionary of B.E.M.S. arrived, girls education in Tellicherry was strengthened. She was sent as the first agent for the education of females as school mistress. With the arrival of Miss. Carolina Mook the number of girls scholars increased and in 1845 there were fifteen scholars in the female day school.\(^9\)

The missionaries opened schools for non-Christian girls too. In the year 1846, the average attendance of the day school for Hindu girls in Calicut was thirty five. Another was a Brahmin girls school. It was established in Tellicherry before 1857.

In every station most of the work pertaining to girls education was done by the wives of missionaries and by other lady missionaries. In 1859 Christian Muller settled at Chombala, seven miles south of Tellicherry. Muller started girls schools in this place along with boys schools.\(^10\)

Missionaries tried to improve the standard of the school. But it was hard for them to maintain order and discipline in the school. One missionary wrote: "Order is still a hard lesson to many and regularity both in attendance and in the payment of fees requires again and again to be strictly enforced."\(^11\)

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10. \textit{B.M.R. for the year 1858}, p.68.
A new station was opened in Palghat in 1858, the missionaries established schools in this station also. According to the available statistics in 1859 the number of pupils in the Malabar area increased to 1345 of whom 1187 were boys and 158 were girls.12

The Cannanore increasing attention had been paid to the education of the children of converts after the first half of the nineteenth century. Seven boarding schools were established there, three for boys and four for girls. During this period, the missionaries, introduced fee in the school. At first a fee of one ‘anna’ per mensum was introduced in the school of Cannanore. Most of the parents were willing to pay this amount. Later it was introduced in all other schools.

Later when the number of congregations increased, more schools were opened. Thus in Calicut education expanded to Quilandy, Elathur, Beypore, Manimooly and Malappuram.13 During this time the Christian schools at Cannanore and Chowva, and the non-christian schools at Chalattu and Mulil made good progress with regard to the number of students and their proficiency.

During the 1860’s the Christian girls day school in Palghat was attended by more girls.14 According to 1913 Annual reports there were

23 Bible women, 65 school teachers, 100 girls in orphanage, Christian girls 770 and non-Christian girls 1191 in schools. Though it is said that the education among the women was a slow process even among the Tiyas, some of the Tiya women had joined the medical profession as doctors. Ayyathan Janaki and Murkoth Madhavi were the first ladies from Malabar who took their degrees in Modern medicine.

Missionaries found out local leaders from their new Christian members to build up good leaders in the community. This was seen in every field of the community, such as presbyters, evangelists, teachers, Bible woman etc. The spirit of concern and service to humanity was transferred into this community also. Along with the missionaries the natives practiced and experienced it and their efforts were recognized by the society. Leprosy Asylum and hospital services, widow houses and concerning spirits, orphanages and upliftment of poor class, hospitals and public health cares, refugee centers and relief funds involvement in natural calamities and epidemic periods all are great witnesses for their public service and social concern.15 Various funds such as orphanage fund, poor fund widow fund, missionary fund etc reveal Christian spirit of philanthropic activities. These tremendous humanitarian activities done by this small community to the Malabar society is really admirable.

Role of Basel Mission and Conversion

The Basel Mission was one of the prominent Christian mission which had participated in the human resource developmental activities in South India during the 19th century.

The Basel Mission was a pioneering agency in Malabar that eliminated caste rigidity through its various programme preaching the gospel to the non-Christian was the main aim of Basel mission of every mission on Evangelism. Evangelism is the Gospel of Christ, Jesus message to the world in his words, his deeds, his sufferings and as the risen lord.16

The participation of natives in this missionary work of hardships with Basel Missionaries was a land mark and appreciable in the evangelization of Malabar.

The first two missionaries Rev. Dr. Hermann Gundert at Nettur and Rev. Samuel Hebich at Cannanore worked together by showing the main pattern of mission that the literature work and personal evangelism” and contributed greatly in the formation of a Christian versatile community in Malabar.17


Basel Missionaries from the beginning onwards stressed on ‘Personal Evangelism’ and also on the doctrine “justification by faith” which means that man cannot save himself but is saved alone by God.

Regarding conversion Basel Mission never did mass conversion. But they converted people from different castes and mingled them in the church through various programmes in order to eradicate casteism, to create a casteless Christian community. Whereas in all other missionary churches Indian peculiar catesism prevailed it is to be mentioned that the mission never left out their responsibility to rehabilitate and to provide livelihood to the new converts due to the particular condition of Malabar.

As the missionaries wanted qualitative conversion, the teaching period prior to baptism was too long. Later on, the confirmation classes in every congregation were two years, a compulsory course. Primary school education was compulsory because all converts should be able to read scripture in order to make themselves spiritually well equipped.

In every station of the Basel Mission churches were constructed. This was for the converts to worship God and for giving spiritual classes to Christian children. Temple messages were also a peculiar ministry that was followed by Basel Mission. During the festival time missionaries with native members visited the temple and gospel messages were delivered along with distributing literatures and religious tracts.
The love and concern of the mission revealed the love of God towards humanity and provided a new way of life to the converts as well as that of the non-Christian working under the Basel Mission institutions.

The Basel Mission was a pioneering agency in Malabar that eliminated caste-rigidity through its various programmes. In fact education and conversion were two major historical forces in this region which acted against the traditional and caste-oriented social system. They were even responsible to a great extend in eliminating the feudalistic social relations. As a dynamic movement, spirit of this community permeated throughout the society and so the whole set up of Malabar fell down and a process of reconstruction in the modern way was begun. It was not conversion but a renovation. It was really a transition of the people in Malabar, a transition in structural life.

1. Communal Integration and Toleration

Regarding Malabar there was no larger level communal riots. But due to the dissatisfaction with land tenure and associated practices protest against the British rule rose. Muslim peasants participated in these protest movements. The presence of Missionaries helped to maintain peace among the people. So all the religious groups Hindus, Muslims and Christians lived together and maintained the communal integration even in the midst of social tensions.
2. Slavery to freedom

Slavery was very much drastic Malabar Government policy was not in favour of depressed classes. But the Basel Missionaries without ceasing their relations with British Governments influenced the Government and made it clear the way for the freedom of slaves. In 1862 a law was passed against slavery and it was a great transition in the life of the people in Malabar. The fervent ministry of mission and the freedom of life of new community enlightened the mind of people in Malabar and so slavery was removed not only legally but also from the behavioural life in attitude and action.18

3. Eradication of Casteism and Pollution

Casteism and pollution were social stigmas in the life of Malabar.19 Polyandry or the plurality of husbands was another social evil which existed in Kerala. The Guruvayur Satyagraha for the granting of temple entry to the Avarnas, the polluted castes was a famous one in Malabar. Kelapppan, the Kerala social leader, took the leadership in this. When the slaves were denied the freedom to educate their children, the missionaries dared to admit the slave children in their schools. The freedom of slaves was a matter of great concern for the missionaries. The missionaries


dared to raise their voice for these unfortunate people when they were being bought and sold in the markets. The missionaries fought for the freedom of these people. They tried to create public opinion in favour of their emancipation. Because of their activities slavery was abolished in Travancore and Cochin. Basel Mission also staged a fight in Malabar against casteism and pollution which are religiously inter connected. It was later taken over by the people or a new Christian community which was formed from the result of direct confrontation with new faith.

4. Tradition and Superstition

Tradition and superstitions were too much in Malabar and people were ruled over by them in their day to day life affairs. The influence of Christianity and Basel Missionaries resulted in tremendous change in their attitude and approaches in tradition and superstition. In short Christian principles and teachings helped the people to open their eyes and to fight against evils and irrelevant traditions and superstitions.\(^\text{20}\)

Faith in astrology, omen, sorcery and witchcraft were gradually loosing ground.

5. Priests-Ridden Occupations

Malabar in the early period was greatly priest ridden country. The Brahmanas who controlled the socio religious life of the people were the

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owners of the land, and also the sole authority of religion. They wielded power even in astrology and astronomy. Since castes and occupations were closely related and occupations divided among castes, the latter were bound to do that duties from birth to death. There were also stratified relationship or castes by birth like master and servant, landowners and labour, patron and client etc. With the advent of industrial revolution brought by the Basel Mission people came out of the traditional duties and to search for a livelihood according to their will and pleasure as there were more economic opportunities than before. Education also was a catalyst of change.

6. Modern Education

In the matter of education, a great transition was made in Malabar. In the place of old shacks school building, missionaries built solid airy spacious buildings. In the place of small mats in which the children sat during school and which was woven by their parents from the coconut palm leaves which they brought and took back along with them, the missionaries introduced benches to sit and desks to write. Instead of writing on sand which they brought from home in coconut shells, slates and papers, pencil, pen and ink were given by missionaries. Instead of using recorded lessons on palm leaves for teaching, the printed text books were distributed to teachers and pupils for studies. The books included

21. Ibid., p.399.
geography, history, elementary science, arithmetic, indigenous and English languages. Rev. Hermann Gundert was the pioneer who introduced these tremendous changes in the education system in Malabar. Apart from these changes, education increased general literacy and qualified people to seek employment.

7. Indigenous Identity

Indigenisation is a creative process and indigenisation means a theologically informed endeavour to make the content and expression of Christian theology ministry and life adapted and rooted in a community of different cultural localities.

Basal Mission encouraged indigenous Christianity, which means not to accept Hindu belief and culture but to make Christianity from Indian soil. So they encouraged native participation and Indian leadership for the church. They wanted to form a genuine indigenous character at all levels to acquire “authentic selfhood”.

In questioning many social practices, the Basel Mission did not indulge in condemnation but engaged in dialogues. The Missionaries studied Hinduism, translated their religions books, arranged inter religious dialogues so as to understand each other and contributed greatly for communal harmony in Malabar. Because of the particular multi-

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religious and multi-cultural context they formulated a new set up of Christian community in order to leave them to go forward with a richness of Indian identity as they opened the way by utilizing the local traditional crafts for the welfare of the new community.

8. Universal Brotherhood and Priesthood

Universal Brotherhood and Universal Priesthood are the scriptural understanding formulated in Basel Mission ideals based upon the Lutheran and Calvinistic doctrines and this is the basis of Basel Mission principle of equality.23

Both ideas pointed out the sonship and responsibility of man. These two dimensions reinforced the missionary work of Basel Mission. Hence the emphasis was on universal brotherhood and universal priesthood as new dimensions of the mission to the world and this dimension empowered the people in Malabar to witness communal harmony.

In the 17th century round type tiles (coconut shell type tiles) were used by Malabar and S. Canara society. The Basel Mission tiles manufactured from Mangalore revolutionised the trade market all over India. The middle class society could afford this type of tile for making houses which resulted in the change in the life style of the society.24


24. *Interview* with A. Achuthan, Retired Professor of Civil Engineering, R.E.C. Calicut.
Medical works of the Basel Mission

Medical Mission was introduced in India by an American Dr. Bacheller in 1840. In 1862 South Kanara District requested to the Home Board at Basel for missionary doctors because at places where medical aid was not available, the missionaries were already helping the people with their limited knowledge which they acquired in the Basel Mission Seminary. In 1866 another appeal was made and 1875 Malabar got a missionary doctor by name E. Leibendorfer. After his arrival a hospital was build at Calicut in 1892. He was the first doctor to introduce vaccination against small pox among the school children and the public alike. His fame brought many patients from the nearby areas like Karaparamba, Feroke, Quilandy and Perambra, etc. Being a Councillor of Calicut Municipality he suggested many improvements for the leprosy hospital near Calicut Beach.25. Finding it difficult to run this hospital, the councillors entrusted the Leprosy Hospital to Dr. Liben-Dorfer. In 1901 the Chevayur Leprosy Hospital (Calicut) became one of the biggest Leprosy Institutions in Malabar catering to the needs of many patients from far and near. In 1885 Dr. Liben Dorfer left India and entrusted the medical work to Dr. Stokes. In 1892 a well equipped hospital was built in Calicut and a year later a Codacal with all the facilities for major surgical works. There were the only two hospitals at that time rendering medical, surgical and maternity works. At Vaniyamkulam (Palakkad district) the

Government Hospital was taken over by the Missionaries as per their request to continue the medical work without any break. In 1910 Dr. Slunaduer took great interest for Leprosy work at Chevayur. In 1849 the Chombal Mission work began, Sister Freeda, the missionary lady opened a small dispensary to look mainly into the needs of the women and sick children. In Wynad Rev. Zuber and his wife initiated the medical work by opening a small dispensary at Sultan’s Battery among the hill tribes.26

In 1905, the Basel Mission brought a huge property at Marole in Mangalore, and built some houses and a dispensary for the treatment of lepers. In 1906 a Leper Asylum was opened with 15 inmates. The lepers were looked after by Mr. Barnabaz, a former school master at Udipi, himself a leprosy patient. The regular medical work of the mission started only after the 1st world war. In 1923 a hospital for women and children was established at Udipi.27 In 1923 new wards were attached and in 1937 a dispensary was opened at Malpe. In 1945 x-ray was installed at the Udipi hospital.28 This hospital proved to be a great blessing to the Christians as well as the non-christians of South Canara and neighbouring places. Many other hospitals and dispensaries were started in places like Palakkad and Calicut.29

Women's Liberation

Another area where the Basel Mission was instrumental in bringing social change was gender. Basel Mission made efforts with regard to the uplifting of the women in the society.

In Malabar, missionaries also took special care for widows. Widow line attached to churches were built by them in order to give the poor and orphan widows a place to live especially under the security of church authorities. It was only seen in Malabar that a fund was started by the missionaries to care and help them. Widow homes still exist in the church compound and every month they are given money to meet their daily expenses. Gifts such as rice and clothes are given on every Christmas Eve. Education of the widows children are also given special care.\(^{30}\)

In every church women were organized under “Dorcas Samajam” which meant women’s fellowship to come together to share their experiences to learn the word of God, to pray for themselves and others and to discuss the needs and problems of the church in order to help the pastors and missionaries in their spiritual works. Thus women fellowship were greatly helpful to pastors and missionaries in their missionary work.

Of the main social evils, dowry system which was prevalent then in Malabar and which stood as a great social stigma which broke the family relations was abolished from this Christian community by the fervent

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\(^{30}\) Ibid., p.44.
efforts of the Basel Missionaries. As a result of the efforts of Basel Missionaries women’s life were enlightened. Quite similar to the modern women’s liberation movement, Basel missionaries introduced nearly a hundred years back a silent ‘Women’s Liberation Movement’ into the Society. From it, women gained freedom from their traditional chains, and freedom to employ themselves in important positions.\(^{31}\)

Women were also employed in large numbers in weaving establishments during the early stages. As per the employment record of the weaving units as on 1877 out of total 392 workers, 216 were women who were all employed in one category thread makers and spool winders. It was these activities that got mechanized when the weaving at Calicut, Cannanore besides Mangalore started using team power. Women however continued to be the mainstay of the embroidery departments of these units.

Dress and life Style

The Dress Revolution is not much stronger as occurred in South Kerala among the ‘Nadar Community’ as an upper cloth revolt, a religious movement against castes and rulers for long period from 1858 to 1865. But the freedom to wear dress according to the will and pleasure was a courageous status in the society.

The new dress code introduced by the Basel Mission was probably the western style. It pointed out decency and a puritanical cleanliness. The new western style distinguished the Christian community from other communities and raised them to a higher level. In the place of dressing in an abominable way by the lower castes like Pulayas thereby symbolizing their extremely low status in the society, every convert as soon as he is converted put on a dress peculiar to the Christians.32

This is pointed out in a report in Madras Mail I, February 1892 by C.Karunakara Menon a journalist regarding a conversion service at Codacal. He opined that from the dress is worn by the convert people one cannot make out a Dalit convert from another Christian.

Basel Missionaries formally forbade the traditional hairstyles and tufts and wearing of ornaments that were indicative of caste. Traditionally Malabar men used to wear their hair tied in a knot, each caste having its own distinctive way of placing the knot on the head. This was changed. The abolition of using caste identity markers went a long way in the creation of an egalitarian society.

The Basel Missionaries encouraged the converts to choose their ways of making a livelihood strictly on the basis of educational

qualifications and economic opportunities regardless of traditional notions of pollution attached to certain caste-linked occupations.

Webster says that the converts had no particular caste status, and they entered a new community that assured a new social identity, thereby on the whole changing their life style.\textsuperscript{33} This change in their life style affected the social structure of Malabar.

The Basel Mission missionaries not only engaged themselves in socio religious activities but also dared to cross over to the sphere of industry so the improvement of the social status of people on the influence of the Basel Mission is also closely linked with the creation of a technically oriented labour force. The early missionaries wanted to give converts a viable alternative to their traditional means of livelihood.\textsuperscript{34} The missionaries then thought of farming as many missionaries themselves came from farming families. In some places fields belonging to the mission had from the beginning been rented to the converts as tenants. The missionaries leased the plots of land and provided them with tools and credit which was helpful to the converts, though it later on created issues between their relationships.


In several places lands had been rented to the Christian converts. But the annual report of 1882 says that a great number of fields had never been used. Colonisation also made the Christian community easy going, lazy and they always looked upon mission for support. Only in Codacal it lasted for some more years on the request and with the help of Malabar Collector. It was a failure and was discarded by 1880. On the whole this experiment of agricultural operations lost its importance in overall activities of the mission.

Another alternative was industrialization. This enabled many to become part of an industrial labour force. The Basel Mission experiment of a casteless group further accentuated the process of social mobility by offering a chance for the Tiya and Billava castes to seek an existence outside their caste based occupations and became factory workers. Basel mission industries had offered employment not only to converts but also to non-converts. The spread of basic literacy enabled the mission industries to recruit a better educated labour force. Much social mobility was acquired by different segments of society as a result of opportunities provided by the industrial activities.

Basel Mission also undertook many social service activities such as running of educational institutions, printing and publishing houses, hospitals, orphanages and old peoples homes.

Thus it could be stated that the Basel Mission brought about attitudinal changes, changes in social practices, cultural changes and more importantly educational and economic changes. \(^{36}\)

Potheri Kunhabu's novel *Saraswathivijayam* (1892) brings out some of these changes. It upholds education and emphasise virtues like hard work, thriftiness and condemns social evils. The novel is about attitudinal changes.

\(^{36}\) As industrial and educational progress has been studied in detail in the previous Chapters, only the main points are highlighted here for fear of repetition.