CHAPTER VIII

MISSIONS AND SOCIAL REFORMS

The social reform movement in a country springs out of the spiritual urge and is necessitated by the existence of social evils. The Christian missionaries could not be indifferent to the practical application of the Gospel to human society and to the reform of social evils in conformity with the Christian ideals. They endeavoured to take their share in a limited way in all matters concerning the public welfare.

The World Mission of the Churches in its review observed that as Christ came into this world to open all the ways of life, so came Christianity both as a message and as a movement for the amelioration of the lot of the suffering humanity—the victims of poverty, war, social hatred, exploitation and injustice. The missions realised their responsibility to launch an attack on such evils.

The strong interest of the evangelists towards social enlightenment was evident. They hoped to effect conversion of people to Christianity through a dynamic programme. The pioneer missionary, G. Lapp, wrote, "If the Bible has stood for anything during all these ages, it has stood for aggression and progression regarding the uplift of humanity."  

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The missionaries were inspired by the example of their master Jesus who according to their belief ministered to all the needs of the people.\(^1\)

The missionaries believed that the vices of the five D's—demon worship, dirt, drink, drugs and dissipation could be cured by teaching which demanded time and patience and by direct action which only the political power could do. They noticed several social practices, customs and beliefs in India which were abhorrent to them. While preaching, they criticised and often ridiculed those things only expressed their own views on diverse social issues which needed reform. But they had not come to India to play the role of social reformers. They were, therefore, very cautious not to occupy themselves too much in social activities at the cost of their main aim—evangelism. However, for promoting evangelical work they had to emphasise the rational of Christianity and criticise those aspects of the Indian society and socio-religious practices which were repugnant to Christianity. Therein lay their ideas about social reforms. The chief social planks touched upon by them directly or indirectly were (1) women's welfare (2) social equality (3) superstitions (4) temperance (5) beggary and (6) environmental hygiene.

**Women's Welfare.**

The Protestant Christians were literate, enlightened and open-minded. They were free from orthodoxy. In their society women enjoyed an important position. Their missions had women members also who were working shoulder to shoulder with the male missionaries for the advancement of Christianity in India and elsewhere. In contrast the condition of the Indian women was quite different. They lived in seclusion and suffered from several disabilities. The missionaries

considered them to be in a state of bondage. They did not enjoy freedom to participate in social activities outside their homes. Their future was more or less sealed. Their fate was linked with the mood and whims of their husbands. While they had great respect for their husbands and treated them as God, their husbands rarely treated them as Goddess, several evils emanated from this type of unilateral relationship. Mostly the Indian women were illiterate and some had acquired rudimentary education at home. They were slave to tradition, superstitions, beliefs and irrational customs. They had neither the right of inheritance nor of divorce. Their function was to look to the comforts of the members of the family and to produce and rear children. They were wholly dependent on men for their existence, comforts, pleasure and everything in life. In the homes where polygamy prevailed their condition was still more miserable.

As girls, most of them had no benefit of education. There were no schools for them. Only a microscopic minority was made literate at home. They were married much before the age of puberty. The child-marriage was a curse. Their personality and talents remained either undeveloped or under-developed. The child-marriage resulted in early motherhood, ill-health and sometimes early widowhood. As widows, they generally had no honourable place in the family and society. A child-widow had no hope in her life, but to serve as slave for the whole life. She was not admitted to partake rituals. Her face, if seen early in the morning, was a curse and she was scolded very badly if her veil disclosed her head or face in a haste or by chance. There were large number of widows of all ages in society. Life of most of them was miserable. According to the long established custom they were not given in marriage a second time in the upper and middle class families.

In the eyes of the Christian missionaries the greatest sufferers in the Indian society were women who were generally debarred from all important social activities. They were in a state of degradation as compared to the western standard. Child-marriage and purdah system had impaired their health. Illiteracy among them had perpetuated ignorance and had made them incapable of enjoying literature, high thoughts and fine arts. Although sati was abolished, widow remarriage was permitted by law, child-marriage was criticised by the social reformers, and some measures—official as well as non official—had been taken to improve the lot of Indian women, but the net results were negligible and highly depressing. Social changes do not take place rapidly.

The missionaries raised a voice against these social evils which had crippled the Indian society morally and socially. They studied the Hindu sacred books and discovered that the existing evils were not sanctioned by the ancient Hindu religion and, therefore, declared boldly their irrelevance to contemporary India. They urged the government to cooperate in the effort to get rid of the evil of child-marriage and appealed to fix fourteen and eighteen years for girls and boys respectively as a suitable age for marriage. The contemporary missionary writings depict the backward condition of Indian women who were never given a chance to cooperate in and contribute to the social and national development. Thus a great human potentiality lay untapped as a result of lack of opportunity to them to contribute to the economic and social growth.

M.D. Adams of the D.C.I.M. reported, "Even converts think there is nothing wrong in buying a wife for 3. They say it is an established custom of long standing."

Elkana Beard, the pioneer missionary of the F.F.M.A., wrote in his letter, "Our hearts yearn in sympathy for the poor degraded women of India, and we hope the day is not very distant when women...... will be raised to her proper sphere of usefulness and honour." The Mennonite missionary E.P. Lapp wrote, "If our missions were only to lift the Indian women socially and morally, would it not be worthwhile to make the sacrifice in going to that far off land?" The criticism and writings of the missionaries not only prepared the background but also encouraged the native gentlemen to take a lead in the work. The Friends Mission published, "Therefore, if the men of India wish the women to be better, they must have moral courage to step out themselves from narrow shackles of custom."

Poligamy

The missionaries were highly critical of polygamy as its prohibition in Christianity was a command of God. All the missions shared the views as stated by the C.M.S. in 1857, "A state of polygamy is unlawful within the Church of Christ, even though commenced in ignorance...... Therefore a polygamist can not be lawfully admitted by baptism into the Church of Christ." This social evil was widely prevalent among the low caste people, aboriginals and high caste Hindus and Muslims. Joseph Taylor of Hoshangabad wrote:

"Some of them had four or five wives, whom they have exchanged in turn with someone else, apparently to their mutual satisfaction and they find it hard to realise, notwithstanding much plain speaking on the subject that this is not permissible under a Christian regime."

2. Lapp, E.P. in Indian women 1893, p. 169.
The missionaries found it a difficult problem to convince people and persuade them to practise monogamy. Even the converts were not willing to accept the idea. Rev. Williamson of the C.M.S. reported his endeavours to compel them to observe monogamy. Among the converted Christians monogamy was strictly enjoyed, but sometimes it was difficult to observe. However, they could set a good example for other communities to follow.

The life the lady missionaries—foreign as well as Indian as they led, their education and enlightenment, the work which they were doing in different spheres side by side with the menfolk, the absence of purdah among them, their public appearance, their talks and discussions, bold assertions and strong convictions, their sense of service and other things did not go without creating some impact on the minds of the Indian people. Many Indian women must have felt thrilled by their sight and free movements. The Indian social reformers of the nineteenth century from Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Justice Mahadeo Govind Ranade and Swami Vivekanand owed a great deal to the missionaries for the inspiration drew from their work, dedicated spirit, undiminished enthusiasm and irresistible zeal. Much of the criticism of the Indian social evils pertaining to women at the bands of the missionaries and Indian social reformers was identical. In the passing of the several social legislations by the government of India in the nineteenth century such as the Widow Remarriage Act, Age of Consent Bill and others, the criticism and views of the Christian missionaries played no insignificant part.

Through various means the missions tried to improve the lot of women in the Central Provinces. Several schools and hospitals were opened for girls and women. Training courses in nursing and

midwifery were opened for them. A long succession of Zenana missionary ladies succeeded in penetrating the thickly veiled seclusion of women and taught many of them reading, writing and rules of sanitation and other useful tips of domestic science, blended with a burning Christian message. Though the progress in this direction was very slow but they were satisfied all the same that the prejudices against the contact with the women evangelists were gradually reduced and they were invited to enter the Hindu homesteads. The missions also opened homes and the poor houses where the destitute women and girls were given shelter. The dowry system prevalent in a marriage was denounced as one of the causes of permanent economic backwardness and insolvency of the parents of marriagable girls. From the society of the Indian Christians this evil was removed by fixing a limit of Rs. 10. This set an example before other communities but in practice it had no impact. Despite the attempts of the social reformers to eradicate this practice, it continued unabated and increased in the twentieth century.

Social Equality.

In the eyes of the western society and the Christian missionaries the caste system in the Hindu society, an epitome of social inequality, was an anathema. Whatever might have been its origin, this concept of compartmentalisation of society was unthinkable to them. Its existence perpetuated the ideas of high and low, privileged or unprivileged. The worst victims of this system were the lower castes who used to be ill-tested, totally neglected and denied all social justice and opportunity. The attitude of high castes gradually made them neglectful of the larger national interests. The acceptance of the philosophy of caste system made social status a matter of birth

heridity and ancestry. All attempts to interfere with it were regarded as sinful. Rev. G. Lapp in his article 'where caste is king' quoted from Keshub Chandra Sen:

"That caste is a frightful scourge no one can deny..... It sets up Brahmanical order as the very viceregent of the Deity and stamps the mass of the population as a degraded and unclean race, unworthy of manhood and unfit for heaven." 2

The attitude of the Christian missionaries towards the caste system became well-known to the people. The missionaries assailed it with dogged determination, and openly and bluntly ridiculed the Hindu society for its caste and vested social interests. On no other aspects of Hinduism were their views so pronounced as about this irrational social discrimination—a Brahmanical tradition degrading to the God's creation for its perpetuated backwardness, made social progress impossible and made the lower classes perpetual victims of social injustice. The upper classes did not look beyond their nose to realise that the caste distinctions were harmful to the larger social and national interests. Almost all the Hindu social reformers from the time of Upanishadas and birth of Buddhism and Jainism to the modern times of the Gandhian concept of society had denounced caste system as an unmitigated social evil, degrading to man and an antithesis to progress. Caste rigidity was ruinous to Hinduism. Its demerits were greater than its limited merits.

The missionaries, who enjoyed the social virtue of equality in their own country, neither understood nor appreciated the caste system as a philosophy of life, a social order or a religious hegemony. They were not convinced by its 'raison de etre' because they

1. McMillan, S. in the Missionary Intelligence 1899, p.266.
considered all their converts as equals in the spirit of Christian brotherhood. They refused to acknowledge the distinction created by the caste system and raised a voice against it. The Narsinghpur Conference of the Swedish Mission, held in 1888, represented the view of the missions towards the caste system:

"It was the question of what position should be taken up with regard to the 'caste system'. Some held that it is merely a social system and should be left without interference with the hope that it would vanish gradually as the light of the truth gained ground. Others maintained that caste is not only a social but also a religious structure, and that it has to be fought from the very start as altogether contrary to the mind of Christ. The latter opinion prevailed and has been adhered to faithfully to the greatest benefit of the church except for its growth in number. Yielding to the former opinion no doubt have meant a numerically strong Christian community by now."

The Christian concept of social equality and its practical working on the missions' premises and absence of any discrimination between one convert and another on caste grounds and the existence of equal opportunities to every convert for the development of his personality and advancement in life, irrespective of his birth, attracted the lower classes to accept Christianity and distracted the upper classes from it. The missionary's criticism of caste and its pronounced denunciation alarmed the latter and made them hostile to it. It was one and probably the most important reason why Christianity could not be popular among the caste Hindus and it attracted the notice of the socially down-trodden depressed and backward people for whom it was full of promise and hope for a better social and economic future.

1. Rinman, Miss V.: In the Heart of India, p.14.
Superstitions.

In the eighteenth century, the period of insecurity and uncertainties in India, the citadels of superstitions in the Hindu society were perhaps the strongest. The society dominated by superstitions was probably in the worst phase in its long history. Anything could be explained by superstitions which had become a part and parcel of life, thought and action of men. Even for the removal of famines, pestilences, epidemics, scarcity of water and all other kinds of calamities and individual ailments superstitious practices were regarded as a panacea. The various superstitions were the products of lack of right kind of education and enlightenment, ignorance, irrational thinking and dominating influence of the degraded priestly class devoid of learning and keen to subserve its vested interests. Belief in numerous superstitions, witchcraft and magic was antagonistic to all reasoning, progressive outlook and renaissant spirit of incessant enquiry and attainment of real knowledge, basic truths, fearlessness in character, and emancipation of mind. They had robbed the people of their dynamism and advancement. This state of slavery to superstitious thinking and wide-spread belief in them posed a serious challenge to the Indian social reformers in the nineteenth century.

The Christian missions in the Central Provinces found their work blocked due to the existence of numerous superstitions. Therefore, to remove hindrance to their preaching they raised voice against the prevailing superstitions. They accelerated the pace of their educational activities to combat this evil and to enlighten younger generation to develop rational understanding and scientific reasoning. They made the enlightened and open-minded people conscious of the evil effects of superstitions on the people's mind and the
colossal harm they had done to the society and thus slowly, but none-the-less surely helped in undermining their foundations and paving the way for intellectual, religious and social revolution.

Temperance

Abusive use of alcohol and other narcotics was quite common in several communities. A great number of people were slaves of the terrific evil of intoxication in its various forms, which had become the main cause of their sufferings, moral degradation, debauchery and economic ruin.

Among the intoxicants, the wine distilled from the 'Mahua flower' was widely used among the natives owing to its cheapness and easy availability like the home brewed beer in Europe. The missionaries of all parts of the Central Provinces noticed the wide prevalence of the drinking habit among people of the low strata, the hill tribes and the aboriginals. George Swan of the Friends Mission noted that the Gonds and Kurkus were very fond of drink made from the flower of Mahua tree and believed this to be the main reason why they were so poor and reduced to the distress. He gives an account how they were dragged into the habit of drinking wine:

"If a Patel has any villages in the hills, he has one of the houses made into a wine shop very soon. People from other villages come to buy till they have spent their all. They do not stop here, but continue to go on drinking the Patel's wine, for which they have no money to pay till they wake up some fine morning to find the Patel has taken over their village and land in exchange for the wine he has let them have on credit."1

The British government and its officials did nothing to mitigate this social evil. It were the missionaries who broke the ice in

launching a campaign against it. The people would hardly believe that the Christian missionaries being Europeans, were teetotallers.\footnote{The story of Friends Mission, p. 31. Box 340. Friends House.}

Intemperance was such an immensely widespread vice that the missionaries launched a frontal attack against it. As a first step total abstinence was made a condition of the church membership and this rule was scrupulously observed.\footnote{Pumphrey, C.W. Samuel Baker of Hoshangabad, p. 101.}

No less determined were they in their fight against narcotics like opium. Having studied the effects of narcotics on the behaviour of addicts A.H. Frautch reported, "Opium smokers are bony, ghastly, yellow eyed, parched skinned wrecks." The curse of opium had also fallen even upon the simple tribal folks. Millions of Indians were ruined by its use which was at the root of most of the crimes and deprived the people of the sense of morality. To the missionaries it was very much astonishing to see that the government patronised the opium trade as it was a source of enriching the exchequer and it had no intention to abandon the black gold even for the sake of humanity.

It was in the public interest that the Christian missions openly opposed the use of opium. Moved by the pathetic condition of victims of this evil the missions decided to put an end to this practice. In the country where the famines occurred frequently, food was a more fundamental need than opium. H.G.E. Dalmas wrote, "Whatever view may be taken about the government opium policy, there is no question whatever, but that a large quantity of wheat and other food could be produced if less opium is grown in India."\footnote{Frautch, A.H. Opium in India in Friend of Missions Vol. XII, October 1890, p. 148.}

\footnote{Dalmas, H.G.E. in Our Missions, March 1897, p. 73.}
The Christian missionaries tried to gain a world wide support for their temperance work by publishing articles on drugs and drinks such as 'Gospel and Temperance' written by Mrs. Denning of the Methodist mission stationed at Marsinghpur, and 'To Cry or Not to Cry' by Miss Stella Dodd of the D.C.I.M. stationed at Bilaspur. These and other articles drew the attention of the Christian world to the evils of opium traffic which was destroying all human worth. The Methodist Mission announced:

"That while we sympathise with Imperial Government in its difficulty in dealing satisfactorily with so a great question as the liquor traffic in India, we are nevertheless, unalterably opposed to enactment of laws that propose by license, taxing or otherwise, to regulate the drink traffic."

It also submitted a memorial to the Imperial Government as a protest against the practice of all social evils in India, including drinks and drugs. Dr. Fraser said, "We strongly urge the disuse and discontinuance of tobacco in every form.... We would also condemn the use of opium, bhang and other intoxicating drugs."

To make their temperance work more effectual the missionaries sought public cooperation and established a Temperance Society of abstainers. The Methodists started forming the branch of 'Purity Alliance' wherever practicable. A Temperance Society was initiated by Joseph Taylor at Hoshangabad consisting of leading gentlemen, merchants and the government officials. Its meeting was held under the name of 'Nasha Mahsak Sabha' or the Intoxicant Destroying Society. Abstinence from the poisonous drinks and drugs was considered

1. A. Metho. Mn.: The opium Traffic in Minutes of the 9th session 1884, p.36.
as a distinctively Christian virtue spiritually enjoyed upon the believers along with other virtues. By all these measures the people gradually became aware of the drink and drug evils and, need for temperance.

Beggary

Beggary was common all over India and the number of beggars—men, women and children—was very large. Rev. J. Lampard of Balaghat showed concern for them and considered the removal of beggary as a duty of the missions. The missions, therefore, tried to tackle this problem. They found a number of invalids among the beggars to whom food was to be provided and for the majority of them who were able-bodied productive employment was imperative. On Sundays the maimed and the blind were invited to the mission bungalows. They were told about Jesus and his love for human being, and a fixed amount was given to each of them. The able-bodied were encouraged to work and earn for themselves. The Friends Mission started a night class for them providing facilities of education—reading, writing, arts and crafts—and an opportunity to them to become good citizens. Subsequently this idea was taken up by several Indian social reform organisations as a practical programme to eliminate beggary, but the path shown by the missionaries was never pursued in right earnest. The Government too did not prohibit beggary and prepared no programme to rehabilitate the beggars with the result that the problem is no less acute today as it was in the nineteenth century. The work of the Christian missions in this regard was, however, a good pointer.

Environmental Hygiene

The social health demands neat and clean environment which

1. Letter from J. Lampard to the Secretary of Methodist Mission dated Balaghat, October 25, 1893, Methodist Archives.
Indian people did not maintain out of sheer lethargy and lack of civic sense. The missionaries exposed in their writings the insanitary conditions prevailing in India. They noticed that the people disregarded the elementary principles of hygiene and sanitation in their daily routines. Sir Richard Temple stated that impure water did more physical mischief than any cause whatever.  

"Miss Ruthquist wrote," "Homes are very dirty....., dogs swarm in the rooms, and hens, chickens, and even crows are allowed to roam unmolested and perch on bedsteads or anywhere they chose."

The missionaries explained to the people that good health was one of the first essentials to prosperity and happiness and they could be achieved by good hygienic conditions at home and sanitary surroundings outside. The mission compounds and the Christian colonies presented models for healthy living conditions. Thus they contributed to the saving of many lives in a year and prevented thousands from sickness and diseases.

The criticism of the Indian social practices by the Christian missionaries, their ideas about social change, and the social set up they established for the converts to Christianity, show of the Indian society they assailed, had a perceptible impact on the liberal-minded and enlightened people of the Central Provinces. The social reform activities of the reformers in Bengal had not reached the Central Provinces until the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the completion of the trunk railway lines through its regions and the social legislation passed by the British Government in India had not been

1. Quoted in Barnes, I.H., in Between Life and Death, p.15.
2. U.F.C.S.: A. Mackay Ruthquist, p.44.
   Scottish Archives.
implemented there for a pretty long time. Therefore the credit of initiating ideas for social reform and social change in the Central Provinces goes to the Christian missions established there in the nineteenth century. Their indirect role in the slow social change that began to be seen in the post-mutiny period of Indian history was undoubtedly significant. It was not easy to convince the conservative society to give up its age-old system and practices which had been in operation for centuries and had become crystallized traditions. The missionaries succeeded only in pointing out the social defects and the way to mend them by placing Christian models before them.

In this background created by the Christian missions the expansion of western education, study of western literature and history, the accounts of the west as given by the Indian sojourners to the European countries and the work of the Indian social reformers created considerable impact on enlightened thinking which was destined to bring about social change in the new India of the future. Several societies and associations, national as well as regional were formed in various parts of India to activate the reforms. The nation began to feel the urgent need for more education, social medicine and a mental revolution. The seeds sown by the missions struck root, sprawled their branches and bore fruits in the following century. The English educated people were inspired to eradicate those social evils which were a hindrance to the development and progress of the nation.

The Ram Krishna Mission made service of the poor as its main declared aim, drawing inspiration from the past as well as the present. The Arya Samaj movement drew inspiration from the ancient glories and felt alarmed by and reacted against the conversions to Christianity. The impact of the work of the missions was felt by the government also. The missionary leaders in India and abroad constantly
reminded the government of India of its duty towards its Indian subjects. Their incessant writings and appeal compelled the rulers to take steps for the implementation of reforms in the province. The people of this region owe much to the missionaries who exerted their pressure for preventing gambling, begging, child-marriage, illiteracy, etc. To fight against superstitions was a hard task, which they initiated and carried on with tenacity, persistently denouncing them as irrational and ridiculing the society for tolerating them. For the progressive removal of the disabilities of women and paving the way for their uplift was no less significant by promoting female education, establishing homes for the destitute women and carrying on an incessant propaganda against their seclusion, discouraging child-marriage, condemning prostitution and assailing polygamy for the first time in the province and thereby preparing ground for sex equality and participation of women in all activities.

It was not without hazards for the missionaries to interfere with the caste system which was so dear to the high caste Hindus. Knowing that the abolition of caste system in the near future was impossible, they successfully roused the conscience of the low castes against the caste domination and aggrandizement. Father Jerome D’ Souza wrote:

"India received a message of Christian brotherhood and of human equality in various forms......, in a large measure it came to us by the direct preaching of the Gospel by Christian missionaries and the example of their work among the aborigines, the untouchables and the other classes of unprivileged people. Consequently the Indian movement for political emancipation went hand to hand with a movement for social regeneration and for social justice." 1

The missionary zeal turned into an evangelistic crusade

1. D’ Souza, Father J in Cultural foundation of Indian democracy, pp.102-103
against social evils hampered the progress of evangelism. Not wholly preoccupied with securing the welfare and happiness of converts, their crusade was aimed at undermining the influence of an institution, which they believed greatly impeded their attempts to spread Christianity.\footnote{1} J.N. Farquhar traces the Indian social intellectual renaissance to the missionary work and the influence of the western culture and learning. It is difficult to disagree with him that the social awakening in the Indian masses is largely a direct outcome of the Christian missions and the western influence, and that all communities have felt the impact in a greater or lesser degree.\footnote{2}

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\footnote{1}{Oddi, G.A. : Social protest in India, p.61.}
\footnote{2}{Farquhar, J.N. : Modern religious movement in India, p.387.}