CHAPTER 4

IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS
AN OVERVIEW

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4.1 The impact of missions, a summing up

In the preceding part an attempt was made to understand the Christian missions in India in terms of western missionary expansion. As stated earlier, India had a hoary tradition of tolerance and assimilation. This tradition was the creation of the syncretic Hindu mind eager to be in touch with all other thought currents. “Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides”\(^1\) was the prayer of the Hindu sages. The early converts to Christianity lived cordially in the midst of Hindus respecting one another. This facilitated the growth of Christianity in the Indian soil perfectly as an Indian religion.

The course of cordiality did not run smooth. The first shock to the cordial relation between Christian community and non-Christians was received from the famous Synod of Diamper. Latin rites and ordinances were imposed forcefully and a new world of Christendom was threatened to be extended without caring to understand the social peculiarities of the place where it was expected to grow and prosper and ignoring the religio-cultural sensitivity of the people amidst whom the

\(^1\) Rigveda 1-89-1.
new religion was to exist. As pointed out earlier the central thrust of the activities of the Jesuit missions established in India during the second half of sixteenth century was proselytizing the native population to Christianity. In Goa mission became an instrument for conditioning the native people to accept to Portuguese rule and to assimilate their culture. Christianity was identified with changing over to Portuguese names and dress, beef eating, wine drinking and loose living. All this created repugnance in the minds of the natives. That missionary enterprises almost everywhere served the colonial political power was a characteristic feature of that time. It has to be noted that, the progress of Jesuit mission activities began to decline when the temporal power of the Portuguese began to decay.

In the second place, the missions brought with them an attitude of moral superiority of the Christians and a claim in their own exclusive righteousness. The doctrine of the monopoly of truth and revelation as claimed by the missionaries were alien to Hindu mind. It was an article of faith with the Hindus that though God / Truth was one and indivisible, there were different ways to it. The sages had said: - ‘Ekam sat vipra bahuta vadanti’ - that which is- TRUTH - is one; but the wise speak of it variously the reasonable. The claim of Christian sects that they alone possess the truth and others are condemned seemed unreasonable. Third is the association of Christian missionary work with aggressive imperialism. Colonial culture and its ideologies were imposed upon India by a dominant class of evangelicals and bureaucrats from England. There was no serious effort from the side of
the missionaries or mission societies to understand oriental institutions, learn natives literature or sympathetically deal with the religious and cultural sentiments of Indian people. Missions believed that introduction of western science and Christianity alone would redeem the people of India from their cultural predicament. The missions believed that India was consigned to the lowest rung of the ladder of civilization because of its barbarous and superstitious religion. National sentiments looked upon this type of missionary attitude and activity as inimical to the country’s interests. The educational activities of the missionaries stressing the glories of European culture only led to the identification of the work of mission with western cultural aggression. All these naturally led the native people to look upon the entire missionary project with suspicion and the missionaries were considered the nation’s enemies.

Fourthly, the missionaries who preached against caste were themselves perpetrators of the cultural superiority of the west, perpetrating the caste sin in a different way. Local missionaries and converts were not treated on equal terms with foreign missionaries. Though it was taught that in Christ all people are utterly equal the European Christians were more equal, to use an Orwellian expression. There were even instances of English missionaries vehemently opposing efforts by Indian Christian leaders to form indigenous missions. This showed that even missionaries were not free from racism.
It is indisputable that in order to interpret the (revealed) message of any religion properly the living situation of the people has to be understood thoroughly. Cultures, languages and traditions must be taken seriously. It could be seen that in this respect also the missions failed. In other words they failed to contextualise the gospel message. It appeared that the missionaries were concerned with ensuring that Indian people received the correct pattern of behaviour, right set of doctrines, and the true model of society, which were developed in Europe. It has been pointed out that the European missionaries failed to understand that authentic mission is true identification with the struggles of human beings for self-expression and self-emancipation, active participation in their struggle for freedom and total involvement towards liberation. Colonial mission failed even in conveying properly the Christian message of hope to the native peoples within context of their sufferings and struggles.

This is not to ignore the fact that there was something basically appealing about the sacrifices of certain missionaries and evangelicals and the efforts they took in bringing the Gospel meaningful and in providing education and knowledge to people in India. Their activities would have been commendable if missions acknowledged the richness of the religious pluralism, communal harmony and the magnificent hierarchy of human relationships prevalent in India. The refusal to accept native cultures deprived the chance of the Gospel being preached in its contextualising nature and of its dynamics of penetrating every human society.
British authorities helped missionaries financially. They helped in the construction of mission houses and Churches. The Christians were exempted from drawing procession cars-chariots-in Hindu festivals. Christians were appointed as civil judges and donations were provided for mission schools. All this created an impression that British rulers intended to Christianise India. Many of the laws enacted in the princely state of Travancore were in favour of Christians. Converted Christians were exempted from all duties connected with the temples and they were permitted free use of public streets while for other low caste people use of public roads near temples were prohibited. In South Travancore missionaries with the help of the British got the low caste people exempted from performing uriyam or forced labour for temples on Sundays.

The work of Christian missions among the depressed classes and tribals is worth examining. The stigma of untouchability that rested upon them for generations had led them to a sub-human level of existence. They were systematically exploited and kept down for centuries by caste Hindus. For many who got converted to Christianity it represented liberation from the dehumanising conditions of their existence. They were also benefited by the educational felicities provided by missions, the converts from the underprivileged groups made striking progress in their

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2 Hugald Grafe, History of Christianity in India Vol. IV, Part II (Bangalore: CHAI, 1990) 221.
social and cultural life. Bulk of the people converted in the nineteenth-and
twentieth centuries were tribals. The Bhils and Gonds in Chotanagapur,
the tribal of North East India are examples. Besides general education,
missions gave technical education to tribal youth. In the field of health
and hygiene also the missions rendered substantial service by providing
medical aid to women and children. Since most of the new converts
came from the economically and socially backward classes, several
industrial and agricultural projects were established to improve their
conditions. The Basel Mission on the west coast of south India became
well known for its tile making and textile industries. Carpentry, furniture
making and other crafts were taught to the poor Christians in south India.
There was great emphasis on rural education and reconstruction
programmes in the Protestant missions’ social agenda. Some of the
outstanding Christian schools and colleges of India are the result of the
pioneering efforts of missionaries. The Christian educational work for
girls served as a model for government and other agencies to found
schools for girls’ education. St. Stephen’s College Delhi, Madras
Christian College Madras, and St. John’s College at Agra are only a few
of the many institutions of higher education started by the missionaries.
Pioneer work in the field of women’s education was done by Pandita
Ramabhai a Christian convert. She worked indefatigably for the progress
of women’s education. Ramabhai founded an institution called Mukti for
helping widows and others⁴. Women’s Christian College Madras,

⁴ P. Thomas, Christians and Christianity in India and Pakistan (London: George
Isabella Thoburn College Lucknow, Sarah Tucker College Palayamcottah etc. are notable in the field of women education. In addition to these there were schools for the deaf and the blind. The Christian educational work for girls provided an impetus to the government and other agencies to found schools for girls. The Arya Samaj, Theosophical society, Ramakrishna Mission and other agencies began to take interest in women's education following the lead given by the Christian missions. The Christian colleges exerted great influence on Indian education and Indian thought. The terrible inadequacy of medical facilities in India induced Christian missions to start hospitals and dispensaries in cities and villages. Zenana Medical Mission (ZMM) was founded to bring medical aid to women and children in India. The missions’ medical work also included establishing several Tuberculosis sanatoriums and leprosy asylums. Tuberculosis (TB) sanatoriums at Arogyavarum and Christian Medical Colleges at Velloore in Tamil Nadu and Ludhiana in Punjab are important medical institutions started by missions⁵.

The movements initiated by the educated Hindus to reform their religion may be listed as the most important positive impact of the work of Christian of missions. The flow of knowledge and education from the west did not brainwash the educated class so as to consider Christianity as a substitute for Hinduism. On the contrary, it helped them to examine and evaluate their own religion in a new light. The

western impact and the resultant awakening were pervasive and had its effect upon Indian politics, art and literature besides religion. The Hindus even used the gift of English education in opposing missionaries. Thus the rational criticism and historical analysis which the missionaries themselves employed to dislodge Hinduism were adopted by the Hindus to defend their religion and critique the doctrines of Christianity. The entire nineteenth-century, especially the second half of it was a period of cultural and religious ferment in India under the influence of western culture and missions. Whether they meant it or not, Christian missions by familiarising the Indian mind with certain European concepts helped in reviving the dormant Indian spirit which in time created new schools of thought. The social activities of Christian missions were directed towards bringing about moral reforms in Indian society and helped in the emancipation of individuals from their age old superstitions and other social evils like untouchability and caste discrimination. Missions demanded legal support from the British government in support of their vigorous fight against social evils and superstitious practices associated with Hindu religion such as widow burning or Sati, child marriage, drowning of children in sacred rivers etc. With the support of liberal Hindu leaders and missionaries Governor General William Bentick introduced several legal measures of social reforms.

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Lastly during second half of nineteenth-century the educational endeavour of Christian missionaries played an important role in the social liberation of the lower castes particularly in the South and in the North Eastern parts of India. The missionaries strove to secure equal rights for them. Missionaries did much to free them from evils like bonded labour, unjust taxation etc. and also for the rights of the women to wear upper cloth. Here missions played the role of a socio-religious movement, which indirectly gave birth to neo-Hindu reformist movements. J. Watson Pickett has also surveyed the Christian mass movements in India and has spelled out the impact of missions in the social emancipation of the depressed classes 8.

4.2 Christian missions and English education

Alexander Duff, Charles Trevelyn and Thomas Macaulay formed the triumvirs of English education in India. The evangelicals in England and missionaries in India were the prime movers behind the spreading of English education in India. With their ceaseless propaganda the evangelicals succeeded in bringing about some changes in the political climate in England, and missionaries effected a similar transformation in the administrative structure in India. The missionary educators in India trusted in the transforming power of western education and the universality of English literature. They were

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bent upon civilizing the people of India by Christianising and westernising them. Their assumption was that nineteenth-century Britain was the ideal paradigm of Christian culture and society. They presumed that God has laid upon Britain the solemn duty of civilizing and Christianising the whole pagan world i.e., the non-Christian world. Missions demanded above all open government patronage for Christian education and the war they declared upon the evils associated with Hindu religion. Governor-Generals like Lord Wellesley and Lord Bentick were in open alliance with Christian missions for introducing English education. They had the dream of destroying the pagan religious system of India and implanting evangelistic beliefs and European cultural practices.  

Both the missionaries and colonial administrators believed that the introduction of European knowledge and civilization was the remedy for all social evils in India. To Quote Arthur Mayhew: “large and continuous doses of western knowledge would not only purge (India) of Hindu and Islamic religion, but also build up a new India with an essentially Christian constitution”.  

After the introduction of English education in India the subcontinent experienced a proliferation of English medium schools and colleges, mostly run by missionaries. A conservative estimate would give a total of 180 English institutions and 30,000 students in attendance in 1854.

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9 P. Thomas, op. cit.: 188-189.  
And six years after the opening of the universities, English historical and philosophical works penetrated every corner of British India. In Bombay, Calcutta and Madras Macaulay’s scheme of English education was implemented, conditioning the converts culturally to accept the Christian spirit\(^{11}\). As the English education introduced in India lacked moral content, the missionary educators reasoned that mere introduction of western science into academic curriculum was not enough. Science in itself was value neutral, or amoral. It should include moral and ethical teachings, by which was meant Christian instruction\(^{12}\).

The great religious revival in the eighteenth century England had its influence on the cultural policy of the British in India. Under its influence, people like Duff attempted to civilize Indians during the period of Governor-General William Bentick. The British administrators imbued with utilitarian ideas and evangelicals under extreme form of pietism were instrumental in introducing the new cultural policy. They sought to civilize Indians by imposing western morality on them and to put them on the way to modernity by making them imitators of the western civilization. For Charles Grant an important member of the Court of Directors of East India Company, Hinduism was a degrading idolatry with all its rubble of impure deities, its monsters of wood and stone, its false principles and corrupt practices, its delusive hopes and


fears, its ridiculous ceremonies superstitions, its lying legends and fraudulent impositions. William Wilberforce while speaking on Indian society and religion declared in the House of Commons: Our religion is sublime, pure and beneficent. Theirs’ is mean licentious and cruel. John Stuart Mill a utilitarian for example, argued that, his views on Europe could not apply to India because Indian people were civilizationally inferior. In the final chapter he argued that Indian’s civilization had ‘not attained the requisite degree of development’ and his views about Europe could not be applied to India. The rulers and evangelicals, in fact, were only articulating the inmost feeling of the self-conscious Britons who in the nineteenth century possessed the inflated self-image of being the most highly civilized people on the earth. They advocated a totally western educational scheme for India and believed in the possibility of disintegration of Hinduism and Indian culture consequent on the widespread introduction of English education.

The spread of English education facilitated intellectual ferment, which produced a new class of Indian nationalists. These educated Indians who came out of the schools and universities, knew Christianity as the spiritual and cultural sources of western civilization and the liberal political institutions of the west. These nationalists had read writers and thinkers like John Stuart Mill, Charles Dickens, Voltaire, Rousseau and missionary educators such as Macaulay,

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13 Tara Chand, op. cit.: 238-239.
14 Quoted in Dharmaraj, Colonialism and Christian Missions op.cit. : 34.
15 Quoted in Dharmaraj, Colonialism and Christian Missions op.cit. : 34.
Alexander Duff, et. al. who idealized western culture and Christianity and poured contempt on Indian culture and religions. They were also watching the anglicising process that the British under the influence of the evangelicals and the utilitarians had thrust upon India. Further, in the streets of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, the new educated classes were hearing Christian missionaries from the west criticising Hinduism as the cause of the cultural, social, and political degeneration of India. The challenge of Christianity and western culture was felt by the Indian psyche. At the same time it was forced upon the nationalists that their identity would be sustained by reaffirming the tradition of India, a tradition that might need reinterpretation to guide Indian’s life in the modern situation. It was this situation where western culture and Christianity on the one side and Indian culture and Hinduism on the other confronted each other under the shadow of colonialism that led to the emergence Hindu religious renaissance. And the resurgent Hindu religious fervour responded to the challenges posed by the English missions. In the next chapter a survey of various responses to the Christian missions is attempted.