Chapter VII

Conclusion

The British acquired the Nilgiris in 1799 at the end of the Fourth Mysore War. The scenic beauty, temperate and equable climate and the choicest of games available there immensely pleased the colonial British Society in South India. Thus the Hills became their choicest settlement. The extension of British rule to the Nilgiris offered the Missionary organizations a stimulant. The Church Missionary Society, the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society were the major Protestant Missions that entered the Nilgiris, in that chronological order. They set foot on the Hills, in the second half of 19th century, with the twin objectives of recuperating their health in the salubrious climate and planting Christianity on its soil. Invitation and help from colonial authorities made their tasks easier.

The zealous Missionaries began to make religious inroads into the tribal settlements of the Badagas, Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas and also into the midst of the immigrant settlers from South India. Each Mission had a community demarcation which was flexible. The agenda of the Missionaries was well articulated. Mission centres and out-stations were established throughout the district to bring the whole of the Nilgiris under their effective purview. Some common preaching methods like itinerancy, open air preaching, door visitations, preaching during ceremonies and rituals were effectively and diligently employed. Exceptionally, only the Wesleyan Mission totally ignored itinerancy as a method. Missionaries learned the scriptless tribal languages in order to interact with the various groups. To make the natives amenable to the Gospel, tribal agents were judiciously employed. Other usual Mission strategies like creation of schools, sending Bible women, opening dispensaries and charitable agencies were also resorted to. Though convertive motive is undeniably present from the start, due credit
should be given for their significant work in eradicating illiteracy, in ridding the tribal society of many obnoxious practices and in imparting modern education. For the first time in the history of the district, orphans and destitute were cared for. Succour to the needy was provided during the famines. Health awareness was also created.

Motivated by several factors, a section of the tribals and immigrant settlers on the Hills, embraced the alien faith. While the substantial force of the argument that such conversions were induced by considerations of bread and butter, the study of the Missionary work among the tribals and immigrants on the Nilgiris shows that a fine sprinkle of families took to Christianity motivated solely by religious reasons. The study points out that the work of the Missionaries drew the patronage and support from both colonial authorities and European individuals. Allotment of lands for Christian colonies, churches, parsonages and schools was liberally made. Grants to schools, orphanages and dispensaries were also given. Further several European nationals fired by the urge to propagate their faith, helped the Protestant Missions directly and indirectly. Some even constructed churches and donated them to the Missions for the use of the steadily increasing native congregation. However, the study draws the reader’s attention to, what could be surmised as the inadequacy of religion, here specifically Christianity. It failed to bring all Christians under its overarch. This could be seen from the fact that while the colonial Government was liberal towards its compatriot Missionary organizations, it prevented the German Missionaries from serving their common God up to the hilt during the World Wars. Since these messengers of Christianity happened to be from a hostile nation, political considerations outweighed the religious concern and they were mercilessly turned out of India, bag and baggage, notwithstanding the enormous good will and unrivalled popularity enjoyed by the German Missionaries among the native converts.
Like the other Missionaries in India, the Protestant Missionaries on the Nilgiris too had failed in Christianizing the whole of the Nilgiris or even a single tribal group completely. The elucidation for their failure could be attributed to the fact that the Nilgiris served better as a sanatorium than as a sphere of Missionary enterprise. The Missionaries who could not endure the burning sun in the plains sought refuge in the coolness of the Hills. Such invalid and sick Missionaries could not be expected to deliver goods. Majority of the Missionaries, barring a few, did not enjoy a longer stay which in turn curtailed the scope for close rapport with the natives. Among them, a few behaved like imperialists and did not mingle with the laity.

The social structure of the mountainous communities had not provided room for the various proselytizing agencies to engineer mass conversions. The chief reason is the absence of a 'vulnerable' section like the 'Dalits' of the plains who could not only rescue themselves from untouchability but also get status through western education by means of conversion. So the Missionaries could not organize a mass movement. Another difficulty was the polyglot feature of the mountain. It proved too difficult for the Missionaries to learn all the five scriptless languages.

Furthermore, the Missionaries had not always been rich. While contemporary reality is the contrary and on that score may gloss our vision of the Missionaries, the earliest Missionaries had been as poor as the church mouse. The Church Mission had no money to offer to the British administration in building the first church on the Nilgiris. For reasons of poverty, the Church Missionary Society was kept out of decision-making and treated like an under dog.

In their endless search for souls, the Missionaries made vituperative attacks on the native faiths and tribal institutions which did not endear them to the tribals. Naturally, they triggered off tribal activism and resistance. The reactions of the Badagas took defensive as well as offensive ventilations. A Toda, friendly to the Christian overtures, was greeted
with excommunication and denial of funeral rites. The Kotas, on the other hand, never allowed the Missionaries to preach in their settlements and turned a deaf ear to the Gospel. Tribal bondage got cemented and Hinduism regenerated on a stronger footing and helped the tribals bolster their faith in their age old traditions. In the wake of such vehement opposition, a handful of Missionaries could not make much headway. To add to this, some nostalgic converts reverted back to tribal fold when their affable Missionaries had left the Nilgiris for good. The Hindu faith accepted such atavistic loyalty. They were admitted after some purification ceremony 'suddhi'.

Furthermore, the Protestant Missionaries had to contend with the Roman Catholic Missionaries in the race for capturing souls. Many hard won converts slipped out of their hands and joined the Roman Catholic Mission, may be for better considerations. Instead of winning new souls, the Protestant as well as Catholic Missionaries indulged in sheep lifting without any inhibition.

Regarding the Toda Mission, no Missionary was appointed to continue the good work of Ling after retirement. Her successor, the Catherine Ling Toda Mission Committee, lacked foresight and caused disintegration among the Toda Christians.

All such factors had hampered the progress of the Gospel and therefore the eventual triumph of Christianity did not take place. Taking advantage of the absence of an organized opposition, and a united front of the natives, the Missionaries directed their energies towards converting individuals. With such challenges facing them, the Missionaries did what they could. They had successfully planted a viable Christian community and had given permanency to Christianity on the Nilgiris. Currently there are around 3000 Badaga Christians and 200 Toda Christians, besides a handful of converts from other tribes. Besides there is a sizeable number of Tamil Christians, mainly composed of Dalits, who came to the Hills in search of livelihood.
When the Church of South India was formed in 1947, the Protestant Missionary organizations on the Nilgiris namely the Church Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society became part of it. Since then the participation of European Missionaries in the evangelistic programme became rare.

Though Missionaries had gone once for all, they left an indelible impact on the multi-cultural society of the Nilgiris. Both the converts and traditionalists derived positive gains from the Missionary incursions. The Missionaries succeeded in educating the tribals, where the official attempts had ended in vain. In the absence of a native system of education, the gospel-bearers became the torch-bearers in taking up the onerous task of introducing basic education to the tribes. Schools were put up even for negligible number of scholars. Night schools were also run at several centres. Missionary agencies had the credit of running the largest number of schools for girls also. The Missionaries were running more number of schools than the Local Bodies and this was the reality till the attainment of independence by India. The various Missionaries who served on the District Education Council urged State Government to increase the spending on education. In the beginning of the 20th century, the literacy rate of the Nilgiris was high. It stood second among the districts in the Madras Presidency in 1904, with about 17% of the inhabitants being able to read and write, 5% of them knew English. The high local literacy rate has been maintained at over 50% to this day. At one point of time the Nilgiris boasted of a higher literacy rate than even the Madras City. These figures speak eloquently for the service of the Missionaries.

Though it may be argued that education was employed as a chief means to win converts, it can not be denied that the educational services of the Missionaries have come in for encomium from all quarters. They popularized education among a previously non-literate population. The numerous educational institutions they founded still continue to enlighten the pupils of the Hill district.
Education served as a spring board for employment in various calling. It paved the way for socio-economic improvement and acted as an instrument of social change and set the tribal society on the wheels of progress. The converts were intensively educated and they were far ahead of others in attaining upward social mobility. Breaking away from cloistered life, they migrated to towns, to other parts of India and even abroad. Their life style underwent a change. In the process of conversion, tribal practices gave way to new values, ideas and modernization. They abandoned their traditional dress and took to European style of dressing. Further, British and German family values began to influence them. From pure vegetarianism, the Christian faction became a meat eating entity.

Many far-reaching social changes ensued the conversions. The most notable achievement of conversions, was the abolition of tribal hierarchy among the converted tribals. Secondly, inter marriages between Badaga, Toda and immigrant Tamil and Keralite Christians became common. While the bulk of the Badaga Christians remain conversant in their dialect, the majority of the Toda Christians have lost their dialect. The reason was the increasing marital links with Tamil Christians which had subsumed them into Tamil culture. But interestingly song and dance – two unique tribal elements – survive among the Badagas. Sadly, in recent times, Toda Christians lost their moorings.

The present study marks a very striking observation, the significance of which is valid for all time. After the initial fury of religious passions was spent, as seen in the farcical conversions and reconversions, the predominant and large parental group and some of the off spring off-shoots have been living in perfect social harmony and vibrant interaction for nine decades and more. The days of boycott of those who went astray and the days of worry over brothers still helplessly clinging on to “heathen Gods” now surely belong only to the distant history. Communalists of any hue who may dig into pages of history, so that the present could be
inflamed and roused to a communal frenzy would be disappointed. The study shows clearly that the converted and the unconverted – both the children of the same forefathers – living with extreme affection towards each other, with full knowledge of the fact, that they are the children of the same forefathers, professing different faiths. In this context it is worth a repetition and one’s attention should be drawn to the reciprocal attendance in family functions between members of different communities. Mention must be made of the fact that the Nilgiris has not witnessed single communal clash.

Regarding the Todas, Missionaries educated them socially and the impurity attached to their womanhood gradually erased from the minds of the converted Todas. Education went a long way, in the emancipation and empowerment of Toda women. The Toda Christians switched over to tiled and terraced houses instead of their traditional half-vaulted and thatched huts. Their tribal way of life had greatly altered. Pastoral way got replaced by settled agrarian economy. Their social practices such as polyandry, female infanticide, promiscuity, killing herds of buffaloes at funerals became things of the past thanks to the initiatives of Ling. The most significant of Ling Mission lies in the veritable saving of the Toda tribe. With virulent attacks on the tribe by ‘relapsing fever’—probably the description of typhoid in those times and venereal disease, the tribe was probably on the verge of extinction. Credit for pulling the tribe out of such a serious predicament will be ungrudgingly conceded to Ling, if one remembers two facts: the smallness of the Toda population—a miserable 582 in 1924 and their practice of female infanticide, which effectively decimated chances of boosting up the population. She educated the Todas on the inherent evils of such practices. Her educational success set an example to the Governments to instal tribal residential schools later.

On the negative side, the Missionaries had been silent spectators to certain things. They could not rise above racial prejudice. They had never demanded entry of native converts
into the St. Stephen's Church which was then known as 'Dorai' Church (A Dorai is a respectful reference to a European). They conducted service for the native converts in the Holy Trinity church meant for the 'Blacks'. Further the Missionaries on the Hills restricted their work to the provision of elementary education only and did not make any provision for higher education. They had never attempted at tribal consolidation but only Christianization.

All of them remained unconcerned about the political developments in the country. Elsewhere in India, several European Missionaries had taken strong exception to the repressive measures of the British rule. Such situation did not arise on the Nilgiris. The national spirit was absent on the Hills. Hence the Missionaries had no chance to react to the nationalistic fervour since there was none in the first place. The spread of Christianity, through Missionary work, helped consolidate the imperialistic design, by beneficial work in the areas of health and education. This way the many Missions acted as the buffer between the imperialists and the colonial people so much so the tribals did not feel the sting of imperialism at all. The over all Missionary impact on the Nilgiris reinforced the colonial structure and in no way contributed to the nationalist sentiment among the tribes. Furthermore, the tribal population never antagonized their 'masters' since they stood to gain a lot from their 'benevolent' rule. While the tribal people, spread over a large part of India, participated in numerous uprisings, resenting the extension of British control and the intrusion of colonial administration, the tribes on the Nilgiris welcomed the colonists. With no pronounced nationalist feelings it was only logical that the participation of the tribes in the freedom struggle was next to nothing. Nevertheless towards the fag end of the national movement some instances of participation in the 'Quit India' Movement—mainly from the immigrants—were reported. Absence of common lingua franca and the geographical barriers proved to be great impediments for the district to have a say in the national struggle, and thus removed a very inconvenient factor from the way of the Missionaries.
Another area where the Missionaries attempted in vain was the eradication of alcoholism from the tribes. One of the effects of colonization was the introduction of alcoholic drinks. Liquor consuming became common among the converts as well as conventional tribes. The temperance movement spearheaded by the Missionaries did not succeed. To this day alcoholism continues to drain much of their earnings.

The first Government clerk, the first teacher, the first writer, the first graduate and first lawyer were all from the converted Badagas and Todas. Tribal Christians became a progressive and powerful social group and served as a model for the rest in modernizing themselves without compromising on their inherited legacy. Another beneficial outcome of the conversion to Christianity is seen in the palpable eagerness of the Hindu Badagas and Todas to emulate their converted brethren who received modern education ahead of them and rose the social ladder. Thus significantly conversion to Christianity, far from leading to fragmentation of the society on the Hills, had only led to a positive reorientation of the outlook of life which always enables the amalgam of the best in the old and new. The tradition-bound highlanders received some minimal modern education. Instead of tribal therapies, they began to try doses of modern medicine the Missionary provided them. Some imitated the Christians in terms of dress and food. They had been subjected to much biblical exposure thanks to the peripatetic Missionaries. Hence their religious outlook as a whole underwent change. Tribal attribution of natural calamities and epidemics to the wrath of vengeful Gods practically ended.

In the field of agriculture, the Christian Toda farmers became a model for the rest of the pastoral Todas in the cultivation of potato, cabbage, carrot, beans, peas etc. The ideas of emancipation of women and equal status for women began to spread slowly among the tribes. The dialects of the tribes received special attention as the Gospel had to be spread. Tamil and Kannada scripts were used for this purpose.
The alien religious practices stood quite distinct from those of the native faiths. This led to, in the hands of eclectic Hindus, to some assimilation. Instances of such syncretic behaviour viz., attending the church without embracing Christianity wholesale, possession of Bible, invoking the blessing of Christ upon their different undertakings and making vows to Christ are features seen by this study as pointing to the innate competence of India to accept, accommodate and nurture religious and cultural plurality.

**Summation**

The first chapter introduced the land, its people and their faiths. The second chapter dealt with the Church Mission endeavours among the immigrants in the Nilgiris and tribes in the Wynaad. The third chapter studied the Basel Mission’s success among the Badagas. The fourth chapter went to list the scholastic and humanitarian concerns of the Basel Mission. The next chapter considered how the Wesleyan Mission carried forward the legacy ‘methodically’. The sixth chapter covered the activities of the Zenana Mission among the immigrant women and the aboriginal Todas.

Having done this historical and comprehensive survey of the work of each Protestant Mission on the Nilgiris, the thesis concludes that though the Missionaries did not meet with success to the extent they desired, they certainly succeeded in creating a viable and steadfast Christian community on the Hills which contributes to the rich plurality that is life in India. The study further emphasizes the need to uphold a political and social structure which would keep all its windows open for all breeze to blow in.
Suggestions for further Research

The present study points out several unexplored areas of research in the same field. The Christianization of the Badagas and Todas, Study of Roman Catholic Mission and Tribal opposition to Christianity on the Hills could be studied at length. The lives of J.F. Metz and C.F. Ling may be separately taken up for intensive research based on archival sources abroad. A more ambitious and challenging task could be the comparative study of the history and impact of Christianity on the Hill tribals all over India. Such a study is likely to unearth the differences between the Nagaland and Nilgiri experiences.