CHAPTER V

CRUSADE AGAINST SOCIAL EVILS
CHAPTER V
CRUSADE AGAINST SOCIAL EVILS

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

Social evils like untouchability, the practice of sati, female infanticide, purdah, devadasi system, polygamy, restriction on the marriages of widows, child marriage and illiteracy were practiced in the name of religion. The Muslim women suffered because of illiteracy, polygamy and purdah. On their arrival in Tirunelveli, the missionaries found that the non-caste Hindus were neglected and considered as untouchables. Bewildered though they were at first by the caste equations they saw around them, the women missionaries slowly realised that they had to involve themselves in a mission to break caste barriers.

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

Zenana Mission

The Zenana work formed an important part of the missionary work of the

Protestant Missions. This work was undertaken by the lady missionaries in order to reach the womenfolk of the non-Christian families and to teach them primarily, reading and writing. The word, zenana means 'the women's apartments'. The orthodox women of India were shut up within the four walls of their homes and used to sit behind the curtains. They had no communication with the outer world. Among Muslim Women, the restrictions of purdah commences at puberty. Among the Hindus, seclusion generally began with marriage. The Muhammadan invasion of India compelled the Hindus to shield their women from their conquerors. They believed that Hindu women were unsafe, unless they were shut up and guarded.

All high-caste Hindus in a province in India with a Muhammadan concentration adopted the Zenana system. In 1852, the Zenana work was first started in Bengal by a woman missionary, Mrs. Mary Jane Kinnaird with the support of the Government of India.

The growth of Zenana visitation by the missionaries' wives induced the missionary societies to send more women missionaires to India. It also led to the foundation of special societies for this purpose, such as the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (C.E.Z.M.S.). The C.E.Z.M.S. built hospitals for women and children in different parts of India. The women missionaries maintained affiliation with the Church Missionary Society. The Zenana missionaries conducted occasional meetings

and conferences for united action.\textsuperscript{10} In Tirunelveli, the women missionaries of C.E.Z.M.S., S.P.G. and C.M.S. were involved in the Zenana mission work with its head quarters at Palayamkottai.\textsuperscript{11}

The Hindu and Muslim women of high caste were kept in their homes and had no education. A married woman was under the care of her mother-in-law. She had no education and led a life in isolation. The women were prohibited from reading sacred texts. Manu states, "It is worse than blasphemy to attempt to educate a female. She was born in ignorance, she must die in ignorance". The women were married at a young age and were taken from their natal homes to live in their husband's households. They were dominated not only by their husbands but also by their in-laws.

A woman in Zenana spent her time in gossiping, plaiting her hair, counting her ornaments, eating sweet and preparing food for her husband and children. She was never allowed to eat with her husband and always took meals only after her husband had eaten. No woman was allowed to utter the name of her husband. The majority of women lived like slaves.\textsuperscript{12} In many Zenanas, grown-up-ladies were found playing with dolls like children. A Hindu lady said, "The life we lead is just that of a frog in a well. Everywhere there is beauty, but we can not see it".\textsuperscript{13}

The C.E.Z.M.S. missionaries and pastors' wives visited the women in their homes.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} 'Women's Work for India's Women', \textit{The Harvest Field}, July 1896, p. 153.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Interview with Mrs. Nirmala Thangaraj, former Professor of English Department, S.T.C., Palayamkottai, 9 January 2008.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Harriett Warner Ellis, \textit{Our Eastern Sisters and Their Missionary Helpers}, London, (nd.), pp. 52-54.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Azariah, V.S., \textit{India and the Christian Movement}, Madras, 1936, p. 13.
\end{itemize}
Regular visits by the women missionaries and the Bible women brought tremendous change in the life of orthodox Hindu women.14

**Work of the Zenana Missionaries**

The lady missionaries spared no efforts in breaking the bondage of ignorance and illiteracy among the women in villages. The Zenana centres yielded wonderful results. The Zenana Mission engaged in visiting and teaching women in their homes. It opened schools exclusively for the girls. The chief object of their mission was to enlighten the women. In the beginning, the work was carried on by the wives of the missionaries. The women missionaries were assisted by Indian Bible women, the elderly widows, matrons and native Christian teachers.

In exceptional cases, unmarried girls and young widows were sent for Zenana visiting.15

Zenana teachers were given training by the missionaries for three days in a week. Zenana trainees were selected on the basis of the following qualifications: a thorough knowledge of the Bible, the customs and superstitions of the Hindus, the ability to sing songs and pray for others, good character and spiritual life and a good knowledge about the magazines and tracts published by the mission. The Zenana teachers were expected to submit their reports to missionary ladies at the end of every week.16

---

lady missionaries faced many difficulties because the non-Christian women considered the missionaries' visits to their homes as an attempt to drive away their gods and goddesses. Undaunted by such difficulties, the missionaries made frequent visits to the Zenanas and started Zenana centres.

While engaged in the Zenana work, the Christian women could also observe the position of purdah women and of the caste restrictions concerning food and utensils. The girls in their charge could not appear in public unveiled. For this reason, separate schools were opened for Hindu and Muslim girls and every effort was made to avoid giving unnecessary offence to their orthodox Hindu and Muslim parents.17 The Zenana girls were given education in vernacular and English in rented buildings. Their education enabled them to question the validity of superstitious beliefs and social practices. They taught both secular and religious subjects. Besides religious instruction, the teachers followed the schedule of courses approved by the government department of education.

The teachers taught the girls reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, languages, music, food preparations, spinning, weaving, needle-work, sewing and other handicrafts.18 The methods and means of imparting education to those under tuition in Zenanas were different from those employed in schools. In a school, the pupils were totally under the control of the teachers and were disciplined.19 But in the homes, the circumstances were entirely different. The

pupils were more or less under home influences. This distracted their attention - it might be a call from an older member of the family, or a cry for help from anyone lying ill in the house or any other domestic duty.

Tracts and handbills about the Zenana teachers and Bible women were printed and circulated among the people. In the beginning, the Hindu women treated the Zenana missionaries as outcasts and were supicious of their motives. Later, after receiving guidance and counselling they found them a source of consolation in their life of hardship and difficulty. They came out of their homes to work, to play and meet together. Consequently, the caste prejudices and restrictions that governed the lives of Hindu women gradually diminished. Quite a number of widows were consoled and relieved from their distresses.

Important Zenana Missionaries

The Zenana mission work in Tirunelveli was carried out by the Indian Female Instruction Society, the forerunner of the present Church of England Zenana Mission. It co-operated closely with C.M.S. in its work among women. Mrs. Annal Arokiam Sathianathan, wife of Rev. W.T. Sathianathan, Pastor of Tirunelveli opened a small Boarding School in her house for girls. She was the only daughter of Rev. John Devasagayam of the C.M.S., Kadachapuram, the first native clergyman of the Church of England in South India. She carried on Zenana work all through her life in association with the C.E.Z.M.S. She was a notable

---

21. Interview with Rev. Maharajan, Good Shepherd Church, Church of North India, North Bombay, 8 November 2006.
Tamil writer who wrote books in Tamil and distributed them in the Zenanas. Her book, *The Good Mother* was very popular among the Christians and Hindus.\(^2^3\) When her husband was transferred to Madras in 1864, she continued her Zenana work in a village, Choolai at Madras. Her friends who were employed as Zenana teachers founded a home for orphan and destitute children. After her death in 1890, the Zenana work was continued by her daughters, Anna Johanna, Hensman Katherine and her daughter in laws, Krupabai Khisty and Kamala Krishnamma. Together with a group of educated ladies, Krupabai Khisty started, ‘The Indian Ladies Magazine’ in 1900. Kamala Krishnamma was the first woman who obtained post graduate degree from the University of Madras and the first Woman’s Auxiliary President of the National Missionary Society of India (N.M.S.) which was established in 1905.\(^2^4\)

Zenana missionaries persuaded the village girls to join the lace school as day scholars. The women missionaries taught the girls the technique of earning while learning. In 1872, Mrs. Jesudasan John, wife of Jesudason, Tirunelveli pastor visited many zenana homes. In 1876, Mrs. Emily Lewis from Australia was the head of the Zenana work in the Tirunelveli town. She was a fluent Tamil orator and a most earnest worker. She built a mission house, which she called ‘Home of Rest’ in Tirunelveli town and stayed there with her colleagues and a street was named after them as Punithavathiyar street.\(^2^5\) Her fellow workers were

\(^{23}\) The Late Mrs. Sathianadhan’, *Gleaner*, August 1891, p. 116.


Miss. Macdonald, Miss. Genrich, Miss. Ridsdale, Miss. Boyton, Miss. Bourna, Miss. Buee, Miss. Max, Miss. Rose, Miss. Hedge, Miss. Blythe and Mrs. Foster. At Tuticorin, Zenana work was under the care of Miss White, Miss Rix and Miss. Boyton. Monthly leaflets were issued under the care of Mrs. Azariah, the wife of Bishop Azariah. Miss. New carried on the Zenana work at Idayengudi, Sathankulam, Suviseshapuram and Christianagaram and Miss Bauliah worked in Mudalur.

Mrs. Eliza Caldwell was responsible for the Zenana Mission at Kuttam, near Idayangudi. Kuttam was inhabited by wealthy Hindu Nadars whose women were kept in strict seclusion. A Bible woman was appointed at Kuttam and was paid from the donations received from Mrs. Fitzroy of England. Consequently twenty-six young women and girls received instruction. Due to the Zenana work in Kuttam, a girl from a respectable family of Nadars was given education by Mrs. Caldwell in the Boarding School, Idayangudi. Then she was trained in the Victorial Normal School, Tuticorin. In 1890 at Kuttam, forty five students received tuition under the Bible women. Bible women in Tuticorin visited the Hindu women in their houses and taught them reading and sewing. Mrs. Caldwell visited the women and girls in their houses and convinced them about the need for education.

Mrs. Caldwell appointed two Bible women to meet the native women in and around Idayangudi. They visited and instructed the Hindu women of high caste who were too old to attend the schools. Miss. Arputham Daniel engaged in Zenana work among the non-Christian women of Kudennkulam and the neighbouring villages. Mrs. Strachan, the wife of Bishop Harriet Nicholson Strachan rendered financial help to the poor and sick women of the Nazareth mission district. She visited houses in Nazareth, teaching about the importance of hygiene and sanitation. She made Nazareth a model village. A grant was given for planting trees in barren lands. During the famine 1876-1877, Mrs. Strachan went to the famine refugee camps in Nazareth and took care of orphan girls. She collected the money needed for the same from philanthrophists. Mrs. Strachan was assisted by Miss. Grazani.

The Zenana missionaries took care of the sick and the suffering. They taught them the values of neatness, punctuality, discipline, service, manners and character. They started Mothers' Unions to spread Christianity among the Hindu women, to create awareness about women education and to liberate them from their bondage. This was a major break-through in the emancipation of women in Tirunelveli. Mrs. Eleanor Carr visited the circles and conducted meetings for women. Mrs. Hodge Walker involved in Zenana work by organising Sunday

32. Madras Diocesan Record, 1898-1899, p. 152.
33. Callison, V.S. Then India Apostlean (T), Palayamkottai, 1907, p. 50.
34. Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society, 1894, p. 156.
schools at Pannaivilai, Nallur and Dohnavur. The Pannaivilai mission sent Bible women among the non-Christians women in 168 villages. The C.E.Z.M.S. was involved in medical and welfare work among the women and children. Miss. Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur Fellowship co-operated with the Dohnavur Circle which had done Zenana work by helping non-Christians and Christians. Miss. C.J. Elwin and the Bible women rendered valuable help to the women at Sivakasi and its neighbourhood. Zenana Missionaries visited 244 villages and 862 girls received instruction.

Devadasi system

Devadasi system, one of the major evils of Indian society existed in Tirunelveli, especially in and around Pannaivilai, Alwar Tirunagari, Srivaikuntam, Kalakad and Dohnavur. The Church of England and Zenana Women Missionaries strongly condemned the unholy devadasi system and vehemently opposed the immorality and obscenity perpetuated in the name of religion. Amy Carmichael attacked the evil system of keeping temple prostitutes and rescued many girls

36. Ibid., 1865, pp. 251-252.
38. Ibid., 1933, p. 53.
40. The term Devadasis literally means servants of God. Originally it denoted a class of women who gave themselves to a life of religious service and austerities. They were married to the temple god and slowly forced to lead an immoral life. (Nora Brockway, K., A Larger Way for Women; Aspects of Christian Education for Girls in South India, 1712-1948, Madras, 1919, p. 51.
41. Amy Carmichael was born on December 16, 1867 in Millisle in North Ireland. She came to Tirunelveli in 1896 under the direction of C.E.Z.M.S. and worked with Rev. Walker who taught her the Tamil language. Till 1900, she worked at Pannaivilai, near Sawyerpuram. Then she worked in Dohnavur, started Dohnavur Fellowship, in 1901. She was responsible for the great change in the life of the dacoit, Jambulingam, Robin Hood of South India. (Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society, 1900-1901, P.348; Amy Carmichael, Walker of Tinnevelly, Madras, 1915. p. 217).
who were dedicated to the temple gods. She nursed them in the orphanage at Dohnavur\(^42\) and educated them. She was not only a woman missionary, but also a social worker. Though Dr. Muthulekshmi Reddi has been credited with the abolition of devadasi system, it was, in fact, Amy Carmichael, the great social worker, who was the first to take up the cause of the devadasis. She studied their lives and submitted her findings before the government.\(^43\)

Amy Carmichael formed a Women’s Band in 1898 at Pannavilai. She and her team used to travel in bullock-carts, camp near a cluster of huts and visit the neighbouring villages. From dawn to dusk, they visited huts and met women and children. When she was involved in such social work in Pannavilai, she came to know about the obnoxious devadasi system in the society of Tirunelveli.\(^44\) Young girls of six to eight years were sold to the temples. They were married to god before the idol at an early age.\(^45\) This practice was prohibited by the introduction of a law by the Magistrate of Tirunelveli in 1826.\(^46\)

Any human society is structurally based on several customs and practices from time immemorial. The custom of dedicating girls to Hindu temples was in

\[42\] Count Dohna of Schlodin in Prussia donated money to Rhenius, the C.M.S. missionary to establish a Christian Village. In Puliyoorkurichi (Village of tiger), he purchased a few acres of lands, where most of the people were Nadars. He established a church there and he named that place after count Dohna as Dohnavur in named that place after count 1824. (Proceedings of the C.M.S., 1894-1895, p. 211.)


\[44\] Madras Diocesan Record, 1904-1905, p. 195.


\[46\] Ibid., 29 December 1827, para 107 and 108.
vogue in the remote past. Little girls were offered by their parents at the age of six to eight to serve the village gods and goddesses. A dedicated girl then became the bride of the gods of the temple and therefore she was barred from marriage. The girls so dedicated were assigned certain duties in the temples, such as fanning the deities and cleaning and lighting the oil lamps. But their major function was to entertain the devotees through singing and dancing at the temple ceremonies. Later, when they attained the age of maturity, the temple priests, kings and the local bigwigs abused them sexually. Though they lived in a state of adultery, rice, milk, fruit and flowers were offered to them as the wives of the deity. As per the system, several beautiful women were kept as devadasis. A separate apartment was allotted to each woman. In return for their services, they received tax free lands and cash allowances out of the rich endowments of the temple. These material benefits and the blessings of the god to whom the child is dedicated tempted the poor parents to dedicate their daughters to prosperous temples.

Several factors were responsible for the emergence of this vile system. Yet the main reason for the dedication of girls, according to Amy Carmichael, were poverty and widowhood. The adoption of a devadasi by a temple was marked by a lengthy ceremonial process. The marriage to God was effected privately by the temple priest at the temple with the usual marriage ceremonies. The children had to be married to gods before they reached the age of ten. Then

they became the property of the temple priests. When the girls refused to go to
the temple, they were either beaten up or brought back branded to the temples.

A girl named Preena, originally known as Lakshmi, escaped from the
nearby temple, Perumkulam, near Pannavilai in Tirunelveli and took shelter in
the mission bungalow of Amy Carmichael. She explained about the devadasi
system. In the beginning, Amy Carmichael did not believe it, but then began to
search for the truth. She had to spend three years to unearth the truth. A temple
woman herself told to Amy Carmichael that it was customary for a girl child was
to be dressed like a bride and taken with another girl of the same community,
dressed like a bridegroom. They both went to the temple and worshipped the
idol. This ceremony was common and was performed openly in the streets.
Sometimes when a child of eight or nine years worshipped in front of the idol of
the temple, the tali was hidden in a garland and the garland was put over the
idol. Then it was taken and put round the neck of the girl. This marriage ceremony
was known as pottukattu. From that day onwards she became the property of
the temple.

Amy Carmichael saved such children. Foreign and native ladies assisted
her in this holy task. Hostile natives often called these women missionaries as
‘child-catching missies.’ But with determination, they pleaded with the relatives
of the girls and guardians and encouraged them to bring the children to Dohnavur.

The missionaries mingled with the priests and pilgrims, listened to their talks

51. Saskia C. Kersenboom, Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India, Delhi,
here and there and picked up clues to redeem such victims. Many were consoled that their babies would grow up to serve a noble cause without a stigma. Devai, a native woman helped Miss. Amy Carmichael to bring such girls to the orphanage.

Children who were affected by this social evil from Kashmir, Puri, Orissa, Maharastra, Travancore, Bangalore, Tanjore, Madras, Trichi, Kanchipuram and Tiruchendur were rescued by Amy Carmichael and her associates. In Madurai, Mrs. Muthambaram Dairiyam, a woman lawyer, helped Amy Carmichael to rescue such girls. By 1923, there were thirty nurseries in Dohnavur which gave shelter to such girls. In 1945, there were 800 girls in Carmichael's three homes, namely Boys Home, Girls Home in Dohnavur and Women and Children's Home in Aralvaimozhi. The children of the Dohnavur Fellowship were moulded in discipline, cleanliness, punctuality and sincerity.

Amy Carmichael's books, *Things As They Are*, *Lotus Buds*, *Windows*, *Though the Mountains Shake* and *Gold by Moonlight* are about her rescue operations and other welfare activities. She made an extensive study of the marriage of girls to temple gods and placed her findings before the Government of Madras. The government officials appreciated her valuable work. The Government of Madras became aware of this evil system. To honour her service, Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras awarded her Kaiser-i-Hind medal in 1919.

Dr. Muthulekshmi Reddi and Miss. Amy Carmichael maintained close touch with each other which resulted in the abolition of the Devadasi system, by the Devadasi Act of 1947 and the dedication of girls to the temples was made illegal in the Madras Presidency.\textsuperscript{55}

**Dohnavur Fellowship**

Miss. Amy Carmichael established an orphanage for the rescued children in Dohnavur in 1901. The C.E.Z.M.S. mission board in England did not recognise Amy Carmichael's work. Hence she resigned from the mission in 1926. The Dohnavur Nurseries became Dohnavur Fellowship in 1926 and it was registered in 1927. Officially, it was a separate entity, inter-denominational and locally autonomous. The objects of the Dohnavur Fellowship were, to save the children from moral degeneration, to train them to serve others and to give succour to the desolate and the suffering people of India.\textsuperscript{56} Financially, Amy Carmichael was not supported by any mission in India. But her overseas friends and the Church of England came to know about this noble service and offered financial assistance. The C.M.S. donated land and a bungalow in Dohnavur to the Dohnavur Fellowship.\textsuperscript{57} Widows came out of social bondage lived with Amy Carmichael. Similarly deserted women too joined the Dohnavur Fellowship with their children. The elderly women took care of the rescued children.

Amy Carmicheal lovingly called her home children the 'Lotus Buds'.\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{57} Proceedings of the C.M.S. Conference, Tinnevelly, 4 October 1912, p. 5.

The arrival of the first child on 7 March, 1901 was observed as the Fellowship anniversary day. Amy Carmichael constructed small cottages, nurseries, workrooms, dormitories and playgrounds for the children of Dohnavur Fellowship. For educating the children, she built schools at Dohnavur in 1908. Till 1910, hundred children were rescued and brought up in Dohnavur Fellowship. The senior girls and young ladies helped to look after the younger ones. The children were educated in useful pursuits and trained to be industrious. The girls performed different types of work like sewing, basket-making and gardening. They made baskets of different colours and designs and in variegated fibres. Dohnavur Fellowship established a weaving and spinning centre at Caruniapuram, near Valliyoor for the welfare of destitute women. There were also different activities like dairy farming (Australian cows were imported for the purpose) and making household products and toys from the fibre of the plant, Agave americana (Kattalai). Their products were sold readily on account of their usefulness and beauty.

Until 1947, the children were educated in the schools in Dohnavur. Both boys and girls received education. The European missionaries served as full time teaching staff with commendable academic excellence. The education was based on the Cambridge system. The medium of instruction was English. After independence, the medium of instruction became Tamil. Two important European teachers who worked in the school were Lucy Ross and Mary Dobson.

60. Interview with Purripu, the former member of the Dohnavur Fellowship, Dohnavur, 8 December 2007.
completion of their education, the children were given training in teaching, nursing, typing, secretarial course and lab-technology. Deserted boys who were nursed in the Fellowship were given training in technical subjects like carpentry, welding. Students of the fellowship found employment in the military, navy and air force. After 1947, the boys and girls were sent for higher studies particularly degree courses. Some joined the engineering and teacher training colleges and were employed in different parts of India.  

**Female Infanticide**

Like in other districts of the Madras Presidency, Tirunelveli too, had the evil practice of female infanticide.  

The women missionaries fought against this evil practice. Amy Carmichael saved children from several states and gave them shelter in the Dohnavur Fellowship.  

While the birth of a son was welcomed with great jubilation, the birth of a girl was viewed with disfavour. As the girl child was viewed as an economic burden and social responsibility, she was unwanted and her arrival was not considered as a matter of joy. Discrimination began immediately after birth, with respect to feeding practices, health and medical care. The birth of a male child was a happy occasion for women.  

Many methods were adopted to kill the female child. Some children were

---

61. Interview with Nesaruthina Carunia, former President of Dohnavur Fellowship, Dohnavur, 14 May 2005.
63. Miss Amy Carmichael - In Memorium, Dohnavur Fellowship, Dohnavur, January 1951.
64. Jaya Kothai Pillai, Women and Empowerment, New Delhi, 1995, p.4.
65. Church Missionary Record, November 1841, p. 183.
simply neglected and they died out of starvation. Other female children were killed soon after birth by having their mouth filled with cowdung or by administering a small pill of opium or by not feeding. Female babies were secret victims in many homes. Various supersitious beliefs were also connected with the female infanticide. Mothers thought that if they sacrificed the child by throwing it into a temple-pool, they would deliver male children. If horoscopes did not tally with that of the parents, they were killed.

In some cases, the mothers hid the children in the rocks in order to save them from death. Then they informed the women missionaries in Dohnavur Fellowship about the babies. Moreover, when a mother died in child birth, the husband invariably wanted to re-marry. The step-mother did not touch the child, born to the first wife. The father hated it saying that it killed the mother. Amy Carmichael saved such children too. The scavengers in the government hospitals buried female children as the parents refused to take the girl children with them. Some times, these scavengers bought the children for rupees 50/- from the mothers and gave them to Dohnavur Fellowship. The Dohnavur Fellowship thus saved many children from female infanticide in different regions of Tamil Nadu.

**Child Marriage**

Early marriage of girls and boys was one of the important customs followed from days of yore in the Indian Hindu society. It was closely associated

67. Interview with Sura Carunia, President, Dohnavur Fellowship, 14 February 2008.
with the caste practices, superstitious beliefs, social taboos and the anxiety to protect the chastity of women. In the orthodox families, the girls were not allowed to appear in public and there was a deep-rooted prejudice among Hindus against the education of women. Lack of female education in turn contributed to the early marriages. Marriages were arranged by the parents after following Hindu religious practices like consulting omens and horoscopes and also auspicious physical practices. It is true that the practice of endogamy forestalled their chances of marrying normally. Child marriage was performed at the age of eight, nine, ten or before the age of puberty.

The Madras Presidency report of 1891 informs that the total number of married girls between ages one and nine years was 166,544. Child marriage was not limited to the upper castes alone, the depressed classes too practised it. This evil system was vehemently attacked by the Christian missionaries. In their attempt to have child marriage abolished, they took recourse to by the Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1872. It made such marriages illegal and made polygamy a criminal offence. According to this Act, the boy and girl must have attained the age of sixteen and thirteen respectively to be eligible for marriage. However the child marriages continued inspite of the legal prohibition. This led to early pregnancies and put pressure on the child to play adult roles.

The women missionaries condemned early marriage and polygamy. They fought for equal status for women and carried on social reforms along with conversions. By giving education to girls, they reduced child marriages to a great extent. Employment opportunities for the converted girls to work as teachers, nurses, Zenana workers prevented early marriages for both girls and boys.\textsuperscript{72} Mrs. Morley, the wife of Bishop Morley worked to prevent irregular marriages, remove superstitious customs and reduce caste feelings in Tirunelveli.\textsuperscript{73} She initiated social welfare schemes for the benefit of girls and women.\textsuperscript{74} Miss. Amy Carmichael fought against child-marriage and admitted destitutes in the Fellowship. The young girls who were in danger of being given in marriage early were given shelter, education and training for useful service to the society.\textsuperscript{75} The women missionaries created an awareness among the women to fight against polygamy. Consequently, the Government of India passed an act against this evil practice in 1872. It reduced the ratio of the evil practice of polygamy.\textsuperscript{76}

\textbf{Widowhood}

Widows in general lived under miserable conditions. They were forced to live either with the relatives of their parents or their deceased husband's relatives. The custom of elderly men marrying young girls led to a large number

\textsuperscript{73} Madras Diocesan Record, 1904, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 1914, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{75} Nathan, N.S., \textit{Amma Amy Carmichael}, (T), Bangalore, 1991, p.53.
of them being widowed early. According to Hindu Sastras, a widow was either to commit sati or to live a life of penitential celibacy. According to the census of 1881, there were twenty-one million widows in India. Of these, two and a half million were child-widows. Many women entered the life of widowhood before they became active wives. The premature death of their husbands made widows of them at the tender age of six or seven and they had to spend the rest of their lives under the imposed widowhood. A widow had to live a life of isolation and seclusation. She had to tonsure her head every month and was required to wear white clothes. Her forehead had to be bare of kum kum, a red powder on the forehead symbolic of wifehood. She was not allowed to wear jewels and had to avoid social gatherings. She was also not allowed to chew betel.

The mother in-law used to curse her as a poisonous viper, that killed her son. The daughter in-laws were prohibited from talking anything against their mother-in-laws. She must wake up in the early morning and go to bed only after all have retired. She had to observe fast also. Above all, she had no legal right for her deceased husband's property. The loss of a husband usually resulted in a significant decline in household income and in social marginalization leading to poorer health and nutrition. When a man died, his widow was forced or induced to commit suicide in the funeral pyre of her husband. Widows who did not mount the pyre had to live a life of serious asceticism. They should not read vedas and Hindu scriptures. Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 allowed the widows to

re-marry and declared the issues of such marriages to be legitimate.\textsuperscript{79} Because of the non-existence of such provision for widow-marriage in the Hindu society, many widows became converts to Christianity.

The distress of the Indian women moved the hearts of the women missionaries and they took efforts to improve the social status of the socially neglected section. Women missionaries Miss. White, Miss. Grove, Miss. Blyth, Miss. Ridsdale, Miss. Boyton, Miss. Bourna, Miss. Buee, Miss. Rix, Miss. Max and Mrs. Foster of Tirunelveli worked among the widows and the aged. Mrs. Sargent, the wife of Bishop Sargent organised classes for widows and poor mothers every Wednesday at Palayamkottai and provided them material help. She emphasised the need for cleanliness and hygiene among them. Every year, she gave new clothes to them.\textsuperscript{80} Amy Carmichael joined this noble team to uplift the status of the widows. She admitted them into her family and educated them. Many widows looked after the nurseries in the Dohnavur Fellowship.\textsuperscript{81}

On 9 July 1834, Mr. and Mrs. Rhenius established the Widow Fund for the widows of catechists and schoolmasters. This was also known as the Friend in Need Society.\textsuperscript{82} Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs started a widow class at Sattankulam in 1836 and instilled in them the spirit of social awareness. They taught the widows to learn, read and write and to become teachers and assistants in the schools.\textsuperscript{83}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{79} G.O. No.383, Judicial Department, 23 March 1858.
\bibitem{80} Church Missionary Society Record, 1884, pp. 143-144.
\bibitem{81} Thiyagaraj Ananda, \textit{Thamarai Mottukalai Nesi}, (T), Dohnavur, 1950, pp.130-135.
\bibitem{82} Tucker, J., \textit{A Review of the Tinnevelly Question}, Madras, 1836, p. 465.
\end{thebibliography}
According to the C.M.S. Report of 1879, one hundred and three widows benefited through this. S.P.G. Widows' Fund was established by the local Christians in Tirunelveli with its headquarters at Nazareth in 1901. Sixty widows were given pension from S.P.G. Widow Fund. In the case of a dead widow, the benefit was continued to the children till they attained the age of fourteen. The fund was further developed by Rev. Pettit and Rev. Newman. The missionaries celebrated Widows' Sangam on second Wednesday of July every year.

To uplift the widows and the poor, the women missionaries introduced lace making, sewing, embroidery, spinning, and basket making. The education and training brought employment opportunities to women. Thus the women missionaries created a silent revolutions in the position and life of the women of Tirunelveli district. It had a tremendous impact on the overall socio-economic life pattern of the women and children. They constantly encouraged the young widows to marry young men. The older widows were appointed in their mission schools as matrons, wardens and Bible women.

Emancipation from the tyranny of higher castes

Caste system in India usually refers to that concept of society, whereby

85. Madras Diocesan Record, 1904-1905, p. 32.
86. Minutes of Madras Corresponding Committee, 13 October 1885.
people govern their societal relations in a hierarchical order. The most striking feature of a caste-ridden society was the predominence of the upper castes over the lower castes.\textsuperscript{90} There were several sub-castes in each division. Different rules were followed by different castes, relating to marriage, food, occupation and foreign travel. No man could marry outside his caste, only certain kinds of food were prescribed for each caste. The occupation rule was very strict for low caste people in most of the castes.\textsuperscript{91}

In the Hindu caste hierarchy of Tirunelveli, the Nadars ranked very low. They were forbidden to enter temples and were not allowed to walk in the public streets. Justice was denied to them. They could not take water from the public well. Children were not allowed to get admission in schools where the upper caste children studied. They could neither carry umbrellas nor live in multistoreyed houses. The high caste people treated the converts as out-castes and all social relationships were cut off. The caste Hindus also denied them even the right to walk along the roads around the temple. In the Brahmin streets of Tirunelveli, the Christian dead bodies were not allowed to be carried to the burial ground. The social position of the Christian community was similar to that of the depressed classes.\textsuperscript{92} The degraded castes were prohibited from wearing golden ornaments. Nadar women were not permitted to carry pots of water on their hips. Some of

\textsuperscript{90} Luther W. Meinzen, \textit{A Church in Mission Identity and Purpose in India}, Vaniyambadi, 1981, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{91} Buchanan, F., \textit{A Journey from Madras through Mysore, Canada and Malabar}, Vol. 2, London, 1807, p.38.

the Nadars turned to trade and secured sufficient wealth to purchase their own lands. The quantum of injustice and tyranny of the high castes over the lower castes led the backward communities to seek the help of European missionaries.\(^93\)

The women missionaries noticed the rigidity of the caste system and the practice of untouchability. The movement for the uplift of the depressed classes and womenfolk was initiated by the missionaries. They raised their voice against such social inequalities. The women missionaries and the missionary wives helped them to break the fetters of tradition. They mingled with the downtrodden and worked to raise their status. When the high caste people adopted oppressive policies towards the low caste people, the latter were brought under their protection. Though a majority of the Nadar population embraced Christianity, the Pallas, Pariahs, Maravas, Vellalahs and other minor communities like Naicks and Reddis became Christians only in the later times.\(^94\) When the outcastes were converted, the missionaries constructed Churches and homes for them and worked for their uplift.

The women missionaries thought that their objective could be achieved fully only through educating the depressed classes. Therefore they started schools all over Tirunelveli district. Establishment of schools hastened the process of social emancipation.\(^95\) Caste system was prohibited in schools and students

---

\(^93\) Proceedings of the Madras Government, Political Department, 23 April 1870.
\(^94\) Madras Diocesan Record, January 1894, pp. 26-27.
of different castes were admitted in the schools and industrial schools. This process set in motion the slackening of the rigidity of the caste structure. They taught the low caste people and brought up the destitute children in their orphanages. The women missionaries had devised a loose jacket for the women of the mission. The Christian women were taught to appear decent in public. The girls and the women began to use umbrellas. Through education, the Christian Nadars began to occupy very high positions in various parts of India, South Africa, Ceylon and Burma.

Many educated men and women of the socially neglected sections found employment as teachers and Professors in Christian schools and colleges. They almost abandoned their traditional professions and took up cultivation, trade and industry and emerged as a prosperous communities. As their wealth grew in volume, they stood to gain their rightful status in the society. Indeed it struck at the root of the caste structure. Native Christians were urged to shed caste and social pride. The Christians of different castes worked unitedly and lived harmoniously. The proceedings of the C.M.S. of 1901 shows that in Tirunelveli, Paraya and Brahmin students were walking together for the first time in the Brahmin streets exchanging their ideas due to their western education.

---

96. Madras Diocesan Record, July 1903, p. 141.
97. Ibid., p. 159.
100. Haridas T. Majumdar, India's Religious Heritage, Delhi, (nd.), p.169.
101. Despatch from Court of Directors, Britain to Bengal Council, Calcutta, 19 July 1854.
Inter-dining was adopted in the marriages and feasts of the Christians. The Vellalas, Maravars and Nadars sat together along with women missionaries and ate what the Pariah cook had prepared. The Christians of different castes drew water out of the same well with harmony. They gave up their caste ceremonies regarding marriages and burials.\textsuperscript{102} Amy Carmichael eradicated the caste system in Dohnavur Fellowship. Different caste students were admitted in the Dohnavur Fellowship. Caste identification was removed and the children were treated alike. Children were treated equally and no caste was mentioned in any field, not even when girls were given in marriage. They were brought up as one family.\textsuperscript{103}

**Slavery**

Brahmins in Tirunelveli owned thousands of slaves as were the property.\textsuperscript{104} On 11 March 1825, Munro, Collector of Tirunelveli reported to the Board of Revenue that slave trade\textsuperscript{105} was in practice at Kayalpattinam to a considerable extent.\textsuperscript{106} Mr. Cotton, the Collector of Tirunelveli reported that in the early part of the nineteenth century, the slaves were sold either with the land

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} Church Missionary Record, December 1841, pp. 37-38.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Church Missionary Record, July 1862, p. 217.
\item \textsuperscript{105} The English East India company indulged in slave trade. They bought them from Africa and employed them in their factories and settlements. The treatment of slaves, domestic and agricultural varied in different parts of the country. In 1789, Cornwallis prohibited export of children for slavery. In 1811, import of slaves was forbidden. In 1832, the purchase and sale of slaves was made a penal offence. The India Act V of 1843 prohibited the legal recognition of slavery. (Subrahmanian, N., *Social and Cultural History of Tamilnadu, 1336-1984*, Udumalpet, 1994, p. 330)
\item \textsuperscript{106} Collectorate Records, Tinnevelly District, Vol. 1014, 17 March 1825, p. 2482.
\end{itemize}
or independently. But by 1819, they were sold along with the land only. Slaves were mortgaged also. To cite an instance, at Nanguneri, a sub district in Tirunelveli, a Pariah executed a bond for rupees fifteen, agreeing to serve his master all his life in field work for daily wages of two seers of paddy. 107

According to the Penal Code Act, 1860, whoever habitually involved himself in slave trade was punishable with imprisonment for ten years or a fine. In defiance of the Indian Penal Code Act, 1860, Zamindars or Mirasidars induced Pariahs to sign documents, surrendering their liberty and that of their children and thereby become slaves. In Tirunelveli, the Pallars were generally called slaves. They cultivated the lands of the high-castes. The slave family members remained as slaves all through life and passed on this ignominy to their posterity. 108

They received no wages except a little grain at harvest time. They often borrowed money for weddings from their landlords. They were unable to pay it back and became slaves. They worked in the black mud under a blazing sun. If they refused to work, they would starve. They lived in small thatched huts. If a Pariah walked on the Brahmin street, he could at once be driven off or beaten up. It was considered a polluting act. Education for them was totally prohibited. The Brahmins did not wish their slaves to become Christians, because they were afraid that if they were to be educated and taught to lead a good life, they would refuse to be slaves. They threatened the slave women that their arms would be

107. G.O. No. 69, Education, 1 February 1893.
pricked with a sharp instrument if they prepared for baptism. If a Pariah boy entered into the class and stood between two high caste boys, all the students moved away from the spot in order to avoid touching one another.110

Slavery, considered an evil practice in the Hindu society even in the ancient times, was challenged by the women missionaries. They wanted to mitigate the sufferings of the women of the lower castes who were denied even the dignity due to a human being. Therefore, they worked towards the liberation of the low caste women from the shackles of slavery. The women missionaries admitted the slave children in their schools. The women were given adult education and taught lace making, embroidery work, needle-work, spinning and basket-making. It helped them to earn their livelihood and remain independent.111

Amy Carmichael rendered yeomen service to the slave girls and young boys. Slave girls were admitted in her orphanage and given education. The popular drama and circus companies of Tamil Nadu had boy artists in their troupes. But in course of time they were deserted and orphaned. Such boys had been given shelter at Dhonavur since 1918. Amy Carmichael taught them moral instruction and the discipline of life.112 In 1965, a separate home for boys was established at Cheranmahadevi, fifteen miles from Dohnavur.113

109. Madras Diocesan Record, July 1903, p. 158.
111. Letter from Mrs. Mault, L.M.S. Missionary to the Foreign Secretary, Nagercoil, 2 June 1830; Church Missionary Record, July 1862, p. 218.
In Christian villages, people of higher, lower and even slave castes were allowed to fetch water from the common well. The boarding schools provided education mainly for the depressed class children. They were given free education and accommodation. In the Idayangudi Boarding School, the depressed class students ate openly with Maravars and Nadars without any caste distinction. In the schools, the high and low caste students sat together on the same benches. The mission hospitals also served to mitigate caste exclusiveness. Owing to the pragmatic and untiring efforts of the women missionaries and the introduction of western education, slavery fell into disfavour.  

**Eradication of Superstitious beliefs**

The people of Tirunelveli had superstitious notions and believed in auspicious and inauspicious days and omens. They made images of deceased kings' wives who burned themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. When a young person between the ages of ten and twenty died, the nearest relatives offered coconut, cloth, fruits, rice, fowls to the memory of the deceased and worshipped their spirits. The same practice was followed on every festival. A man in business considered the following as ill omen: seeing an oilmonger, a barber, a lame or a blind man, a potter, a widow, a single Brahmin, a person carrying a new pot or a pot of butter-milk or an empty waterpot or oil-pot, a cat running across the road; a crow flying upon the left side; the sound of only one person crying, a lizard squeaking and an owl screeching. The auspicious omen

are: seeing a married woman carrying water, a washerwoman carrying dirty clothes, a cowkeeper's woman carrying milk, two Brahmins together, a person carrying fruit, a corpse, a man blowing the shank or a woman with her hair properly combed and tied, braying of an ass, a horse neighing and four or more women carrying together.\textsuperscript{115}

In a garden with flourishing crops, people fixed a pot on a stick and marked it with white spots of chalk to ward off the evil eye and save their crops. They believed that the ants in the houses were evil agents of demons. To get rid of this trouble, they distributed a small basket of flour among children. People also offered pepper and limes at churches in order to get cure from the sores in their bodies. They believed that the source of water would be found only in a particular direction of the house. In order to redeem them from such ignorant practices, the women missionaries and the wives of the catechists used Mission Agents to speak to them against such evil practices. They inculcated good manners in them and impressed on them the need to pay tithes and first fruits to God. After the harvest, the first fruits were offered as thanks offering to God.\textsuperscript{116}

In Nazareth, in order to encourage the women the missionaries formed the Rice Sangam which offered rice to the church as thanks giving offering to God. This system was extended in the neighbouring christian villages. Though the Sangam was established for the mission cause, it strengthened the hands of the oppressed people.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{116} Annual Report of S.P.G., 1864, pp. 121-122.
Rich people of the district were invited to donate liberally for the welfare of the poor. Poor Fund was started in 1832 by Mrs. Rhenius. Most of the Mission Agents and a few others in the congregations subscribed to this society. The object of the Poor Fund was to give clothes and jackets to the poor women of the congregation once a year. The work of the women missionaries certainly enhanced the social status of various communities. They formed organisations and united themselves to protest against the high caste people. No wonder, the last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed an awakening among the lower communities. They raised their voice for the right to worship and social equality in the society.