CHAPTER IV
MISSIONARIES’ PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

1. Tamil Voices and Reforms for Women

The pre-colonial Tamil literature is a compendium of poems, epics, and treatises. These include such classical Sangam era (200 B.C.–500 A.D.) works as Tiruvalluvar’s *Tirukural* (Sacred Poem), *Attisudi*, by the woman sage Auvaiyar and *Silappadikaram*, an epic on a heroic woman. The first Tamil novel emerged only after upper-caste men, the chief beneficiaries of colonial education, encountered English prose in Western schools in Madras Presidency in India, the scene of evangelical activity. A study of gender relations in the early Tamil novels written between 1879 and 1924 reveals that the authors of these novels were Brahmins or Vellala men who used fiction to challenge women’s unequal access to education and the ritually sanctified customs constraining women’s sexual lives.1

Vedanayagam Pillai (1826-1889) a Vellala Christian who focused on women’s education, wrote the first Tamil novel, *Pratapa Mudaliar Charitram* (Pratapa Mudaliar’s Story), in 1879, which described the flagrant social ills. The book was adopted as a school text in Madras within one decade. Similarly, another noted writer was Madhaviah (1872-1925), who wrote *Patmavati’s Charitram* (Patmavati’s Story) in 1892. Between May and October 1892 he published five chapters of a novel, *Savitri Charitram* (Savitri’s story) in the Tamil journal *Viveka Chintamani*. However, the editors abruptly stopped printing this controversial story of a widow’s remarriage. In 1903, Madhaviah published his novel as a complete book, *Muthumeenatchi*. In the years of inflamed patriotism around World War I, C. Subramania Bharati, a poet (1882-1924) began *Chandrikayin Kadai* (Chandrika’s Story), an idealistic novel on widow remarriage, which was published posthumously the year he died.2

A significant goal of Hindu reformers was their agenda for removing restrictions on women’s lives, and although Madras was considered a colonial backwater, change

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2 Ibid.
was brewing by 1865. Men of the patriarchal upper castes participated in the colonial educational system and then served as interpreters of Dharma Shastras (Hindu Law Texts). These men questioned the scriptural validity of customs that defined the parameters of women's sexual lives and thus consigned them inferiority with regard to education. Indigenous schools declined as princely patronage ground to a halt.  

The colonial state ably established secular institutions for girls in 1870, and missionary schools continued to dominate the educational system for decades. As upper caste families feared Christian indoctrination, few girls of these castes were visible in Western schools. Official rhetoric pinpointed the connection between the upper caste girls' illiteracy, child marriage, and post-puberty nuptials. While there were many educated upper caste women, the British data on indigenous veranda schools were collected systematically, if not always accurately, by foreign male surveyors who neglected to look beyond the verandas for upper caste girls, who studied inside their home. Except for lower caste teyvadiyal (women servant of god) women, who had to master scriptures to perform classical dance, few Hindu women attended schools outside the home, which made girls' schooling disparate among families, districts, and communities.  

At the southern tip of the Madras Presidency, the Indian converts to Christianity were foremost among the groups, who made dramatic and far-reaching changes in the signs and practices that constituted their life worlds. Drawn for the most part from the lower sections of the Indian social hierarchy—landless agricultural labourers and artisans who were generally members of traditionally polluting castes—Christian converts deployed a wide variety of strategies to improve their social and economic conditions. They gained many new advantages through their association with foreign missionaries, including the right of access to public roads, liberation from unpaid


4 “According to Hindu mythology the temporal and spiritual destinies of women lie not in their hands, but of men. Their husband is their god. From birth till death woman is under man’s authority, her own virtue ought to be obedience. It has never been considered necessary to educate women, because, as one of the proverbs says, ‘To educate woman is like putting a torch in the hands of a monkey.’” See Ryland, op. cit., p. 13.

5 Ibid., pp. 114-120.
labour (Ooliyam), a regular day off from work to observe the Christian Sabbath, the advocacy of missionaries in disputes with rivals both inside and outside the courts, and access to Western style education in mission schools, which sometimes led to clerical jobs in the colonial government.\textsuperscript{6} Thus, with Westernisation began the movement for women's education.\textsuperscript{7}

A rising tide of concern among foreign missionaries, British administrators, and Indian Christians brought the issue of women's modesty into public discourse. Articulated in moral statements about space, mobility, self-restraint, and sexuality, this concern for decorum created a discourse that had wide-reaching implications for the roles that women would play in the family and society and tended to narrow the already restricted range of behaviour and choices deemed appropriate for women. And yet, the reconfiguration of gender among the Indian Christians did not consist only of life style changes in and of themselves. In addition, Christians and non-Christians, Indian and non-Indians all attributed various meanings to these changes in such a way that the social organisation of gender became a crucial measure of a community's relations of power and status with respect to other groups. In other words, the changing status of the groups undergoing conversion to Christianity was frequently understood and expressed in terms of how women were treated and conducted themselves. Although the behaviour and appearance of Indian Christian men was carefully scrutinised by people in colonial South India, women's behaviour and appearance received a greater deal of attention and became a widely recognised index of gender transformation inner and outer, spiritual and social, that the Indian Christians were undergoing.

Eliza Kent argues that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of a "discourse of respectability" among the Christian communities in the south of the Madras Presidency during the British Raj that radically transformed the life style of families, especially as it was supported by indigenous notions of


\textsuperscript{7} C. S. Lakhshmi, "Tradition and Modernity of Tamil Women Writers," \textit{Social Scientist}, vol.4, no. 9, April, 1976, p. 38.
respectability. Indian Christian communities were not passive recipients of the complex of beliefs, values, practices and habits that accompanied Christianity as it was transmitted by missionaries from continental Europe, British, and the United States. Indigenous gender ideologies prevailing in nineteenth century South India also had a large impact on the emerging discourse of respectability among the Indian Christians. 

Underlying these practices were mystical beliefs based on women’s *karppu* (chastity) as evidence of propitious strength. The idealisation of chastity reflected an awed male response to women’s sexual power and the argument was that, despite women’s apparent physical limitations, they were capable of both benign and malevolent influences upon men. A corollary to karppu was that of *pativiratai*, the chaste wife whose selflessness imbued her with a semi-divine energy. These ideas are still so deeply rooted among most castes that some scholars attribute an ancient Dravidian aegis to them. Indian women have long been conditioned to believe in empowerment through sacrifice, such as sati on the altar of marriage and pyre of widowhood, and although southern Indian widows from the Brahmin and Vellala communities did not follow their husbands to the cremation pyre, they lived a death like life. Criticising these customs, Vedanayagam Pillai wrote about late nineteenth century domestic politics and underworld of women superstitions and ignorance, the degradation of widows and the cruelty of buying and selling children into marriage. In the 1920s, Subramania Bharati wrote idealistically of Brahmo Samaj radicals; stalwarts, educated, yet chaste matrons, and widows remarried to men of their choice.

Tamils were not much advanced in rediscovering their heritage. Protestants arrived in India as Christian soldiers ready to spread the gospel, but these missionaries who translated *The Bible*, were soon caught by Tamils’ fiery poetry and the curious resemblance between Christian and Sangam ethics. Thus Robert Caldwell wrote the

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9 The abolition of sati is highly significant in the history of British imperialism because it became used as a major moral justification for imperial rule over India through positioning British men not as violent conquerors and coercive rulers, but rather as rescuers and protectors of non-Western women. See Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865*, op. cit., p. 66.

10 Sita Anantha Raman, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-117.
influential Dravidian grammar (1856) and translated Tamil texts; Herman Jensen translated the *Tamil Proverbs* (1887); G.V. Pope translated the *Sacred Kural* (1886), Naladiyar (1893) and Manimekalai, a Buddhist epic; and W.H. Drew and Lazarus translated Tirukural in the late nineteenth century.\(^{11}\)

These re-discoveries energised the Tamil elite. Educated by missionaries they now felt free to explore their cultural dilemmas in Tamil, but they used the moral lens of earlier texts to reaffirm paternalistic notions while writing in popular modern genre. Vedanayagam Pillai, Madhaviah, and Subramania Bharati boldly criticised women illiteracy, child marriages and widow abuse as they simultaneously quoted moralists who preceded them. The male descriptions of women were laced with anxious fastidiousness, which show that despite their advocacy of women’s education, and social participation, they did not seek to question existing norms of women sexuality and gender roles. As these male authors viewed women’s role in the family as essential to social stability their maternal heroines performed their pre-eminent functions in the household. Reformers were, in this respect, more conservative than radicals as they exposed a modern version of Karppu, Pativiratai, and classical motherhood.\(^{12}\)

2. **Towards Upward Mobility**

Eliza also argues that low-caste Indian women had long been discouraged or prohibited from adopting the practices that connoted modesty and feminity in the hegemonic gender discourse of the region. Upwardly mobile Indian Christian communities tended to appropriate practices from both elite Indian and Western sources related to marriage, labour, clothing, child-rearing and so forth that privileged women’s right over mobility, self-restraint over spontaneity and self-denial over self-indulgence. This produced a form of feminity, which, from a present day feminist’s outlook, appears more restrictive than liberating. However, it is crucial to bear in

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\(^{11}\) *Ibid.*

mind the specific historical context in which the discourse of respectability arose in
the nineteenth century Madras Presidency.\textsuperscript{13}

After 1865, there began a slow-paced increase in state sponsored schools that taught
hygiene, geography and history in addition to the basics of reading, writing, and
arithmetic. However, girls who were informally taught at home remained unlettered in
the corpus of new secular knowledge. Girls past puberty were rarely sent to schools
outside the home, but reform minded patriarchs taught them to read Tamil and
understand liberal ideas from English texts.\textsuperscript{14}

As elsewhere in India, early marriages kept girls away from school, and informal
home education depended upon male whims. Early marriages in South India were the
norm amongst most castes, but \textit{kalyanam} (pre-puberty marriage) and \textit{ritu shanthi
kalyanam} (post-puberty nuptials) were peculiar to the Sanskritic upper castes.
Patriarchal customs meant that teenage brides commonly faced drudgery, frequent
childbirths and early death. In an age marked by epidemic mortality of young men,
these ritually sacred castes were blighted by the shadow presence of thousands of
virgin widows. Often a young widow remembered the wedding garland and fine
clothes but not her groom, even though his death meant she was ritually shorn of hair,
wore mourning attire, was forbidden to remarry, was cast out from auspicious events,
and subsisted on family charity. To reformers, such practices appeared as remnants
from an era when the scriptures had been provisionally interpreted. As the Tamil
terms for auspiciousness-\textit{manam}, \textit{mangalam}, and \textit{kalyanam} are synonymous with
marriage Hindus held that a \textit{amangali} or \textit{mundai} (tonsured widow) brought
misfortune. To be cursed as \textit{mundai} was the worst insult. Such women resembled
Buddhist nuns; although nuns voluntarily took vows of celibacy and poverty. In
\textit{Chandrikayain Kadai} Subramania Bharati faulted this excessive display of sexual
sobriety as stemming from Buddhist monastic influence.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Eliza F. Kent, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{14} Sita Anantha Raman, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 99-119.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 112-119.
Women constitute the most significant part of society everywhere in the world. Various reformers and missionaries like Raja Rammohan Roy and William Carey initiated several measures to improve the position of women. Acts were passed in favor of widow remarriage, and against sati, female infanticide, child marriage and polygamy. Special emphasis was placed on facilities like education of girls, better health, and provision of opportunities for taking up respectable jobs in order to make them economically independent.\textsuperscript{16}

Scriptures and sacred texts provided scope for diverse interpretations and value emphases at the hands of different religious authorities and at different periods of time. Religion had a dynamic character and is shaped and reshaped by historical processes such as interaction with popular religion. In India, Islam and Christianity had to compromise with local customs since their followers gave up the pre-conversion social and religious traditions only to some extent. These cultural changes varied between communities and denominations. In each of these communities the practice of the tenets of Christianity has been influenced, in varying degrees by historical and contemporary socio-cultural factors. This has resulted in over shadowing, suppressing, or reviving and bringing into focus the essence of the teachings of Christianity in connection with the status and role of women.\textsuperscript{17}

As the proverb goes, “a man’s home is his castle,” and as society sees it, home is the place where, if the woman refuses, the man’s way of life is rendered homeless. The woman who becomes a wife through a marriage contract as a free individual finds herself relegated to the margins and victimhood after the marriage. She may be pushed or hit, may be beaten black and blue, or may even be murdered. Curiously enough, she has to bear these forms of violence silently and regard these as natural consequences of being born as a woman and if she points these facts out in public, she is further subjected to violence. Even her parents rarely empathise with her and ask her to be mature, tolerant or silent. Thus the worst part of her victimisation is that


gender-violence get naturalised as part of women misfortune and everywhere she is asked to keep these sufferings under wraps.18

It is now accepted that like class or race or creed, gender too existed or still exists as a stratifier or dividing line between communities across the world; deeply influencing the roles, responsibilities and rewards that society assigns to women and men. As compared to men, women tend to have a more deprived and subordinate status in terms of access to resources and enjoyment of rights and freedom. This has profound implications for women’s capability to conduct their lives as autonomous and self-reliant members of the society.19 Subhadra Mitra Channa in her “Feminism and Empowerment in an Indian context: A critical Analysis” argues that the position of woman is not a universally uniform category, but one that is culturally and historically conditioned. Thus, before embarking on any study of empowerment it is necessary to look for the already existing possible sources of power and the manner in which power exists and is managed in the society. It is historically true that what we understand as feminism today had its origin in Western societies but it is also true that the concept of women’s empowerment has existed in Indian society, albeit manifested in different forms. Indian society has never ideologically endorsed the Western view of patriarchy which is shared by Christianity.20

Beulah Herbert in her Tamil Christian Women at the Turn of the Millennium: Mission Initiation and Gender Practice argues that the Tamil Christian women are not merely empowered to participate in church activities, but their empowerment is displayed in their experiences and views about women’s involvement in Church administration, women’s preaching and teaching and women’s ordination. On the issue of women preaching and teaching many of the women respondents approve of and recommend and support such developments. They point to God’s approval, note powerful examples in their own and other women’s lives, root their claims in how they

understand the *Bible* and justify women preaching and teaching, using Biblical, cultural and ethnological understanding. Quite a few women approve of women’s involvement in church administration. Some even vehemently advocate this by emphasising its value. Regarding women ordination in churches, the women were given rapid responses. Those who approved of women’s ordination, use faith claims and Biblical examples to bring out God’s approval. Bible women, evangelists, independent preachers and others have participated in the indigenous church’s mission initiatives. The Indian church in the Tirunelveli area in south Tamil Nadu, for example, was started by the efforts of a woman called Clarinda with the help of Christian Frederich Schwartz of the Lutheran Mission in Tanjore. Gnanadeepam, the first daughter of Vedanayagam Sastriar, carried on an itinerant evangelistic ministry through songs and speeches, both in Tamil and English.21

The role of Christian missions in transforming the condition of family life and mitigating the evils which appeared is crucial. James S. Dennis opines that: "The missionaries have done for the elevation of women, the central figure in the home, to deliver them from the humiliation and suffering incidental to those great historic curses of oriental society polygamy, concubinage, adultery, idolatrous laxity and divorce and also the abolishment of child marriage, and the alleviation of social miseries of widowhood. They have effected not, let it be done, with indiscreet precipitancy, but with wise caution and sobriety-to secure the release of women from the condition of enforced seclusion and minimum privilege which traditional custom in the orient has imposed upon her."22

Needless to say, for the study of status of women in India approaches are made through many groups of variables; making our investigation, particularly the search for trends and patterns of social behaviour and attitudes, highly complex and difficult. Most of the variables stem from the characteristic features of depressed class society, others from processes of change effected by modernisation and development. Still

some others were repercussions of the historical ups and downs that affected India in the past few centuries, particularly the impact of a colonial regime and exposure to foreign culture.\textsuperscript{23}

3. Education for Children

After the Renaissance and Reformation movements in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Europeans, like the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English and the French reached India through the sea route. They began to spread Christianity. They established missionary schools in various parts of Tamil Nadu. They taught simple villagers, such as those at Cape Comorin. Writing to clergies in Rome in January, 1544 Francis Xavier mentioned that: “I went through all the places with a bell in my hand gathering all the children that I would, and having gathered them twice each day; and in the space of the month I taught them prayers so that they should teach their fathers and mothers and all the household and neighbours what they had learned in school. I hope in God that the children will be better than their fathers, for they show much love and desire towards learning.”\textsuperscript{24} Christian education for girls in South India began at Tranquebar in the early eighteenth century. Schools opened by the German missionaries were attended by girls, as well as boys, though few in numbers. Though the first school for girls did not survive very long, many girls’ high schools in South India today have developed out of schools for girls, which were opened by missionaries in the nineteenth century. Similarly the first school for Anglo-Indian girls, St. Mary’s Charity School was opened in December, 1715 in Fort St. George, Madras, where thirty poor Protestant children were educated with ‘diet and education grants.’ In the first year eighteen of the children were boys and twelve were girls.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1735, the S.P.C.K. was permitted by its committee in London to build a church and two schools in Madras for girls. In that year the secretary of the S.P.C.K. in London sent out long instructions to the Protestant missionaries in the colonies at Madras, Cuddalore, etc. The report states: “The education of the children of the well ordering

\textsuperscript{23} Afsar Bano, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 1.


\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 1-10.
of the schools is what the missionaries must have most at heart and tend with their utmost care and diligence; being sensible not only that the pliable minds of children are more susceptible of good impressions than those of earlier years, but that from these schools they may expect the greatest, and best increase of their congregation ....wherefore they never ought to neglect to visit everyday, those schools that are in the town where the missionaries reside and catechise the children.26

However, there were schools known as bazaar schools, which, though few and small, provided educational in a wide and general sense. They were in every instance the outcome of the zeal and love of missionaries' wives and their friends. They drew the attention of the high and low castes alike to Christianity and its principles. They exhibited the mindful, disinterested zeal of the missionaries for the poor, the ignorant, and the despised. They conveyed some knowledge of Christian truth and doctrine and the ability to read to a few in various towns and in many Indian provinces. They helped to familiarise the people with missionary methods and some aspects of European life and policy and they assisted in making Christian people more conscious of the dense ignorance of Hindu women, and the peculiar difficulties to be encountered in reaching them.27

However, the honour of advancing beyond individual efforts in small separate schools for united action and securing higher efficiency of teachers and teaching is claimed by Dr. Alexander Duff, a Scottish missionary, for some young ladies associated with the Baptist Missionary Society in Calcutta. In April, 1819 an address was issued setting forth the actual condition of women in Bengal, and proposing the formation of a school for the education of Hindu women. This led to the formation of an association, under the title of the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society for the Education of Native Females. But for nearly 12 months, notwithstanding the most strenuous exertions, the number of scholars did not exceed eight. Still the promoters of the scheme went on. At the end of two years the number amounted to thirty two and in three more years

26 Ibid., p. 15.
the schools had increased to six, in which there were 160 scholars. On December 14, 1823 the anniversary of the society was observed.\textsuperscript{28}

Richard observes that: "The anniversary must ever prove a memorable day in the history of feminine native education, as it was the first time that the establishment of native female schools of any description could be spoken of as in the remotest degree practicable without opening the windows of incredulity and drawing down showers of ridicule and contemptuous scorn."\textsuperscript{29} It should be noted here that women education was acknowledged by all to be the greatest lever which could be used for the regeneration of Indian society. The native press was helping in this direction by an enlightened and vigorous advocacy of the necessity of women education. An extract from the columns of \textit{The Hindu} reads: "The community of native Christians has not only secured a conspicuous place in the field of higher learning but in the instruction of women, and in availing themselves of this existing means for practical advancement they are far ahead of the Brahmins. The programmes of education among the girls of the native Christian families will eventually give them an advantage for which no amount of intellectual precocity can compensate the Brahmins."\textsuperscript{30}

The educational consequences of the passing of the Charter Act of 1813 were of great importance and there were prolonged discussions as to the type of education for which the Company's grants should be used. From the outset, a central element of missionary activity in India was the spread of education. The setting up of mission schools was motivated by the belief that intellectual enlightenment would lead to rejection of Hindu idolatry, conversion to Christianity and the moral reform of society. Since missionaries identified many of the evils of the Hindu society as involving the ill-treatment of women, promoting Indian women education was potentially crucial to their success. Given the refusal of Indian parents to have their

\textsuperscript{28} James S. Dennis, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{29} Richard Lovett, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 243-244.
\textsuperscript{30} James S. Dennis, \textit{Christian Missions and Social Progress, op. cit.}, p. 183.
daughters educated by men, women teachers were essential if progress was to be made.  

As a matter of fact, missionaries stressed the need for giving training to young Christian lads who were capable of receiving it. The main motive was that a mission school or college ought properly to be manned exclusively by the Christian teachers. Missionaries observed that: "Those societies e.g. the C.M.S. in Tinnevelly, and American Board in Madura, which, with a liberality, have established and maintained efficient institutions for the training of teachers, are already reaping the fruits of their wise policy. Their schools are supplied with a staff which may be depended upon not only for secular education but also for direct religious teaching, vacancies suddenly occurring are promptly and satisfactorily filled, men are available from time to time for establishing new schools as the opportunity and demand arise, the requirements of Government are met, the evangelistic influence of the schools is immensely strengthened, and occasionally a man may be spared for work in connection with some less-favoured mission."

The outcome of these discussions had influenced the development of girls' education in the later days, but it had little to do with the type of education—the teaching of little groups of girls, generally by a missionary's wife. One of the earliest of such schools dates back to about 1816, when according to a report made by the Reverend James Hough and Mrs. Bailey of the C.M.S., Mrs. Bailey had a few girls under instruction at her own house in Kottayam. In 1823, Mrs. Rhenius of the C.M.S. Mrs. Bailey opened a girls school in Palayamkottai. In 1832, Mrs. Drew of L.M.S. opened a girls school in Vepery, Madras, from which the Bentinck school has developed. In 1835, Mrs. Eckard of the Madura Mission opened a day school for girls in Madurai. In 1840, Mrs. Sewell of the L.M.S. opened a school for girls in Bangalore. In 1841 Mrs. Braidwood of the Scottish Presbyterian Mission began to undertake the education of

31 Clare Midgley, op. cit., p. 73.
the girls in girls' schools in Royapuram, Madras. In 1849, the German Lutheran missionaries in Madras opened classes for girls in a church building.\footnote{K. Nora Brockway, op. cit., pp. 38-39.}

However, the girls’ schools managed by women missionaries were much less efficient and more ephemeral than the corresponding boys’ schools managed by their husbands; but that was by no means always the case. In Travancore, the two girls’ schools opened by Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Bailey respectively were flourishing, according to reports given in 1827 and 1830. However, due to ‘disturbances by native Hindus’ nearly all the boys’ schools of the region were closed. The report from Mysore of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society for the year 1841 thus read: “Our boys’ schools in the native languages do not give me much satisfaction. Our Tamil girls’ schools on the mission premises have been in operation only four months, but in that short time the girls have made very satisfactory improvement both in reading and needle work.” Women missionaries who became interested in a school gave continuous thought and attention, while their husbands were so busy touring, preaching, supervising buildings and hundred other things, that their schools got very little personal supervision. It must be admitted, however, that the little girls in those early schools, though often happy enough, learnt very little. A Director of Public Instruction, Madras, summed the matter up in a statement, written in 1868 on the education of girls in Madras Presidency: “I fear, the teaching is productive of no permanent effect beyond rendering the pupils better disposed towards female education and so paving the way for the instruction of a succeeding generation.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 44-45.}

James Hough, a missionary scholar is of the opinion that: “In point of higher education of native Christian Community stands second only to the Brahmins, in female education; no other class of the native population of India had made such rapid progress than the Christian women. In this community were to be found women who had with great credit carried off the highest academic distinctions at the disposal of the Indian universities, and among them were to be found accomplished ladies who will be valued as acquisition in any good and polished society. It was chiefly from
the ranks of native Christians that the government had to get female doctors and agents for the education of the women.”

Lord William Bentinck's Governor Generalship was marked by great and important reforms and advances which had a distinct bearing on the cause of Christianity in India. In effecting these, Lord William was, during part of his time, strongly supported by Charles Grant, the Younger. By various enactments including those related to (i) widows to be burnt alive on their husband's funeral pyres, (ii) to murder parents by drowning, or exposure, or burial alive, (iii) to murder children by leaving them on the river bank to be the prey of crocodiles, (iv) to encourage devotees to destroy themselves by throwing themselves under the wheels of idol-cars (v) to promote voluntary torture by hook-swinging, etc., and (vi) to offer human sacrifices he tried to prove that all these social evils were committed in the name of religion.

In September, 1819, the Calcutta School Society was founded, and was intended to unite Europeans and 'natives' to establish new schools to improve the general system of education; and to diffuse useful knowledge of every description among the inhabitants of India. Further, investigation brought out the appalling truth that for the entire mass of women population there was no system of education whatever, and that out of forty million women then supposed to be in British India, probably not 400, or one in 100,000 could read or write, and of these the greater number had been educated by the wives of missionaries. Thus the Calcutta School Society received considerable aid from missionaries. In the report of the L.M.S. for 1821, it is mentioned that: "It is well known that the Calcutta School Society is vigorously employed in the establishment and support of schools. The directors were satisfied to state that the operation of society was likely to prove of the greatest importance and have interested themselves very warmly on behalf of the native women population of that country with a view to extend to them the advantages of education."

37 Richard Lovett, op. cit., pp. 244-245.
Mrs. Mullens, a missionary of the Calcutta Educational Society became more and more impressed with the need for women education, and for some means of carrying the gospel to the secluded and other Hindu ladies. In a long letter dated June 1, 1862, she describes four girls' schools in Calcutta and the neighbourhoods which she was superintending. She writes: "It is strange how the schools flourish in the heart of that orthodox Brahmin village; the people are quite used to it, and like it, and even those who do not speak English call it the lady school. The brothers of the girls, many of whom attend the schools, often call to know how their sisters are getting on. The schools are carried on at one end of the chapel of the house, a mat screen merely separating the two; on the one side the idolatrous priest goes on with his incantations, while on the other is being read the Bible."\(^{38}\)

It may be noted here that in Tirunelveli and other parts of southern Tamil Nadu, Hindu girls were not counted as members of the family but they were ranked more with the cattle.\(^{39}\) Missionaries like Robert Caldwell, a missionary of the S.P.G., was interested in the education of women even though it was generally thought that it was impossible for girls to learn, read and write. In fact, education was considered suitable only for the high-born girls and daughters of dancing girls in the temples. Quoting an incident Robert Caldwell recounts that: "Once a Muslim subordinate magistrate exclaimed on seeing the boys and girls studying commented, what are these girls learning for? Will it enable them to spin cotton? What are these boys learning for? Will it enable them to climb palmyra tree?" Despite this kind of ridicule from the 'natives,' Robert Caldwell regularised the function of the schools, and introduced new subjects and admitted children particularly from the poor.\(^{40}\)

In Tirunelveli, Sarah Tucker Female Training Institution\(^ {41}\) played a vital role in women's education. Explaining the condition of girls of that school, V.W. Harcourt, the superintendent of the Sarah Tucker Female Training School says: "The girls are

\(^{38}\) Ibid., pp. 238-239.

\(^{39}\) C. F. Pascoe, op. cit., p. 553.

\(^{40}\) J. Manuel, Studies on Tirunelveli Protestant Mission, Palayamkottai, 2004, pp. 33-34.

\(^{41}\) "The year 1861 is marked by the establishment of the Sarah Tucker Institution at Palamkottah, Tinnevelly. The two objects are training of school mistresses and the education of the daughters of Clergymen." See J. Murdoch, Indian Year Book, Oxford University Press, 1862, p. 138.
most eager to learn, but cannot stand any continued fagging. Their heads begin to ache, and they lose the power of grasping or retaining what they hear.”

Robert Caldwell observed that: “Rhenius is the first missionary connected with the Church of England Mission in India by whom female education was systematically promoted and patronised. It is also remarkable that the practice of assembling the people of every Christian village morning and evening for united prayer both in schools and churches is a practice which universally prevails in the missionary congregation of the Church of England in Tinnevelly, and which gradually entered to other localities appears to have been first introduced by Rhenius.”

Meanwhile, there were schools for Hindu girls, started by Mrs. Braidwood and by Mrs. Anderson of the Scottish Mission that were growing in numbers and popularity. In 1872 two women missionaries opened a Hindu girls’ school at Vellore and by 1885 there began several elementary schools of that mission. Nora Brockway observed that: “In 1875 a large and interested audience of Indians in a function at one of these schools and expressed great pleasure in witnessing the proficiency of the little girls.” Similarly, a missionary woman wrote: “There are no girls anywhere in the world more lovable and more responsive than are these shy little creatures in the Hindu girls’ schools”.

Meanwhile, the Hunter Commission viewed the progress of education in India; serious efforts had been made to develop primary schools for girls and teacher-training institutions. Higher education for women and co-education were still contentious issues. Faced with the fact that 98 percent of school age girls were not in school, authors of the Hunter Commission Report recommended more liberal grants in aid for girls’ schools than for boys’ schools and special scholarships and prizes for girls. In the next two decades higher education expanded rapidly. Whereas there were only six women in Indian universities in 1881-82; by the turn of the century there

44 Nora Brockway, op. cit., p. 84.
were 264. During the same period, secondary school enrolment rose from 2,054 to 41,582.45

The rapid growth of women education is indicated, so far as statistics can make it plain, by the following figures: "How female education has advanced in later years of the nineteenth century, after its long struggle with opposing influences may be briefly stated. Even in 1885, the number of girls being taught was not more than 1,000 or 1,200 in a population of 20 million girls in the Bengal Presidency, and in the Presidencies of Madras and Bombay it being assumed that a somewhat larger number were at school, there would only be 5000 or 6000 women under tuition in a total Indian women population from 80 to 100 million, or one girl out of about 15,000 females."46 The exact number according to the census of 1891, was 127,726,768 illiterate women out of a total 128,467,925 whose condition was ascertained, and the number includes all those under instruction in schools, a remnant of 41,157 who could either read or write or likely to do so.47

All high school education at that time was imparted in the English medium and if girls were to continue beyond the primary stage it was necessary for them to study in English. The Indian girls had already shown that this would not prevent them from passing the matriculation examination. The report of the Director of Public Instruction, Madras, for 1888-1889, states: "A matriculation class was opened in the early part of 1888 in the Female Normal School, Nazareth, which is under the able superintendence of Margoschis and to this school belongs the honour of having passed the first native female candidates. Five pupils were successful and taking into consideration the great difficulty which the study of the English language alone must have prevented them, the results are most satisfactory." In the next few years, other schools had sent up girls for the matriculation examination to Sarah Tucker High School, Palayamkottai in 1890, the Boarding School of Northwick, Madras in 1892,

47 James S. Dennis, op. cit., p. 178.
and the London Mission Girls School also known as Bentinck School of Madras in 1896.\textsuperscript{48}

However, only the exceptional girls went to high school. The support, while at school and in later life, of other Christian girls presented a serious problem. It was to help find a solution, that industrial schools were opened. These schools helped the girls in fostering a spirit of self-help and industry, but sometimes the educational value of the work was overlooked.\textsuperscript{49} In the report of Director of Public Instruction for 1889-90, Grigg wrote: “Where much attention is paid to mere profits the educational character of the institution has lost its sight and the school degenerates into an ordinary workshop.” In the next year Duncan wrote: “A distinction should be made between schools designed to rescue the orphaned and destitute and schools intended to improve arts and industries by training pupils to understand and apply the underlying principles.”\textsuperscript{50}

Small schools were established in villages near the missions and these schools were often supervised in part by the missionaries’ wives. Education of the Indian children became gender segregated. Basic literacy and numeracy, with an emphasis on domestic skills including sewing, house keeping and lace making were the order of the day in these schools.\textsuperscript{51}

It may be noted here that many girls were taught plain and fancy needle work, bead work and basket making in the industrial classes run by missionaries in southern Tamil Nadu. They were indeed able to sell their products and supply the orders they had received from visitors and other people.\textsuperscript{52} One of the important results of the lace industrial school was that the condition of educated Christian young women of the

\textsuperscript{48} Nora Brockway, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{49} K. Nora Brockway, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 80-81.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The Church Missionary Intelligencer}, vol. XIV, London, November, 1893, p. 849.
neighbourhood improved. Formerly the women were totally ignorant and generally helpless, entirely dependent upon their relations. 53

Isaac, a missionary from Nazareth, opines that, “The lace school is not only useful in maintaining several Christian families, but is also a help towards the growth of families’ spiritual life. Their regular attendance at the services, Sunday reading classes, prayer meetings, their subscriptions towards the church funds and their peaceable life are all to be attributed to their attending the lace school under a well-trained matron.” 54 The village schools, which had commenced on a very small scale by Ringeltaube, continued to increase from time to time. These schools had been the means of training for many girls in terms of habits of order, cleanliness and industry. They had been in a great measure supported by the profits from the sale of the lace manufactured by the girls. There had also been such schools in Neyoor, Parachaley and Sandhapuram, which had done much to elevate the socio-economic condition of women. 55

In 1816, the Church Missionary Society began work in Travancore on the invitation of Colonel Munro, the Dewan and the Resident. It was during this period that a school was opened. A number of ‘slaves’ were already attending schools in the Tamil region to the south of Travancore where the L.M.S. was working. In 1823, a school for girls had been opened in Nagercoil 56 in spite of opposition from both newly converted Christians and non-Christians. By 1827, fifty girls were taught in that school and as many in the villages round about. A lace making class was started by Mrs. Mault to help to defray the expenses of the school. In a letter dated 2 June, 1830 she described thus: “The children who were orphans, friendless and ‘slaves’ are encouraged to join the lace making class and anything they make beyond their support is kept towards the purchase of liberty.” Mrs. Mault’s daughter, who married Robert

55 Proceedings of the South India Missionary Conference, Ootacamund, Madras, 1858, p. 7.
56 A tract on the advantage of women education was printed at the London Missionary Society’s press in Nagercoil in 1831 and distributed through the length and breadth of the country. By the publication of this tract many parents began to send their children to schools. Mrs. Abs of London Missionary Society started a lace industrial school at Parasala and Sandhapuram in Nagercoil. See Ryland, op. cit., p. 11.
Caldwell, opened a lace making industry at Edayankudi and Tirunelveli. Similarly Mrs. Wyatt started a lace-making industry in Tiruchirapalli. However, no girl was permitted to join the lace-making class before she could read the *New Testament*. In fact, the primary purpose of the Christian missionary enterprise (including various initiatives such as education) was neither political nor social nor cultural, though its influence may extend to all these fields but religious. When the new Charter Act of 1813 removed the opposition to missionary efforts, work began at once.

It should also be noted here that, there were many girls who were taught plain and fancy needle work and basket making. Lace industrial schools in south Travancore, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin and other places taught them to manufacture lace and in course of time they were able to sell their products and meet the demands they had received from foreign visitors. A missionary says that, "Our difficulty so far, has been, that we have not been able to supply the demand, which shows that the work done in the school is appreciated." Therefore, the lady missionaries trained in such arts formulated the curriculum whereby the girls could give some of their time to work which would be used to promote their educational needs and at the same time make it profitable for them financially. One such project was the introduction of lace industry for women by Mrs. Caldwell, in Tirunelveli. The quality of the lace produced in the school found special mention in the report of the Inspector of Schools in 1861: "The lace of Edayankudi School is a superior article, having gained distinction at the exhibition and commanding a ready sale and a good price. As a household industry, lace making spread rapidly among the Christian wives and

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65 "When Mrs. Caldwell first began with her girls' schools in Edayankudi, the people exclaimed: 'From the beginning of the world it had never been known that a woman could read'.” See J. A. Sharrock, *South Indian Missions*, Westminster, 1910, p. 222.
mothers of the villages.” The lace made here is what is called real lace, made for pillows with English thread and it was said to have been much admired especially for its remarkable fineness, through which some sections of the depressed class got benefit.

Ryland, a missionary writer observed that: “Lace and embroidery industry was started by the L.M.S. missionaries wherever possible so that poor women folks will be benefited with this industry. The girls of the boarding school soon showed themselves to be apt pupils and in addition to all elements of a primary education, needle work was taught. Mrs. Mault, an L.M.S. missionary who had some knowledge of lace making began to teach this industry to a few girls. Mrs. Abbs of Parasala and Mrs. Bylis of Neyoor began to teach embroidery work on cambric and fine linen. In selling the prepared articles, the wives of military officials and officers undertook the sale. At beginning many little slave girls were taught lace making or embroidery.” Similarly, as a rule the young girls and women were taught cooking, weaving, needle-work and embroidering; while the boys and men were instructed in carpentry, shoe making, tailoring, agriculture and other trades.

However, this created two sections of women; one skilled and the other unskilled. To set right this cleavage, missionaries began implementing yet another strategy in the form of giving financial assistance in times of need particularly when some epidemic broke out. They distributed money to widows both on daily and monthly basis, clothes and food for their children and for widows, and in addition the Catechist Widow Fund was also created for the benefit of the depressed classes. Even though the missionaries’ efforts to empower women gave the depressed classes some relief from their earlier suppressors, it nevertheless created some kind of ‘economic dependency’ among the women.

66 Madras Church Missionary Record, vol. LIV, no. 11, November 1817, pp. 348-349.
67 Ibid.
70 Madras Church Missionary Record, vol. LIV, no. 11, November 1977, pp. 351-352.
71 Ibid., p. 322.
72 Church Missionary Record, vol. X, no. 10, October, 1839, p. 204.
The girl child from the moment of her birth until death underwent one continuous life long suffering as a child-wife, as a child-mother and very often as a child widow. Early marriage and early consummation curtailed the freedom and joy of girlhood. The practice of child marriage was responsible for the high rate of infant mortality. The custom was also responsible for millions of widows in the country, abnormal deliveries, and prolonged illness of mother after confinement, sterility in some cases and prolonged debility due to chronic diseases in others.  

Colonial officials agreed that religion was central to Indian life, and the Indian people were 'slaves' to religion and many other customs and religious practices such as sati. In this regard Pandit Vidyasagar's view is worth mentioning: "Countrymen! How long will you suffer yourselves to be led away by illusions! Open your eyes for once and see that India, once the land of virtue, is being over-flooded by the stream of adultery and feticides. The degradation to which you have sunk is sadly low. Dip into the spirit of Shastras, follow its dictates and you shall be able to remove the blot from the face of your country." 

In due course, the Christian view of marriage, which prevailed everywhere in mission churches was insisted upon as an essential part of the social code of Christianity. Wherever Biblical standards had been established; charity was made as the inflexible law of Christian living, conjugal infidelity was not tolerated within the church, and the right of frivolous and unjust divorce was totally denied. The immediate effect of this was to elevate the status of women, secure for her just rights, deliver her from iniquitous discrimination, release her from practical 'slavery' and prevent gross wrongs. The Christian missions thought that Christian teachings alone were effective in liberating her from iniquitous fetters. It is noticeable that the new atmosphere introduced by missionaries is also lessening the actual practice of divorce where theoretically the right would be claimed. James S. Dennis argues that the marriage was in many instances a matter of bargain and the sale by parents or brother usually without any reference to the choice of individuals. But the Christian theory according

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to missionaries with the practice of a union of hearts based upon voluntary choice was an immense help in securing and safeguarding the domestic relations. 75

When missionaries first attempted to commence work amongst the girls, it was with great difficulty that they could induce parents to allow them to learn. Before this time, girls who were intended for a life of prostitution had received some instruction in order that they might prove more attractive to their visitors. Hence education of women was associated with immorality. In order to promote education, parents had to be paid to allow their daughters to attend schools. Then there was the conservatism of the older members of the family who most strongly opposed education on the ground that the gods would be angry and shows their displeasure by eliminating the husbands of girls who had been taught. But gradually this prejudice was destroyed by the quiet and persistent efforts of the ladies of various missionary societies in India in general and Tamil Nadu in particular. 76

Wherever mission stations were established, they opened schools for girl children. They were either small schools for the children converts or for the children of the lower-middle classes; or else they were boarding schools for ‘famine made orphans,’ and for children who had been entrusted by their parents to the care of missionaries. Almost, if not all, the women schools referred to in the various reports prior to 1860, were of this kind. Danish and Halle missionaries, supported by the S.P.C.K., were not able to succeed in attracting children other than those of converts or non-Hindus into their schools. 77

Meanwhile, missionaries began to enquire a little into the state of women education in the Tirunelveli province, with its population of more than one and half million. They found that though there were boarding and day schools for girls run by missionaries, in which the children of Christians numbering more than two thousand were being instructed, there were only 160 Hindu girls in all the Church Missionary Society’s

75 Ibid., p. 228.
76 James S. Dennison, op. cit., p. 185.
schools and there were girls from the lower castes and of the poor classes, most whom were induced to come to school by having food and clothes given to them. 

4. Zanana Mission

In 1820, M.A. Cooke, a British resident was sent out by the British and Foreign School Society at the request of a local educational body at Calcutta, with a view to starting a school for the Hindu girls. Women education had already been successfully begun at Serampore by Mrs. Marshman of the Baptist Mission. Side by side with the teaching given in Hindu girls’ day schools, teaching was also given in Hindu homes through a system of home education classes. This was suggested as early as 1840 by Thomas Smith, who wrote in an article on ‘Hindu Female Education’ in the Calcutta Christian Observer: “It is impossible to get the daughters of the higher classes to attend schools, and then we must teach them without requiring their attendance at school ... we must send our teachers to them”. It was at a much later date that home education classes of the Calcutta model were opened in Madras. In the report of the acting Director of Public Instruction for 1890, reference is made to the extension of Zanana or home education classes and to the special provision made for them in the grant-in-aid. These classes were carried on at that time by the National Indian Association, the Free Church Mission and the Church of England Zanana Mission.

Even though the earliest missions were intended for both males and women and all castes and classes, increased knowledge and experience convinced the missionaries that prejudice was far too strong for their intentions and their schools were left almost entirely to boys belonging to the depressed classes. The construction of society and the prejudices everywhere dominant, alike among rich and poor, high caste and low, made this most difficult. They could preach, but the women were not present to

78 Madras Church Missionary Record, October, 1877, pp. 324-325.
79 Eugene Stock, op. cit., p. 119.
80 "Of the other Anglican missions in India, the largest is the Church of England Zanana Society, with its 160 women missionaries, working in most parts of the country except the United Provinces and Bombay Presidency, by arrangement, are served by the Sister Women's Society, the Zanana Bible and Medical Missions." See Eugene Stock, op. cit., p. 162.
listen. They conversed with men, but few opportunities were allowed them to do so with women. They published books and tracts, but there was not one in 20,000 who could read, even if a Christian publication could have been placed in their hands. It may seem strange that Zanana visitation was not thought of as a means of reaching the most secluded and influential class of women, but a long leavening process was necessary to make that practicable. 82

Describing the significance of the Zanana mission, Eliza F. Kent observes: “For the education and evangelisation of Indian women, came into existence in the mid nineteenth century in part in response to the urgent need to contain what were seen as the subversive capabilities wielded by Indian women. Through lessons in literacy and needle work, Western women missionaries, with the help of educated Indian Christian assistants, were to transform Indian women into suitable wives and mothers for a new generation of ‘civilized’ Indian men.” 83

The constantly increasing importance of Zanana agency has led to the employment of many Bible women. They were Christian women with some knowledge of the Bible and of Christian truth, and a fair amount of intelligence, zeal and tact. Their primary duty was to visit houses or small groups of houses into which towns and even villages were usually divided to sell portions of scriptures, read or narrate Bible incidents, explain to the women the main features of the gospel, sing hymns and give instruction. Such visits were welcomed by the local women and in turn missionaries tried to preach the gospel to them and thus, women placed themselves under Christian instruction. 84

After the second half of the nineteenth century, Zanana Missions came out with certain innovative ideas, including those that the education of the men must precede the education of women and that women of the higher castes could not be reached by

schools but by family or house instruction. It was Thomas Smith who first gave voice and form to this sort of mission. 85

It was Mr. Lazarus, an honorary Zanana missionary, Danish Mission, Madras, who opened a branch of its mission work in southern Tamil Nadu. She opines that: "It was with great reluctance that I consented to open the discussion on this important branch of mission work. My experience is very limited. I have only been seven years at work; and during this short period my work was confined to elementary teaching. It originated in visits to the wives of educated Hindus. With preparing pupils for public examinations I have had nothing to do. My chief desire is to instruct the illiterate so that they may read the Bible for themselves, and to give a Christian tone to the knowledge of those who can read." In fact, there were no Zananas in Madras or for that matter in any part of south India in the first half of the nineteenth century. 86

Explaining the nature of Tamil women, missionaries were of the opinion that: "By day or by night they dare not be seen by men. But this is not the case with Hindu women. They may be seen going in large numbers to temples, festivals and processions. Even at home they are free and easy in their movements. The better class of women does not appear in any society of men or share in a meal or conversation with them. When male friends are calling at their houses, the women usually keep aloof and mind their own business. There is a stricter kind of voice as regards to girls who have become marriageable. These girls, who have already been withdrawn from school, are kept under the strictest privacy, and among certain classes are not permitted to cross even the threshold of their houses until they are married, and often till the birth of their first child. These girls, therefore, and the widows and married women among Hindus, form the Zananas of Madras." 87

Missionaries explain the nature of the Zanana missions in the following lines: "Between five and six in the morning there are signs of life in the morning in the house, which usually consists of a square set of dark rooms opening on a paved but

85 Ibid., pp. 246-247.
87 Ibid., pp. 425-426. Also see Knowles, Woman's Work for India's Women, The Harvest Field, August, 1892, pp. 71-73.
roofless court-yard, with another yard at the back for the special use of the women. You hear noises of sweeping and washing even before the men are up and astir. By a beautiful subdivision of labour, the morning duties of the household are duly discharged, and breakfast is got ready. First the children and the male members are served, and after they have gone, the women take their baths and perform their ceremonies and then sit down to their meals. By about 11 o’clock they are quite free. They have little or nothing to do till about 5 P.M., when preparations usually begin for the evening meal. We may safely say that six hours are about the duration of a Zanana day. The simplicity of their life gives them nothing to occupy their mind, while their ignorance prevents them from seeking pleasure in reading or work.”

Chiefly three methods of work were pursued by the Zanana mission. First, home classes for old pupils and others who were willing to study for a public examination. Regular systematic instruction was given, which was carefully superintended. In some cases, this work was placed under government instruction. In this respect, home classes were the exact counterpart of missionary education for boys, but with this exception that all the teachers as well as superintendents of the Zananas were invariably Christians, while those of boys’ schools were mostly non-Christians. The next method was Bible teaching, pure and simple. The last method corresponded to the open air preaching of the evangelistic missionary.

In regard to Bible teaching, missionaries stated that: “In the case of those who cannot read at all, they are first taught to read and then the Bible is placed in their hands. In a few cases a little needle work is also taught to induce the people to take greater interest in Bible lessons. The daily teaching is entrusted to teachers, called Bible women on this account, who are generally widows and are not highly educated, but anxious to do some good to their countrywomen, who correspond to catechists and readers, should be persons of irreproachable character, devoted and strong minded disciples, able to resist the many temptations to which they are exposed by their going

in and out of Hindu homes, and their daily contact with sights and vices peculiar to Hindu society."\(^{90}\)

Zanana missionaries’ most important method of preaching the gospel was the open air preaching. They note that: “Only open air is wanting. The style of preaching is rather different. No stiff addresses are given. A group of women is easily gathered, especially where several families occupy the same house. An interesting portion of scripture previously prepared is read and explained, or a narrative is told as only a woman can tell to the attentive listeners, and one or two salutary lessons calculated to impress the truth in their minds are added. Questions often thoughtful ones are usually asked. The women no doubt think upon what they are told or taught, and it cannot but leave its mark upon their minds. A favourite topic with them is the comparison of Krishna with Christ. Their ideas of morality are so perverted that they fail to see anything like moral superiority in the character of Christ. His miracles of mercy and his words of love and even his self-sacrificing death they appreciate; but not the purity of his life and career.” Meanwhile, the greater production and circulation of Zanana literature, *Mather Podini* and *Satya Tudan* was given priority.\(^{91}\)

Regarding the progress of the Zanana mission, missionaries were of the view that: “The progress made is not considerable, seldom exceeding the Lower Secondary Standard. The pupils are usually taught one by one in their respective houses - a system involving a great loss of time and energy, not to speak of other advantages. The number of pupils in the Zananas is also out of all proportion to those in schools. Still it is far better than unlearning the little that has been learnt at school. Of course, Christian, that is to say, Bible instruction is added to secular teaching; in fact as in all mission schools, it is a necessary condition of Zanana instruction. Improvement is effected in bringing up children and general house keeping. Prejudice and narrow mindedness give place to right thinking and large heartedness. Ignorance and superstition recede before the advent of truth and fact. Many of our peoples are ashamed of idolatry. Constant intercourse with good Christian women tends to purify

\(^{90}\) Ibid., p. 427. Also see Knowles, Woman’s Work for India’s Women, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-74.

\(^{91}\) Lazarus, *op. cit.*, 428-429. Also see M. G. Goldsmith, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-211.
the mind and foster the desire for better things. These are not small advantages. They may all be classed under one head and called "civilization." 92

As a missionary agency, work in the Zanana differs in no way from work among youths and men. As shown above, it embraced the usual methods of mission work, viz., education, preaching, circulation of literature, and social intercourse - each in its turn was ‘carefully’ regulated by the condition and capacity of the women. Whether by means of secular teaching, familiar talk, sacred story telling, or sale of books the woman missionary and her helpers aimed at instructing the people towards Christianity for a better ‘hope’. Nevertheless, Zanana work was considered as a new epoch in the life of Madras women.

5. Missionaries on Temple Women

It is increasingly recognised that women were of fundamental importance in defining, developing and shaping the course of the modern missionary movement and that women missionaries working abroad served as a catalyst that opened opportunities for women denied to them in their country of origin. This development was noted first in North America, reflecting to some extent the greater opportunities for women from early days in contributing to the American Missionary movement. 93 The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was the first American Missionary Society to work in India. In 1813 two missionaries of their board began work in the Bombay Presidency, but it was not until 1834 that their mission began the work in Madura which had given it the name ‘The Madura Mission’. Nora Brockway observed that: “It was not early to begin Christian work in Madura which is famous for its Hindu temple of Sri Meenakshi, where thousands of pilgrims gather. Devadasis, or dancing girls, were the only educated girls in the city. These dancing girls were the custodians of Indian culture and they were trained in the beautiful and intricate forms of Indian music and dancing, but they were also prostitutes married to the temple god, and while yet children are dedicated to immoral lives. However, a

92 Ibid., p. 428.
hundred years ago devadasis were an accepted institution, and the fact that they were the only educated girls, further strengthened the general prejudice against girls’ education.”

James Herrick, a missionary scholar observed that, “There are many ancient temples in the Madurai district, which have been much resorted to by one generation after another, for hundreds of years. Several of these are large, and were built at enormous expense. The largest and most celebrated is the temple in the city of Madurai, devoted to Meenakshi, the tutelary goddess of that place. This temple was begun by one of the earlier kings but enlarged and beautified by his successors, who expended vast sums of money upon it and gave lands of great value to its support. A large number of dancing girls are connected with this temple, who were devoted to it by their parents or born of those previously thus devoted. A part of their duty is to sing and dance in the temple. They are as corrupt in character as many of the women in Corinth were in the days of Apostle Paul. Several men were also connected with it, who plays upon drums and other instruments and the sound of which may be heard all over the city, every morning before the dawn of the day.” Similarly observation of the same kind was made by Nils Johan Ringdal, a British social historian. He opines that: “Young girls looked after India’s temples and pagodas, adult women coddled the gods, much as daughter and wives did for their men at home or as court ladies cared for the princes in their palaces. Every morning the temple girls sang and danced to honour the god, during the day time they swept and cleaned and fanned the images of the gods so that they would not grow hot in the heat of the day. In the evening they again sang and danced for the god; they were a joy and an inspiration for men who visited the temple.”

However, David Abraham, a British writer argued that: “The best known Indian classical dance style Bharatanatyam, is a graceful gestural form performed by women. A popular subject for temple sculptures throughout South India, especially Tamil Nadu, it originated in the dances of the devadasi temple dancing girls who

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95 William W. Howland and James Herrick, Historical Sketch of the Madura and Madras Missions, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1865, p. 28
originally performed as part of their devotional duties in the great Tamil shrines. Usually donated to a temple by their parents, the young girls were formally wedded to the deity and spent the rest of their lives dancing or singing as part of their devotional duties. Later, however, the devadasi system became debased, and the dancers, who formerly enjoyed high status in Hindu society, became prostitutes controlled by the Brahmins, whom male visitors to the temple paid for sexual services.”

Over a period of time this ‘immoral’ devadasi system attracted the attention of missionary societies cutting across the denominations. South India witnessed the arrival of a large number of missionary women in this endeavour. Of all missionaries who came to the southern part of Tamil Nadu for this cause only few missionaries could stay back in their adopted places. Amy Carmichael (1867-1951), a native of Ireland came to India as a Protestant Christian missionary mainly with a view to ‘edify,’ educate and ‘emancipate’ the women folk. She came to Dhonavur, a hamlet, 35 km away from Tirunelveli, where she opened an orphanage and a mission, called Dhonavur Fellowship. She was commissioned by the Church of England Zanana Mission. Much of her work was with young ladies, some of whom were believed to have been ‘saved’ from temple prostitution in Tirunelveli district. In an effort to respect the Indian culture, members of her mission organisation wore Indian dresses and the children were given Indian names like Karunya etc. The custom of ‘temple girl’ in Tirunelveli according to Amy Carmichael dates back to 6th March, 1901 when the first temple child escaped, and was brought next morning to the missionary bungalow at Pannaivilai, a hamlet, 40 km away from Dhonavur. Amy says that: “The girl was seven years old when she left the house of the temple woman at a lake,


98 Eugene Stock is of the opinion that the Church Missionary Society has had about a dozen ladies in Tinnevelly. One of them, Miss Wilson Amy Carmichael, was well known for her remarkable books, ‘Things as They Are,’ ‘Lotus Buds,’ etc., and for her ‘beautiful’ work in rescuing and caring for “Temple children.” Similarly another veteran missionary-cum educationist Miss Swainson who had been thirty years in India, and her work for the deaf and dumb, gained her the Silver-i-Hind medal. See Eugene Stock, The History of the Church Missionary Society, op. cit., pp. 246-247.

crossed the water to Pannaivilai, and was found by a Christian woman outside the church. It was already dusk, and when the child came from a temple to the Christian woman, the girl begged not to be taken back; she took her to her own home for the night. She went hungry to bed because she was a high caste child and would not break caste by eating the kind woman’s food. Once already she had escaped and made her way to Tuticorin, where her mother lived. But the temple women followed her and her mother unloosed her clinging arms and gave her back to them. They branded her little hands with hot irons as a punishment for attempting to escape. Then she gradually understood that she was to be married to god.”

Amy Carmichael found that in case of illness in the home parents sometimes vow to give one of their children to the god if the sick one recovers; that in some families a certain child, perhaps the first born, or the second, or the third is regarded as belonging to the god; that in cases of unhappy marriage, a man may get rid of his wife and dedicate his child to the god, that a poor widow or a deserted wife may marry her child to the god for economic reasons; or finally that a baby abandoned by her parents may be adopted by temple women if she is fair to look upon and likely to be intelligent. Writing about her experiences Amy concludes that: “It became part of the itinerant work which still filled the days. Sometimes in an attempt to find the carefully guarded secret of how the children came to the temple houses, we had curious experiences. Once we stayed in a hostel for priests and pilgrims, and sitting on the floor, while a garland maker made garlands for the gods, we listened to the talk and here and there picked up a clue. Once we slept in a byre (the cow was away), and heard conversation through the wall of the next house, for the wall was thin and the voices loud. This led straight to a child in danger, and also opened our eyes to one of the sources for which we were searching. The child was saved.”

It is apparent that the strategy followed by Amy to find these temple girls in and around Tirunelveli, created large scale opposition from the upper sections of the society. Many a times, Indian women who accompanied Amy were severely beaten

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101 Frank Houghton, op. cit., p. 123.
102 Ibid., pp. 124-125.
up by temple administrators. Nevertheless, a large section of depressed class women welcomed Amy’s attitude against this practice. They even went with her and supported her physically in finding out those girls from the nook and corner of the region.103

6. Cloth Controversy

As a matter of fact, missionaries slowly and steadily began to focus much of their attention on the everyday socio-cultural activities of the ‘natives.’ Though the main concern of the Christian missionaries was to preach the gospel their opposition to the traditional practices, particularly dress laws in Travancore is noteworthy. Missionaries’ attitude towards “breast cloth controversy” also known as the “upper cloth revolt” in 1822, in southern Tamil Nadu; their influence on the representatives of the British government regarding the practice of ‘slavery’ and their attitude towards other social issues not only made an indelible impact on the Tamil people but also encouraged the people to struggle against oppression of any sort.104

In southern Travancore, lower castes like the Nadars were subjected to many civil disabilities. On account of their untouchability status, they were refused entry to temples and courts; they were not allowed to use public roads and wells, to wear sandals, jewels, golden ornaments or fine cloth, to build larger or more convenient houses, to carry water- jugs on the hip, to sit on cots or to have songs in their places of worship. No infringements of these rules were permitted and Mault wrote home that, “.... Here the people must not deviate from ancient usage in the construction of their houses in the shape of their umbrella in the quality of their iron pen in a hundred similar matters—indeed it seems to be taken for granted that everything has arrived at

103 Interview with Miss Nesa Karunya, a close associate of Amy Carmichael, who is at present in-charge of Dhonavur Fellowship, a missionary organization, established in 1901 for Indian women and young female children by Amy Carmichael in Dhonavur, a small hamlet, 35 km away from Tirunelveli. Dated, 17 September, 2008.

perfection for by the laws of the land no further improvement among the lower classes can be attempted.”

Persons of low caste in Travancore were not permitted to approach those of higher status and fixed distances at which they should stay were prescribed for each caste. A Nadar must remain thirty six paces distant from a Nambudri Brahmin, and must come no closer than twelve to a Nair. As members of a degraded caste, Nadars were prohibited from carrying an umbrella, wearing shoes or golden armaments. Their houses could not be higher than one storey in height. They were not allowed to milk cows. According to Robert Hardgrave, in their rise, Nadars experienced a series of escalating confrontations with other communities which served to weld the caste into a community with a high degree of self-consciousness and solidarity.

As part of their tradition in Travancore, the bosom was bared in deference to those of high status as a symbol of respect. In the elaborate hierarchy of caste ranking the Brahmins bared the upper portion of their body to the deity; Nairs for example bared their breasts before Brahmins, and the Nadars bared their bosom to Nairs. Due to the influence of Christian missionaries, Nadars of Travancore began fighting for equality, which was known as ‘Breast Cloth Controversy’; the demand that the Nadar women be allowed to use the breast cloth as the Nair women did. It was considered an insult to a caste Hindu, if a lower caste woman dared to appear before him covering her bosom, and this custom continued for centuries. If any low caste woman covered her bosom, she would be punished severely. Caste rules brought restrictions on the mode of wearing dress, ornaments, and sandals and so on. In 1812, under the influence of missionaries like Ringletaube, a missionary of L.M.S., this issue took a new turn. Ryland observes that: “In 1822 in the month of May, the first upper cloth ‘disturbance’ started in Kalkulam taluk of southern Travancore. The ‘native’ Christian women, under the influence of Christian missionaries began to dress neatly like the Sudra women; the high caste Nair men opposed and persecuted them. In due course of

105 Quoted in Dick Kooiman, Conversion and Social Equality, Manohar, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 148-149.
time, the second upper cloth controversy disturbance started on 1828 and it continued up to 1830.\textsuperscript{107}

In February 1829, the Raani (Queen) issued a new proclamation. It reminded Shanars who had embraced Christianity of their remaining obligation to perform \textit{ooolium}\textsuperscript{108} but exempted them again from labour duties on Sundays and from services meant for Hindu temples and religious festivals. As far as dress controversy was concerned, the Shanars could hardly feel satisfied by the new royal order. Overruling the Padmanabapuram court decree, the proclamation confirmed the decision of 1814, allowing Christian Shanar women to cover their bosoms, but not in the same way as the higher castes. The proclamation added, that whatever Christian denomination people belonged to, they were not permitted “to act towards persons of higher castes contrary to the usages of their own castes before they became Christians. In the 1850s social tension between Shanars and Nayars further increased, partly in consequence of the growing adoption of the upper cloth by Shanar women. To avert a threatening outburst of violent clashes, the Dewan issued a public warning, which was read out in streets and bazaars with drum-beating, urging that the existing rules and usages should be respected. If the Shanars desired modifications, they should represent them to the sarkar (government) and await its decision. On the other hand, the Nayars were ordered not to take matters into their own hands and to cause no breach of peace. Nevertheless, these two communities entered into a fresh struggle, which led to a revolt in 1858.\textsuperscript{109} In November, 1858 Queen Victoria issued a Proclamation which brought down the tempo of the struggle. Meanwhile, in 1859 missionaries like Cox, Russell, Louis and others sent a petition to Maharaja of Travancore. But there was no favourable reply from the Maharaja. So they sent a petition to the Madras Governor. Sir Charles, the Governor of Madras intervened and wrote a letter to the Resident General, Cullen in Travancore.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{107} Ryland, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{108} Unpaid labour was known as \textit{Ooolium} in Tamil.
\textsuperscript{109} Dick Kooiman, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 150-151.
\textsuperscript{110} Ryland, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 6.
During this crucial situation, in 1859, Charles Trevelyan, the son-in-law of Macaulay was appointed as the Governor of Madras to replace Lord Harris. Charles Trevelyan decided to end this age old custom. On this basis a Proclamation was made on 26 July, 1859 in Travancore stating: “We hereby proclaim that there is no objection to Nadar women of all creeds dressing themselves ... as the Mukkuvarathiyas do or to the covering of their bosoms in any manner whatever, but not like women of higher castes.”

Due to the breast cloth controversy the Christians themselves had been brought within the protective embrace of the European missionary organisation. Through the structure of the mission in the southern districts, the Nadars for the first time were brought into association with the mission over a wide area. It also served as the initial catalyst for increasing community self consciousness. As the first movement for social upliftment, it brought to the Nadars the awareness and the solidarity of an emerging integrated culture. Meanwhile the self consciousness led to the emergence of caste conscious Christians in the churches of Tamil Nadu in one way or the other.

The role of missionaries in purifying and transforming the conditions of family life and mitigating the evils which appeared is crucial. They have done their utmost for the elevation of women, the central figures in the homes, to deliver them from the humiliation and suffering incidental to those great historic evils of Indian society, polygamy, child/early marriage, temple prostitution, infanticide, ‘slavery’ and other social evils. Even in Tamil, proverbs like ‘never listen to a woman’, ‘woman of fifty should bend her knees to a boy of five’, and ‘a woman’s sense comes too late’ were common, indicating how women were degraded and reduced them to the status of dependence.

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112 Robert Hardgrave, op. cit., p. 163
114 The Harvest Field, May, 1893, p. 426.
The colonial state, while it adopted the rhetoric of freedom and individual dignity, was reluctant to dismantle social structures like 'slavery' that would involve both a loss of revenue as well as the allegiance of the landed groups who were their bulwark. Missionaries rushed in where the colonial state feared to tread. It was Christianity that appeared as the mediator of modernity to those who were wrestling with the problem of a subordinate identity.\footnote{Dilip M. Menon, "Religion and Colonial Modernity: Rethinking Belief and Identity," \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, vol. 37, no. 17, April 27-March 3, 2002, p. 1666.}

Missionaries' pioneering efforts to abolish 'slavery' in Travancore opened up new vistas for the socio-economic empowerment of the depressed class masses. The L.M.S. missionaries like Messers, Mead, Mault and Baker pleaded with the government for the complete emancipation of the whole lot of 'slaves' of Travancore. 'Slaves' were sold as cattle and their services were extracted cruelly. The chief proposals given by the missionaries were: "No traffic in slaves should be permitted and it should be made penal as in British India. 'Slaves' should be allowed to acquire and possesses property as other classes of people. The hereditary or perpetuation of 'slavery' should be done away with." As a result, the Raja of Travancore began to respond. The Maharaja and the British Resident accepted the proposal. The 'slaves' of the government were made free. In due course of time, the private agencies were also prohibited from keeping 'slaves.'\footnote{Ryland, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 7.}

Missionaries, in days past, had set their pupils to discuss the question of their country women's ignorance or enlightenment. It was in this way that John Anderson and his colleagues, the pioneers of education for high caste women in Madras Presidency, exercising the minds and raising the views of educated youth around them gave an impulse, which led to the establishment of schools for girls in Madras and elsewhere, by the members of Hindu community. Meanwhile, the wives of missionaries had obtained access to 'native' houses, and there had taught the wives of most respectable Hindus.\footnote{Proceedings of the South Indian Missionary Conference, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 193-194.}
It has been said that the Indian woman’s external physical living is shaped by Western values but her being itself is governed by deep-rooted, static values which give her no scope to be different. The Tamil woman is no exception. Her expression has to be understood in this context of this duality of Westernisation and cultural inheritance.\textsuperscript{118} In the absence of a widespread government provision for the education of the ‘natives’ the initiatives taken by the Christian missionaries were very crucial and cannot be easily ignored. The missionary contribution to the education and liberation of women has long been acknowledged by prominent social workers and even Hindu leaders of eminence. However, the effect of education and other empowerment measures on the depressed class women who got converted was comparatively higher than those from the non-Christian background.

Missionaries, endowed with an idea of equality, attempted to break the fetters of differences at every level: social, economic, and cultural. Their policy of ‘Soup-soap-salvation’ aiming to bring social transformation in the lives of the converts created sufficient knowledge infrastructure to educate the hitherto unlettered masses. Education as an instrument of social action was put to good use in creating level playing fields across the spectrum of society. Educating women had been the fundamental policy of missionaries like that of their male counterparts.

Given the social predicament and cultural taboos the missionaries had to adopt appropriate methods to disseminate knowledge through various culturally sensitive programmes. The Zanana mission and the Bible women of S.P.G. and C.M.S., carried the message of learning through social interaction which marked the beginning of women’s participation in the public sphere. Though the effort was not sufficient enough to bring a substantial change, it send out a message of new possibilities, which were indeed carried forward by the Indian intelligentsia, who voiced the concern for women’s education as part of the national and cultural regenerative programme. Empowerment through education, attempted by missionaries undoubtedly enabled the women folk to see the realities of the world in new perspective. The access to

\textsuperscript{118} C. S. Lakhshmi, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44.
education in fact came for the first time to women converts of depressed castes. It was from there that the experience was further carried to the caste Hindu women.