CHAPTER-VI
MISSIONARIES’ ATTITUDE\(^1\) TOWARDS CASTEISM\(^2\) AND ITS IMPACT ON CONVERTS

Relationships between India’s Christians and questions of caste, conversion and colonialism have always been complex. Despite intrusions from the West, from cultures that were alien, most Christians of India have continued to retain their own distinct cultural identities. These identities have remained, in most respects, clearly and predominantly Indian. Perhaps the biggest, most ceaseless, and most continuous of all ongoing arguments and conflicts that have brought about mutations within Christian groups in India, regardless of whether they were Catholic or Evangelical, Anglican or Dissenter, Mar Thoma or Syrian, conservative or liberal, are those that have centred on some issue relating to caste.\(^3\)

Caste has been a predominant cultural practice, and no substantial remedial measures could be so far prescribed to deal with it. At various times in Indian history egalitarian reformers tried to do away with caste barriers; however, instead of radically undermining the system, their opposition often ended in the creation of new castes. Their followers organised themselves in new sects, and each of these soon assumed the characteristics of a caste. This happened in the case of Lingayats and Sikhs as well as among many minor sections of the society. The Christian churches, too have been unable to break down caste distinctions among their converts.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) James, a missionary scholar observes that: “What attitude shall the missionary assume towards the question of caste? Shall he violently denounce its injustice? Shall he exhort the timid and degraded low caste man to resist his oppressors and content for his rights? Or shall he preach a gospel of patience, a gospel of hope, and meantime introduce the elements of a better life among the people?” See James M. Thoburn, *The Christian Conquest of India: Young People’s Missionary Movement*, New York, 1859, p. 202.

\(^2\) John Murdoch, a nineteenth century missionary historian observed that the early missionaries in South India tolerated caste, in the hope that it would yield gradually under Christian teaching. This expectation has not been realised. C.T.E. Rhenius, a missionary of Church Missionary Society in 1850s opined that, “Although a century has passed since the establishment of Protestant congregations in this country, the attachment to caste, instead of diminishing among the Christians, has increased rather, and is perhaps, more obstinately, insisted upon by them than the heathen.” See John Murdoch, *The Indian Missionary Manual*, Christian Vernacular Education Society of India, Madras, 1864, p.317.


1. Caste in Missionary Discourse

According to the Protestant ethic, the caste system was a denial of the belief in the potential spiritual and material development of the individual. Most Protestant churches adopted the view that the struggle against caste was one of the most important tasks that confronted them in India. Lutheran and Catholic missionaries were, however, more reluctant to take a stand on the issue of caste. 5

All the great Indian reformers, from Buddha, who lived and worked five centuries before Christ, to the present day, denounce the cultural practice of the caste system. Missionaries who came to India denounced caste system and tried as far as possible to ignore it in course of their work. A group of Protestant missionaries were of the opinion that, "Caste was probably built by degrees by the early Aryan invaders of this desirable land, for their own selfish ends. They had much the same feeling towards the aborigines that the South Americans had towards the black Negro who works in his plantations. In other words it is based on a colour prejudice. Then as the wealth and the power of the invaders increased, it was built upon on the economic principles of inheritance of occupation." 6

While the missionaries opposed caste among the Christians partly because it was an essential part of Hinduism, partly it seemed to damage the quality of life among the Christians and conflict with the idea of a true Christian community. They were also influenced by the fact that caste distinctions and feelings within the church frustrated attempts to build it up in numbers. They also found that it was the chief relationship which binds the Christian to his old faith. 7 For instance, after Ziegenbalg's demise in 1719, hundreds of people placed themselves under Christian instruction. These members caused him considerable difficulty in many ways. Chief among them according to missionaries was the institution of caste. 8 Similarly, the S.P.C.K. missionaries who supervised the Tamil congregations in Bishop Heber's time,

7 Geoffrey A. Oddie, Social Protest in India, Manohar, New Delhi, 1974, p. 51.
8 D. Julius Richter, op. cit., p. 108.
including the venerable Swartz and venerated Kohlhoff, had tolerated the usages of caste titles as their predecessors had done. Thompson, one of the missionary scholars concludes that, "The chief mistake of some German missionaries was too much leniency regarding caste." The institution according to him was the most conspicuous and most remarkable feature of the Indian society.

German missionaries in Tranquebar observe that: "Caste is nothing more than an association of families of the same status, or of the same profession. The association is based partly on ties of blood among the various people and partly on the similarity of their profession. Just as in Europe bourgeoisie and the peasantry represent the larger sections of the society, here too the Suttirer (Sudras) caste is the largest and consists of craftsmen, artisans and peasants."

When converts came from Hindu background into the pale of Christianity, some of the early missionaries, being anxious to win converts particularly from high caste Hindus like the Brahmins, admitted them without asking them to renounce caste. Moreover, the missionaries of earlier times, not having a clear idea about the nature of caste, held divergent views on caste. While some of them regarded it only as a civil right having nothing to do with the fundamentals of Hinduism and therefore it might be tolerated, others considered it: "one of the evils of heathenism which has unwarily and most unfortunately been allowed to accompany the 'native' convert in his passage to Christianity. For such conflicting views and divergent approaches, the acculturated ethos of the Western missions characterized by cultural pride and a feeling of the West's innate superiority also was a cause. Missionaries who came with a 'sense of superiority' and racial prejudice naturally first looked for converts from culturally dominant, traditionally rich and powerful sections of India. From the time of Robert De Nobili onward, the missionaries who came to India worked primarily with the

9 "Caste has given by far the most trouble in South India. The evil was caused to a large extent, by the course pursued by the missionaries themselves. With the exception of the Lutheran missionaries of the Leipzig Society, a vigorous stand is now made on the subject by all Protestant missions." See John Murdoch, The Indian Missionary Journal, op. cit., p. 317.
10 Eugene Stock, op. cit., p. 300.
12 Report from the missionaries of Tranquebar sent in 1728, pp. 172-179.
upper castes. These missionaries who came from aristocratic and affluent background naturally linked with and appealed to the upper sections of the society.\(^{13}\)

Contrary to this was the view held by the blue-eyed and fair haired North-Germans, Scandinavians, and Anglo-Saxons who had greater affinity to Protestantism. These missions developed a different world-view and different approach to caste. Except the Tranquebar Lutherans and the Leipzig Mission, other major Protestant groups like the Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists were greatly influenced by the egalitarianism and humanitarianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which had taken root in the North European countries. The missions from such background considered the inequality implicit in caste the very antithesis of equality embedded in the gospel and hence they vehemently opposed it.\(^{14}\) Rhenius was the first German missionary to question the tolerant policy of the earlier missionaries. His views had been eagerly adopted by other newly arrived missionaries, including Hanbroe, a Dane who had arrived in 1819 at Vepery and William Sawyer of the Church Missionary Society who began to work in Madras in 1822.\(^{15}\)

Undoubtedly, missionaries were very sensitive to the inhuman treatment of the lower caste people.\(^{16}\) As a result of this, they initiated various policies and programmes to do away with this cultural practice. Hence in the year 1858 missionaries came out with a resolution against the institution of caste. The resolution states: "That this conference regards Hindu caste, both in theory and practice as not a mere civil distinction, but emphatically a religious institution, and it is the monster evil of India. It is the duty of all missionaries to spare no pains, on all proper occasions to expose the absurdities and falsehood, as well as denounce the wickedness of caste, to show its great injuriousness to all classes. No man should be regarded as worthy of the name of Christians who refuses to renounce caste and to remove all its outward marks. It is the duty of all Christians to unite in protesting against all recognition of caste in all the..."


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) M. E. Gibbs, The Anglican Church in India, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 87-88.

public acts of government, whether direct or indirect, and in the whole of the military and civil services.”

Similarly John Lawrence came out with a bold step and said, “The system of caste can no longer be permitted to rule in our service. Soldiers and government servants of every class must be entertained for their merits, irrespective of creed, caste or class.”

Meanwhile in a controversy with Lutheran missionaries, the S.P.G. missionary, G. U. Pope, explained the position of his mission on caste in a pamphlet entitled “A Letter to Tranquebar Missionaries Regarding Their Position, Their Proceedings, and Their Doctrine,” he declared that: “I do not allow any caste distinction to be observed in the boarding schools in our mission. All children fed and clothed by me must be treated alike.”

There was soon a disagreement about how things should be handled. Bishop Heber of Calcutta visited in 1826 and took a very relaxed view, writing ‘God forbid that we should make the gate of life narrower than Christ made it, or deal less favourably with the prejudices of this people than St. Paul and the Primitive Church dealt with almost similar prejudices of the Jewish converts.’ The missionaries in Tanjore, in particular, felt that Brahminism must be opposed, but caste in the church should be dealt with gently and by degrees. His successor, Bishop Wilson took the opposite line, saying that Christian converts should show they are ‘new men and women.’

Bishop Wilson of Calcutta described caste as, “A cancerous evil of our infant churches.” One of the biggest difficulties which Bishop Wilson had faced during his South Indian visitation was casteism in the churches. As early as 1833 he had declared that the distinction of caste must be abandoned decidedly, immediately and

18 Ibid., p. 287.
19 He laboured both in Tirunelveli and Tanjore; He observed that the ‘native’ church was built upon two foundations of caste and money. See J.A. Sharrock, South Indian Missions, Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, Westminster, 1910, p. 46.
21 Andrew Wingate, op. cit., p. 30.
finally. He also took a strong line at once. Basing his decision on the grand New Testament principles in Christianity he declares: “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all.” Nevertheless, when his letter was read to the principal congregation at Vepery, Tiruchirapalli and Tanjore, few newly converted Christians started revolting openly.

Commenting upon Indian caste, Reverend Wilson explains very logically the supremacy of caste that prevailed in India: “Caste has for infancy, pupilage and manhood, its ordained methods of sucking, sipping, drinking and eating; of washing, of clothing and ornamenting the body; of sitting, of moving, visiting, travelling, speaking, working and fighting. It has its own law for social and religious rights, privileges, and occupation, for education, duty, religious service, sins, for errors and other punishments. It deals with birth, death, burial, and burning; and with commemoration, assistance, and injury after death.”

Over a period of time, caste feelings among the Christians resulted in separate churches among converts on caste lines. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century only the English and Indian clergy had seats in Trinity church at Palayamkottai in Tirunelveli district - rest of the people, high or low, were expected to take their seat on the floor of the church. This arrangement was not acceptable to those who considered themselves superior than others. In fact there started a protest by a group of new coverts to erect a separate church. In some churches there were separate

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27 John Murdoch observes that, “Indian Christianity has not contended with a more serious evil than superstition viz. caste. Superstition loses strength and disappears as enlightenment and civilization extends; but caste is so deeply rooted in the Hindu mind, that no amount of intellectual enlightenment compels it to quit its hold. Even Christian Piety does not in all cases appear to succeed in eradicating it.” See John Murdoch, Indian Year Book, Oxford University Press, 1862, p. 237.
28 A.S. Appasamy Pillai, op. cit., p. 46.
entrances for the Sudras and Pariahs. In many places separate space to sit in the interior of the church was allotted to depressed class converts.29

James, a missionary scholar, is of the opinion that there were many instances in Tamil Nadu, where the Sudra Christians refused to sit on the same side of the church with the Pariahs; they would not drink at the Lord’s Supper with them or after them. They would not eat their food, or drink their water. They would not contract marriages with their families, however wealthy or respectable they might become.30

Missionaries, both Catholics and Protestants, besides making policies to do away with the caste system inside the church, constantly criticized one another over this cultural practice. Missionary writers, including Reverend Paul, criticized the attitude of missionaries who were working in Tranquebar region; many of the British missionaries conclude that the German Lutherans had allowed too much caste observance in the church. Paul argues that: “The missionaries of Tranquebar and Tanjore who went to Tinnevelly very early to preach and to whose hands the superintendence of the church was entrusted for a long-time are responsible for the continued usage of caste practice in the churches of Tamil Nadu.”31

Other missionaries who came later - Walter, Pressier, Dal, Bose and Ringletaube decided to allow the distinction of caste in their church, for they found it very difficult to eradicate the deep rooted caste prejudices even from among the ‘grown-up’ Christians.32

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Pariah Christians in south Travancore openly started to express their feelings that European missionaries were

31 Reverend S. Paul, “Castes in the Tinnevelly Church,” The Harvest Field, September, 1893, p. 82-83.
prejudiced in favour of Shanars. They complained that all the higher posts in the mission were given only to Shanars (Nadars). In substantiation of that complaint, they pointed out that among the eighteen ministers and twenty four evangelists, there was not a single member from the Pariah caste. But nothing was done by missionaries to eradicate caste dominance from that "sacred enclosure," the Christian church. This feeling of being subjected to a new variety of the old caste hierarchy led many Pariahs and Pulayas to leave the L.M.S. and to join other missions, especially the Salvation Army.33

By 1850s almost all the Protestant missionaries were agreed that caste within the church was an unmitigated evil. In the second half of the century a large measure of agreement was to be reached in favour of a hard line in dealing with the continuing problems relating to caste within the churches and in favour of Christians spearheading a general onslaught on caste, using every tool available-political pressure, education, publicity-and enlisting as allies all who would co-operate in the campaign, without regard to their religious affiliation. A resolution of Madras Missionary Conference in 1848 had laid it down that only those who broke caste by eating food prepared by a Pariah should be entitled to baptism. But the consensus is best shown by the minute of Madras Missionary Conference of 1850 which was signed by nearly a hundred Protestant missionaries and supported by the Missionary Conferences of Calcutta and Bombay. This resolution justly claimed to represent "the view of nearly all the Protestant missionaries in Southern India" that caste in the church was a grave scandal, incapable of being defended on Christian grounds.34

33 Dick Kooiman, op. cit, pp. 178-179.
The origins of the caste system are a continuing matter of speculation among scholars and there are clearly more theories than facts in what one can read now in the works of the contending authorities and interpreters. Perhaps the most commonly repeated version is that it all dates back to pre-historical times, perhaps four or five thousand years ago.36

The term "caste" has been widely used to describe ranked groups within the rigid systems of social stratification and especially those, which constitute the society of Hindu India. A. L. Kroeber defined caste as "Endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit, occupying a superior or inferior division."37 David L. Sills, on the contrary, opines: "Membership in castes is determined by birth. An individual is assigned his life long and unalterable status according to his parentage status which he shares with others of similar birth who are, therefore, assigned to the same group (Caste)."38

Bernard Johnson argues that caste, a term primarily applied to the basic division of the Hindu society of the Indian sub-continent only in the secondary sense is a term that is also used to designate any social class of extreme rigidity. According to him the principal characteristics of an Indian caste are: endogamy (i.e., the practice of marrying exclusively within the caste); hereditary membership (accompanied by the virtual impossibility of changing one's caste); restriction of dining together and other personal contacts with members of other castes; recognition of a fixed place within

35 David L. Sills argues that the Indian caste system appears to have evolved out of the varna system which developed about 1000-800 B.C. Some authorities associated the hypothetical Aryan invasion of northern India with the origins of the varna, which are mentioned in the Indian classic, the Rig Veda. About 2000 years ago, the four varnas became elaborated into numerous Jati, which more or less became the castes that we know today. While the Jati were themselves organised within the general varna framework, they were regarded as the products of sexual relationship between members of different varnas. Further elaboration of the Varna system gave rise to the additional category of untouchable's castes. Meanwhile, according to Kotani, the varna system that was established in ancient India functioned as the larger framework within which the caste society was formed. See David C. Sills, *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, vol. I, London, 1972, p. 186; K. Kotani, *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1997, p. 3.


37 David C. Sills, *op. cit.*, pp. 335-337.


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the hierarchical order of the total society; and restrictions on the choice of occupation and autonomy of the caste in the regulation of internal relations. 39

The early historical writings on “caste” came from the British historians and anthropologists starting with Francis Buchanan’s *Survey of Bengal* in the early nineteenth century and the works like *Studies on the Tribes and Castes of North Western India* by W. Crooke and J.C. Newfield; by C. Mayer, and R.V. Riley for Central India; by Edgar Thurston and M.A. Sharing for Madras Presidency, etc. It should also to be noted here that by providing anthropological discourse, through ethnographic studies and census reports; the British had constituted a new category of social identity called ‘caste’ that replaced the earlier categories of social identity like ‘Varna’, ‘Jati,’ ‘Kula’ etc. 40

Furthermore, the studies of ethnographers as well as the decennial census reports have highlighted three important aspects as determinants of ‘caste’: religion, descent/origin linked with social aspects and traditional occupation. In other words, it can be said that ‘caste’ was identified and studied as an identity within a religious framework. In the 1871 census report of the Madras Presidency, the Europeans were listed first, followed by the Eurasians and the Asiatic. Under the category of Asiatic, the Brahmins were classified as being at the helm of various castes, which numbered seventeen. 41

While the recording of ‘caste’ in the census had defined the social identity of a person on a permanent basis; at a different level however, it also unwittingly came to the aid of social mobility. For example, in the Madras Presidency, on the occasion of the first census, undertaken during years, 1867-1871, two Tamil peasant ‘castes’ from Changleput district, namely Vellalas and Vanniyas wanted to be recorded as belonging to a higher ‘varna’ than that was probably conceded to them. In anticipation

of a census enumeration in 1871, they petitioned to be classified ‘kshatriyas’ and wanted to be called as Vanniya Kula Kshatriyas. A similar example can be given of Nadars of Tamil Nadu. Originally known as Shanars they were traditionally toddy tappers and thus were considered to be ‘polluting community’ by the Hindu orthodoxy. On the occasion of 1901 census, they made a petition to the census commissioner claiming that they were, “The descendants of the Pandiya or Dravida Kshatriyas race who... first deforested and colonized this land of South India,” and presented him with a historical volume entitled “Short Account of the Tamil Xatras, the Original But Downtrodden Royal Race of Southern India.” After frequent appeals the state recognized Vellalas, Vanniyas and Nadars as members of ‘higher caste.’

Thus, caste as a social category is constructed on the basis of imagined attributes whereas casteism is preferential treatment to one’s fellow caste men and caste discrimination is based on the belief that some castes are inferior and others superior.

Meanwhile, F.G. Bailey distinguishes four referents of ‘caste’ in India. The first is Varna, the classic division of Vedic society. The second is what he calls ‘caste categories -- aggregates of persons, usually in the same linguistic region, usually with the same caste name.” The third is caste association, the voluntary group which draws its membership from the assumptive reservoir of traditional caste. It is “exclusive but not exhaustive.” The fourth referent is jati, characterized by a system of segregation, independence and hierarchy. He says: “Caste allows for co-operation but not competition. We might distinguish here between caste as “organic stratification and class as ‘segmentary stratification’. Thus, caste in India is ‘closed organic stratification’.”

On the other hand Susan Bayly opines that ‘traditional’ caste was to be found in India’s villages. Caste in Bailey’s view was therefore not a unique moral or religious system. It was merely a more elaborate form of the social stratifications to be found in

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42 G. Randhan, op. cit., pp. 80-81.
many other societies. Susan Bayly says: “Caste is now and has been fixed fact of
Indian life. Both caste as varna and caste as jati are best seen as composites of ideals
and practices that have been made and remade into varying codes of moral order over
hundreds or even thousands of years.”45

For all its diversity and its points of comparison with schemes of social differentiation
to be found in other parts of the world, caste stands alone as a mode of thought and
action. India’s nationalist and communal religious ideologies have both interacted
with the ideas and experiences of caste. Thus Susan Bayly concludes that caste is not
to be seen as a mere variant of the class or racial hierarchies prevailing in complex
societies elsewhere.46

With regard to caste M.N. Srinivas writes that: “Caste is everywhere the unit of social
action.”47 Contrary to this, Edward J. Hardy, a British social historian concludes that:
“Caste as an utter absurdity, contrary to both reason and revelation and also is so
chameleon like, that it can change its colours and aspects to suit every circumstance
and evade every difficulty in society.”48

Thus, the contemporary social anthropological approach to the Indian caste system
can be summarized in the following points:

1. “Caste as a system operates only within a limited locality, a single village or a
few linked villages.
2. A village or local population is composed of a sense of mutually exclusive
castes, usually numbering anywhere from a handful to a score or more.
3. A dominant caste, or a dominant family, or set of families typically has
preponderant political economic power over everyone else in the locality.
Dominance is rooted in monopolistic control over arable land and in physical
force.
4. Each caste has an occupational specialty and offers its services to other castes
in exchange, for food, products, or services. Especially important is the food
grain provided by the land controlling dominant caste or families to the largely
landless servants, artisans and mendicant castes. This exchange of food, goods
and services also has a ritual dimension concerned with purity and pollution. It

47 Quoted in Robert Hardgrave, Nadars of Tamil Nadu, the Political Culture of a Community in
Change, University of California, 1969, p. 1; M. N. Srinivas, “Caste in Modern India,” The
functions such that the highest caste remains pure, while the lower castes absorb pollution for them.\textsuperscript{49}

Let us turn to a nineteenth century opinion. James Hough in his book, \textit{The History of Christianity in India} comments: 'The pagan inhabitants of India are divided into four general classes, called castes, who are said to have been created by Brammah out of different parts of his own person. The fourth caste sprang from Brammah's foot and is called Sudras, a name implying servility. They are regarded as made for the service of the other castes, which employ them in all menial offices. These castes were created with their females, and Brammah surveyed them, as they first issued from his body, he addressed them thus: "What shall be your occupation?" they submissively replied, "We are not our own masters, O God! Command us what to undertake". Then, there followed the distribution of their duties in the order above described."\textsuperscript{50}

Although the earliest Protestant missionaries in the south of India, where caste feeling was in its most emphatic form, had definitely forbidden all caste distinctions inside church among their converts, such distinctions had slowly but steadily obtained recognition. Until the end of the eighteenth century, there was little to choose in this matter between the Protestant and Roman Catholic missions, which from their earliest times had recognized caste and still continues to recognize\textsuperscript{51} it to some extent inside the church. Even Christian Fredrick Swartz, a missionary of S.P.C.K., though opposed to the practice of caste in principle, slowly and steadily found it necessary to deal very gently with its manifestations and checked only its most extreme and barbarous forms.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{51} Benjamin Schultce mentions in his diary that: "The Pariah children in our congregation are treated the same way as the other as long as they are with us; however, we find it difficult to let them learn the same craft as others. Recently we sent two boys to learn calico-printing, the master asked us whether they were of a high caste, if not, he could not accept them because it would be detrimental to his business since no one would then want to associate with him. We also still can not bring our adult Christians to put behind this deeply ingrained division of caste." See Benjamin Schultce's \textit{Diary}, 1726.

According to John C. B. Webster “Protestant missionaries, unlike their Roman catholic counterparts, tended to view caste as a religious institution sanctioned by and integral to Hinduism. They therefore chose not to work within the caste system but to condemn it.”

Further, Kenneth Ballhatchet, a British historian argues that caste was a long standing problem for the Jesuits in the Madura Mission. They treasured the memory of Robert de Nobili who had lived like a Brahmin and converted some of them. But the Jesuits’ toleration of caste among the Catholics was much criticized. The final word (seemed to have been spoken by Benedict XIV) is noteworthy in this endeavour. In 1744, he ordered that everyone, whatever their class, should hear mass and receive communion in the same church at the same time. Nevertheless, there were little walls which divided the low and intermediary castes from that of the so-called higher sections of the society. Meanwhile, the Jesuits claimed that they could see their congregation hearing the mass together without any differentiation and disparity. There were also separate entrances for low castes in many of their churches, which indeed show the existence of ‘caste’ based division inside the church.

During the early nineteenth century, the question of caste and the attitude of missionaries was much debated. One missionary declared: “The Leipzig society fully acknowledges that caste is, as it exists amongst heathen, not merely a civil but also a religious institution. It has been based on religious ground. The Leipzig society also acknowledged that caste, in the sense of the Hindu Shastras, is totally opposed to the word and the spirit of the gospel.”

It was in this context, that the missionaries began to attempt and adopt policies and programmes to deal with the question of caste. Hence, by the end of the nineteenth

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century, there were two main schools of thought that emerged among the missionary scholars on the caste issue inside the church. Missionaries, in the 1850s began to advocate firm and unyielding measures to tackle the practice. They argued that even if their strong attitude towards this issue led their converts to secession, it was far better to have a few real Christians rather than many memorial adherents. On the contrary, other group of missionaries (some of whom were perhaps forced to compromise in practice) advocated a more tolerant and flexible approach. Their approach, reflected in the attitude of Christian Frederick Schwartz (1724-1798), was that with gentle persuasion and the general dissemination of Christian ideas, castes within the churches would gradually disappear.56

As a result of the ‘strong approach’ of the missionaries towards casteism inside the church, a considerable number of new converts came out of the church and quarrelled with missionaries as they were not willing to leave their deep rooted cultural practice. It was during the first half of the nineteenth century that a few converts went back to their old faith. In Tanjore, a large number of ‘caste-keeping Christians’ seceded from the churches. Caste feeling was still very strong among the Christians there in the 1860s. Bishops from different missionary organizations expressed their displeasure over this question either through their speeches or in their writings. In a letter to Bishop Gell, J. Ignatius, an Indian pastor, complained that: “High caste Christians still consider common Pariah Christians as unclean and that they refuse to associate with them or approach their houses. The Pariah Christians, also influenced by caste feeling, assume caste titles in the hope of moving up the caste hierarchy.”57

Meanwhile, Robert Caldwell, a missionary-cum-Bishop of the S.P.G. in a reply to Gell, Bishop of Madras, wrote that the problem of caste in Tirunelveli congregations in the period 1861-1898 was at its peak. After detailing a long list of the evil effects of caste in his congregations be concluded by saying that: “Worse than all, it is asserted that these are still Christian people and even mission agents, who are reluctant to

evangelize the low-caste people in their neighbourhood at least the new converts should disturb their missionaries, claiming the right of attending the same churches as their neighbours, and sitting under the same roof, though in a different and a lower place.” It shows that although the missionaries remained remarkably united in their attitude towards the ‘evil’ and the disastrous effects of caste within the churches, when it came to practice they become increasingly disunited and uncertain about how to tackle the problem.  

Caldwell firmly asserted that, “caste is anti-social in its own nature, irrespective of its origin and history and is therefore anti-Christian”. He was aware, however, that caste in the church would not disappear that easily. As for casteism in the church, he bemoaned: “Indian Christianity has to contend with a more serious evil than superstition, viz. caste.” Referring to the strong presence of ‘caste feeling’ among the Shanars, Caldwell pointed out that they were “as much influenced by caste feeling as the people of any caste in India, and that to leave them in this matter would be to nourish a serpent which would eventually turn against us”. From the outset, Caldwell introduced a number of measures among converts, such as prayer meetings among the ‘native’ Christians irrespective of caste, inter-dining and learning together in the schools and boarding schools. Caldwell despaired: “I was so far, however, from fancying that caste could be eradicated, even amongst the Shanars, that I was accustomed to say it would take a thousand years to overcome it.”

In due course, Bishop Heber’s moderation and comprehensive humanity led him at first, to question the expediency of any frontal attack on caste. He was inclined to accept Schwartz’s compromise, and to wait hopefully for the undermining of the evil by slow permeation of Christian principles. He, however, understood the need for further enquiry which ultimately resulted in the division of missionaries into two almost equal camps, and the existence of a very bitter feeling among ‘caste Christians’ against any drastic condemnation of caste. Nevertheless, Wilson’s (Bishop

of Bengal) strong and decisive campaign against all caste distinctions indeed determined the Protestant missionaries’ future course of action.60

As a matter of fact, missionaries had made clear their frustration that caste was their single largest obstacle and spoke of the need for potential converts to distance themselves from their caste in order to free their souls for possible conversion. When the Madras Missionary Conference put forward a minute, it was held that: “Caste is one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the gospel in India. Whatever it may have been in the origin, it is now adopted as the essential part of Hindu religion.”61 Since the Christian missionaries recognized caste as the strongest obstacle to the propagation of the Christian faith, they adopted a policy to change the way of life of the people by establishing schools to bring social reform through the process of combating the evils in the Hindu system in general and ‘depressed societies’ in particular.62

In addition, with regard to caste, a ‘native’ pastor observes: “Caste sticks to the people as closely as their skins.” Another ‘native’ pastor who worked in Tirunelveli region opines: “The blood of caste was thicker than the spirit of religion.”63 Meanwhile, Bishop Sargeant was of the opinion that: “Caste is Hinduism and Hinduism is caste.” Bishop Wilson of Calcutta, in his pastoral letter in 1833 says: “The distinction of castes must be abandoned immediately.” Similarly, J. Sharrock commented: “Caste is far stronger in the south than in the north of India.”

By and large, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries considered caste as a great evil which must be uprooted from the church.64

Alexander Duff, a Scottish missionary opines: “Caste has like a cedar struck its roots deep into every crevice of the soil of Hindu nature; wound itself, like a rig, round

every stem and branch of Hindu intellect. It reaches to the unborn child and it directs the nursing of the infant. It shapes the retaining of the youth. It regulates the actions of manhood and it settles the attributes of the old age. It enters into and modifies every relationship of life and it moulds and gives complexion to every department of society. From the cradle to the funeral pile, it sits like a presiding genius at the helm, guiding, directing and determining every movement of the inner and outer man. Beyond the ashes of funeral pile, it follows the disembodied spirit to the world of shades, and fixes its destiny there. It communicates itself to all the parts of a living idolatry, chains each to an unchangeable position and cements the whole into a close rock-like body.\textsuperscript{65}

The missionaries' anguish on caste can be seen in the following lines: "The institution of caste with hereditary possession assigned to each is the most striking feature of the Hindu system." About the role of religion, missionaries opined: "Whatever might be their origin, religion is now intimately interwoven with castes."\textsuperscript{66}

3. Caste Discrimination in Church

Adding injury to insult, depressed class people suffered caste discrimination by the so-called upper sections of the society and other socio-economic disabilities within the churches.\textsuperscript{67} A missionary report states that: "The persistence of caste in the Christian church had been recognized by the Roman Catholics. In 1599 a decree was issued, whereby Christians were permitted to refrain from touching persons of inferior caste, when in the company of heathen (Hindu) of superior caste. Meanwhile, the early Jesuit missionary Robert de Nobili recognized the right and privileges of the caste hierarchy, and within the church, the traditional usages of caste prohibitions were accepted. Churches were even divided into two sections. While sharing a common altar, the high caste Christians were separated from those of low caste by a wall from the church door to the altar. The wall was hollow, so that the priest could

\textsuperscript{65} Proceedings of the South India Missionary Conference, Ootacamund, Madras, 1858, p. 289.
\textsuperscript{66} Church Missionary Society Register, June, 1918, p. 253; David Mosse, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 461.
enter at the door and emerge at the altar without siding with either the high caste or
the low.” 68

Meanwhile, there was a separate prayer house for Pariah converts in Veeranakaru, a
village in the southern region of Tirunelveli district, noted for its early conversion
towards Christianity in 1850s. In due course, a prayer house was constructed within
the premises of the L.M.S. compound for the use of Pariah converts, who were
refused admission into the chapel by Shanars (Nadars) and Ezhava Christians. When a
missionary of L.M.S. called the Pariah Christians into the original church, the Nadar
Christians, as a form of their protest, got up and went out of the church. 69

Further, various missionary societies in their publications on the subject of caste
clearly show that caste is more pervasive and inveterate in South India than in the
north and Ceylon. In a work on caste published in 1847, by Robert, a missionary who
worked in and around Madras region, a reference is made to the year 1828. He
narrates: “We had suffered much in north Ceylon from the retention of this monstrous
evil in the church. For some would not take the sacrament at the same time, place and
mode. For fear of impurity; they could not sit together on the same bench.” 70 This
only shows the nature of casteism in the church.

Besides, by 1850s, there was considerable unanimity between both the British and
American Protestant missionaries that the retention of caste was incompatible with the
profession of Christianity. Caste was not apparent among converts in Bengal and
Bombay presidencies where the missionaries had insisted on its exclusion from the
churches from the very beginning. However, in South India caste feeling in general
was stronger than in the north. Here the early Protestant missionaries had allowed
some caste practices within the church. Over a period of time, caste had become
strongly entrenched especially in the churches established by the S.P.G. mission,

68 Robert Hardgrave, op. cit., p. 31; Ines G. Zupanov, “Aristocratic Analogies and Democratic
Descriptions in the Seventeenth Century Madura Mission, Representations, no. 41, Winter, 1993,
pp. 123-128.

69 Dick Kooiman, Conversion and Social Equality, Manohar, New Delhi, 1989, p. 173; Dick
Kooiman, “Mass Movement Famine, Epidemic: A Study in Interrelationship”, Modern Asian

whose beginning originally dates back to the Danish mission of Tranquebar. Meanwhile, a survey conducted in the Tanjore mission in 1828 revealed that: "In church the Christians of the higher caste still sat on the right while those of the lower caste sat on the left side of the pulpit. The same chalice was used for separate castes, but they went to the altar at different times and the high caste Christians still refused to intermarry or eat with the lower caste converts."71

Meanwhile, with regard to casteism inside the church, Tirunelveli is one of the most important examples. The Diocese of Tirunelveli, formed in 1896, is one of the most important dioceses of the Anglican Church in India. It has probably a larger Indian Christian population than any other. The reason for this can easily be stated. It was in this part of India that the famous Lutheran missionaries supported largely by the S.P.C.K. laboured throughout the eighteenth century and made large number of converts. The diocese of Tirunelveli includes the then government districts of Tirunelveli, Ramanad, and Madurai, which are the most southern districts in British India.

Similarly, Eyre Chatterton was of the opinion that, "Tirunelveli is a part of a missionary field, which has in its records many names of men and women. Tirunelveli is more completely Hinduised, more superstitious and more caste bound than any other part of India."72 One of the prominent factors for the existence of casteism inside the church in southern parts of Tamil Nadu is the great numerical predominance of the Shanars (Nadars) everywhere. This foreshadowed an entirely new aspect of the caste question; the dominance of the Tirunelveli church by the Shanars, or Nadars as they preferred to be called. Thus it can be noticed that caste distinctions were tenaciously maintained between the various divisions of the lower sections of the society.73

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Commenting on the issue of casteism inside the church, Rhenius, a missionary of the C.M.S. narrating an interesting incident: “Besides our usual congregation, there are again several heathen (Hindus) attending divine service. They begin now occasionally to come in and sit down. During this month (March 31, 1822), I appointed David, a ‘native’ convert to instruct the beggars who come every Monday, to receive some charity. When they first began to do so, about 35 poor, lame, blind, old and other wretched men and women were together. We made them all sit down under a tree and when I saw several of them sit rather scattered, I told them to come round and draw closer towards the others, they looked at me, as well as they could, waved their hands and said, “Oh, sir, we cannot sit close to them, because they are not of our caste.” It is to be noted here that these persons, equally wretched and craving for their daily subsistence with the rest indeed were not out of the race of this deep rooted cultural practice.74

Furthermore, it may be observed here that some 81.5 percent of the ‘native’ clergy and converts in Tirunelveli and Ramnad were drawn from the Nadar caste. The catechists and school teachers were of the same class and in some mission districts there was not a single outsider employed. Hence, Pascoe, a missionary writer argues that the predominant nature of the Nadar caste in the church and its over all administration tended to create a dangerous monopoly, as if Christianity were intended only for one class, and the people actually started speaking of “The Nadar church”. This, undoubtedly, paved the path for sharpening of caste discrimination inside the church.75

Thus in the mid-nineteenth century, from the point of view of the distribution of castes, Tirunelveli diocese may be called to be almost a ‘one caste church’ as vast majority of its members (68%) are drawn from the Nadar community. Two other

castes with an appreciable membership are Pallas (11.6%) and the Pariahs (9.3%) and all the other 34 castes put together make up only 10%.\textsuperscript{76}

Due to the dominance of the Nadar community there began caste conflicts between them and the Pariahs inside the church. Many a times there were struggles in the premises of the churches in and around Tirunelveli region. Particularly, in the village of Sawyerpuram, southeast of Tirunelveli, where the congregation had refused to be instructed by a so called low caste catechist on threat of secession, the Nadars occupied the front pews of the church, while the Pallas sat in the back. Furthermore, Sharrock reported that in one congregation, the Pariah pastor “never presumed to sit down in the house of his Shanars (Nadar) flock because of his recognized inferiority of caste,” and when in another village, a Pariah pastor did violate the proprieties of status, he was beaten by his congregation with slippers.”\textsuperscript{77}

Thus, it seems that the main victims of a severe caste feeling within the local church have been the Pariahs. They were the people who had invited missionaries like Ringletaube to come over to south Travancore and had formed the first congregation in Mylaady and its immediate neighbourhoods. However, when the C.M.S. headquarter was shifted from Tirunelveli to Nagercoil, social historians like Jacob and Yesudas agreed that the Nadar predominance began gradually to emerge not only in south Travancore but in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu as well. In many places the Nadars established their ‘supremacy’ in the church thereby, making a subtle return to casteism and forcing other groups to form their own congregations.\textsuperscript{78}

In due course, the observance of caste practice slowly and steadily spread into the hearts and minds of the young pupils. James Hough observes that, “The missionaries were perpetually distressed to observe how ingeniously the casteism operated in their schools and congregations. The children learned their lessons in the same classes, indeed, but they would neither eat together, nor had any intercourse with each other,

\textsuperscript{76} Robert Hardgrave, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 92-93.
\textsuperscript{77} J. S. Ponniah, \textit{An Enquiry into the Economic and Social Problems of the Christian Community of Madurai Ramnad and Tirunelveli Districts}, Madurai, 1988, pp. 28-29.
whereby they might be defiled. This feeling was encouraged by their parents and it is affirmed of some of the child native officers under government that while they pretended to be Christians, at heart they were “real heathen.”

A resolution was now passed, that henceforth no boy should be admitted into school without his consent to lay aside all his heathen customs for those of Christians and every scholar was to consider his reception as preparatory to his embracing Christianity. In order to prevent casteism inside the churches missionaries started various strategies and plans including Caste Suppression Society.

4. Missionaries and Annihilation of Caste

Missionaries opposed the observance of caste norms among the Christians as they saw caste as an essential and integral part of Hinduism. They objected to this cultural practice mainly due to its religious content. Missionaries objected this traditional religious system as they feared that it would damage the quality of life among the Christians and conflict with the idea of a true Christian community. They were also influenced by the fact that caste distinctions and feelings within the church frustrated attempts to build it up in numbers.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Reverend Hough, observing the miserable condition of the Tirunelveli church, appealed to the C.M.S. to send their missionaries to Tirunelveli, in the years 1816 and 1821. In compliance with his request the Church Missionary Society sent two missionaries, Rhenius and Schmid in 1820. The missionaries refused to yield to the prejudice of the Sudras. So it was the C.M.S. missionaries who first launched their battle against caste in the Tirunelveli church. However, the battle against caste, raised by the first two C.M.S. missionaries,

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80 *Caste Suppression Society* was formed in Tuticorin, south eastern part of Tirunelveli at the end of the nineteenth century. It suggested new design for Tali (Maangalyam), heart shaped pendant with a cross in the place of the traditional Hindu Tali. See H. Grafe, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. IV, Part II, Bangalore, 1990, p. 213.
and continued from time to time by their successors, was not entirely able to get rid of caste at the beginning.82

Meanwhile, Bishop Wilson’s circular on the abolition of caste distinctions in the church played a crucial role. In this circular, sent to the missionaries working in the diocese of Calcutta on 5th July, 1833 Bishop Wilson gave instructions concerning the abolition of caste distinctions among Indian Christians under their charge. The circular states: “The children of native Christian will, in the next place, not be admitted to the holy communion without the renunciation of caste, their previous education being directed duly to this amongst other duties of the Christian religion, no material difficulties will, I trust arise here. In the meantime, the distinction of castes, be at once and finally discontinued in the church, whether places in the church be convened or the manner of approach to the Lord’s table, or procession in marriages, or marks on the forehead made with point or other mixtures, or differences of food or dress-whatever be the overt acts, they must, in the church and so far as the influence of ministers goes be at once abandoned.”83 On the other hand, one of the biggest difficulties which Bishop Wilson has faced during his visit to South India is casteism and its impact on the churches. He had declared in the same year that the distinctions of caste must be severely dealt with. He defined his requirements in a letter to Schreyvogel of the S.P.C.K. at Tiruchirapalli on 17th January 1834.84 They are as follows:

“The converts all sit together in church. They come without distinctions to the Lord’s Table. The country priest or catechist remains in his house. Anyone that comes to him, whatever his caste, the congregation admits into their houses the catechists who are duly appointed to instruct them to read with them. The country priest does not refuse to remain in the village where he is appointed because there are none but those who were formally of inferior castes. God fathers and God mothers are taken indiscriminately from whatever caste, and if a different caste from the rest, no objection is taken. When the congregation is called together about any matter all that

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82 Reverend S. Paul, op. cit., p. 463; Lloyd, I. Rudolph, op. cit., p. 975.
can come are welcome, if only they are baptized." Interestingly, on his arrival Wilson attempted to enforce this policy rigorously and at Tanjore on Sunday the February 1, 1835 at a communion service at which there were about three hundred and sixty communicants, sixteen or twenty who had been among the strongest opponents of the abolition of caste mingled indiscriminately with the Pariahs.

The tacit recognition by the government of caste distinctions was from time to time cited as another instance of weak concession to religious prejudice. The Charter of 1833 had confirmed and applied to all the Company’s possessions the principle already formulated by Bentinck in Bengal, that no disabilities in respect of any place, office or employment should be recognized by reason of religion, place of birth, descent or colour. Meanwhile, Macaulay, during the short period of his control of education in Bengal, applied the principle of the 1833 Charter in declaring all schools open to all castes. But this remained for the most part a dead letter, partly because few outcastes during this period had any desire to see their children educated and partly because fewer still were prepared to submit themselves or their children to the persecution that would inevitably attend those who took advantage of this proclamation.

When Rhenius, one of the C.M.S. missionaries first arrived in India in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, he at once opposed the easy going policy on caste which had been followed by the S.P.C.K. missionaries. So did the other new arrivals, Hauboe and Schreyvogel of the S.P.C.K. and the English C.M.S. missionary, William Sawyer. Moreover, the government indeed considered at one time the possibility of intervention. According to Arthur Mayhew, the directors were wise enough to turn a deaf ear. The story as a whole shows the strength of caste even in a sphere that had been subjected to Christian influence. It illustrates the general conception of government at that time as a defender de jure of all indigenous belief and custom, and it explains why the government was able to make so little headway against caste and

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85 Ibid.
87 Ibid., pp. 134-54.
88 H. C. Perumalil, op. cit., p. 234.
why this particular omission on their part received, comparatively, so little criticism in definitely Christian circles. 89

In 1847, the subject to caste among 'native' Christians was, by various circumstances, forced upon the attention of missions. In this regard Tracy, one of the missionaries observed that caste distinction had never been countenanced by the mission, no separate seats in church were allowed and all communicants partook of the sacred emblems of the Lord's death, from the same cup as well as from the same bread. All distinctions of caste among the 'native' Christians in their social intercourse with each other were discountenanced. 90

Meanwhile, Madura Mission had passed the following resolution in 1847 against the casteism inside the church: "That the mission regard caste as an essential part of Hinduism and its full and practical renunciation after proper instruction, as essential to satisfactory evidence of piety and the enunciation of caste implies at least a readiness to eat, under proper circumstance, with any Christians of any caste. We will not hereafter receive into our service as a catechist any one who does not give satisfactory evidence of having renounced caste." 91 In consequence of these resolutions and the subsequent actions upon them many of the catechists left the service of the mission. However, some of them who had left returned with the requisition of the mission. Nevertheless, people who converted to Christianity were still following casteism. 92

What could the missionaries do to weed out these evils from their congregations and to create a real Christian fellowship instead? One of the main weapons resorted to, especially in times of crisis, was giving of a 'love feast.' At such a feast, usually held before or after a Sunday service, people from different castes joined together in eating the same rice and curry, paid for by the mission or by a more well-to-do member of the congregation. In Nagercoil, in 1861, no less than 250 Christian converts shared the

89 Arthur Mayhew, op. cit., p. 155.
91 Ibid.
same meal. Some years later, the missionary in Parachaley, a hamlet near Kanyakumari, invited one or two couples from every caste represented in his church to a similar celebration at his bungalow. Some of them did not turn up, but 29 couples accepted the invitation, among them Shanars of two sub-divisions, Pariahs of three sub-divisions, Nayars, Ezhavas, Chettis, barbers, washer men and hunters. Also, special meetings were held with the Indian agents, to instruct them on the un-Christian nature of the caste system.\(^93\)

Several missions had adopted 'love feasts' both as a test and to promote a kindred spirit. J. J. Dennis in the last report of the Nagercoil Mission, south Travancore says, "At the close of the year, for the first time since I came into the mission, we held a love feast, at which more than 250 church members, persons from 11 different castes sat down together to eat the same curry and rice, prepared and served by men, some of whom used to count themselves as of high caste, and others who are looked upon as of low caste; the mission families also uniting with them..."\(^94\)

Similarly, Robert Caldwell observed that, "I was so far, however from fancying the caste could be eradicated, even amongst the Shanars, by methods (freedom of wells, freedom of streets, the interior arrangements of each congregation etc.), that I was accustomed to say it would take a thousand years to overcome it. Recently, I organized a ‘feast of charity’, to which all communities were invited. More than a hundred persons, men and women, of five different castes including Vellalas attended and ate the food together that had been cooked by the caste that was regarded as the lowest. It has been my rule ever since not to admit to the Communion any persons who have not proved either in this way, or in some other manner equally public and decisive, that they have abandoned the heathen notion, that food which has been prepared or touched by people of inferior castes conveys pollution. I am still, however, very far from supposing that caste has been overcome. A beginning has been made, and that is all. The line of battle must be advanced further and further by

\(^93\) Dick Kooiman, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 174.  
each generation of missionaries, and position after position must be gained, before the crisis arrives.\textsuperscript{95}

Another weapon in this fight was to make a complete renunciation of caste as absolute condition to church membership. As church membership was the highest position attainable for Christian laity, it was at the same time indicative of the emergence of a new ranking system alongside the old one. It became the usual procedure that only after about six months of regular attendance and probation, aspiring Christians could reach the first level of this hierarchy by having their names entered on the list of a local congregation. After a certain period of instruction, persons thus listed could receive baptism and become candidates, but only after several examinations and sufficient proof of good Christian conduct, they were admitted to full church membership and Holy Communion.\textsuperscript{96}

Meanwhile, in 1867 Bishop Gell instituted an inquiry into the attitude of missionaries in his diocese on the question of caste in the church, a vital matter in South India. He received some very interesting replies which were privately printed in 1868 and provided a fairly complete survey of the situation. Interestingly, none of those who replied to the Bishop had any hesitation in condemning caste.\textsuperscript{97} Moreover, to counteract the practice among missionaries and pastors of using caste titles when addressing members of the congregation and of allowing communicants to approach the altar in order of caste, Caste Suppression Society was formed at Tuticorin, the south eastern part of Tamil Nadu in 1893.\textsuperscript{98} The Caste Suppression Society according to J. A. Sharrock had branches at Tuticorin, Trichinapoly, Ramnad, and Madura. He stated that: "Many more would join but for the offence of the cross i.e., they are afraid to give up the use of caste titles from fear of offending their neighbours or their parishioners. It is the fear of man, rather than fear of God, which impels them."\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., pp. 237-238.
\textsuperscript{96} Dick Kooiman, op. cit., pp. 174-175.
\textsuperscript{97} M.E. Gibbs, op. cit., pp. 248-249.
\textsuperscript{98} Geoffrey A. Oddie, Social Protest in India, op. cit., p. 53.
Meanwhile, Henry Jacob, Bishop of Madras in his paper “Caste Suppression Society” admitted that: “It is difficult to understand the ideas and sentiments which lie at the root of the caste system in India.” He was of the opinion that: “Christianity with caste would be no Christianity at all. Christianity with caste would be Christianity without the Body of Christ, and Christianity without the Body of Christ would he Christianity without union with Christ and without reconciliation with God.” He also explained that: “This is a matter then of supreme importance to the Christian Church of South India. There is already a tendency to palliate and make terms with caste; to allow it to retain its foothold in the Christian society; to let it alone in the vain hope that it will die out of itself. In the same way the Israelites were tempted to make terms with the Canaanites in the Promised Land, to allow them to retain their foothold, in the hope that they would gradually die out of themselves. We know the results. There is reason to dread a similar result in the Christian Church in South India. Caste is an Anti-Christian system. The spirit of Christ and truth of Gospel demand that it should be exterminated in the Church with the same severity as the Canaanites of old.”

Ultimately, the Bishop of Mylapore, pleaded in the Conference of the Indian Hierarchy in 1921, to reiterate the non-implemented instruction of the Propaganda Fide of 1783, which disapproved of separate seats in churches and against The Letter of Propaganda of 1865 which demanded that all castes be admitted into schools. In 1933, South India Bishops wrote a common pastoral letter in favour of the abolition of caste distinction in the church.101

5. Missionaries as Upholders of Caste

One of the many difficulties with which one contends is that some missionaries disapproved of caste in theory, but did nothing in opposition to it - they merely palliated its evils, and hence were there regarded by ‘natives’ as upholders of caste.102

The Roman Catholic Church began with group conversion along the coasts of

Paravars (fisherfolk), from Bombay to Goa to Kanyakumari and up to Madras. The culture was accepted and this included caste. The colonial power and the early missionaries did not wish to disturb social realities for obvious reasons.  

Early Catholic missionaries in Tamil Nadu like, Robert de Nobili (1576-1656) rejected entirely all considerations of state help and determined to become “An Indian to the Indians.” He wore the light yellow robe of a Sanyasi Brahman, engaged Brahmins as his servants and confined his menu to the vegetarian diet of the Brahmins. He allowed visitors of highest castes, and Brahmins in particular to have access to him. The view that baptism in itself constituted a break down of caste, invariably resulting in exclusion from heathen caste circles, did not quite happen that way in practice. On the contrary, those who were baptized maintained all the forms and ceremonies of their old religion. They continued to wear the sacred thread, which Nobili himself did, the only difference being that Christian “Sacred thread” consisted of three golden strands, symbolic of the holy trinity and two silver ones, typifying the human and divine nature of Christ.

The Christians too, like the Hindus, put a caste mark on their forehead, and they simply did not employ cow-dung ashes as the ‘natives’ did, but instead, used ashes of sandalwood on their forehead. A special church was erected by Nobili for his converts, and they were organized into a self-contained community which had no dealings whatever with the older church of Parava Christians. Robert de Nobili allowed caste differences to exist in all their vigour between church members of the higher and lower caste, even to the extent of countenancing the idea that contact between a Parava Christian and a Brahmin Christian rendered the later unclean. Further he called himself a raja of Rome, a guru or teacher of religion, a sanyasi and from 1611 onwards, a Brahmin.

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103 Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion*, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1999, p. 27.
In the policy of accommodation the Catholic missionaries tolerated caste inside the church and allowed a wall of separation to be erected between the high and the low. To the Catholics and the Lutherans social barriers like caste neither looked strange nor did it offend their finer sensibilities. They did not think that human inequality was offensive nor did they care to take cognizance of the social inequalities among the Christians of India. As such social pluralism was allowed to flourish in the churches without any resistance.  

On the other hand, in 1706, two German missionaries arrived in Tranquebar, paid by the Danish Crown and were sent out on their mission by the Danish Missionary College. They were Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau and were the first Protestant missionaries in India. To a certain extent Ziegenbalg and Plutschau continued the tradition, laid down by the Jesuit missionaries. They established close connections with local Brahmins who were to teach them about Hindu rituals, customs, gods and goddesses and morals. As a result, these two missionaries gave a clarion call for the total rejection of Hindu religion and the morals it represented. “They also accepted a certain amount of caste behaviour in the church congregation. In the churches, the Pariahs were seated separately from the higher castes and used separate entrances. Until 1778, the two groups did not receive communion from the same chalice.  

While the difficulties of dealing with the complex issue of caste stimulated the formulation of a more definite attitude towards caste and close cooperation among the Anglican missionaries, there still had not been a serious attempt to coordinate the approach of the diffident Protestant denominations or enunciate an overall Protestant policy on the question. Matters, however, soon came to a head. The Lutheran missionaries of the Leipzig Mission, which took over the work of Danish Halle mission among the Tamils in 1840, adopted a conciliatory attitude on this issue.

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106 S. Manickam, “Missions’ Approaches to Caste,” op. cit., p. 68.
Ringletaube, a missionary of the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.) in south Travancore, had assumed a tolerant attitude towards casteism. In his opinion, it was impossible to make converts, if the missions were to insist on the losing of caste. He was also frank enough to ascribe the results of his work to adjustment to the prevailing 'racial system'. Missionaries who came later, Walther, Pressier, Dal and Bose decided to allow the distinction of caste in their church, for they found it very difficult to eradicate the deep rooted caste prejudices. For instance, after Jenicke (1791), the first resident missionary in Tirunelveli, Sathianathan, a 'native' Indian was ordained at Tranquebar by the missionaries according to the Lutheran tradition. The earlier missionaries, like the Roman priests, did not interfere with the caste questions. All the leading mission agents who came from Tranquebar were caste observing men. But after the departure of Jenicke from Tirunelveli, the young church was placed under the immediate charge and guidance of the 'native' missionary Sathianathan and his catechists. As most of them held that they should not give up their caste at any cost, they infused the caste spirit into the infant church.

On this point Reverend Paul, a missionary writer of the C.M.S. opines that: “The missionaries of Tranquebar and Tanjore who went to Tirunelveli very early to preach and to whose hand the superintendence of the church was entrusted for a long time, were the cause of it.” Expressing his concern, Paul added: “The Tranquebar and Tanjore missionaries chose to make caste a friend rather than enemy. In doing this, however, while they made their path easier, they sacrificed their principles and admitted an element into their midst which acted in their Christian community like poison. They embraced an adversary who could never become their friend. They sowed the seeds of pride, distrust and alienation in their congregations which brought forth abundant crops of rank and vexatious weeds.”

Meanwhile, the role of headmen of church is also crucial because it paved the way for the sharpening of casteism within the church at large. In Tirunelveli and surrounding

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111 Reverend S. Paul, *op. cit.*, p.82.
112 *Ibid.*, pp. 82-84.
districts of southern Tamil Nadu, headmen of church congregation played a vital role in superintending over the congregation. The headmen not only looked after ecclesiastical and educational matters, but even social matters. The heads of the congregation, being also the heads of the community, had much more power and a much wider scope of influence than English church wardens. They felt themselves responsible for the obedience of the rest of the people to Christian rules, for their regularity in attending church and sending their children to school, for the collection of contributions for charitable and religious purposes, for carrying into effect decisions of church discipline, as well as for the settlement of any civil and social disputes. Generally the head men were chosen by the people, and appointed by the missionary; yet in almost every instance those persons were alone appointed to whom the people had always been accustomed to look up to. However, the head men sometimes abused their power and placed might before right in their dealings with the poorer members of the community. This misuse of power of village headmen slowly paved the way for the sharpening of casteism in the church.\textsuperscript{113}

In spite of missionaries' protest against casteism both inside and outside the church, government census reports continued to declare and rank the various castes, fostering in the process a greater awareness of status and inter-caste rivalry. Missionary scholars and Western historians in their writings focused on the cultural past of depressed class converts. Robert Hardgrave's study on the Nadar community concluded that the missionaries by providing education, by opening up channels of communication among them and by campaigning against their disabilities, encouraged a sense of caste solidarity and intensified inter-caste rivalry among the depressed class masses in general and the newly converted intermediary sections of the society in particular.\textsuperscript{114}

It should also be noted here that in southern parts of Tamil Nadu casteism inside the church became a common phenomenon. There were constant struggles between the Nadars and Vellalas. The Nadar pastors exalted themselves before Vellala pastors and

\textsuperscript{113} Robert Caldwell, \textit{Lectures on the Timevelly Missions}, London, Bell and Daldy, 1857, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{114} Geoffrey A. Oddie, \textit{Social Protest in India}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 73-74.
vice-versa. As a result, it led to conflict between these two castes.\textsuperscript{115} On the other hand, calling out of names by caste titles and appointment of pastors on caste basis also became common in most of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu even before 1800.\textsuperscript{116} It shows the continuation of casteism and its impact inside the church even after the members’ conversion to Christianity from Hinduism.

Elaborating upon his scathing attack on casteism inside the church, Reverend Paul laments that: “It is an undoubted fact, not an opinion, that missionaries of Tranquebar and Tanjore have spoiled the Tirunelveli church with regard to caste. They publicly preached the gospel and privately preached caste. They spoiled not only the Tirunelveli church but that of Madras also.”\textsuperscript{117}

Further, as late as 1906, the Reverend A.J. Sharrock, missionary of the Society for the Propagation of Gospel (S.P.G.), well known for his opposition to caste within the church observed that: “We, missionaries preach against caste, and we use occasional opportunities to check it, but the great stream flows on and unrestrainedly. Theoretically, we all English and ‘native’ denounce it practically, we all permit it or practice it, we speak against it, we write against it and in fact we do everything but act against it.”\textsuperscript{118}

Thus, even though the missionaries denounced caste and tried as far as possible to ignore it in their work they continued to use caste titles like Pariah Christian, Palla Christian, Nadar Christian, and Brahmin etc. As a matter of fact, they were not able to execute their ‘caste abolition plan’ effectively and efficiently. They also established schools on caste lines; particularly schools for lower castes and schools for upper castes and so on so forth. Besides titles like high caste converts, low caste converts etc., had also been used at regular intervals.\textsuperscript{119} Even though they did not understand

\textsuperscript{116} Robert Hardgrave, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{117} Reverend S. Paul, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 83-84.
\textsuperscript{118} Geoffrey A. Oddie, Social Protest in India, \textit{op. cit.}, p.54.
what they were actually doing the usage of caste titles made an indelible impact in the minds of the newly converted masses.

On account of the poor plight of the newly converted masses, very often missionaries tried to show their ‘sympathy’ towards them. As a result of which, they themselves fell victim to the ‘caste trap.’ It is evident from what Shafter, a missionary says: “The low proportion of Nadar population in northern Tirunelveli is a ‘disadvantage’ for our gospel. The disadvantage is perhaps, that Shanars (Nadars) who show in, our days, a particular disposition for receiving the gospel, are less numerous in the north than they are in the south.” On the other hand, Reverend Honis once observed that, “Caste is as ingrained in the native character as the colour in their skin. Even if it has been washed, and in many instances, I fear white washed, at any rate the evil still remains.”

Hence, George W. Sawday concludes thus: “Gods have arisen, had their brief day of power and then passed into forgetfulness. Buddhism shook the empire to its very centre and won over millions of its brightest intellectuals. Mohammedanism with its lust of empire and Christianity with its gospel of brotherly love, have fought against caste. However, it still rules with its iron sway. The capacity and culture of man’s intellect was shamefully under estimated when it was expected that such an artificial order, so preposterously unsuited to the interest of humanity and to the advancement of civilization, should for ever continue to influence the life and destiny of untold generations.”

Meanwhile, one of the major consequences of casteism inside the church is that during the last decade of the nineteenth century, Christian converts from lower and intermediary background felt that they were being ignored, deserted or forgotten by the missionaries as they were occasionally neglected by missionary societies like the S.P.G., C.M.S. and L.M.S. and others. They accused missionaries of being prejudiced in favour of the Nadars. They even complained that all the higher posts in churches,

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120 Madras Church Missionary Record, No.11, vol. XXXVI, November, 1864, p.338.
schools, hospitals, and other institutions of missionaries were given only to Nadars. This feeling of being subjected to a new variety of the old caste hierarchy made many Pariahs and Pulayas leave the Anglican churches to join other newly formed missions. The Salvation Army, a missionary organization, under the commissioner, Booth Tucker,\textsuperscript{122} which worked among criminals and the out caste ‘native’ people, gave ‘asylum’ to these so-called, neglected Christians.\textsuperscript{123}

Hence, it may be observed here that the missionaries’ war against casteism inside the church gave them only a ‘temporary relief’ partly due to Hinduism and the ‘castiest mindset’ of the converted masses and partly because of the ‘appeasement approach’ adopted the missionary societies towards their newly won converts and congregations. It could even be argued that the missionaries had lost their battle much before their war began with the monstrous force of caste. The early Catholic missionaries more or less recognized the inevitable social differentiation and accordingly social arrangements were initiated within the premises of church. High caste converts, low caste converts, Parava converts, Nadar converts, Pariah converts, and Vellala converts had become the order of the day in the congregational discourse, giving subtle recognition to such a dangerous social phenomenon.

‘Half-hearted’ efforts were undertaken in the beginning of the eighteenth century by the missionaries due to which they were not able to arrest the all-pervasive influence of caste across the society. Caste today is the fundamental ingredient of southern Tamil Nadu church social fabric, an effort to eliminate which may even turn out to be fatal to its existence. Nevertheless, efforts are on to contain the influence of caste, if not to terminate it altogether.


\textsuperscript{123} Dick Kooiman, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 177.