CHAPTER-II

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

The modern understanding of religion and conversion not only developed as an answer to political problems in Europe, it is the result of the expansion of the European world system and the encounter with different religions and cultures that were gradually subjected to colonisation. Clearly, the globalisation of Christianity was not only economic but also cultural and religious. In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that Western knowledge about the Orient was a systematic discourse by which European was able to manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and even imaginatively. ²

Conversion³ has been the subject of considerable theorising. It has been and is still defined in terms of ideological, philosophical or other pre-disposition. Some for example see conversion as consequence of persuasion, as the cognitive act or commitment of a free will, which usually calls for total transformation of one’s world view, value system and behaviour. Many a times, conversion is understood to be miraculous and supernatural event: an act of divine grace performed by creative or reproductive supreme being, which is experienced by a single individual person or group of persons; totally transforming or beginning to totally transform the personality of the person concerned and thereby producing a different understanding of ultimate reality, along with new beliefs, new doctrines, new principles, new behaviour and new norms of conduct.⁴

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¹ During the sixteenth century, the Protestants had no mission in the East. In their teachings neither Luther nor Calvin had emphasised the missionary obligation recognised by the Catholics as a Command of Christ to spread the gospel throughout the world. The Lutheran and Calvinist movements had concentrated on establishing their churches and in winning their recognition of their right to exist. However, a few lonely voices had called for the Lutherans to compete with the Jesuits to carry the “True gospel” in to Asia. See Donald F. Lach and Edwin J.Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 269-270.


³ Conversion is also called as Manamthirumbuthal in Tamil.

As a matter of fact, the earliest recorded conversion had taken place among the Parava\textsuperscript{5} caste of pearl fishermen around the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula. The poor Parava fisher men were constantly harassed and subjected by the Arab pirates and the high caste Hindu traders. Having no option, the Paravas sent their deputation to the Portuguese, seeking protection and offering to adopt Christianity. By 1537, almost all the castes in the coastal hamlet had been baptised and the Portuguese in turn, had accepted some kind of responsibility for their protection.\textsuperscript{6}

Having faced the intellectual difficulties relating to a sufficiently accurate and workable definition of conversion, Robert Eric Frykenberg provides the following statement as a working definition: “Conversion is a change from one view of way to another; from set of beliefs or opinions to another.” What has emerged from the above definition is that, conversion is the inner experience of either one single individual person or a group of persons involving changes in beliefs, groups’ identification and characteristics of personality.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{1. Strategies of Conversion}

For the missionaries of the sixteenth\textsuperscript{8} and seventeenth centuries, particularly Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) who came to India in 1602; he built on Francis Xavier’s work but also brought new concepts into Roman Catholic mission. He wanted to keep the mission outside the dominion of the Portuguese Crown, which was the main reason why he settled in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu. The most important of Nobili’s new concept was his wish to adopt the religious background of the Hindus. He dressed like a Brahmin \textit{sanyasi} (ascetic), restricted himself to a vegetarian diet and received only

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{5} Fishing community.
\textsuperscript{8} Goa was captured by the Portuguese in 1510 and forthwith the ‘natives’ were brought under compulsion to become Christians. The king of Portugal was asked to tell commandants that if they did not propagate the faith, they would be deprived of all their possessions. Similarly, the ‘natives’ were threatened with detention for long terms and imprisonment. Native authorities were threatened with imprisonment and deportation to Goa. Money was also freely distributed. Francis Xavier’s letters show that at one time the governor of Goa gave 4,000 gold \textit{fanams} (Rs. 15,000) to be distributed in thirty villages, Rs. 500 each for converting the ‘natives.’ See J. S. Chandler, \textit{History of Jesuit Mission in Madura, South India}, Madras, 1909, p. 9
\end{footnotesize}
high caste people in his house. For the missionaries of the nineteenth century, the significance of Robert de Nobili’s endeavours lay in two spheres. Firstly, he attempted to convert India ‘from the top’, i.e., through the Brahmin elite. Secondly, he accepted the continued use of a number of Hindu practices which he considered not essentially religious but rather social or cultural. This included acceptance of the smearing of the sacred ash or sandalwood paste on the forehead and the use of the Brahmanical sacred thread. It also included the building of separate churches for Brahmin converts and the Palla converts.

However, on the contrary, the Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century concentrated on converting India ‘from the bottom’ i.e., by concentrating on the low-caste groups. Meanwhile, the later part of the nineteenth century witnessed the rise and expansion of missionary activities in different parts of the world. A great evangelical spirit shook particularly the Protestant sects both in Britain and the United States in general and India in particular. Co-incidentally, the early years of the twentieth century also marked the beginning of energising inducement of the native workers, who were trained and reassessed in mission stations which inculcated new habits and customs in mass organisation among their own tribes.

In this context, in South India, converted individuals from the upper sections of the society started looking upon themselves as agents of a gradual penetration of Christianity to the lower sections of the society. There had indeed been converts from the depressed sections of society. It has frequently been argued that the depressed classes embraced Christianity for a variety of reasons, which indeed kept on changing from person to person and region to region. Abbe Dubois observed that, of his two or three hundred converts in southern districts of Tamil Nadu; two thirds were Pariahs,

10 Henriette Bugge, op. cit., pp. 45-46.
11 Providential Christian expansion throughout history has its roots in the missionary movement that grew up outside the Protestant state churches in eighteenth century European Christendom; first among Lutheran Pietists, then among Moravians and finally among the British and shortly afterwards, American Evangelicals. See Jeffrey Cox, The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700, Routledge, 2008, p.11.
or beggars and the rest were composed of Sudras and outcastes of several tribes, who being without resources turned Christians, in order to form new connections, chiefly for the purpose of marriage or with some other material reasons.  

About the role of caste in group conversion, Duncan B. Forrester had pointed out: “Group conversion was something most Protestant missionaries had neither sought nor expected and in the beginning were puzzled at seeing that caste links could help rather, than hinder evangelisation: in what the missionaries labelled ‘mass movements’, the traditional social structure of centre, including links between those who had converted and those who had not, was maintained and proved to be in many ways a useful thing. It took time for the missions to adjust their thinking and strategy to the new phenomenon, which quickly transformed the whole mission scene, forcing missionaries to reassess their attitude to caste.”

It is to be stated here that, after the gospel had been preached amongst the people of a number of hamlets and villages for, say, six months or a year, or sometimes even after as long as four or five years, a whole village or a group of villages might come to the missionary or to the native priest requesting him to teach certain truths and thus voluntarily submit themselves to Christian instructions. This kind of conversion often took place between the 1840s and 1910s amongst the outcastes such as: the Nadars, Pariahs Pallas, and Maravar communities. According to the missionaries, the Nadars always waited to be converted along with their kith and kin, because they could not shake off the ties of kinship to which they had been accustomed from their early age.

However, in the initial stages, not all those who committed themselves to Christian instruction continued to the point of baptism. At times the whole village withdrew,

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14 In the last decades of the nineteenth century, urgent and unprecedented demands among oppressed peoples in colonial India drove what came to be called ‘Mass conversion movements’ towards a range of Christian denominations, launching a ‘revolution’ in South Asia’s two thousand years history of Christianity. See Christopher Harding, Religious Transformation in South Asia: The Meanings of Conversion in Colonial Punjab, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 176.
16 Samuel Jayakumar, op. cit., pp. 133-134.
because of the violent opposition by upper caste Hindu communities under whom the depressed classes, particularly the Pariahs and other outcastes then worked. In the case of Nadars, persecution mostly came from their own relatives or the Hindu Nadars under whom they worked as tree climbers and also from Brahmins and other upper-caste Hindus.\textsuperscript{17} The group conversion thus spread this time to a caste (Nadars) in a very similar and political situation but living on the other side of Cape Comorin. Both castes (Nadars and Pariahs) retained most of their social structures and very little was done by missionaries to integrate them with Christians from other backgrounds.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus, a considerable number of the South Indians had become Christians because either their parents or their ancestors converted in what have been called ‘mass movements’. Donald McGauran calls them ‘peoples’ movement’, as groups after groups converted. The conversion of Nadars and Sambavars in Tirunelveli\textsuperscript{19} and south Travancore areas respectively, are such examples for mass or group conversion.\textsuperscript{20}

Tirunelveli, known for its group conversion, was always understood as a change of direction and perspective in the history of the Christian mission. Samuel Jayakumar, a missionary scholar observes that the conversion in Tirunelveli region marked a new beginning with a change of consciousness resulting in Christian discipline, character formation and adherence to the norms of the church. He concludes that in the areas in and around Tirunelveli, conversion to Christianity was both personal and communal. The depressed classes embraced Christianity as a family made decision to follow the teachings of Christ. It required the total commitment of the converts and their families to lead a life altogether in a new direction. This new direction was the fundamental factor in the social mobility of the poor and the oppressed believers.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] Ibid., pp. 134-135.
\item[18] Geoffrey A. Oddie, Religion in South Asia, op. cit., p. 80.
\item[21] Samuel Jayakumar, op. cit., p. 33b.
\end{footnotes}
2. Conversion: An Act of Social Change

Conversion as an act of social change has been the centre of our debate, particularly in regard to the spread and growth of Christianity among the marginalised sections of the Hindu society. David Walters argues: “Conversion is nothing but the missionaries and their Indian colleagues go into the village, among those of lower caste or among the Pariahs and other depressed classes and there preach Christ. They seek interviews with leading men or village councils (Panchayats) and persuade them to lead their people out from contact with heathenism and all its corrupt and degrading practices. The village declares itself Christian in name only it is true, but it means that the people are willing to be taught and led. A teacher is given to them, a school is opened, which promises some measure of social and economic improvement in their condition. The teacher is also a pastor, and in addition to a day school, classes are conducted to prepare the people for baptism.”

Thus an era of expansion, took place in the nineteenth century, when missionary societies were established in both Europe and United States and when the European colonialism was at its peak. Both Protestants and Catholics sent missionaries to almost every part of the countries on earth, and medical missionaries began to provide medical and educational assistance in conjunction with spiritual help. The result of these efforts is the worldwide Christian church existing in their own regions.

Protestant missions in India began with the arrival of Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau in 1706 in Tranquebar under the royal patronage of the king of Denmark.

In due course, in the Madras Presidency in the 1850s, there were at least 80,000 native converts from Hinduism in connection with the different Protestant missionary societies, at work in various parts of the field and of that number, about 58,000 were

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24 Christian Frederick Schwartz, Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of the Reverend Christian Frederick Schwartz: To Which is Prefixed as Sketch of History of Christianity in India, Published by D. Appleton and Co., 1835, pp. 19-20.
connected with the missions of the Church of England. In this context Robert Caldwell observed that a large group or village blocked the mission compounds and demanded to be baptised as Christians. The numbers of Protestant Christians in the Madras Presidency undoubtedly rose from a little less than 75,000 in 1851 to about 300,000 in 1891. Another dimension of the new situation was that, the majority of the new converts came from the ranks of the lower and intermediary sections; the Malas and Madigas in the Telugu areas, and the Pariahs, Pallas and Nadars in the Tamil areas. Most of the depressed classes placed themselves under Christian instruction, partly because of the care they had received during the terrible famines and epidemics of the late nineteenth century and partly due to the influence of the Christian ideology of egalitarianism, freedom from the oppression of the caste system, opportunities for social ascent via mission school education, legal protection and justice and the possibility of freedom from the snares of superstition.

Despite the first Christian mission in Tirunelveli, which was formed by the Roman Catholics among the Paravas along the coast in the first half of the sixteenth century, where Francis Xavier was engaging in the work for about two years 1542-1544, the pioneering effort in this endeavour was made by a Protestant missionary, Schwarz of S.P.C.K., with the conversion of native individuals including, Savarimuthu and Clorinda etc. at Palayamkottai in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. It is to be noted here that from 1780, the mission took an organised shape by the formation of a congregation there, gathered from many castes numbering forty persons. Of these, the first convert in Tirunelveli was a Brahmin widow, Clarinda.

The object of Christian missions to nations like India was not to found schools, orphanages, and hospitals or even to give better physical help and aid to self-support, but to obey Christ’s last command: “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations.” Nevertheless, the missionaries tried to secure converts through their

26 Henriette Bugge, op. cit., pp. 142-144.
‘mission strategies’ like, evangelisation, education, literary and medical work and other material means.30

Although few missionary societies engaged themselves in the process of conversion, there were also restrictions placed upon foreign missionaries by the colonial government. Those coming from countries other than Commonwealth countries had to take a neutrality pledge before coming out to India, by means of which they promised not to interfere in political matters. Another restriction on foreign missionaries in the British days was that some of the small Indian states living under feudal conditions were permitted to close their doors to Christian missions. 31

3. Royal Patronage and Proselytisation

In the early years of Portuguese conquest in India the sword and the Bible went hand in hand. If the colonial rulers found the Indians a vile race who had to be subdued, the missionaries who were part of the ruling establishment found Indian religions abhorrent and worthy of destruction. It was not enough for them to win converts among the Hindus. Firmly convinced that that religion amounted to little more than ‘stories and fables’, they attempted to stamp out Hindu rituals, beliefs, and religious and cultural practices as well. Therefore Hindu religious processions were banned even as Christians were encouraged to take out processions of their own, Brahmin houses were raided, sacred texts were confiscated, and the Jesuits destroyed several Hindu temples, defiled them by slaughtering cows on their grounds and polluted water sources by throwing the carcasses into them. Writing to the Portuguese Fathers on 25 December, 1558, the Jesuit Father Teixeira explained how ‘sometimes we spend our time making fun of the Hindus’ gods, of their eating and drinking habits, and of the errors in their religion, so that they will get less fond of them’. It hardly needs to be added that in all of these activities the missionaries had the full protection of Portuguese soldiers.32

Many of the attitudes of the early Portuguese, if not their most extreme ones, came to be shared by British missionaries and administrators when they got into the business of colonising India.\textsuperscript{33} It was in the year 1698, the East India Company Charter of 5 September, 1698 contained provision for the appointment and support of chaplains states: "We do hereby further will and appoint that the said Company, hereby established, and their successors, shall constantly, maintain a minister and school master in the Island of St. Helena and we do further will and appoint, that all such ministers as shall be sent to reside in India, as a foresaid, shall be obliged to learn, within one year of their arrival the Portuguese language, and shall apply themselves to learn the native language of the country where they shall reside, the better to enable them to instruct the natives."\textsuperscript{34}

Meanwhile, the first Protestant missionaries who came to India, Ziegenbalg and Plutschau of Halle University, Germany, were sent under the patronage of Frederick IV, King of Denmark. This declaration constituted their authorisation and instructions.\textsuperscript{35} Instruction, according to which, "We, Frederick IV, King of Denmark and Norway etc., do in our Royal favour desire, that Mr. Henry Plutschau, born in Mecklenburg, whom we have resolved to send to Eastern India as a missionary, should with all submission conduct himself on his voyage out to and there in India until our further orders. He shall be content with what we in our Royal favour have granted him for his annual pay and support and not take any money from the people for the performance of his official duties."\textsuperscript{36}

Similarly, the first English missionary to India was William Carey, who landed at Calcutta on Nov. 13, 1793. At that time the East India Company forbade any European not in its service to set his foot on the Company's territories without special license. Arriving in a Danish ship, William Carey had to register himself as an indigo planter, and at Mudnabatty, 150 miles north of Calcutta, he went to work as a

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} M. K. Kuriakose, \textit{History of Christianity in India}, Christian Literature Society, Bangalore, pp. 56-57.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., pp. 57-58.
\textsuperscript{36} M. K. Kuriakose, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 57-60. See also \textit{Abstract of a letter dated at Copenhagen, December 22, 1714 to the Reverend Mr. The Boehm in London from Frederick. A Brief Account of the Measures taken in Denmark}, p. 23.
superintendent of an indigo factory on rupees 75 a month. There and in that capacity he lived for six years and then started missionary activities. Thus missionaries from England started coming to India from the eighteenth century and Scotland from the beginning of nineteenth century.

With the opening of the modern era, Spain and Portugal, as the chief colonial powers, naturally took the lead in missionary work. It was in the year 1806, Ringletaube, a native of Prussia, sailed from Copenhagen in a Danish ship in April 1804. He landed at Tranquebar and spent sometime in consultation with the Danish missionaries there. Finding that there were some professing Christians in Tirunelveli, in a very neglected and destitute condition, he resolved to labour in those parts.

Meanwhile, the clause in the East India Company Act of 1813 which occasioned most controversy was XXXIII, which declared it to be; “The duty of this country to promote the interest and happiness of the native inhabitants of the British dominions in India” by introducing “useful knowledge and religious improvement” and “to make provision for granting permission to persons desirous of going to or residing in India for the above purposes”. One of the results of the clause of 1813 Charter Act was that it opened the gates for missionaries to India in general and to southern Tamil Nadu in particular.

Even though the first two decades of the nineteenth century were considered by missionaries as an unfortunate period for their missionary work, due to the British Raj and its cautious policy towards the missionaries, the arrival of Lord Bentinck as

37 M. K. Kurianose, op. cit., p. 65.
38 Alexander Duff, a Scottish missionary once appealed to the fathers and mothers of Scotland to send their children for evangelical mission in India. In his appeal he says, “There is not a valley nor dell nor burning waste from one end of India to the other, that is not enriched with the bones, and not a rivulet or stream that has not been dyed with the blood of Scotia’s children. And will you, fathers and mothers send out your children in thousands in quest of this bubble fame, bubble wealth, bubble honour and perishable renown and prohibit them from going forth in the army of the great Immanuel, to win crowns of glory and imperishable renown in the realms of everlasting day?” Undoubtedly, such a man’s enthusiasm and personality did not fail to make an impact on the history of missions in India. As a result he could ‘influence’ the hearts and minds of many young people. See V. Azariah, India and Christian Movement, Madras, 1934, pp. 68-69.
40 Proceeding of the South India Missionary Conference, Held at Ootacamund, Madras, 1858, p. 6.
Governor General in 1828 and the growing influence of reform-minded Utilitarians in leading circles, and government policies definitely changed in favour of the Christian missions. The number of Protestant missionaries showed a sharp increase, approximating 339 men in 1851 and British personnel soon outnumbered their German colleagues. At the same time, these later missionaries were, at least to a certain extent, nationalistic in their Anglicanism or Scottish Presbyterianism and a ‘closer alliance’ emerged between the British-India government and few missionary societies. To get innumerable missionaries, a change of policy was witnessed in the Company Charter in 1813.

Mounting pressure from the missionary bodies and returned Company officials, like former resident in Travancore and Cochin, Macaulay resulted in a Parliamentary Resolution asking the government not to support but at least permit the work of Christian missions in India. This resolution was translated in a special Clause, inserted in the new Charter Act and was passed without difficulty. The Clause laid down that, in view of the interests and happiness of the native inhabitants of British India; “Such measures ought to be adopted as may tend to the introduction among them of useful knowledge, and of religious and moral improvement and in furtherance of the above objects, sufficient facilities ought to be afforded by law or persons desirous of going to and remaining in India, for the purpose of accomplishing those benevolent designs.” Thus the motion to allow the missionaries to proselytise and convert was passed in 1813. Missionaries came to India to serve in a multitude of ways: whether it was relieving distress following some natural disaster or political upheaval or ministering to the sick and diseased; or raising economic standards; or sharing in the important work of education. Nevertheless, their primary concern was to proclaim the gospel.

During the first years after 1813, the British Raj adopted a cautious policy towards the missionaries. After the arrival of Lord Bentinck as Governor-General in 1828 and the

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42 Dick Kooiman, op. cit., pp. 31-32.
43 Ibid.
44 Dick Kooiman, op. cit., pp. 30-32.
growing influence of reform minded Utilitarians in leading circles, government policy definitely changed in favour of Christian missions.46

In the early days of the mission, the work was fostered by the venerable S.P.C.K. From Tanjore, as their centre and head-quarters, the missionaries of that society continued to tend and nourish the church of Tirunelveli.47 The Tirunelveli mission was a mission with a great past behind it. The first beginnings of it may be traced back to Christian Frederick Schwartz, a missionary of S.P.C.K. An entry in one of his journals in the year 1771 speaks of a native Christian (Clorinda) of Palayamkottai. A visit of the same eminent missionary to Tirunelveli two years later resulted in the baptism of the ‘bonafide’ Tirunelveli convert and the erecting by her of the first Christian church in Palayamkottai in 1780s.48

In due course, to bring a holistic change among the depressed classes, several missionary societies started their work, such as: the Free Church of Scotland, the American Dutch Reformed Church, the American Baptists, the Leipzig Evangelical Lutherans and Basle Evangelical Missions, Church Missionary Society, Society for the Propagation of Gospel, London Missionary Society and Zanana Missions in the first half of the nineteenth century.49 However, the London Missionary Society, C.M.S. and S.P.G. began to send missionaries to different parts of the world including India in large numbers.50

In India, these missions were situated in the southern parts of Tamil region, which include Travancore, spread over the country from Neyyattangarai on the west, to the Travancore frontier on the east and extending to the Tirunelveli district further east. The country immediately to the west was occupied by the Malayalam missions of the London Missionary Society and to the north by the Tamil missions of the Society for

46 Dick Kooiman, op. cit., pp. 31-32.
48 Ibid., pp.121-122.
the Propagation of Gospel (S.P.G.) and Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.).

Thus first attempt to introduce Protestant Christianity into Tirunelveli was made by Schwarz, who visited the province thrice, and proved to be successful in establishing a congregation of native converts in the fort of Palayamkottai.

The Missionaries’ aims were to undertake social service and philanthropic work, and to provide education and convert people into their respective religious denominations. The missions by providing education, medical and other social service activities, not only benefited their religion in terms of conversion, but also provided a lesson to the caste Hindus about the neglect of these classes. Through this process, the missionaries introduced Indians to the humanistic side of Western civilisation. But in August, 1858 Britain announced that India would henceforth be governed, “By and in the name of Her Majesty and all rights in relation to any territories which might have been exercised by the said Company shall and may be exercised as rights incidental to the Government of India.”

In due course, Queen Victoria declared an end to aggressive missionary activities: “Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity and acknowledge with gratitude the solace of religion, we disclaim alike the might and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects. We declare it to be our royal will and pleasure that none be an anguished favoured, none molested or disquieted by reason of their religious faith or observances, but that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of law and we do strictly change and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure.”

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51 *Proceedings of the South India Missionary Conference* held at Ootacamund, April 19th- May 5th, Madras, 1858, p. 5.
53 Initially the Charter Act of 1813 realised the importance of education and permitted missionaries to work in the Indian institutions of the Company. In 1837, English was made the language of administration and a Government Resolution of 1844 threw open subordinate positions to Indians. Therefore, English education attracted Indians and the rapid expansion took place. The famous Woods Despatch of 1854 realised the need of educating the masses not only through English but also through the vernaculars. See Chinna Rao Yagati, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
55 Quoted in Nicholas B. Dirks, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
put a halt to the evangelical enthusiasm in 1858 that had mounted since Charles Grant had reversed Company policy earlier in the century.

Missionaries were deeply frustrated by Queen Victoria’s declaration of interference, but continued to work on the margins of the British imperial presence in India, to establish an influence in which the work of the church could go on. In doubting the ultimate possibility of the conversion of inferior ‘natives’ into genuine Christian subjects, missionaries acted out the deepest contradictions of the colonial state and yet, missionaries railed against colonial policy either when it seemed to curtail their own activities too powerfully, or when the colonial state seemed to sanction attitudes or practices that challenged the claim of Christianity to the moral character of imperial rule. On the other hand, the Tirunelveli Christians connected with missionaries of both the S.P.G. and the C.M.S. sent an address to the Queen, expressing their gratitude for the benefits they had derived from the Christian teaching which Queen’s English subjects had afforded them. Over a period of time, attempts were made to plan and co-ordinate missionary activities with a larger perspective of statesmanship, in the consideration of issues which ‘affected’ their work in India and elsewhere.

The World Missionary Conference in 1910 at Edinburgh inaugurated a new phase with mission becoming an international interest vis., one nation working with another for the attainment of a common aim. In America and in Great Britain two board representatives of all missionary organisations had been formed to further efficient preparation to preach the gospel. Both existed primarily to put their resources for the service of every outgoing missionary, desiring advice and aid.

In October 1875, when Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales paid a visit to Tirunelveli, he was received by the Reverends Dr. Caldwell and Dr. Sargent, the two oldest

59 Ibid.
missionaries of the two societies of the Church of England in this district. Dr. Caldwell read the following address: "... we rejoice that it pleased Divine Providence to put it into your Royal Highness's heart to visit India, the greatest and most important dependency ever committed to the care of any nation in ancient or modern times, and it is a cause of special joy and thankfulness to us that your Royal Highness, in the course of your progress from province to province, determined to avail yourself of the facilities afforded by the railway opened to-day for the first time to pass through the district of Tinnevelly on your way to Madras, as the adoption of this route has given the native Christian community, in this district, the southernmost in British India, the unexpected pleasure of seeing amongst them, for, however short a time, the Heir-Apparent of the British Crown. It has also given them the opportunity of acknowledging to Royal Highness in person, not only the benefits for which they are indebted, in common with the rest of the community, to the strong, just, wise Government under which they live, but also the special blessings that have been conferred on this district by the introduction into it of that religion which has made the English Government what it is and England itself what it is. It has given your Royal Highness also an opportunity, such as we doubt not you were desirous of obtaining, of seeing for yourself a specimen of the reality of missionary work, and a proof that it is not, as it has often been represented to be, a failure, and at the same time of giving the encouragement of your approval to those who are working in so great a cause....",62

Similarly, the Prince read the following reply: "... it is a great satisfaction to me to find my countrymen engaged in offering to our Indian fellow-subjects those truths which form the foundation of our own social and political system, and which we ourselves esteem as our most valued possession. The freedom in all matters of opinion, which our Government secures to all, is an assurance to me that large numbers of our Indian fellow-subjects accept your teaching from conviction. Whilst this perfect liberty to teach and to learn is an essential characteristic of our rule, I feel every confidence that the moral benefits of union with England may be not less evident to the people of India than are the material results of the great railway which

62 Madras Church Missionary Record, October, 1875, pp. 274-276.
we are this day opening. My hope is that in all, whether moral or material aspects, the
nations of this country may ever have reason to regard their closer connection with
England as one of their greatest blessings." 63

Thus the relationship between colonialism and Christian missionaries is a complex
one. Though the missionary came to India only in the shadow of the colonialist, the
missionary endeavour cannot be seen merely as an extension of colonialism or even
as a benevolent mask for it, though on occasion it has been both 64. Indeed the survival
of the white European missionary in India even after the end of colonialism shows
that missionaries now define themselves without any reference to empire. Today
foreign missionaries in India maintain that their job is not to convert or preach or even
to educate and heal, but to lead Christian lives in an Indian ethos and thus provide a
witness to Christ; and to the extent that is so we can no longer speak of missionary
activity in terms of colonialism, even in terms of an oppositional or adversarial
relationship to colonialism. The link between the two has snapped: each has become
part of a separate and unrelated paradigm. 65

4. Conversion and its Various Means

Various missionary societies worked with identical aims: social service and
philanthropic work. They provided education and converted people into their
respective denominations. Through this process the missionaries introduced Indians
to the humanistic side of Western civilisation. 66 The converts sought baptism with
mixed motives, and it is extremely difficult to pinpoint any one single motive for
conversion. Every member of the depressed classes was not equally possessed by the
purest desire, unmixed with any thought of personal gain. Except for a few rare
baptisms where the individual concerned was a fully committed believer, most of
them were made mainly as a result of family pressure, or by the examples of others. In
such cases baptism by conviction was secondary. Baptisms for reasons of
convenience, protection, material benefits and education were great in number. One of

63 Ibid., p. 277.
64 Brijraj Singh, op. cit., p. 150.
65 Ibid., p. 150.
66 Chinna Rao Yagati, op. cit., p. 71
the strong reasons for conversion was their ardent desire to liberate themselves from the oppressive caste system and to improve their social and economic status.\(^\text{67}\) Robert Caldwell observed that the converts who came to Christianity were mainly from poor economic background whom he called “Rice Christians.”\(^\text{68}\)

Similarly, Lumbrick, a missionary of S.P.G. in Ramnad region observed: “Our Christians are for the most part from the lowest orders of the society. The increase in the numbers of Christians during the last twenty years, is due not to a desire for Christianity per se, but because the lowest classes in India see that it is only through Christianity that they can escape from that degradation which has been their lot for so many hundreds of years. This being the case, they can never submit to this degradation again. Yet a question arises immediately: ‘If you disturb the economic conditions under which these people have lived for so many years, what are you going to do with them? Most of them are without land, and have no interest in the land. They cannot all become teachers, and mission agents, what is to be done?’ There is only one answer. ‘Teach them trades.’ This is the only solution of the difficulty. It seems as though the time had come, when our sole attention should be devoted to our Christians only. The Brahmin and high caste men have had their chance, and have rejected the gospel. The poor, as usual, have accepted it. Therefore let the mission money that is now being spent in the education of Brahmins, be devoted to teaching our poorer Christians ‘trades.’\(^\text{69}\)

The religious ‘revival’ in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with a new interest in voluntary philanthropy and religious humanitarianism. Congregations like, Church of England, Baptists and Methodists organised agencies which had to deal with the pressing humanitarian issues: poverty, education and ‘slavery.’ These activities were seen as a clear articulation of one’s commitment to Christ and Christianity.\(^\text{70}\)

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\(^{67}\) S. Manickam, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-165.

\(^{68}\) J. L. Wyatt, Reminiscences of Bishop Caldwell, *op. cit.*, p. 192.


\(^{70}\) Parna Sengupta, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
In due course, various missionary organisations involved themselves in the act of conversion by providing education, medical and other social service activities which not only benefited their religion in terms of conversion, but also served as a lesson to the caste Hindus for their neglect of these depressed classes.\(^7\) For instance, freedom from the oppression and tyranny of the higher castes was of course, the first material effect of conversions of the Nadar caste to Christianity.\(^7\) The presence of the missionaries and the protection that they extended to their flock also paved the way for the state to interfere and to extend its protection to the oppressed people.

The period between 1809 and 1816 according to missionaries was one of the darkest in the history of the Tirunelveli church. There was no resident priest or missionary in the district. In the absence of any person to protect the infant Christian church, the Brahmins and others placed in authority gave free hand to their feelings of hostility against the Christians. According to missionaries, many were put under punishment for offences which they never committed. They were made to drag the chariots during Hindu festivals and perform similar services, from which they considered themselves rightly exempted. As a matter of fact, the East India Company eventually passed a resolution that the Christians were entitled to the same protection as followers of other faiths and empowered the Collector to take action, when instances of oppression or mishandling were brought to his notice.\(^7\)

Even though the East India Company passed this resolution, missionaries were of the opinion that those who converted to Protestant Christianity suffered from certain civil disabilities. They observed that the depressed classes, who were aspirants of Christian teaching, were not allowed to keep milch cows and use oil mills. Trade was out of bounds for them and they were even debarred from using caste titles. The situation

\(^7\) In South Travancore, L.M.S. missionaries, like Mead and Mault discovered that the mere expectation that a missionary connection might yield official favour or government protection could induce many people to change their religion. When Mead was appointed civil judge at Nagercoil in 1818, more than 3000 Shanars or Nadars from the neighbourhood came over to join the L.M.S. The Nadars and other depressed class people suffered many forms of injustice and hoped to receive better treatment at the court by adopting the faith taught by the judge. However, after Mead had relinquished his judicial office, most of the 'neo-converts' gave up their new faith vis., Christianity and returned to their old religion. See Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India*, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.
\(^7\) S. Ponnaiah, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-40.
became worse with the issue of the Edict of 1851 by Dewan Krishna Rao, which deprived the Christians of backward classes of even these few privileges that were granted to them when Colonel Thomas Munro was the resident. The edict prohibited them from using the roads used by the caste Hindus and required them to make use of the roads and ways assigned to the lower castes. Besides, a violent assault on the Reverend William Lee, a missionary of Lutheran Missionary Society, in Travancore on August 19, 1868 made the missionaries launch another fight to end the unrelenting oppression of the caste Hindus. Therefore, the missionaries requested the Governor of Madras to intercede on their behalf.74

The Madras government after reviewing the whole case drew the attention of the Rajah of Travancore to the principles laid down that: “The public streets of all towns are the property of not any particular caste, but of the whole community, and that every man, be his caste or religion what it may, has the right to the full use of them, provided that he does not obstruct or molest others in the use of them.” As a result, an inquiry was soon instituted to investigate and examine the nature of injustices suffered by the lower classes in Travancore. The Madras government requested the Rajah to remove all impediments facing the lower classes, including the stigma of untouchability or “Theendal,” the root cause of all caste based persecution.75

Meanwhile, evangelical Christians of nineteenth century in Tirunelveli were continually overshadowed by the military, administrative and technological presence of an increasingly enormous imperial system. The gospel was interpreted in new ways and extended to new peoples, reaching even lower strata of society, seeking out peoples in remote jungle areas and touching the lives of more women and children. Help for people in want, i.e., people hitherto neglected; impaired, diseased, or relegated to exclusion and oppression, entered into Christian consciousness. Expanding notions of humanity radically suggested that all men, women and children, no matter what their birth, colour or condition should be equal to each other not just

intrinsically in the sight of God, but in circumstances of life on earth. Visions of equal access to basic protection and basic needs of food, health, education and opportunity opened up the flood gates of radical and revolutionary changes in society.  

It is to be noted here that, one of the missionaries of S.P.G., J. K. Kearn observed: “The vast improvement among those who embraced Christianity is that, it taught them to feel they are superior to what they originally considered to be.” However, George Pettit, a missionary in his Tirunelveli Missions opined that, “Though the missionaries in Tirunelveli did not directly aim at gaining converts from heathenism by promoting the welfare of their people in the things pertaining to this life, the temporal advantage of a Christian profession could not make an impression on the minds of the neighbouring Hindus.”

The temporal advantages included in the European view were: “The expectation of receiving from the missionary of their district, advice on difficulties, sympathy in adversity, and help in sickness, and of being all times, friendly enquired after and kindly spoken to, the desire of being connected with a rising, united body, guided by European intelligence and governed by principles of Christian justice, the expectation of being protected in some measures from the oppression of the wealthy neighbours, the desire of advancement on the part of lower castes, who find that they are considered by the missionaries as capable of advancement and taught to feel that they are men.”

Azariah, a local convert-cum-Bishop was of the opinion that: “Becoming the followers of Christianity not only brings individuals and communities to the transforming influence of Christ, but also unites them into communities to act as instruments of change.” He himself was a witness to the fact that his own Tirunelveli Nadar community had undergone a social change through the influence of gospel. He noted that: “Where Christianity goes, education, civilisation and habits of cleanliness

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76 David Packiamuthu, *Tirunelveli’s Evangelical Christians*, Bangalore, 2003, p. XXVII.
in body, dress and food, in speech and conduct, are the concomitant results.” Furthermore, Azariah and his co-workers accepted social changes as “The very essence of the gospel of Christ and therefore an integral part of the Christian message.” Hence, for Azariah Christianity was an instrument of liberation.  

Azariah emphasised a holistic approach in which the material as well as the spiritual needs of the converts should be met with proper social programmes. In order to liberate these depressed classes, he also encouraged both native priests and missionaries to start cottage industries to eliminate poverty and idleness which he thought were the cause of many evils. Admonishing his fellow workers once, he advises: “Study the economic condition of your people to see if you can introduce any cottage industries to enable the villagers to augment their daily wage.”

Meanwhile, after his initiative, the church offered training such as: spinning, tape weaving, and making of baskets, mat and rope making, which helped the depressed classes in securing work outside the fields in the lean period. Thus corresponding to the work of the Tirunelveli missionaries such as Robert Caldwell and Margoschis, Azariah made efforts to provide facilities in the villages for men and women to earn a decent independent livelihood. He was of the opinion that creation of self-contained villages for new converts was important, who were until then always dependent on caste Hindus. These contributions made by Azariah paved the way for their conversion to Christianity in large numbers.

The phenomenon of large scale conversion was a unique development which brought about a significant change in the life of the Nadar community, who constituted the major bulk of the population in the region. The en-masse religious conversion was a natural corollary to social exploitation in the region. At the time of Robert Caldwell, a missionary-cum Bishop of S.P.G., mass conversions began among the Nadars. Nadars according to Caldwell converted to Christianity, not as a single individual or families but as entire villages, “Without priests, without a written religious code, without

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79 Samuel Jaya Kumar, op. cit., pp. 296-297.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., p. 303.
sacred tradition, without historic recollection, without aversion to Christianity as a foreign religion which other classes evince.” He was of the opinion that, “They (Nadars) have always been found more willing to be guided, controlled and moulded by Christian principles, than any other class of people. The number of this one caste that has placed themselves under Christian instruction is greater than that of all the other converts in India in connection with all Protestant missions.”82 Thus the case of the Nadars of Tamilnadu is one of the best documented and most interesting of all mass conversions.

In the mid nineteenth century the missionaries found the Nadars in a social limbo somewhere between Sudras and the outcaste untouchables, highly dissatisfied with their current status and intent on improvement. Furthermore, the Nadars’ attention seems first to have been drawn to the possibilities of uplift presented by the church when they saw groups of Sambavars, one of the depressed classes in southern Travancore who were becoming Christians. The Sambavars were considered lower in status than the Nadars. However, the Sambavars’ response towards Christian instruction, which was always on a small scale, sparked off a massive conversion of Nadars into the church in south Travancore and Tirunelveli districts.83

It is to be noted here that during the visit of Christian Fredrick Schwartz, one of the founders of the Protestant mission in Tirunelveli, a Brahmin widow applied to Schwartz for conversion to Christianity. She was a widow of a Maratha Brahmin, who had been one of the king’s servants at Tanjore and after her husband’s death she became the concubine of an English army officer named, Lyttleton,84 who also for a time seems to have been stationed in Tanjore. It is stated that she repeatedly requested

82 Robert Hardgrave, op. cit., pp. 46-47.
83 Geoffrey A. Oddie, Religion in South Asia, op.cit., p. 81; Edger Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, 7 volumes, Madras, 1909, vol. VI, pp. 365-366.
84 Once in a Brahmin family in Tanjore, the husband died and preparations were made to burn the unfortunate bride, much against her will. When she was about to be pushed into the pyre of her dead husband, one of the Europeans, who assembled to witness the strange barbarous ceremony, reportedly came out of the crowd and dragged her away from being burnt in the pyre. What would had been the reactions of the members of this family can well be imagined. But all the more surprising to note is, this widow was not willing to die in the pyre; but willing to live with her saviour, the European army officer. She was a revolutionary lady with progressive outlook on life. The name of this British army officer is given as Lyttleton and the Brahmin widow was baptised as Clorinda. See C. S. Mohanavelu, op. cit., pp. 180-181.
for Christian instruction. Finally, she was converted to Christianity and was named Clorinda as she belonged to a royal house. 85

Thus, it was in 1780 that the Tirunelveli mission first took an organised shape with the formation of a small congregation in Palayamkottai. A document of great interest has been preserved in connection with the year 1780. It was the first Tirunelveli register, exhibiting, the infant condition of the mission in 1780, two years after the baptism of the Brahmin widow by Schwartz. The congregation in Palayamkottai was then the only one in Tirunelveli, and the number of members enrolled in it was forty. 86 Furthermore, Sathianathan Pillai, one of the disciples of Schwarts, from a landed caste group of Vellala family of Tanjore became a Christian, despite strong opposition from his own family. 87

In due course of time, Sathianathan became a pastor first to a Tamil Christian community, within the Company’s military garrison at Vallam. When Company forces destroyed a congregation’s prayer hall, which existed in a village, seven miles away from Tanjore, he became a pastor to the city congregation of the region. The progress of his work increasingly became linked to the mobility of Christians and especially of Christian soldiers in the armies of the Company and of the local rulers. In 1790, after Sathianathan Pillai had returned from Tanjore, he was formally ordained and commissioned as the first ever Tamil evangelical missionary. During this time, there took place an extraordinary and rapid expansion and mass conversion in Tirunelveli. 88

Villages constructed by native converts with the help of foreign missionaries attracted the depressed classes, which in turn paved the way for a large scale conversion among depressed class masses. One such example was that of a person named David, one of the converts (the first convert from Nadar caste) who purchased a piece of land, settled his relatives upon it, built a prayer home and dug a well with the help obtained

86 Ibid., p. 9.
87 Ibid.
from a captain, Everett, a friend of one of the missionaries of the Tirunelveli Mission in Palayamkottai of Tirunelveli district. As this little settlement was the first place in Tirunelveli which could be called a Christian village and which owned its existence solely to Christians, it received the name of Mudalur (first town). The land was purchased in August 1700, by Jenicke 89 a missionary of S.P.C.K. and the population of the village at the commencement of the century amounted to twenty eight members. It was called a city of refuge for the persecuted Christians of the south. 90 People came in huge numbers to embrace Christianity wherever Jenicke went. There were four villages in the vicinity of Palayamkottai that placed themselves under Christian instruction in an open display of their faith and conviction in the adopted religion.

Missionaries like Robert Caldwell and C.T.E. Rhenius, played an important role in expanding village-based Christian communities across the region. Establishment of Christian villages continued to be the major pre-occupation of missionary societies which worked in the Tirunelveli region. Edayankudi in south-eastern Tirunelveli was established by Robert Caldwell, a Scottish missionary, which still exists in the south of Sattankulam of Tuticorin district in southern Tamilnadu. Thus the setting up of villages resulted indirectly in large scale conversions not as a single individual or families, but the village as a whole. The mass conversion of the 1840s was followed by another period of great missionary activity. As a result, in 1880s, the total number of converts increased from 22,000 to 44000. Almost all of them were drawn from the Nadar community. 91

Similarly it is also to be observed here that, Rhenius, a missionary of the C.M.S. in Tirunelveli region, according to Eugene, proved himself a most devoted and untiring

89 "Jenicke, a missionary of Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, was deeply interested in the sufferers, and resolved to visit them again, in order to comfort them and to afford them what relief he could. For this purpose, he set out for the south in July 1802, travelling through the country of Mysore as far as Palayamkottai and visiting the entire Christian congregation on the way. He was welcomed everywhere with gratitude. Many people sought Christian instruction. Further, in four other villages the inhabitants, unanimous in their resolution to embrace the Christian faith broke their idols and buried them deep in the ground. Their temples they converted into Christian churches in which they were taught the teachings of Christ and afterwards baptised."

90 Ibid., pp. 31-62.

missionary. Due to his works, the converts increased in number. The people who put themselves under Christian instruction were far more numerous than could be satisfactorily dealt with. Many native teachers and pastors were employed in the newly formed congregations. Rhenius was able to found several societies among the people, especially the *Dharma Sangam*, or Native Philanthropic Society, for the purchase of land and houses as a refuge for converts who were persecuted. Several Christian villages sprang up under the auspices of this organisation, such as Kadachapuram (Grace Village), Suviseshpuram (Gospel village) and Nallur (Good Town). Special funding agencies were set up to focus on the particular needs of the converts. Societies like *Poors’ Fund, Widows’ Fund* and *Tract and Bible Societies* were created to meet the impending requirements.\(^{92}\) In this regard Caldwell argued that one of the principal reasons for the large number of Nadar converts to Christianity was ‘the desire of protection from oppression,’ a fact found ‘natural and reasonable.’\(^{93}\)

In 1818, Charles Mead was appointed by the directors of London Missionary Society (henceforth L.M.S.), to labour in Travancore. He arrived at Mylaady and then went to reside at Nagercoil, one of the southernmost districts of Tamil Nadu, in a house presented to the society for the use of the mission by the Ranee (Queen) of Travancore. Colonel Munro, the British Resident unlike other officials rendered a valuable support to the extension of missionary activities. She also gave rupees 5000 to purchase paddy land; the produce of the land was utilised for the maintenance of the seminary, a training centre for religious learning in Nagercoil, established in 1819. It was about this time in this region, a large number of the people renounced Hinduism, and submitted themselves to Christian instruction. According to a missionary report there appeared to have been about 3000, chiefly of the Nadar caste.\(^{94}\)

The evolution of Christianity in the nineteenth century was characterised by its social action-oriented projects and an attempt to win the heathen for the ‘kingdom of God’


\(^{93}\) Nicholas B. Dirks, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

\(^{94}\) *Proceedings of the South India Missionary Conference*, Held at Ootacamund, Madras, 1858, pp. 6-7. Also see M.G. Goldsmith, “Woman’s Work for India’s Women,” *The Harvest Field*, May, 1895, pp. 209-211.
through the process of evangelism. There can be no doubt that many of these converts were attracted by the prospect of material relief.°5 A missionary observed that: "The converts probably thought that a connection with Europeans, who were friends of the powerful British resident, (for instance, Mead, a missionary of L.M.S. and whose position as a judge in the Zillah Court in Nagercoil) would prove the means, of delivering them from the higher classes, and generally improve their worldly positions and circumstances.°6 Thus Christianity had been introduced among the depressed classes of Tamilnadu. The great majority of those who had embraced Christianity were from the Nadar community.

5. Natural Calamities and the Spirit of Conversion

Thus the conventional approach of conversion brought forth flocks of people into the fold of Christianity through a patron-client process. But this is not the case everywhere. The large scale conversion was generally bound to happen at the time of economic stress owing to natural calamity and disaster. Missionaries' remedial welfare measures invariably opened up new vistas to get in touch with the poverty stricken masses, who in turn were willing to imbibe the instruction of missionaries. Poverty-stricken masses, debt ridden peasants and socially stigmatised outcastes generally came forward to embrace Christianity with a view to alter their present predicament. Missionaries' persistent efforts and their ameliorative steps ostensibly struck a deep root in the community of marginalised people, who lived in the coastal and semi-arid zones of southern Tamil districts. Missionaries who worked in this region did not adopt a 'piecemeal' approach but instead evolved a strategy of alternative mechanisms to liberate the 'believers' from their perennially penny stricken social plight. Their 'innovative' measures and 'effective' initiatives made an indelible mark in the life of the people, who came thronging in numbers to the missionary societies.

The 1877 famine was remarkable in the history of the church as it opened up a large vista for conversion activities. Natural calamities like famine were instrumental in drawing large numbers of people to the arms of the missionaries and thus people became Christians during the famine. One argument is that the people placed themselves in the hands of Christian missions not only because of the expectations of being better-fed and saved from starvation but also as a form of protest against the landlords and the British Raj, who were considered as having failed to fulfil their moral obligations towards their dependents.

The famine of 1877 was more severe in the southern districts of Tamilnadu, where the S.P.G. and the C.M.S. undertook considerable amount of relief and rehabilitation works. Charles Frederick Childe, one of the missionaries of the S.P.G. observes in his report: “The exhibition of Christian charity produced a profound impression on the heathen (Hindus) and coupled with special evangelistic teachings, made by private native Christians as well as by the agents of that mission, led to upwards of 20,000 asking for Christian instruction. Three hundred and ninety unpaid labourers, some of them women, from a community of less than 40,000 baptised persons have voluntarily offered themselves to preach the gospel of Christ.”

The question of conversion or proselytisation can be better explained and enumerated but not established by figures and facts. Missionaries in their endeavour to expand their ‘harvesting’ mission often produced inflated data about the local converts. On

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97 The year 1877 was the year of the great famine which also desolated the central and southern provinces. The government made superhuman exertions to save life. But the means of communications and conveyance of food were not organised properly. Therefore thousands of people died simply because food could not reach them in time. At the same time, of the amount spent, the greater part was for relief in Tirunelveli, where the people, though they did not die in large scale, were reduced to great straits. A much larger sum was disbursed by the missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of Gospel. See Eugene Stock, *The History of Church Missionary Society*, vol. III, London, 1899, pp. 172-173.


99 “The Conviction Prevailed” wrote Bishop Caldwell, “That whilst Hinduism had left the famine stricken to die, Christianity had stepped in like an angel from heaven, to comfort them with its sympathy and cheer them with its effectual succour.” In the course of a few months some 20,000 Hindus in the Society for the Propagation of Gospel districts, and 10,000 in the Church Missionary Society districts, threw away their idols and placed themselves under Christian instruction. See Eugene Stock, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 170-172.


the contrary, the so-called converts may not express their loyalty to their adopted faith under all circumstances and lead the life the way they want. They are believers in their church and pagans in their every day practice, a fact that continues to elude the study of Christian movement in India since its inception.

Missionaries also paid utmost care in providing material and spiritual support to the ‘newly won’ congregation at regular intervals. However, during their distress period missionaries saw themselves as the only ‘saviours’ who could offer the much needed material support to tide over the critical situation. The creation of famine and flood relief funds was the result of this inter-relationship between the missionaries and the congregations. Writing on this subject Horsley, a missionary of the C.M.S., working in Sivakasi, northern Tirunelveli states that: “Almost all my congregations, comprising 656 persons are belonging to the lower classes. This being the case, many of them have suffered much from the severe famine which has visited us and is still felt among us. One congregation almost ceased to exist, the members with a few exceptions, having left their homes in search of food. Much reasonable relief was, however, received from the contributions of private friends in England, and received from many committees at Madras.” Thus the contribution made by missionaries of the C.M.S. in terms of money and material created a considerable impact in the southern districts of Tamilnadu, which in turn pulled innumerable people towards Christianity for protection and material help.

Robert Caldwell of Tirunelveli admitted that lower castes initially came to Christianity for protection and material help: “The natural outcome of the circumstances in which they are placed”. He also opines that: “I cannot imagine any person who has lived and worked amongst uneducated Hindus in the rural districts believing them to be influenced by high motives in anything they do. If they place themselves under Christian instructions, the motive power is not theirs but ours. They will learn what good motives mean, I trust in time and perhaps high motives too if they remain long enough under Christian teaching and discipline, but still if they

discard Hinduism, with its debasing idolatries and superstitions and place themselves under the wings of the church, there is not the slightest chance, as it appears to me, of their motives of becoming better than they are."\textsuperscript{104}

The famine on the one hand and the heavy flood\textsuperscript{105} on the other which occurred in Tirunelveli in 1877, played a crucial role because many people placed themselves under Christian instruction partly because of the help rendered by missionaries at the time of famine and partly due to the pathetic condition of the people. It is evident from the fact which Horsley, a missionary says in the lines: \lq\lq The present year has been one of the great scarcities, owing to the failure of the monsoon. Seeing that the people were in great distress and that they were continually coming to us for assistance, I appealed for help to friends in England. This appeal was warmly responded to; and I have had the pleasure of helping many sufferers from the money received.q\rq Mentioning the pathetic condition of the people of the region he observes that: \lq\lq Some people are making what may be scarcely called \lq an honest living\rq by digging out ant hills and carrying off the handfuls of grain which they may find there, thus robbing the poor ants, of the result of many a hard day\rq s incessant labour. Others are said to be getting their living by digging up the bones of men and of cattle and selling them, and thus turning a questionable penny."\textsuperscript{106}

During this situation great assistance had also been received from the \textit{Mansion House Fund} and from Church Missionary Society\rq s \textit{Famine Relief Fund}. Meanwhile, Bishop Sargeant spoke with thankfulness of great comfort which this timely relief has afforded him, and the seasonable aid he had been able by this means to give to many sufferers.\textsuperscript{107} It is to be stated that the famine fund raised by the society, vis. £ 17,747, provided for the relief of 96,000 sufferers (irrespective of caste, creed and race etc.,) and for the maintenance of hundreds of orphans during the next eight years. A second

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{105} It is to be mentioned here that due to heavy floods and famine in southern Tamil Nadu in 1877, various missionary organisations started getting involved in social service and philanthropic work. In regard to welfare schemes, missionaries implemented different programmes in compliance with their social commitment to the cause of Christianity. See \textit{Proceedings of Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East}, London, 1879-1880, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Madras Church Missionary Record}, November, 1877, p. 349.
appeal elicited in 1878-1879, a further sum of £ 9,345, which under the administration of Bishop Caldwell and the native church councils provided for the 'spiritual wants' of the many thousands who had sought instruction. Of these, many of the more ignorant relapsed to their old faith vis. Hinduism but many more remained steadfast, and were joined by others long after famine relief had ceased.  

Thus, a great amount of relief work was done by the Christian missionaries during the national famines of 1877. Thousands of people died not only of starvation but due to cholera and other epidemics that followed in Parvathipuram, Nanjankulam, Manarkadu, Konganthanparai, Maruthakulam, Puthukulam, Madathupatti, Tinnevelly and Alvaneri. A considerable number of children became destitute. Apart from the very scanty relief operations of the colonial government, Christian missions were the main relief and rehabilitation forces during these national disasters, starting from Punjab to Tamil Nadu. The great masses of depressed classes embraced Christianity as the missionaries rendered those services at the time of natural calamities. In many cases, not surprisingly, the depressed class converts to Christianity were famine stricken orphans for whom the missionaries had cared. Missionaries believed that their relief measures and charitable activities attracted first the attention of the poor and later their religious allegiance, particularly, Hindus who lived in and around the region of the missionary society. Nevertheless, the policy of conversion was adopted by most of the Protestant missions with a view to expand Christianity such as by the S.P.C.K., L.M.S., C.M.S., and S.P.G. they almost worked with identical aims, objectives and expectations.

6. 'Slavery' and Salvation

Grave economic problems were pressing in rural districts especially in southern part of Tamil Nadu. Missionaries in addition to taking full share in remedial efforts in time

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109 Madras Church Missionary Record, November, 1877, pp. 351-352.
of famine, pestilence, or sudden disaster, involved themselves in preventive work among those who ordinarily lacked means of subsistence, such as the depressed millions of India, the poverty stricken, debt-ridden peasantry and preached the gospel of Christ and the people in turn followed Christianity.

Charles Mead worked for a long period for the London Missionary Society. He encouraged peasants to get English ploughs to the people to cultivate the land. He started a school of industry in Nagercoil in 1820. Through this industry people were trained in printing, book binding and leather works. Meanwhile many people were engaged in the work and received decent salaries. Thus, he worked not only as a spiritual leader but also made a pioneering effort for the economic well-being of the people through which he could convert thousands of people in southern Tamil Nadu.

With the aid of the missionaries, many social groups improved their socio-economic position. The Nadars, the numerically preponderant community made significant progress. The Nadars extracted themselves from many of the burdensome taxes and from the corvee labour demanded by government. In addition to this they began to advance economically. Some of the Nadars turned to trade and secured sufficient wealth to purchase their own lands. Others purchased land with financial assistance from the mission. In the years following the establishment of the mission in south Travancore, the Nadars were benefited by education. Their release from the obligation of servility and their concomitant rise in economic status aroused antagonism among the higher castes. Robert Hardgrave concludes that, "The
education and Christianity had given the Nadars hope of an escape from their sufferings\textsuperscript{121} under the dominance of Nair landlords.\textsuperscript{122}

In times of oppression and exploitation, the poor local Pariahs looked to missionaries to fight their cause particularly against their immediate local administrative authorities and dominant landlords. In this context the Reverend W. Goudie, whose work was largely amongst the Pariahs in the southern Tamil Nadu noted in the Madras Missionary Record the following incident that had lately come under his notice: “A company of people waited once from the village, Tiruvallur and complained the munsiff was harassing them and trying to take away from them the plots of land which they have accustomed to cultivate.”\textsuperscript{123}

In one case, the Pariah had for many years, cultivated some fields without pattah, the formal government order, but had paid his taxes regularly. However, he was informed that the munsiff holds the pattah for the land and that he will henceforth be treated as a trespasser. It is a very common instance that the munsiff has not until lately reported the lands as cultivated, that he has given no receipts for the taxes paid and that he has thus carried on a little revenue work on his own account. Meanwhile, the Pariah is treated as a trespasser and the usual methods employed to turn him out. His taxes are doubled for the next year. The village Munsiff is none the less, perhaps all the more on that very account, a man who is his own little world knows how to make his power felt.”\textsuperscript{124} In these circumstances, it seems reasonable to assume that missions were perceived, at least in part, as a source of help and protection as something which Pariahs and others could utilise, not only in times of conflict with landlords, but in other occasions of difficulty and distress.\textsuperscript{125}

In addition to this, Finimore, one of the missionaries of the C.M.S. observes that, many a times the poor people of southern Tamil Nadu were treated pathetically by wealthy and powerful people. He laments that: “In December, 1888, the agents of the

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{123} G. Goudie, “How the Pariahs are Oppressed,” The Harvest Field, July 1895, pp. 282-284.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Geoffrey A. Oddie, op. cit., p. 160.
Zamindars sought to impress the inhabitants as labourers on a new road in the estate. The villagers objected of being taken away from their agricultural pursuits, and refused to work. A number of them were accordingly laid hold of, and unjustly submitted to ignominious punishment, being made to bend with their fingers to their toes, whilst stones of great weight were placed on their backs. The poor persecuted people sought protection from further cruelty by attaching themselves to the Christian church in their neighbourhood, knowing that no one would dare to treat them thus, as they had a European missionary, their protector. They applied to the pastor for admission and around hundred persons were accepted for Christian instruction.\textsuperscript{126}

A corpus of instances of conversion that had taken place had been the result, not of spiritual motives alone but of a combination of motives partly spiritual and partly secular; the spiritual motives, predominated in some instances over the secular, while in others the secular predominated over the spiritual.\textsuperscript{127} J.E. Kearns of S.P.G. concludes that: “The vast improvement among those who converted to Christianity is that Christianity taught them to feel they are superior to what they originally considered to be.”\textsuperscript{128} Nevertheless, missionaries’ initiatives and ameliorative measures to woo the depressed classes through money and other material means, healthcare and other socio-economic policies and programmes did not bring more converts into the fold of Christianity which the missionaries expected.

Thus, the Protestant missionaries’ process of conversion began in about the first half of the eighteenth century and went on up to the middle of the twentieth century. The southern tip of the peninsula was fully exposed to the impact of missionaries’ social action. Village after village accepted the new faith for various reasons partly constituted by material and partly spiritual compulsions. The followers of Jesus Christ in this religious process were mainly drawn from Shanars or Nadars, a toddy tapping caste the Paravas, the fishing community of the coast. The intervention of Christianity invariably brought about a significant social transformation in general and radical


\textsuperscript{127} Robert Caldwell, Lectures on Tinnevelly Mission, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 66-68.

difference in the social and cultural life of the converted believers in particular. The process of conversion is a complex social mechanism through which the caste ridden Tamil society was exposed to the new aspects of the modern world with regard to life, religion and culture.