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Protestant Christianity and Social Changes among the Hill Tribes in Kerala

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Abstract

The history of Protestant Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate from it. The history will therefore focus on the Christian people of India and they understood themselves upon their social, religious, cultural and political encounters and changes which these encounters produced in them. The appropriation of the Christian gospel in the Indian culture and society of which were a part of their propaganda. The experience of conversion is viewed as diverse possibilities that focus on new identities, believes and practices. The modes, motivations and symbolic meanings of Christianity to religious conversion are identified and transformations of caste and tribes. Historians argued the Conversion as a transition on the basis of tradition, heredity, customs and practice, etc. On the one side conversion is the change of customs and tradition, on the other hand it is the process by which natural change happens with the individual. Religious conversion has played a vital role in the life of Hill Tribes.

Keywords: Christianity, Protestantism, Hill Tribe, Conversion, Missionary, Caste

Introduction

Being the products of social, educational, economic, political and cultural Christian environment, the missionaries who came to India had their own concept of a 'to be life', and assumed that they were to bring 'civilized life' to uncivilized people through the mission work. It cannot be denied that the outstanding achievements of the missionaries in the 19th century brought social reform, which led Indian society to modernity.

Missionaries carefully observed how Hinduism influenced the Indian Social System, so as to find a ridge to wedge in the Christian ideologies to the system and the theoretical rooting of the same. They concentrated their mission to down to earth problems and issues which affect the missionary activities and situations instead of socially deep rooted questions. They found that the answer lies always with upliftment of suppressed class, and never with the superior ones.

How they approached the Social Issues?

Idea of equality and gospel of fraternity was new to the people who were differentiated and dominated in the name of caste. It was indeed hard to eradicate it all-together, a practice which even began to take place in the church, but the rigidity with which it was practiced began to disappear. People were given awareness about the cruelty of caste discrimination and protestant missionaries who worked in Travancore and other parts of India tried to spread this awareness among the various classes of people. It was necessary to have the support of higher caste to get along with the missionary works, and therefore the missionary activities were aimed at winning the higher castes and later the entire population. Koji Kawashima, a researcher on protestant mission and Hindu State in Travancore also made this point clear while pointing out that "the CMS had been more reluctant than the other protestant Christians. With diverse educational family, and personal backgrounds the protestant missionaries had played a role in the social protest and agitations that brought a change in India.

All missionary work done in the world has a particular context. The history of Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate from it. The history will therefore focus on the Christian people of India and how they understood themselves upon their social, religious, cultural and political encounters and the changes which these encounters produced in them. The appropriation of the Christian gospel in the Indian culture and society were a part of their propaganda. In the colonial period the C.M.S Missionaries came to Kerala. The work of the Christian Missionaries and spread of Western education helped to bring radical changes in the society. Moreover, the spiritual attention bestowed by the missionaries and evangelical work among the tribal communities and backward classes in Hindu society led to large number of conversion. The work of the protestant missionaries resulting in conversion can be meaningfully explained only by the Protestantism.

Conversion and Protestantism:

The experience of conversion is viewed as diverse possibilities that focus on new identities, believes and practices. The modes, motivations and symbolic meanings of Christianity to religious conversion are identified and that resulted in transformations of caste and tribes. Historians argued the Conversion as a transition. On the basis of the tradition, heredity, customs and practice, etc. On the one side conversion is the change of customs and tradition; on the other hand it is the process by which natural change is happens with the individual. Religious conversion has played a vital role in the life of Hill Tribes. According to East India Company, the missionary activity was a means to the propagation of European economic and political ideologies; hence they hardly allowed Christian missionaries to work beyond the territory of Company.

According to Koji Kawashima, “the imperial missionary activity never became a success for the latter continued missionaries from various, patch of the world also and allowed by the imperialist force in power because, missionaries from other countries often viewed as agents of their home countries”.

Though Missionary activities started in England during 16th century, it reached in India only during 19th century and developed as part of colonization. During this period traditional society was based on rigid caste system. Brahmin community was very dominant in society. Religious conversion was effected through religious and spiritual education done by the missionaries. In the 1804's the London Missionary Society (L.M.S) and Church Mission Society (C.M.S) started a campaign for the liberation of all slave communities. Both worked in Travancore for a very long time and had great influence on society and government policies. The first L.M.S missionary in Travancore was W.T Ringeltaube, a German Lutheran, who commenced his work in 1806. The C.M.S was formed by the Evangelicals in the Church of England in 1799 and started its work in north Travancore in 1816. Besides these two societies, there were a few Protestant missions. The Salvation Army established its headquarters at Nagarciol in 1890; the Brother Mission started its work in 1898; and Lutheran Mission in 1907. That process again boosted the relation between missionaries and low caste people and subsequently this affinity led to the conversion to Christianity.

The second phase was marked by educational and charitable activities that the missionaries extended to the people. The latter included the establishment of schools and hospitals. Education has always been one of the main fields of missionary activity. Congregations were established in close association with the schools. And education was opened to all children, irrespective of caste and creed. The people wished that their children should be educated. In response to this, protestant missionaries opened a large number of schools. Opening of the school for tribes also attracted many people but that caused increasing rivalry between missionaries and slave owners. On the other side, government and missionaries considered spread of education as one of the most important aspect of social change.

Protestant Missionary Work in Travancore

The Protestant missionaries' work had a tremendous impact on the social, educational, medical, religious, and economic life of the people of Travancore. This also had a direct or indirect influence on Hill Tribes. There were three main mission societies which carried out their work in Kerala during the early part of the 19th century, namely the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, and the Basel Mission Society. These mission societies concentrated their work in the three geographical regions of Kerala- the London Mission in South Travancore, the Church Mission in Central Travancore and Cochin, and the Basel Mission in Malabar. The protestant missionary work in Travancore society brought tremendous changes and challenges, mainly in the field of education, social relationships, medicine, industry, and technology. Here there is no attempt at a detailed analysis of the Protestant missionary work in Travancore.

By giving shape to new social ideas and giving impetus to new social trends, the missionaries converted the static society of Travancore into a progressive one. The social changes that have taken place in Travancore during the last two centuries are connected directly or indirectly with the activities of the Protestant missionaries in that region. During this time the traditional society of Travancore underwent significant changes as a result of the activities of the protestant missionaries.

It was the missionaries who raised voice against the social inequalities and the evils of the caste system in Kerala. As noted above the slave castes were treated worse than animals. But after the missionary work their conditions enormously changed and their lives transformed. The missionaries had given them education, medical treatment, love and fellowship. Freedom of dress was another area touched by the missionary movement. In the emancipation of women the missionaries made a significant contribution. Education helped to elevate the social status of women. Even the poor women received learning and were allowed to wear good dress and to engage in useful occupations. The missionaries taught the people to give up child-marriage and the introduction of re-marriage of widows resulted in empowerment of women.

The field of medicine was another area where there was tremendous change through the missionary work. Prior to the coming of missionaries' work, the medical facilities were limited, but the missionaries brought the modern treatments and medicines which saved many people from death. They also helped in the development of Ayurvedic medicine. The education imparted by the missionaries enabled a large number of people to find jobs in government service and in private firms. The industrial and technical education helped many people to start their own industries. The mission schools, colleges, hospitals, printing presses and other institutions also provided jobs for large number of people.

The development of plantations and industries in Travancore is another product of missionary work. Some of the missionaries had great interest in agriculture. They introduced scientific methods of cultivation, which inspired the native people to take similar interest in plantations. The Basel Mission Industries such as tile making and textiles not only provided many employment opportunities but also modern technologies.

The missionary activities also had an impact on the cultural life of Tribal societies. People who came in contact with the missionaries were able to understand some aspects of western culture. The literary activities of the missionaries enriched Malayalam and Tamil literature. The Protestant missionary work in Travancore resulted in the massive flow of many lower sections of society towards Christianity where they found their life transformed in all spheres such as education, health care, social dignity, and financial stability. It was a socio-religious movement in Travancore society alongside many other similar movements.

Thus the Protestant missionary activities had an impact on the social economic, political, religious, moral and cultural spheres of Kerala. An old order had come to an end, giving way to a new one. Men and women considered as low had responded to the higher values of life. They broke the fetters of tradition and custom that held them in bondage for long, had asserted their right to social justice.

An Encounter with the Tribal Life

The missionaries in India and particularly in Travancore were at a disadvantage in the exchange of ideas. Their theology was derived from an infallible scripture and allowed for only one-way interaction. Missionaries came to India as bearers of truth and, as such, had everything to teach and nothing of importance to learn. Under such circumstances, a genuine 'give and take' had not taken place. Another issue was that the missionaries were at a disadvantage in having to express themselves in different local languages depending on the area where they worked, using words with different connotations. But here in Kerala, in Protestant missionary's case, it appears that they have favorably considered the belief systems of the Hill Tribes and, they are fluent in tribal language. But this does not totally wipe out their western prejudice against tribal culture, which will be pointed out in the course of discussion.

How did the missionary demonstrate and establish that the religion he proclaimed was true and more powerful than that of the Hill Tribes? Normally the Protestant missionaries in India tackled this question directly, for they generally preferred to proceed by assertion rather than by argument. Here in the Hill Tribes case, one of the first difficulties, in the missionary's experience, was to persuade 'heathen' hill tribes to a universal religious truth: that there is but one supreme God, and that 'God is their God as much as the missionary.

Western protestant missionaries came to India during the last three centuries with the pre-conceived notion that Indian culture was "pagan", "heathen", "devilish" or "dark" and hence desperately in need of reformation. So the removal of 'heathen' practices from the converts seemed to be their primary assignment. Here the missionaries made many mistakes in understanding the culture well enough to assess the good elements that could have been incorporated, into the Christian teaching. The protestant missionaries also struggled with these issues and this needs further examination. So here one cannot neglect the fact that by the 19th century Protestant Christianity was completely westernized, and the West, pushing into Africa and the Asian countries, was frankly commercial and imperialistic aiming to turn the colored races into copies of the west. Another aspect of the missionary impulse and mission thinking in the English evangelical tradition from the late 18th century to the mid of the 20th century was the commitment to the priority of Christianity over civilization.

Conclusion

Transformational culture change is one of the important issues in cross cultural mission. The pioneering works of Christian missionaries has played a significant role in empowering lower class communities and enabling them to lead a life of social dignity. That movement of social transformation gradually percolated to the tribal communities also. Missionaries did not judge all the hill tribe cultural practices to be wrong. They rather brought some of their traditional cultural practices to find new values and meanings in Christianity. Some of their old rituals thus became transformed to Christianity with new ideas based on the Christian teaching of the missionary. Missionary was also responsible for introducing a number of traditional festivals and practices into the church.

In the process of this transformational culture change it can also be argued that the hill tribe pre-existing ideas and 'worldviews' also played a significant role. The work of the protestant missionaries at the time of the introduction of Christianity among the hill tribes influenced their socio-cultural life in many ways. Jungles were cleared, modern agriculture was introduced, traditional forms of worship disappeared, and dreadful diseases, brought under control and the literacy rate increased. Here it is also evident that the introduction of Christianity was effectively working as an agent for social transformation. But the question arises what comes first for missionaries, gospel or civilization? From the above analysis it is evident that for missionary's preaching the gospel is primary and 'civilization' is secondary.

Many people critically evaluated the hill tribe's conversion. Some philosophers assimilate conversion as like as people's movement. We can't agree with this view. They opined based on the conversion activities in the north India. The social situation of Kerala is entirely different from that of Northern India. In brief Missionary's efforts to incorporate the hill tribe's culture into the Christian life were no doubt a radical attempt at detribalization. And also in this regard it appears that he moved beyond contemporary missionary motives, character and thinking, to lead the hill tribes from-'tradition people' to 'modern people'. The gospel itself was believed to be the great engine of social change, and the moral and cultural transformation among the converted hill tribes in Kerala.

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