

Social and Cultural Changes in the Tribal Society of Kerala

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Abstract

The missionary intervention among tribal communities has undergone significant transformation in recent years, particularly in the context of post-colonial theory. Post-colonial studies have analyzed colonial missionary efforts as a manifestation of power dynamics, shedding light on the impact of these interventions on third-world societies. Some theories highlight the pivotal role of Protestant missionaries in propagating Christianity in the Third World. Their approach emphasized the superiority of Christianity over other belief systems and the imperative for all individuals to embrace the salvation it offered. This zeal motivated many individuals to travel to India and other regions to establish and promote Christianity.

Key Words: - Tribal Society, Christianity, Colonialism, Conversion, Modernity

Introduction

The nineteenth century witnessed drastic changes in almost all the fields of social life, especially the impact of colonial modernity. Traditional education, culture, beliefs, customs, and traditions profoundly transformed. Colonial economic policies and religious conversion were the two main agents of these changes. Despite the process of economic exploitation brought about by colonialism, the colonial phase witnessed the modernization of the society, which historians usually have described as the process of social renaissance. The transition from traditional life to modernity was a gradual and complex process, influenced by missionaries who executed ideas that suited the local environment, local culture, and their social, economic, and political standing in the then Kerala caste society.

Though Missionary activities in England started in the 16th century as part of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, they reached India only during the 18th and 19th centuries and developed as part of colonization. During this period, traditional society was based on a rigid caste system. Religious conversion was effected through religious and spiritual education done by the missionaries. Conversion was placed in the tribal environment to adapt to the indigenous circumstances, apart from the religious point of view. The differences in Western modernity and its feasibility from that of the Indian practices offered tribals solutions to their problems and social crises with the help of the modern colonial system. The tribal society adapted to the new world. They built schools in Western patterns, learned handicrafts, and used cash crops. The missionaries were also a source of Western medicine, which seemed to cure many diseases that had otherwise been incurable. Transformation to modernity was that source that mitigated the social evils that tortured the tribals for generations in the name of caste and power.

Christianity and Conversion among the Tribals

In the eighteenth century, England witnessed a decline in Christian spirituality. As a reaction to this incident, religious revival movements emerged in England. This concern for the salvation of the neglected people in England gradually moved to non-Christian lands of the East. Before this, a society promoted Christian knowledge in 1698 and formed with the English Church to propagate the gospel in 1701. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the London Missionary Society (LMS) was also established as an organization, and its works started in 1795 in southern Travancore.

In 1804, the London Missionary Society and Church Mission Society started a campaign to liberate all slaves. In 1847, they presented a joint memorandum to the ruler of Travancore, demanding the abolition of slavery. The government and upper caste argued that the abolition of slavery would result in the destruction of agriculture. There is increased pressure upon the Travancore Hindu government to amend laws supporting caste distinction. Thus, consequent on the frequent interference of missionaries in the administrations through memorandum and petitions, the Travancore government proclaimed the abolition of slavery. This incident aroused an affinity towards the missionaries among the low caste. That process again boosted the relationship between missionaries and low-caste people, and subsequently, this affinity led to the conversion to Christianity. Hence the social upliftment activities of missionaries constituted the first stage of conversion.

The second stage was marked by the educational opportunities and charitable activities missionaries extended to the people. The latter included the establishment of schools and hospitals. Education was always been one of the main fields of missionary activity. Congregations were established in close association with the schools. A single building was used for worship and teaching. Education was opened to all children, irrespective of caste and creed. The people wished that their

children should be educated. In response to this, missionaries opened a large number of schools. Bible reading was also included in the curriculum. There was a great emphasis on female education; averages of a quarter of the children attending mission schools were girls. Still, a more relevant fact is that these children chiefly came from poor and untouchable communities to whom intellectual development was denied till then.

Contemporary society sustained a traditionally inherited upper caste notion that untouchables could study. Their work strengthened the missionaries' conviction that caste distinction was not founded on natural ability differences. Low-caste people could equal or even excel over those considered superior. Still, it was not easy for the untouchables to get educated. Low caste had to face severe attacks from their landlords for sending their children to school. Although slavery had been abolished by this time, the low-caste people had to depend upon caste Hindus and Syrian Christians to earn their livelihood. Under the auspices of the missionaries, the low castes of Kerala achieved a number of progressive rights. However, their activities for uplifting the downtrodden began only in the middle of the 18th century. Opening the school for slaves also attracted many people, but that caused increasing rivalry in the society: missionaries and bonded laborers whose social position nearly equaled that of the slaves on the one side and landlords and government on the other. Missionaries considered the spread of education as one of the most important aspects of social change. Samuel Mateer observed that spiritual progress had been made where there were no schools, but small intelligence is the basis of one work.

Missionaries and the Tribes

Many missionaries arrived in Kerala as a result of the religious reformation in England during the 18th century. The first missionary to come to Travancore was Thomas Norton in 1816, followed by Dozen in Cochin (1817) and Kottayam in 1818. Kottayam became the center of all activities of Benjamin Bailey Backer and Fen, known as the Kottayam trio. This group of missionaries started their work among the Syrian Christians of Travancore. It was a landmark in the history of the modernization of Travancore.

The contribution of protestant missionaries to the transformation of the tribal community was remarkable; mainly in the areas of social reformation, medicine, and education. One of the main weapons that the mission could wield in its fight for social liberation and progress was education. From the beginning, education had been one of the main fields of missionary work. Missionary intervention among the tribes and this transformation has been a critical evolution of the latter, especially in the post-colonial theoretical attention. As post-colonial studies evaluate colonial intervention as a controlled atmosphere of power, some theories do drive the third world to observe the activity of colonial missionaries in spreading conversion to Christianity. The protestant missionaries also promoted the new ideas of Christianity in all religions and traditional cultures. The attitude of the missionary movements towards Christianity, its belief in the superiority over all religions, and the necessity of salvation for all men, which could be only offered by Christianity, have been the main motivating forces in causing men to go to India to try and establish the same there.

As a result, the Anglican Church came into being in Kerala. The activities of Christian Missionaries and the spread of Western education helped to bring radical changes in society. Moreover, the special attention bestowed by the missionaries on Evangelical work among the backward classes in Hindu culture and the large number of conversions that took place to Christianity from among the Hindu religion served to highlight the evils that existed in Hinduism. Christian Missionaries rooted in the regions spread over the erstwhile Travancore and Cochin States. On the south, it spread up to Munroe Island, and in the east, most of the portions of high ranges. Protestant Missionaries worked hard against the rigid caste system, and social inequality prevailed in the traditional Society. They worked for social equality. In 1819, Missionaries liberated 100 slaves near Munroe Island near Kollam. It marked the beginning of missionary activities in Kerala. Missionaries started schools for the slaves and brought slaves from the traders and the market and liberated them.

Conversion and Social Change

The 19th century was decisive for Indian society and its history, culture, beliefs, education, customs, and tradition. It witnessed social renaissance brought by colonialism along with social renaissance brought by colonialism along with economic exploitation and religious conversion. Conversion is a strong historical tradition that treats Christianity as an offshoot of colonialism. According to the East India Company, missionary activity was a means to propagate European economic and political ideologies; hence, they hardly allowed Christian missionaries to work beyond the territory of the Company. In 1787, Charles Grant put forth a proposal citing the necessity of the company's support for missionaries. Without a proper response to this proposal, the missionaries had to seek protection from the Dutch.

The publicized idea of colonial mightiness and Western superiority in all shares of social life impacted the acceptance of modernity and the need for Westernization among the natives, such as the hill tribe. The tribe's encounter with Western missionaries roped them to the effects of Westernization, where the missionaries were incubating this culture in modernization. Name, the most basic cultural root, was cut off by missionaries to ensure the Malayalam culture broke apart its hold on the community and sincere conversion. Conversion to Christianity brought about changes in fashion, medicine, agriculture, and industry among the tribals as part of urbanization in the culture. So was the introduction of modern agricultural methods, coffee, tea, rubber, cardamom plantations, English medicine, and the colonial education system.

History points out the relief and liberation missionaries brought to the tribe by adapting them to the changing social structure of the Travancore. Tribals found themselves in clothes used by the surrounding society and treatments for cholera, smallpox, and other malaria. The detribalization attempt ignored the values of traditional methods, medicines, treatment lore, knowledge, skill, and craft carried down over this generation and this legacy. Missionaries presented the tribal people with Christianity as the religion ensuring modernity, progress, freedom, and dignity.

Missionary's inability to differentiate between social and religious symbols used by the hill tribe community altered the status of converted Christians when they began to use Western symbols, which were in dire contest with the Indian ones. The

cultural plurality of Indian society was never given due consideration by the colonial masters or missionaries, which later resulted in the dichotomy between converted Protestants and other cultural communities. Missionaries never cared to see things from both ends, which might have been the reason for their rejection of tribal culture.

Educational and economic practices among the Converted Tribes

However, according to missionaries, the impact of Education was much more complex. The missionaries were committed to the westernizing or civilizing mission to bring salvation to the people. The colonial administration also aimed to create a group of people who supported the British Raj. In order to achieve this aim, they educated these hill tribes also. Yet modern education provided these hill tribes with a new worldview. The spread of education enabled them to discipline their orderless life, which provided them with a few hours to attend school. And all Sundays, they spent time only for worship. Education was a powerful medium to spread the influence of missionaries among the tribals. Education enabled them to attain a very respectable place in society. This had a tremendous effect on the tribal community. The spread of education and the progress of tribes inspired the people of other castes to convert to Christianity, especially many Nairs and Ezhavas.

Another important aim of the missionaries was to create a group of people who could convert other people to Christianity. The missionaries knew that they would not always be with the natives, so they selected a group of tribals and taught them. Thus, with the spread of education, a tremendous change occurred in the tribes' perspective.

The country's social and economic transformation also affected the untouchable communities. Thus, the complex relationship between Christian conversion, expansion of education, and commercialization of agriculture constituted the broad context of social change. There are a number of arguments regarding the conversion of lower caste people to Christianity. It has been argued that Christian missionaries and colonial administration intended to modernize the people. So they considered Christianization as one of the most important means of modernization. Laws and customs of the government exploited the poor, and Christianity promised to deliver them what they were denied in their traditional society. The conventional Hindu religious practices and its social structure were embedded in the caste. It was the philanthropic attitude of Christian missionaries towards the low castes that attracted them to Christianity. After the 1860s, church missionaries could not pay sufficient attention to the tribes because of their other responsibilities. However, in 1879, the number of converted tribes number exceeded 2000.

In India the social relations were very rigid and strong. Hence, philosophers gave names like people's movements, etc. Picket opined that it's better to have people's confrontations in situations like India. Compared to Western countries, Indian families are rigid and strongly bonded to society. It was argued that the mass conversion is for material factors. The majority of the leaders were against this view. Among the leaders, Gandhi's view was significant. He was of the opinion that the converted persons should be considered bold personalities and should not be considered just missionaries or Christian idiots. Regional variations exist in the structure and functioning of the societies in different parts of India. Despite these geographical dissimilarities, they had some common peculiar features. As we know, the tribal communities live together and will be isolated. Hence, as regards the tribes, conversion came to become locally oriented.

Change in Culture and Traditional Life

The Gospel was used as a tool to judge and transform non-Christian culture by the missionaries. Thus, judgments implied liberation, renewal, and a new identity, and they positioned themselves as the only medium to make the right choices for the oppressed class, based on the Bible. Tribal culture was also judged by this pattern, which made the missionaries ignorant of the value of traditional practices and the real-world view of the tribal society. Symbolic image of leadership was taken away from them to ward off the pagan rituals the converts once practiced. But the fact was that the missionaries weren't bothered to find out whether the symbol actually was a pagan religious one or a social image, one which could have been of help around the converted community as well.

Westernization was bait meant not only for the oppressed class. The colonial power sought to baptize the high caste first, which was a hated by the Hindu community and its cultural stronghold, which gave him the only option to turn towards the subjugated class. However, as Western education proved fruitful over the Indian Sanskrit learning system, a few educated Indian high-class people baptized and became part of Anglican Christianity. The thesis was not a door to the Western world and power alongside the colonial master. It provided a high-class intellectual group to lead the church, eventually resulting in a distinction based on caste within the church itself. They became the church's ruling class, and missionaries couldn't see through the differences within Christianity. It would also be doubled whether the missionaries hesitated to act even when they had realized such a state.

Conclusion

The missionary intervention was not a boon to them, though the tribal community's social, cultural, educational, and religious perspectives were totally transformed by the Protestant Missionaries. The light of education enkindles the reason and thinking power among them. They became aware of their depressed status. In short, the contributions of missionaries among the tribals and their transformation status are remarkable in the history of Christianity and India. It was highly strengthened the tribals social liberation, identity, uniqueness, spiritual and religious life, which was transformed from an inhuman society to a human society, though the complicated aftermath of their arrival irrevocably damaged their ethnicity and permissivity.

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