

GROWTH OF MODERN EDUCATION UNDER CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN TIRUNELVELI REGION DURING THE 19TH CENTURY - AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Christian missionary societies played a pivotal role in the development of elementary and women's education in the Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi regions during the nineteenth century. Beginning with Rev. James Hough's initiatives in the early 1800s under the S.P.C.K., a systematic expansion of educational institutions was undertaken through surveys, funding, and the establishment of Anglo-vernacular schools and seminaries. Missionary organizations such as S.P.C.K., S.P.G., and C.M.S. significantly contributed to the spread of both boys' and girls' education, teacher training, and boarding schools across rural and urban areas. Particular emphasis was placed on female education by pioneers like Eliza Caldwell, whose institutions combined academic learning with vocational training and social reform. These schools not only imparted literacy and practical skills but also promoted social mobility, improved the status of women, and addressed issues such as caste divisions and poverty. The introduction of structured curricula, government recognition, and grant-in-aid systems further strengthened educational development. The research article highlights the missionary efforts transformed the educational landscape, leading to long-term socio-economic progress and the emergence of a more educated society in southern Tamil Nadu with special reference to Tirunelveli region during the nineteenth century.

Key words : Christian Missionary Education, S.P.C.K., S.P.G., C.M.S. Missions, Eliza Caldwell, Missionary Schools, Social and Educational Development

Introduction

Christian Missionary Societies played a great role in imparting elementary education. Rev. James Hough (1816 – 1821) arrived at Tirunelveli in 1816 as a Missionary for the Society for promoting Christian knowledge (S.P.C.K.). He founded theological seminary at Nazareth in 1819. He established Anglovernacular school at Mudalur, Thoothukudi and Nazareth. He founded a special school with a hostel for giving training Christian students in church ministry. Rev. Hough undertook a survey of all the neighbouring villages in erstwhile Tirunelveli district at the request of the Madras committee of the S.P.C.K. Mission. He submitted his survey reports to the S.P.C.K. in September, 1818, September, 1819 and August, 1820.

Genesis of Mission Schools

After analyzing the Mission reports, the S.P.C.K. allotted a considerable amount every month for educational development service in Tirunelveli region from 1820. In 1842, there were four schools for boys, two at Thoothukudi and one each at Meignapuram and Ettayapuram. Rev. John Thomas, the Missionary of Church Mission society established school for boys and girls in 1842 and 1847 respectively at Mengnapuram. The first training school for Women teachers was opened at Kadachapuram in 1843 by Mrs. Rhenius where it was carried on for thirteen years. The Society for the propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G. of England 1701) established many schools in Thoothukudi district. The Society spent nearly 40,000 for its educational activities in 1852 and 30,000 in 1853. It also maintained one Teacher Training School at Sawyerapuram in Thoothukudi district.

Bishop Robert Caldwell started many schools for boys and girls in and around Idayankudi. Eliza Caldwell's female Boarding School at Idayangudi in 1844 was the first of its kind in the Diocese of Madras and the teaching of the girls in those days caused great amazement among the Parents who exclaimed "What she may teach the cows next she also give the school the character of an industrial school by teaching them to make lace which became a flourishing branch of manufacture and source of considerable and increasing profit to the school. Though it began functioning only with eight girls, It had rapid growth with hundred boarders. Boarding schools were also started at Christianagaram, Nagalapuram, Puthiamputhar, Koodenkulam and Kuttam by Eliza Caldwell. She paid periodical visits to these schools to provide the necessary guidance and support. The Idaiyankudi Boarding school was also instrumental in starting similar schools at Nazareth and Mudalur under Mrs. Cammerar and Mrs. Henry respectively. Mrs. Eliza Caldwell used education as a tool to change the attitude of girls about themselves. Her Principal object was to train the girls to become good wives. The annual reports of the S.P.C.K. and S.P.G. throw light on the growth of the School. The students were taught Tamil Grammar Geography, English, Arithmetic, History needle works and hygiene poor children were given free education and supplied free food and cloth. Eliza Caldwell was a pioneer in giving free mid day meals to hundred and seventy one students. Anominal amount of many was collected as fees in order to make the parents aware of the expenditure marred on education. Lady Napiere wife of the Madras Governor on her visit to Idayengudi in 1868, donated money, required for planting a thousand Palmyrah trees which could serve as a source of Permanent income for the Boarding school in future. Toget permanent income for the school Mrs. Eliza Caldwell purchased agricultural lands with a gift of £ 100 (Rs. 1060/-) obtained from Rev. Fenton of England and named the land as "Fenton Estate", she also constructed a Fenton Tank at Kudenkulam. Mrs. Caldwell was assisted by Miss. Eleanor, a motive of Idaiyengudi. She was appointed as teacher and matron of the Boarding school in 1844. Later she was appointed as the Headmistress of the School. She was the first Indian Headmistress of the school. The boarding School children paid rupees ten to the District Sabai as an annual offering, from their earnings from rearing fowls and keeping small gardens. The expenditure of the school was met partly by the Madras Diocesan Committee and partly by the subscriptions collected from the rich people. During epidemics, the missionaries and teachers Jointly helped the affected people. At times of caste disputes the educated women in those schools assisted their husbands in restoring peace. The girls after passing the fifth standard either had to go home to help their parents in household work or to Join the mission industrial school. Caldwell's daughters Isabella and Louisa wrote impressive and moving letters to their friends in England and raised sufficient funds to support the poor girls in the boarding school. They even managed the girls boarding school in the absence of their mother. In 1869 the strength of the boarding school was one hundred and sixty seven. With the limited resources they opened a new Anglo Vernacular School in 1869 at Oramankulam. The Society for the promotion of Christian knowledge (S.P.C.K) offered scholarships to the poor girls with the contribution of S.P.C.K the school built rest rooms for the boarders. The Ladies Association of England supplied clothes and toys for the school. The surplus articles and clothes, unsuitable for school children, such as childrens frocks and Christening robes were sold among the wives of the mission agents and former boarding school girls. With the help of her daughters, Mrs. Caldwell developed the school and brought it into a very high standard. The girls school was recognized as first grade elementary with seven standards and aided by the Government. On the model of Girls Boarding School, Idaiyengudi Mrs. Eliza Caldwell started a girls school at Kulasekarapattinum near Tiruchendur in the Christian agaram mission district for high caste Hindu Girls, Eliza Caldwell solved the financial problems of Pudukkottai School near Thoothukudi which was started by Rev. Sharrock in 1883, Sixty girls in and around Pudukkottai were admitted in the school, which

was a great boon to the poor. She offered financial support to a Marava boy and a Marava girl from Radhapuram Mission district. The S.P.G. Boys and Girls Boarding Schools at Kudenkulam and Radhapuram were opened in 1888 by Rev. S. S. Daniel under the Patronage of Mrs. Caldwell, Mrs. Agnes Clarke and Mrs. Isabella Wyatt. These schools were managed mostly on subscriptions from the friends of Mrs. Caldwell of England.

In 1883, Victoria Girls School was started by Mrs. Eliza Caldwell in Thoothukudi for high caste Hindu girls. There were twenty three girls in the Day School at Thoothukudi, Melur and twenty seven at Keelur Thoothukudi with qualified female teachers. In 1884 another School was started at Vadakkur in Thoothukudi. These three schools of the women Missionaries obtained Government recognition in 1885. In 1887, Melur Girls School was upgraded into a Middle School and was subsequently made a Boarding school. The School was named after queen Victoria on the occasion of her golden jubilee celebration in 1887. In 1893 the school was upgraded into a high school.

In 1887, When Caldwell was appointed as Bishop of Thoothukudi. Since Sawyerpuram was a in significant Villages Caldwell transferred the high school and Second Grade College originally functioning there to Thoothukudi and classes were conducted to obtain First Degree in Arts and Bachelor of Arts degree courses. The College functioned well for ten years. However the financial problems led to the closure of the College in 1891. The College was converted as a high School thereafter.

In 1854, the Directorate of Public Instruction was formed and all the educational Institutions in the Madras Presidency were brought under the administrative control of the Department for the regional Administration the Office of the Divisional inspectors were created and the Educational Institutions in the district of Tirunelveli along with the neighboring district were brought under the control of Divisional Inspector of Schools stationed at Madurai.

St. Johns Girls High School was the first Girls High School in South India. It was started by Rev. James Hough in 1820 with twenty girls. Mrs. Michael from Thanjavur was appointed as a teacher in Nazareth School. She taught needle work to the students. But it was closed down in 1826 due to financial constraints. In 1843, Annecammerer started St. Johns Girls Primary School in Nazareth. She was the wife of Rev. A.F. Cammerer who was the pastor of Nazareth from 1838 – 1858. The Missionaries met with much opposition from the natives of Nazareth. In order to Collect students for the new school, Anne Cemmerer went from house to house, spoke kindly to the parents, offered gifts to them and stressed the need for female education. Consequently parents agreed to send their children to the school. Thus the nucleus of the St. John's Girls School was formed in 1843. Mrs. Annecammerer served as first Principal. She constructed a boarding school in 1848 to accommodate forty one girls. She started Boarding schools at Mukuperi and Alwarthirunagari. At the age of twenty eight Mrs. Anne Commerer passed away on 15th, September, 1849. In 1860, Mrs. Sarah Scarbarough sister of Rev. Brotherton, took charge of St. Johns Girls Primary School, Nazareth. During her time the school was upgraded into a middle school. Mrs. Sarah Scarbarough Jointly managed both boys and the Girls Schools of Nazareth. After the death of Rev. Brothern, the school was brought under the control of Anne Brotherton. Due to her efforts the school got Government grants in aid in 1869. After the death of Anne Brotherton in 1869, the school came under the control of Mrs. Harriet Strachan from 1870 – 1876, the wife of Dr. Harriet Nicholson Strachan. She also took charge of the girls Boarding school in 1869. Conon Margoschis was appointed the superintendent of the school in 1876. He stressed the need for good education for women and started a kindergarten school.

The School attained the status of a High School in 1886. However the school became a fully fledged High School only in 1888. The first set of Women students to pass the Matriculation Examination in the Madras Presidency from this school, Elliot Tuxford Girls

School, Megnanapuram. Mrs. Mary Thomas started a Boarding School at Megnanapuram in 1841 with four pupils.

Rev. Tucker laid the foundation for the new building of the school on 20th, June, 1844. It was called Mary Elliot Tuxford school in memory of Mary, the wife of Rev. E.B. Elliott, formerly vicar of Tuxford. The school had to its credit European teachers Miss Sophia Hobbs, Miss. Darling, Miss. Ecvines and Miss Frances Thomas, Subjects like Rani Grammar Arithmetic, Geography and History were taught besides music needle work, embroidery, tatting, cotton spinning, cooking and gardening. The students of this school had the advantage of having their character moulded. Since the school was situated in the midst of Paddy fields, when epidemic like cholera broke out, the students voluntarily nursed the sick people in the surrounding area. The school was financially supported by the friends of England.

The average number of girls for years upto 1864 was eighty. A few students had undergone the course of study at the Teachers Training institution Palayamkottai and Sarah Tucker college for the Madras Matriculation Examination. Meritorious students were given training in teaching practice topper for government examination in 1865. After the death of Mrs. Thomas in 1870 her eldest daughter Mts. Marie Jone Dibb and her younger daughter Miss. Frances Elizabeth Thomas took charge of the administration of the school. When Miss. Francis Elizabeth Thomas went to England. Mrs. Edith Daughter, wife of Rev. E.A. Doughas took over the Elliot Tuxford school temporarily and was assisted by Miss. E.C. Vines.

With a view to popularizing female education, Miss. C.C. Giberthe and Miss. Sophia Hobbs the C.M.S. Missionaries opened the female Norma School for Women teachers at Katachapuram near Mudalur in 1843. Miss. C.C. Giberthe a teacher in Tirunelveli, Female Normal School, employed brained elderly women and widows as school teachers. Meanwhile in 1845, Miss. Sophia Hobbs was transferred to Meignanapuram to assist Mary Thomas in the Boarding School. As she married Rev. James spratt, the C.M.S. Missionary of Meignanapuram in 1845 her sister Mary Jane Hobbs was put in charge of female normal school, Katachapuram till 1856. Unfortunately the training school at Katachapuram was closed in 1856 for lack of staff members.

Miss. Graves, Miss. Evans, Miss. Swinger and Miss. Harris, the eminent women Missionaries were responsible for the establishment of St. Johns Teacher Training Institute in 1877 at Nazareth. Young Women were trained to be eligible to teach in middle and elementary schools. The training school functioned as a lower grade training school from 1877 to 1900. In 1885 the school was recognized by the Government of Madras as a Normal Training Institution. English arithmetic algebra, geometry, history, Geography, general knowledge, grammar map drawing, drawing needle work and gymnastic exercises were taught. The training school was upgraded into higher grade training school in 1900.

A branch school for the blind was opened in 1893 with six boys at Pannavilai, twenty three miles away from Palayamkottai. It was administered by Nallathamby an instructor trained in the parent school. The students who were admitted in the school became Christians. Mrs. R. Wilson of Canada sister of then Bishop Morley, donated four weaving frames for the blind boys of the school at Pannaivilai. It helped them to earn their livelihood by weaving grass mats in different colours. Miss. Ask with found it difficult to supervise the school at Pannaivilai. So a house near the Sarah Tucker Institution was taken for rent in 1904.

Mothers Union was started at Kadachapuram in 1847 by Muthammal wife of Rev. John Devasahayam. The Union started a nursery school and a night school and gave adult education to the elders. Perinban a member of the Kadachapuram Mothers Union started a night school at Kadachapuram for the women who worked in the Paddy fields. As many women had to spend the whole day boiling Palmyra Juice to make Jaggery nursery schools were started for their children. It was also responsible for the emergence of branches of Mothers Union in C.M.S. and S.P.G. fields all over the world lace industry at Idaiyengudi was

started by the Mrs. Eliza Caldwell in 1851 with sixty girls Idaiyengudi is situated three miles south of Thisayenvillai. The students taught lace making Indian embroidery and needle work. The lace school at Kudamkulam was started in 1894 to provide employment for the grown up girls who were passed through the boarding school.

Mrs. Mary Thomas established an embroidery and Basket industry at Megnanapuram in 1842. The villages produced articles of daily use by using different varieties of grass, cane and bamboo. After her death, Miss. Francis Elizabeth Thomas became the manager of this industry and was assisted by Miss. Gertrude Pakentanwalsh. The finished products were sold in the markets of Kodaikanal and England due to the efforts of Miss. Ryods, S.P.G. Missionary. Free meal was given daily to the poor girl students.

Pope Memorial High School was one of the oldest S.P.G. Mission Institutions in Thoothukudi district which was founded by a famous Tamil Scholar Rev. G. U. Pope on 12th, October, 1844. He started the school as a seminary and developed it into a reputed centre of learning. Here English, Latin, Hebrew, Tamil, Greek, Maths, Philosophy, Geometry, Algebra, logic, bible music and several other subjects were taught. The fame of the institution spread far and wide. The University of Oxford in recognition of the fame of the institution contributed financial assistance in 1848 for establishing a library. Pope Principles of education were summed up in a Tamil mat to which he hung on the wall "God Food Good Study, Good Thrashing. The seminary was raised to the rank of a high school in 1862, students began to appear for matriculation examination from 1864. Students sent by all other Missions in the district received secondary education. Some were trained as school masters and some others as catechists and were employed in the mission. Bishop R. Caldwell who was interested very much in higher education of the Tirunelveli Christians raised the high school to the status of a Second Grade college in 1880. It was in due course affiliated to the Madras University. Sharrock, the Principal of the institution made Sawyerpuram the centre for Government Matriculation examination.

Medium of Instruction

The medium of instruction was English. In 1860 James Thomas son of John Thomas started the Tamil sections with the object of giving useful training to youths from 12 to 16 years of age. The Missionaries thought that instruction through Tamil at this stage would prepare them to join the normal school. In 1860 eight boys were sent to the normal school, one to the normal school and two were appointed as schoolmasters. John Thomas advocated instruction through English, as it would be easier to impart good knowledge of Christian theology to the youth who would later on become ordained priests in the Mission. But his view on English education was opposed by some of the Missionaries. Ashton Dibb reported in 1863 that English education was a problem to many children and therefore he had to abolish English Education. Tamil was sufficient for the training of Mission agents as schoolmasters and catechists. He taught Theology, History and Tamil grammar and composition, reading, writing, arithmetic. Philosophy, Anatomy. Medicine and Astronomy also in Tamil. Tamil books on all these subjects had already been published.

However. John Thomas reintroduced the usual course of study in 1864 when he came to Mengnanapuram after his furlough. He reported in 1864 that the youths desired to study English. He quoted in his report what his friend had said. "If you keep back your people from a knowledge of English, they will be found, some years hence, infinitely distanced by their fellow country-men in knowledge, status, and influence. The boys in the boarding school were provided free food, clothing and instruction with the sole aim of utilizing them later in the Mission service. The achievement of the school was great. John Thomas reported in 1864 that between 1844 and 1863, 190 pupils were admitted and of them 22 were serving as catechists and 43 as schoolmasters in the Mission.

Conclusion

The Mission School served as the agency for the propagation of the Gospel and at the same time it catered to the interests of the society. They enriched curriculum, regular examinations, appointing external and internal examinations. Written and viva -voce tests and the practice of rewarding merit were some of the good aspects of work done by the Missionaries. The school was put under the charge of Indian teachers after the year 1888. As a result of the manifold educational activities, Mengnanapuram, a small village in the remote eastern part of Tirunelveli District surrounded by Palmyra tree, progressed and got urbanized. The socio - economic condition of the people improved considerably, as many were employed in the civil service and Mission and Government schools.

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