

Negotiating With Modernity: Mapping The Contributions Of Franciscan Missionaries Of Mary (FMM) To Tamil Society In Colonial South India

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ABSTRACT

Since the 16th century, the constant entry of Christian missionaries, traders from various parts of Europe, to a great extent, altered the very basis of the social system in India. The highly complex, heterogeneous nature of Indian social system with an amalgam of customs and rituals along with the indispensable, omnipresent role of caste this had appeared heavily unfamiliar to Europeans. The pattern of colonial impact on the old order of the Indian society in the context of land relations was repeated and reaffirmed in other contexts too, such as the introduction of English education and the consequent expansion of and diversification of civil society into professions. The history of the progress of Christianity in India is an interesting study in itself. More fascinating is the history of the Christian missionaries' activities towards the development of education and other welfare activities. The development of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) in Tamil society was founded in 1876 in the Nilgiris. Initially schools, shelters, dispensaries and tailoring institutions for young girls were opened. Soon after FMM houses were established in Coimbatore, which had Tamil schools, orphanages, weaving centers, a crèche, home for the aged and home for the uncared mothers. Sisters of FMM are aware of the changing needs of today's world. FMM has evolved a wholesome programme of social welfare activities. Programmes included rehabilitation measures and promoting humanness for the deprived and the marginalized.

KEY WORDS

Missionary, Marginalised, Franciscan, Colonialism, Modernity, Mapping, Modernity

Introduction:

It is exactly five centuries ago, when the Portuguese traveller Vasco de Gama triumphed in landing on the west coast of India through sea route, a new era begun for the subcontinent. This was not just an arrival of a European traveller to India; it was an opening up of a closed continent to the European colonizers. It laid the foundation for the genesis for world trade. The arrival of Vasco de Gama as the logical corollary of European enlightenment strongly constructed the basis for colonial expansion. However, it is also necessary to remember that it was the arrival of modernity as well. The enlightenment ethos with their initial hopes and promises opened up new vistas to the people of this subcontinent.

Since the 16th century, the constant entry of Christian missionaries, traders from various parts of Europe, to a great extent, altered the very basis of the social system in India. The European particularly the British traders who later became rulers, presented themselves as the real inheritors of enlightenment ethos and brought liberal political ideas to India. The active presence of Christian missionaries from various parts of Europe facilitated this process. Thus, with all such forces, having modernity as the core, Indian society began to respond them.

The highly complex, heterogeneous nature of Indian social system with an amalgam of customs and rituals along with the indispensable, omnipresent role of caste this had appeared heavily unfamiliar to Europeans. Therefore, the compelling defining feature of Indian society made the colonizers to categorize the society through numbers; because numbers are believed to be the core for practicing bureaucratic or instrumental rationality. The numbering process eventually had ended up in the categorization of caste, religion and mother tongue. Thus, the Indian subcontinent began to look like a conglomeration of several ethnic and religious groups.

Economy and Society in 19th Century Tamil Society

The main tenets of traditional explanations of caste, religion and languages were raised to the status of official definitions hence paved the way for decoding India. This is not only for the colonizing the west but for the colonized Indians too. Several aspects of Indian social structure began to change with modernity and colonial rule. Once decoding came to an end, the British administration introduced its way of governing the natives. The governance mainly included heavy taxed slapped on the natives. People were overburdened with numerous kinds of taxes, all

of a feudal nature. Poor peasants, artisans and workers of lower castes had to bear the largest share of these exactions. Apart from land tax the cultivators had to satisfy the rulers and feudal chieftains with numerous contributions on occasions of festivals, social and family rites and in emergencies. Most of cruel taxes were aimed at the laboring classes. Many of these poor peasants, in order to escape the oppression of these cruel landlords and revenue collectors, use to make over their property to upper caste Hindus and served as labourers. Economic disabilities imposed on these helpless millions who formed the backbone of the economy ruined their lives. Impressments of labour for public works was, till the end of 19th century, resorted to under the British rule also. The misdirected revenue policies of the early British administrators put the whole south India in a condition of economic backwardness never known before. The British financial system differed from the earlier systems in four important particulars.¹

1. The payment of the army, police and other public establishments in cash.
2. The collection of the land tax in money instead of wholly or partially in kind.
3. The transfer of a portion of the Indian revenues to England, for the payment of the Home charges usually styled 'The Indian Tribute'.
4. The creation of a funded public debt, of which the interest had to be paid in cash.

As a result of the exploitative policies of the British imperial government, several peasant unrests took place. The 1824 famine was unusually severe during the course of which serious grain riots took place in Madras city itself for which the service of the army had to be called for to restore peace and order. Along with peasants, small traders and weavers too bore the brunt of colonialism in a big way. Before the gigantic array of machines and machine made clothes of mighty Manchester, the poor weavers of India especially in Tamil society stood absolutely helpless. The free trade principle applied here brought about the complete ruin of this section of industry.² The peculiar economic and social conditions prevailing in Tamil society as a result of political changes effected by the British imperialism witnessed to the rise of new caste and class structure. The new social and economic order was confined to the upper castes especially to Brahmin community alone. The brahminic version of social order pervaded the entire region to a greater or lesser degree through religio-cultural symbolism in the form of mythologies, ubiquitous temples as social institutions, Sanskrit as the sacred language, codification of laws

and customs and most of all through the actual socio-economic dominance of brahminic and other collaborating upper castes and imbued society with a sense of artificial cultural unity.³

Education, Colonialism and New Social Order

The pattern of colonial impact on the old order of the Indian society in the context of land relations was repeated and reaffirmed in other contexts too, such as the introduction of English education and the consequent expansion of and diversification of civil society into professions. The old dominant sections of society managed to monopolize the new opportunity-structure generated by the introduction of English education. The upper castes most notably the Brahmins reaped maximum benefits of this new education during the whole of 19th century and the early quarter of 20th century. In fact, English education was concentrated in the three coastal presidencies and here too mainly in the metropolitan centers. In Bengal, it was the Brahmins, kayasthas and baidyas, and both in Madras cum Bombay the Brahmins in solitary held the near monopoly of education. In other words, there was not any new class but just the same old wine in new bottles.⁴

In other words, the very principle of modern, secular and universal education brought in by British colonialism to suit its imperial agenda was also hijacked by the local caste elites. However, it does not mean that modern education itself is brahminical in its content. The very intention of the British to introduce such a system of education was to make the native society into a conglomeration of professionals notwithstanding the structural hierarchy embedded in the subcontinent. The true character of modernity – equality, fraternity and liberty is organically enmeshed in the foundation of the education system itself. Therefore, in order to redeem the system from the tentacles of the local elites a new mission was required to help the already marginalized people of the subcontinent. This was provided by various Christian missionaries in Tamil society.

Religion and Modernity: Missionaries in Tamil Society

The history of the progress of Christianity in India is an interesting study in itself. More fascinating is the history of the Christian missionaries' activities towards the development of education and other welfare activities. Though the propagation of Christianity and conversion of

the natives to their religion were the objectives of some missionaries; they were initially not able to accomplish these objectives. The caste system, the steel frame of the local Hindu society was quite against any change. However, the situation began to change after the introduction of the Charter Act of 1813 by which the British parliament opened the doors to all missionaries to go ahead with their programmes. It is through the introduction of English education that the missionaries slowly began to capture the masses. But to those efforts only people of upper caste origin benefited more than the subaltern masses. The position of the toiling masses from the lower castes was highly deplorable. It is under such circumstances that a few selfless Christian missionaries who were moved by the pathetic conditions of the poor, downtrodden and the lower caste people determined to work for their well-being. Thus they had taken up service activities for the welfare of the needy people. They established educational and charitable institutions. In such service endeavours both the catholic and protestant missionaries had served in their own unique ways for the well-being of the poor.

Christianity was introduced into India since the first century of the Christian era. St. Thomas one of the direct disciples of Jesus Christ came to India and labored in Kerala and Mylapore in Madras. Consequently many Christian settlements were established in these parts. The church began to organize several welfare programmes not only for their own folk but also for all fellowmen.⁵

From the 19th century onwards, various religious congregations of both men and women were engaged in the implementation of the catholic social action programmes. One such important congregation of women is the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM).

The Genesis of FMM in Tamil Society

The development of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) in Tamil society was founded in 1876 in the Nilgiris. Initially schools, shelters, dispensaries and tailoring institutions for young girls were opened. Soon after FMM houses were established in Coimbatore, which had Tamil schools, orphanages, weaving centers, a crèche, home for the aged and home for the uncared mothers. In Palghat and Kothagiri, the sisters took special care of the Badugatribals as they were illiterate and in stark backwardness.

In 1888, FMM arrived in Mylapore Diocese on the invitation of Mother Mary of the Passion. There were eight sisters including Mother Veronique, the Provincial and Mother Marie de Jesus and Mother Mary de Alben. In the beginning, a school and a dispensary were started and around 26 women were accommodated in the hospitals to stay and carry on their welfare activities. In addition to that a room was constructed to teach women embroidery and lace-making. Besides that an English school attached to a boarding house was started in the new building. A Tamil school was also opened side by side.

On the invitation of the Bishop of Mylapore, FMM sisters founded a school in 1900, on top of the St. Thomas Mount near Madras – The convent of the Holy Apostles came to the services of people in that area. In order to serve the poor girls children exclusively yet another school – St. Dominic School for girls was started in the same area in the same year.⁶ In addition to schools, FMM sisters founded an orphanage in the same area in the late 19th century itself.

Social Welfare of FMM

From the very beginning, social welfare activities would be the major objectives of FMM sisters. Their basic motto is 'To Love is to Serve'.⁷ Sisters of FMM are aware of the changing needs of today's world. FMM has evolved a wholesome programme of social welfare activities. Programmes included rehabilitation measures and promoting humanness for the deprived and the marginalized.

Care for the sick

Foundation of Leper houses and nursing the leperacy was a special mission of the FMM. The founders of the congregation always insisted that all the willing sisters to dedicate themselves to the mission of caring for the lepers. In Mylapore the sisters of FMM founded a dispensary in 1888 along with a school to educate the poor children. Medical facilities were offered to the poor in other places also. The leperacy home in Tuticorin had also carried services under the able guidance of FMM sisters.

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Women's Welfare

In spite of many achievements, the conditions of women all over the world remain to a very deplorable situation. In today's male dominated world, the pitiable condition women had to

live, really a cause for concern. The sisters of FMM became hard workers in this direction in order to show good example to others and also to express the value of manual work. Every FMM house has a workroom. The workroom became an outstanding example of social work.⁸ Young women who were interested to do social work particularly to take care of the poor and the sick were given training to by the sisters of FMM. They were paid during the apprenticeship period itself. Above all the workroom was to educate the young women to take up social work with much devotion and sincerity.

The training houses in Madras were oriented towards services for women, young girls, families and also for the uncared mothers with the provisions of workrooms, weaving and serving centers. In addition, hospitals for women were also started. Service to the poor young girls and women had always been a priority to the congregation.

The purpose of the foundation of orphanages in the mission countries was to give shelter and rehabilitation to the orphan and abandoned children. To keep children in a homely atmosphere, FMM has started a few orphanages in Madras way back in 1901 itself. The children in such homes were given food and shelter and education; this formed a part of their daily exercise that many children found this house as a home of love and affection.⁹ FMM sisters passionately associate themselves with the people of working class too. Many peasants from agricultural farms moved to industrial areas and the FMM took care of the entire families. Houses of support were established during the 1930s in Madras to offer useful services to some of the working class people who were rendered homeless and left in lurch in many parts of the city. The sisters of FMM realized the importance of associating with the poor. By constantly listening to the poor, the sisters of the FMM came to understand their miserable conditions. They found that the poor were capable of raising themselves above their poorest situations. For the FMM, the poor working classes appeared to be the great hope of the future. The sisters of FMM volunteered themselves and went to the huts of the poor to attend to their demands and grievances without waiting for them to approach. FMM prefers to give all opportunities to poor people to work and earn for their livelihood.

Concluding Remarks: Negotiating with Modernity – Social Welfare and the rise of Civil Society

When the concept of civil society and social welfare entered the subcontinent through the cannons of colonialism, the contributions of the missionaries were immense in bring those benefits to the downtrodden. Especially the FMM sisters tirelessly and selflessly worked for the welfare of the subaltern masses hitherto marginalized by the imperialism and its local agents. In order to fight against the double-edged enemy – imperialism and casteism, the contributions of FMM sisters in Tamil society to liberate the natives to reach a better stage would be in golden letters in the annals of history.

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