

Missionaries and Foreign Regime: A Critique of the Christian Missionaries' Activities During the British Governance in India (1757-1947)

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ABSTRACT

The coming and gradually growing activities of the Christian Missionaries during Colonial Hegemony (1757-1947) proved significant historical events in the Socio-Cultural History of Modern India. Undoubtedly they played a key role in prohibition of a number of socio-religious evils, abuses and disparities then strictly prevalent in India but they never deviated from their underlying aim of conversion to Christianity. As Indian religion and society were plagued by these evils and disparities, the Christian Missionaries got opportunity to fulfill their basic motto of religious conversion across the country. They were actively supported by the British governance and colonial bureaucrats, even the Charter Acts of 1813 and 1833 were enacted by the British Parliament to the benefit of the Christian Missionaries in India and abroad. But they were not successful in getting their goal fulfilled by converting people of higher castes of Hindus, however, they converted a large number of tribal communities and lower castes of Hindus to Christianity during colonial administration in India. Even after Independence, a large number of Christian Missionaries have been active across the country. The paper traces and evaluates the growing activities of the Christian Missionaries and their social services as well as it reveals their main purpose of religious conversion during the British rule in India.

Keywords: *Christian Missionary, Conversion, Social Services, British Regime, Tribal Region, Weaker Sections.*

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Introduction:

The arrival and growing activities of the Christian Missionaries marked a new era in the History of Colonial rule in India 1757-1947. The enacting of the Charter Acts of 1813 (Srinivas1998:50) and 1833 proved a turning point as the Christian Missionaries got much inspiration to spread their activities with special focus on religious conversion of tribal and backward communities of India. The Colonial Administration and British officials favoured and encouraged them as most of official subsidy was granted to the Christian Missionaries. This made their work of religious conversion much easier in India and many more specially tribal, dalit and weaker communities got converted to Christianity in India. A noted historian K.K.Datta rightly pointed out that

“Christianity was an important force in the social and religious history of India. In the period after the Indian Movement of 1857-59, the Christian Missionaries directed their attention to the conversion of low castes and hill tribes like the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Nagas, Kharias and Garos.” (Datta1975:230-231)

Objectives:

The underlying purpose of the study is to disclose gradually increasing activities of the Christian Missionaries during British rule in India 1757-1947. Undoubtedly they made contributions to social and religious reforms and criticized social evils and disparities. but they always concentrated on their mission of conversion and converted specially a

large number of tribal communities ,dalits and weaker sections of Indian society. The social services done by the Missionaries are discussed and applauded but their fundamental target of converting tribal and dalit communities and weaker sections is traced and exposed.

Methodology:

The study is based on published sources consisting of edited and authored books, reports and articles published in official records and research journals respectively available in libraries and archives. Foreign and Indian Social Scientists who wrote on Missionaries' activities in India have been observed and assessed with online sources available in Google, included in other important sources of the study.

Review of Literature :

There is no dearth of authored and edited books on Colonial Rule in India 1747-1947 but in most of the books the activities of Christian Missionaries during the regime are not properly discussed and assessed.

R.C.Majumdar et al (1946),Anil Chandra. Banerjee. (1992), Bipan Chandra. (2009), M.S.Jain (1991) V.D. Mahajan. (2013) A.K. Mittal. (2003). Dhanpati Pandey(2016) Ramchandra Pradhan. (2017), Tirthankar Roy(2015), Shailendra Nath Sen. (2017) N.R.Sethi (1973). L.P. Sharma (1990)..S.R. Sharma (1951), Ramlakhan Shukla (2006, Spear. Percival Spear. (1970), D.N.Kundra (1976), J. Troisi(2024), S.K.Sharma (2021), Suranjan Chatterje & Siddhartha Guha Ray (2015) and M.N. Srinivas (1998, 1985), L.P.Vidarthi(ed. 1987), Ishwari Prasad (2016) and other Indian scholars wrote on various aspects of History of Colonial Regime in India but most of them overlooked the activities of the Christian Missionaries in India during 1757-1947.It is to be noted that many scholars wrote briefly about the coming and activities of the Christian Missionaries in India and did not evaluate their activities and its effects on India and its people. Even in writings of a noted scholar K.S.Singh (1985,),the

conversion activities of the Christian Missions have been briefly discussed but in his study John MacDougall (1985) did not write on conversion activities of the Christian Missionaries in India. Therefore, in this study, there is an authentic discussion of the activities of the Christian Missionaries with their target of converting people to Christianity during Colonial Rule in India.

Activities of Christian Missionaries During 1757-1947

St.Thomas ,one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, came in first century AD at Malabar Coast and up to third century AD. Christianity emerged as an organized group in Kerala coast(now Keralam coast).During the reign of Mugal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) Baptist Mission in 1580 established a mission in Fatehpur Sikri and its Priests used to participate in religious discussion held in Ibadatkhana .During the reign of Emperor Shahjahan (1628-1658) the Jesuit Missionaries opened a College in Agra. But arrival of Vasco de Gama at Kalicut in 1498 opened a new age in religious relations between east and west as he openly stated that we have come here to get Christians and spices.(Grover&Yashpal 2002:515) However during 17th and 18th centuries the Directors of the East India Company and British Bureaucrats showed contradictory attitude towards Missionaries. The Missionaries were not only encouraged but also banned sometimes. In first decade of 18th century Protestant Missionaries of Danish started their activities in Serampur (Bengal) and Tranquebar (South India). The merchants and officials of the Company in view of their trade business were opposed to Priests called Salvation Army so they banned the arrival of Missionaries in Presidency towns as they were aware of the indifferent attitude of Mughals to the Portuguese Jesuits.

Joshua Marshman, William Carey and William Ward wanted to start their work in Calcutta But Governor General of India Lord Wellesley (1798-1805) refused to permit them as their activities were considered subversive and threat to peace. They were compelled to take shelter in Denmark colony

Serampur where they did marvelous works in sphere of translation and printing. In addition to translation of Ramayan and Mahabharat etc. they also attempted to social reforms. (Grover & Yashpal 2002:412) William Carey, Thomas, Marshman, Ward and other Baptist Missinaries made earnest efforts for the conversion and education of Indians, in spite of the Despatch of the Court of Directors, dated 7 September 1808, "declaring their policy of strict neutrality in all matters of religion, and in spite of the contempt thrown on their efforts at home." (Datta 1975: 230-231). They built up the famous Serampur Mission in January 1800. According to Sen, "This was the beginning of a new era in the history of missionary activities in India." (Sen 2017:198)

During 18th and 19th centuries England again witnessed spread and popularity of Christianity. This changed the attitude of Directors and Members of British Parliament. Consequently the Charter Act of 1813 was enacted and ban on the activities of Missionaries was lifted. (Srinivas 1998:50, 61; Sharma 1951:461,464,475) The Missionaries were allowed to come and reside in India, and further permission was given to all Missionaries across the world by the Charter Act of 1833. (Sarma 1951:462-465) It is to be noted that during 18th and 19th centuries Christianity again spread in England that added to their growing popularity and influence across the world. Therefore German and American Missionaries became active all over the world including India.

Admittedly the main function of Christian Missionaries in India was religious conversion and they benefitted from a number of social and religious evils then prevalent in India. So the Christian Priests felt necessity of spreading Christianity but also its essentiality to save the Indian society from a number of socio-religious evils and disparities. During 16th and 17th centuries England had witnessed Reformation, but India was away from socio-religious reformation. So the Christian Missionaries started to criticize Indian society and religion. Undoubtedly they translated Hindu religious texts (Ramayan, Mahabharat etc.) and attempted to social

reforms also, but their motto was to ridicule Hinduism and attract people towards Christianity. One of the Christian Missionaries observed, "your Gods are nothing but demons: you will go to hell to expiate in eternal flames, the crime of your idolatry." (in Datta 1961:9,26) Enlightened Hindus opposed it that led to Hindu awakening gradually across the century. Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand, Swami Vivekanand, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and others led the foundation of socio-religious reform movement in the country. (Majumdar et al 1946:806-829; Kundra 1976:349-364; Jain 1991:303-325; Banerjee 1992: 525-543)

The Missionaries adopted two ways to perform their work of religious conversion. At first they criticized Hinduism and its tenets, and vindicated and professed Christianity. They established orphanage, blind school, training centre and Hospital etc. that made Christianity popular in Society and people used to get influenced by them. This opened the gate for converting people to Christianity. Srinivas rightly observed that Christian missionaries played a notable part in humanitarian activity, especially in providing education and medical aid to sections of Indian society most in need of them—Hajians, women, orphans, lepers and tribal folk. Equally important were their criticisms of such Hindu institutions as caste, untouchability, the low position of women, child marriage and polygamy. The British western attack resulted in a reinterpretation of Hinduism at both the ideological and institutional levels, and conversion of the lower castes (especially Harijans) to Islam and Christianity was an important factor in producing a changed attitude among the Hindu elite towards caste and Untouchability." (Srinivas 1998:52)

However, the Missionaries could not get much more success in attracting people of higher castes, except Bengal, Madras and Bombay (Datta 1975:231) but they were highly successful in carrying out the aim of religious conversion among tribal communities, scheduled castes and the people residing hilly regions. After First War of Indian

Independence 1857-1858, the Christian Missionaries directed their attention to the conversion of low castes and hill tribes. (Datta.1975:231) They got considerable success in Eastern part of India, (tribal regions of Khasi, Garo, Naga and Jaintia), Mijo region adjoining Burma border, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Kokrajhar, Jagdalpur of Odisha, Korapur of Bihar, Phulbani of Jharkhand and its neighbouring forests of Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. (Grover & Yashpal 2002:516) According to Datta, with the assistance of five hundred and fifty one native preachers, they carried on the work of conversion vigorously. They founded three hundred and nine native churches and also maintained twenty-five printing establishments. (Datta 1975:231)

Most of the social scientists are of the opinion that the non-association of the people of the said tribal regions with the mainstream of Hinduism was main reason of the Missionaries' successes. The British bureaucrats were influenced by them and on the pretext of saving tribal society and culture declared tribal regions as "reserved" where only Christian Missionaries were allowed to open schools, orphanages, hospitals etc. Rigid Social and religious distinctions in South India paved the way for Missionaries' work of religious conversion among weaker sections of society. It is significant to note that the Missionaries actively assisted people and provided relief during natural calamities. This inspired Indians who also provided social services to the people during famine, flood, epidemic and other natural disasters. The Missionaries also contributed to the growth and spread of education, Indian languages and literature, publications and establishment of Printing Press. etc. They opened training institutes for teachers. (Bandyopadhyay 2004:140-141)

The Missionaries' performances in Moga (Punjab), Salem (Tamilnadu), Medak (Andhra Pradesh), Ankleshwar (Gujarat) were highly praiseworthy. Bandyopadhyay rightly pointed out that the encouragement of the learned natives of India and the revival of and improvement of literature the

promotion of a knowledge of the science amongst the inhabitants of that country (were) unprecedented in an age when publicly funded education was not in vogue even in England." (Bandyopadhyay 2004:140-141) They left no stone unturned to criticize socio-religious evils and disparities, and opened the gate for social and religious awakening. During 1936-1937, in total 14341 Missionary organizations were established where 11,18,200 students were enrolled and its annual budget was 3,82,00,000 Rs. It is to be noted that these institutions enjoyed the special favour of the British administration and received most of the share of the government subsidy. After Second World War 1939-1945, the activities of foreign missionaries increased a lot. Thousands of Missionaries came to India and their activities in India increased significantly. Therefore, a Commission was appointed under the Chairmanship of M. Bhawani Shankar Niyogi, a retired Chief Justice of the Nagpur High Court, to investigate their activities. The Niyogi Committee Report on Christian Missionary Activities was an official inquiry published by the Government of Madhya Pradesh in 1956 to investigate proselytization and religious conversions in India. The Niyogi Commission reported that Christian Missions allegedly used schools, hospitals, money-lending and social services to secure conversions among lower-caste Hindus and tribal communities. (Srinivas 1985:106-107)

The growing activities of Christian Missionaries during British Rule 1757-1947 profoundly affected India and its people, specially tribal communities, dalits and weaker sections. Bandyopadhyay observed that "As the Christian Missionaries started working among the dalits and the colonial government sponsored special institutions for the spread of education among them, not only was a small educated elite group created among these classes, but in general a new consciousness was visible among the masses as well." (Bandyopadhyay 2004:350) The Christian

Missionaries apart from Raja Rammohan Roy ,too exerted some influence for the removal of the Sati practice in India. (Datta1961:39) A noted historian Sen rightly observed that “Despite their failure in their main objective of conversion, their influence was felt directly and indirectly on the Bengal society. The missionaries were mainly critical of Hindu idol-worship and the rite of Sati. The missionaries were the first to show that the cruel rite was not sanctioned even by the Hindu Shastras.” (Sen 2017 :199-200, see also Srinivas1998:79-81,84-85).

Conclusion:

Thus the Christian Missionaries’ activities during the British Governance in India (1757-1947) gradually increased as they were actively supported by colonial administration and its officials in India. So they could dare criticize socio-religious discriminations and evils then prevalent in India. This paved the gate for social and religious reform movement in India. They contributed in prohibition of various kinds of social and religious abuses, evils and disparities across India. Their contributions to the development of education was no less significant (Chatterjee & Guha Ray 2015:260-264). Many of them were close to Mahatma Gandhi and also made some contribution to the freedom struggle but their main purpose was conversion (Singh1985:15-18) , and they successfully converted specially a large number of tribal and dalit communities to Christianity during British regime in India. It is to be noted that their works also encouraged separatism in India. A noted social scientist Srinivas noted that “ The fact that in some areas tribal converts to Christianity led separatist movements has deepened the fears and suspicions of Hindus about conversion to another religion.”Even after Independence, behind the curtain of providing social services and other temptations ,the Missionaries have been active to fulfill their mission of conversion that emerged as“a contentious issue in India”.

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