

REIMAGINE THE COLONIAL INTERVENTION AND MASS CONVERSION IN TRAVANCORE

Abstract

In this paper I would try to explain what were the factors contributed to the mass conversion of lower castes into Christianity. Scholars and missionaries always blindly blamed the caste Hindus and ruler's oppression and persecution brought a mass conversion. Though some facts lay behind this argument but so many factors contributed to the mass conversion. Caste Hindus and rulers opposed with tooth and nail to the proselytization activities, but colonial intervention in many time threatened their position and they obeyed the colonial powers.

At all times and in all places human society is highly dynamic and not static. Voluntarily or involuntarily society welcomes changes at times. The ability to change causes the society to lead to new developments. This change can take place suddenly or gradually, violently or peacefully. However, during the time of a transition the forces of change affect all aspects of human life such as intellectual, cultural, economic and political. It is always possible for the forces of change to counteract the forces of 'reaction', but the end result will be the success of the factors of change.

Internal as well as external forces can operate as causative factors for a transition. However the factors of change challenge the existing orders, values and norms. This was true in Travancore in the nineteenth century, which was a period of radical changes in her history.

Many of the laws, customs and practices that had been regarded sacred and irrevocable for centuries were challenged, questioned and many of them broke down. The existing order gave way to a new order. At the dawn of the nineteenth century the missionaries of the London Missionary Society made South Travancore a field of their work and they were able to accomplish a great deal.

The Hindu rulers of Travancore, at all times, habitually showed a spirit of toleration toward their subjects professing alien faiths. This attitude won for them the genuine admiration of students of history. At a time when Christians in other parts of the world were persecuting fellow Christians and were being persecuted in turn, the rulers of Kerala were considerate toward colonies of Christian immigrants from Western Asia, and conferred on them substantial social privileges which gave them a status corresponding to that of the Hindus of the higher castes.¹The Travancore rulers respected the foreign religion and encouraged rational and scientific thinking.²

This impartial policy of the Travancore sovereigns towards Christianity was however not viewed by the caste Hindus in the right spirit. The large scale spread of Christianity and conversion of large numbers from depressed classes to that faith was considered by the caste Hindus as a challenge to Hinduism. They exerted pressure on the Rajas to stem the tide against *sanathana dharma*. A marked change in the attitude of Hindu rulers toward Christian missionary activities was seen in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Conversion was viewed with

1 *The Tarissappalli copper Plate inscriptions of Sthanu Ravi Varma in 848-849 AD., granted to the Christians of Kerala tax exemption and seventy two privileges. Elankulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, Studies in Kerala History, Kottayam, 1977, pp.370-377.*

2 Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia, Cambridge, 1811, p.98.*

suspicion and converts were not openly baptized by the priests for fear of being noticed by the government.³

It was in this environment that Protestant Christianity was conveyed to Travancore by William Tobias Ringeltaube. To him, the *Brahmins* were the sworn enemies of Christianity.⁴ Nevertheless, we do not see them coming into direct conflict with the missionaries or with the Christians except on a few occasions. It was the *Nairs* who offered active and direct opposition to missionary work. They feared that the spread of Christianity would destroy the caste system and along with it their political power and influence. In other words they were unable to tolerate the social changes and the progress of the suppressed people. Christianity was considered as a revolt against their established customs and practices, and associated it with the political machinations of the British. The missionaries of the L M S in Travancore combined religious and social work; the result was the creation of a new consciousness among the lower classes and they believed that Christianity could liberate them from social discrimination and oppression. This was in all respects against the will and pleasure of the Travancore government which was of the caste Hindus, by the caste Hindus, and for the caste Hindus.

The missionaries of the L M S were looked upon by the Travancore government as a set of people trying to subvert the existing social fabric of the state. They alleged that the missionaries were encouraging the backward classes to defy the caste Hindus, and that their intension apparently was to introduce English customs and usages in Travancore. Prominent Hindus believed that the missionaries were using the name and power of the British to convert

3 Thomas Whitthouse, *Lingerings of Light in a Dark Land: Researches into the Syrian Churches of Malabar*, Oxford University Press, 1873, pp. 215-23.

4 William Robinson, *Ringeltaube, The Rishi: Letters and Journals*, London, 19 June 1806, p. 78

the people and were claiming perfect toleration and liberty for their converts. Shungoony Menon writes:

“The system adopted by the London Missions savoured more of the undue and illegitimate exercise of power than persuasion and well meant endeavours to impress upon the people of the truth of the principles of religion and hence, the chief cause for the Hindus to be dissatisfied with them and to consider their proceedings offensive”.⁵

The Travancore government claimed that in spite of the opposition of Hindus, it afforded toleration and protection to the Christian missions, and that the work of the missionaries progressed rapidly. However, without considering this fact, the missionaries charged the government of cruel and unfair machinations against them.⁶The government also held that the aim of the missionaries was to increase in every possible way their own prestige and the prestige of the Christian church by winning the largest possible numbers of converts without any real regard for actual conversion.⁷The Raja feared caste Hindus and therefore the government followed a neutral policy as long as the missionaries avoided injuring the interests of the caste Hindus. Madhava Rao writes; “The Hindoo inhabitants of Travancore in general, seriously entertain the impression that the *sircar* is too much influenced by a leaning to missionary views, and that, while the state religion is Hinduism, the state is identifying itself with efforts directed against that religion.”⁸

The missionaries accused the government of following barbarous customs, usages and institutions. They alleged that the government was practising ‘intolerance, under a profession of

5 P.Shungoony Menon, *A History of Travancore*, Madras, 1878, pp.505-506

6 *Ibid.*, p.511.

7 John Mackenzie (ed.), *Christianity in Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1901), p.186.

8 T. Madhava Rao to the Resident, 24 November 1868. Political Proceedings.1869, Vol.III, p.128.

toleration”⁹. The lower classes of people suffered injustice at the hands of the government and the caste Hindus. The missionaries declared that the state was ‘priest-ridden’, and by no means the model, which it has long been represented to be. The officials were prejudiced against the weaker sections and perpetrated injustice in the name of administration of justice.

The root cause of opposition against the missionary activities in Travancore was the caste system. The missionaries regarded this hydra-headed monster as their greatest enemy. The supporters of caste fully reciprocated this sentiment and regarded the missionaries as the greatest foes of that institution. The supporters of caste system consisted of two groups. One group consisted of people who clinged to the caste system because they deliberately believed that caste was the bed-rock of Hinduism and that any attempt to tamper with it were an attack on their religion. The other group consisted of people who, though not morally inconvenienced by any religious scruples, hugged to the caste system because it ministered to their selfishness, greed and lust for power over the person and property of large numbers of their fellowmen. It was firmly believed that everyone must die in the caste or religion in which one was born, and that it was foolish for any man even to dream that he could improve his social or spiritual position by changing his faith.

The caste Hindus thought that the converts to Christianity would rebel against the trammels imposed upon them by ancient caste usage and assert their rights as free human beings with the spread of education. Such a change was not welcome to the caste Hindus. So they did their best to thwart the missionary and his agents in their attempt to educate and draw toward the Christian fold those miserable creatures.

9 *Memorial of the Missionaries of the L.M.S.*, 18 July 1859, Vol.III, p.128.

Christianity became the most important factor for the overall development of *Nadar* community. The existing social system and its customary practices quickened the pace of proselytization. The political influence of the British in Travancore at the beginning of the nineteenth century played a vital role in the establishment of a mission centre of the London Missionary Society in that area. The first three years from 1806 to 1809 was a period of trial for the Travancore mission of the L M S. It faced severe opposition from the government and caste Hindus during this period. The request of Ringeltaube for permission to establish a church was denied on the ground that it was a violation of established customs.¹⁰ However, the general attitude changed with the suppression of the rebellion of 1809 by the British. The Resident became powerful in the political affairs of Travancore and evinced a keen interest in the spread of Christianity. They lent their support in aid of the pioneering efforts of the missionaries. Herber Druary expatiates, "It was fortunate that such men as Macaulay and Munro were in those days the British residents at the court of Travancore, for the Raja was much inclined to promote the welfare of his Christian subjects, and the British plenipotentiaries brought their powerful influence in aid of the good cause".¹¹ They utilised the official position and influence to introduce and spread Christianity in Travancore.

Further Christianity taught them that God was only a personification of love and that he was ready to pardon them, help them, and lead them to light from darkness. All these days, the *Nadars* believed that the spirit of the dead remained on earth to do all

10 *Memorial of the Missionaries of the L M S*, 18 July 1859, Vol.III, p.128.

11 R. N. Yesudas, *The History of the London Missionary Society in Travancore from 1806-1906*, Trivandrum, 1980, p.viii.

kinds of mischief¹² and had only hatred towards mankind instead of mercy, gentleness or love. They had physically taxing ceremonies¹³ and also their type of worship was noisy, costly and crude; so the principles and the order of worship of Christianity attracted the *Nadars* powerfully. Hough wrote thus in 1820, “It is remarkable that this caste is less attached to Hinduism and more inclined to embrace the Christian faith than any caste of natives, I have hitherto seen.”¹⁴

This was mainly due to the socio-political antecedents of the *Nadars* and their social organization. Before the arrival of Protestant missionaries, Father Britto, a Jesuit missionary converted 200 souls in the Palmyra region of Nanguneri taluk within two months.¹⁵ He was the first man to convert the *Nadars* in large numbers to form a congregation of *Nadars* in Vadakkankulam in 1685.¹⁶ Though the Jesuits had concentrated their attention on the coastal areas of Southern Kerala they succeeded in establishing an important inland mission station at Nemom in 1701. There were thousands of *Nadars* who got converted to the fold of Jesuits and continued to remain as Catholics till the advent of the Protestant Missions. It seems that most of the churches including the Nemom mission were changed to churches under the Protestant missions.

Thus colonial intervention exerted a great influence in the mass conversion of the lower castes in Travancore. The caste system paved the way for the mass proselytization activities. The Travancore rulers favoured the caste Hindus and their rules. The rulers never consider the interests of the majority of the common people. The judiciary and law all were in the hands of *Brahmins* and *Nairs*. Travancore was a subsidiary ally of British. A British Resident look after the administration of Travancore. So the rulers feared the

12 Dalton, *Missions in India*, London, 1854, p.97.

13 Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity*, pp.219-220.

14 Paul Appaswamy, p.40.

15 K. N. Krishnaswamy Aiyar, *Madras District Gazetteers of Tinnevelley District*, Madras, 1934, p.165.

16 Leon. Besse, *Father Beschi of the Society of Jesus*, Trichinopoly, 1918, p.41.

British authorities. The Travancore rulers followed a neutral policy towards the missionaries. Sometimes the British authorities threatened the government who were against the converts. Gradually there happened a mass conversion in Travancore.