

MEDICAL MISSIONARIES OF TRAVANCORE

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Abstract

The Indian Christian Church owes its existence to the Apostle Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ who is believed to have reached Cranganore in the Malabar Coast in 52 A.D. However Christianity as a recognized faith came to be established in the 15th century A.D. with the advent of Francis Xavier who had converted the people belonged to fisher folk of the sea shore extended from Quilon to Tuticorin. Here and there a few Nadars also were found joined in the congregation. However, Protestant Missionary enterprises traced its beginning in India to the early years of 18th Century when the Danish Mission secured their footing in Tranquebar. In 1792 mainly by the efforts of William Carey, the Baptist Missionary Society was established. In 1795, it was followed by the London Missionary Society, mainly worked in South Travancore. In the beginning these missionaries concentrated evangelical work along with their educational endeavors. Later on, they turned up towards medical services too.

Introduction:

The London Missionary Society was established with London as headquarters in 1795 by few members of the Congregational, Anglican, Presbyterian and Wesleyan churches in order to spread Christianity in the overseas countries. In 1804, LMS sent its first missionaries to India. Ringeltaube, the first Protestant Missionary to evangelize in Travancore started a school in the village of Mylaudi in 1806 with twelve students. It was the first English school in Travancore. In some villages he started schools and trained teachers to be in charge of them. In 1809, an English Seminary was started in Mylaudi by Ringeltaube. His educational activities extended to other villages too. It was followed by his successors who operated all over South Travancore under the control of the L.M.S. Both Christians and Hindus were admitted in the Seminary. He also started a school in Mylaudi. Within six years, he had baptized over 1,100 people. He conducted services for the European soldiers in Udayagiri Fort in 1810. He established seven churches in James Town, Thamarakulam, Puthalam, Athikadu, Kovilvilai, Anandanadarkudiyyiruppu and Ethamozhi. Congregations were formed in Ammandivilai, Peicode and Allan Villai. He devoted his entire time and energy for evangelistic work and wherever he went he carried with him the mission of English education. He was

incessantly preaching and teaching and he established many schools for poor children, Christians as well as non-Christians. Ringeltaube's noble effort in the spread of English education was aided by the Maharaja of Travancore.

From 1810 to 1812, the people suffered from hunger and pestilence due to a severe drought and several of them died. In such a critical time, Ringeltaube went to Quilon and Palayamkottai and represented the difficulties of the people to his friends who provided funds to relieve the people of Myladi. However he was fully aware that free supply of foods and money would make them idle. So he followed the principle "he who will not work shall not eat". He asked those who approached him for relief to sink a well, tank and canal and cultivate land at Myladi. Moreover, Ringeltaube asked them to collect red stones (rubies and garnets) from the neighbouring Maruthuva Hills. The stones, thus collected, were sold to traders who mounted them in gold and silver and sold them to the gentlemen who contributed to the relief fund. The sale proceeds of the stones went to the starving poor. Since the poor people were left with no means for purchasing rice, the missionary himself procured rice and doled it out.

Ringeltaube kept in his small hut the poorest of the widows and orphan children and provided them with food. He sent the sick to the doctors and distributed medicine gratis. In his last report to the Directors of the London Mission Society in 1815, Ringeltaube made a mention of the efforts he took for vaccinating the people. After six years of tireless work in Travancore, his health began to decline and suffered from asthma and malaria and decided resign and appointed Vedamanickam as the Superintendent of the Mission. He died on 5 February 1816.

Rev. Charles Mead

In the meantime, Charles Mead was appointed as the Judge of the Nagercoil court in April 1818. The dual responsibilities of Civil Judge and missionary made Mead very popular. He made a few land mark judgments within a year. As L.M.S. did not agree this appointment, he resigned the post and he transferred his headquarters from Mylaudy to Nagercoil in April 1818. The L.M.S. was one of the first missions to realize that health care was part of Gospel message. The London Missionary society also developed cottage and small scale industries. Lace making and embroidery helped the Mission become self supporting and gave employment to many destitute women and girls. After settling in Nagercoil, Charles Mead got himself acquainted with the people around him. He realized the urgent need for orphanages, boarding schools, churches and a printing press. He bought eight pieces of land adjoining his house.

In 1818, Charles Mead was joined by Richard Knill, another Missionary of the LMS and laid the foundation stone for the Home church, Nagercoil. This church was 127 feet long and 66 feet wide, capable of seating two-thousand people. The foundation basement of the church was built with well shaped stones and so the church came to be called *Kalkovil* (*Kal* means stone, *Kovil* means church). It took 19 years to complete the building. Maharajah of Tanjore gave Rs.500/- to Charles Mead for the construction of the church. Similarly the Rajah of Cochin donated Rs.1000/- for the construction work. Rani of Travancore donated the land, timber and stones. It is important to note that funds for the building work came from different sources. Contributions were received from friends of England, Indian Christians and native non-Christian Princes.

Charles Mead took charge of the Neyyoor Mission in 1828. In 1831, a church was established at Neyyoor. Mead formed Religious Tract Society in Nagercoil and Neyyoor and both were eventually united under the “South Travancore Tract Society” in 1853. The congregation in the west of Nagercoil including Kotanavilai, Devikodu, Pattanam, Mathicode, Peyankuzhi, Eraniel, Eathamozhi, Anathanadar Kudiyiruppu, Tittuvilai and Kalliyamkaud and the evangelistic work extending up to Trivandrum were under the supervision of Rev. Mead. Rev. Mead stood shoulder to shoulder with the Nadar community in its fight against the right of women to wear upper cloth above the waist. The struggle was termed as “Upper Cloth Revolt”. It was erupted in the years 1822, 1828 to 1830, and 1858 to 1859. In 1814, Col. Monro issued an order permitting the women converted to Christianity to cover their bosoms.

Rev. Charles Mault

Rev. Charles Mault arrived in 1819 along with his wife Mrs. Martha Mault. In 1821, the South Travancore Mission was divided into Tamil and Malayalam Mission. Rev. Smith was posted to Quilon, in-charge of Malayalam Mission. Rev. Charles Mead and Rev. Charles Mault managed the Tamil Mission. Tamil Mission was divided into Eastern and Western division. Rev. Charles Mault and Mrs. Mault were in charge of Nagercoil division. The congregation work of Nagercoil including Mylaudy, Thaamarakulam, Mukillankudiyiruppu, Agasteeswaram, Papanaben Mission Field, Puthalam, Kottar, Parakai, Pichikudiyiruppu and Vadakkankulam and the evangelistic work of Cape Comorin were under the supervision of Rev. Charles Mault.

Charles Miller

In 1834, the Seminary was removed from Nagercoil to Neyyoor after the departure of John Roberts to Trivandrum. Charles Miller took charge of the institution to assist Charles Mead in the Educational work of the District. He was the first trained educationist of the Mission. After his death, in 1838 Charles Miller took charge of the Seminary. Miller evinced great interest in the work of the Seminary. It is remarkable that two of his students C. Yesudian and N. Nanu Pillai rose to honourable positions. During his time, great attention was paid for the training of school mistresses and furnishing suitable wives for the Catechists. The manufacture of lace was taught in the Girls Boarding School by Mrs. Mault. Nanu Pillai, in recognition of his indebtedness to his early training in the Seminary, instituted annual prizes for students of the institution in later years.

Medical Missionaries

The first medical missionary arrived on the shores of Travancore in 1838 with Charles Mead was Dr. Archibald Ramsay. He started work in Neyyoor in a few thatched sheds and the South Travancore Medical Mission often known as the Neyyoor Medical Mission was born in June 1840, Dr. Charles Leitch reached Nagercoil on 21 June 1852. He gave both general and surgical treatment. He built a building at Neyyoor a larger and more convenient place for the increasing number of patients. But unfortunately in August 1854, he was drowned while bathing at Muttom, seven kilometers away from Neyyoor. In 1864, Dr. John Lowe started a three year course on Medicine and Surgery for the Indian students with a view to open branch dispensaries in the villages. Dr. Thompson reached Neyyoor on 29 January 1873 and took up the entire responsibility. He started the second batch of Medical Evangelists classes and constructed the new hospital buildings. Maharaja Aayilliam Thirunal Ramavarma donated Rs. 2000/-. The new building was dedicated on 20 December 1875. Travancore kings always greatly appreciated the missionaries for their Medical Ministry as well as for their Ministry education. He started branch hospitals at Santhapuram (1876), Thittuvilai (1879), Kulasekaram (1879) and Marthandam (1880). These Medical assistants were known as dressers. They went about vaccinating and distributing tracts on the prevention of small pox. During the seven years of Dr. Lowe's service in Neyyoor, over 11000 people were vaccinated. This was the nucleus of the Community Health Programme of the Medical Mission. Dr. Thompson and others who succeeded him opened more branch hospitals.

In 1936, Dr. Joan Thompson, the first lady appointed in Neyyoor hospital as Medical Missionary and she brought large number of women patients to this hospital, especially for maternity and gynecological disorders. There were many Muslim inhabitants in Thiruvithancode, 3 kilometers away from Neyyoor. But very few of them came to hospital for child-birth. Dr. Joan Thompson made frequent visits to their places and convinced them the necessity of coming to hospital for treatment. Consequently it reduced the infant and mother mortality cases. Special Maternity and new out-patient wards were constructed in 1938. Dr. Joan Thompson trained the nurses in mid-wifery at the Neyyoor hospital from 1939.

Somervell

From 1923 to 1945, Somervell worked in South Travancore Medical Mission. The first step taken by Dr. Somervell was to produce modern equipments for undertaking major surgeries. He purchased a powerful oil engine and dynamo with amounts received as donations from rich friends and relatives and also an amount of £700 which he earned by giving lectures on his experience in the Everest Expedition. Electrical equipments were installed with the help of electrician, Mathavan Pillai. Dr. Somervell also purchased an X-Ray machine from Watson and Sons of London and also a diathermy machine for bloodless operation. Modernization of the hospital attracted patients in large numbers from all over Travancore. He was a great Surgeon. He did almost all the operative work in a most remarkable manner. The surgical cases of the branch hospitals were directed to the Central Hospital, Neyyoor. The people of Travancore called the Neyyoor Hospital as “Somervell Hospital”. He built a Nursing Home for Europeans in 1927. During the months of October and November 1928, South Travancore witnessed cholera epidemic. He saved hundreds of cholera patients from death. Marthandam in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu and Chavara Medical Mission (Kerala) were started by him. With the opening of the Women’s ward in 1924, the women’s side of work had much improved under a native Medical Evangelist, Dr. Manuel.

Somervell was a pioneer of leprosy treatment. New buildings were built on new site at Odayarvillai near Colachel, the men’s wards were opened in 1933 and the Women’s Wards in 1937. It provides accommodation for 200 patients. This Leprosy Hospital began to register rapid growth under the Superintendence of Dr. D. Christdas in 1938. Dr. Somervell introduced radium treatment for the patients in 1930. While on furlough to England, Somervell collected donations and purchased radium worth £1000 for the treatment of cancer. It brought immense benefits to

hundreds and thousands of sufferers. By the end of the year 1930, two special wards were built in the Neyyoor Hospital for the radium treatment. The Medical award Kaiser-I-Hind was given to him in 1938. He became the Associate Professor of Surgery in Vellore Christian Medical College in 1949. The Medical College at Karakonam in the Kerala State is named after him.

Rev. Samuel Marteer, Rev. Baylis and Rev. Abbs

Missionaries introduced mid-day meals in the schools by providing free food to the students. Rev. Samuel Marteer supported free noon meal for the dalit community and urged Maharaja Ramavarma Ayilyam Thirunal to give free education to dalits. Robert Caldwell supported education, self governance and self finance of the churches. He started giving mid-day meals to the poor students. Previously, the condition of the widows was very pitiable. Due to child marriage, many young wives became widows and could not think of remarriage. They were taught in different crafts by the missionaries. Rev. Leitch opened a “Widows Welfare Centre” in Neyyoor in 1853. Rules and regulations for this association were drafted by Rev. Baylis in 1860.

Rev. Baylis made free meals centre (kanchipurai) for the poverty-stricken people. He took many relief measures including the construction of free houses for the widows whose husbands died due to cholera. The street where these houses were built was known as “Kaimpen Street” in Neyyoor. Rev. Lewis constructed living quarters for the use of widows at Santhapuram and so many were benefited. Mrs. Lewis arranged marriages of many girls who studied in the boarding school and presented them with gold ornaments and brass vessels. Rev. Abbs initiated several projects for the welfare of the widows around Parasala region. Rev. Abbs and Mrs. Abbs arranged marriages for the widows with suitable God-fearing men. Rev. Abbs worked for the abolition of child marriage by fixing the age limit 14 for girls 20 for men. The women missionaries taught them different crafts to earn their livelihood. They began to breathe the air of freedom, equality and self confidence.

Conclusion:

The missionary work of the London Missionary Society mostly concentrated on education. However, the Neyyoor Mission focused on the medical needs of the people of the area and formed the Neyyoor Medical Mission. Further, the Catherine Booth Hospital constructed at Puththeri on the outskirts of Nagercoil town also rendered a

wonderful service for the people of the Travancore region, the erstwhile princely state of India in general and South

Travancore in particular.

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