

Contributions Of Christian Missions To Welfare Of The Differently Abled In Tirunelveli Region

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Abstract

This study explores the contributions of Christian missions to the welfare of differently-abled individuals in the Tirunelveli region. Historically, Christian organizations have played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights and support of marginalized communities, including those with disabilities. This research highlights various initiatives undertaken by these missions, such as the establishment of specialized educational institutions, vocational training programs, and healthcare services tailored to the needs of differently-abled individuals. The findings reveal that Christian missions have significantly enhanced accessibility, provided social integration opportunities, and fostered community awareness about disability issues. Moreover, the study discusses the challenges faced by these missions in sustaining their efforts and the need for collaborative approaches with government and non-governmental organizations. The contributions of Christian missions in the Tirunelveli region represent a vital component of the broader social welfare landscape, demonstrating a commitment to inclusivity and empowerment for differently-abled individuals. This paper underscores the importance of ongoing support and the potential for replication of successful models in other regions.

Keywords: Christian missions, Miss. Anne Jane Askwith, Visually Challenged school, Braille, Florence Swainson School for the Deaf, Vidivelli Ashram

Introduction

The welfare of differently-abled individuals remains a critical concern in many regions, including Tirunelveli, where societal attitudes and resource availability can significantly impact their quality of life. In this context, Christian missions have emerged as pivotal players, offering a range of services aimed at promoting inclusion, empowerment, and support for this marginalized group. Historically, these missions have emphasized the importance of compassion and service, often stepping in where governmental resources may be lacking. Christian missions in Tirunelveli have initiated various programs, including specialized education, vocational training, and healthcare services tailored to the unique needs of differently-abled individuals. By fostering an environment that encourages acceptance and understanding, these missions not only provide immediate assistance but also work to reshape societal perceptions of disability. Through community engagement, awareness campaigns, and advocacy, they aim to dismantle stigma and promote the idea that differently-abled individuals can lead fulfilling, productive lives.

Welfare services to differently abled

The first organizations in the contemporary world to plan social and humanitarian services were Christian missions. The primary goal of the Christian missionaries was to rehabilitate the disabled, particularly the blind, deaf, dumb, and crippled. They would become equal to their fellow citizens and gain social acceptance as a result. According to the 1909 Indian census, there were 34,000 blind

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people living in the Madras Presidency. According to Miss Florence Swainson, there are two lakh deaf mutes in India. The missionary women who felt sorry for the poor group of individuals looked for solutions to assist them live productive lives independent of others. The female missionaries started charity initiatives for them in addition to offering education. Generally speaking, the main causes of deafness, dumbness, and blindness were poverty, severe malnutrition, TB, insanitation, genetics, aberrant development, maternal infection during pregnancy, and chronic mental stress. Neglect of eye injuries was the primary cause of blindness in rural regions. Common causes of blindness include smallpox, jaundice, vitamin A deficiency, and eye conditions that cause sore eyes, which can be crudely treated with lime and salt.

The majority of youngsters in Tirunelveli lost their sight at a young age due to smallpox or careless handling of eye pain (ophthalmia). The months of June through September were a popular time for sore eyes due to dust and strong winds. Many youngsters became blind as a result of applying salt and lime to their irritated eyes. According to the 1900 Diocesan record of Tirunelveli, eight family members in Pannavilai lost their sight at the age of three from cataracts, and several others suffered from eye damage as a result of abuse. The missionaries came forward to create rehabilitation facilities for the deaf, stupid, and blind after being horrified by the impoverished illiterate people's ignorance of even the most basic health needs. The first step they took in and around Tirunelveli was to build schools for the visually impaired and hearing impaired. Regardless of caste or faith, free education was offered in these schools. The training they received was excellent. They eventually received training for practical vocations. Instruments, maps, and special aids were produced to support appropriate training. Books were provided in order to foster the habit of reading. The students at these residential schools remained there for several years until they were well enough to begin a useful job.

Visually Challenged School, Palayamkottai

In 1889, Miss Annie Sharp of England founded the first blind school in India at Amritsar. In 1890, the C.M.S. missionary Miss Askwith established a blind school at Palayamkottai. The C.M.S. Miss oversaw these two schools. In November 1881, the Church Missionary Society in London dispatched Anne Jane Askwith, an Irishwoman, to India to teach at the Sarah Tucker Institution. She then held the positions of Principal of Sarah Tucker College, Palayamkottai, and Manager of the Sarah Tucker Institution. In 1888, a twelve-year-old blind child named Suppu from Palayamkottai is reported to have visited Miss Askwith's home to solicit alms. This irritated her, so she responded that she had come here to teach, not to administer charity. "Then, please educate me, Madam," the youngster said courteously. These remarks moved her, and she realized that social welfare should be a part of her missionary work. She chastised him for pleading. What else could a blind person do but beg, he said? The first thing Miss Askwith said was, 'You can pull a punkah' (a fan that is operated with the hands). She promised to pay him every day and showed him how to pull a punkah. Every day, he traveled four kilometers from his home to the Miss Sarah Tucker facility to labor. She informed Suppu that blind people in England use their fingertips to read books. She was pleasantly surprised by his instant response. "Please teach me to read as well," he added. She was overjoyed and started teaching him. She learned the Braille system while studying how to instruct the blind in England. In 1890, Askwith started a blind children's program at the Sarah Tucker Campus with seven students. The institute started operating at Tharisanamanai in Palayamkottai in 1909. It gradually expanded to become one of the largest educational establishments in India, offering general education and vocational training to the segments of the population with physical disabilities.

Dr. William Moon, a blind man from England, created the Moon style of instruction for the blind in 1848. For the blind, he imposed characters for the English alphabet or published books in Moon Type. In 1888, Miss Askwith, who was keen to teach the blind, met Dr. William Moon. He prepared the moon signs for the Tamil language with Miss Askwith's help. The Gospel of St. John and the first Reader in Moon's type in Tamil were prepared by Dr. William Moon. Suppu, the Moon type,

was taught by Miss Askwith. He immediately became proficient in the art. He was then baptized under the Christian name Devapirian. In order to learn to read like himself, he gathered several blind boys and girls from Palayamkottai. Devapirian was the first instructor when Miss Askwith opened a class for them on the Sarah Tucker campus. It developed into the center of Palayamkottai's school for the blind.

The school's primary goal was to provide the blind kids with industrial and literary education so they could sustain themselves. In 1890, the Sarah Tucker campus began offering separate classes for boys and girls. The school's first blind girl to be admitted was Avoodaiammal. She was baptized under the Christian name Kirubai Pattal and learned the Tamil alphabet in six weeks. Later, as the strength increased, one of the trainee teachers from the training division started teaching the blind girls at the Sarah Tucker Institution. The blind boys were housed in a different structure near the second gate of the Sarah Tucker institution, which is fairly close to the compound. Regardless of caste, the school accepted all blind students.

Every Monday, the Girl Guides and Bulbuls societies for the blind and visually impaired met under the direction of Miss Nightingale, a C.M.S. missionary. In the evenings, the pupils engaged in outdoor games. They engaged in sliding jack, jungle gym, swings, and group activities. Miss Nightingale created associations for the Girl Guides and Pulbuls. Nagercoil, Sivakasi, Srivilliputhur, Virudhunagar and Aruppukottai, Madurai, Coimbatore, Erode, Salem, and Tiruchirappalli were among the locations visited annually on a demonstration trip. Typically, town halls, colleges, high schools, and social organization centers hosted the relevant talks and protests. It went on for at least an hour. The school orchestra would perform a number of songs at the conclusion of each demonstration.

Askwith Tamil Braille

'Askwith Braille' is the name of the Braille code that Miss Askwith created in Tamil. The Braille system was created by a Frenchman named Louis Braille. In his father's harness shop, he was playing with tools when an owl slipped and stabbed him in the eye. In an accident when he was three years old, he lost his sight. In 1824, he created the Braille system. It has sixty-three combinations that can be worked out at the six raised dots. Students read with Moon's type until 1912. The fact that Braille can be handwritten gives it an advantage over Moon's type. Miss Askwith implemented the Tamil Braille system in the school in 1912. For every Tamil vowel and consonant that has phonetic similarities with the English alphabet, Miss Askwith provided Braille symbols. The blind students were able to read English Braille with ease thanks to this phonetic relationship. "Askwith Tamil Braille" is the name given to the Tamil Braille that she organized. In 1947, the new universal India Braille Code was unveiled. It was created by the Indian government's education department. It is based on the 46-letter Sanskrit alphabet, whereas the previous technique was based on the Roman alphabet. It gave all Indian languages a unified script. For the Dravidian languages, appropriate modifications were made.

Florence Swainson School for the Deaf, Palayamkottai.

In 1895, Florence Swainson, a female missionary from the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, established a school on the Sarah Tucker Institution grounds for three deaf students. Florence Swainson had nursing training. In 1882, she was sent to India as a missionary by the Church of England Zenana Mission. She first served in Punjab's Amritsar. In 1890, she was moved to Palayamkottai to attend the Sarah Tucker Institution. Her missionary talks brought her fame. Florence Swainson provided social services to the local impoverished ladies in 1887 while she was employed at Sarah Tucker College in Palayamkottai. D. Packiam, a ten-year-old girl who is deaf and dumb, sought medical attention from her when she was working in social services. She was taught to read and write by her. Beginning in 1895, she taught four girls in regular lessons for the hearing impaired at the Sarah Tucker Campus. The school's strength increased to twenty within five

years. Deaf kids from several orphanages were soon accepted. Bible women and others provided sanctuary to deaf and dumb youngsters who had been abandoned by their parents in the school. Florence Swainson initially used words and pictures to teach Tamil language. She gained some knowledge of dactylology—the technique of communicating using signs and teaching aids—after being delighted by her accomplishment in this endeavor. She started teaching Tamil reading, writing, and math using the English finger alphabet. Miss Cooper's introduction of lip-reading in 1919 was a significant advancement.

Industrial School

In 1896, Florence Swainson established a women's industrial class for the benefit of dumb and deaf girls. They learned how to make curry powder, knit, sew, cross stitch, beadwork, linen embroidery, needlework, threadwork, and cuisine. In 1902, there were 70 students from various communities enrolled in the Women's Industrial Class. Their origins were in various regions of the Tirunelveli district. The Industrial School boarded impoverished females with physical disabilities. These girls cared for the little deaf youngsters. In Florence Swainson's absence, the industrial class was supervised by Miss Walford and Miss Doxey. The blind produced clothing and other items that were ordered by the industrial class both domestically and internationally. All of the raw materials used to make the goods came from India. In England, Miss Sandy and her associates marketed cross-stitch clothing created by students who were deaf or dumb. Suvisechapuram was home to a branch of the Palayamkottai Industrial School. It enabled a number of underprivileged women in the surrounding communities to earn a living via embroidery. The C.E.Z.M.S. women missionaries successfully operated the deaf and dumb school in Palayamkottai. In addition to teaching the students moral principles, the female missionaries baptized a number of Hindu children. The departing students were placed in appropriate jobs by Miss Swainson. She also made a point of asking her former students' employers for their opinions. For the kids, the school employed flag signals: blue for girls and red for guys. The girls received instruction in kummi, badminton, netball, and folk arts.

Vidivelli Ashram

In 1932, Miss Maud Muriel Frost and Miss Joy Solomon, professors at Sarah Tucker College in Palayamkottai, established the Vidivelli Ashram at Sayamalai with the help of European donors. It served as a training and devotional facility. The ashram organized house visitation programs and set up day and night schools. In addition to providing free midday meals, Miss Frost and Joy Solomon established a nursery school for the kids at the ashram. They went to the nearby villages and educated the locals on the value of cleanliness. They combed their hair and gave the filthy rural kids a bath. In their quarters, night schools were established, one for caste girls and one for Harijan girls. The girls in the night schools learned to read, write, do math, and sew. Miss Frost gathered used clothing from her acquaintances and used it to make handkerchiefs, comb cases, jackets, petticoats, and purses. She then cut the cast-away items into tiny pieces and placed them inside pillowcases. She helped out around the house by peeling potatoes, chopping limes, and preparing snacks. She also cleaned the store room and placed the items in marketing tins. She attended teacher Bible sessions every Sunday afternoon. Joy Solomon made arrangements for the Tirunelveli Children's Mission staff and Vacation Bible School (V.B.S.) teachers to spend ten days in Sayamalai.

At Sayamalai, Miss Frost constructed a modest dispensary in 1933. This dispensary was run by Dr. Leela Thambidurai and her sister, Sylvia. Once a week, Dr. Leela brought the older girls and ladies together to discuss home science and health. Miss Frost and Miss Joy Solomon were both knowledgeable about first aid and medicine. Miss Frost administered first aid for a deadly bite and scorpion sting. She provided remedies for itching, fever, cold, painful eyes, and discharged ears. For better care, complex cases were sent to Neyyoor Hospital in Kanyakumari District. Miss Frost was an effective physician and surgeon who oversaw the dispensary. Every week, a medical examination

was performed on the Sayamalai children. In a Tirunelveli district hamlet, according to the 1939 survey, barely 3% of the women were literate. Bible ladies and the wives of church workers ran night classes for girls with the assistance of the Mothers' Union Committee. In the night schools, the women worked both individually and collectively. The uneducated girls were voluntarily taught by the night schools. The girls who were unable to attend daytime normal schools were taught to read, write, and do math at night schools. . It aided in the women's literacy development. The hours of operation for the night schools were 9 to 10 p.m. The adult pupils were given books and slates. The top students received rewards, and assessments were administered on a regular basis.

The rural girls were initially hesitant to enroll in the night classes. To draw them to the classrooms, the teachers had to introduce folk arts like kolatam and kummi. The 1930 report of the Tirunelveli Diocesan Council states that 355 adult women from 25 Tirunelveli villages acquired literacy skills. The Mothers' Union Work Fund provided funding for the night schools. Workers in rural areas were given the authority to gather money for the night schools. The Sunday and weekly collections from the diocese's churches covered the cost of the night schools. In the Tirunelveli diocese, twenty-four night schools operated during Miss Smith's presidency (1935–1945). The following locations saw the opening of night schools: Mallakulam in Alwarneri, Nambitope in Dohnavur, Sawyerpuram Shoe Makers Colony, Evanspuram in Idaiyangudi, Draviapuram in Nazareth, and Muthurayapuram in Perpilkulam. An missionary was hired to serve with the Adi Dravidas at Dohnavur. The Rural Work Committee and Mothers' Union secretaries visited the night schools on a regular basis and reported back to the committee. In 1947, the Diocese of Tirunelveli nominated Mrs. Rachel Devadason, the Mothers' Union secretary, as the convener to oversee the night schools.

Lace industry, Idaiyangudi

With sixty females, Mrs. Eliza Caldwell established the lace factory at Idaiyangudi in 1851. About three miles south of Thisayanvilai is the Christian community of Idaiyangudi. 'The village of the shepherd' is what Idaiyangudi signifies. It was among South Tirunelveli's driest areas. The district has thirty-nine village congregations. In 1823, Eliza's mother, Mrs. Martha Mault, brought the Lace Industry to Travancore for the first time. Her granddaughter, Mrs. Isabella Wyatt, established a lace-making business in Tiruchirappalli, and her daughter, Eliza Caldwell, established a lace school in Idaiyangudi. Indian embroidery, needlework, and lace-making were all taught by the students. Lace was mostly made by crocheting and tatting. With the designers' assistance, the lace industry created lace and embroidery products. Bobbin lace, also known as pillow lace, and needle-point lace were two different kinds of hand-made laces. The pattern was created by weaving bobbin lace using bobbins on a pillow or cushion over stiff parchment that had tiny holes in it. A needle was used to work the needle-point lace on a tiny piece of paper or linen.

The affordability of the handcrafted items was one alluring aspect of the lace industry. Hundreds of underprivileged girls in the Tirunelveli area were given jobs as a result. A large number of women and girls learnt how to manufacture lace using the English pattern. For the advantage of the missions, the products were sold for a profit. Knitting was used to make sweaters, drawers, coats, and socks. Like painting, embroidery relies heavily on its color or attractiveness. It was taught on linen and cambric clothing to ensure that the final embroidery pieces were clean and neat. The primary target audience for the lace industry in the mission centers was impoverished girls and orphans. Each girl's earnings from creating lace and needlework were saved for her wedding.

In 1894, the Kudamkulam Lace School was established to give mature girls who had completed the Boarding School a job. The lace school at Kudamkulam was run by Mrs. Arputham Daniel, a pupil of Mrs. Caldwell. It greatly benefited the residents of Radhapuram Taluq. A total of 270 impoverished widows and girls were employed by the lace industry in Idaiyangudi and its offshoot in Kudamkulam. It also generated a significant amount of revenue for the ministry. Mrs. Caldwell urged the workers to recruit more women from their communities to work in the sector. Thus, the money made from the lace business was used to create orphanages, boarding schools for girls, and facilities for women's care. After graduating from the girls' boarding schools, some of the skilled

pupils obtained work in neighboring districts' lace and embroidery schools.

Orphanages

Many people died as a result of a famine that struck the Tirunelveli district in 1867–1868. There were orphaned children. Christian missionaries established orphanages in the Tirunelveli district to provide shelter for the orphans. The orphanages were run by the clerics and their wives. The prisoners received clothing, food, and instruction in several crafts. Mrs. Harriet Strachan went to Nazareth to take care of the orphan girls in the famine-stricken refugee camps. She comforted the ill and those stricken by the famine. She found and provided the most loving care for children living in poverty. She traveled overseas to raise money for the orphanages. She was responsible for the opening of a famine orphanage at Sullivan's Garden in. Information about famine relief efforts was communicated to the Rural Work Committee. To organize famine relief efforts, a committee was formed, with the archdeacon serving as its chairman and the rural worker as its secretary. During the period, the Church World Service of the United States of America provided wheat, multipurpose food, vitamin pills, and milk powder, which were then dispersed throughout the famine-stricken districts. The missionaries adopted the scientific method of farming in order to address the scarcity of rice. It appeared that the Japanese technique of growing paddy on a cement floor was more practical. Two crops were successfully harvested when this unique farming method was implemented inside the Monicka's school compound in Nagalapuram. It was first introduced in Dr. Vedabodagam's properties, Rev. Gnaniah's complex, Margoschis School, and Art Industrial School in Nazareth. Additionally, the missionaries provided loans to impoverished farmers so they could buy pumpsets, seeds, manure, and cattle for farming. In February 1945, the Diocese was visited by a survey commission that was appointed by the National Christian Council. It recommended the establishment of several cottage industries as well as the development of a model farm for the Diocese. A Rural Worker for the diocese created plans for the enhancement of mission lands in several locations with a £200 grant from the S.P.G.

Conclusion

The contributions of Christian missions to the welfare of differently-abled individuals in the Tirunelveli region underscore a profound commitment to fostering inclusivity and empowerment. This study has illustrated that through a multifaceted approach—encompassing education, vocational training, healthcare, and community awareness—these missions have significantly enhanced the lives of many individuals facing challenges due to disabilities. Their initiatives not only address immediate needs but also challenge societal perceptions, promoting a culture of acceptance and support. The role of Christian missions in the Tirunelveli region serves as a powerful example of how faith-based initiatives can drive social change and improve the welfare of marginalized populations. By continuing to champion the rights and dignity of differently-abled individuals, these missions not only fulfill their spiritual mandate but also contribute to the broader goal of building a more inclusive and equitable society.

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