



# Contribution Of The Church To The Emancipation Of Women In India

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## ABSTRACT

Over centuries, women have been suppressed and their rights were neglected as a human being. They were treated as lower part of the society and their roles were restricted to household works and delivering babies. Protestant Christian missionaries created fully clear principles of female education in colonial India in the 1830s and 1840s, several decades before large numbers of British and American women entered the mission field to carry out the venture. The Christian missionaries who were bringing Christianity in colonized India encouraged female education, which implanted values and individual rights among the natives. By the middle of the nineteenth century an argument emerged that the education of the female was essential for the purpose of transforming national character. The missionaries lasting contribution was unintentional. They gave equal educational facilities at all levels to girls and introduced a curriculum that promoted higher education including university education for women. Education is the one common issue which unites all of these women, viewed by them as the key factor in the emancipation of women.

**KEYWORDS:** Christian Missionaries, Emancipation of Women, Female Education

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Indian women is a tragedy of gradual suppression down the ages. Some of the earliest accounts show their position as one of superiority over men. Thereafter, their status had a steady downward trend. They were considered a completely inferior, socially kept in a state of utter subjection, and denied all rights in the educational, social, economic and religious spheres. Blind superstition and inhuman social customs had taken root in the soil. People languished under political and priestly tyrannies, and economic privations.

## DISSCUSSION

On the eve of the British rule in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century women's position had reached the depths of degradation. The British government maintained a hostile attitude towards Christian missionaries who would have initiated many social reforms in the 18<sup>th</sup> century itself.

After the renewal of the company's charter in 1813, Britain slowly established a network of educational institutions throughout India which imparted modern western education, resulting in the spread of great liberal ideas of modern Europe. A new class of enlightened Indians sprang up. They started Social Reform Movements and organized campaigns against the cruel practices and social evils which degraded women.

Indian women comprehended the significance of a higher life and realized this capacity for it under the leadership of Gandhi during our freedom struggle. Soon they were organizing themselves into Reform Groups and developed numerous women's institutions all over India which have become in course of time representatives of the new awakening among women.

Humanistic, nationalist and political movements, Reform Groups and women's organizations had been doing their part all these years in liberating women from their age-old shackles of slavery. The Church also has played a vital role in this regard. The Church in its own way has contributed to the betterment of women.

The Serampore missionaries led by William Carey were the first to draw the attention of the Government to the evil practice of Sati and pressurize it to abolish this inhuman social custom. The missionaries noticed the rigidity of the caste system and the practice of untouchability. Opposing this, they asked the pundits at the Serampore College to teach the sacred classics even to the Sudras. They were very critical of polygamy and early marriage and also pointed out to the government the inequality found in the Hindu law regarding inheritance of property by women. Also they urged the government to immediately prohibit the cruel practice of infanticide. Ultimately, by an Act of 1802, infanticide was legally abolished.

The movement for the uplift of the depressed classes and women in India was initiated by the missionaries in Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, they started schools all over Bengal. With that view, missionaries in different parts of the country started several such schools. After the charter of 1813, the number of missionaries increased rapidly. Many young missionaries brought to India their wives who opened up small schools for girls in their residences.

Mrs Rhenius (CMS) opened a school for girls in Palayamkottai in 1823. Mrs Drew (LMS) in 1832 started a girl's school in Vepery, Madras, from which the Bentinck School has developed. Mrs Eckard (Madura Mission) had a school in 1835 and Mrs Sewell (LMS) started one in Bangalore. Mrs Braiwood undertook to educate three cast girls in Royapuram, Madras in 1841, and in 1849, German Lutheran mission in Madras opened classes for girls in a church in Purasuwalkam, Madras which grew to be a big school later. After 1840, the number of school grew in large numbers.

Tirunelveli showed its leadership in women's education very early. Sarah Tucker female training school started in 1858 had been producing trained women teachers who were well received in Madurai, Tanjavur, Madras, Ceylon, and Mauritius. The Sarah Tucker College the first women's College in South India was founded in 1895. The year 1896 is especially notable in the history of women's education. Miss Askwith opened up a small school for blind girls and boys and Miss Swainson another school for deaf children in the same year in Palayamkottai.

Miss Ida Scudder began her work as a medical missionary in 1900 and opened the first Christian medical school for women in 1918 in Vellore. The most remarkable missionary worker in this field is Amy Carmichael who rescued girls and boys from evil surroundings and established an ideal settlement for them at Dhonavur in Tirunelveli District.

The problem of the status of women is not confined to India alone. It is universal. It is well known that prior to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century little provision had been made for formal education for girls at the global level, and their status was one of complete dependence upon man. Yet it took several centuries and many great forces like the renaissance, reformation, industrial and technological revolutions, to bring women out of their shells. Another important factor that gave women equal access in all ventures of higher education and employment is the finding of the new sciences.

The World Council of Churches has launched the Ecumenical Decade in 1988 to enable the Churches to express their solidarity with women all over the world in their specific situations. The main area of concern is to create concrete actions towards women's development, liberation, education, and equal participation.

In the 22<sup>nd</sup> Assembly of the National Council of Churches (NCCI) which took place at Pune (14-18 December 1991) ten commissions were selected to study the important thrust areas in Indian Churches. One of them was the "Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity of Women." This commission, consisting of sixteen members of various denominations, made an in depth study of the existing practices in different Churches regarding the status and participation of women in various ministries of the church and made suggestions.

#### **The following are some of the recommendations made by the commission.**

- That women be given greater representation on decision making bodies, 50% of reservations as recommended by the *World Council of Churches (WCC)*.
- That more women be encouraged to go for theological training and the church be responsible for their placement.
- That steps be taken by the church to make people understand the correct interpretation of certain passages in the Bible about the status of women.
- That the church be aware of increasing violence against women and the church to actively support movement championing women's causes.
- That women be made aware of contemporary issues in the church and the society.

#### **CONCLUSION**

With regard to the existing social evils prevalent in the country, the church as a body should take active steps to eradicate them. There, apart from recognising the presence of women in the areas of worship and ministry in the church, we should oppose vehemently the unfair treatment of the weaker sex in the church and its neighborhood. We should develop awareness of the unjust treatment of women and also provide support – structures for women who are placed in unfortunate surroundings in life.

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