

Protestant Missions and Gendered Spaces: The Case of Basel Evangelical Mission in Colonial Malabar

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Abstract

As historians have interrogated the general shape and particulars of various colonial encounters, the importance of gendered discourses to define the “civilizing” colonial projects has become ever more apparent. Favorable association with the colonial state, a deep motivating sense of cultural superiority, and a divine mission to transform non-western societies, became instrumental in achieving the agendas of the colonial state to a large extent. These agendas, in turn, culminated in the bringing together of gender on the platform of capitalist labour irrespective of their assigned roles in Christian life. How gendered religious activities in an era of developing ‘colonial modernities’ were catalyzed and mediated by new languages and practices introduced by protestant Christian missionaries is a crucial question posed in this study. In the process of pursuing this question, this paper attempts to analyze the diversity of western missionary strategies and appropriations of Christian ideas and institutions in the then Malabar. Since the Basel German Evangelical Mission was a major missionary group which deeply influenced the socio-economic scenario of Malabar, this study concentrates empirically on the sources pertaining to this missionary society and largely draws the theoretical frame from the Weberian analysis of religion and capitalism.

Keywords: Protestantism, Missionary, Gender, Colonialism.

Introduction

Weber agreed with Marx that ‘class’ as ‘political economic power’ was a major factor in the historical development of ‘modern society’. However, he disagreed with the fact that ‘class’ was the only institution that dominated the development of modern society. Weber believed that cultural factors, especially religion, were also important. However, Weber did not argue that religion was the cause of capitalism but that Protestantism and capitalism fitted together and developed in interaction with each other. So he did not argue that religion ‘created’

capitalism. Gregory Baum, in his work 'Creative Religion: Max Weber Perspective' illuminates the sense of religion as an independent variable (Baum, 1975). This is supposed to answer some other scholars who used to see religion as dependent variable. Marx, for example, in his thinking on alienation clearly asserts that religion is a result of depressed human feeling dissatisfied with alienation created by an unjust economic system. Religion becomes a way to look for happiness which human beings do not find in economic life. In Baum's perspective, Weber is successful in highlighting the function of religion in social life. Religion is not merely a result of social system, but a cause of the nature of social life. Religion is energy; religion is stimulator. Religion has a significant influence on human beings.

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* illuminate very clearly his position in looking at religion. This does not mean at all that Max Weber ignored the thinking that on other occasions religion can be dependent on other social systems, say culture in general and economy in particular (Weber, 1930). However, using empirical experience as a starting point to pose the alternative view on religion, Max Weber found that religion can shape human beings and human life. Weber simply compared how Catholic and Protestant communities live their life. Weber found that Catholics tend to be quieter, while Protestants are more aggressive. The idiom "to sleep well or to eat well" depicts how both religious community perceive the religious principles and practice them in their daily life. Catholics, being fatalists, considered the principles of totally relying on God and submitting their life wholly to God as primary and tend to avoid materialistic matters and prefer to enter spiritual sphere. Catholics strictly separate the spiritual and immanent, the transcendent and materialistic, and see that the spirits and the transcendent are better than those that are immanent and materialistic. On the other hand, Protestants see that to work hard is to pursue God's calls and treats it as a part of spirituality. Therefore, it is not a surprise if Weber found in the Middle Age, and may be until now, Germany which is mostly protestant used to be employers and Polish which is mostly Catholic used to be laborers. Both live in different levels of economy, in which Germany used to be much richer, wealthier and living a better life than the Polish (Firdaus, 2011:1). Nonetheless, Weber understands that religion is not the sole factor influencing one's state of economic being. There might be other things, like economy, politics, and culture. He emphasized the importance of cultural influences embedded in religion for understanding the

development of capitalism.

Capitalism efficiently colluded with religion to put forth the prospect of uplifting the downtrodden. It was a disguised means to remain at the fulcrum by intelligently exploiting the contemporary socio-economic and political conditions of the colonized. The new prospects opened up new standards of survival, offering a drastic improvement in the status quo of the converted people who were the major beneficiaries of the new ventures of the capitalist system. A corollary of the religio-capitalist development was the innovative spaces created for the converted wives. These spaces were meant to enhance the capitalist modus operandi, but in its own way it had its impact on the status of women both within and outside the family. The role of the women inside the family, as a caretaker, still remained the same while the male counterpart wielded greater authority within the family as a stronger financial source. Women, on the other hand, earned more social respect either working as aids of missionaries or undertaking easier and more productive jobs in which they were trained as part of the missionary work.

The Vision of the Mission

During the 19th century, a number of Protestant Christian Missions were formed in Europe. These missions generally followed paths of colonial expansion and established centres of activity at various European colonies. Basel Evangelical Mission was one of such missionary organizations which had its origin after the battle of Waterloo in June 1815, when a group of missionaries from Germany and Switzerland assembled in Basel on 25 September 1815 to form an “Evangelical Missionary Society” (Watson, 2015: 161). It is recorded that until the year 1813 the colonial authorities did not permit other nationals to spread Gospel in India. The British Parliament while renewing the contract of the East India Company in 1813, a bill was passed permitting the Christian missionaries to do evangelical work in the colonies (Webster, 2012:141). They were permitted to work in the expectation that the conversion of the local people would also change their consumer habits. As the sole purpose of parliamentary enquiries of 1833 was to discover ways and means of replacing indigenous produce by British substitutes in the Indian market, they assumed that ‘Missions’ can be used as arms for implementing the colonial policies in India (Nair, 1999:3). It was in this background the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society sent their first missionaries to India. The first three German Missionaries named Rev. Samuel Heibich, Rev.

John Lenher and Rev. Christoph Griener belonging to the Society left for India from Portsmouth on the 12th of July 1834 and reached Calicut, the capital city of erstwhile Malabar district under Madras Presidency, on 13th October 1834 (Albert, 1980: 1).

The missionaries enjoyed the support of the authorities and many British residents also supported them with gifts of money and property¹. Once they learned the languages their first task was to set up schools where children would be taught in the local language. Though the schools built in various parts of Malabar had considerable strength, most of the students were irregular in attending the classes. Poverty was the main reason behind the absence of scholars in the schools. Since most of the students were from the poorer class, they left the school whenever an opportunity was offered for earning the livelihood². So the reports of BGEM said that it was a hard labour for the missionaries to get this people educated. The Missionaries soon realized that only if these converted groups are provided with a minimum standard of living, the objectives of the Mission could be achieved. In an early statement the goal of the Basel German Evangelical Mission was described as follows:

...We have come together ... to set up a missionary institute in our city which has the simply great purpose to conduct regular courses to appropriately train and prepare students who may then be sent out to promote a beneficial civilization and to proclaim the Gospel of peace in various regions of the heathen world where the English and Dutch missionary societies have long been working with auspicious success (Stenzl, 2010:28).

This description, in a sense links up with the thought of 'civilizing mission' which formed the basic justification fabricated by the colonialists.

Politics of Religious Mission and Gender

The extent to which imperial mission objectives reveal distinctive features in relation to gender is a question of growing historical importance. The distinctive contours of various denominations of Protestantism dominated the British mission enterprise in India can be best identified in the district of Malabar where the Basel German Evangelical Mission Society maintained their field of missionary activities. For instance, in early stages of missionary work the rehabilitation measures continued and the missionaries were given so many lands for settling the converts there. The unused plots at Quilandy, Annas-

sery and Chombala in the Calicut taluk were cleared and brought under cultivation (Sneham, 1992:33). These new spaces of training and disciplining taught the Christian ethics of morality and principles of life which makes a person subservient to God and the Church. It also contributed skilled and well disciplined human capital to the colonial establishments in the later days. If a baptized person or family found retrograding to their old caste vices they were sent to Calicut for counseling and necessary corrections were made on them. The letter regarding a *Vettuva* baptized couple named Andreas and his wife Salome, sent to Calicut Mission House in 1845 from the Tellicherry station for counseling, is a case in point³.

The Basel Mission considered schools in general as important and effective institutional sites for evangelizing the natives⁴. Most of the teachers of the educational institutions were Christians — either trained persons from converted indigenous groups or the missionaries. In the Middle-Schools, apart from religious education the teachers were also assigned to teach Geography, History, Arithmetic, Geometry, as well as English and Sanskrit⁵. Gradually the people got attracted to the new educational system and the missionaries established schools in various taluks of Malabar district. It was because of their intense desire to get into the forefront of the society as most of the people who got converted to Christianity were from the lower castes. By becoming a Christian, they were ‘offered’ all the privileges by the missionaries whom they had never experienced. Very soon the missionaries were able to reach the caste Hindu community and draw converts even from the Muslim community⁶. Many among them were soon chucked out from their families. These destitutes, who denounced their castes, became a “castles society” and had no other option for livelihood but to depend upon the missionaries for protection and existence. It was in this background that the Mission started many industrial establishments like the carpenter’s shop, weaving establishment, tile factories, dyeing industries and industrial institutes where technical know-how was imparted to the locals by German experts.

Women Education and the Mission

The main educational agenda of the Basel Mission for girls was to instill in them the spirit of Christianity. A girls’ school was considered to be especially important as it provided one of the best means of access to indigenous women. In the boarding schools for boys and girls, the forenoon session was dedicated to lessons, and in the afternoon session boys were assigned for field duties like garden work, and the

girls were given training in sewing, knitting and crochet work⁷. Missionary wives took the initiative in training girls and also adult women in needle work and other ‘feminine skills’, and also in the sale of their products. This kind of work of women was located within the home and the family, which eliminated the necessity of going out to work, and which was more in compliance with the European model of femininity of woman as the homemaker (Konrad, 2015:83). In the process of their conscious effort to educate women, missionaries hoped to convert not just their female pupils but also the future generations as these students would pass on what they had learned to their own children. The school started by Rev. Fritz served as a boarding school for girls where they got training to meet their future tasks as wives and mothers⁸. It does not mean that they were educated simply to play their roles as wives and mothers but they were taught the western lessons of home science and were given technical training also. Since the salary of father of a converted family was not sufficient to maintain the family, income earning activities of mothers increased. Thus women were employed in large numbers in the Basel Mission industries where they were given low wages compared to the men folk. They still found it comfortable as they started earning. But the local pastors of congregations started complaining about the neglect of household duties and lack of parental attention to children (Fischer, 2009:212). The provision of crèches by the factories and the establishment of workers’ temperance societies did not achieve much towards improving the situation (Fischer, 2009). The household expenditure of converts was high when compared to the others. They had to incur higher expenses for clothing that would meet decency standards set by the congregational rules. Women were asked to send their children to school and this caused only expenditures instead of contributing to the household income. In their non-convert life, children also were earning members (mostly in kind, not in money). Family also had to pay Church tax and contributed towards the factories ‘sickness and old age funds’ (Ibid.: 211)⁹.

Bible-women: Task with converting “heathen women”

The ‘Bible Women’ who were the local ambassadors of the Mission in Malabar paid visit to the households and catered to the spiritual needs and provided counseling to the converted women folk. These charity women were indigenous converted women, who were employed by the Mission to visit ‘heathen’ women in neighbouring localities. They received partial support of the British government and the Foreign Bible Society (Maben, 2015:99). The first native Bible Women

of Calicut, Martha Vatcharan and Orphu Deborah visited the houses of Christians and non-Christians and taught the women various subjects¹⁰. The Sunday Schools they started for non-Christian girls inspired their parents to send them to schools. Singing, story-telling, and showing pictures became part of their scheme for work. They also took up the task of making their hearers literate. Most Bible-women were wives, generally of catechists or school-masters, or widows. A remarkable feature of the work of the Bible-women is that they could not only gain access to the non Christian women, but also to the men of the house, many of whom they could convince about Christianity. Thus, these women-evangelists were silently shouldering the colonial task of the upliftment of womenfolk along with the European missionaries and formed an important part of the transactions that took place between missionaries, indigenous communities and converts. By making the people around them get used to the notion of a new kind of mobility for women, the Bible-women made new models of gender acceptable in the indigenous society.

Women Associations

Like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Ladies Association and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), inaugurated the delightedness of association life among the converted women. Earlier, these women had their gatherings in the domestic spaces of mission houses with the wives of missionaries or in the stitching rooms, a room intended for stitching and lace making. These associations became instrumental in bringing up an urbane consumer society where native women were given training classes to make laces, kerchiefs and other types of apparels and cloths for women folk. Their products got a big sale in the market and they themselves started using such types of materials. Naturally it marked a shift from the old patterns of lifestyles and to the westerners it was the success of their mission to dress the colonized bodies. They were also taught to read books and moreover, the association was keen in inculcating in them the leadership qualities¹¹. Eliza F. Kent in her work *Converting Woman*, treated conversion less as an inner change of belief than as a gradual process 'revealed in and aided by changes in external behavior' like dress, diet, lifestyle, speech and comportment (Kent, 2004:6,7). Thus the colonial plan of shaping the socio-economic space of the 'other' was largely instrumentalised through the work of these missionaries.

Conclusion

The newly created 'casteless' society provided ample human capital to the industries run by the missionaries. Thus caste as a barrier of capitalism, as said by Weber, was removed by the efforts of missionaries which eventually helped the policies of the colonial state. The newly emerged western educated casteless community at various urban spaces of Malabar represented the consumer class where both men and women became the earning members of the family. Nevertheless the women were placed under their husbands in their venture of leading a Christian life. This ascertained the women folk to perform the dual roles of an industrial labourer who supports the family by her wages and also a responsible wife in the family. They became more concerned with the day to day life of the family and engaged in buying and making the commodities inevitable for the daily life of the new space. The colonial lessons of health, hygiene and cleanliness were taught first within the gendered spaces of converts with the help of these missionaries and the burden of dressing the colonized body also became part and parcel of the duties of the missionaries. Hence due to the growing influence of the missionary activities the masses, especially the women folk, became more instrumental in the 'civilizing' task of the colonial plans and it culminated in the gradual transformation of the society of Malabar during the in the colonial period.

Notes

1. The BGEM Report of 1849 contains a list of colonial officials who supported the missionary activities in Malabar by giving donations. H V Conolly, then collector of Malabar was one among them. See *Ninth Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1849*, p. 49
2. *Sixth Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1846*, p. 62.
3. *Fifth Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1845*, p. 52.
4. Most of the Basel Mission Reports gives us a clear picture about the educational activities done by the missionaries in Malabar and South Canara. Missionaries, by means of their schools, sought to carve out a space within the 'heathen' world, where the most pliable segment of the population, that is children, could be schooled into the ideals of the Christian life. See Maben, Veena. (2015: 99).
5. *Twenty-Sixth Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1865*, p. 27.
6. Rev. Gundert speaks about a Muslim youth named Baker from Tellich-

erry, who adopted Christianity and when his conversion created problems within his community, his uncle at Calicut persuaded him to get back to his own faith by offering him a good job at his business centre at the town of Calicut. It should be noted that, in those times Calicut was an attraction for the youngsters. *Fifth Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1845*, p. 50.

7. *Thirty-Third Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1872*, p. 37.
8. *The Fifth Tour Report of Sir Arthur Lawley to Malabar*, September 13th to 24th, 1907, p. 94.
9. Ibid., p.211. The report on Tile Industry at *Puthiyara* of Calicut congregation says that alcohol consumption was very high among the male workers and it caused poverty among the families. So the wives of these workers were forced to join the factory in order to meet the expenses. At the same time the workers of weaving establishment at Calicut were able to build houses for themselves inside the town. Here both husband and wives were encouraged to save something so as to acquire property of their own. *Fifty-First Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1890*, p.38.
10. *Thirty-Third Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1872*, p. 38.
11. *Sixty-Ninth Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission for the year 1908*, p.54.

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