THE CASTE SYSTEM OF JAFFNA AND THE ACTIVITIES OF THE AMERICAN MISSIONARIES - A HISTORICAL VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Even in the present era, the domination of the caste system exerts its influence on almost every movement of the human life (Sebamalairasa, S.S., 1998, p.22). This system appears to be a social organization that has either been introduced or has crept by itself into the society. The caste system pervaded in such a way as to keep at higher echelons a group of people who had a 'divide and rule' attitude, while other clans were deemed to be suppressed classes, supposed to have lost their human rights and live a life of supplication under the so called high caste people. Hocart, who examined the caste system, was of the opinion that it was a combination of several distinct clans that descended from their own origins. He also thought that blood relationship agreed between certain clans. (Bakthavathasala Bharathy, 1996, p.82). Though different opinions have been put forward linking the origin of the caste system with a South Indian background, evidences indicate that the caste system had been strictly followed during the period of the earlier kings who ruled Jaffna. Following the period of the Jaffna kings, the political scene in Jaffna was dominated by Europeans. Even during the regime of the Portuguese there was no change in the adherence to the caste system. However during the period of the Dutch rules, some leniency was observed. However during the British rule, effective attempts were made to do away with the caste system in Jaffna as well as in other parts of Sri Lanka. Religion and education were used as the main instruments to achieve their purpose. In addition, medical and printing services also helped in their attempts. In this regard the activities of the missionaries who began to visit Sri Lanka, were remarkable. Among such missionaries, the incomparable services of the American missionaries who influenced the people of Jaffna were most noteworthy. The challenges they had to face in trying to vanquish the caste system through direct and indirect methods were in fact more than the challenges they faced in propagating their religion. It cannot altogether be claimed that they succeeded in their attempt. However it must be admitted that they paved the way for the appearance of a progressive society in Jaffna. This study based on a socio- historic approach primarily aims at examining the impacts on caste system, at a time when the influence of the American missionaries was high in Jaffna. It also aims at encouraging future researchers on this subject. Primary and secondary data are used for the purposes of this study. Primary data include contemporary reports of the American missionaries, and other documents, while books, and essays written at later times, based on primary data, from the sources for secondary data. On the bases of such evidences, it has to be noted that the success achieved by them in the matter of caste system has not been up to the level of their achievements in other matters.

Keywords: American missionaries, Caste system, Customs, Progressive thinking.