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. (Bakthavathsala 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.
Introduction

By the latter part of the 18th century i.e by 1793, the activities of the American missionaries in India had been completely forbidden. Following this however, in 1833 all foreign Christian missions were allowed to carry on their activities in India. Such legal restrictions in India did not have any repercussions in Sri Lanka, where the governors at that period were supportive to missionaries activities. In 1812 Jaffna was selected as the propaganda base of America (Jebanesan, S.,2004, p.02). Like other Europeans, they too used education as their main tool and succeeded to a great extent in their religions propaganda. Simultaneously however, they could not totally eradicate some of the hitherto existent traditional customs, false beliefs or backwardness, of particular mention, is the caste system that had been prevailing in Jaffna. The people of Jaffna could not be freed from their caste conscience particularly became of contemporary Hindu and Muslim intensive activities against those of the American missionaries. While engaged in their efforts to safeguard their own religions, they could not move out of the circle of their false beliefs and customs. Nevertheless it was by all means true that the missionaries continued their activities ardently, and that equality of the human race was clearly revealed in their efforts.

The arrival of American missionaries in Jaffna

The activities of the American missionaries were found to be more in Jaffna, than in other parts of Sri Lanka because of the influence of the contemporary East India Company, in India. In 1812 missionaries including Hall, Rice, Nott and Mrs. Nott were despatched in a ship named 'Harmony' for the purpose of religions propagation. (Jebanesan,S.,2009, p.12-13). More or less during that same period, Judson couple and Newell couple had been sent to India in a ship named "Caravan". The British East India Company which was engaged in trade and administrative activities vehemently opposed their arrival into India for fear of their trade activities getting disturbed. (Nadarajah,G.,2005, p.01). One of the evacuated missionaries, named Newell, who proceeded to Maturities with the intention of establishing an office and continuing his service, unfortunately lost his wife and child on his way and reached Sri Lanka. Thus, his arrival in Sri Lanka marked the beginning of American missions services in this Island.

Robert Browning(1812-1820) who was the governor of Sri Lanka at that time did not oppose the spreading of Christianity in Sri Lanka. (Root Helen, I., 1916, p.06). He was quite supportive to all Christian propaganda. He welcomed Newel and made all arrangements for him to select suitable place to carry on his propaganda. Out of his ten months’ stay in Sri Lanka, he spent 11/2 months in Jaffna. Following this, he selected Jaffna itself as the place for organising religious propaganda. A letter he sent explaining the reasons for selecting Jaffna as the most suitable place, captivated the interests of the Mission head quarters, who sent another group of missionaries to Jaffna. This group which included Daniel Poor and others, who set off in a ship called Dryad in 1815, and reached Jaffna in 1816. (Veluppillai,C.D.,1984, p.19). Sea voyages during that period were very risky and also took a long time to reach their destinations. (Jebanesan,S.,1989, p.05). At the time of their arrival, the activities of the London missionary and the Baptist missionary were already going on. The group reached Colombo on the 22nd of March 1816. They did not proceed to Jaffna immediately. However, after staying in Jaffna for some time, they proceeded to Vattukkottai and Thellippalai, where they started their activities. This may be reckoned as the commencement of the American missionary activities in Jaffna.

The caste system and the missionary set up

The caste system of Jaffna presented a block to the smooth functioning of the American missionaries. The people who lived here paid much importance to the adherence of the caste system. However it was only after the Colebrook constitution, the situation arose whereby all subjects were deemed equal. Prior to this it was the caste that decided the education, residence, life style and occupations of the people. Citing a book by the name, "Caste, Customs manners and Literature, Dr. S. Jebanesan has mentioned the names of more than 65 castes. (Jebanesan,S.,2007, p.13). An incident that took place in Vattukkottai in 1820, is cited as an example of how steeped the vellalas were in their caste conscience. Some saiva vellala who studied in the seminary there used to cook and bring their own meals. However, thinking that all the wells within the missions were polluted, they decided to clean one of the wells and keep it exclusively for their use. As it was the rainy season they could not draw out all the water from the well. The students stopped their work satisfying themselves to the effect that since the sinful water that remained in the well before the rainy season had already been drawn out the well was then purified! (Tennent James Emerson, p.147).
For a long time before, Jaffna fell in to the hands of the British, Jaffna had been under the influence of the Portuguese and Dutch in turn. (Arunthavarajah, K., 2014, p.147). However, as their main concern was exploitation of the land and religious propagation, they were interested neither in correcting the evils in the society nor their welfare. Consequently they could not bring about any noteworthy change in their life style. Out of the cultured remains left behind by the Portuguese only the religion and some of its features have stood up-to-date. Similarly even the Dutch who followed, could not break the heritage of the people of Jaffna. They who composed the laws of Sri Lanka Tamil administered Jaffna, but in keeping with the caste system.

Like their European predecessors, the British rulers also tried to use education as their instrument for all activities. Fredrick North who assumed office as governor of Sri Lanka in 1798, tried to do some reform in the education system that prevailed in Sri Lanka. (Arunthavarajah, K., 2012, p.87). The Dutch priests who were under arrest, were released and allowed to serve in parish schools. But this did not yield much success. The governors who succeeded North, did not show much interest in these matters. However it has to be noted that at the background of the support given by the British government for the educational, religious and other activities of the American missionaries, there were remarkable changes in the growth of education in Jaffna. However, as already pointed out, they could not bring about any significant changes in the customs that prevailed in Jaffna. Particularly, they could do nothing towards the caste system. Though many people converted themselves with the idea of shadowing their caste effect, things only turned worse in that they began to be looked down as converted low castes. (Arunthavarajah, K., 2003, p.167).

The caste system which had developed in India and particularly Tamil Nadu, exerted in influence in Sri Lanka too. The word caste is a term derived from Portuguese origin. (Malley, K.S.S.O., 1932, p.01). This term was initially used to denote various races among people. In Sri Lanka the caste systems remains as a contagious disease to date. Generally it was after the 10th century that Vellalas from India came and settled down in Jaffna with their slaves. They also established a separate kingdom in Jaffna. Since their caste consciousness in India was ratter high, they tried to maintain the same in Jaffna. All though the domination of the Brahmins was allowed in religious matters socially the Vellalas were regarded as most dominant.

The Vellalas who came from time to time and settled down in Jaffna, used to get down whenever necessary, slaves from India. Apart from them, some oppressed village folk were also captives in the hands of the Vellalas. Such a situation prevailed right from the time of the Jaffna kings through the Portuguese and Dutch periods. Later, even at the beginning of the British rule too they made the quasi land lord organisation favourable to their colonisation theory in such a way as to allow the maintenance of the caste system. During that period five low castes in Jaffna, viz; Nalavar, Pallar, Parayar, Ambattar and Thurambar, known together as ‘Panchavars’, had been declared out castes who cannot enter the houses of the higher caste people. (Manonnani, Shanmugathas, 1997, p.05). Vocation formed the main basis for the caste system. (Sivaththamby, K., 1992, p.15). Thus, at the time of the arrival of the missionaries the following castes were found in Jaffna. Brahmins, Vellalar, Koviar, Ahampadiyar, Thevasi, Chandals, Kaikkulars, Thurbamas, Kollar, Thattar, Parvar, Pandaram, Ambattar, Nalavar, Pallar, Vedar, Karayar, Siviyar and Thimilar to mention a few.

Whether at the time they left for India or whether at the time of setting feel in Jaffna, the missionaries were completely lacking any knowledge of the caste system. In fact their arrival in Sri Lanka was quite unexpected. Had their visit been pre-planned, they would have gathered some knowledge about the religions and the caste systems prevalent here at that time. (Jebanesan, S., 2004, p.140). However, after their arrival they learnt little by little the nature of the caste system that prevailed here. While the Portuguese who neglected this caste system and earned the hatred of the people, the Dutch who knew well about the caste system took advantage of it to hoard their own wealth. At the same time they also realised that the caste system in Jaffna was milder than its counterpart in South India.

At present we find that some of the castes found in the past are no more extinct. There is also no restriction that vocations should be in accordance with a person's birth caste. (Shanmugalingam, K., 2014, p.74). Many people belonging to various castes have also departed to foreign countries in seek of profitable employments. When a printing press was opened at Manipay by the American mission, Daniel says that a number of high caste youths had joined there for employment. (Shanmugalingam, K., 2014, p.74). As printing was entirely a novel occupation, there was no particular caste assigned to it, and the youths who saw the printing press for the first time, did not have any feeling of insinuation as if offered a carpenter's job. In fact the machinery for printing did not create any such feelings in their minds. They joined these jobs willingly. (Shanmugalingam, K., 2014, p.74). The American missionaries hoped that the people would on their own embrace Christianity, if the caste system found at that time were shattered. So, they got down to action in that direction. As one way of religious propaganda, in the schools opened by them, they introduced such rules according to
which all students were required to sit together when they eat or listen to lessons and also drink water from the same well. These activities were totally unacceptable to the high caste people. They thought that the missionaries were trying to create a social revolts. (Jebanesan, S.,2007, p.14). Such activities were vehemently condemned by saiva Tamil scholars who lived during the latter part of the 20th century. Opinions also began to prevail that those who sent their children to missionary schools would not come into the circle of high castes. Some saiva oriented newspapers also were condemning such activities. In this regard, it may be observed that while the propaganda of Sri Arumuganavalar protected salvaism and its cultures, it also did not fail to spoil the image of Christianity. The people of Jaffna were tightly linked with the caste system. Consequently, though some people converted themselves to Christianity they could not free themselves from their caste consciousness, and they felt that there was no use in embracing Christianity. It appears that 127 Vellalas, 8 Koviaris, 10 Madappallis and 2 Karayar (Fishermen) studied in the school conducted by them. (Jebanesan, S.,2007, p.142).

Certain rights had been denied to the low castes by the higher Vellala caste. They can't enter the temple maintained by higher castes, and they were prohibited from drawing water from common wells. They could not seek any education. Even if education facilities were available at a place already mentioned above, they could not sit equally with the higher caste students. They had to bury their dead bolides unlike as cremated by higher castes. They were also prohibited from wearing foot wear, carrying umbrellas, and also wearing shawls on their shoulders. (Vekujanan, Irravana.,1998, p.26). There were even separate gods for them to worship. For example the Koviyars worshipped Aiyanar. The nalavars, pallas, parayars, and vannars worshipped Kootatetheethar, Annamar, Vairavar, and Periyathambiran respectively. The situation was such that even the names of the high caste people could not be given any low castes. The American mission which started its activities at a time like this had to face severe challenges in its work.

Almost till 1950 admission even to Hindu students had been denied to the depressed classes. In the American mission schools too admissions were limited. Here again, even such limited admissions were given amidst strong opposition from vellalas. (Arunthavarajah, K.,2003, p.110). Several restrictions were imposed even on those limitedly admitted students . They were not allowed to wear trousers and shirts. Instead, they were expected to wear verity. They could neither eat their meals nor stay in hostels together with high caste students. It was only in 1930 that laws were brought in to allow equal seats and equal meals for all. This law was highly opposed by people of higher caste . As a result of this opposition, 13 schools in Jaffna were set fire. The Eelakesari newspaper of that time carried several news items pertaining to such incidents. It also published a news about Tamil-English school in Urumpirai being set fire. Consequently this area was placed under police vigilance. By the end of June another V.M.S school in that area was burnt down. There after an English school was destroyed while its fences were burnt. A Christian church near that English school was also set fire.

Though in general most of the people in Jaffna held backward opinions about equal seats and equal meals, in some schools this matter has been successfully implemented. Such a progressive activity has taken place at the government college in Kopay. In this college many students refused for equal seating and equal partaking of meals, and they had their meals outside. However from the beginning of 1931, they changed their mentality and accepted equal seating. (Vekujanan, Irravana.,1998, p.26).

Furthermore, as the principals of schools had face the antagonism of the public at that time. When some teachers were appointed from among depressed classes they were not allowed to teach in Hindu schools. They were given opportunities only in schools where students from depressed classes learnt. The following statement of Prof. K.Sivathamby, proves that the caste system had been indirectly followed even in schools run by the American missionaries.

"A close view of the way in which education opportunities were offered to students in Hindu-English schools, reveals that depressed classes had been mostly overlooked. The caste system had to be accepted even in Christian schools." (Sivathamby, K.,1992, p.50).

The American missionaries used education as their main tool. Such activities like drought relief, employment, and mass movements as under taken in South India were not found here. At the background of the missionaries attempting to provide higher education opportunities, the higher caste people with an educational heritage came in seek of the missionaries. The missionaries in fact wanted to convert their intended higher education institution, into a college conferring degrees. Some of those who came were Vellalas in the higher levels of the society. Some of them converted themselves to Christianity and even wrote some books on Christianity. However, in the course of time the American
missionaries had to yield themselves to the caste system even within their church societies. People like D.Nobili who visited Maturai in 1606 were not keen in adhering to the caste system. However, the churches realised that they had no other alternative but to give in to the caste system. Consequently, the American missionaries had to function at times as the society of higher castes. (Jebanesan, S.,2004, p.142).

Ceiling a book written by Rev.Meigs, the policies adopted by the missionaries in 1854, are mentioned by Dr.S.Jebanesan in the following paragraph.

"Our local helpers go enthusiastically into the societies of low caste people and spread the message of Jesus. They supervise their schools. They help in burial services. But it will be in insinuating their feelings and exceed limits are enacted to force them to eat in the homes of the low caste people or have marital relationships with them. It will amount to affliction people in Boston and Newyork societies being compelled by law to sit at the same tables with black or white labourers." (Vekayanan, Irravana.,1998, p.26)

The church could not make any progress, because of the attitude shown by the American missionaries towards the caste system. They majority of the high caste people did not accept Christianity. Even those who embraced it, did not live as true Christians. At the same time many people abandoned Christianity and became prominent leaders of the movement of Arumuganaval. Among them C.V.Thamotharampillai, Carrol Visvanathapillai, and Daniel Somasegarampillai are worthy of mention. This flawlessness created much concern to the headquarters in Boston.

Even some of the Tamil leaders of that time appeared to be holding views against the equal seating movement. There are references to the effect that Sir. Ponnambalam Ramanathan met the governor and had talks with him against equal meals being provided to non-vellala students who had been admitted to Kopay Teachers’ college. (Sivathamby,K.,1994, p.06). In 1930, when laws were enacted to enforce equal seating and equal meals, Sir V.Thuraisamy had talks with the then education officer Robinson at Jaffna kachcheri for the purpose of reducing the tension surmounting in this area. Robinson, while expressing his opinion on this matter, had told that no change could be effected on the laws enacted by the government and that people were not forced to accept equal seating against their policies. It they wanted, they could establish course would not receive any state aids or donations. (Eelakesari 1930 July 02, p.05). Their church could not develop well in Jaffna. However, through the work they did in Jaffna they learnt a bitter lesson. Consequently when they went in 1835, to work in Mathurai, they had completely given up caste consciousness. They introduced regulations to the effect that those who tried to bring caste differences into the church would be expelled. They were tried to bring caste differences into the church would be expelled. They were not so much concerned about brahmins, chelties and Mudaligars. They went straight to the people who were oppressed, church develop by leaps and bounds. (Jebanesan, S.,2004, p.143, 144).

Conclusion

The very purpose behind the arrival of the American missionaries in Jaffna, leaving behind their country and their kith and kin was to spread their religion and religious policies. In general, all Europeans who came to Sri Lanka were ignorant of the south Asian countries and the religion, all other faiths were shrouded in mythical, false beliefs. The American missionaries were also immersed in that same conceit. But when they tried to propagate their religion in Jaffna, they found that the caste system in Jaffna was posing a stumbling block to their activities. They could not achieve the objective behind their arrival. They treated Jaffna only as a stepping stone to their future activities in South India. Though the missionaries had been successful everywhere they stepped in South India, the same was not true in North India and Jaffna. The missionaries opened schools and colleges for this purpose and they gave prominence to the education of females. The seminary established in Vattukkottai, was at par with the University in England and America. The printing press established by them in Manipay brought several charges in the social history of Jaffna. Never toelless, they could not do anything about the caste system which deeply influenced people's life style. In this regard, all their efforts being rendered futile, they were pushed down to the state of helplessly accepting the caste system.

Notes

2. Arunthavarajah,K.,(2003), The Contribution of Eelakesari for the Socio-Political Devalopment of the Sri Lankan Tamils,(Tamil), M.phil in History, University of Jaffna,(not published)


19. **Periodical**