

MEDICAL WORKS OF WOMEN MISSIONARIES IN TAMILNADU (1870-1920) - A STUDY

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Gosha Hospital, Mohammedan Dispensary, Hospital for Women and Children, Medical School for Women are some of the unfamiliar institutions of today were opened up by women Missionaries of the west to reduce the horrors of Indian women of yester years. The suffering of women were so much that it was said they either turned-out to be so violent as husband murderers or so cowardice to commit suicide and thereby were condemned to a prison or a grave respectively.¹

Plight of Women

There was a high mortality rate among women due to early marriage and early child birth, primitive unsatisfactory mid-wifely superstition and ignorance. A study of maternal mortality in four Districts Madras, Madurai, Tiruchirappalli and Coimbatore showed that among the 7,324 confinements cases studied by the Director of Public Health, Government of India for 1928, the maternal mortality rate was eighteen per thousand.² Phthisis, Tuberculosis and Small Pox often affected the women due to unsanitary living conditions, deficient ventilation of houses and poverty. Malaria and Cholera also affected Muslim women frequently since they lived in filthy, over-crowded, shut-in-houses.³

Native Medical Practice

Some of the native medical practices were cruel, ignorant and barbarous' cruel treatments were melted out to women specially at times of illness and sufferings. A Brahmin widow of twenty-five years of age had high fever with delirium for which the native quacks blistered her head with boiling margosa oil.⁴ Once Dr. Ida was taken inside a dirty windowless back-room to see a woman in confinement and the woman was practically dying due to thirst with a swollen tongue and thick hot lips for she was denied of water.⁵

To prevent the birth of a child in the dark hour which was considered unlucky, two midwives placed ropes around the mother's ankles and strung her feet upto a beam and kept her there for the hour. The child was neither born in the dark hour nor in the bright, but both the mother and the child were dead.⁶ A poor girl of a confirmed epilepsy first was treated to drive the devil by bums and when that treatment failed tried heavy blows with thick sticks and, the girl was dying not of the disease but of the treatments.⁷

Need for Women Doctors

The First women Missionaries were sent to India as educationalists but some of them soon felt that doctors were needed even more urgently than teachers.⁸ Thus the need for women physicians to relieve the physical suffering of her own sex was first perceived and first emphasized by missionaries. The early

missionaries acquired considerable skills in prescribing for minor ailments and in carrying for wounds and bums but found themselves helpless before the cases that demanded the service of a fully trained physician. These Missionaries tried getting medicines from-male doctors were not allowed to treat them.⁹ It was said that the native ladies of high position would rather die than allow a male doctor even, to examine the chest with a stethoscope.¹⁰

Initial Hurdles

In 1878 four ladies graduated at Madras, but there was no demand for the services of lady Doctors since Hindu women were the most benighted, superstitious and ignorant and the greatest opponents to general practice among the natives. At this juncture, the Zenana Missionaries did a grounding work by building up the confidence in these women through simple medical help and by showing love and care. Zenana Missionaries were also able to take the lady Doctors into the houses where sick women were found.¹¹

The patience of the Indian Nurses were sorely tried since the patients took considerable time to explain their difficulties.¹² The nurses were taught to be kind and gentle even to the patients who were troublesome. Even when they hesitated to take medicines the nurses were trained to be understanding since it was a totally strange medicine from strange doctors.¹³ There was also the difficulty of persuading even well educated women to take up nursing as profession.¹⁴ Medical care and service was often hampered due to lack of trained nurses of native women.

Strictly secluded Mohammedans seldom visited the Hospitals.¹⁵ Even the Mohammedan Dispensary at George Town opened up by the Free Church of Scotland Mission could be used by the pardah women only if it was kept open for an hour or two after dark. Since only they could leave their homes even in a conveyance without exciting adverse comment.¹⁶

Even after establishing the Hospitals separately for women, the Missionaries had the difficulty of persuading the patients to avail themselves¹⁷ of the privilege offered to them.¹⁸ Dr. Ida said I will go out into the community and look for patients.¹⁹ In one month alone in 1901, she made visits in 177 Hindu and Mohammedan homes, often the women complained how could they leave their home, their children and husband. How could they come alone or who would accompany them? They had no clocks to time the medicine but would demand the place of the shadows of the sun.²⁰ They had initial fears of even seeing nurses in white sarees. Since only widows were in white in their caste. Thus both the religious bigotry among Mohammedans and caste prejudice among Hindus dominated the upper classes and hampered the medical mission of the early missionaries.²¹

The total number of Medical Missionaries at the end of 1911 was 335 and among them 217 were women.²² As per Simon Commission Report (Vol. I para.69) 400 women doctors worked Hospitals. Christian Medical Association in 1930 reported that there were ninety-eight Mission Hospitals for women in India.²³

Objectives of Medical Mission

The medical mission had four objectives they are; To give medical care to the Missionaries To give medical care to the natives. To aid evangelistic work by disarming prejudice and bringing the gospel to the notice of those who were not attracted by mere evangelistic methods and to train native physicians and nurses.²⁴ Medical Missions had also been described as the Kindergarten method of teaching Christianity like Braille script to the blind and the sign language to the mute. Through this Mission every section of the population was being reached specially the Zenana women, people in remote villages, the out castes and the tribes of the jungle.²⁵

Toda tribes in the Nilgiris Hills permitted the Missionaries into their territory specially because a Toda Tribal man was cured by the medicines given by them.²⁶ People from far off places travelled miles and for days to reach the hospital and thereby exposed to Christian faith also. Medical Mission was carried on by different Missionary societies at various centres in Tamil Nadu.

Works of the Medical Mission

The Medical Missions promoted harmony and solidarity among women for high caste Hindus and Mohammeden women began to be together. In the same way these women found the Hospital a great contrast to the narrow, monotonous life they were compelled to live in the zenanas.²⁷ These women were initially reluctant to give money to the Hospitals but slowly they learned to express their gratitude by bringing gifts of fruits and flowers and even contributing in the Hospital box.²⁸

In the early periods of the Medical Mission only the western missionaries did the work but slowly the Indian or Anglo Indian who passed through the Madras. Medical College or the Union Christian College for Women, Vellore took up this responsibility. Many women were qualifying themselves as Doctor's and Nurses and taking part in relieving the sufferings of their fellow country women.²⁹ The prejudice against nursing began to be fast dying down and many Indian girls took up nursing as their profession.³⁰

Women began to have more faith in the western medicines and treatment and the cases of patients being taken away at the most critical period of illness from the hospital were greatly stopped.³¹ Women hospital which attracted both high caste and low caste women and gave them the shelter alike from a cruel world.³² In one incident in Tiruvallur Hospital three women a Sudra, Paraiyah and a Brahmin stood side by side to get their baptism breaking down the prejudice against the discrimination.

The Medical Mission also realised the need to have other social Institutions attached to it as it was felt necessary or unavoidable. Since most cases brought to the Hospital were maternity cases, the child birth was a common event. Unfortunately sometimes these children were deserted by their parents either being an unlucky child or due to poverty. Hence the hospitals had to open up orphanages in order to take care of these children. In the Vellore Hospital Orphanage, the first child was named as Mary taber who was brought up by Dr. Ida herself.

Again often the deserted and destitute women tried to take asylum in the Hospitals and expressed their willingness to take up nursing or to do the work of a Bible woman in the Hospitals.³³ Oadir Bia Mohammeden

convert to Christianity in order to get entrance amongst her own people who had cast her vote, has taken her diploma as trained nurse in the Madras Hospital. This resulted in the opening up of rescue homes in the places where medical work was being carried on for women.

Some times, the Medical Mission had turned foes into friends. The neighbours who were so skeptical and hostile to the Medical Mission after being helped at times of crisis turned their attitude altogether. Miss. Swainson has written that because of the medical service extended by them to a lawyer's wife a judicial case filed against their school bidding was withdrawn.³⁴ Then the heart of many were won by this noble mission. Often these medical missionaries helped the Government and the people in ameliorating the horror of various epidemics like plague, cholera, small-pox, etc.

In this process, many missionaries themselves have become the victims also. Dr. Lousia Hart was called by the Government in 1907 to fight against the plague.³⁵ Dr. Mary Rajanayagam, who was fighting against plague patients became its victim in March 1904 at Madanapalle. Mrs. Van Allen, who assisted her husband during an epidemic of malignant type of Cholera got affected and died in 24 hours.³⁶ In 1918, when the scourge of Cholera followed the strange and awful curse of influenza, the Vellore Christian Hospital for women was filled with patients and three of their nurses were the victims.³⁷

Kaiser -1 - Hind, "empress of India" tide bume by the great Moghals was assumed by Her magestly Queen victoria in 1876. This award since 1900 was given for public service in India. Two of the medical missionaries from Vellore, Dr. Louisa and Dr. Ida Scudder were awarded this honour in recognition of their service to the public. A Brahmin official once told the missionaries that "through your Schools you have secured the minds of our children, through your Bible women you have won our homes and through your benevolent doctors you have touched our hearts".

Miss. Amy Carmichael, Social Reformer

The European Christian Missionaries came to India mainly for converting Hindus and Muslims to Christianity. They also rendered meritorious services for the upliftment of the oppressed communities and the eradication of certain evils in the society. Like men, women missionaries also played a dominant role for the upliftment of the oppressed communities in Tamil Nadu. Most important among them was Miss. Amy Carmichael. She rendered meritorious services among women for their liberation.³⁸

Amy Carmichael was born in Scotland in 1867. She came to Tirunelveli, the Southern most part of Tamil Nadu in 1896 under the direction of the Church of England. "Zenana Missionary Society" (C.E.Z.M.S) was organised in 1864 in England exclusively for preparing lady missionaries. In 1864, Amy was sent to Pannavilai, a village near to Swayerpuram. She worked there till 1900, along with Rev. Walker. She used Saree, the traditional dress of native woman, with a view to attract them. She visited daily the nearby village in bullock cart. She gave special attention to preach gospel to women and children. She organised the women folk of the village and formed a 'Women's band in 1898 at Pannavilai.

While visiting the houses, she saw with her own eyes the pitiable condition of widows. Due to child marriage, many young wives became widows. According to the local custom, remarriage was denied to them. Their conditions were deplorable. They used to sit at the corner of the house. They were not permitted to mingle with outsiders. They were compelled to wear only white sarees. Jewels were also removed from them. Only simple foods were provided to them. One among them was Ponnammal who touched the heart of Amy Carmichael.³⁹ Amy Carmichael dealt with the widows gently and created self - confidence in them. Finally, they were liberated and utilised for the upliftment of the society.

The prevalence of Devadasi System was an evil in the society. It reduced the status of the women in society. They were offered voluntarily to the deities in the local temples. After dedication, the girls were treated as a property of the temples. They performed dances in the temples and places. They had to perform various services in the temples. Usually, the young girls were dedicated to various deities all over the country on each full moon day. A few of them were offered to the temples voluntarily. But most of them were sold to the temples due to poverty. The girls sold to the temples were refused to serve as Devadasis and often escaped without the knowledge of temple authorities. One among them was Preena. She escaped from the Perumkulam temple and got asylum in the mission bungalow at Pannavilai on 7th March 1901. Later, she served under Amy Carmichael as social worker.

Due to lack of medical facilities at Dhonavur, the children were taken to Neyyoor in Kanyakumari District for treatment in bullock carts. It took one and half days to reach Neyyoor. So, many of them died on the way. So to remove this handicap, she founded a dispensary at Dhonavur in 1907. A trained nurse was appointed in this dispensary.

Dr. M.E. Powell was its first qualified doctor. He was appointed in 1924. As the number of patients increased, this dispensary was upgraded into a hospital, in 1929.⁴⁰

In 1925, she ceased to be a missionary of C.E.Z.M.S. and acted independently. She officially registered the Dhonavur fellowship, in 1927. In 1931, she fell in a pit, and was bed ridden for nearly twenty years. She died in 1951 at the age of 84. Amy Carmichael was a talented writer. She wrote 32 books. Among them, Lotus buds, Gold by Moon Light, etc., were important. Through her writings and social works, she awakened the minds of the women in Tamil Nadu.

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