

FORMATION OF THE SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE (SPCK) IN TIRUCHIRAPALLI –TANJORE REGION

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ABSTRACT

The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) was formed by Dr. Thomas Bray. The object of "Promoting Christian Knowledge" in the English Colonies was not by sending missionaries but by providing all material helps. The Society continued its services for about a hundred years in Trichirapalli district and in 1825 it handed over the mission centres to its sister organisation viz., Society for the Propagation of Gospel in Foreign parts (SPG).

Key Words: Propagation, Reformation, Missionary, territorially, Methodist.

Introduction

The Trichirapalli-Tanjore Diocese is bounded by the Bay of Bengal in the East, the Madras and Coimbatore Dioceses in the North, the Madurai Ramnad Diocese in the South and North Kerala Diocese in the west. From Nagapattinam to Anamalai Hills, it covers a distance of about 416 km. In the East-West direction and about 64 km in North-South direction and the total area of this diocese is 26624 sq. miles. The whole area can be divided into three broad divisions, viz., The Cauvery Delta Area (Trichirapalli-Tanjore), the Karur-Dharapuram area, and the Anaimalai Hills Area. The Cauvery Delta area of about 6400 sq. miles is a very fertile one as it is watered by the River Cauvery. So, rice is mainly cultivated in this area. The province of Tanjore, between Coimbatore and the sea is the most fertile of the whole.¹

In the year 1698 the oldest English missionary society, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) was formed by Dr. Thomas Bray. One of his great concerns in life was to "catechise" - instruct people in their faith and help to train those who would do this work effectively.

Formation of the S.P.C.K

Founding of the S.P.C.K at first Dr. Bray sought help from the British Parliament, but without success; so he originated the plan of a Society to be incorporated by a Charter, for spreading Christian knowledge at home and in the plantations. The plan was laid before the Bishop of London in 1697, but it could not be carried out. He proposed other plans, one of which was "A General Plan in Constitution of Christian Knowledge" to promote religion in the plantations and to support missionaries. As he had undertaken a good deal of work and was about to leave on a visit to America, four of his friends decided to help him". They assembled in the room of Mr. Justice Hooke, Lord Guildford, and Sir. Humphrey Mack worth, Col. Maynard Colchester along with Dr. Bray on March, 1699. It was a voluntary Society without Charter to enable Dr. Bray's work to continue on a secure basis. Archbishop Tenison, declared that it would be 'of great consequence imaginable' to the establishment of religion in the colonies. Without doubt, it was mainly the action taken by Dr. Bray inspired the Archbishop, Bishop of London, and the members. The Bishops welcomed the idea that it would help very much to propagate 'Christian Knowledge' in the Indies. Other books were to be given to all persons immigrating to America from Britain.²

The objects of the Society were to maintain charity schools and distributing the Bible and other Christian literature in England and Wales, but also of 'Promoting Christian Knowledge both at home and in other parts of the World by the best means that should offer'. But Dr. Bray knew that enthusiasm is no substitute for thought and planning. 'He never thought of calling his new Society, as well he might have done, a Society for Promoting Christian Zeal. He was far too conscious of the urgent and widespread need for knowledge of Christian Gospel.³ So he devoted himself to developing methods of making this knowledge accessible to the world, even to this day, 250 years later, his Society puts in the forefront of its evangelistic armament. Yet no one was fuller of zeal than himself. In his own person he exemplified the fusion of zeal and knowledge which always marks out the true Christian. So plans were set on foot to found schools, print and distribute books, send missionaries to America, as well as to improve the morals in the services and to reform prison conditions. All these were urgent and crying needs, but Bray as Commissary was more concerned with Maryland and it was time for him to go and see for himself. Since his stipend as Commissary had not been, and never was paid, he sold his over possessions, borrowed from his friends and set sail to America before Christmas 1699.

Progress of the Mission

The first mention which occurs in the Reports of the S.P.C.K. of its benevolent intentions and endeavours in favour of the joint work of instruction and conversion in the East Indies is found in the postscript to the Annual Sermon preached before the Society, by the Rev. Dr. S. Bradford in the year 1709 A.D. The members of the Society came to know that two Lutheran missionaries Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Pleutschau have begun small charity schools at Tranquebar on the coast of Coromandal for the Malabarian boys; that they provided food, instructed in German on the fundamental principles of Christian Knowledge; that they met the expenses from their own salary and money got for interest from the Malabarians for promoting this and other pious designs.⁴

In the same year, a proposal was made by one of the Danish missionaries, Rev. Schultze to move to Fort St. George to begin a new mission there for the conversion of the natives at Madras. His offer was accepted by the S.P.C.K. and thus the 'English Mission' began in Madras.⁵ This was an innovation, since for the first time the Society took responsibility for a mission, and Schultz became a missionary of the S.P.C.K. with a fixed salary of £60. Thus the S.P.C.K. engaged itself for the support of a new mission in India by providing all material and financial help. Dr. Franke's Seminary at Halle helped S.P.C.K. by sending missionaries' of all the missionaries connected with the Tranquebar mission and supported by the S.P.C.K.

Conclusion

From the History of the Protestant Missionaries in the South the 19th century can be regarded as the formative years for the Protestant Churches. Though Christianity was introduced in the Trichirapalli-Tanjore Diocesan area in the 17th and 18th centuries, Christian community remained backward and degraded. Slavery and servitude, in which they were steeped for centuries, deprived them of meaning and value in life. With the advent the S.P.C.K., S.P.G. and Methodists, a new chapter was opened not only in religious history of the Trichinopoly and Tanjore districts but also in the social, cultural, educational and economic history of the people. The mission field was not a bed of roses in these two districts where Hinduism and Castuism has a stronghold over the people. Right from the beginning of their labour, the Missionaries had to encounter several formidable obstacles in the land of the Hindus. In short it was the Protestant Missionaries who strove hard to make available to the people the fits of modern civilized life along with the Gospel. The innumerable churches, schools, colleges, seminaries, hospitals and other institutions which they established have ever been the torch bearers of their culture and way of life.

End Notes:

1. **Annual Letters of Trichinopoly District**, 1829, p.19.
2. **Report of the Madras Diocesan Committee Report of SPCK**, 1858, Madras, SPCK, 1869, p.299.
3. George Parte Fisher, **History of Christian Church**. New Yorte, 1982, p.189.

4. Hambye, E.R., *History of Christianity – 18th Century*. Bangalore, 1997, p.79.
5. *Ibid*, pp.327-329.