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Impact of SPG Missions on the Dalits of Tirunelveli

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A Critical and Comparative Study of the Relationship between Missionary Strategy, Dalit Consciousness and Socio-economic Transformation in the Missionary Work by SPG among the Nadar and Paraiya Communities of Tirunelveli District between 1830 and 1930

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Abstract

The Dalit liberation theologians speak of "Dalit awareness" or "Dalit Consciousness". It is this consciousness that provides the depressed classes of India with a new sense of self. This new self replaces for them their former inferiority complex and slave mentality. The whole idea of Dalit gives the depressed classes a new found dignity. For Dalit liberation theologians this Dalit identity has precedence over religious identity or spiritual associations, i.e. the Church. Dalit liberation theologians criticize the missionaries who worked among the various depressed communities in the 19th century. They maintain that the missionary endeavour did not contribute to the awakening of the depressed classes' consciousness, sense of selfhood or personal dignity.

On the other hand this dissertation argues that Christian mission did bring about a change of consciousness among Dalits. The missionaries believed that it was conversion to Christ and the new life in Christ that produced in the depressed class believers a new identity and a transformed view of the self and this in turn brought social change and very often upward social mobility. The missionaries provided education and health care and these facilities contributed positively to the well being of the depressed class Christians and to their sense of personal worth. Moreover a well disciplined life in the Church worked to produce a transformed character. The resulting values cultivated by these Christians provided for them an awakened sense of freedom, social justice, fraternity and equal opportunities in life. This proved to be quite revolutionary because the outcastes used the missionaries and the facilities they provided effectively for their own advantage.

This thesis argues that modern Dalit theology and Dalit Christian history do not converge. The view of the Dalit theologians on Dalit consciousness, religion and social change differs from the views of the missionaries and the Christian converts of the mass movement areas. Does Dalit consciousness precede Christian consciousness in the struggle for liberation? The verdict of the historical data is no. The thesis concludes that the Dalit theologians appear to have an ideological position which determines their reading of the history. This ideological position is ultimately a statement of faith that a certain process will bring social change which is unsupported by the historical record. The view that this ideological position opposes is, on the other hand, strongly supported from the historical record that Christian conversion was a critical step in the process of Dalit consciousness.