

Missionaries' Encounter with Casteism/Racism: An Indian Experience

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“Caste is older than the church... Christianity has no caste but Christians have caste” (Lancy Lobo)

1. Introduction

Caste practice is a social evil of the Indian society based on social, occupational and economic considerations but one cannot deny its relationship and roots in racism. It has visible and invisible influence from and on the religions and the Indian church also is not free from its clutches. The Christian missions in India encountered this evil from its very beginning. Though the Colonial rules and the missionaries had different approaches to this evil but it is a fact that majority from both the parties try their level best to eradicate it from the Indian society. The colonial legislations and the missionaries ardent efforts during the 19th century did not uproot the caste practice but helped to significantly reduce its age-old discriminations such as untouchability, slavery, forced labour, right to use public roads, temples, and prohibition of education, land ownership and proper dress etc. The Indian church is not free from the evil of the caste even today. This paper is an attempt to highlight the protestant missionaries' encounter with the casteism in Kerala, South India with two case studies, i.e. one from the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the other from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary work in Travancore during the 19th century.

2. Missionaries Encounter with the Caste Issue in Travancore

The social relationships in Travancore during the 19th century, when the other Protestant missionaries began their work, were characterised by caste distinction, discrimination and segregation. The missionaries introduced a western idea of equality and the gospel of brotherhood and love to this society that was governed mainly by caste. In spite of this, the influence of caste remained in society and within the Church, though the rigidity of caste rules and untouchability began to disappear.²

Many Protestant missionaries who worked in India and particularly in Travancore taught the people the evil of caste discrimination.³ They made special efforts to impress upon the people that it was against the word of God, and the Christian Church should not accept it in any way. But unfortunately one could notice a strong discriminatory attitude, as bad as the caste system

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² See, J.W. Gladstone, “Christian Missionaries and Caste in Kerala”, in M.E. Prabhakar (ed), *Towards a Dalit Theology*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1988, pp.104-105.

³ Cf. J. Roberts (ed), *Caste in its Religious and Civil Character Opposed to Christ*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1847, pp 12-18.

itself, among the missionaries, especially those who worked in Travancore. The incident cited below from the middle of the 19th century can substantiate this.

2.1 The Two Views about Caste

There were two contradictory views about caste among the missionaries during the nineteenth century. One group including Bishop Heber and Christian David (an Indian clergyman) believed that caste was a civil rather than religious institution and they advocated a policy of tolerance of any practice which could be regarded as civil or cultural rather than idolatrous. Heber had the strong opinion that it was no part of the Christian mission to attack Indian social structure and that caste observances ought properly to be tolerated within the church if the Christians themselves regarded caste as secular and adhered to caste in part out of fear of losing the society and respect of their neighbours and relations.

Another group consisting of a number of the younger missionaries were no less insistent in declaring that caste was an idolatrous abomination based on Hindu religion, which must be rooted out of the church. This group including Bishop Daniel Wilson believed that if caste be retained Christianity would be destroyed. They had the opinion that:

“the distinction of the caste must be abandoned, decidedly, immediately, finally; and those who profess to belong to Christ must give this proof of their having really put off the old, and put on the new man in Jesus Christ. The gospel recognises no distinctions such as those of castes, imposed by a heathen usage, bearing in some respects a supposed religious obligation, condemning those in the lower ranks to perpetual abasement, placing an immovable barrier against all general advance and improvement in society, cutting the bonds of human fellowship on the one hand, and preventing those of Christian love on the other”.⁴

So this group had the strong feeling that caste was one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the Gospel in India

⁴ See *Caste and Christianity*, Ibid. p. 33-39; W. Taylor, *A Memoir of the First Century of the Earliest Protestant Mission at Madras*, Madras, 1847, p.332, and G.A. Oddie, “The Protestant Missions, Caste and Social Change in India, 1850-1914”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. VI No.3. Sept.1969, P.262.

P.J.T. Pieris opines that Bishop Wilson wanted to abolish Indian casteism and to respect European hierarchism. See, P.J.T. Pieris, *The Echoes of a Faded Memory: A Contribution to A History of the Tamil Coolie Mission*, A Thesis submitted to The University of Birmingham for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, (Unpublished thesis), 2001, p.53.

Most of the CMS missionaries who worked here in this period seemed even to have refused the conversion and emancipation of the lower castes. Joseph Peet, a CMS missionary in Travancore, wrote in 1860 that:

While I would not make them (the lower castes) the prominent object of our labours, I would in an unobtrusive manner establish school-houses among them to instruct and Christianise them and, when baptised I would and do admit them to equal standing with myself and other Christian brethren; yet, under present circumstances, I would not meddle with their legal standing, or urge them to assume a position in Travancore society that has never been granted them.⁵

The attitude of the missionaries appears to have been largely a result of their strategy of winning the high castes first in order to win over the entire population. They knew very well that admitting the lower castes might constitute a grave obstacle to their work. A.F. Painter, another CMS missionary worked in Central Travancore, wrote in 1907 “many missionaries have felt that to seek and evangelise these (the outcastes) first would be to repel the higher castes and prevent them receiving the gospel”.⁶ This attitude of the CMS missionaries seems to have not changed until at least the early 1900s. Koji Kawashima, who did research on the Protestant mission and Hindu state in Travancore, also argued that, “the CMS had been more reluctant than the LMS to renounce the caste system in its own churches...”.⁷ Forrester observes that the missionaries were not themselves totally consistent: even while fighting for the rights of the slaves, they were notably reluctant to accept low-caste candidates for baptism - the first Pulaya was baptised by the C.M.S only in 1854 - and for a long time they tolerated separate congregations for Syrians and low-caste converts.⁸

3. Case Study 1: Charles Mead: The Discriminatory Attitude of the Missionaries

Charles Mead, a LMS missionary, worked from 1817 in the southern part of Travancore, South India. In 1848 his wife died and after a couple of years he wanted to marry an Indian lady, a social teacher in his mission. Re-marriage was not forbidden to the missionaries, but this lady happened to be an outcaste/dalit. The rest of the missionaries protested against the marriage. They reported to the mission, “Marriage of Mr. Mead to a young woman, the daughter of a catechist and of the Pariah caste, which in this part of Travancore is the slave caste”. They

⁵ Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin, Vol.II*, p. 111, see also for the same view Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance*, p. 39.

⁶ A.F. Painter, “The Call of the Indian Out Castes”, *CMI*, June 1907, p.347.

⁷ Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State Travancore 1858-1936*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.166.

⁸ Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity, Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, Curzon Press, London, 1980, p.108.

continued, “But a young Pariah woman however connected by marriage or however high her qualifications may be, cannot gain the esteem and command”⁹. The missionaries also added that they would not be able to trust the lower caste people.

Mead in his reply, stated that:

I am surprised that there is so much of caste spirit amongst the missionaries of our own and other societies. We (should) employ natives and East Indians more freely than formerly and if India is to be evangelised we must not depend on men and women from Europe and America alone... My present wife’s family were the first to invite Mr. Ringeltaube from Tranquebar to Travancore. Still the brethren speak of her caste as though I had married a heathen. The higher castes of heathen and Mohammedans especially approve of the step as a proof of what we preach and practice too.¹⁰

However, under the continued pressure of the missionaries in Travancore Charles Mead was given an early and compulsory retirement. One can cite many other examples of negative attitudes to caste to prove that missionaries from abroad, especially during the 19th century, were not free of prejudice.

The English mission societies were very slow, however, to involve themselves with the regulation of the local working of the missions and were apparently perfectly content until the early nineteenth century that their missionaries should continue to decide disciplinary issues affecting the indigenous church on the spot. It is hardly surprising that the societies had no policy on caste: it was only toward the end of the century that any understanding of Indian society and religion became accessible in Europe and the possibility of an organic link between Hinduism and the caste system was recognised¹¹.

⁹ Correspondence regarding Mr. Mead’s marriage to a native woman, (Archives of CWM, London), quoted in J.W. Gladstone, “Christian Missionaries and Caste in Kerala”, pp. 105-106.

¹⁰ Mead in Ibid.

¹¹ See, Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity, Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*, Curzon Press, London, 1980, p.34.

4. Case Study 2: Henry Baker Jr.'s¹² Work among the Malayaraya¹³ Hill Tribe and Dalits

Henry Baker Jr. (1816-1878) a CMS missionary in Central Travancore and a pioneer in starting Christian mission among the Hill tribe namely Malayaraya, appears to have represented the second group, convinced that caste was rooted in Hinduism and an obstacle to the liberation of tribes and dalits and also a scandal to Christian belief and practice. He was one of the pioneers in promoting this view in Travancore. The following discussion will provide evidence for this argument.

It is evident that British Protestant missionaries involved in social protest and agitation for change in India were drawn from a wide variety of different backgrounds.¹⁴ In a few cases, missionaries conspicuous in social reform activities had been employed in skilled working class occupations. Here it can be argued that Baker came from a farming family and this experience deepened his understanding of the needs and aspirations of the underdog and increased his suspicion and dislike of Brahmin and upper class privilege.

Against this background, what was Baker's approach to the caste system and the lower classes of society? The following sections are an attempt to analyse his encounter with the caste issue

¹² Baker was the major instrument used by God for the socio-religious transformation of the Malayarayans. He was born on January 26th 1819 in Tanjore, Tamilnadu, a famous mission centre in India, the elder son of Rev. Henry Baker Sr. and Amelia Dorothea Kohlhoff who were working as CMS missionaries in Tanjore. Later they were transferred to Kottayam. Baker spent his childhood in Kottayam with his parents, then was sent to England for education and there he married and was ordained. He also had his missionary and medical training in England.¹² His parents' unconscious example and the religious training they gave their child would have had a profound effect on him, including the Halle Pietism that his mother perhaps inherited.

In 1848 Baker started the work among the Malayarayans. He continued this till his death in 1878. He faced various struggles and sorrows in starting and continuing this mission. In the midst of difficulties and problems he evangelised the majority of the Malayaraya villages, and thousands of Malayarayans converted to Christianity. He established several churches, mission houses, and schools, and gained properties for the churches in every village. He helped to release them from all kinds of social bondage, exploitation, and caste oppression. He identified with the people as one among them, ate, slept, walked, worked and lived with them. To the Malayarayans he was a father, brother, guide, teacher, doctor, pastor and moreover, a liberator from both spiritual and physical bondage. His love and compassion to the Malayarayans is still praised by new generations. He gave his prime years for these people (age 29-59). He died because of jungle fever, which he caught on the Malayaraya mission, on 14th June 1878 in Madras. He died before retiring from the mission. He laid a substantial foundation for the Malayaraya mission and the present C.S.I East Kerala Diocese.

¹³ The Malayarayans are an aboriginal tribe of people living in the Eastern ghats of Kerala State, Southern India. From the sixteenth century onwards the Malayarayans were known by different names, which had particular meanings. In 1599, they were known as 'Malleans' or 'Mallees', which means 'Arayers of the hill country', i.e. rulers of the hills. In Malayalam, the local language of the people, the word 'Malayaraya' literally means 'Lord of the Hills'. But most of the mission documents use the name 'Hill Arrians' (hill=mala) to refer to this group of people. This hill tribe also affected severely with stinges of caste practice during the 19th century.

¹⁴ G.A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India: British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms, 1850-1900*, Delhi, 1979, pp. 15-17.

in Travancore as well as in the Malayaraya mission and its implications in leading the Malayarayans from ‘no people to God’s people’.

4.1 Caste Practice - A Sin and Social Evil

Baker’s concept of caste practice seems to be based on his concept of the human being. He stressed the dignity and equality of all human beings¹⁵. When he had the first meeting with the Malayarayans themselves he did not claim any superiority over these people, rather he said,

... that, some centuries back, the people of England had the same rites and hero worship as they had; that the druids taught the Britain just such ideas as their *pusaris* (priests) did; but that at last a book was brought them which told of God what He was, how powerful, yet the father of trusting children and He had sent this book.¹⁶

Arby Varghese and others observed, “...Henry Baker Jr. considered every individual as a brother in Christ and worked for their salvation”¹⁷. He acted as mediator between the high castes and the low castes, teaching them that all of them are children of the same father and hence brethren and they are not supposed to fight against or hate each other. Only when we practise love, forgiveness, kindness and treat others as our equals, can we experience the presence of God¹⁸.

Baker said that the practice of untouchability and caste was like leprosy in the heart and must be healed by the gospel of Jesus. It was an unholy practice in one’s life¹⁹. He also considered caste practice a sin and a social evil, not acceptable to Christian faith and practice.²⁰ This seems to have been a new theological concept in Travancore society as well as among the Malayarayans at that time²¹. Baker carried this new theology into the most remote and inaccessible places in the state, especially to the Malayarayans and slave castes.

Thus Baker’s approach to the caste issue seems to have treated it as a serious sin and a social evil which made people less than human or ‘no people’.

¹⁵ See, Henry Baker Jr., *A Commentary...*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Henry Baker Jr. *The Hill Arrians of Travancore ...*, p. 14.

¹⁷ Arby Varghese and etal., *The Contributions of the Baker Family*, p. 65.

¹⁸ See, *Ibid.*, p.59.

¹⁹ Henry Baker Jr., *A commentary...*, p. 18. (Translation by the author from Malayalam).

²⁰ See, Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin, Vol. II*, p. 104

²¹ Remember that the practice of caste was supported by Hindu theology and moral codes.

4.2 Pragmatic Methods Applied to Eradicate Caste Practice

It appears that Baker experimented and implemented different methods by words and deeds to eradicate caste prejudice and practice in the Malayaraya mission as well as in surrounding society.

4.2.1 Disciplinary Actions

In his mission fields Baker used disciplinary actions as a sharp sword to cut down the clutches of caste. As a great step forward, he dismissed the mission agents and teachers (most of them Syrian Christians) and refused Holy Communion to any other Christian whose caste attitude led to discrimination. He wrote:

I have refused the Lord's Supper to persons who would not renounce caste as well as dismissed agents who would not allow Pulayas (i.e. one group of untouchable converts) and others to come near them, or treated other lower caste men as inferiors. I think all our agents should be called upon to make a strong renunciation of castes and even think no one should communicate in our church who would not kneel at the same table with a Pulaya or Paraya.²²

This seems to be a very important step taken by the missionary to impress upon the new converts as well as society at large that the caste system was evil and that Christianity is totally against it.

The missionary's concept of human and his opposition to the caste system influenced the Malayarayans greatly. They were not allowed to practise any caste system within the church. It is observed that all this helped the Malayarayans to discover their own dignity and treat others as equal.

4.2.2 Inter Dining or Love Feast

Inter-dining and common meals were an important method employed by Baker to combat the complicated caste system. Though a resolution of the Madras Missionary Conference of 1848 had laid it down that only those who broke caste by eating food prepared by a pariah (the lowest caste) should be entitled to baptism, in Travancore the missionaries were unable to implement it²³. But Baker consciously arranged common feasts on special occasions when all castes, i.e. Brahmins, Nairs, Chogans, Pariahs, Pulayas, and Malayarayans, participated. He remarked,

²² Quoted in Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin*, Vol. II. p. 104.

²³ See Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, E.T., Edinburgh & London, 1908, p.170.

“At one commemoration meeting on New Year’s Day, we had 280 baptised adults. Converts from nearly every caste in Travancore dined together, as many more unbaptised, and more than ninety-two slaves, all learners”. It appears that he expressed his feelings and views on caste in very clear and practical ways. “It was an imperfect, still a faint, resemblance of that time when we shall sit down to the marriage supper of the Lamb”²⁴. The Malayarayan people still remember these incidents as recorded in their church history books.²⁵

It is important to note that this historic event took place in a period in which strict laws regarding the distance to be kept by the lower classes from the higher classes existed, to prevent pollution by sight and touch. No one could imagine a feast at that time where the lower castes dined with the high castes, or high castes eating food prepared by lower castes. It is also important to note that the practice and concept of inter-dining in the Travancore society of that time was that if two castes freely ate together, they demonstrated that they regarded one another as having equal status; if two castes had a mutual ban on inter-dining, this reflected that each of them questioned the superiority of the other caste; if the dining arrangements were not mutual, the caste which accepted cooked food from another indicated that it also accepted its own status as inferior.²⁶ In this context the love feast had a tremendous impact on society, showing that Christianity is against caste practice and treats all castes as equal²⁷.

Several years after Baker implemented the love feast among the Malayarayans, the other CMS missionaries working in Travancore also experimented with the feast but failed. In Alleppey they tried love feasts, ‘but the converts from the Pulaya or slave caste do not attend the same love-feast as the other converts’! In Mallappally in 1868, it was reported that, ‘The communicants...from the Syrian, Nair and Chogan castes do not eat together with those from the Pulaya and Paraya castes. They live in separate villages and have prayer houses of their

²⁴ Henry Baker Jr., *Hill Arrians of Travancore...*, p.44 also see, Arby Varghese and etal, *The Contributions of Baker Family*, pp. 58-59.

²⁵ See, *Holy Emmanuel C.S.I. Church Koovappally...*, p.97.

²⁶ See, T.S.Epstein, *Economic Development and Social change*, p. 39.

²⁷ Similarly no one could imagine a Pulaya or Pariah talking the language of a Nair or a Brahmin. Nor could anyone think of the high and the low castes reading the same religious book or performing the same rituals before the very same altar. It is important to note that the Bible, songs and liturgy introduced by the missionary in the Christian worship were common to all irrespective of their caste.

own'... Rev. G. Mathan summed up this situation: "The slave converts form a separate body, with whom the rest of the Christians have no social intercourse".²⁸

A shared meal after every baptism provided at the expenses of the people for all who attended church was also very common in the Malayaraya mission.²⁹ Baker argues that this "creates union"³⁰ among them. The people brought the provisions such as fowls, a bunch of plantains, or rice for the feast from homes of all castes, cooked together and ate together.³¹ This seems to have helped the people to uproot the feelings of caste from their mind. Christian fellowship, love and other virtues made them stronger. They became more practical Christians in every sphere of life. It appears that the missionary encouraged the concept of equality of all human beings which widened their world-view and improved social intercourse. At New Year and on other special occasions they started feasting with both Christian and non-Christian people from other castes. After such a New Year feast Baker commented, "It was an imperfect, still a faint resemblance of that time when we shall sit down to the marriage supper of the lamb".³² So to him human equality is not confined to 'the other world' but is also a present reality that must be experienced in this world.

4.2.3 Mission Compounds – An Ideal Community

The mission compound that Baker started at Mundakayam, (a place in Central Travancore) seems to have been an attempt to create a casteless society where everyone could enjoy equal rights and freedom with others in all spheres of their life. In the mission compound he put Tribals, Dalits, Ezhavas, and high castes like Nairs, and Syrian Christians together. He converted the forest into a centre of community life including several castes and tribes.³³ Nellimukal argued that by the establishment of the Malayaraya mission Baker "was able to create a new society in the midst of jungle consisting of several castes"³⁴. It was a shift in thinking and status, as Sahu explains, "Conversion was a kind of group identity crisis in which the group passed through a negative rejection of their lowly place in Hindu society to a positive

²⁸ Inquiries made by the Bishop of Madras Regarding the Removal of Caste Prejudices and Practices in the Native Church of South India; together with the Replies of the Missionaries and Native Clergy sent thereto, Madras, 1868, C12/ 0 31, CMSA. pp. 127-142.

²⁹ Henry Baker Jr., *The Hill Arrians of Travancore ...*, p.48.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p.53.

³² CMS Report, 1855.

³³ See, Arby Varghese and etal., *The Contributions of the Baker Family*, p.7.

³⁴ Dr. Samuel Nellimukal, "Publisher's Note", in *The Contributions of Baker Family ...*p.XIII..

affirmation of the equality of the dignity of man”.³⁵ It appears true of the Malayaraya mission also. They found a positive affirmation of equality and the dignity of human through Baker’s effort. So the work of the CMS among the tribes and outcastes in Travancore society is a glorious chapter in the history of Christianity in Travancore as well as in India.³⁶

It is observed that the greatness of Baker rests on the fact that he led the way in forming a new society including all sects and classes at a time when the caste system prevailed in all its might. He was a “living example of the highest moral ideas and social values to the natives”.³⁷ The establishment of the new Christian villages greatly influenced the Malayarayans’ life. One visitor to the Assappian village exclaimed, “It was like the Garden of the Lord’s own”.³⁸ It appears that these villages helped villagers to grow in Christian virtues.

4.2.4 In Schools and Churches

The great task facing Baker was to teach the people and make them aware of the evils of caste that had for so long occupied their minds. To eradicate ideas of caste, he consciously encouraged children of all castes to sit and study together in the mission schools. In the church also he encouraged the people of all castes to sit and worship together. In one of his churches there were even people from all seven castes.³⁹ But he failed to implement this practice in the Syrian Christians’ church in the plain.

He also baptised many people from different castes all together at one time in the same church, which helped people to realise that in Christ there are no segregations.⁴⁰ His church comprised Brahmins, Malayarayans, Ezhava, Pulaya, and Parayar, people from all castes, untouchables and outcastes⁴¹. The denial of Holy Communion to those who segregated on the basis of caste differences, which we discussed above, can also be seen as a conscious attempt of the missionary to persuade people to fight against caste practice. All these efforts seem to have

³⁵ Dhirendra Kumar Sahu, *The Church of North India, A Historical and Systematic Theological Inquiry into an Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang GmbH, 1994, pp. 61-62.

³⁶ See, M.M. Thomas, & R. Taylor, eds., *Tribal Awakening*, Bangalore, CISRS, 1965.

³⁷ Arby Varghese and etal., *The Contributions of Baker Family* ...p.36.

³⁸ Quoted in Henry Baker Jr., a letter to the Secretary, from Pallam, July 20, 1852, C12/0 30, CMSA.

³⁹ Henry Baker Jr., *Hill Arrians of Travancore* ..., pp. 51, 54 and also see, Arby Varghese and etal., *The Contributions of Baker Family*..., pp. 45ff.

⁴⁰ See *Holy Emmanuel C.S.I Church Koovappally* ..., p.47

⁴¹ See *Melukavu Christ Church* ..., pp. 19-20.

helped people of all age groups, especially younger generations, towards a new social order and a new world-view that respected human dignity irrespective of caste and creed.

4.2.5 High Castes to Uplift the Low Castes

One of the important steps taken by Baker in his encounter with the caste issue was to encourage and employ the Syrian Christians (high caste), Nairs and other high castes to work among Dalits and tribals as teachers, catechists and priests. This was unimaginable in those days when untouchability ruled over all Travancore. This appears to have helped to reduce the caste feelings in both lower and upper castes. But later after the missionary period this led to caste oppression of Dalits and tribal people.

5. Collaborative Endeavour Against the Caste System

It is a well-known fact that the fight against the caste system in India as well as in Travancore was not one missionary's effort but it was considered as a duty by the British colonial government as well as by Protestant missionaries who worked during this period. But Baker's contribution is also evaluated in relation to his joint efforts with other Protestant missionaries in this regard. The CMS missionaries, who were brought to Travancore in 1816, were by the 1850's acquainted with social struggles in Travancore, especially those concerning the rights and sufferings of the Tribals and the Dalits. Baker joined with them and with other Protestant missionaries working in Travancore in this period.

It appears that the liberation activities of missionaries like Baker challenged and disturbed the Hindu patriarchal society. Forrester along with other scholars explains "Christianity destroys the sacredness as well as the rigidity of caste by cutting the link with Brahmanism"⁴². This also helped to inspire the Hindu revival movement in Travancore in particular and in India generally.

In the light of the above discussion it can be argued that, in dealing with the caste issue, Baker can be included among the liberal missionaries like Bernard Lucas (1860-1920), Farquhar (1861-1929), and C.F. Andrews (1871-1940), who considered caste practice an obstacle to the liberation of the deprived classes in Indian society.⁴³ It can also be argued that the influence of radical anti-intellectualist revivalism which pressed for the abolition of slavery and a response to social injustices, and Baker's view of caste as a form of idol worship characteristic of

⁴² Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity...*, p.37.

⁴³ For a detailed analysis on the liberal missionary attitude to caste see Duncan B. Forrester, *Ibid.* pp.136-152.

Hinduism, also helped Baker to fight against caste in Travancore. Thus the individual as well as collaborative efforts of Baker against caste practice also helped the Malayarayangans to enjoy human dignity and liberation from the status of 'no-people to God's people'.

6. Casteism: Eradicated or Persisting in the Church?

One of the important questions needing to be addressed in this paper is how far Baker was able to eradicate the effect of caste practice from the Malayarayangans' life as well as from the Travancore society. There is no doubt that Baker's contribution to liberating Malayarayangans from the forces of caste was remarkable, but after the missionary period they faced caste oppression in the church too⁴⁴. The Syrian Christians became the oppressors by keeping caste prejudice in their mind. The root cause of this can be traced back to Baker's period. As discussed in the previous section, Baker employed Syrian Christians as teachers, mission agents and pastors in many of the Malayaraya churches. Hence one can blame Baker that organised people were reorganised under Syrian Christian leadership.

It is also true that in the course of time, the so-called 'upper caste' Syrian Christian rule was imposed on the Malayarayangans' life and Baker consciously or unconsciously became the channel for it. On the other hand, Baker had no other option than to appoint Syrians as teachers and mission agents to the Malayarayangans. As already noted in the previous sections, he tried his best to appoint efficient and qualified Malayarayangans to these posts, but the high caste Syrian Christian priests' domination over the Malayarayangans' churches continued for more than a hundred years. This issue needs further attention.

Mundadan points out how the high caste became leaders of the Indian church:

With the introduction of Western education and the starting of Christian schools, several educated Indians from the upper classes of Indian society were attracted to Christianity and accepted baptism. This movement of educated persons to Christianity continued through out the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century. It provided an intellectual leadership for the Indian church, but the number of such persons who accepted Christianity was small.⁴⁵

Here Mundadan seems as a representative of high caste Syrian Christians to think that only high caste educated people could provide intellectual leadership in the Indian church and, though they were small in number, become the ruling class in the church. What about the

⁴⁴ For further examination on Indian Christians and caste and the missionaries and caste, see P.J.T. Peiris, *The Echoes of a Faded Memory: A Contribution to a History of the Tamil Coolie Mission*, pp. 50-62.

⁴⁵ A.M. Mundadan CMI, *Indian Christians Search for Identity & Struggle for Autonomy*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 1984, p.162.

Tribal and Dalit Christians in India, were they not intellectuals? This shows how high caste feeling dominates in the Indian church. Deepak Behera also points out, “The upper caste Christians however, have merged their pre-conversion caste identities into a larger group; and are carefully maintaining a social distance from Christian converts of tribal and low caste backgrounds, like the Syrian Christians of Kerala.”⁴⁶

It is observed that this is why in the Malayaraya Mission the ordination of indigenous people was delayed for seventy-one years. Baker never tried to ordain a Malayarayan as priest to them, though they had educated people. He only used them as leaders of the local churches, teachers and mission agents. The first Malayarayan was ordained only in 1919, seventy-one years after the commencement of the mission. It seems that it was because of caste feeling and not because of qualification or ability. There is no evidence that any of the missionaries or leaders of the Anglican Diocese of Travancore made any efforts to train or ordain a Malayarayan before 1919.

Forrester points out, “The diocese (Central Kerala) is an area where the C.M.S. showed itself initially very reluctant to baptise low-caste converts, and then delayed ordaining the first convert for fear of offending the Syrians. For many years all scholarships at the C.M.S. College in Kottayam were reserved for ‘boys of Syrian parentage attached to the Anglican Church’...caste attitudes and operative norms remain exceedingly strong among the Syrians”⁴⁷. This also seems to have motivated the Malayarayans to think of forming their own Diocese in the Church of South India. As already noted this became a second liberation movement on the part of the Malayarayans. From the later half of the 20th century onwards the Malayaraya Christians started to ask for their own separate diocese for effective missionary work, pastoral care, and development. It was a cry for self-governance and liberation from the caste oppression of the Syrian Christians. But the plea was denied until 1983, though they had sufficient resource, leaders and church members to form a diocese. Hence it seems that one of the reasons for the delay in the formation of East Kerala Diocese in the Church of South India was the caste prejudice of the Syrian Christians. So the Malayarayans can describe it as a second liberation movement and they finally achieved victory with the formation of the East Kerala Diocese in 1983.

⁴⁶ Deepak Behera. *Ethnicity and Christianity: Caste and Tribe in Western Orissa*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1989, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity...* pp.112-113; and also see *C.M.S. Report*, 1890, p.18. For a detailed discussion on the relations of Syrian Christians to converts from lower castes see Forrester, *ibid.*, pp.110-113.

Here it is very important to note the remark made by a Hindu fundamentalist, Arun Shourie.

He points out:

Caste and untouchability are the peculiarity of Hinduism, the missionaries insisted. Christianity (and of course Islam on the telling of its advocates) is the religion of equality – it does not recognise castes. In fact, castes survive among Christians and Muslims to this day – as the Supreme Court has narrated in its recent judgement on Reservations. And the church (as well as advocates of Islam), having proclaimed for two centuries that untouchability was a curse peculiar to Hinduism, has been in the forefront in demanding that benefits given to scheduled castes and scheduled Tribes must be made available to Christian scheduled Castes and Christian scheduled tribes also! Not one missionary organisation has protested that by extending caste-based Reservations to Christians (and Muslims) the Supreme Court has put the axe to a basic tenet of Christianity (and Islam)!⁴⁸

7. Conclusion

It is a fact that caste feelings still prevail among Christians in India in one way or another. This shows that the church in India is moulded according to Indian culture rather than Western and hence caste will affect the life of the church until Indian society is totally free from it. It is also a fact that the caste system which has existed in Indian society for thousands of years, cannot be easily uprooted within two or three centuries. But at the same time, due to the Christian missionaries' work in India, the cruel practice of caste has been reduced. The protestant missionaries and the Colonial authority's contribution in this regard needs to be applauded.

⁴⁸ Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India, Continuities, Changes, Dilemas*. India: Haroer

Collin Publishers, 1997, pp.51-52.