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Colonialism, Christianity and Mission Activities In India: A Postcolonial Perspectives

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Abstract

The Genesis of European Empires in India started at the end of the 15th Century, when Vasco Da Gama discovered a sea route to India and landed at the Port of Calicut in 1498 and following his arrival, many European powers like Portugal, France, Holland Denmark, and Britain also extended their imperialism in India. On the other hand, Christianity in India was introduced in India during the 1st Century CE but it was well established by the end of the 19th Century. European Colonizers and Christian missionaries introduced several changes in the Indian society with both positive as well as negative influence, i.e. new growth and development in social, religious and other aspects, at the same time there were some misconceptions in their mission.

It is obvious that Christian mission activities and colonialism go hand in hand with each other in spite of certain misunderstandings between them. Colonialism as an instrument paves the way for Christian mission activities and at the same time helping them to establish power. It is hard to affirm whether the association of colonialism in the mission work was a blessing or curse. Because, on the one hand, Colonialism improved the Christian mission activities and granted resources and moral support; on the other hand, because of its collaboration with Colonial authority, Christian missions received many allegations and instilled negative attitudes towards Christian mission by many indigenous people.

Keywords: Colonialism, Christianity, Mission Activities, Relationship, Missionaries

1.1 Introduction: This article will highlight the relationship and impact that Colonialism, Christianity and Christian mission activities had on India's development as a nation and on how these agents of social change both benefitted and hindered the growth of India economically, socially, and culturally, in particular the north east India. To achieve this endeavor, it will be looking at the establishment of European colonization and Christianity involvement in India. The intention of this article is to study the long lasting effects of European colonization on the Indian nation and will look at both sides of the argument, allowing for positive and negative effects before concluding with a summary. The article

will avoid taking sides, but rather the aim is to present an account of the positive and negative effects of European imperialism in India. The article will focus in general on the European Colonialism, Christianity and Christian mission activities in India.

1.2 Christianity and European Colonialism in India: The genesis of Christianity in India had been argued, since the religion was introduced to the nation in the 1st Century CE. Depending on the available sources relating to the genesis of Christianity in India, western source namely the *Acts of Thomas* (AD c.180 – 230) which was written in the Syriac language, stated that St Thomas went to the Kingdom of Gudnaphar in North India. Archaeology finding found that the coin that bore the name of the King belong to the 1st Century. On the other hand, an indigenous source namely the *Malabar Oral Tradition* stated that St Thomas came to India by passing through Socutra and landed in Cranganore in 52 AD. From here he went to preach among the Jews colonies in Chennai, converted the Brahmin, established 7 churches and appointed a priest. As a result, Christians in south India accredited their salvation to St. Thomas and this view was vocal and soon captivated by the other local churches.

The growth and development of European Empires in India started at the end of the 15th Century, when Vasco Da Gama, a Portuguese navigator discovered a sea route to India and landed at the Port of Calicut (now in Kerela), on the South-West coast of India, in 1498 has been an important feature of world history. Thus marked the colonial era in India that began in 1502, when the Portuguese Empire established the first European trading centre at Kollam, Kerala. In 1505 King Manuel I of Portugal appointed Dom Francisco de Almeida as the first Portuguese viceroy in India, followed in 1509 by Dom Afonso de Albuquerque. Since then, many European powers like Portugal, France, Holland Denmark, and Britain extended their imperialism and entered in the tussle of colonialism in consequence to their trade.

When expressed the onset of European Colonialism in India, it is strongly linked with the global extension of Christianity and its mission activities from the Western world. Since the dawn of the modern age, Colonialism and Christianity were tag together and became inter-reliant with each other as it these two terms are interrelated and signify the same meaning. Therefore, it so happened that the development of Christianity coincided, if not associated with the European colonialism leading to the argument and disagreement among historians and other social scientist as to the relation between Colonialism and Christianity.

Historians have voiced out suspicion and doubt that these two agents have been strongly linked and are of the view that Christianity, since the 16th Century has been an arm of Western imperialism. K. M. Panicker, in his book '*Asia and Western Dominance,*' describes as the 'Vasco da Gama period stated that "The captain general's ship flew on its mast a flag on which was painted a large cross of Christ and also carried cannon, symbols of the new power entering the East" (*Panicker: 1959*). He further commented on the causes of the failure of Christianity and its mission's activities in Asia, feeling that, "*the missionary*

brought with them an attitude of moral superiority and a belief in their own exclusive righteousness. The association of Christian missionary work with aggressive imperialism introduced political complications. That diplomatic pressure, extra-territoriality and sometimes support of gun-boats had been resorted to in the interests of foreign missionaries could not be easily forgotten.” Hans-Ruedi Weber, in his book ‘Asia and the Ecumenical Movement 1895-1961’ commented about the linked between colonialism and Christianity that “no Christian can be proud of this combination of the cross and cannon, but it’s a fact that the spiritual and earthly powers symbolised by the two have together fundamentally changed the course of Asian history”. (Weber: 1966) In the word of Brahmabandav Upadhayaya in 1899 as quoted by Dharmaraj stated that, “First comes the Missionary, and then comes the Resident, lastly comes the Regiment” (Dharmaraj: 1993) describing Christianity and its missionary activities as the agents of imperialism. But it is widely agreed that these are exaggerated statements where careful appraisal is to be done.

To endow with a precise account of the connection between Colonialism, Christianity and Mission activities in India, we require to solicit certain questions on the issues like:-

1. Did Colonialism create and support Christianity and its mission’s activities?
2. Did Christianity support Colonialism?
3. Did Christianity and its mission prepare the way for Colonialism?
4. Did Christianity identify with the cause of Colonialism?
5. Did they fight or criticize each other?

It is to these areas that this research article is aimed at for further investigation.

1.3 European Colonialism, Christianity and Mission’s Activities in India:

1.3.1. Portuguese Colonialism and Mission: Portugal, one of the pioneers in geographical discoveries was granted Padroado rights (*Spiritual Patronage*) by the Pope to evangelize, established missions, appointing clergy and to set up Christian congregation. The rights guaranteed them for exclusive dominant over the eastern territories. Jeyakumar in his book ‘*History of Christianity in India: Selected Theme*’ stated that ‘armed with the Padroado rights, the Portuguese colonial effort championed the cause of the Church zealously than the others who followed them. The Portuguese made Goa, in the western coast of India the center of their Eastern Empire.’ (Jeyakumar: 2002)

By conquering and converting India into hapless colonies, the European powers exploited trade and commerce at their own will. Another aspect of the Portuguese power in India was their will to evangelize and promote Catholicism that led to the imposition of Christianity. In this, the Jesuits missionary *Saint Francis Xavier* played an essential role, and to this day he is respected among the Catholics of India.

Christian mission was limited and restrained to areas within the reach of the Portuguese gunboats. Their imperialistic approach is apparent in the way they Christianized Goa. For instance, in the Pearl Fishery Coast, a mass conversion took place in 16th Century was under the protection provided by the Portuguese military. The spreading out of Christianity in

India became a part of colonial empire. Church Priest and Friars accompanied every political, military trade established by the colonial power in India.

Therefore, Portuguese colonialism had a closer link with Christianity and its mission activities in India. Churches were built; missionaries were paid from the royal treasury. Thus crown and the cross remained inseparable part in the history of Portuguese colonialism.

1.3.2. Dutch Colonialisms and Mission: The Dutch East India Company powers had relatively small colonial area and established trading posts on different parts along the Indian coast. They controlled part of the Malabar southwest Coast, Cochin, Cannanore, Kundapura, Kayamkulam, the Coromandel southeastern coast and Surat. They had no interest on spreading the Christian faith in India and they could not make any labors for the growth and developments of the church. They considered evangelization and Christian mission politically and economically unprofitable as their main concern was on trade and commerce. Thus their impact on India was very little.

1.3.3. Danish Colonialism and Mission: The Danish colonial power (Denmark and Norway) was able to acquire two settlements in India i.e. Tranquebar in the Southern part and Serampore in the North Eastern part in their course of trade. Unlike the Portuguese, the Danish Christian mission did not link with the colonial power in India though the King of Denmark Frederick IV of Denmark patronized the mission work and to spread Christianity among his non-European subjects. However, lack of interest from his Royal Court to spread Christian faith in India, non-Denmark missionaries, namely *Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg* and *Heinrich Plütschau* from Halle, Germany responded to the appeal to establish the mission activities for the natives living in the Danish East India Company colony of Tranquebar in 1706.

In Serampore, the Danish East India Company extended their helping hand to the Serampore Trio (*William Carey, William Ward and Joshua Marshman*) at their difficult times, when the British East India Company asked them to banish the Serampore Trio, they did not compel. The connection between the Danish Colonial Power and Christian mission was very meager and insufficient. In fact the early Protestant missionaries were put into lots of difficulties and obstacles. Thus the Danish Colonial connection with Christian mission differed from person to person. For instance, the Danish missionary, Christian Friedrich Schwartz had closer connection with British in India than Danish. (*Firth: 2005*)

1.3.4. British Colonialism and Mission: The British East India Company joined the fray in establishing their political power in India during the 17th Century and eventually emerged as the most powerful colonial power in India by the middle of 18th Century. By the beginning of the 19th Century, the British domination extended over a large part of the Indian sub-continent. The British East India Company primary concern was trade and commerce rather than religious activities. C B Firth commented that '*the company initially did not combine*

commerce and Christianity, as its religious interest was secondary but it was not reluctant in proselytizing activities.' (Firth: 2005)

Naik and Syed stated in their book "A Student's History of Education in India" that in 1659 the Board of Directors of the British East India Company resolved that 'it was their earnest desire by all possible means to spread Christianity among the people of India an allowed missionaries to embark on their ships.' (Naik & Syed: 1974) In 1698, the British Parliament inserted the famous Missionary clause in the company's charter. "This clause directed the company to maintain ministers of religion at their factories in India." (Sharp: 1920) The company had learnt to use Christian mission activities to its advantage whenever necessary. But the scenario changed when the company emerged as a political and economic power in India by the end of the 18th Century that lead them to give less importance to the spread of Christianity and declared religious neutrality as their policy.

In 1823, Christian missionaries were given freedom for to work without license by the British parliament in India, yet the officials were indifferent and unreceptive to mission activities. This situation leads to ambivalent attitude in their treatment of Indian Christians, where Indian were excluded from military services, debarred from appointment in Government offices and lost the right to inherit their parent's property on account of their conversion to Christianity. In spite of this harsh prospect of the British East India Company, yet some British officials were extremely helpful to promote missions work, namely *Lord Wellesley* became the patron of the translation project of the William Carey in Bengal, *Lord William Bentinck* stood firmly for the rights of Indian Christians, *Lord Dalhousie* worked for the betterment of the people, *Colonel Munro* and *Colonel Macaulay* helped the Syrian Christians and were involved in bringing the Church Missionary Society mission of help to the Syrian Christians.

Many Christian missionaries enjoyed the protection and support from the British Government. Duncan B Forrester in his book '*Truthful Action: Exploration in Practical Theology*' stated that 'the missionaries generally understood British's Rule as a providential ordering, a sign of God's care for India rather than simply an opportunity for the making of individual converts.' (Forrester: 2000) Thus Christian missionaries provided a religious justification to European Colonialism in India and on the other hand, imperialism influenced their very act of evangelism and the theology of mission. This is represented in terms like campaign, stations, field, enforcement, etc on which are pure imperialistic terms borrowed from imperialism.

The nature of the British East India Colonial power was different from that of the Portuguese and other European Colonialists counterpart. Yet they did support the spread of Christianity in their Empire with much vigilance and judgment.

1.4 European Colonialism, Christianity and Mission's Activities in North East India

The North Eastern Part of India came into contact with the European Colonialism and Christianity in the 19th Century. It is not adequate to give a detailed study on how these

agencies came into control in the region and also the interaction between them, whether directly or indirectly.

The history on the extension of European Colonialism in the Hills Tribes of Northeast India began with the annexation of the Garo foothills along Mymensing and Goalpara in 1822. (*Fieldhouse: 1976*) After which followed the annexation of Assam in 1826 (defeat of Burma & Signing the Treaty of Yandaboo); annexation of the Khasis after the defeat in the Khasi-Anglo War of 1829-1833); Cachar in 1832 and Jaintia Hills in 1835. Quite a few developments occur during the last quarter of the 19th Century where Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and the twenty-five Khasi States were brought under the British Colonial power through treaties and conquests. (*Gait: 1963; Barpujari: 1980; Barpujari: 1993*)

Christianity entered the North Eastern Region of India before British Colonization of India. The history of Christianity in North East India goes back to two Jesuit priests Stephan Cacella and John Cabral when they first crossed the Brahmaputra valley in 1626 with an intention to go on to Tibet and China. (*Maclargan: 1932*) F S Downs, in his essay “*Rangamati: A Christian Community in North-East India during the 17th and 18th Centuries*” remarks that there are pastoral visits by the Augustinian and the Holy Cross priests to several Indo-Portuguese settlements at Rangamati located on the frontier of Bengal with Assam, Bondashill in Cachar and Mariamnagar in Tripura. For example, Bishop Laynes of Mylapore accompanied by Fr. Barbier called on the Rangamati settlers on the easternmost frontier of the Mughal Empire in 1714. These visits however were infrequent and did not establish the Catholic influence in the region apart from their pastoral functions. Hence, it can be said that, the Catholics were the first among the Christian missions to have entered the region and they were operating in the region prior to the East India Company foundations of formal empire.

The first significant contact with North East India was made by the Serampore mission of the British Baptist Missionary Society in the early part of the 19th Century. Remarkably enough, the initiative for starting missionary enterprise came from the government officials. It may be said that the flag representing the colonial administration and the Bible representing Christian missions went almost together into the North East. This happened after the Charter Act of 1813 permitted missionaries to propagate their faith in British India. The officials, therefore, expected that what could not be achieved by military power could be gain by the power of the gospel. The officials in Assam also felt that Assam and its hills inhabited by various tribes who were not in the least influenced by Hinduism or Mohammedanism offered the most promising field for the spread of Christianity. (*Dena, 1988*)

There was a widespread support for missionary activities among government officials, particularly during the first 35 years of British rule there. It is equally clear that the missionaries of whatsoever denomination acknowledged that support appreciatively. It is interesting to note that most of the missionaries dealing with the people in North East India

were Americans and Welshmen among the Protestants, and Germans, Spainards and Italians among the Catholics. (*Down, 1992*)

The missionaries on the other hand, did not consider themselves to be the agents of the colonial power; their primary purpose was the propagation of the gospel. Thus it can be assumed that Christian missions and the government were in North East India for their own objectives, each found the other useful and functional. Government found the missions useful, in appeasing the hills tribes and providing education at a minimal cost to the people; the missions found the government useful in endorsing, in many cases, their educational work and in providing security for both themselves and their converts. Therefore the relationship between the missions and the government can best described as cooperation in certain limited areas of mutual coincidence of interests.

In other areas there was often conflict between the two. For instance; the missionaries disagree with the government to the displacement of Assamese with Bengali in the courts and schools of Assam, opposition to the state opium monopoly and its implied encouragement of the use of that drug, opposition to the slavery in Mizoram which led to the expulsion of a welsh missionary. (*Down, 1992*)

1.5 The Era of David Scott and Francis Jenkins: During this phase, the British Colonial administrators showed keen interest in evangelizing in the region that they encouraged and supported Christian's missionaries' activities. The relationship between Christian mission and colonialism can be seen in the like of *David Scott* and *Francis Jenkins*, the two commissioners who dominated British administration in Assam between 1826 and 1861. Both of them were an evangelical Christians who encourage and supported missionary activities. They saw Christian missionaries converting the indigenouse people into Christianity as well as helping them in educational work and this were serving British interests of imparting minimal education in the hills area; they were mainly interested in the educational aspect of such work in the plains too. Scott, was a student of William Carey whose evangelicalism had been nurtured by him, provides an interesting example of how far a highly placed officer of that time might go in the encouragement of missionary work despite the official disapproval of the British East India Company which was the agency of British governance. (*Dena, 1988*) In spite of the opposition Scott contributed much in Christian missions activities in North East India.

1.6 The Pros and Cons of Western Missionary Activities in the Colonial Era: Evaluating the Christian mission activities in India through the years, their works were enormous and colossal and that cannot be mentioned all. For example the success of Tranquebar missions and the service rendered by Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, Henry Plutschau and Christian Frederick Swartz. Some of their great works in Tranquebar were that they established opened schools to enable the people to read and write. They set up Printing Press in 1712, published books and Tamil-German Dictionary.

William Carey along with Joshua Marshman and William Ward commonly known as *The Serampore Trio* settled at Serampore which had become a very successful mission venture. They founded Serampore College with Arts, Science, and Theology Department in 1818 which was incorporated in the Danish Royal Charter in 1827 and Bengal Government Act in 1918. He founded the *Bengal Asiatic Society* for Cross-Cultural understanding; translated the Ramayan from Sanskrit to English and published it in three volumes; he also formed the *Agri-Horticulture Society* and his fight towards *human right* can be seen in protesting against Sati. On the other hand, the work of Alexander Duff, who introduced Western Education and Science in English in Calcutta was praiseworthy and his example was followed in founding similar schools in other cities like Bombay, Madras, Nagpur and Agra. The Hindu converts had to face great hostility and opposition from their families as well as from their community. (David, 1988)

On the other hand, Christian mission activities have its shortcomings. The Christian missionaries identified with the superior political powers and culture; the Gospels they presented and the religion they introduced was a '*new religion*' to the Indians. As such, instead of transforming the existing social system, their converts rather joined the new society. Asia has the worst record of success in mission and India has an all time lowest percentages of Christians. Lalsangkima Pachuau writes, 'The driving force at the heart of the movement was the spirit of crusade backed by colonial expansionism. Various strategist were devised to achieve the goal of conversion and the expansion of Christendom. (Pachuau, 2002) Wesley Ariarajah writes, Christians mission is a mission that threatens, that breaks up community that does not connect other religions (*Ibid*). The Christian's message presented was not contextualized and the Christian's Churches so planted were not indigenized. (Jeyakumar, 2002)

1.6.1. Christian Mission Activities were seen as a Threat to the Society: While Christian mission activities bring health, education, relief and justice into the lives of the people, it has on the whole been well received. But one of the most troubling features on this respect of Christian mission is the sense of threat that is experienced by those to whom the message is brought. People of other faiths do not understand Christian mission as an activity that focus on healing and fullness of life, but as one that initiates a rival society, which was claimed to be superior and which was not accessible elsewhere. Thus people of other faiths identify the motive of Christian mission, as Stanley Samartha put it, *as the extension of the Church and the extinction of other faiths.* (*Ibid*)

1.6.2. Christian Mission Activities breaks up Community: In evaluating the Christian mission activities rendered by the Roman Catholic Church as well as Protestant Church in India, one may conclude that the aim and objectives of their mission activities was the creation of a religion within the community which is possible only by breaking the existing community. Hence Christian mission activities have been understood and look out as that which disrupts communities.

1.6.3. Christian Message is Preached with a Crusading Mind: Kosuke Koyama writes that western missionaries preached the Christian message with a crusading mind. Intentionally and unintentionally, the missionaries imposed their western culture and tradition upon the people to whom they preached the message. They tried to convert the 'heathens' and once they converted them they had to abandon their culture and religions and embrace Christians culture which looked foreign to the people of India. Christian missionaries unable to distinguish Hinduism – on what is *culture* and what is *religion*, taught Christians convert to reject every Hindu custom indiscriminately. According to Bishop Leslie Newbigin, converts were called upon to separate themselves radically from the society. (*Newbigin, 1974*) The Church buildings were constructed in the western style and western music and instruments were imported as missionaries wished their converts to become as much Englishmen as possible. (*Muller, 1998*)

Christian Churches in India as well as in North East India still followed the identity of the Western-colonial pattern of evangelism. Many concluded that Christianity was foreign or more specifically a western religion. Time and again, Christian Missionaries were often accused of bribing people of other faiths to change their religion, an allegation difficult to prove. As K. Rajendran wrote, missionaries in their limitations were exaggerated to an extent that placed them on a level with the majority of the selfish colonialists. (*Rajendran, 1998*)

1.7 Conclusion: Christian missionaries and the colonizers brought many changes in the Indian society with both positive as well as negative influence. Christian mission societies were well established in India by the end of the 19th Century where it gain more converts through mass movements among those classes that suffered most from the existing social and economic order. The European introduce many changes and new things in India with the progress and improvement in social, religious and other aspects, such as trade and commerce, printing press, educational institution and communication, at the same time there were some misconception in their mission.

From the above thoughts, it is evident that Christian mission activities and colonialism go hand in hand with each other in spite of certain misunderstandings between them. Colonialism as a mechanism paves the way for Christian mission activities and at the same time helping them to establish power. It is hard to affirm with confidence whether the association of colonialism in the mission work was a blessing or curse. Because, on the one hand, Colonialism improved the Christian mission activities and granted resources and moral support; on the other hand, because of its collaboration with the Colonial authority, Christian missions received many allegations and instilled negative attitude towards Christian mission by many indigenous people. With these allegations many continue to emphasize that European missionaries were merely the dummies of colonialists but Carey's life account surely demonstrates that this was by no means the whole truth. There are many real Christian missionaries who were taking the most of the opportunity to take the

Christian's message to the world, teaching ethical values, promoting Christ's Kingdom and not endorsing the British Colonial Empires.

However, we cannot alter what had occurred in the past; but what we can reflect on is to learn from the previous errors for our future endeavors.

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