

Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Early British Period—III.

The American Missionaries, 1816-1826

THE first American missionary to come to Ceylon appears to have arrived accidentally like the first Portuguese priest who came with Lorenzo de Almeida more than three centuries before him. It happened in 1814 when the Revd. Samuel Newell chanced to land in the port of Galle in the course of his missionary ventures in the East. Mr. Newell was one of a band of missionaries sent out to the East by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a voluntary congregational agency for Christian missionary work with its headquarters situated in Boston, Massachusetts. The Board had sent the missionaries to work in Bengal but the government had forbidden them to remain in the country. Newell who went to Mauritius returned some time later and it was during the course of this voyage that he touched at Galle. Although Sir Robert Brownrigg who was Governor of Ceylon at the time gave Newell the assurance of help and protection, the attitude of the Government in India having changed for the better Newell left Ceylon in the same year for that country as it was the place to which he had originally come. But during his stay in Ceylon he saw enough of the many opportunities for missionary work in the island and made representations to the Board of Missions on the advisability of sending a mission to Ceylon. The first missionaries to be sent by the Board in response to this request were the Revd. and Mrs. James Richards, the Revd. and Mrs. Benjamin Meigs, the Revd. and Mrs. Daniel Poor and the Revd. Edward Warren. They left Massachusetts on October 13th, 1815 and arrived in Colombo on March 22nd, 1816. In Colombo they had a friendly reception from the Governor, other government officials and the missionaries of those denominations already in the island, and they spent their time preaching and teaching in English and studying the Tamil language for after a few months they were to leave for the Jaffna district which, on the recommendation of the Governor, and other officials like Sir Alexander Johnstone, they had decided on as their chief sphere of work.¹

The missionaries established themselves in two 'stations': Mr. and Mrs. Poor and Edward Warren made Tellipallai their headquarters and Mr. and Mrs. Richards and Mr. and Mrs. Meigs went to Vaddukodai. The majority of the

1. Winslow M.: A Memoir of Mrs. Harriet W. Winslow, combining a sketch of the Ceylon Mission (J. P. Shaw, London, 1838), pp. 95-6. Tennent, Sir. J. E.: *Christianity in Ceylon* (London, John Murray, 1850), p. 112.

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people in the District were, of course, Hindus. But there were also Christians: many Roman Catholics and members of the Reformed Church, among whom were both Europeans and Tamils, and of Christian Evangelists in the District there were two Wesleyan missionaries and Christian David, a Government lay-worker from India, who was ordained later and worked as a very successful Christian missionary. As to the other Evangelists, to the Americans too, the Government granted the use of some of the old Dutch Churches with land for houses and assistance for their maintenance.² 'In all the parishes under the care of the American missionaries, there are ancient churches with glebes', stated one of their reports. 'In 7 out of 8, the Churches are in so good a state of preservation as to be easily rendered fit for public worship, but will rapidly decay if not occupied'.^{2b} Very soon the Evangelistic zeal of the missionaries was such that they began to visit the surrounding villages too and where in these villages they found no houses to live in they got their own built consisting of 'bungalows of mud walls covered with leaves'.

Like the missionaries of the other denominations the Americans too decided on the establishment of elementary schools as one of their main concerns. Two years after the arrival of these missionaries in the Jaffna district they had twelve vernacular boys schools with 470 pupils.³

In 1819 the mission was strengthened by a second complement of missionaries sent by the Board: Dr. John Scudder, a medical man, the Revd. Miron Winslow, Levi Spaulding and Henry Woodward. Winslow and Spaulding made Uduvil their headquarters, Dr. Scudder and Woodward helped Poor at Tellipallai.

It was by Dr. Scudder that the first known Christian medical mission in Ceylon was begun when, in extending the work of the Tellipallai station, he advanced the necessary money from his private funds and opened a medical mission station at Pandeterippu. The medical work of the American mission grew rapidly and became a great source of blessing to the people in the Jaffna district and to many beyonds its confines in later years.⁴

The increase in the number of American missionaries resulted in the expansion of the work of the mission and soon the missionaries undertook advanced educational work. In the early years the missionaries were helped by Ceylonese teachers who had themselves been taught by the proponents and among the best known of these teachers were Franciscus Malleappah (Tellipallai), Nicholas Paramandar (Tellipallai) and Philip Matthew (Vaddukoddi).

2. *Missionary Register*: 1819, p. 39; p. 299; *M.R.* 1820, p. 59; 1821; p. 522; 1822, p. 522; Harvard, W. M.: *A Narrative . . .* (London 1823) pp. 284-5; Winslow, pp. 96 ff; 136.

2b. *M.R.* 1820, p. 59.

3. *M.R.* 1820, p. 59.

4. *M.R.* 1820, p. 58 f; *M.R.* 1821, p. 523; *M.R.* 1823, p. 61; Winslow, p. 122.

The work of these lay assistants was of great value and the missionaries were anxious to increase their number.⁵ To this end they established a Central School Academy, or Seminary for the higher education of boys at Batticotta (later Vaddukoddai) "wherein the most promising youths of the different schools may be trained by scientific as well as by religious instruction for the various departments of service".⁶ This school was to train workers for public service and the mission field and was considered to be the nucleus of a higher College. At a time when in the heat of controversy over educational matters we sometimes tend to forget the contribution of Christian missionaries to education in Ceylon it is interesting to read the prospectus of the original Jaffna College and to see what a grand vision they had of the country's needs in those early days:

"The American missionaries in Jaffna, Ceylon, have, in common with most missionaries in this part of the world, directed much attention to the establishment of Native Free Schools. . . . Such (of the pupils) as have been longest under instruction are now so far advanced as to be able, with proper helps, to prosecute the higher branches of Tamul learning, to enter upon the Sanskrit, or to apply themselves to European literature and science, as might be found expedient, to fit them for services under Government, for teachers of schools, for Interpreters, for Translators; or if pious, (as some are hopefully so already) for Native Preachers . . . It is therefore, because necessity is laid upon them, that the American missionaries in Jaffna propose, by the help of their friends and the friends of humanity and missions in India, Great Britain and America, to found a College for Tamul and other youth . . .

- I. A leading object will be to give native youth of good promise a thorough knowledge of the English language . . .
- II. Another object will be the cultivation of Tamul literature and . . . composition . . .
- III. . . . Sanskrit or Sunskritu . . .
- IV. . . . to give a select number a knowledge of Hebrew . . . Latin and Greek . . .
- V. . . . the sciences usually studied in the Colleges of Europe and America . . . The course at present contemplated will embrace . . . Geography, Chronology, History (civil and ecclesiastical) Elements of Geometry, Mathematics, Trigonometry, Natural Philosophy of the Mind, and Natural and Revealed Religion. In teaching these it is designed to provide as fast as possible elementary works in Tamul for the assistance of the student. The public lectures will be delivered

5. *M.R.* 1820, p. 360, 523; Winslow, p. 107 ff.

6. *M.R.* 1824, p. 71.

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principally in English with suitable explanations in the Native language . . .”

The Prospectus is dated Jaffna, Ceylon, March 4, 1823 and signed by B. C. Meigs, D. Poor, M. Winslow, L. Spaulding, H. Woodward and J. Scudder. The School was started in July, 1823, and its first pupils were advanced students selected from the schools and its first Principal, the Revd. Daniel Poor and the English and Tamul Tutor, Mr. Gabriel Tissera.⁷

Another sphere in which the American missionaries did beneficial pioneering in these early years was in the education of girls in the Jaffna district. “We regret exceedingly” say the missionaries in a letter written in 1820, “that we cannot educate female children as well as male. If we enquire of the natives why they do not teach their girls to read, their only reply is ‘we have no such custom in our country’”. But chiefly through the perseverance of the wives of the missionaries this prejudice was gradually overcome. At first they appear to have visited and made friends with the women in the area in which they worked and they then began the girls boarding schools. By 1822, Woodward was able to write that although “when our mission was established a female who could read was not to be found in the whole population of the district . . . now there are 20 female children connected with our mission”. It was a small beginning but, judging from the progress the mission made in this sphere, it was well worth while. The attitude of the villagers to the education of girls changed before long from: “There is no custom for girls to learn” to “That is now the custom of the country.” And the demand was such that a higher school for girls was established at Uduvil as early as 1825.⁸

It was not only for girls that the mission had boarding schools. In fact the first boarding schools were begun for boys: for the mission felt that such schools alone could provide the children with the necessary atmosphere for the building up of character guided by the Christian influence of the missionaries. The first boarding school was opened at Tellipallai. By 1826, there were boarding schools with 144 boys and 30 girls at five stations run by the mission. In these schools each child was fed, clothed and otherwise maintained by the mission, the funds required being subscribed by benefactors from America, each of whom undertook the support of a child. Great care was taken in the management of these schools and a considerable amount of tact was called for as the missionaries had to face the difficulties of caste divisions and the suspicion of their motives by some of the villagers. But the success and popularity of the boarding school system run by the mission were ample repayment for the difficulties the missionaries had.⁹ In 1821

7. *M.R.* 1824, p. 71; Winslow, pp. 168-9; J. V. Chelliah: *A Century of English Education*, Tellipallai: American Ceylon Mission, 1922, p. 5 ff.

8. *M.R.* 1820, p. 361; 1822, p. 524; Winslow, p. 110; 142; *M.R.* 1824, p. 70.

9. *M.R.* 1826, p. 146; Winslow, p. 107; Tennent, p. 179.

they reported: "Our boarding schools are giving shape to all the other schools connected with our station: the progress which our boys have made has become a powerful stimulus to many who attend our schools. Several boys of the first families around us, whose parents would not permit them to eat on land occupied by Christians, spend more of their time, day and night, on our premises, that they may enjoy equal advantages and make equal progress with our boarders."¹⁰

The climatic conditions of the Jaffna district often disagreed with some of the missionaries and death removed, Edward Warren, James Richards and Mrs. Poor from the mission.¹¹ And among other difficulties the missionaries had was the prejudice shown against them in the days of Governor Sir Edward Barnes who succeeded Brownrigg in 1820. James Garrett, a missionary sent by the Board to start a printing establishment for the mission was not permitted to make use of the press and he himself had to leave the island. Tennent points out that the machinery was handed over to the missionaries of the Church of England. Barnes also obtained an injunction from the Colonial Office against any future addition to the mission: a measure rescinded after eleven years by Sir Wilmot Horton.¹²

Despite their difficulties, however, the Evangelistic work too expanded. The missionaries organised Sunday schools, did extensive preaching tours in the villages and distributed tracts provided by the American Bible Society. The mission 'stations' occupied by 1825 were Tellipallai (1816) with H. Woodward, and Nicholas Paramander; Batticotta (1817) with B. C. Meigs, Daniel Poor, Gabriel Tissera and Ebenezer Porter; Uduvil (1820) with Miron Winslow and Francis Malleappah; Pandeterippu (1820) with Dr. John Scudder and George Koch and Manipay (1821) with Levi Spaulding. In the Boarding Schools there were 152 children. In Tellipallai 30 boys and 8 girls; Batticotta 24 boys and 2 girls; Pandeterippu 25 boys and 8 girls; Uduvil 28 boys and 7 girls and Manipay 76 boys and 4 girls. There were also 32 free day schools in 1825 and 45 boys in the Batticotta Seminary and 30 girls in the Uduvil Girls' College. Later in the same year the missionaries reported that the number had slightly increased (32) and that the subjects taught were Reading and Writing in Tamil, Religion, Arithmetic, Geography and Sewing.¹³ Among the earliest admissions to the Church as converts were Nathaniel Niles and Jordon Lodge, pupils of the Tellipallai boarding school. By 1825 the mission appears to have had about 165 Ceylonese members of whom the majority were

10. *M.R.* 1821, p. 523.

11. *M.R.* 1820, pp. 58, 273-5; *M.R.* 1823, p. 158; *M.R.* 1823, pp. 457-460, Winslow, p. 112 f.

12. Tennent, pp. 112-3; Winslow, p. 135; T. Robinson: *The Last Days of Bishop Heber* (London, 1830), p. 6-7.

13. *M.R.* 1825, p. 91 f, 371.

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adults.¹⁴ The American mission throughout its history restricted its Evangelistic and educational work to the Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon and worked in the Jaffna district. But even in these early years, both through the variety of its missionary work and through the enterprise with which it overcame the problems that assailed this work, the mission gave promise of the very fruitful contribution it was to make in the course of its history to the religious, cultural and social life of the Tamils in Ceylon.

C. N. V. FERNANDO

14. Winslow, pp. 136-7 ; 206.