



The activities of Welsh Presbyterian Mission in Barak Valley

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Abstract

The main subject of this work is the study of the activities of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries of Barak Valley. It is the southern part of Assam comprising of three districts viz Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi together known as Barak Valley. Different Christian Missionaries namely Baptist, Catholic, Welsh Presbyterian, Salvation Army, Anglican Church and Seven day Adventist etc came and established. Their mission stations before and after the independence of India. But among them the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries were the first and pioneer Christian Missionaries of Barak Valley. In 1851 William Pryse the first Welsh Missionary came to Cachar plains. However, he could not establish any mission station in Barak area. In 1893, the three Welsh Missionaries namely Dr Thomas Jones, Miss Elizabeth William and Miss Laura Evens supported each others and established their mission station at silchar which was the chief town of Cachar district. During fifty five years of their service from 1893 to 1958, twenty Welsh Missionaries came to Silchar and twenty two missionaries came to Karimganj they established Presbyterian system of church government, Christian missionary schools and also the dispensaries to serve the tribal as well as the poor people of the valley.

Keywords: Welsh presbyterian missionaries, barak valley, Christian.

Introduction

Wales is one of the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and is usually described as a principality. Its people are called and ancient Celtic people¹. By their own language they themselves called Gymru and their country Cymru². As the people of hilly place, they maintained their own custom and tradition separately from the people of other states of Great Britain. By the act of Union, the England and Wales were formally united and also followed the protection of Anglican Church. But this continuity was broke down in the opening year of 18th century when Wales become completely decayed in social and spiritual sides this intolerable social and religious condition of Welsh was said by Morris like this: "Ignorance, Superstition, Infidelity, flagrant desecration of the Sabbath a land without schools or teachers, books or Bibles such were the condition of Wales life"³. In such social and spiritual disorder two Methodist leaders were flourised in Wales namely- George Whitefield and John Calvin. When the numbers of Methodist were increased in Wales they started Association. In 1811, they organized the Calvinistic Methodist church of Wales with about 22,000 numbers at Bala. The majority members of the Calvinistic Methodists came from the Church of England, from the Presbyterian, Congregational and independent churches. They followed the Presbyterian form of administrations. So they were later known as "the Presbyterian church of Wales"⁴. When London Missionary Society was formed in 1795 as a non-denominational Society, the churches of Wales got their first opportunity of participating in Missionary efforts. So, they took active co-operation with the *London Missionary Society* continued until 1840, a period of 45

years. But due to the theological controversies, the Calvinistic Methodist of Wales separated from the London Missionary Society and in 1840 they formed their own society called 'the welsh Calvinistic Methodist foreign Missionary Society', first at Liverpool and later in Cardiff, the capital of Wales. When this newly formation society was choosing their Mission field of operation in the part of the world, Jacob Tomlin a Salvadorian further suggested the name of Khassiah hills as an exceptionally promising field which was ultimately accepted by the Directors of the society. Accordingly, Thomas Jones, the prime mover of the formation of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist foreign Missionary Society arrived at Charapoonjee on the 22nd of June 1841; from Khasi hills they extended their Missionary work in the plains of Sylhet district of present Bangladesh, Cachar and Karimganj districts of Barak Valley and other hill areas of North-East India.

Objective of the study: The basic objectives of the present study are: i. To investigate the advent of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries in Barak Valley. ii. To examine the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries works in terms of conversions and social change. iii. To find out Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries contribution towards education and medical works in Barak valley.

Methodology

The study is mainly based on primary data and secondary sources like books, Journals, personal interviews and Missionary reports etc.

So far as the Methodology that has been adopted in preparing the work is concerned, the empirical methodology is basically followed and generally used.

The Study: Due to the Missionary Zeal, different Christian Missionaries came in Barak Valley. Among them Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries was the first Christian Missionaries who established their mission center in this valley. In 1851 William Pryse came in Barak Valley to visit Manipur with an intention for establishing Missionary work there at Manipur but he returned back from Jiribam, a part of Manipur and settled down in Silchar for expanding his work. He stayed in Silchar a few years and in 1856 he opened a school in Silchar⁵. Again in 1863 he also opened a high school in Silchar with 150 pupils enrollment. From 1861 to 1866 William Pryse visited so many places in this valley. But unfortunately in July 1867 the General Assembly of the Liand Loes terminated him from his Missionary work. Due to the lack of Missionary workers to work in Sylhet, the General Directors' meeting held in December 1872 resolved to discontinue the work on the plains. After 15 years of abandonment, the General Assembly of Aberdare held on 13 to 15th July 1885, decided to resume missionary operations on the plains without delay. Accordingly the missionaries namely – Revs. Mrs. J. Pengwern Jones, Rev Dr. T. J. Jones, Miss Elizabeth Williams and Miss Brownlow came in Sylhet in 1892 and started their Mission work.

In 1893 the second Mission Station in the plains was opened by Rev. Dr. T.J. Jones, Miss Laura Evans and Miss Elizabeth Williams. They started the Missionary work (Silchar) here by selling scriptures and preaching the word of God to the Bazaar and at Mela. Three Indian Aborigine Missionaries namely Rev J.H. Lorrain, Rev F.W. Savidge and Rev William Pettigrew also supported them.

The main object of the Missionaries to come in Silchar was to open the day school and Sunday school for moral and Christian religious teaching. With the help of education they wanted to spread Christianity in this area. They also adopted the work for women called "Zanana". They managed a large room at Silchar Fatak Bazaar area as their Residence. At last, they got a plot of land which was belonged to the prison. The total area of the land was 21 bigas. In this jail road they established their permanent mission house. At present this is called "Barak Presbyterian church" under Mizoram Synod. The first convert in silchar was Gongaprashad. He received baptism on the 26th July, 1895. He was baptized by T. J. Jone. In 1897 Silchar a little Chapel was built. In 1901 T.J. Jones erected the new chapel. They also built the church at Rampoor, Itkhola, Pailapool, Sonapur, Karimganj etc. Karimganj was their second Mission station in this valley. It was stated by Dr. O.O. Williams. In Karimganj station they worked specially for Namasudra. By the initiative of Dr. Helen Rowland they did the work for widows and orphans. During 55 years 1893 to 1958, twenty Welsh Missionaries came to Silchar, among them, nine were married couples and eleven were single ladies. Likewise, twenty two Welsh Missionaries came out to

Karimganj, four were married couples and eighteen were single ladies. They established Presbyterians system of church government. They taught self-support, self government and self propagation right from the beginning⁶.

The first three Welsh Missionaries Dr .T.J.Jones, Miss Elizabeth Williams and Laura Evans were very active in evangelistic work through weekly meetings. In that meetings they taught different subject related to Christ like the version of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, faith, love, hope and the different books of the New Testament chapter by chapter. From Karimganj Dr. O.O. Williams came to assist them. For preaching the Gospel they adopted many devices – like Selling Scriptures, in the market, at mela and also opened the Sunday school. They work among the different tribes of Cachar and North Cachar Hills – like –Kuki, Naga, Khasi, Mikir, Pnar, Hadem and Dimasas etc. The Gospel of St. Mark was translated in the Dimasa language in 1911 and was printed in Roman script. But, work among the Cacharies was not successful.

The important churches built by the Welsh Missionaries in Barak valley were-Pailapool church (1925), Rampoor church (1893), Itkhola church (1895), Katlicherra church (1960), Karimganj church (1927). The first convert of Karimganj was Raj Kumar Sharma, received baptized by Rev Dr O.O. Williams in 1896. In silchar the first convert was Ganga proshad, a young Brahmin received baptism on the 26th July, 1895.

In 1951 statistic for the whole of Sylhet Cachar Synods there were 37 churches, 87 preaching stations and 13 deacons. According to the statistic of 1985 Cachar district workers plain 32, workers Mizo-19, Communicants-730, Total no. of the churches -1234.

In Barak Valley women education was first started by the Welsh Missionaries. In 1893, the Municipal Girls School of Silchar was transferred to the Mission⁷. Miss Elizabeth Williams became the in-charge of this Mission School. In 1895 they also established another girls school at Silchar which is at present called the govt. Girls Higher Secondary and multipurpose School. There they constructed three small Assam type buildings for school. It was opened for girls of all classes. In 1907, the nursery school which was established by Welsh Mission in the Mission compound of Silchar converted to Mission M.E. School. The head of the institution was Miss Lloyed. In 1915 it was converted from M.E to High School then Miss Lloyed become the first head mistress of the school. In 1905, one girls school was opened in another part of Silchar town under the care of Miss Laura Evans. In 1938, Welsh Mission Girls School Silchar was opened with three department namely- Kinder Garten, primary and middle English under the direction of Mr Reese. Teachers of the Mission School drawn their salary Rs. 10 to 150. Christian Missionary education could not heartily welcomed by the high caste Hindus and the Mohammedan of Barak Valley. They protest Missionary education system by opening vernacular schools for girls. Miss

Laura Evans in her report of 1898 said that near to the Mission Girls School of Silchar a Hindu (Swadeshi) School was opened with the intention to close the Mission Girls School. The result of the said incident was more good than harms. Because after that the number of pupils of the Mission School were increased.

In 1941, Missionary also started the first teacher training class in the Girls School of Silchar. But the teachers training class discontinued after 1924. In 1939 Missionaries also started Home craft class to fit the girls for home and village life. The subject of the Home craft class were – needle work, knitting, cooking, gardening, hygiene, the care of the sick and the care of the child etc. But main work of the Missionaries was to make the foundation of the workshop and service of the Lord Jesus. From 1945 to the end of 1946 home craft class was not continued due to the lack of suitable teachers.

In Barak Valley, Karimganj was the second Mission station which was started by Dr. O.O. Williams. In this station women education was started by Dr. O.O. Williams, Miss J. Helen Rowland and Miss S.M. Das. In 1895 Karimganj Mission girls school was started and Miss S. M. Das was the in-charge of the school. In this school they taught Bible class, story of Jesus with other subjects. In 1901, a school for boys was also opened and Purna babu was the in-charge of this school. Mission girls school was conducted by Miss S. M. Das till 1912. In 1913, the charge of the School handed over to Miss M.A. Jones. In 1915 Miss Hetty Evans took the charge of the school. In 1925, a large new school was built for girls and was inaugurated by the Minister of Assam. In 1936, in the month of February Missionary closed the High School Section. When Mission Girls School of Karimganj was closed then all the Christian teachers and hostel girls had moved to other centers of Welsh Mission in the plains viz- Silchar, Sylhet, Habiganj, Maulavi Bazar, Sunamganj etc.

In Barak Valley first Medical work was started by Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries at Karimganj by Dr. O.O. Williams in 1895. He was assisted by Dr. (Miss) Mimi Das, a lady from Sylhet, daughter of a patni land lord. She was the first native women worker of Welsh Mission who visited England for the purpose of gaining medical training and knowledge at the cost of her father without any direct foreign Missionary aid. She took care of the maternity department of the Karimganj Welsh Mission Dispensary. Karimganj Welsh Mission dispensary was built by Dr. O.O. Williams. This dispensary was made by wood and tin, called Assam type house. He received the donation to build this dispensary from Wales. Except this dispensary Welsh Missionaries did not open any other dispensary to other districts of Barak Valley. In the initial stage he had seen on an average over 40 patients a day, or almost 1000 a month⁸. At Silchar Mission station there was only a matron for look after the minor diseases of the Christian people who were living in the Mission Compound.

Welsh Missionaries were not professional medical men but amateur in nature. In Karimganj dispensary there were always attended from 5 to 7 medical workers. Annually from 3000 to 5000 out door patients were treated by them. They were also yearly attending from 2000 to 3000 indoor patients. For infectious diseases they had a sick room of 4 to 6 isolated beds. They also utilized public building for bigger need of epidemic diseases. They also done the minor surgical cases.

The medical mission had a great social significance. Because during that period most of the villagers of Barak Valley were deprived from medical care. It was the Welsh mission who had rendering the great medical services to the poor and low caste people of Barak Valley in time of their need.

Conclusion

The Welsh Missionaries who established their Mission center in this valley in 1893 and worked till the end of the year 1958. In this Sixty five years they did hard and tremendous work but they failed in their Mission of Conversion into Christianity as they expected compared with to the same amount of efforts that they rendered in neighboring Hill areas viz., Lusai Hills, Khasi and Jainta Hills and North Cachar Hills etc. In these Hill areas they did much less toil and endeavor they gained much converts than that of Barak Valley. The reasons for failure of the Welsh Missionaries in this valley are as follows: i. The population of plain area comprising of Hindu, Muslim and few Jain and Buddhist had already their own religious faith. The Western Missionaries could not get any foot hold in this firm socio cultural and religious faith. ii. Although Welsh Missionaries provided services like- education, medical relief, and rehabilitation of distressed people of Barak Valley these had hardly any impact in the spiritual life of the people to convert them into Christianity. It was mainly because of the fact that the plain people of this valley did not consider the method of Missionaries' conversion as the indigenous method of spiritual attraction. Moreover, during that period most of the plain people of Barak Valley did not consider themselves as financially backward people. So that they did not accept the services of the Missionaries. iii. In those days, the plain people of Barak Valley did not want to have close relation with them. They used to boycott the native people belonging to their society who attended in the preaching meeting, Missionary school and Missionary Hospital. Therefore, the native people were afraid of attending the functions or taking part in the activities of the Christian Missionaries.

It can be said that the Welsh Missionaries established their Mission center in Barak Valley considering that this valley is the only gateway to enter into neighbouring Hill states like Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. The activities of Welsh Missionaries in this Valley produced some effects which are given below-

It was the Welsh mission that established the System of higher education as well as the Female education in this Valley is a historical fact approved so far. They are rightly called the pioneer of modern education in Barak Valley. They established several beneficiaries in terms of Christian people and their diserved children in terms of stipends, vocational trainings and similar things .The Oriental English School of Silchar which was started by Welsh Mission at Jail Road Silchar to serve the people of this valley .Baptist Mid –Mission (USA) at Alipur in Cachar and at Markunda in Karimganj district opened educational institutions and hospitals for the neglected communities like Monipuries, the Rongmeis, the Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) and other tribes inhabiting in Barak Valley .Besides these, there came up mission employment facilities for deserving native Christian members in terms of pastors, teachers, evangelists, Nurses and other Mission workers etc . The Missionaries established schools in Barak Valley for preparing teachers from native people like Namasudrus and Brahmins for Christian teaching. Moreover, they used Bengali as the medium of instruction in the initial stage of the Schools .Because of the fact that at that time Bengali was the only medium of this valley. They also provided native leadership through Christian education.

The role of the Welsh Presbyterian mission in the transformation of the position of women in Barak Valley was significant .Because they brought about Social changes in the areas where the Missionary activities were in Vogue. Before the advent of Missionary activities they walked within the allotted boundaries of their Superiors. For the upliftment of the women of this valley they started female schools. Moreover, by organizing Church meeting for native Christian women in every Sunday, giving them the responsibilities of rice collection and also the other works of the Churches etc. Helped them to learn the method of the formation of women society and association.

Welsh Missionaries were the first workers who played a great role for spreading western education and western life style to the tribal people of this valley by setting up schools and Churches. Because of the Missionary activities people were brought to one place through Churches and schools and thus earliers minor subdivisions among the tribal's were removed. Through English education and conversion they adopted Christian culture.

Welsh Missionaries were not capable of adopting any successful medical Mission in Barak Valley. For their Mission purpose i.e for spreading Christianity they started the medical work in Karimganj district which was for a time being. Moreover, no other Missionaries of Welsh Mission except Dr. O.O. Williams, were interested for medical mission in this valley. For this reason when he received a home call, the medical work in Barak Valley could not function properly and the medical Mission operations in the plains came to an end. Leprosy hospital of Makunda of Karimganj district and Alipur

hospital of Baskandi, Cachar are the hospitals of Baptist Mid Mission. Though the Missionaries have converted the people of different communities and tribes of Barak Valley like- Bengali, Khasis, Nagas, and Tea garden labourers etc. But inspite of their conversion in to Christianity they are still following the rituals, customs and traditions. They also used the title which they obtained from their forefathers. These have made in a dilapidated condition of choosing their identity whether to follow christinity or their original religion.

Welsh Missionaries could not spread Christianity in most of the tea garden areas of Barak Valley. It was due to the fact that the tea garden labours of this valley were the followers of Hindu religion. As a orthodox Hindus they thought that if Christianity entered in their areas through Missionary works then they would lost their traditional culture and religion. So, for the fear of conversion they did not welcome any Christian Missionary activities in the Tea garden areas of Barak Valley.

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