

# Empowering Women: Basel Mission Educational and Industrial Endeavours in the Kanarese Region

**Nandakishore S**

Assistant Professor of English

Government First Grade College, Bantwal Kamaje, Jodumarga, Karnataka, India

anands333@yahoo.co.in

**Abstract:** *At a time when women's education was 'a new thing' in India, the Basel Missionaries from Germany ventured into the phenomenal task of educating the indigenous women in the Kanarese region of Karnataka by establishing schools devoted exclusively for girls in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. This was perhaps the early and most decisive step in the long process of 'empowerment of women', the positive effects of which are still felt in the Kanarese region as the district stands out in many sectors where women have been faring well in comparison to their counterparts in many other districts of the state. This paper tries to probe the missionary attempts to empower women through education and other philanthropic work and the way these attempts shaped the aspirations of women in the region.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Missionary, Indigenous, Educational, Industrial, Colonial

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Swiss German missionaries to Kanara in the Nineteenth Century played a distinct role in shaping the imaginations of the people of this region. Though an insignificant number of indigenous population got converted to the missionary religion, the missionary presence in the region did influence the aspirations of many irrespective of their caste and creed. The strong desire to serve the 'heathen' population, prompted by the larger aim of proselytism, through mission agencies like schools, hospitals, industrial units had a strong impact on the indigenous populace. Mission agencies triggered a series of new developments that in turn transformed the local society in ways unimagined. Missionary educational endeavours gave wings to the aspirations of the indigenes, especially indigenous women, bringing about material and social changes. Missionary endeavours are recorded in the Basel Mission Reports (henceforth, BMR) which constitutes the primary source material for this study.

At a time when indigenous women were confined to the four walls of their homes due to the apathetic attitude towards women's education, the missionaries embarked on a pathbreaking endeavour of educating the 'heathen' women in Kanara. Though initially the project was looked at with indifference and resistance by the male dominated indigenous society, gradually it succeeded in bringing about a change in the perception about women's education in the region providing the much required impetus to the missionaries to pursue their task of educating and reforming the women.

The Basel Mission sought to permeate Christian values, if not the religion, into the 'heathen' family and from there into the community at large through the education of 'heathen' girls. It began by establishing three different kinds of schools for girls. This was a classification made on the basis of the degree of control the missionaries had over the spiritual and material life of their students in each of these schools. Each of these institutions had a specific pedagogic agenda, developed distinct pedagogic strategies and was attributed with different degrees of efficacy in inculcating the Christian religion and enlightened femininity into the 'heathen' world."(Maben :74)

The Basel mission began educating the girls through its orphanages which were under the supervision of the missionary wives. BMR of 1844 reports:

The Girls' School under Mrs. Greiner is flourishing. The Girls are making progress in Bible History, Geography, Writing, Reading, and casting accounts, as well as in needle work and knitting. They attend school from 8 to 11 and from 2 to 4 in the afternoon." (21)

These were the initial endeavours in educating women by offering them secular and skill based education along with teachings in Christian principles. These were attempts not only to educate the girls but also to empower them by providing



them shelter and food. There were also efforts to teach life skills to the students in these orphanages as “both ‘outward’ and ‘inward’ uncleanness had to be gotten rid of in order to fashion these destitute girls into suitable members of the community at the orphanage.” (BMR 1900:115) The missionary aspiration was that the disciplined work regime of the orphanage, would permeate the ‘heathen’ home and restructure it through the entry of its female inmates, as wives and mothers. The education of these girls and the skills it had taught them, it was hoped, would raise the social status of their families by introducing into it aspects of middle class femininity. (Maben :77)

Preparing the girls for family life was the primary aim of this education which is expressed in clear terms in the BMR of 1891. It states that the objective of female education is to provide these girls with ‘sound knowledge of Scriptures’ along with imparting ‘a good secular instruction in the vernacular’ and to prepare them for the requirements of family life by ‘teaching them household-work, needle-work and such agricultural work as generally falls to the lot of women in this part of the country.’ (38) The care and nurture offered in the orphanages transformed the sickly, sore-ridden, malnourished destitute girls into clean, healthy and cheerful young ladies. The orphanages were considered to be a blessing for the poor, destitute girls where they received a training of ‘heart, brain and head’ which ‘lifted them far above the average of their Indian sisters.’

The Mission also established parochial schools for girls which were the first instances of an institution that offered education, and the associated possibility of upward social and economic mobility, for the women of the region, especially, for women of the lower caste and class. For the first time it was possible for women to acquire institutional education, a marker of colonial modernity, and enter the new professions this modernity brought into existence. These schools were the mixed schools where boys and girls studied together. Maben opines that ‘such a coming together of girls and boys in the pursuit of knowledge and skills, that until then had been the exclusive privilege of the upper caste male, would have been radical for the times.’ (87)

The Vernacular School for Girls were also set up which were devoted exclusively for the upper caste girls, hence they came to be known as the Brahmin Girls’ Schools later. The first school of this kind was set up in 1856 in Mangalore. Elaborating on the Brahmin Girl’s Schools, Maben opines that “often these girls were sent to school under the influence and pressure of their educated brothers and husbands, whose education, in many cases a Mission school education, had made them aspire for a re-formed femininity in their wives, sisters and daughters.” (96) She further observes that ‘the mission was replacing the hierarchy of caste with the hierarchy of ‘capacity’. The enabling aspect of the new hierarchy, in contrast to the disabling hierarchy of caste, was that: firstly, it was not decided on the basis on the accident of one’s birth; secondly, all the children of the convert community, irrespective of the distinctions of gender or caste, were given equal opportunities to display and develop these ‘capacities’. (88)

The Basel Mission educational enterprise in Kanara brought about radical changes in the society. For the first time girls too were provided with an opportunity to get modern education and acquire the knowledge and skills that was an exclusive privilege of the upper caste male till then. Missionary educational institutions were seen as the sights of reform and transformation. The radically transforming power of missionary education was felt by the boys educated in the mission schools and were eager to educate their wives and sisters too. Getting educated in the mission schools also meant getting qualified for the jobs that the colonial government offered. Many girls trained in the Basel Mission schools went on to serve as teachers in the girls’ schools established by the Colonial Government. This substantiates the fact that the missionary efforts to educate the girls in the region paved way for the emancipation and empowerment of women at a time when the condition of women was in dire status in the region. Girls from communities like Saraswat Brahmins were the first to make the best use of the educational services provided in the missionary schools. As a result, they became the early beneficiaries of the fruits of modern education as they entered into the professions offered by the Colonial administrative institutions. These women were also in the forefront of the social reform movements of the period primarily due to their exposure to Western education. Most of the members of the Theosophical Society and Brahmo Samaj in Mangalore, were the former pupils of missionary schools. (BMR 1906:67) No doubt these schools aided in the enhancement of the moral and social status of the women in the region.

The mission also ventured into the arena of industrial work by establishing modern crafts like watch-making, book-binding and printing. These industrial units provided ready employment for the students passing out of the Mission Schools. Many women found employment in the Mission Industries. There were as many as twenty-five women employed in a weaving establishment in Mangalore. (BMR 1858:31) Women were also employed in the tile factories. The tile factory at Kudroli in

Mangalore alone employed sixty-two women. (BMR 1891:37) Women became the bread winners of their families as employment in mission industrial units provided them a steady source of income ensuring economic security. Exposure to modern work environment under the European supervisors enabled them to learn entrepreneurial skills, work culture, time and money management skills. The industrial workshops had a civilizing effect on the women who till then remained within the confines of their home or the farms and fields where they worked. It is in the industrial units that the women learnt “habits of industry, order, punctuality, honesty, and thrift” which not only reformed the indigenous women but also gave them a sense of dignity. (BMR 1892:36)

The printing press established by the Mission printed and circulated text books, novels, newspapers and journals. Hence it was an important centre for the dissemination and construction of modernity in the Kanarese region. Indigenous people, especially women, were exposed to the world outside their locale through the missionary publications. Along with religious literature, the mission published many books on secular subjects which were introduced in the school curriculum. Opening the doors of western knowledge and ideology these educational institutions radicalised the society triggering many social reform movements in the region. The social changes initiated by the missionary intervention in the region had a strong impact on the social reform societies. The pathetic condition of women became an issue of concern for the English educated intellectual class who were primarily the products of mission schools. There were attempts to emancipate women, especially widows and destitute by means of empowering them through education. Many widows found solace in the missionary institutions like schools and industrial establishments. These institutions provided them the resolve to break and move against the age old customs that deprived widows social liberty and basic amenities of life.

Child marriage, widow remarriage and such other social evils were questioned by the English educated youth. Women’s education was accepted as quintessential to make women equal partners to their husbands. As a result, gender and gender practices were significantly recast during this period of history in the region. Missionary and colonial institutions became centres of power and symbols of modernity. Women getting into these centres were looked at as the ‘reformed modern women’ educated in missionary schools and exposed to the western knowledge. English became the language of power and social mobility. Anybody aspiring for social and economic mobility had to learn English in order to fit into the institutions opened up by the Colonial Missionary masters.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

The pathbreaking steps initiated by the Basel Mission in the Kanarese region in the fields of education, industrialisation, medical aid and so on had far reaching effects on the people of this region, especially the womenfolk. The impact of these activities shaped the aspirations of the women who could dream of getting educated and employed at a time when the societal norms were not conducive for women’s empowerment. The legacy left behind by the missionary institutions speaks volumes about their contribution to the empowerment of women of the region by creating platforms for gender equality and social justice. The high literacy rate in the region and the enterprising skill of the people owes a lot to the missionary endeavours initiated centuries back. The advent of missionaries in the Kanarese region opened a new era in the field of education and industrialisation which contributed to the social and economic empowerment of women the aftereffects of which are still felt strongly in the region.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1]. Maben, Veena. *Missionary Narratives*. Diss. Mangalore University, 2012. Print
- [2]. The Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, *Reports of the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society for 1844*. Mangalore: Basel Mission Press, 1844. Print
- [3]. The Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, *Reports of the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society for 1858*. Mangalore: Basel Mission Press, 1858. Print
- [4]. The Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, *Reports of the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society for 1891*. Mangalore: Basel Mission Press, 1891. Print
- [5]. The Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, *Reports of the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society for 1892*. Mangalore: Basel Mission Press, 1892. Print
- [6]. The Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, *Reports of the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society for 1900*. Mangalore: Basel Mission Press, 1900. Print

- [7]. The Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society, *Reports of the Basel German Evangelical Missionary Society for 1906*. Mangalore: Basel Mission Press, 1906. Print