

CONCLUSION

The history of Christianity in India is as old as its foundation in the West Asia even though it remained confined to the Malabar Coast, the present state of Kerala. Its introduction to Gujarat began with the arrival of the Portuguese which also remained restricted to few pockets on the coast. The real spread began only in the nineteenth century with the reaching of the more zealous protestant missionaries. The thesis deals with the hundred years' past of the Methodist Church and community of Baroda beginning with the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The present effort happens to be the first academic research into the local history of a Christian community in Gujarat. This also becomes important as it an exploration of dalits of the region.

The early phase of the Methodist church clearly shows the evangelical fervour of the missionaries. Either Europeans or Americans, the missionaries of the time were driven by the force and passion of 'spreading the gospel' in the non-Christian world. The basic Christian morality and ethics with values of love, service, tolerance and equality pushed them to the agenda of eradication of social evils prevalent in the society that they build upon the social work among the poorest of the poor and the despised sections of society.

As discussed in the second chapter, the missionaries experimented and adopted different strategies for evangelistic work. The Melas, Gayan, Toli, Magic Lantern, and Sunday Schools were effectively used. Their reaching out to the higher castes had a very limited success and ultimately they could only focus on the untouchable communities who were more than

willing to move out of the world of exclusion and contempt. The acceptance of Christianity by large number of dalits, of course, occurred at the times of wants and scarcity when the poor were the most vulnerable. The establishment and organisation of the church was important for consolidating the evangelical work and gains. With the passage of time the church and community grew in strength leading to erection of more church buildings, schools, hostels and hospitals.

The use of memory and memoirs of the community constitute the core of the third chapter to reconstruct the past of the converts to the new religion. The poverty, social exclusion, exploitation, humiliation and miserable material condition is brought to life by the recall of the elders and intellectuals of the Methodist Christian community. The denial of basic rights to dalits by the upper castes proved to be the major cause of conversion to Christianity. Dalits saw a golden opportunity to come out of their wretched condition and they became the agents of change by enthusiastically joining the church in large numbers. The education facilitated by the missionaries not only improved their material condition but also inculcated in them self-confidence and a new spirit which they had lost way back in times immemorial. But moving away from the 'Hindu fold' was not an easy task. They were subjected to attacks and more hatred by the caste Hindus who would not like to see slippage of virtually free labour of these dalits. According to many interviewees they had to face and bear social, cultural, racial prejudices and even boycotts by the upper castes. But in the face of such earlier opposition the converts slowly saw fate bringing smile on their faces as they got education, secured jobs, improved their economic status and also witnessed acceptability in the public sphere. By following the new religion they did not necessarily follow the western ways. Very largely they continued their cultural practices, food habits and even continuing their

indigenous names. But significant break from their past practices also occurred. In the realm of faith and religion adoption of Christian values was a major shift. It is good story of continuities and discontinuities; the converts themselves becoming the agents of change.

The Christian women of Methodist church in Baroda experienced a variety of changes in their lives in the century of their existence as Christians from 1880 to 1980. They were suppressed under the pressure of various power relations and social customs as they were also placed at the bottom of the Indian society. There was no question of their education and awareness of their basic human rights in the Brahmanical patriarchal society was an extremely difficult proposition. Poverty and dependence of their families rendered them subordinate and vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation. But conversion to Christianity was to make some difference in their lives as they slowly came to realize the worth of their existence as human beings who enjoy the equal status with men and other castes in the eyes of God.

The missionaries played an important role in educating the converts not only the Christian ways of life but also inculcating in them the values they brought with them from the west. Conversion to Christianity meant discontinuance of certain cultural practices and ways of living. The women missionaries played a leading role in the church's social work which was for the betterment of all groups of people in society but their direct communication and relationship with local women meant a lot to the latter. By their restless efforts, they were slowly transforming society by providing new dimensions of work facilitated by founding the schools, dispensaries, hospital, training schools for nurses and teacher's training colleges. They would train Bible women and organize evangelistic work; they would visit

women in their homes and teach the adults how to read. They trained the women in handicrafts to make them self supportive.

Methodist women came to experience total freedom and equal rights in their religious lives. They could participate in any religious activities and sacraments just like men. The freedom and equality in religion led to other freedoms. Slowly through education provided by the missionaries, the local women converts started working as teachers, nurses, typists, clerks and secretaries. With improved and better education in the second half of the twentieth century, many women emerged as professionals like doctors, lecturers, engineers, social-workers, lawyers, and also entrepreneurs. The status of women within the church community tremendously improved as was the case within their families. But the same was not true of the larger society. The Christian woman continued to be considered as low by the upper caste Hindus. But as there was general advancement of Indian society at large the older prejudices and discriminations weakened and the Christian women came to acquire respect and dignity which was a radical different scenario from the late nineteenth century before their conversion to Christianity. A number of Methodist women as 'achievers' scaled the social heights and served as role models for the young girls. Personal interviews with the Methodist women highlighted their self confidence, pride in their being women who have shed off the centuries-old sense of inferiority imposed on them by the society. While being proud of their achievements they reflected gratefully the contribution of Christianity and the church as much as the role of modern institutions.

The role of missionaries in the field of social service is even acknowledged by the worst critics. By the end of the nineteenth century the Methodist Missionaries were able to introduce educational health programmes as they were also absorbed in the relief works in Baroda during

the time of famine. Thus they started the social service for the people and played a pioneering role in the fields of education and health. In the process the women in general and the untouchables benefited most from these services because they also became Christians.

In 1889 two schools, one for boys and one for girls were opened. Today, these schools are known as Hill Memorial High School and Web Memorial High School and they continue to cater not only to Christians but very generally the urban poor of all faiths in a far better way than otherwise available to them. In order to provide accommodation to the students from the villages, the missionaries also started hostel facilities way back in 1899. Over the last hundred years these schools and hostels have contributed greatly towards the improvement of life condition of the local people of Gujarat, specially the low caste people.

Along with education the missionaries are fairly well known for their work in the field of health services. The Methodist Church had begun the work of medical service in 1889 with Dr. I. Ernsberger in a modest way but slowly its institutionalizing was worked out. In 1910 the William Butler Memorial Hospital for women was opened and the Nurses' Training School was affiliated with the hospital. This hospital served the women and children of Baroda and the surrounding villages for many years.

The Missionary activities occurring during the nineteenth century were logically embedded in colonialism as much as they were imbued with western rational thought. 'Civilizing mission' was as much a Christian agenda as it was of the colonial state. The church and state to that an extent were playing the complementary role but at times the church came into conflict with the state as the latter tried to remain detached from the entanglement in the intricate social cobwebs of Indian Brahmanical society. The church

continued its reformist activities by blowing away the abominable practices harmful to human dignity and depressing to human conscience. The child marriages among the Christian converts came to a virtual halt even when the practice continued among others. In that sense the Methodist church of Baroda remained at the forefront of the movement for the emancipation of women.

In order to make people independent economically the Methodist Technical Institute was started in 1957 in Baroda. It trained the poor students in such a way that they eventually got different jobs after training.

By their social work, the missionaries succeeded in inspiring the critics and organizations to take up reformative measures which would benefit society at large. In a way they proved to be catalysts for a social change.

Looking from the subaltern perspective or more particularly from dalit perspective, the Christian experiment of missionaries, more so of the Methodist denomination in Gujarat, and the experience of the local converts who happened to be mainly coming from the untouchable castes has been of seminal significance. Even when they have been deprived of the reservation policy of the government, the Christians strongly feel they are far better placed than many who are covered under that policy. Their self-confidence is driven from their faith in Jesus and as Christians they feel equally proud of their ethnic, i.e. Gujarati identity as they feel strongly of their national identity. Christianity rather than robbing their native cultural moorings have reinforced their sense of indigenous belongingness and their worth as equal partners in the larger social and cultural space. Doing their history has been a journey of self fulfilment to bring the people on the margins to the central

stage where they have been actors of their chosen roles and not just spectators of others' games.