

# Educational activities of American Missionaries in Jaffna (1796-1948)-A Historical view

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**Abstract:** The reign of British in Jaffna was distinct from other European powers especially from those of Portuguese and Dutch. These distinctions were based on political, economical and socio cultural levels. Jaffna was not an exception for these changes. The period of Portuguese and Dutch made small changes in the life style of people, whereas the changes made during the British reign were remarkable. The main reason for these changes was the arrival of Christian Missionaries and their services. The American Missionaries became more prominent as their services were more public oriented. As a result of this they could also imprint their name in the history of Jaffna. The notable period of the impact of the Missionaries was from the 1820s to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period they engaged themselves in printing and publishing translations of English works into Tamil. Printing publishing and establishment of primary, secondary and tertiary educational Institutions and provision of health care for residents of the Jaffna peninsula. These activities resulted in many social changes amongst Jaffna Tamils and some of them survive even today.

They also led to the attainment of a lopsided literacy level among residents in the relatively small peninsula. This is cited by scholars as one of the primary factors contributing to the recently entered civil war. Many notable educational Institutions within the Jaffna peninsula owe their origins to the Missionary activities from America. The services on education, carried out by the American Mission brought many changes in the lives of those who resided in Jaffna. Thus the main objectives of this research are to explain how and where these changes occurred, how the inhabitants of Jaffna faced the impact of these changes and also to document all these changes.

The research methodology is based on history. The primary sources for this study include the British documents, notes, letters and books written by the priests who had come here to propagate Christianity in Jaffna and archaeological and other historical materials. I have utilized as secondary sources, books and articles in the journals, magazines and internet based sources.

**Key Words:** *Bahthi* Movement, Guru kula education, Women education, missions schools

## American Missionaries and their arrival in Jaffna

The *Bahthi* Movement which originated in Massachusetts formulated American mission in 1810. During their early days they travelled to India, China and Burma to spread Christianity in Oriental countries. In this manner Rev. Samuel Newell (Missionary) went to India. But permission was not granted to him by the English government. So he started his journey towards Island of Mauritius to continue his services there. Accidentally he reached Galle face harbor because of the sorrowful incident that happened on his way to Mauritius. Rev. Samuel Newell arrived in Sri Lanka in 1813, (Velupillai,C,D. 1992, pp.11-15.) as the Missionary sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions(ABCFM). The British Colonial Office in India and Sri Lanka restricted the Americans to the relatively small Jaffna peninsula for geopolitical reasons for almost 40 years. He landed in Galle and finally reached Jaffna city. Although he spent most of his career in India, particularly in Bombay he was instrumental in starting the American Mission in

Jaffna. At that time Sir. Robert Brownrigg was the Governor, in charge of the coastal areas of Sri Lanka. Being pleased with the Missionary, the governor recommended Jaffna as the area to be served.

Rev. Samuel Newell accepted the recommendation of the governor and served Jaffna for about 45 days and sent a report to the head office in America. In that report he requested that the services of Missionaries were essential to Jaffna. His request was accepted and a lot of missionaries were sent to Jaffna. He was followed by other Missionary families such as Rev. Edward Warren, who arrived 1816. He took special interest in educating the people of the area in both English and their native Tamil language. Further, the first group of Missionaries was sent by the head office in 1816. They first came to Colombo and served there for a short period and then they reached Jaffna with their families and settled down in places like Tellipallai and Vaddukkoddai and continued their services. (Jebanesan, S. 1992, p.24.) The second set of missionaries were sent in 1819, They too brought along with them their families and settled down in areas such as Manipay, Uduvil and Pandaitharrippu. They further extended the areas that they served.

One of the main intentions of these American Missionaries was evangelization among the natives. Since they had chosen education as the prelude to evangelization lot of institutions from primary schools to colleges were established in different parts of Jaffna. These rapid changes gave way to a new trend in the Jaffna educational tradition. Even though the services regarding education were religious oriented the whole society of Jaffna showed a rapid growth in education.

## The nature of education in Jaffna before the arrival of American Mission

During that time system in Jaffna education was basically Hindu. The educational system too was based on Hindu tradition. The influence of Hindu tradition was there in each and everything in their culture, habits and in the life style of the people. The

educational system that was prevailing in Sri Lanka before the arrival of Portuguese was not properly institutionalized. Furthermore, during that period people did not have the habit of writing on paper. The education system that prevailed during that period was traditional educational system. The traditional educational system prevailed in the areas where there were Tamils and also where there were Sinhalese. (Abeyasinghe, Tikiri. pp.5-9.) In a general sense these two were called native educational traditions.

During the early days, Brahmins were generally responsible for education. The houses of Brahmins were the educational centers. And this education system was known as *Guru Kula* educational system. But it was taken up by Buddhist monks around 3rd century B.C with the influence of Buddhism. (Heaiwasam, D.P.G. 1969, p.08.) Brahmanical educational system was strong in the following places of Jaffna namely Uduppiddi, Puloly, Velanai, Arali, Atchuveli, Karainagar, Varani, Chunnakam, Tellippalai and Madduvil. (Sasikala, Kurumoorthi. 2013, p. 41.) Only a small group of people enriched themselves with this education system and they were not willing to share it with others. The subjects that they taught were Tamil literature, Tamil Grammar, Hinduism, Logic, Astrology, Sanskrit and Ayurvedic medicine. Yet this responsibility regarding education was later on taken up by kings who ruled Jaffna after 13<sup>th</sup> century and the kings considered it as one of their obligations. (Ambikaibakan, K. 1969, p.45.)

This traditional educational system fulfilled the requirements of Tamils to some extent. The people of Jaffna were mostly of Agricultural society. They considered that it was sufficient, if people were literate. Later on primary education was taught through village schools. Because of the close relationship that Jaffna had with South India, Jaffna education too was based on *Saiva* tradition. (Because of the set up, the educational system too was based on Hindu tradition). The general aims of this educational trend were, to develop Tamil education make the children devotional and obedient and to teach them Tamil Grammar and make them to read and write. (Sivalingarajah, S. March

1983, p. 69). But this native educational trend degraded as a result of Portuguese rule and their interest in Catholic religious education. (Arumugam, V. 1976, p.94.)

After the fall of Jaffna kingdom, Portuguese reign became dominant. Traditional education imparted on the *Thinnai* was preserved along with the introduction of another new educational system known as *Kovil pattu* (Parish Schools) education system. The educational service conducted by the priests who served in the churches were known as *Kovil pattu* educational system. It is the Franciscan priests who came to Jaffna during the Portuguese period established these *Kovil pattu* schools for the first time and taught religion, reading and writing skills. These schools mostly taught religious preaching and through this education they tried to convert people to Catholicism. The Portuguese priests who were engaged in educational activities learned the native tongue. They also gave some priorities to the native teachers, converted them and used them for educational purpose in their *Kovil pattu* schools.<sup>9</sup> (Jebanesan, S. 2009, p.20.) The literary tradition that developed from Jaffna kings period was influenced by Catholicism during Portuguese period.

In 1658 Dutch captured Jaffna from Portuguese. As a result of this all the churches and *Kovil pattu* schools established by Portuguese were converted into Protestant Churches and educational centers for Protestant priests. Since Dutch were more interested in merchandise /commerce they did not interfere much with the activities of the natives.

Since this approach was not a hindrance for the development of Tamil Hindu tradition of the natives both traditional education imparted in the *Thinnai* and *Kovil Pattu* education system were continued for their administrative purposes, Dutch divided Jaffna peninsula into *Kovil Pattus* and built a primary school in each of these *kovil pattus* for their educational activities.<sup>10</sup> (Sivalingarajah, S. p.13.). Protestant religious education was prominent in these centers where they also taught some basic methods of how to read and

write. Liberal policy was followed by the Dutch. They gave priorities also for appointment to the natives who were good in education. As a result of this, education was developing in this period too.

Even though the education that was brought up from the period of Jaffna kings kept on continued during the times of Portuguese & Dutch, it was influenced by Christianity. But during this period it was difficult for all to get the education and the higher educational system too was hard to follow. Hardly anyone paid attention regarding to the education of women even though the Dutch paid little attention to women's education. Under these circumstances American missionaries made some noticeable changes through their educational services during the British period.

## The educational activities

The British government which ruled Jaffna at the time when the missionaries arrived here was not interested in the education of the natives. At the same time the natives of that period showed little interest in education. Some native scholar like Senathiraja *mudaliyar* from Irupalai, Arulampala *mudaliyar* from Uduppiddy and some others at Vannarponnai established schools and educated students. But only a few availed themselves of this opportunity in these schools. (Ruberu Ranjith. 1969, II, p.418.) But it was impossible for all to get educated. The credit goes to the Missionaries to change this system and provide education for many irrespective of race, religion and social status.

In keeping with their aim to propagate their religion, the American Missionaries used education as the means to achieve their goal after their arrival here. As a result, schools were opened in several parts of the Jaffna district. Though these schools were set up for religious propaganda, the education of the Tamils improved as a result of their activities. The Missionaries started their educational service by setting up two schools at Mallakam and Tellippalai

with thirty students in 1816. These were started by Edward Warren. By 1848 105 Tamil Schools and sixteen English schools were founded. Mission centers were soon opened in nine locations. At the outset Hindu teachers were employed .Writing, reading and simple verses in Tamil were taught at these schools with these , geography, mathematics and Christianity included in the western educational curriculum also were taught in same schools. (Jebanesan,S. 1983, p. 25.)

The Missionaries generally set up schools in the villages. They were established near the residences of the Missionaries. The basic education was imparted free in Tamil medium schools. Annually about 300-400 students who could read passed out from these schools. At the initial stage Missionaries used the buildings of the Dutch for their educational activities. But as the number of schools increased later, they used huts built with earthen walls and thatched with Cadjan. As the missionaries expanded their educational activities the number of schools also increased in course of time. In this respect the increase in the number of schools and the students boys and girls who studied from 1819 to 1917 are listed below (Jebanesan,S. 1983, p. 25.)

**Table 1: Number of schools and the students from 1819 to 1911 in Jaffna**

Year	Schools	Boys	Girls
1819	15	633	10
1824	90	2864	613
1836	155	6037	1000
1868	60	1598	728
1879	121	8120	1400
1884	138	8332	1751
1900	133	10224	2791
1911	118	9893	3544

Though the purpose of the American Missionaries was to promote their religious activities Hindu teachers also were employed to these schools.

This provision might be due to the fact that the Hindu students who did not like to study under the Christian teachers in the schools. could study under the Hindu teachers . When one considers this fact, it is clear that the Missionaries wanted to give opportunities for all . They were successful in their endeavor.

One may cite the introduction of higher educational system in Jaffna in the English medium as the turning point in the history of education started by the Missionaries. A high school called the “Batticotta Seminary” was established by the Missionary Daniel Poor at Vaddukoddai in 1823. He also functioned as the first principal of this high school . This is one of the oldest schools in Asia. Though the medium of instruction was English, the school promoted the study of Tamil and Sanskrit. Besides, the development of Tamil Prose, publication of newspapers etc also were encouraged at this institution. (Nadarajah, G., 2005, PP 1-5.) They continued to introduce the western system of education and western educational curriculum in Jaffna and fostered them.

Another important aspect of the educational activities of the American Missionaries was the interest on female education. The female education was not given due importance in the Jaffna educational set up at that time. Some people considered that the girls should not touch the manuscript used for writing while learning. The Missionaries had the credit of introducing female education as for males in Jaffna.

At the outset education was imparted for females and males together. As the girls showed interest in education in course of time, the Missionaries established separate schools for the girls . As a result, Mrs. Harriet Winslow a great – great – grand mother of the late secretary of state John Foster Dulles, established a girls’ school with a hostel at Uduvil in 1824. This was the first girls’ school not only in Jaffna but in Asia as well. Here the subjects were taught in Tamil with English also as a subject. The girls who studied here belonged to the age group 5 to 11 years. (Harrison Minnie Hastings., 1925, P.12.) The girls who studied here and passed out worked for social welfare

and promoted female education. The female education was an important contribution of Missionaries to the Jaffna society as they were the pioneers in this respect.

Generally, the instruction on Christianity was given the top priority. The missionaries observed educational setup of Jaffna and formulated the syllabus accordingly. They also observed the traditional *Thinnai*. (a front part of the teachers house) schools which were the then primary schools. The Missionaries organized the schools into primary, intermediary and high schools. The students of the primary schools used to write on earth and read their lesson. After they could read and write, they had to memorize certain portions of the Bible and submit them to the teachers. They learned to write and read manuscripts (made of Palmyra leaves) Some elementary code of conduct as found in the Tamil works Atticudi, Konraiventan, Muthurai, Nalvali etc were written in these manuscripts and the students had to memorize and submit them also. As the content of education and number of students increased the Missionaries feel the importance of the printing press. Accordingly they set up a printing press and started publishing important books on both religious and secular. Western knowledge was introduced through the printing of books including those on science. Western scientific subjects were introduced and important books were translated into Tamil and taught in the schools. They also setup a library by the side of the schools. Thus the importance of school libraries were emphasized to the teachers and students

Thus the Missionaries were greatly interested in the educational service. But the mission commission from America came here in 1855 and after studying then situation they found fault with the Missionaries that they were more interested in education than on Christian propaganda. As a result of this the educational activities received a setback. From this time onwards the educational activities of the Hindus increased. In 1868 the number of mission schools was 60 and that of the students was 2332. But there was a decline. The number of Hindu schools was 132 and

that of the students was 3624. (Though the Hindus established more schools later the American Missionaries continued their educational activities. Thus they fostered education and continued to promote the welfare of the people.

## Conclusion

The American Missionaries came to Jaffna with the purpose of propagating their religion. They adopted educational and medical services as the means to achieve their goal. They won the admiration of the people of Jaffna by these social services. Education formed the basis of all their activities and hence they concentrated on education. As a result, in the educational set up of Jaffna. Many could receive education irrespective of caste and other differences. Of particular importance are the western system of education higher education and female education. People of Jaffna were provided with the opportunities to benefit by these. The educational activities of the American missionaries in Jaffna in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still continue to remind the people of Jaffna about their valuable service.

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