

ROLE OF MARTHA MAULT IN UPLIFTING THE WOMEN IN SOUTH TRAVANCORE

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ABSTRACT

Martha Mault, a 19th-century missionary associated with the London Missionary Society, played a pioneering role in advancing the status of women in South Travancore. At a time when female education was severely restricted, she established some of the region's earliest schools for girls, promoting literacy and moral instruction. Her introduction of vocational training especially lace-making and needlework provided women with new avenues for economic independence, benefiting widows and marginalized groups in particular. Through her advocacy for women's dignity, support for widow rehabilitation and efforts to challenge gender-based social limitations, Martha Mault contributed significantly to the social transformation of Travancore's traditional society. Her work laid the foundation for women's empowerment in the region and influenced later reformers, leaving a lasting legacy in the educational and socio-economic upliftment of women in South India.

Key Words: Protestant, London Missionary Society, slavery, Ringel Taube and Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural landscape of South Travancore in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was marked by rigid caste hierarchies, gender-based restrictions, and limited access to education for women. It was during this period that Christian missionary organisations played a transformative role in initiating social change. Among them, the contributions of Miss M. A. Marthoma (often referred to as Marthamault/Martha Mault) stand out for their lasting impact on women's upliftment. As a pioneering missionary educator associated with the London Missionary Society (LMS), she dedicated her life to improving the conditions of

women in South Travancore through education, vocational training, moral instruction, and community support. Her efforts laid the foundation for female literacy, economic independence, and social dignity in a region where women had long been marginalized. By creating accessible schools, promoting girls' education, and advocating for women's welfare, Marthamault helped spark a silent social revolution that reshaped the status of women in South Travancore.

ROLE OF MARTHA MAULT IN UPLIFTING WOMEN

After William Tobias Ringel Taube, the first Protestant missionary, Rev. Charles Mead arrived Travancore in 1818, to continue the activities of Ringel Taube and to spread Christianity. In 1819, Rev. Charles Mault was sent by the London Missionary society to assist Rev. Mead in his social activities.ⁱ Mault reached Nagercoil, which is a village in South Travancore with his family. Martha Mault was the wife of the missionary, Rev. Mault. She was very much interested in uplifting the low castes, when she experienced the pain of them. The Christian missionaries intended to uplift the low castes through educational upliftment. Many schools were started all over South Travancore.ⁱⁱ In 1819, a seminary was started together by Rev. Charles Mead and Rev. Mault. Books and food were also supplied to the students by them. Seminary was a boarding school started by the Missionaries.

Rev. Mead started a school in 1819 in the Nagercoil town. Initially, the school consisted of only 30 students. Various languages like Tamil, Malayalam, English and Sanskrit were taught in that school.ⁱⁱⁱ The school consisted of well-versed teachers like Mr. Ashten, Mr. Macaulley, Mr. Christian Pillai, Mr. Sivasubramaniam and Mr. Rayappan.^{iv} Soon, this school got a good opinion among people and its publicity became widespread. Even some Europeans, who settled in Travancore chose their children to be enrolled there. In 1819, Mr. Feury, Mr. William Brown and several other European settlers also chose that school to educate their children. Later in 1821 it was elevated with a first aid hospital.^v The mode of education in the schools started by the Christian missionaries differed from the educational method which already existed in Travancore. The current educational system of our country is the direct result of European influence.^{vi} Though the low castes were denied education, they were given education in these schools without any discrimination.

Martha Mault, the wife of Rev. Charles Mault was very much interested in educating the women of South Travancore who were neglected in all walks of life.^{vii} She saw the plight

of the low caste women and intended to educate them, so that they would come out of their ignorance and all other chains in the society which bounded them. Martha Mault is well known for her socio-revolutionary activities, which were entirely based on women liberation and education. In Travancore, the status of women in society was very pathetic when the missionaries arrived. They witnessed the injustices done to them as the inferior one. Though the Christian missionaries opened up schools throughout South Travancore, only male students received education as low castes were not aware of educating female children. In order to change this scenario, Mrs. Martha Mault decided to start a separate school for female children. She sought financial help from her friends in England and established a Boarding school for girls in 1820.^{viii} This was the first girls Boarding school in the entire South India. It was established in the city of Nagercoil. This school got developed and came to be known as Duthie Girls higher Secondary School which is still providing education to innumerable female students since its establishment in 1820.

Martha Mault aimed at educating the female children of the most backward communities. Majority of the students who received education in this school were slaves, orphans and were financially poor. During this era, only the male children were prioritized in receiving education. The parents were not even ready to educate their girl children. Martha Mault took severe measures to create awareness among the low castes about educating the female children. Due to her strenuous efforts, fourteen girls were enrolled in this school, initially. These students were provided with food, clothes and shelter.^{ix} They were well taught and became well educated. Eventually encountering their educational advancement, the low castes showed interest in educating girl children.^x However, there were heavy oppositions from the side of high caste who were not even ready to educate their own female children. Amidst the oppositions, the publicity of the girls' schools flourished which induced the missionaries to start similar schools all over South Travancore. Thus, several girls' schools were established in Marthandam, Santhapuram, Neyyoor and Parasala.^{xi} The Christian missionaries published pamphlets, indicating the importance of women education and distributed it throughout South Travancore, so that the low castes would voluntarily let their children join in these schools. All the children were permitted without any religious or caste barriers. Martha Mault established nearly 26 girls' schools in the Kanyakumari district with the help of her husband Rev. Charles Mault.

The Protestant missionaries didn't stop with providing education and gave special trainings for both men and women. Vocational institutions were established in Neyyoor and Nagercoil which provided training courses to the individuals in the field of printing, weaving, paper manufacturing and rearing silk worms.^{xii} Martha Mault initiated the same in the boarding school at Nagercoil. Apart from education, special trainings were given to the girls in needle work and in other fancy and embroidery works. During her missionary period in South Travancore, she aimed at uplifting the low caste women both educationally and economically. She started to give lace training to the women of the backward castes. Soon, lace making became a major cottage industry, which provided economical support to the Avarna women of South Travancore.^{xiii} Martha Mault encouraged them and gave advice to them, so that they would earn money through this activity. Apart from the girls in the boarding school, Mrs. Martha Mault gave lace making training to the village women, who were bound in ignorance and uplifted them. For this purpose, she bought a lace making equipment which was shipped from England. The poor and slave girls were able to liberate themselves. through the money obtained through this cottage industry.

Once, Mrs. Martha Mault found a sixteen year old girl, who was lying on the ground due to hunger. Mrs. Mault provided food to her. The girl worked as a slave under a caste Hindu man and being unable to withstand his oppression, she ran away from her master. After knowing this Mrs. Mault decided to provide shelter to her. She was enrolled in a school and was provided with food and clothing. After ten days, her master was able to find her. He was so fierce to take her back. Mrs. Mault pleased him to free her in return for her slave amount. But the high caste man refused to do so and dragged her away. Mrs. Mault tried her best to help her.^{xiv} She was so much disappointed by this incident and decided to eradicate slavery completely from Travancore.

The Christian missionaries continuously wrote letters to the British government to eradicate slavery. Eventually in 1843, the British government enacted a law to eradicate slavery from India^{xv}. However, Travancore continued to remain the same as it was under Monarchy and not under the British rule. But the Christian missionaries never gave up. The Christian missionaries from both London Missionary society and Church Missionary society together submitted a letter to the Maharaja of Travancore Uttiram Thirunal Marthanda Varma through the British representative. Twelve missionaries signed the letter demanding the Travancore

government to forbid slavery just like in the other parts of India.^{xvi} The Travancore government didn't incline to their demands. Despite their disapproval, the missionaries continuously strived to eradicate slavery. Thus, in June 1855, the Maharaja issued a proclamation eradicating slavery entirely from Travancore.^{xvii} The London missionary society established its major centres in Trivandrum, Marthandam, Nagercoil, Parassala, Neyyoor and Attingal. As per the statistics of 1939, LMS had fifteen vernacular schools and 222 primary schools under them. The role of Christian missionaries in uplifting the low castes of South Travancore is indispensable. Likewise, the role of Mrs. Martha Mault in liberating and educating the low caste women is irreplaceable. Only because of her social and educational reforms, the low caste women got educated and were respected in the society, as they were able to earn independently through the handicraft works taught by Mrs. Mault. After thirty-five years of service in South Travancore, Rev. Charles Mault and Mrs. Martha Mault returned back to their home land in England.

Conclusion

The efforts of Marthamault marked a turning point in the social history of South Travancore, particularly in the lives of its women. At a time when female education and mobility were extremely limited, her initiatives opened new pathways for learning, self-reliance, and dignity. Through the establishment of girls' schools, vocational training centres, and programmes aimed at improving women's social status, she challenged long-standing customs that restricted women's progress. Her work not only educated generations of women but also inspired broader social reforms that elevated their role within the family and community. The legacy of Marthamault continues to be reflected in the region's high levels of female literacy and social awareness. Ultimately, her contributions stand as a powerful example of how committed individuals can transform society and empower women to build better futures for themselves and the generations that follow.

END NOTES

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