

Disability and Christian Theology in Colonial India

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ABSTRACT: It was not the state but the missionaries that first gave special attention to the disabled in Colonial India. In other words, the conceptualization of awareness about special care and education for the disabled in India started with the Christian theological idea of disability and with the idea of charity. Christian missionaries established special education institutions in India with funding from overseas charitable societies. Through the preaching of Christianity in these schools, missionaries constructed the idea of ‘divinity of brokenness’ for the disabled in India. They preached about the divinity of suffering and used education as a tool to integrate the disabled into Christianity. The missionaries primarily used basic interpretations of the Bible to create an awareness of the care needs for the disabled among the local populations. They tried to spread the Christian ideology that everything under God’s patronage was a created image of God and that everyone held a high value. Most importantly, they maintained that all believers were created by God, and each has a mission to fulfil based on his/her destiny. For every evangelization, the missionaries quoted the Bible for more support and interpretation. The rooted dogma of having a life for a purpose was spread across the country to advocate the significance of the disabled in society. The missionaries indoctrinated the idea that ‘in a healthy church, everybody belongs.’ Christianity was appealed as a religion of ‘inclusion’ and this continuous mission work among the disabled population increased the popularity of Christianity in India.

KEYWORDS: Disability, Theology, Christianity, Colonial India, and Missionary

INTRODUCTION

To understand how the colonial mission functioned in its totality in India vis-a-vis disabilities, it is imperative to look at the role of Christian inclusivity and interdependency in India. Religion and disability have an inescapable relation to each other. Religious perception of disability includes the way the disabled are treated in a religious community, definitions given to disabilities, and the way disabilities and the disabled are pictured in religious principles and texts. Religion always provides an intimation of divinity to the disabled and disabilities. In this paper, we shall see how Christianity and Christian missionary theories functioned and meaningfully interpreted the concept and framework of disability in Colonial India.

1. Disability in Christian Scriptures and the Account of Missionary Work India

There are two extreme ways in which religion deals with disability—first, disability as the result of sins committed in one’s lifetime, and second, the curative possibility for disability through sufficient faith in religion.¹ Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain scriptures dealt with disability in the light of ‘*karma*’ and sin. Christianity dealt with disability through healing and divine suffering. There are marked differences in interpretation, internalization, and preaching of disability-related matters between Christianity and other religions.

According to the Christian scriptures, people should reflect on God in a personal way. One way in which God’s reflection is fulfilled was through ‘brokenness’—the brokenness of body and mind, i.e., disability.² It is believed that brokenness brings a person closer to God. Christianity glorifies ‘brokenness’ and talks about the additional benefits and abilities associated with disability. Christianity advocates not the body but the soul matters and ‘we’ as a society always rehabilitate our bodies while ignoring the demands of the soul.³ Christian scriptures promote that people should not blame their souls for the condition of their bodies.⁴ Therefore, the concept of disability goes beyond the physical and mental defects of human beings; the body goes back to dust as prescribed in the biblical preaching while the soul is permanent. In simple words, the soul is pure and abled despite any visible disability in the human body.

Missionaries who worked for the disabled urged Indians not to look at the limitations of the body, but to see and actualize the possibilities of the soul.⁵ They preached that people may not obsess over ‘abnormalities’ of the body. Missionaries advocated that a body is whole, whether weak or strong they work together, and ‘abnormalities of the body’ should not be ridiculed. Missionaries preached that those body parts which are weaker should be treated with special honour. They delivered the message

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that it is imperative to treat a person with dignity and acknowledge the bodily variations. According to the Christian faith, it was not correct to associate a person's bodily features with a person's abilities.⁶

Missionaries in Colonial India particularly exploited a specific episode from gospel where a man asked Jesus about a blind person. The questioner's inquisitiveness about blindness as an enigmatic phenomenon of the human body encouraged him to question further as to whether it was due to his sins or due to the sins of his parents.⁷ Jesus answered that the man becoming blind had nothing to do with his/his parent's sin, but "this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."⁸ Jesus's response was clear enough to dispel doubts and establish the 'divine plan' enacted through disability. Christianity's non-association with sins and *karma* was the prime reason why disability was received in a positive light among the families of the disabled because they were tired of the discrimination that they faced. This non-association of disability with *karma* is the principal difference between Christianity and the other native religions.

Missionaries who worked in Colonial India asked the families of the disabled to see the virtue in disability so that the disabled could be integrated into the community. They preached that the disabled should not be subjected to mockery, abandonment, discrimination, and marginalization. Missionaries in Colonial India advocated that disability was a "spiritual gift, the kind of spiritual gift that brings a person closer to God," and preached that the 'gift of disability' also teaches a person the good side of dependence and help.⁹ Providing help to the disabled was looked at as an act of good faith.

2. Disability and the 'Miracle of Healing'

Colonial missionaries preached the idea of 'healing' among the disabled community. They defined disability in terms of a defect that could be healed in the 'kingdom of God.' They used biblical promises such as "in the reign of the Christ the blind will recover sight."¹⁰ The kingdom of God was proven and raised by Jesus by curing the blind, the sick, and the 'lame.'¹¹ The Bible also accentuated the healing power of the faith. This gave hope to many Indian families with disabled children which ultimately resulted in conversions. Unlike Indian religions which preached that disability was the result of sins they or their forefathers had committed, Christianity preached that disability was a sign of weaker faith and as faith grew, healing chances brightened.

Healing is the miracle that is attributed in Christianity as the panacea for disability. Missionaries talked about a leper who was healed by Jesus.¹² Missionaries also quoted the story of a paraplegic man who was healed by Jesus.¹³ They narrated the story of a man who was physically disabled and was a part of a preacher's group.¹⁴ He talked to Jesus and was thankful to Jesus for not despising him. They also mentioned an incident in the book of Mark, where a deaf and mute man was brought in front of Jesus. Jesus took the man away from the crowd, put his fingers inside his mouth and ears, and cured him.¹⁵ All these stories of healing had a favourable reception with the disabled population in India. By quoting such stories from the Bible, missionaries advocated that the disabled should look at Jesus as a friend who "whenever we struggle in life, (God) sits beside us and helps us cry," and this portrayal of Jesus as a 'compassionate God' increased the popularity of Christianity among the disabled in India.¹⁶

Missionaries preached that the reason why the disabled were looked upon with contempt in India was because of the absence of a Christian understanding.¹⁷ They advocated that accepting Christianity would increase awareness about loving the poor and the disabled. Many families with native or converted disabled in India were ostracized by their communities. They were seen as bringing shame to the family honour, and the conversion was regarded as an act of treachery to the native religions. For example, the blind teacher Asho, was converted against the wishes of her family. She was humiliated and insulted by her family because of her conversion.

3. Disability, Charity and Integration to Church in Colonial India

The first step adopted by the missionaries was the implementation of the integration of the disabled into the conventional space of worship—the church. Missionaries advocated that the body of Jesus was comprised of both the church and people.¹⁸ They preached that the church and people should reflect the image of an 'inclusive' world how Jesus wanted the world to be. Therefore, excluding people from places of worship basis on their disabilities means 'sinning against the order of Christianity.'¹⁹ However, it is unclear whether these spaces of worship were physically accessible for the disabled or not. Many records show that the disabled were integrated into churches, or special provisions for the sermons were arranged. Some instances will be mentioned here. In 1839, in Banaras, William Smith, a missionary preached in a local town church to a crowd including several blind and lame; he also gave out alms and food to the disabled after the prayers.²⁰ Similarly, in 1857, in Ratnagiri, Bombay, De Crespigny stated that the 'blind, lame, and the deformed' received help from the local European community through charitable contributions. In the 1890s, in Agra, Dr. Colin Valentine arranged religious services and the distribution of money and food to the poorest in the area. He attracted thousand attendees 'of whom nearly three hundred are blind.'²¹ In 1826, in Allahabad, Mr. Mackintosh used to read the Bible to 250 blind and 'lame.' He regularly distributed alms to them collected from the local Europeans. St. Mary Church used to conduct sabbaths for boatmen who were injured or disabled because of the accidents. A fine was taken from the owners who forced their boatmen to work on the day of the sabbath and that money was used to fund the treatment of the disabled or injured.²² Many disabled who lived in the streets attended the sermons regularly, not only to hear about the Christian scriptures but also to receive alms, food, and other necessary items because they were unable to make ends meet by begging alone.

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4. Disability and the Idea of Children of God: Role of Women Missionaries

Missionaries like Mrs. Sherwood used to write children's stories explaining the need for a compassionate and inclusive approach to the disabled.²³ Through her stories, Mrs. Sherwood introduced the idea of the disabled as 'children of God' in India.²⁴ This approach offered the disabled a newfound feeling of 'positive spirituality.'²⁵ According to missionaries, if there is any impairment, people would remember God, and in that suffering, it was the responsibility of each Christian to provide aid and a place for them in the institute of worship so that they could heal. In her narration, Mrs. Sherwood emphasized the charitable nature of Christianity which accommodated and valued everyone irrespective of the disability. This idea of the need for charity in Colonial India attracted rich elite educated Indians to donate funds to missionary endeavours.

By quoting instances from the Bible where Jesus embraced the blind, the deaf-mute, lepers, and people with bodily differences, missionaries in Colonial India presented Christianity as a religion that accepts everyone.²⁶ Missionaries like Miss Hewlett, Miss Swainson, and Mrs. Sherwood met with disabled people and introduced Jesus as an 'accessible God' and Christianity as a religion that 'saved, secured, and protected the disabled and poor.'²⁷ They popularized a 'God' who was committed to 'inclusion' and claimed that inclusivity was biblically based because "people of all races, nationalities, gender, and physical conditions were included in Jesus's ministry."²⁸

The role of women missionaries in popularizing Christianity among the disabled population in India was massive. They traveled through villages, visited homes of the disabled, and tried to get to know the local customs related to disability in India. Women missionaries like Mrs. Sherwood had in various instances, stated that there was a prevailing habit of killing disabled children because they were considered a burden on the family.²⁹ Many missionary narrations about 'wolf boys' and 'jungli' children' were all references to children who were abandoned by their parents due to their disabilities.³⁰ Blind and the physically disabled were valued based on their ability to make money from the streets through begging. These disabilities were deemed as sources of revenue where the disabled were exploited and commercialized. However, children with mental disabilities were abandoned by their families.³¹ The mentally disabled were considered 'useless' whose dependence sought more attention and was troublesome to the families. Women missionaries used to pick them from streets and residential places to house them in orphanages.

Just like abandonment and forced begging, infanticide of a disabled girl child was a common trend. Miss Hewlett who worked among the blind, wrote in her account that she witnessed such an incident where a blind girl child was abandoned by her family in a street to die. The villagers were not ready to help the child because they thought the child's disability would bring them bad luck. The child was rescued by missionaries after two days but sadly died due to starvation and exposure.³² Realizing this trend among the native families, women missionaries in their *zenana* missions used to preach about the value of life, especially of the disabled.³³

5. Disability as Divine Suffering: Story of Wiran

Miss Hewlett also talked about Wiran in her journals, a paraplegic Christian converted disabled and the aunt of a young educated man named Pratab, whom Hewlett met in a train journey.³⁴ Wiran was disabled when she was just an infant by falling from the roof. She was fondly loved by her nephew and through him, she learned to read. Hewlett wrote that reading the Bible was the only pleasure in her life then. Hewlett used the term 'invalid' to denote Wiran, to explain her physical disability, and wrote that through her conversion, her existence became 'valid.' Colonial missionaries like Hewlett looked at the disabled as 'invalid people' who needed saving from their 'horrible' state of life. The only way they could be saved was through learning the Christian way of life.³⁵

Missionaries like Hewlett advocated the idea of 'divine suffering.' Wiran's story is the best example of how missionaries incorporated her suffering into her 'supposed divinity.' Wiran was orthopedic disabled who used to question life and its purpose and was in deep thought about her disability. She learned about the Bible through her nephew Pratab. Hewlett wrote, Wiran's disability was 'darkness' and she would come to light when she converts to Christianity. Just like Wiran, Pratab also was growing dissatisfied with his religious ways of treating the disabled and slowly turned to Christian scriptures. With the help of Pratab, Wiran received the Bible from the missionaries. Hewlett stated that the reason why Wiran was attracted to Christianity was due to her disability, and the Bible answered her questions about sin, life, death, grace, and blessing. Pratab attributed her sharpness to her disability and looked at her intellect as something given by God to compensate her physical condition. This was another idea propounded by missionaries in Colonial India, where disability was attributed to special intelligence, and that intelligence is related to the grace of God. Wiran's Bible in possession was confiscated by her brother and the entire family asked Pratab to leave the family for covering her 'wrongdoing.' Later Missionaries found Wiran in a deprived condition, denied of the basic necessities, avoided and neglected in her own house. After a long legal battle, Wiran was removed from her house with the help of missionaries and lady doctors. She converted to Christianity later and died due to her illness.

Missionaries preached about bodies, whether disabled or abled in terms of 'failing' and 'broken,' and associated life with suffering. They also preached that those who suffer hardship in life are loved by God, and added that God chooses weak people to love because their minds and faith are strong enough to hold the 'burden of the disability.'³⁶ They also advocated that God

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never gave humans anything more than they can bear and people with disabilities were special to live through the sufferings and trials. This attempt to associate pain and suffering with divinity attracted many disabled people to Christianity.

6. Aid from Translation, Technical Invention and Conversion

To teach and preach Christianity to the disabled, colonial missionaries sought the assistance and support of technological inventions like signs and scripts. They translated the Bible into blind scripts like Moon, Lucas, and Braille. Missionaries translated the Moon scripted Bible of St. Matthew in Urdu from London in 1873 to teach blind students in the mission orphanages.³⁷ Later, the Bible was translated into Moon scripts of Hindustani, Malayalam, Tamil, and three portions of Bengali, and Dr. Moon adapted Moon characters into Sanskrit, Telugu, and Panjabi.³⁸ All of which were used by the colonial missionaries printed extensively and distributed among families of the disabled or communities to teach about how Christianity dealt with disability.

Missionaries in Colonial India carefully talked about the process of conversion of the disabled who learned about Christian Scriptures. Missionaries like C. T. Hoernle, who taught the New Testament to the blind was supportive of conversion. Under his instruction, a blind boy who learned chapters from the New Testament and the whole gospel of Matthew using only his memory was converted to Christianity.³⁹ Sarah, the blind student under the care of Mrs. Dauble also converted after reading the Bible.⁴⁰ Mrs. Dauble used to teach her blind students Christian stories from the Bible in hope of more voluntary conversions and was quite proud of her girls being able to read them efficiently. She mentioned a blind girl Mary who read the gospel of St. John and converted to Christianity.⁴¹

Similar to Mrs. Dauble, Miss Annie Sharp also believed in converting the disabled to Christianity. It was under her mentorship that Miss Asho was converted. Miss Sharp stated that she was happy with the growth of Asho in terms of her faith. Asho became the missionary 'poster girl' for the 'newfound Christian hope' for the disabled. Under the care of Miss Sharp, along with Asho, many blind students from the Amritsar institution were converted to Christianity.⁴² Many young children like Ellen, a deaf-mute girl under the care of Mr. Baumann was baptized on the false belief that converting to Christianity could cure their disability. Miss Marial, another blind woman whose parents treated her badly due to her disability was converted to Christianity under the mentorship of Mrs. Askwith.⁴³ These inspirational stories of the disabled finding Christian faith and 'getting better' increased the popularity of Christian missions in India.

Disabled individuals who converted to Christianity faced harsh treatment from their families and neighborhood; it led to their marginalization, dehumanization, and exclusion by and within their family and social surroundings. At times, families of the disabled along with other children were converted. It was not only the popularity of Christianity that attracted the disabled and their families, the social acceptance of the disabled among Christian communities was higher when compared to other religious communities. Along with it, many were able to access education, medicine, and better living standards provided by the missionaries. For the disabled who were abandoned, a conversion meant having access to stable shelter to live.

However, many missionaries were hesitant to convert the disabled to Christianity due to the fear of local resistance. Miss Fuller, in 1880, recorded about an 18-year-old blind girl who wished to convert to Christianity. Miss Fuller stated that if the girl converted, the locals would accuse the missionaries of bribing her. Miss Fuller and other missionaries discussed the need for a home for the native women who converted and lost their homes, families, and friends. Accordingly, missionaries worked carefully on the question of conversion so that government, as well as local communities, did not hamper their larger agendas.

CONCLUSION

Missionaries attributed 'brokenness' to disability and preached that faith could heal disability which attracted the disabled population to Christianity in Colonial India. They popularized the idea of charity concerning disability and tried to integrate the disabled into conventional places of worship. They also advocated the idea of divine suffering, and sought the help of signs and scripts to spread Christian ideas. Even though the conversion of the disabled population was a common practice, missionaries were careful about it.

The missionary narrative of disability was always based on 'overcoming' stories and they transcended the disabled body and its pain into extraordinary or divine which created a religious perceptive of disability. Church in India promoted an image of the divinity of suffering and the miracle of healing among the disabled communities. When native religions placed disembodied and decontextualized knowledge of disability based on the idea that disability is the result of the sins of previous life, the colonizer introduced a religion that promised heaven to the sufferer. Christianity was appealed to as a religion committed to inclusion. Both the special education programmes and the charity work among the disabled were heavily adopted and implemented Christian values and the understanding of disability. Missionaries treated the 'other' disabled as something to be discovered, conquered, and as exotic curiosities.

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⁷ Book of John 9, 1: 3.

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¹⁰ Book of Luke, 4, 16: 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Book of Mark, 1, 40: 45.

¹³ Book of Matthew, 8: 5–13.

¹⁴ Book of Galatians, 4: 13–15.

¹⁵ Book of Mark, 7: 32–16.

¹⁶ K. Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 37–38.

¹⁷ Missionaries talked about a part in Luke 6: 6–11, Matthew 2: 9–14, and Mark 3: 1–6. Jesus saw a man having trouble with his daily life due to his paralyzed hands. When he was healed by Jesus, the first response from the crowd was awe, then fear. Upon witnessing the miracle of healing, the crowd wanted to kill the man accusing him of witchcraft. The New Testament mentions that it happened because the idea of Christianity was not familiar to people. Leupolt, *Memories*, 5.

¹⁸ Book of Corinthians, 1: 12.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Penny Frank, *The Church in Madras: being the history of the ecclesiastical and missionary action of the East India Company in the Presidency of Madras in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1904), 216, 313.

²¹ Ibid., 217.

²² Ibid., 216.

²³ Mrs. Sherwood, *Stories Explanatory of the Church Catechism* (Baltimore: Published Under the Direction of the Rt. Rev. Dr. Kemp, by the Protestant Episcopal Female Tract Society of Baltimore, 1823), 12.

²⁴ Christianity holds the idea that Christ was disabled. Nancy Eiesland's argues that after the resurrection, Jesus was disabled. She advocated that the "Imago Dei"—the image of Christ with pierced arms and legs on the cross is an embodiment of disability. This illustration was employed as a strategy to legitimize the argument that the disabled were undeniably 'special' to God as his 'son' was himself reborn in a scarred and disabled body after his crucifixion. N. F. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 12.

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