

# Medical Services Rendered by London Missionary Society in Tamil Nadu

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**Abstract** - In Travancore, the missionaries of London Missionary Society (LMS) made a significant contribution through their medical services. A native agency for Medical Missions was as important and necessary as for any other department of missionary operations. The medical services rendered by the missionaries of LMS were a boon for the poor and the downtrodden in Travancore. Their Health Ministry slowly broke down the middle wall of partition between the high and the low, the pure and the polluted.

**Keywords:** Missionary, London Missionary Society, Medical Services, Tamil Nadu.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The London Missionary Society was established in September 1795 in England. Rev. David Bogue took the leading part in its founding. The constitution of the Society was thoroughly catholic and the first missionary sent to India by the Society in the year 1798 was Rev. N. Forsyth. He came to Calcutta and settled at Chinsurah, twenty miles north to the city of Calcutta where he continued his work until 1812. The London Missionary Society was the first to establish mission and work in Madras.

The first missionary sent to Travancore by LMS was William Thobias Ringeltaube a German Lutheran who commenced his work in 1806. Colonel C Macaulay was the British resident at the court of Travancore. He was a good friend to Ringeltaube and supported his missionary work. He helped Ringeltaube to get permission from the Rajah of Travancore to purchase land for the construction of church at Myladi. He was forced to face so many difficulties before a permanent settlement in Travancore. In 1818, Rev. Charles Mead took charge of the ministry and Rev. Richard Knill also joined with him in September of the same year. The early missionaries entered the work with great spirit and enterprise. They opened a Seminary for training the native youths and carried out periodical visitation of the congregations and villages. Rev. Mead was called as the "Father of South Travancore Mission". He laid the foundation stone for the Nagercoil chapel on 1 January 1819 and he established a Theological School.

In Travancore, the missionaries of LMS made a significant contribution in establishing the medical facilities. Their medical services to the poor and the affected people helped them to accept Christ. They wanted to have close contact with the natives which made them to start a medical mission at Travancore. The Government of Travancore recognized the medical mission and provided large

concessions and donations to the LMS. The starting of medical mission at Neyyoor was the commendable work of Rev. Mead, the pioneer missionary.

## II. MEDICAL SERVICES OF DR. RAMSAY AND DR. LEITCH

The first medical missionary sent to Travancore was Dr. A. Ramsay who was a pioneer in western medicine. His arrival laid the foundation for the modern allopathic system of practice in South Travancore by establishing a hospital at Neyyoor in 1836. The medical mission that was started at Neyyoor was later shifted to Nagercoil in 1839, which was the headquarters of Kanyakumari district. Ramsay set up small thatched huts with the help of Rev. Mault, another missionary of LMS. But it was inadequate to accommodate the patients and hence he wanted to construct a better building. The people of that locality and from other parts of Travancore were attracted by his service. People of all castes including the Brahmins came to him. Ramsay attempted to build a permanent hospital at Nagercoil and this created a misunderstanding among the missionaries. Following a controversy, Ramsay resigned in 1840 and after that, the medical mission was in a state of disorder. However, after the continuous efforts of Rev. Mead the medical mission was restarted in 1853. He was treated with respect by Her Highness the *Maha Rani* and he was given the protection and favour. At Nagercoil, he was granted a compound with house by Her Highness.

After the retirement of Mr. Mead, C.C. Leitch took charge of Neyyoor on 7 March 1853 and he re-established the medical mission at Neyyoor centre. He sent his first report in March, 1854 in which he stated that 5,318 patients including 1,332 women had been treated. At the dispensary, the Brahmins and Nairs, with their female family members sat near the persons of the lowest castes. They used to listen to the brief address from the scripture, which always prefaced the work of healing. Neyyoor became the head quarters of South Travancore medical mission. In August 1854, Mr. Leitch was drowned while bathing at Muttam, five or six miles from Neyyoor, and for a second time the mission was deprived of its qualified medical head.

## III. MEDICAL ENDEAVOUR OF DR. JOHN LOWE

C.C. Leitch was succeeded by Dr. John Lowe who reached Neyyoor on 21 November 1861. He sent his first report to the Mission in 1861, in which he mentioned that 2629

patients were treated with the annual expenditure of Rs. 835. His service marked a new era in the mission and during the seven years of his service, 50,000 persons passed through the dispensaries. He opened a hospital at Neyyoor and established three branches.

#### ***A. Training for Medical Assistants***

A native agency for medical missions was as important and necessary as for any other department of missionary operations. The examination of the patient and prescribing of medicine were only the first stage of cure. There must be preparation and dispensing of drugs, in the hospital and there must often be serious surgeries in which trained help was essential to success. The after treatment and nursing was frequently as important as the surgery itself. Every medical missionary felt the necessity of training one or more native helpers to assist in his or her routine work. In November 1864, a class was commenced for the study of medicine and surgery. John Lowe, the then medical missionary trained few young men as assistants or dressers. They were sent to work throughout the mission by means of branch dispensaries. The class consisted of eight missionary students and one private student. They were supported by His Highness the First Prince of Travancore. All the young men received a good English education and they treated their patients with kindness and diligence.

John Lowe sent the best of them to be in charge of the branch hospitals at Santhapuram, Agasteeswaram and Attoor. One of these men, Thavithoo was also trained to vaccinate against small-pox. He went about vaccinating and distributing tracts on the prevention of small-pox. Outbreaks of cholera and small-pox were annual events which carried away many people. During the seven years of Dr. Lowe's service in Neyyoor, over 11,000 people were vaccinated. This was the nucleus of the Community Health Programme of the Medical Mission. To know the views of the students regarding their work, a report was collected from them. During Dr. Lowe's superintendence, the Rajah of Travancore became so interested in the medical work that he aided it by an annual grant.

#### **IV. Dr. THOMSON AND HIS SERVICES**

Dr. Thomas Smith came to Neyyoor as a medical missionary in 1873 and he was a man of great energy, strong faith, and energetic temper. The hospital soon became too small for the work and hence he added a second hospital equal to the first one. The Maharajas helped the missionaries to establish hospitals and dispensaries. In 1874, the Travancore government handed over an old rest house at Tittuvilai in South Travancore to the missionaries. They met the entire cost of 877 rupees to convert it into a dispensary. Again in 1878, the government gave an old salt store to the mission at Kulasekharam. The Maharaja also granted 200 rupees for a new building at Neyyoor Hospital. In addition, the retired Diwans such as Nanu Pillai and

Rama Rao supported the medical mission. In 1883, Nanu Pillai laid the foundation stone of the mission dispensary in Attur. Rama Rao, after his retirement requested the missionaries in South Travancore to extend more medical service for the poor and the afflicted. He donated a dispensary along with some paddy fields to the mission. In the enlarged hospital at Neyyoor Dr. Thomson and his assistants annually treated more than 20,000 patients. He was equally successful in the development of the medical training school. Dr. Thomson was full of missionary zeal, no less than of enthusiasm for his profession. In July, 1884, Dr. Thomson died after only a few days' illness. He passed away in the full vigour of manhood, and in the midst of most important and most successful work. Thousands of grateful hearts in Travancore thanked God for his services, and thousands mourned his death.

#### **V. Dr. SARGOOD FRY'S WORK AMONG THE LEPROSY PATIENTS**

After the demise of Dr. Thomson, Dr. Sargood Fry came as a medical missionary. During his period big spacious buildings were built for the hospital at Neyyoor. After twenty years of hard work as a monument of his skill in design, he completed the new building. Another class of students was trained by him and he trained and appointed Miss. Macdonald as the lady medical superintendent. She quickly found the need for the nurses and midwives in the centre and also in the branch dispensaries. She appointed nurses and midwives after building a new maternity ward.

The Maharaja of Travancore and several rich nonchristians came forward with substantial financial contributions for the construction of the building. His medical service was very commendable because of his service towards the lepers. On 8 September 1888, a separate home for the leprosy patients was opened at Allancode, two kilometers north of Neyyoor. The dread of infection and the disgrace attached to the disease made those who were affected by it as objects of horror. Those found suffering from leprosy were thrown out of their homes and chased out of the towns and villages. Most of them had no other choice except to beg and even this was not easy as they were literally driven out of the streets by the frightened people. Moved by the appeal of such helpless beggars, Dr. Fry launched the Leprosy Mission of mercy and courage providing accommodation for ten to twelve sufferers. In this he was helped by the Mission to Lepers and soon this Home became an asylum for men and women suffering from leprosy.

The first block of buildings which could accommodate twenty patients was opened on 11 August 1892. Since then, Mrs. Charles Pease, a benevolent friend of lepers from England had given the entire sum necessary to complete the whole scheme of buildings contemplated, which includes separate rooms for forty in-patients, chapel, houses for attendants, dispensary, mortuary and a well. She made

herself responsible for the whole work among lepers and their children. The Diwan of the State, Shankara Subaiyar who was invited to open the new building, paid high tribute to the missionaries for the work they were doing for the benefit of the poor and the oppressed. He considered the work among the lepers deserved unmeasured praise.

A home for the healthy children of leprosy parents was started in March 1891. The need for such segregation was brought to the missionaries in a very painful manner because of the child of the cook in the leprosy home who was allowed to play with the patients in spite of warnings of contracting the disease. In this Home, the healthy children of leprosy parents grew up free from contagion along with other orphan children. Further, on 1 January 1901, a separate home was opened by Dr. Fells in Neyyoor for the women patients and this again was the gift of Mrs. Charles Pease. Greater love than this no one had shown to these miserable beings.

#### ***A. Lady Medical Missionaries and the training of Nurses***

Towards the close of Dr. Fry's period of service at Neyyoor, another significant advance was made. Miss. Macdonnell, a fully qualified nurse was sent by the LMS to Neyyoor in 1892 for developing nursing care of the patients. Before that, the patients were left to the care and mercy of their ignorant relatives. It was earlier even in the countries like England, the social condition was against young women taking to nursing. In South Travancore, only married women above forty and widows could be recruited. Miss. Macdonnell organized the nursing section and became the first Nursing Superintendent of the Medical Mission. A new maternity ward was built by her efforts, offering privacy to women. After the arrival of Edith Mills and Eileen Pidcock, this department of Nursing had a new life. They trained the young men as nurses and for the first time in 1930, five of the students were trained by them. They passed the Nursing Examination conducted by the Christian Medical Association of India.

### **VI. DR. T.H.SOMERVELL**

Dr. Theodore Howard Somervell a surgeon, mountaineer, painter and medical missionary spent nearly forty years working as a missionary doctor in India. Dr. Somervell, the senior surgeon came to serve in Neyyoor after taking part in the adventurous attempt to reach the top of Mount Everest. He played a vital role in introducing modern medicine to South India as the leading light of Neyyoor hospital, South Travancore Medical Mission, set up by London Missionary Society. Dr. Somervell took charge of the medical mission at Neyyoor in 1923. The two goals set before him were to have the work entirely under a capable Indian Christian Staff and to have the Church take over more responsibility. When he came to Neyyoor, the hospital had over 200 beds and new buildings. The private wards were constructed by Ramanathan Chettiar of

Kottayur, because a serious operation had been successfully performed for his wife.

In 1930 Dr. Somervell introduced radium for the treatment of cancer and Neyyoor hospital was the only one in India to have a cancer ward. A new laboratory, consulting room and the Indian Nursing Home were opened by the *Maha Raja* in 1933. With an anonymous gift from England, a new cancer ward for men was constructed. In the central part of the campus chapel in Indian style was constructed by the Somervell family in memory of his father. The whole condition of the work was very different from what was twenty years ago. The Nursing equipment was better, water was supplied on all wards and sanitation much increased. The number of patients had increased within the last twenty years. There were operation theatre and labour room in the hospital and, the Neyyoor hospital was well equipped with all medical facilities.

#### ***A. Prayer and Healing***

Dr. Somervell had written an incident in his work *Knife and Life in India* related to prayer and healing. A schoolmaster had developed tubercular disease of the tibia and the larger of the two bones of the lower leg had apparently been affected by a secondary infection. The leg got worse and the patient was going down in general condition. Amputation was advised several times, but the man refused. Finally, the condition of both legs was getting worse. Dr. Somervell sent the X-ray picture of his leg to a very good surgeon in another part of India. The opinion of the other doctor confirmed that the leg was incurable and amputation offered the only chance of life. The man said as "*Will you let me keep my leg for three weeks? I don't believe it is God's will for it to be lost, and I am going to pray about it. If it is not better in three weeks, you can take it off*". He went home, feverish, flushed and ill. Three weeks later, he went back to the hospital to see the doctor. He certainly was looking much better and was actually putting the foot on the ground with the aid of a stick. X-ray picture showed that bone was remarkably improved. But he was not yet freed from the disease and his general condition was amazingly good. He told the doctor as "*he was sure it was against God's will that His servants should suffer in this way*". He gathered his family members and some of his friends and asked them to pray for his leg. The patient few months later walked and played games and witnessed to the power of God to heal and to save.

### **VII. CONCLUSION**

The medical services acted as a catalyst to speed up the process of leveling of society. Sickness and disease which know no barriers of caste or status were bringing people together within the hospital walls, even if it was for short periods: There lived in the same room in the hospital for nearly two months a young Brahmin and his mother, a *Sudra*, his wife and brother, a *Shanar* and his mother besides patients of other castes who were admitted for

shorter periods. The missionaries of LMS could do their best by rendering medical services to all people. Through these services they evangelized and brought many people to the fold of Christianity. They were able to build hospitals and train health assistants and nurses which ultimately improved the health status and well being of the natives.

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