

Women in the Indian Church

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The Church in India, except for the various branches of the Syrian Church, is not an indigenous growth. It has been planted here by missionaries from the West and has consequently inherited both the strength and the weakness of the parent stem from which it has sprung. Moreover, in the case of most of the Reformed Churches, the missionary movement was at its height during the Victorian era and, as a result, many of the prejudices and traditions of that time were brought to India along with the timeless Gospel and faith in the eternal God. Only the other day an Indian Bishop remarked that if you wanted to see the Church as she was in the days of good Queen Victoria, you should look to India rather than to England! We have only to read the novels of eighteenth-century England to realize that in those days professional education for women was almost non-existent and that such Church activities as educated ladies were allowed to engage in were exceedingly amateur. This is the background from which most of the early missionaries came and it was this tradition, coming not only from England but also from many European countries and from America, that was first grafted on to Indian society. Since then there has been a complete revolution with regard to the position of Indian women in the outside world, their education, professional status, etc., with which the Church has not altogether kept pace. At the same time in some important respects—e.g. marriage and the relation of the sexes, the extent to which parental control must still be accepted even by highly educated wage-earners, and so forth—Indian society has remained more or less static and much of this appears to be supported by Christian tradition. It is this somewhat complicated and often contradictory situation which forms the background to any consideration of the contribution of Indian women to the life of the Church, since that is necessarily conditioned both by the state of society in which they live and the traditions which they have inherited from abroad.

After the first meeting of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948, a Commission was set up under the chairmanship of Miss Sarah Chakko, entitled *The Life and Ministry of Women in the Church*, which attempted to make a comprehensive survey of the ministry of women, their position and status, the scope of their work and their contribution to the whole life

of the Christian community throughout the world. The urgency of this matter had come to the World Council at Amsterdam along two different lines: i.e. the richness which women's groups and organizations were bringing to the life of the Church side by side with a great sense of frustration that, in these days of rapid change, the Church as a whole was not making the most of women's gifts and abilities. It was the realization that these two kinds of experience must be brought together which led to the formation of the Commission but, as its work proceeded, two things became evident. First, that the life and ministry of women could not be separated from that of men, and, secondly, that it could not be studied apart from the society which surrounds the Church. Consequently, at Evanston, the Commission was reconstituted as the Department on the Co-operation of Men and Women in Church and Society, a cumbersome title if ever there was one but definitely expressive of something fundamental to our Christian thinking. The functions of the Department were then defined as follows:

1. To interpret the relations between men and women on a Christian basis.
2. To stimulate women to take their full place in the life of the Church.
3. To secure an ecumenical outlook in Women's Organizations.

It will be seen from this that the scope of the Department was made exceedingly wide, its purpose being to integrate the life and work of Christian women, from each aspect and at every level, with the whole life and work of the Church to which they belong.

At the first conference organized by this Department in the summer of 1955, a comprehensive survey was made of the work of women in the Church in many parts of the world and it soon became clear that there were two main trends to be taken into consideration. First, from America, came the tale of how their women, accustomed to the fullest freedom and equality in every other sphere of life, have attempted to overcome their frustration in Church life by developing very powerful and extremely wealthy Women's Auxiliaries, running parallel to the Church, financing their own missionary work, founding colleges, schools, hospitals, etc., and being in most ways entirely independent of their parent body. It seemed as if in most Churches, far from there being neither male nor female, the One Body of Christ was divided into men and women working in separate spheres through different organizations. Among the Continental Churches, on the other hand, there were practically no women's organizations (apart from the interdenominational ones such as the Y.W.C.A.) and there seemed to be a deep sense of frustration among many Christian women who felt they were regarded by the Church only as inferior and semi-capable beings. Women who stood high in their

professional careers or who had staked their all in resistance movements during the war felt themselves to be rejected by the Church because of the dead hand of past tradition. In Britain, the situation seemed to veer between these two extremes, the Church of Scotland, for instance, inclining strongly towards the parallel organization, while many of the Free Churches were making a much fuller use of the ministry of women, with the Anglican Church as usual sitting on the fence! One felt compelled to ask this question: Can the Church in India move steadily towards a greater and more comprehensive use of women, with all their gifts and abilities, and at the same time integrate their ministry fully with the life of the Church, thus avoiding both the sense of frustration and the danger of feminism? In order to answer this question it is necessary to consider the position of Indian women today, both in society as a whole and in the life of the Church.

It is certainly true that Indian women owe their present degree of emancipation to Christian education since the Church and the Christian community as a whole were pioneers in this respect. For this reason Christian women in India were the first to enter into certain fields of activity which have now come to be regarded as peculiarly suitable for women, e.g. teaching, nursing, ministering to the needs of women and children, etc. It is undoubtedly true that, even thirty years ago, the majority of Indian women in the medical or teaching professions were Christians. Today non-Christian women have caught up with their Christian sisters in this respect, but how much of this rapid progress do they owe to the existence and influence of Christian schools and colleges? Most of the women who blazed the trail along this path of service to their Church and country belonged to a generation who had foregone marriage in order to devote themselves more completely to their vocation as teacher, doctor or nurse. This generation is now gradually dying out since it has become possible for married women to follow almost any profession but the Church will undoubtedly be the poorer for the loss of this single-hearted devotion given in and through so many Christian institutions.

Meanwhile a new need has arisen which is leading educated Indian women into new and often difficult paths of Christian service. In November 1948 an inter-denominational conference was held in Madras on the Life and Ministry of Women in the Church which was sponsored by the Commission of the World Council of Churches already referred to. Here great emphasis was laid on the need for educated and trained leadership in the villages and the practical difficulties most Indian women felt in answering this call. Not the least of these was the reluctance of their parents to allow them to enter a field of service for which there seemed to be no provision of security nor adequate recognition by the Church. It was in fact a vicious circle since the

Church would do nothing until a supply of women was forthcoming and the women would not offer until the Church showed signs of wanting them. Out of this situation there has arisen in the Church of South India an Order for Women who, having been duly selected, trained and commissioned by the Church, are now engaged in all forms of Church work. These Sisters of the C.S.I. do not take vows of celibacy but they cannot be fully commissioned until they are over thirty years of age and are accepted only on the basis of a real and tried sense of vocation. They have grown steadily in number from twenty-seven to sixty during the last six years and the Order has never been without at least three or four probationers. Their work varies enormously in scope as they themselves vary in their educational attainments. The main point is that the Church has recognized and set her seal upon this ministry for women and the women have been given the opportunity to make their particular contribution to the life of the Church and to enter into positions of real leadership in ways not open to them before.

All this, however, concerns only the minority of women who are able to undergo special training and desire to identify themselves wholly with what is technically known as 'Church work'. What about the vast majority, mostly married, educated and illiterate, living in the towns and villages of our land? Have they no contribution to make to the life of the Church? Far from it, for they are often the backbone of the Christian congregation. Here undoubtedly much has been done and much more could be done through the various women's organizations. The chief problem lies in the extent to which so many of these women are wholly or partially illiterate, living often at or below starvation level and entirely taken up with the struggle for existence for themselves and their families. Yet even against all these odds real progress has been made through systematic teaching following a carefully thought-out syllabus, applied at every point to village conditions, which includes instruction through the media of lyrics, action songs, kummi, dramas and such-like. Even annual oral examinations for wholly illiterate village women have been successfully undertaken and have provided a great opportunity for the town ladies to go out at least once a year to some near-by village and gain practical experience of its problems and its charms! Moreover it is a great mistake to neglect the gifts of potential leadership that are often to be found in people who can neither read nor write. A number of years ago, in some of the villages of Andhra, the experiment was tried of having Women Elders, chosen by the Christian women and duly appointed by the Pastor in the presence of the whole congregation. The choice was invariably good and in many cases the Women Elders did wonderful service among the women and children, bringing them to Church, healing quarrels, encouraging Christian giving and even sitting on panchayats when they were dealing with cases of immorality where women were concerned. Now in many

areas such women are being brought in to various centres to take part in courses for lay leaders from the villages and we are realizing more and more that the Church of rural India must look to its own sons and daughters for the leadership it so sorely needs.

Another aspect of Christian work in which women have been to the fore is that represented by the Christian Home Movement: It is a deep-rooted Indian tradition that the woman is the spiritual head of the family and there are various ceremonies in a Hindu home, such as the daily lamp-lighting ritual, which are always performed by the mother. After the big International Missionary Conference held at Tambaram in 1938 the following sentence appeared in the report: 'There are no two institutions which need each other so much as the Christian Church and the Christian home,' and it is on the solid basis of Indian custom and tradition that much of our teaching on Christian marriage and family life has been securely laid. The Indian Church certainly owes a great deal to the Christian teaching, the practice of daily prayer and Bible reading and the example of a truly Spirit-filled life given by countless wives and mothers in their homes. In these days of rapid change, when the old pattern of family life is dying out and so many wives and mothers are also professional women, it will be a terrible loss to the Church if the influence of Christian homes with their family prayers and regular habits of worship is allowed to dwindle and die. Husbands and fathers undoubtedly have a big part to play too but the lead will rest with the women.

Yet another notable contribution to the life of the Church has often been made by the wives of ministers, evangelists and other Church workers. It would be impossible to overrate the quiet and unassuming share which many women have taken in their husband's ministry, especially among the women and in the villages. Sometimes real gifts of leadership have emerged in most unexpected directions and a very real partnership in work for the Kingdom has ensued. On rare occasions it has been the wife who proved to be the moving spirit and I have known of at least one instance where quite a considerable movement of caste people into the Church had begun through the work of the Pastor's wife among the Sudra women. The tremendous potentialities of such work were fully realized by the late Bishop Azariah when he first started the systematic training of the wives of the ordinands at Dornakal which has since been adopted in many other theological colleges. People living in Dornakal used to say that they could set their clocks by the sight of Mrs. Azariah setting off under her big umbrella at the hottest time of the day to take the women's classes while the husbands stayed at home to mind the children! Once again here is an important contribution to the growth of the Church which is largely lost today in our changing pattern of life. Owing to economic pressure it is no longer possible for an educated wife to remain unemployed and in the pressure of trying to run both a professional career and a family how much time and energy is there left to share in her husband's

ministry? Much has been said and written about 'unpaid curates' both in India and elsewhere but to my certain knowledge there were scores of women who gloried in their vocation as the wives of Pastors and village teachers.

Have Indian women given of their best to the Church and has the Church made the fullest use of their ministry? As usual the answer seems to be both Yes and No. We have seen that much has been done but there seem to be two ways in which lies failure. Of all the Christian women receiving higher education in India today, how few, how terribly few, feel the call to a life of Christian service. Does not this reflect the failure of Christian mothers in the greatest trust which God has given them? And if a Christian girl does desire to give herself and her gifts to the service of God, how much encouragement does she receive in her so-called Christian home from her professedly Christian parents? It is perhaps here more than anywhere else that Christian homes are failing to produce the atmosphere in which the saints of God can grow up to seek His will and answer His call. Again, among all the Christian women in Government service, how many, how tragically many, are completely out of touch with the Church? Does not this reflect the failure of our ministers and lay leaders to go out of their way to bring such people right into the Christian fellowship? Anyone who has had experience in organizing retreats for Christian women working in Government institutions can testify both to the difficulties and temptations which often beset them and to their real hunger for a living relationship with Christ. During the last two years a Christian Medical Fellowship has come into being in the Mysore State which has brought some of us into intimate contact with doctors, nurses, midwives and public health visitors whose living interest in the Christian religion and joy in Christian fellowship *when they can get it* is an inspiration and a reproach to those of us who enjoy it all the time, and we know that there are still about one thousand of such medical workers in the Mysore State alone who are practically untouched by the Church.

Does this failure to attract young women into specifically Christian service or to prevent them from drifting away from the ordinary Church life indicate a more deep-seated malady than mere indifference on their part and neglect on ours? In India as in all the world, the Church apparently holds the last ditch in the struggle for male superiority. In every other sphere women find themselves able to work side by side with men on a basis of complete equality even if the practical application of the work is slightly different. For instance we still have women's colleges, girls' schools, and hospitals that deal specifically with women and children but nobody ever suggests that women doctors, professors or teachers are in any sense less capable or less qualified than men of the same grade. Already in only ten years of independence, India has had women Ministers, Governors of States and diplomats, and has even been represented by a woman on the United

Nations Organization. Only in the Church are women debarred from partaking in a full ministry, side by side with men, a ministry which might well be different from but should certainly be complementary to the ordained ministry of whole Body of Christ. Can we honestly expect the *total* contribution of women to the life of the Church as long as this barrier remains? This is the crucial question which the Church has to face today, whether in the East or in the West, with ever-increasing urgency. Ours is the religion of the Incarnation with its complete redemption and sanctification of body, mind and spirit. Can this be reconciled with any doctrine which denies to one half of the human race any share in the highest form of Christian service on the grounds of inherent inferiority? If not, are reasons of practical expediency or emotional prejudice to be allowed to settle this matter for ever? There are questions which admit of no easy solution especially here in India where Hindu and Jewish ideas of ceremonial uncleanness still persist strongly in the Christian community. For instance in the Orthodox Syrian Church there are times when women are not even allowed to enter the Church building much less partake of Holy Communion because of physical impurity. Yet this is a living issue which cannot be continually shelved except at our peril. In our rapidly changing pattern of life, where insecurity predominates and Christian values are being challenged as never before, we must use to the full every source of spiritual strength that God has given us and the potential power lying virtually untapped in the hearts and minds of our leading Christian women is still unguessed because it has never been fully explored. At present almost every Church is hiding behind the fear of unilateral action and its repercussions on other Christian bodies. It is for the Church as a whole to see the vision of the greatly increased gifts and capabilities of women and to claim them for God with courage, insight and expectancy.

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The basic difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that the Buddha saw that life was meaningless in itself, and set out to rescue men from this meaninglessness. Jesus, on the other hand, saw that life could become meaningful in God and set out to call men to share that meaning. . . To attain Nibbana is to be rid of the sorrow and meaninglessness of life's constant becoming, to attain to Life Eternal is to attain to the state where Nibbana itself is fulfilled in the deathless perfecting of life's meaning.