Echos from the Past

In the twenty-first century, feminists still struggle to find a vocabulary sufficient to describe their sense of connectedness with each other across distance, class, culture, race, and religion. The second wave clergy called a ‘sisterhood’ pedagogical tool, but cracks, denying rather than acknowledging the lack of coherence in the category ‘woman’ or the ways in which power circulated through the politics of feminism and feminists. Women of colour, indigenous and majority world feminists resisted and dismantled the universal claims embedded in western religious middle-class theory and politics, successfully pluralizing feminisms (and a unitary ‘category of women’). In the 2010s, despite an ever intensifying global connectedness, ways of thinking about, building and naming cross-cultural and cross-racial feminist connections remains a fraught and difficult area of scholarship and politics. As feminist scholars of gender and imperialism, we find uncanny echoes of this contemporary dilemma in the history of women, missions and empire.

In our paper, we look back to a transitional moment in this history – itself part of the long durée of globalization – when new relational configurations were emerging that presaged a post-empire (if not post-colonial) global imaginary figured around relations of friendship rather than relations of ruling. We begin by sketching the changing dynamic within the missionary movement that inspired a push to conceive of the missionary enterprise in terms of friendship and mutuality rather than mastery, and locating the women’s missionary movement in relation to this. One of the questions our paper seeks to explore is the degree to which this shift in vocabulary involved a re-working of the notion of ‘sisterhood’ underpinning relationships between women in the mission field and the nature of such changes.

We explore this through a micro-history of the changing nature of the relationships between Indian and British missionary women in South India, against the backdrop of Indian nationalist and anti-colonial movements and later the inevitability of Indian independence and the departure of British authorities and British power. We discuss two case studies drawn from the lives of three women: the Indian Christian writer, Krupabai Sattyanarayanan; Eleanor Rivett, an Australian missionary; and her British counterpart, Eleanor McDougall, both of whom served as principal of the Women’s Christian Education College in Madras (now Chennai). We bring to the conversation ideas from the available (fragmentary) sources some idea of the range of relational possibilities between Indian and British women in the mission movement. The paper seeks to address this question from both sides of colonial relationship; how did Indian and western notions of friendship differ? To what extent were they culturally specific? How did British and Indian Christian women understand the nature of the relationships they built with each other in the mission of sisterhood? Furthermore, what understandings can be reached from an archive dominated by western accounts? In particular, we focus on how the word ‘friendship’ operates in these texts in ultimately ambiguous and complex ways to connote a range of connections rather than a singular notion of friendship.

“What we need are friends”

At the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, the first Indian Anglican Bishop, V. S. Azariah, issued an historic call for western missionary women to be trained as ‘missionary workers’. As friends to those whom they would meet, as equals to them, and as ‘comrades’ rather than ‘fathers and sons’. “You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS!” (315 emphasis in original). His plea was a direct appeal against “the problem of race relationships”, a problem he saw as among the most serious confronting the Church (306). Self-sufficiency and independence on the part of Indian Christian pastors and catechists was often frowned upon, indicative of a reluctance by the missionaries to make themselves unnecessary. This was despite a long-standing commitment among most Protestant missionary societies, to the ideal of a self-governing Indian church, an ideal most missionaries in South India espoused as the aim of fostering a strong local clergy and church-based organisation (see Williams, Collins, and Cox). As Azariah’s speech demonstrated, Christian missionaries tended to view themselves as superior to Indians whether Christian or not. The universality of Christian spirituality was imbued with that more parochial sense of racial superiority that formed the backdrop of empire. The spiritual mission of salvation went hand in hand with the hubris of the civilizing mission. Azariah’s speech, as Dana L. Robert (100) points out, was not only a criticism of missionary racism; but an expression of his own belief in the possibility and power of cross-cultural friendship to fulfil the spiritual ambitions of an evangelistic religion. A religion that sought a world communion of believers was necessarily multicultural in its composition. In the decades following the Conference, new vocabularies of mission based on cross-racial friendships informed the international mission movement.

The rhetoric of the British women’s missionary movement was couched somewhat differently, in the language of sisterhood rather than the overtly maternal language of mother/daughter (father/son) as scholars such as Susan Thorne, Rhonda Sempke and Elizabeth Prevost, amongst others, have demonstrated. Of course, sisters are ranked by age and maturity; the distinctions of which, when mapped on the civilizational line of colonialism, eroded the language of ‘age’ and assumed that the woman missionary was fit to ‘bring the light’. It became easier to label women regardless of age or status. But was this an issue of race status or religious expertise? And to what extent did it include an ability to forge meaningful friendships? Recently Elizabeth Prevost has usefully cautioned against a simplistic interpretation of mission relationships as always and only about colonial subjugation. Instead, she posits a need to historicize the mission of sisterhood suggesting that it would yield more complicated stories ‘of solidarity and empowerment as much as fragmentation and subjugation’ (244). Prevost argues that the women’s missionary movement post about 1860, constructed a ‘mutual space where spirituality and “sisterhood” could transcend distance, counteract secularization, and lessen the repressions of ecclesiastical, gendered, economic and colonial forms of subordination’ (292). We acknowledge the importance of building a more complicated picture of the mission of sisterhood, however, we suggest a notion of a continuum or spectrum where both solidarity and subjugation might be relatively intertwined.

Indian Christian Women and Women Missionaries in Relationship

In India, as in most other mission fields, Christian converts were crucial to the missionary effort; they provided the labour of mind and body through which the educational and proselytising efforts of the mission could be affected. While Christianity had ancient roots in the religious mosaic of pre-colonial South India, it was the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that witnessed the emergence of a numerically significant and distinctive Indian Christian presence in the region. Most of these converts were drawn from the lower castes of the pre-colonial religious based political economy. Converts from high caste communities, especially Brahmin, were few and far between. It is only with the opening up of training schools, provides a training ground for the graduates of these schools and their mothers, and in ‘zonaie vision’ – an outreach of preaching and education to mainly higher caste women and girls in their homes. It was the ‘bible women’, primarily drawn from ex low caste Christian communities, who acted as the teachers, evangelists and missionaries working under the direction of the women missionaries who formed a crucial component of the missionary effort.

The nature of the relationships forged between the ‘lady missionary’ and the ‘bible woman’ under the rubric of ‘sisterhood’ are difficult to capture historically except through the gaze of the missionary interlocutor, embedded in the archival records of Missionary Society correspondence, reports and publications, occasionally enriched by more personal correspondence lurking amongst official records; and the memoirs and autobiographies of serving missionaries. Rarely are the bible women’s own voices heard, except in translation as part of a missionary discourse. What is clear from the missionary texts is that the bible women were usually in a relationship of ‘superintendence’ with the missionary women, which set any ‘friendship’ with the missionaries as secondary (except when needed in the cadres of an imperial feminist movement). The relationship was that of a ministering mother/daughter. Occasionally, however, another realm of connection and engagement is hinted at, in the relationships occasionally forged between Christian women from formerly high caste families and famous missionaries. Even rarer in the South Indian context, is a historical text
superiority. The placing of the vocabulary of 'race' and colour with her mother in the novel, hints at Krupabai's awareness of a generational shift in compassions that her colleague had received a Bible Woman in the drawing room rather than the kitchen, Saguna, who knew this woman as a friend.

During a stay with two female missionaries, both of whom supported her sister's zenana work, Saguna has a tempestuous relationship with Miss Roberts, a rather temperamental personality it seems, explained by her colleague in terms of her being Irish. At one point, when Miss Roberts claims that her colleague had received a Bible Woman in the drawing room rather than the kitchen, Saguna, who knew this woman as a friend, exploded:

"In the kitchen?" I said, in amazement and indignation. I was angry, and thought of many grievances that I had heard spoken of. I had also heard that we were the real aristocrats of our country and that the English ladies who came to India only belonged to the middle class, and I resolved to tell her that, so I boldly added: "What do you think of us? We are the real aristocrats of this place." Unfortunately, I pronounced the big word wrongly, and she burst out laughing and repeated it again and again, as I had done. "I don't care. Anyhow, you are middle-class people. She is a Brahmin, and only takes money from the Mission because she is poor. She is no servant. In your country you are no Brahmins. You are Sudras." Tears fell from my eyes, and I felt as I should choose." (115)

In some ways, Krupabai's text gives little guidance in how to "read" Saguna's engagements with European missionaries and the women missionaries she stayed with. Superficially, she seems to prefer to claim her equivalence, even superiority, over the missionaries in terms of the codes of class and culture rather than race. Running through her account is a kind of gamesmanship; a continual parrying, which always ends amicably enough. In this sense, there is a sisterly quality about Saguna's engagements with Miss Roberts. Hence, although their quarrels are vehement, and Saguna's rejection of Miss Roberts' hierarchical relegation of herself and others as 'natives' never wavers, she can still 'love' her and value their time together. Saguna resists the conventional doctrine of mission imperialism. She does this by modelling cross cultural friendships bound around a secure sense of Indianess based in the universalisms of both brotherhood and the novel. She depicts an emotional range of sisterhood based on equivalence, merit and affection that confirms what Azariah had in mind. Is it a postcolonial voice? Perhaps not, but it is definitely revealing of how a young Christian Indian woman is able to think herself in ways that refugue the tension between the universal and the particular embedded in mission imperialism away from subordination and domination to a respectful interaction between spiritual equals and equivalent, if different, national subjects.

As noted above, with the dawning of the twentieth century, new and more liberal ideas of mission, crystallised at the Edinburgh conference, were coming into vogue. Some missionaries sought to better understand non-Christian religions (Singh 2000, p.180-1) and began to employ a discourse of friendship in relation to Indians. Susan Askland Khan has argued that increasingly American women missionaries in India 'presented themselves as allies, rather than as saviours of Hindu women' (Khan 2010, p.150). Missionary societies moved towards sharing scarce resources rather than competing against each other, working together in united missionary activities in schools and colleges, at least.

Records from the Women's Christian College (WCC), founded in Madras in 1915, provide the opportunity to explore how two women college principals and missionaries elaborated their relationships with their Indian women students, staff and colleagues over the period 1915-1947. As with the example of Krupabai Satthianthan, we see the complexities of a shared spirituality and apparent sisterhood, enabling solidarity but also often linked to subjugation.

The early twentieth century saw the rise of the professional woman missionary, highly educated and a trained educator, nurse or medical doctor (see Brouwer 2002: 45 (1973-1986), the founding principal of Women's Christian College, was one such woman, holding an M.A. in Classics from the University of London. She did some post-graduate work in archaeology at Cambridge, before becoming a lecturer at Westfield College in London in 1902 (see Eleanor McDougall) . Following upon the Edinburgh conference, the need for a Christian higher education institution for women in Southern India was mooted. In 1912, Eleanor McDougall was commissioned by the Continuation Committee of the Edinburgh conference (later the International Missionary Council), to survey higher education for women in India. She travelled around meeting 'all sorts of educationalists and Government officials' (The Sunflower 1938, p.5) and the subsequent report led to the establishment of the college in 1915. This was an ecumenical and international venture, supported financially by twelve women's missionary societies from Britain and the United States.

On her way to take up her position in India in 1915, Eleanor McDougall visited the contributing American missionary societies. She developed
relationships with influential American women who were able to access considerable funds to finance the growth of the college over a number of years. She seemed well-fitted to found a women's college and under her leadership, the Women's Christian College grew and prospered. Many of these women worked closely with well-educated and experienced nationalists and feminists. The membership of this organization was, as she put it, '80% Indian'.

McDougall came to India at the age of 42 years, she had already achieved a great deal in Britain and was in India to undertake the daunting job of establishing the college. She did not learn any of the languages of South India. She came to India with an agenda, namely to change Indian girls and women, to educate them and hopefully to convert them to Christianity, to help make them modern and 'freely' (McDougall, October 1934: p. 22) about the activities, the failures and fobles of her women students. She often sat in judgement of them, their families and their society, in the journals addressed to her own Western friends and to the college's supporters. Written in a chatty conversational style, with their discussion of the affairs of the students, converts and possible converts, these journals belong to a long tradition in missionary writing from the field to supporters at home (Johnston, 2003). In such accounts, as in McDougall's journals, it was possible to follow the fortunes of particular individuals as they wavered over the decision to convert, converted, and then negotiated the consequent social ostracism and possibly became a 'back-sider': returning their original faith. In missionary publications, these accounts would be concluded by a request for supporters to pray for these people's conversion and could often be the hinge for donations to the mission venture. (See Haggis n.d. and Haggis and Allen, 2005)

Her accounts lack respect for the agency of her students and former students. Thus in May 1934, she wrote of a recent graduate who had expressed an interest in Christianity:

[One] about whom I wrote about last time, Varada is marrying into a rich North Indian family, very liberal and educated Hindu she tells me, who will give her a good deal of freedom. Her danger will be the difficulty of maintaining spiritual aspiration in such a mild atmosphere and of finding scope for her energies. (6)

McDougall had hopes that her student Roja, was coming near to converting, but wrote in a most disparaging manner about her father, 'a caste Hindu of good birth', continuing,

He has a grudge against his family and spends his days in reading the newspapers and neglecting the very charming and promising children who are growing up around him. (6-7)

Without Roja's knowledge, her family's business was being discussed with McDougall's friends in Britain and the United States. McDougall tightly restricted access to these journals in which the Indian women were written about (McDougall April 1933, p.1). However her attitudes were not to remain confined to a select circle.

In 1940 she wrote a book about her Indian years, entitled Lamps in the Wind. A strong theme of this volume was the notion that missionary educators like herself had sought to spread the light of Christianity and modernity to Indian womanhood, drawing here upon 'a standard missionary metaphor that depicted Christian civilization as a lamp illuminating the darkness of heathenism'. (Khan 2010, p.152)

The question was posed as to whether these lamps would grow in strength or would be blown out by the characteristic weakness of Indian society and Indian womanhood. According to some incidents already recounted there, McDougall represented Indian womanhood as weak and wavering, gullible, unable to be independent and self-sufficient and essentially 'deficient in strength of will and independence of opinion'. (McDougall 1940, p. 21) There was, she claimed, 'the longing, bred by centuries of over-sheltered life to evade responsibility', 'the mental habit of docility to the command of a man' along with 'the inert submissiveness to masculine domination' (9-10).

The publication of this book meant that now Indian women of WCC became more aware of the aspects of domination in McDougall's relationships with them. Reading this volume, the Indian staff of WCC were outraged and felt deeply betrayed by their former principal. Eleanor Rivett, the new principal reported that a number of the Indian senior college staff were:

deeply hurt by what is to them a picture of the Indian woman student which stresses her weaknesses unduly, and they consider the very personal details of actual and still remembered happenings in College constitute a breach of the confidence they have always given their greatly beloved Principal. (Rivett, 1940)

Margaret Hunt noted the reaction of an Indian colleague Sara Abraham, who was

in an explosion of distress about the book. It doesn’t, an Indian feels, do justice to Indian women… it seems to the Indian members of the Staff… that she has written entirely of exceptional incidents, not of the normal life of the College which really flows on very slowly… Miss McDougall doesn't do justice to Indian womanhood. ’(Hunt 1940, 40)

Eleanor Rivett (1883-1972) (Godden, 1988) McDougall's successor, who had to deal with the ensuing crisis, had different attitudes towards and relationships with her Indian students and colleagues. Susan Haskell Khan has suggested that 'Disagreements over the missionaries' relationship with Indian women often reflected generational differences.' (153) Certainly Rivett was only a decade younger than McDougall, but in her relationships with Indian women and men notions of solidarity appear to have a higher profile. It is important to emphasise that like McDougall she was described by Elizabeth George, an Indian member of staff, as 'the strongest link between the different generations of Staff and students' (George 1938, p. 19). As the contingent of Indian staff increased, they were often drawn from the ranks of former students. Elizabeth George had described herself as a WCC student and must have been greatly admired, even loved by her students and staff, but her relationships with the Indian staff were characterised by a certain aloofness, rather than a solidarity.

Rivett, an Australian, came to India in 1907, aged 24 years, as the principal of a girls' school in Kolkata. She studied Bengali and learnt a great deal about Bengali literature and culture. In contrast with the British, Bengal was the crucible of Indian nationalism in the first decades of the twentieth century, witnessing 'more fervent nationalist activity in the early decades of the twentieth century' (Singh 2000, 175). It was in this testing atmosphere and in the spirit of Edinburgh that Rivett laid the bases for her life's work and her relationships with Indian girls and women.

There were few conversions to Christianity here and missionaries could learn to work with influential people of nationalist beliefs. Indeed Rivett was very interested in the project of the Edinburgh conference. She embraced the policies of working with Indian Christians on a more equal basis and was a founder of the Young Men's Christian Association in Kolkata, which provided many opportunities for cross-cultural co-operation (Hovee 2001, 317).

Almost half of the students in her school were from non-Christian backgrounds and she largely respected their beliefs and their families. In the Bengal Women's Education League, (Southard, 1988) which she served as secretary from its beginning in 1927 until she left Bengal in 1937, she worked closely with well-educated and experienced nationalists and feminists. The membership of this organization was, as she put it, '80% Indian'. (Rivett, 1928) Such work in 'organisations under the leadership of middle-class Indian women' was part of the new missionary strategy (Khan 2010,
Her respect for non-Christian faiths also saw her deeply involved in committee work to develop booklets in Bengali for inter-faith religious services in schools. Rivett reflected on this cross-cultural experience:

Those who worked together over this compilation have found it a liberal education, to discover and to be mindful of the religious heritage of each member of the group in regard to thought and phrasing. (Rivett 1929, p.15)

Her Bengal experience made her aware that the rule of the ‘Britishers’ in India was limited, and she declared in 1926, ‘We must leave India, all of us,’ continuing:

Some – whose real understanding had been appreciated - would be invited back, possibly, but it would be to work under different conditions, in a different relationship. India has no use of superior persons, but did want friends alongside, who would work with her to enter her upon her rightful heritage. (Rivett 1926, 11)

The greater emphasis upon solidarity in her relationships with Indian people saw her abandon the confidential judgements that had characterised McDougall’s Principal’s Journals. In Rivett’s journals, which were printed in Madras and freely distributed to college staff, the note ‘For Private Circulation’ soon disappeared. Their tone focussed upon the achievements of the students and staff. In 1940, when her staff became aware of the harsh and unfaltering judgement in which she tackled the problem it presented and respected, fashion, arranging for all WCC staff to read it before convening a group discussion. Elizabeth George led this discussion and her comments were conciliatory, even-handed and respectful of McDougall, her long-time teacher and mentor. However she did suggest that McDougall did not understand Indian values and notions of family responsibility.

In pondering Indian women’s views of their relationships with these missionary women, it is important to note that much of the information about the nature of the relationships between McDougall and Rivett and their Indian students and colleagues come from missionary sources. We can only attempt to read Indian responses to them from fragmentary materials, chiefly from the laudatory publications issued by the college and students of the college on the occasion of each of these women’s retirement in 1937 and 1947.

When Eleanor McDougall, retired Elizabeth George wrote in a highly complimentary manner about her mentor: she ‘in every way treated us as her friends’ (George 1938, 19). As a senior staff member, she would have had access to McDougall’s journals and indeed referred to them in a positive tone as one of the means that McDougall used ‘to draw us nearer to each other and to strengthen our fellowship’ (19). However, as we have seen, she was more critical of McDougall’s categorical and public judgements upon the mind of the Indian woman when they were drawn together in Lamps in the Wind.

In a number of the Indian comments upon Eleanor Rivett, notions of co-operation of ‘friends alongside’, of solidarity more than domination and subjugation are prevalent. Thus Mary Masilamani commented, ‘My first impression was one of friendliness.’ (WCC, 33) Another commented, when the floods came in the college, ‘we found Miss Rivett just like one of ourselves, friendly, sympathetic, seeing the humorous side of the situation and laughing over it with us.’ (34) Finally Elizabeth George, wrote,

Yet we think of her more as a friend, to work with her was a delightful privilege, rather than as a leader, for she always trusted us with responsibility and made us feel at home with her as her co-workers. (32)

But even as we note the greater solidarity that permeated Rivett’s relationships, we need to remember that notions of friendship are subtle and various. Like McDougall, Rivett was part of a project to change Indian women and girls. When she retired back to Sydney, she could think back over her years at WCC, looking over the photo album of the college presented to her on her retirement (Long, c1947). The photographs of the class groups, of the college activities and of the staff were those of friends, but also images of what she and others had achieved in their work to create a modern Indian womanhood. We must wonder whether these friends at the college were friends in the same way and to the same extent as the women friends with whom she shared her summer holidays in the Indian hills, the single women missionaries from Australia and Britain and those she had known as a young woman in the Student Christian Movement and at the University of Melbourne.

Conclusion

These brief examples of Indian and British women’s texts that describe their sense of each other are shaped by the contexts the women found themselves within. Mrs Satthianadhan is not a ‘typical’ Indian Christian by virtue of her origins as a high caste Brahmin that reflected her sense of her and her family’s social status. This shapes Sagu’s sense of entitlement and awareness of class and status in the British society her missionary ‘sisters’ hailed from. Even Miss Roberts’ relegation of the Bible Woman to the kitchen is not straightforward evidence of racialised power, pure and simple. Her precise words, as written by Krupabai, were, ‘In England we receive them in the kitchen. She is no better than a servant, I laugh over it with us.’ (34) Finally Elizabeth George, wrote,

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Recognizing how class, caste, race and gender were refracted through the sense of Christian mission both Indian Christian and British women missionaries shared, does not mean we must suspect or refute the relationships forged by Indian and British women in missionary work. Rather, we argue these are a continuum or spectrum in which both solidarity and subjugation might be relatively intertwined, in complex and ultimately unanswerable ways. Eleanor McDougall’s more hierarchical approach probably worked to get the WCC established and to fund it. Rivett could imagine the end of colonialism and Indian authority and independence and worked with her staff to fit her students for that. For both, Indian women staff and students had a kind regard. The universalism embedded in evangelical Christianity’s conviction of ‘one unto Christ’ in a c1880-1920.’

References


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