

# WOMEN IN SOCIETY AND IN THE CHURCH OF TAMIL NADU\*

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## ABSTRACT

M. Baby Kamala shows that Tamil society, formerly matriarchal and pluralistic, is now patriarchal, and women in the society are in an ambiguous position. They are culturally voiceless and politically powerless. Customs and hardline practices suppress and oppress them. In arguing that women are victims both in society and in the Church, Kamala discusses such issues as low wages for women, inheritance laws, female infanticide, the dowry, and calls for a “discipleship of equals” as a new way of being Church in Asia.

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## Introduction

We are the Church. If our calling is to be one people of God, we need to ask what it means to be the Church in the contemporary society. Contemporary society is fragmented by discriminations of caste, creed, gender, and a host of other factors. God has created us in God's very own image and gifted us with our own capabilities so that we can become what we are called upon to become. As one people of God, it is our task to build up a community without such discrimination. In recent years, gender discrimination has become a matter of concern. Many gender-related issues are being addressed on many fronts. This research is a humble attempt to address the same issue in the context of the Church of Tamil Nadu, India.

The divine image is neither male nor female, neither white nor black, neither rich nor poor, high caste or low caste, but multi-colored and multi-gendered and more. We, the people, are God's visible representatives. Created in the Divine image, we are equal. We are integral members of the body of Christ. Our ministries are linked to the fulfillment of God's desire to reveal God's glory in us, as one people. As each member of the body of Christ allows the expression of Christ to come forth, the divine presence will be revealed.<sup>1</sup> Since women, too, are equally rooted in God's divinity, they need to actively participate in building up the Church. The late John Paul II, realizing the need for greater participation of women in the Church, asserted the dignity and rights of women as seen in the light of the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

It is in the light of these statements that I have chosen to undertake this study on the participation of women in society and in the mission of the Church in Tamil Nadu. However, in order to properly situate the study, it is essential that we have a clear picture of the situation of women in the Church of Tamil Nadu.

## Geographical Background of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is a state in the southern part of India, bordered on the north by the state of Andhra Pradesh, on the northwest by the state of Karnataka, on the west by the state of Kerala, and on the east and south by the

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1. Katherine M. Haubert, *Women as Leaders: Accepting the Challenge of Scripture* (California: MARC, 1993), 1.
  2. John Paul II, *Letter to Women* no. 1 (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1995).

Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean respectively. Tamil Nadu is situated on the southeastern side of the Indian peninsula. It has an area of 1,030,058 sq. km. The capital of Tamil Nadu is Chennai, formerly called Madras. Its population is 55,858,946. The state of Tamil Nadu is divided into 30 administrative districts, which in turn are further divided into smaller divisions and sub-divisions including a total of 17,272 villages. Its Legislative House has 235 seats. It is represented by 57 members in the central government of India. The state has a literacy rate of 63.72%. The people of the state speak Tamil, which is one of the ancient languages of India. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the majority of the population. Tamil Nadu has a 1000 km. long coastline and with its equatorial climate it permits year-round fishery and farming.<sup>3</sup> The people of Tamil Nadu, by and large, lead a relaxed lifestyle.

## Tamil Nadu: A Patriarchal Society

Tamil society has been a matriarchal, pluralistic, and secular society for several centuries in ancient India. But now it has become a patriarchal society in which women are in an ambiguous position.<sup>4</sup> They are described as *Peñkal veettin kankal* which means “women are the eyes of the home.” While on the one hand this reveals the important position of women in the home, on the other hand, it also seems to restrict them to the domestic front.

In ancient Tamil society, women were identified with the mother goddess and highly respected,<sup>5</sup> because women participate spiritually and bodily in the divine work of giving and nurturing life.<sup>6</sup> They were the real leaders and rulers of the community and during the time they were considered deities. The culture safeguarded this belief. But in the contemporary Tamil society, such respect for women has been lost. Today “women are victims,”<sup>7</sup> both in the society as well as in the Church. A large number of them are victimized daily. The father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi and other prominent Indian leaders and thinkers such as Jothirao Paboole, Periyar, and Bharathiyar

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3. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, “The Christian Lens,” *Vidyajyoti* 68, no. 4 (December 2004).

4. Israel Selvanayagam, *Tamil Nadu: Confrontation, Complementarity, Compromise* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 3.

5. Ibid. See also Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 84.

6. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching*, 85.

7. Selvanayagam, *Tamil Nadu*, 3.

played a significant role in bringing women into public life. These are a few supportive men in Indian society who were sensitive to the needs of women. Until now, women in Tamil Nadu continue to live with all sorts of hardships and work under varying difficult and disadvantageous conditions.

Today, there is a heightened awareness of the need to establish a more egalitarian relationship between men and women in Tamil Nadu. The roots of awareness lie in modern conceptions of the individual and the public. Society needs to achieve greater equality between men and women. While the future holds the promise of a better deal for women in Tamil Nadu, it is going to be a difficult process because they are still perceived to be subordinate in many ways.

Tamil Nadu is considered to be one of the fast developing states in India. The majority of the population of Tamil Nadu are Hindus who form 89% of the total population. The Muslims and Christians compose about 9%. In the field of education, Tamil Nadu has achieved 63.72% literacy. There is government support for primary, middle, and high school education as well as college and university education.<sup>8</sup> The 2001 census showed female literacy to be 73.5% in Tamil Nadu.<sup>9</sup>

## Culturally Voiceless and Politically Powerless

While the participation of women in some activities is moderately high in Tamil Nadu. C. V. Mathew, in his electronic article “The Church’s Role in Nation Building,” says that women involved in building a nation have to be deeply concerned with more foundational aspects, which are values and ideas.<sup>10</sup> Even though the constitution grants women equal rights with men, a strong patriarchal system denies those rights to them. The written laws become useless in the face of hardline practices and customs that suppress and oppress women. These customs and cultural norms make them second-class citizens.<sup>11</sup> The treatment given to women in the private and public spheres

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8. S. Krishnamoorthi et al., “Causes of Fertility Transition in Tamil Nadu,” in *Fertility Transition in South India*, edited by Christophe Guilmoto and S. Irudaya Rajan (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 231.
  9. *Ibid.*, 232.
  10. C. V. Mathew, “The Church’s Role in Nation Building” (accessed 25 December); available from <http://www.intersity.org/ism/download.ph?articleid=754&versionid=1644.2005>.
  11. Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women, *Status of Women and Empowerment* (accessed 10 January 2006), available from <http://www.TamilNaduwomen.org/manual1.htm>. All references are from this document henceforth referred to as TNCDW.

is ugly, inhuman, and cruel. Men want to occupy all the important positions in the society. Women are systematically and historically marginalized. They are economically resourceless, politically powerless, culturally voiceless, and socially defenseless. They are the last colony where men are the colonizers who subjugate and subordinate women for their own interests.

However, it cannot be denied that the government has launched several programs and schemes for women at the grassroots level in order to facilitate their participation in decision-making and their empowerment in the area of self-reliance and income-generation.<sup>12</sup> Barbara Harris-White, in her article “Gender-Cleansing,” explains the two government schemes in an effort to protect the women such as special awareness programs designed for adolescents: “cradle baby scheme”<sup>13</sup> and “girl child protection scheme.”<sup>14</sup> The government’s best achievement is that of putting women first in the state “self-help”<sup>15</sup> groups.<sup>16</sup> Women begin to realize their collective strengths and get organized. Women make progress in their positions, in their workplaces, and in their private and social lives. However, they still have multiple problems compared to men. Besides being in the work force they have to perform all household chores and childcare while their husbands rarely help. Such responsibilities prevent women from fully participating in other social and political life activities.<sup>17</sup>

While all these programs exist in the cities, they are very few and very far from the villages. There is hardly any support from the state in promoting the mother and child welfare scheme, or cradle baby scheme in the rural places. Women in the rural areas continue to be victims of female infanticide, forced

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12. Sunita Norohna, “Impact of the Beijing conference of Indian Women,” *In God’s Image* 21, no.1 (March 2002): 44.
  13. A cradle baby scheme is an indication of such thinking. The government launched the cradle scheme under which parents who did not wish to keep female babies could leave them in cradles kept at government reception centers.
  14. According to the Girl Child Protection Scheme (GCPC), parents who have opted for sterilization, while having no male child but one or two girls are given incentives, scholarships for their education, and a lump sum of money when the girls reach maturity.
  15. A group of 10 to 20 persons of similar economic class, generally poor and mainly women, form a cohesive group to improve their social and economic position through collective action. They are assisted by some non-government organizations (NGOs) and with a little government support.
  16. Barbara Harris-White, “Gender-Cleansing: The Paradox of Development and Deteriorating Female life Changes in Tamil Nadu,” in *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*, edited by Rajeswari Sundar Rajan (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), 148.
  17. Phoebe A. Tan, “Women’s Political Participation in the Philippines,” *In God’s Image* 21, no. 1 (March 2002): 27.

marriages, sexual exploitation, kidnapping, humiliation, and suicide, due to high dowry and a host of other social problems.

Globalization also has had adverse effects on women in Tamil Nadu. They are consumers and producers in the world market. As consumers, women are the targets of a host of dangerous products in a consumer culture, which reduces them to commodities. As producers, they are exposed to exploitation and occupational hazards. Globalization of culture promotes an image of woman, which is discriminatory, oppressive and male-oriented.

Israel Selvanayagam explains in his book *Tamil Nadu*, that women are victims both in the society and in the Church. Indeed, their untold sufferings and struggles go unrecorded. They are silenced in the name of cultural norms and values. They perform important tasks such as nurturing children, preparing food, caring for the family, keeping the house intact, and running special family events. Nevertheless, they are often reduced to mere objects and toys in the hands of men. A female child is almost a slave to the father in her parental home. When she grows up, she has to be paid for through a dowry in marriage to a man who may treat her worse than a slave. When her husband dies, she lives her life as a walking corpse. She is not allowed to come out of the house to participate in important family and religious functions. In many places, as soon as her husband dies, the widow is clothed in white sarees, stripped of all body ornaments and forced to live in isolation and agony. She is told to accept her pitiable condition as something unavoidable, fateful, and inevitable. All these show that women are useful and worthy only as long as men give them protection. They are useless and can be discarded once their husbands die. The following discussion sheds more light on certain specific problems of women significantly in Tamil Nadu society today.

The contemporary Tamil society considers women second-class citizens. This is confirmed by the report of the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women. Subservience of women is precisely summed up in the famous injunction of the code of Manu,<sup>18</sup> where it is said that a woman should never be independent; i.e., a daughter or wife is a commodity or possession. As a daughter, she is under the surveillance of her father; as a wife, of her husband; and as a widow, of her son or parents, or male relative. A woman is always viewed as someone's sister, daughter, wife, or mother and never as a

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18. An ancient Arian moral code, which has formed the basis of Indian ethos for several centuries.

citizen in her own right who needs to live with dignity and self-respect.<sup>19</sup> In most Tamil families today, a daughter is viewed as a liability and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to men in the society. Sons are idealized and celebrated. Moreover, women have no freedom to live as they wish; they are always under someone's control. For example, when women laugh in public, people make comments such as: "Just as the tobacco leaf is disfigured when unfolded, so also the woman who laughs publicly."<sup>20</sup> When husband and wife have problems, the woman's voice is always silenced. Ultimately the voice of the male is the voice of the society and the female voice is unheard.

### *Low Wages*

In Tamil Nadu, women work harder and yet receive just half the wages of men. There are many female laborers and construction workers who do more work than men and yet are under-paid. Most of the working women are engaged in agriculture. In rural areas, female child labor is common, as industries prefer them, due to lower wages.

Aruna Gnanadason in his article "A Mother Turned Woman" says, women do thankless jobs and unrecognized sacrifices.<sup>21</sup> This is true in the manufacturing area, where women work in *beedi* and brick companies, fish and food processing, cashew, cotton and match industries. They do intermittent jobs as hard as men; they are paid lower wages for long hours under unsatisfactory working conditions. Further "they are often the victims of sexual exploitation by unscrupulous contractors, landlords and so on."<sup>22</sup> Due to low wages, most women suffer from shortage of food. When the family budget shrinks, the quantity of women's food shrinks and women's needs are the first to be cut. This practice indicates that parents follow cultural norms for food distribution. Lower wages for women appear to be justified because their wages are considered supplementary, and housework and childcare are believed to be women's "natural" vocation.<sup>23</sup> In this case, women are understood as following institutionalized norms, eating last and meeting expectations of self-sacrifice and frugality.

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19. TNCDW, *Status of Women and Empowerment*.

20. Selvanayagam, *Tamil Nadu*, 3.

21. Aruna Gnanadhasan, "A Mother Turned Woman," *In God's Image* (April 1986): 39.

22. Franklyn Jayakumar Balasundaram, "Feminist Concerns in Asia: An Ecumenical Christian Perspective," *Bangalore Theological Forum* XXIII, no. 3 (September 1991): 41.

23. Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals* (New York: Cross Road, 1993), 217.

## Inheritance

The society in Tamil Nadu is patriarchal. The inheritance goes from father to son. Woman has no awareness of her legal rights and she depends largely on the male siblings or the husband. Women also do not have much access to income and most of the expenditure is controlled by tradition.<sup>24</sup> Parents decide their marriage<sup>25</sup> because they want to keep their heritage. On the other hand, the society forces women to stay with their husbands regardless of the quality of their marriage. Sometimes they have to endure very inhuman conditions.<sup>26</sup> Males are allowed to support their parents and siblings, but women are prohibited from this practice. The social value placed on women in the family is also much lower in Tamil society.

## Female Infanticide

Female infanticide is the deliberate killing of female infants soon after birth.<sup>27</sup> In some villages, female infanticide occurs when the female infant is fed with bottled milk by the woman's mother-in-law. The milk is usually laced with *yerukkam paal* or paddy husk<sup>28</sup> which causes the baby to die. Within minutes, the baby turns blue and dies.<sup>29</sup> Many female children are born to live, but they are denied the inalienable right to life by their own kith and kin for the simple reason that they are females. The practice has spread through the districts of Salem, Dharmapuri, North Arcot, Dindigul, and Madurai. This practice is more predominant in Usilampatti in Madurai district. It has been around for about 50 years. In Tamil Nadu, female infanticide is called *peñ sisu kolai*. Although *peñ sisu kolai* is illegal, the practice still continues. Nowadays there are new and more efficient methods of killing.<sup>30</sup>

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24. Joanna Ledgerwood, *Microfinance Handbook: An Institutional and Financial Perspective* (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2002), 52.

25. Economic & Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Promoting Women's Rights as Human Rights (Studies on Women in Development 2)* (United Nation: United Nations Publication, 1999), 131.

26. Balasundaram, "Feminist Concerns in Asia," 41.

27. George M. Sabu, Female Infanticide in *Tamil Nadu, India: From Recognition Back to Denial?* (accessed 1 January 2006); available from <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/SAsia/suchasa/0225/george.html>.

28. Yerukkam Paal is the poisonous juice of the Oleander plant. The paddy husk method is cruder; it slits the tender gullet with its sharp sides as it slides down the tiny throat.

29. Gita Aravamudan, *Born to Die* (accessed 1 January 2006); available from <http://www.rediff.com/news/2001/oct/24spec.htm>.

30. The more "modern" families use pesticides or sleeping pills. Sometimes, they just suffocate the infant with a pillow. The newborn is deliberately weakened and dehydrated by its own parents. They do this by wrapping it in a wet towel or dipping it in cold water soon after



Researchers explain some reasons for female infanticide. Sabu M. George, in his electronic article “Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu,” gives the following reasons for the increase of female infanticide: the low status of women, decreasing fertility and consequent intensification of preference for a male child, observance of the practice of dowry, the green revolution, the resulting marginalization of women in agriculture, and a shift to cash cropping.<sup>31</sup>

### Dowry

Marriage is a mutual contract between a man and a woman. However, most of the families do not know the value of marriage. One reason for this may be that marriages are arranged by parents or by male members of the community.<sup>32</sup> Arranging marriages means that the dowry<sup>33</sup> is demanded, directly or indirectly, from the bride’s family. Hence, a girl’s marriage means a great burden on her parents.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the dowry forces a woman to depend heavily on her husband and his family. In this situation, women’s “lives are under inhuman conditions.”<sup>35</sup> They meet various kinds of abuse from their husbands and their families. Examples of this are: stove bursting,<sup>36</sup> stirring boiling water with the woman’s hands, chopping their hands, burning different parts of their bodies with cigarettes, being locked in the hut, set on fire to be burnt alive.<sup>37</sup> There are many cases of torture, which finally end up with committing suicide or being murdered.

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delivery or as soon as it comes home from the hospital. If it is still alive after a few hours, it is taken to a doctor who diagnoses pneumonia and prescribes medicines. The prescription is carefully preserved, but the medicine is never bought. When the child finally dies, the parents have a medical certificate to prove pneumonia. Sometimes, the infant is fed with a drop of alcohol to create diarrhea in order to have a certifiable “disease.”

31. Sabu, *Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu*.
32. J. P. Singh, “The Contemporary Indian Family,” in *Handbook of World Families*, edited by Bert N. Adams and Jan Trost (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2005), 143.
33. Dowry means any property given by the parents of the bride in consideration of the marriage either before marriage or any time after the marriage. It is a demand either by the bride groom himself or by his parents to the bride’s party. If the marriage has to take place, this must be paid.
34. Rama Sharma, *Bhanga: Scavenger in Indian Society—Marginality, Identity and Politicization of the Community* (New Delhi: M D Publications, 1995), 48.
35. Balasundaram, “Feminist Concerns in Asia,” 41
36. Stove bursting is a bit complex to explain. For example, a man and woman are married. The woman mysteriously gets badly or seriously burnt and eventually dies. The man will say it is due to the stove bursting in her face. But most often it is done deliberately for various reasons such as not having a male child or not having paid enough dowries.
37. Mary Bosco Ebere Amakwe, *Women Pay the Price* (accessed 25 August 2005); available from <http://www.sedos.org/english/amakwe.htm>.

*Eve-Teasing*

It means harassing and denigrating women in public places.<sup>38</sup> In Kanniyakumari district, Saritha and Sabitha, 17-year-old secondary school girls had acid thrown on their faces and were raped when they refused to yield to their classmates. There are many similar cases. In Chennai and in other districts, there are also cases of crime against women. More than 500 cases of eve-teasing were registered between January and March of 2004.<sup>39</sup> This number clearly shows the huge number of women who suffer such trauma in Tamil society in India.

Other social evils against women in Tamil Nadu are rape, kidnapping, and, finally, murder. This situation has worsened today due to the media, which uses female bodies as marketing tools. Women face economic and sexual harassment both in their workplaces and in their own houses.

*In Politics*

Clearly, there is a gender bias in political life as well. The percentage of female members of parliament has been consistently below eight percent. This reflects a relatively lower position of women in society.<sup>40</sup> While the government continues to discuss equal participation of women, little is done to achieve this. If progressive women, feminists, and supportive men would get together, Tamil women's status might improve in the future.

## Historical Background of the Catholic Church of Tamil Nadu<sup>41</sup>

According to tradition, St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, introduced Christianity to India in 52 ACE. Acknowledging this in 1972, Paul

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38. Eve-teasing is the sexual harassment of women by men. It becomes a big problem in Tamil Nadu because when a girl walks on the road or travels in a bus, or when she stands in a public place, the boys tease her and make fun of her, or they go to the extreme of making advances to her in public.
39. Mary Bosco Ebere Amakwe, *Tamil Nadu's Gender-Justice Measures Galore: Are They (Athi radi) Populist or Revolutionary?* (accessed 11 January 2006); available from [http://www.sysindia.com/forums/Ladies\\_Corner/posts/27596.html](http://www.sysindia.com/forums/Ladies_Corner/posts/27596.html).
40. Cf. Synopsis of Tamil Nadu HDR 2003 (accessed 7 January 2006); available from <http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:vJ1JnZwLBCIJ:www.undp.org.in/STNc/sSTN/Synopsis/TN.pdf+the+position+of+women+in+tamil+Nadu&hl=en>. All references are from this document and henceforth referred to as STN.
41. S. M. Michael, "Catholic Mission in the Region of Tamil Nadu," in *Integral Mission Dynamics*, edited by A. Kanjamala (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1995), 59–69.

VI declared St. Thomas the Apostle of India. According to the same tradition, he lived and worked in the southern part of India and was martyred in Tamil Nadu. Other than this, we do not have enough historical evidence to document his missionary activity in the state of Tamil Nadu. However, around the 1500s, an influx of Christian missionaries and religious orders propagated Christianity especially in Tamil Nadu. Next to St. Thomas, the greatest saint who introduced Christianity to Tamil Nadu was St. Francis Xavier. He went to many places in Tamil Nadu and preached Christ to the people. He converted many people especially those who lived in the coastal areas.<sup>42</sup> Even today, many Christians name their children after St. Thomas and St. Francis Xavier. After St. Francis, the Jesuits (1506–1552),<sup>43</sup> the Franciscans (1518), and the Dominicans (1548)<sup>44</sup> arrived in large numbers.

Robert de Nobili, a Jesuit, is yet another great name in the history of the Church of Tamil Nadu. He founded the old Madurai Mission in 1606. His aim was expressed thus: “As Jesus Christ became man in order to save man; I want to become an Indian in order to serve Indians.”<sup>45</sup> He had close ties with “Brahmins”<sup>46</sup> and brought them to the light of Christ. Even though the number of Brahmin converts to Christianity was small, de Nobili succeeded in witnessing the Christian faith to them.<sup>47</sup> It may be said that de Nobili elevated the social status of the Catholic Church which was then considered to be an “untouchable religion.”<sup>48</sup>

Later, another missionary, St. John de Britto, a Jesuit, who changed his name in Tamil to Arul Anandar (one who takes delight in the grace of God), worked for a long time in different parts of Tamil Nadu. His ministry consisted in evangelizing the people who belonged to other castes. His brave way of life earned him opposition from Hindu rulers, and thus he embraced martyrdom on 4 February 1693. Sand soaked in his blood at the place of his martyrdom still exerts a very powerful influence in strengthening the faith of Christians

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42. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2005), 184–85.

43. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India 1707–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 121–27.

44. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 123–33.

45. Ranjit Toppo, “A Paradigm Shift,” *Sevartham* 22 (1997): 96.

46. The priestly caste who claim to be high caste among others.

47. Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 189–90.

48. Untouchables are the low caste people who are also referred to as Dalits.

and inspiring vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the entire area of his ministry.<sup>49</sup>

Yet another great Jesuit missionary to be remembered in the 18th century is Constantine Joseph Beschi. He too changed his name to Veerama Munivar (sage of fortitude). His life was a rare combination of pastoral ministry and literary contribution. He inserted many changes into the Tamil script. His literary contribution to Tamil poetry, prose, grammar, lexicography, translation, and *siddha* medicine brought him much fame. This medicine was intended to bring relief to the poor. Through these, his spiritual ministry was much enhanced, and he brought many people to Christ.<sup>50</sup>

There was yet another by the name James de Rossi S.J., called by the people Sinna Saveriar (small Xavier, in honor of St. Francis Xavier). He worked around Sarugani about 1736 and wrote simple pious books in Tamil on the lives of saints and on miracles for every day of the week.

There was another lay person, born in 1712 to a Nair family, and was known as Neelakanda Pillai. He served Hindu King Marthanda Varma, the king of Travancore, as the army chief. He first heard about Christianity from the king's military adviser, a foreigner. In 1745, Pillai became a Catholic and chose Lazarus as his baptismal name. However, he came to be known as Devasahayam, which means "God's help." Devasahayam was martyred on 14 January 1752 at Kattadimalai, Kanyakumari district. Martyr Devasahayam was killed for upholding the Christian faith and was buried in front of the main altar of the St. Francis Xavier's Cathedral, Kottar, Tamil Nadu. It is rare for a layperson to be nominated for beatification.<sup>51</sup> These holy and inspiring men laid the solid foundation for Christianity in Tamil Nadu.

## Present Situation of the Catholic Church of Tamil Nadu

Presently, the entire State of Tamil Nadu is divided into 17 Catholic dioceses in the three provinces of Madurai, Madras (Chennai), and Pondichery. Madurai has a population of 20,283,000, of which 1,786,000 are Catholics, representing 8.81% of the total population; Madras has a population of

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49. Toppo, "A Paradigm Shift," 95. See also Selva J. Raj, "Transgressing Boundaries, Transcending Turner: The Pilgrimage Tradition at the Shrine of St John de Britto," in *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines*, edited by Selva J. Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 85–114.

50. Toppo, "A Paradigm Shift," 96.

51. Cf. Hindu, "CBCI Backs Catholic Varsity in Chhattisgarh" (accessed 10 January 2004); available from <http://www.hindu.com/2004/01/10/stories/2004011006790400.htm>.

31,115,000, of which 930,000 are Catholics, representing 2.99% of the total population; and Pondichery and Cuddalore have a population of 20,392,000, of which 824,000 are Catholics, representing 4.64% of the total population. Due to the long history of Christianity and the committed work of the missionaries, Catholics alone form 5.48% (3, 785, 060) of the entire State of Tamil Nadu, compared to the whole of India where Christians together form only 2.3% according to the 2001 census. If we turn to the situation of male and female ministers who serve the people in these three provinces, Madurai has 1,067 male religious, 688 diocesan priests, 3,934 female religious; Madras has 763 male religious, 480 diocesan priests, 4352 female religious; and Pondichery and Cuddalore has 282 male religious, 507 diocesan priests, and 2,649 female religious. Given the large number of Catholics in the entire State, it is clear that the male religious and diocesan priests cannot totally meet all the spiritual needs of these people. There is a sizeable number of female religious who can serve better if they are given their rightful place and responsibility in the Church.<sup>52</sup>

## Situation of Women in the Church of Tamil Nadu

Even though women have very few opportunities to participate in the life and mission of the Church in Tamil Nadu, as mentioned above, there are many female vocations to religious and apostolic life. Unfortunately, the Church does not have enough official structures to support them and their services for the avail of good of the Church.

It must be noted here that the women religious who are engaged in apostolic life offer their services, more often than not, as unpaid laborers in Church institutions. It is sad to note that sometimes they serve as domestic servants and even fulfill personal needs of parish priests.

Lay women who are involved in pious associations and do a lot of charitable works are not really encouraged by male church leaders. On the contrary they are often found with fault within their ministries.

About the situation of catechists, in Tamil Nadu, there are two kinds,<sup>53</sup> the untrained and the trained. Until the year 2000, there were only male

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52. Gajiwala, "The Christian Lens," 884–92.

53. The term "catechist" (from Greek *katecheo*, "instruct") is mentioned in the New Testament only in Gal 6:6. It means the same as *didaskaloi* (teaches). In 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4:11 catechists are grouped by Paul among charismatics who had the task of instructing those who sought baptism in the fundamentals of the faith. However, there is a need for a change of definition of the term to something which is more reflective of the dynamism of the catechists in the life of the Church.

trained catechists. The Tamil Nadu Bishops' Conference (TNBC) and Tamil Nadu Biblical Catechetical Liturgical Centre (TNBCLC) realized the need for women's participation. Hence, the decision was made to include women as catechists. Now, Tamil Nadu has 25 women catechists compared to more than 350 male catechists. While this is a courageous and welcome move, it is still only a drop in the ocean. How the number of women catechists will increase in the future is still to be seen. Once the former director of TNBCLC told me that he would never take women catechists in his life as they are not ready for field work and that some parish priests do not like women catechists.

There are also certain other initiatives such as Tamil Nadu Biblical Catechetical, Liturgical Centre institute in Tindivanam, the Bible School in Poonthamalle in Chennai, and diocesan commissions, which train women as Bible teachers and help them to live the Gospel values. There are also some altar girls in some parishes and many untrained women catechists and volunteers. These volunteers are involved in choir groups and only in some cases do they teach catechism in the Church.

The situation of women in general in the society is worse. Even in Catholic-educated families today, there are women who are victimized by their husbands due to problems concerning the dowry. Young female college students face eve-teasing and many prematurely terminate their studies. For example, in 2004 alone, it was reported in the daily papers that more than 25 young girls committed suicide due to eve-teasing in the State of Tamil Nadu.

However, women today are politically motivated, economically oriented, and socially becoming more aware of the great injustices done to them in the past, denying them their due place in the society. Hence, it is urgent and imperative that the Church keep pace with this awareness and work towards acknowledging the rightful place of women in its mission.

Peter C. Phan, an Asian theologian speaking of the challenges for Asian Christianity, asserts that it is a "discipleship of equals" that can lead to new ways of being church in Asia.<sup>54</sup> In the Church, woman as a "sign" is more than ever central and fruitful. If that is so, the Church must provide equal opportunity for women to exercise their God-given gifts in all ministries. In 1988, John Paul II in his exhortation to the laity on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful, *Christifidelis Laici*, affirms that it is necessary that the Church recognize all the gifts of women (CL no. 49).

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54. Peter C. Phan, "Challenges for Asian Christianity," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37, no. 3 (2000): 86

At the level of theological reflection, equal opportunity for women can only be achieved through a paradigm shift in theology that will necessarily involve the Church's appreciation of the feminine. At present, most theology taught in seminaries and in lay theology courses in Tamil Nadu tend to be patriarchal. Most importantly, although women are allowed to study the Bible and engage in theological reflection, comparatively fewer women are appointed to teaching positions in theology departments in most Catholic seminaries.<sup>55</sup> In some places "women have been excluded from the study of theology, and hence from the teaching ministry."<sup>56</sup>

A South Indian theologian, Pauline Chakkalalal, explains the term feminist orientation as a genuine commitment to realizing the full equality of women with men. Feminism does not mean a rejection of men or replacement of male power with female power. It means replacing an oppressive outmoded value system with particular emphasis on enhancing shared responsibility and partnership. Feminists see power as an opportunity to empower self, not control others.<sup>57</sup> Leonard Swidler explains in his book, *Biblical Affirmations of Women*, that "a feminist is a person who is in favor of, and who promotes the equality of women with men, a person who advocates and practices treating women primarily as human persons and willingly contravenes social customs in so acting."<sup>58</sup> D. Migliore points out that feminist theologians emphasize Jesus's vision of the inclusivity of the Reign of God and discipleship of equals.<sup>59</sup> They stress the humanity of Jesus and try to draw upon the experience of women as a source for theology.<sup>60</sup> Through these definitions, it can be clearly seen that feminist theology attempts to articulate the experience of women theologically by unfolding their story and affirming them as human persons with dignity and worth. It envisions a new community based upon the values of mutuality, reciprocity, and inclusiveness.<sup>61</sup>

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55. John D'Mello, "Paradigms for a Feminization of the Church," *Vidyajyoti* 63, no. 2 (February 1999): 125.
56. Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary Discovered* (accessed 11 December 2005): available from [http://www.womenreligious.org/~education/Mariology3/Read/Readings\\_3/Balasuriya.htm](http://www.womenreligious.org/~education/Mariology3/Read/Readings_3/Balasuriya.htm).
57. Pauline Chakkalalal, "Mary of Nazareth," *The Examiner* (7 March 1988): 12.
58. Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 164.
59. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 210.
60. C. Gillis, *Pluralism: A New Paradigm for Theology* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1998), 83.
61. Chakkalalal, "Mary of Nazareth," 12–13.

One of the main purposes of feminist theology is to expose the systematic injustice of patriarchy. It tries to accomplish this task by reclaiming the importance of women's experience, by exposing the distorted views about women present in Scripture, Church history, and Christian theology.<sup>62</sup> Women experienced wholeness in encountering Jesus Christ. These experiences transformed them into persons of self-worth and dignity. Jesus entrusted these women with his own mission, making them equal partners in the understanding and fulfillment of God's vision for humanity.<sup>63</sup> This is the message we offer the Church in Tamil Nadu.

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62. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 209.

63. Statement of the Indian Theological Association, "Women's Concerns and Indian Theological Response," *Vidyjyothi* 68, no. 9 (September 2004): 698.



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