Thomas Hampton

A Model of Mission by and for the Marginalized: CEZMS Missions to the Deaf

Abstract:
This paper shares the untold stories of three missions to the deaf and mute in India and Sri Lanka. Prior to Indian independence, three of the first schools in the country specifically focused on the deaf were founded by the women of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS). Their locations were Palamcottah, in Tirunelveli, India, Mylapore, in Chennai, India, and Kaitadi, near Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Each of these schools has adapted over time and continues to serve deaf students today with local leadership. While examining the histories of these three missions in more specific detail, there is a wider interest in the factors which allowed missionary institutions to transition to local leadership and thus survive and thrive in a post-colonial world. These missions include: the Florence Swainson Deaf School in Tirunelveli, India, the Church of South India (CSI) Higher Secondary School for the Deaf in Chennai, India, and the Ceylon School for the Deaf and Blind in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Church of England, Zenana Missionary Society, India, Sri Lanka, hearing-impaired education

Thomas Hampton is a doctoral student at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.
Introduction

It is often said by those studying them, that “Institutions protect themselves.” Reflecting the ambitious personalities at the helm, common practice is for organizations to show strength, and in conflict to prove they can withstand vacillations of public opinion. This is the general approach of most famous companies, foundations, hospitals, and schools. The survival instinct is stamped in the DNA of prominent organizations, history presented as template for replication. But while Leviathans may be optimized for specific environments, they struggle when the world turns.

Western mission societies existed symbiotically with the British Empire, but post-World War I, it was often the voluntary sodalities led by women and other marginalized groups that thrived. These “Zenana” missions were more in-tune with the grassroots changes foreshadowing the eventual death of the empire, though the women, their work, and the institutions they led are infrequently recorded in history. Early missionaries, especially the well-educated and well-connected ones, mostly focused their efforts on high caste-Hindus, hoping to Christianize society broadly through their influence.¹ The missionaries that explored unmapped terrain, led mass conversion movements, and founded strong enough institutions to publish books about themselves are the usual subjects of mission history: the anomalies. But the history told in this paper is of a different sort.

This paper shares the untold stories² of three missions to the deaf and mute in India and Sri Lanka. Prior to Indian independence, three of the first schools in the country specifically focused on the deaf were founded by the women of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS).³ Their locations were Palamcottah, in Tirunelveli, India, Mylapore, in Chennai, India, and Kaitadi, near Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Each of these schools has adapted over time and continues to serve deaf students today with local leadership.

Sourcing

Because few historical or theological studies have been done on the missions to the deaf, this article relies heavily on primary source documents from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) archives. Nearly all the information used to narrate the histories of these institutions comes directly from letters written by missionaries working at the schools. These letters would be gathered from across the mission, edited, and reformatted by secretaries and administrators in England, then published in mission
bulletins. Their primary purposes were fundraising and recruiting, with even early missionaries recognizing bias in the reporting. Though the CMS archives clearly prioritize the missionaries’ perspectives, I believe it is best to share these incomplete perspectives in hopes of stimulating a productive dialogue.

The CEZMS was founded in 1880, primarily to facilitate Anglicans sharing the gospel in India, though it would eventually distribute its efforts through eastern Asia. “Zenana” missions were focused on outreach to women by women in societies with a highly gendered space. For this reason, the CEZMS focused mainly on women’s health and children’s education.

An important structural note is that during Indian independence, the CEZMS began plans to transfer ownership of its institutions to local control. Its work had frequently paralleled the CMS, and it was absorbed by the CMS in 1957, which is why the CEZMS letters and publications are now in the CMS archives. A board continued through 1968 to gradually transfer funding and property to local leadership.

**Palamcottah, India**

When Florence Swainson, a teacher at the Sarah Tucker School, started the first missionary school specifically for the deaf in 1895, she was simply giving specialized care for the two deaf students in her general class. She never could have predicted the impact her pioneering work would have on a country with an estimated 18 million deaf people today.

The Sarah Tucker School was founded in 1858 by Reverend John Tucker, also the secretary of the CMS. His sister, Sarah, was disabled and stayed in England, but she wrote letters and magazine articles requesting funding for John’s missionary work. Though Sarah died in 1857, her friends continued raising money for the school she cared about. A compound was built with the school continuing to expand enrollment and education levels through the 1900s. A school for the blind began in 1890, and a hospital opened in 1892.

Florence Swainson was inspired by two of her deaf students to begin the first school specifically for the deaf. Plans for the school began in 1895, and it would be called the School for the Deaf and Dumb, the first school of its type in south Asia. Boys were taught trades, most commonly carpentry, and the girls were taught housework, needlework, and embroidery. The expressed hope was that the students would grow
up to fully support themselves, though it is difficult to tell from available documentation if this was regularly accomplished.

Another goal of the schools for the deaf was to teach them about Christianity, through a process culminating in confirmation. Confirmation involved daily lessons in Bible and theology, along with study of the creeds, commandments, and the Lord’s prayer. Students participated fully in church services and events through signing. In a 1918 letter about a class of students being confirmed in the church, Swainson states that students “were plainly told it was not compulsory and that each one must make his or her own free choice.” Though it is difficult to confirm numbers, it is safe to conclude from the size of the confirmation groups that a large majority of students attending the deaf schools identified as Christians and went through the confirmation process.

Without other schools for the deaf at this time, Children from across the country were dropped off at the school to be cared for, sometimes with very little instructions or information other than a name. Many referrals came from other Christian orphanages that could not provide specialized care. Educated Hindus also dropped off their children for education. Because not all hearing children were able to go to school already, and the schools for the deaf were seen as being less efficient, the British Royal Commission did not allocate funds to the deaf schools.

The school grew quickly, but the growth brought new challenges. In 1899 the school for the deaf had 40 students, and over 100 by 1908, but the government provided no financial aid to the program. Instead, funding was arranged for the school through CEZMS by connecting deaf organizations in England with the schools for the deaf in India and through other private donations.

Deaf children first began to be taught speech in 1916. During this time the school grew quickly, with new dormitories, classrooms, workshops, a hospital, and teachers’ houses all added. Together they formed a compound over eleven acres. Construction of a chapel was completed in 1916, and all furniture was made by the boys who were trained at the school.

In a 1935 letter, the director of the school, Elizabeth Morgan reported that children are referred to the school from many different ministries, listing the CMS, SPG, Salvation Army, and Methodists among others. As time passed, other missions, especially those which would eventually merge with the CSI continued to send children to the school,
though they did not financially support those students. Letters shared through the CEZMS publications frequently request more funding for institutional growth.

Some promising students – hearing and deaf – were then taught to be teachers to the next generation of students. One girl, named Nesammal, was picked out of the “Normal Class” to train as a teacher to the deaf because of her patience and skill with her hands. Nesammal was then responsible for converting the Tamil alphabet to a Tamil finger alphabet, and she served ten years at the school.

As another example, Elizabeth Morgan wrote another letter in 1935 about a stand-out student named Masillamani, who has spent every year of his life, except for summers, at the school. He was referred to the school through another L.M.S. missionary. Through his training, Morgan reports that he became a skilled needleworker, giving his money away to his family each summer he traveled home. Besides needlework, he was a housemaster for middle school deaf boys, taught a Sunday School class, and sometimes read scripture in chapel by signing.

In her 1935 article “The Deaf Hear”, Elizabeth Morgan described the importance of the mission to the deaf in Palamcottah. Building a case for the vitality of the ministry, she compared the daily lives, especially the security, of the people who have been trained at the school with the lives of other deaf people in the country. She painted a picture of precarious aimlessness for those outside the school and productive contentedness within. However, she also added that the school is unable to help new deaf people who are referred to them, but who have not been specially trained.

Today, the school is named after its founder, called the Florence Swainson Deaf School, became a certified high school in 1978, had 200 students in 1983, and began higher secondary level classes in 1993. Today it is the largest residential institution for the deaf in India and continues to be a part of the Diocese of Tirunelveli in the CSI.

Mylapore, India

A second school for the deaf opened in 1913 in Mylapore as an offshoot of Florence Swainson's school in Palamcottah. Early in the development of the school, through 1920, administrators had to visit the homes of families with deaf children, persuading them to allow their children to go to the new school, but as enrollment accelerated, opening a second school made sense. By 1930, the school had 65 students.
In 1957, ten years after the Indian Independence Act, ownership of the school was transferred from the CEZMS to the local Diocese of Madras. At that time there were 115 deaf children under care at the school, and Margaret Benson and Gwen Clarke were the missionaries in charge. Benson was there first, serving the school for nineteen years of her 35 years as a missionary, and Clarke joined in 1956. Even after official ownership transfer, top leadership at the school remained western.

In 1958, All-India Radio had a broadcast about the school, and by 1960, an average of two children per day had to be sent away because of a lack of facilities. Despite demand, and an ambitious expansion plan, funds remained too tight to expand the school, likely one reason for its frequent mention in publications through this period. Besides private donations, the school raised money through a popular mimed Nativity play during Christmas and sales of furniture made by the boys. The school also specialized in printing and bookbinding. Through 1960 there were 130 children at the school from all over India, though the majority were from Madras (Chennai). By 1966, the staff also consisted of 20 people.

Because of the high demand but the school’s inability to expand, by 1983, the school in Mylapore was just one of 25 schools for the deaf in Tamilnadu, and one of an estimated 100 in all of India. Interestingly the consistent size of the school combined with the continuing high demand for the school’s services made the school very durable.

Today, this school is still in existence, officially called the Church of South India (CSI) Higher Secondary School for the Deaf, located in Chennai, India and affiliated with the Church of South India. Its unofficial name, for example on its Facebook page is “CSI Deaf School Chennai.”

**Sri Lanka**

A third school for the Deaf and Blind was opened in Kaitadi in Sri Lanka (called Ceylon in most documents and quotes in this paper) in 1912, and an article mentions the baptism of two deaf children along with three blind children in 1916. Mention of a trained teacher for the deaf being needed was in the “Special Needs” section of a CEZMS publication in 1917. A separate workplace was made for the graduates, called the Women’s Industrial Section at Kandana, which focused on sewing and needlework. Some graduates of both genders returned to work at the school. Jobs for male graduates were more varied, including working at an architectural firm and printing for a newspaper.
Originally founded as a school for the deaf and blind, the school was split by a 1946 decision by the Education Department into separate schools for the deaf and for the blind. Marjorie Carter, author of most of the available sources on the school became the first Principal for the School for the Deaf.\textsuperscript{60}

Though it was hoped for that the school could be financially sustainable, there were simply too many expenses and not enough income. An industrial department had just been opened in 1937,\textsuperscript{61} but some of the graduates were not able to obtain employment after turning twenty-one, so the organization retained responsibility for the individuals. A large number of adult deaf and blind people were under the care of the organization but ineligible for government support through 1949.\textsuperscript{62} Additionally, most of the unemployed were also orphans who had been deserted by their parents, so there were no other available caretakers.\textsuperscript{63}

A new Department of Social Services was established in 1949 following the 1947 Ceylon Independence Act. Carter wrote about it hopefully as she continued her leadership in the independent country, “Through this Department the Government of Ceylon is accepting full financial responsibility for the welfare of all adult deaf or blind who are unable to support themselves.”\textsuperscript{64} The main idea was that the School for the Deaf would maintain control of education before releasing their students and older people to the custody of the state. They planned to take advantage of any government services that would be made available to them,\textsuperscript{65} though they also planned for the construction of hostels attached to the school building to maintain a continuous deaf community.\textsuperscript{66}

In her 1949 article, Carter also expressed hope that a local leader would be trained to take over the direction of the School for the Deaf. She wrote, “Last year Mr. O. Welilakale, whose wife and two sisters were all educated at Hillwood, was sent to Manchester for training in deaf work. When he returns in August, he will become Principal of the School for the Deaf, and I shall no longer be needed. I am proud to know that that pioneer work, begun and carried on for so long by our Society, is now to be placed in the hands of trained Ceylonese.”\textsuperscript{67} She added that she was certain the institution would maintain its missionary emphasis under non-European leadership.\textsuperscript{68} In the same publication, she also stated that two Welfare Officers would be sent to England for training.\textsuperscript{69}

But there are no other mentions of Mr. O. Welilakale in the archives, and ten years later, in 1957, Carter penned another article still
listing herself as the school’s principal. Titled “Education and After-Care of the Deaf in Ceylon” she describes the ministry of the school, which had 36 deaf and four blind students. During this time, Carter was still a missionary with CEZMS, though the school had its own independent Board of Governors.

In Sri Lanka, in 1957 there was some interaction with government assistance in the programming. Carter was optimistic that “a Placement Office may be appointed by the Government to help both the deaf and the blind to find work, and to explore new avenues of employment.” There were also sections of houses for deaf people to live together, though deaf people with living relatives would usually go live with them. Many of the deaf people also married other deaf people.

Today, this school is called the Ceylon School for the Deaf and Blind, though it exists in three different residential campuses, each with about 200 students. The school is funded through a mix of government grants and private donations, so it is free to students, though it is governed by the Church of Ceylon through a board of directors.

Hearing Technologies

The connections with the mission agencies allowed the schools to have some of the latest technologies for their time. In June 1935, eight deaf students were able to hear after being given sound amplification devices. An article titled “Sound in a Silent World” describes the joy of each student listening to the sounds of everyday objects – like crumpling a piece of paper. The article asks “If science can already give us instruments to penetrate the eternal silence in which these little brains and souls are encased, can we rest until these instruments are perfected and multiplied to be of service to all deaf children wherever they may be, whether in this country, or in India?” This hypothetical ends with a request for funding, mention of the price of one teacher’s microphone and headphones, and instructions that donations for this purpose should be earmarked “Wireless for the Deaf.”

A 1957 article titled “Through the Sound Barrier” describes the introduction of multi-tone hearing aids. The small amount of residual hearing possessed by most of the children would be amplified through the technology, allowing up to ten children to listen at one time through the device. The school used this technology to introduce music and hymns.
The article also records the hearing aids being used to train children in speech.\textsuperscript{85} This would eventually become a standard practice at all locations.

In general, the deaf children outside the school are described as being non-reactive, desolate and miserable. Articles today describe them in similar terms.\textsuperscript{86} Through education and community with other deaf people, “Sullenness and selfishness gradually disappear, and as they improve in hearing and speech, they become unselfish and helpful to others.”\textsuperscript{87} Even in the school, children who are mute are described with the common term “dumb.” For example, Florence Swainson, founder of the first school, consistently referred to her students as “little Dumbies” intending it as a term of endearment.\textsuperscript{88} Though she did think highly of many of her students, she believed the schools and the ministries were essential for rescuing them from otherwise terrible lives.

**Witnessing to God’s Power**

Power dynamics are clearly present along axes of race, nationality, age, ability to speak or hear, religious affiliation, and education – it is a natural component of a missionary society focused on serving socially disadvantaged groups. While the schools for the deaf did not use the most progressive terminology by today’s standards, their emphasis on all people being equal in the eyes of God was positively egalitarian. The pioneering teachers at the deaf schools were passionate that everyone deserved an education and an ability to pursue self-sufficiency. This passion drove them to innovate and initiate new programs even when outside support was extremely limited. A 1930 version of the “Headquarters’ Notes” describes the schools of Blind and Deaf as places where children “find hope and possibilities of usefulness.”\textsuperscript{89} Begging is seen as something for the missionaries to do, not the children. There are many anecdotes of children who learn to be independent and self-supporting through education.\textsuperscript{90}

The schools were unparalleled, and it is no coincidence that they came to exist within the usually decentralized and agile structure of the CEZMS. Care for the underprivileged was always an area of emphasis for the CEZMS, with specialized programs evolving for multiple ostracized populations.\textsuperscript{91} The schools worked under the radar, received little to no government support, and were frequently marginalized themselves for their efforts. Yet demand for the school’s services proved their utility, and the high rate of conversion to Christianity by the students and their parents
demonstrated that many who encountered the schools and their teachers would eventually subscribe to the same principles.

Still, it is positive that the missionaries clearly state that deaf children have the full ability to place faith in God. “Faith is as possible to a little deaf child as to a hearing child only if the child has been to a Mission school... The children are taught to pray to Him. They pray with signs as well as with words, and when they make their signs they believe that God is looking at them and they are very reverent at prayer.” Maintaining that the deaf children are equally valuable to God, even if not recognized in broader society, was clearly an empowering belief and message animating the function of the school.

The missionaries do commonly describe difficulties in doing missions to deaf populations, but in their view, overcoming these difficulties made the ministry even more effective in demonstrating God’s power and blessing at the school. In a 1927 article, Elizabeth Morgan writes, “How shall we give the Word to those who cannot hear? Is it not written, ‘Faith cometh by hearing?” She responds to this question with another quotation from Jesus, “It is difficult indeed, but the call is insistent, ‘Feed my lambs.’ We dare not ignore the deaf and dumb children. For them as well as for us Christ died. They, too, are children of God, and we cannot let them remain in ignorance of their heritage.” She also described the education of the deaf as “a Christian miracle.”

**Conclusion**

Overall, the CEZMS mission providing education to deaf populations was an impressive, female-founded mission that was well ahead of its time in sharing the gospel and offering support to children in extremely isolating situations. They are strong models of mission by and for marginalized populations. Though budgetary pressures were a constant pressure, it actually forced the three schools in Palamcottah, Mylapore, and Sri Lanka to be innovative with the resources they had, to train highly involved indigenous leaders from the beginning, ultimately building resilient institutions that could thrive during colonial transition. All three are successful institutions today, run by the local church, with high demand still for services, and exemplifying the potential of holistic mission.
End Notes


2 For example, there is no mention of ministry to the deaf, even in passing, in the otherwise excellent and comprehensive Jeffrey Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700* (New York: Routledge, 2008). I have also not found more than a few paragraphs written on any of these institutions other than in primary source materials.


6 This number comes from a variety of sources, with most tracing back to an estimate by the National Association for the Deaf, India.


8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 15–16.

10 Ibid., 16.


12 “School for the Deaf and Dumb at Palamcottah,” *India’s Women and China’s Daughters* XXVIII, no. 270 (December 1908): 179.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

Ibid.


“Deaf and Dumb Schools,” The Church Missionary Intelligencer, December 1899, 994.

“School for the Deaf and Dumb at Palamcottah,” 179.

Swainson, “A Confirmation at Palamcottah School for the Deaf.”


“School for the Deaf and Dumb at Palamcottah,” 180.

Ibid., 181.


Ibid.


Ibid.

1983 CMS Historical Record (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1983), 42.

Florence Swainson Deaf School « About Us.”

Ibid.


40 “Through the Sound Barrier,” 14.


42 1959-1960 CMS Historical Record, 447.

43 Ibid.


45 1959-1960 CMS Historical Record, 448.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 447.


49 1959-1960 CMS Historical Record, 446.

50 “CSI School for the Deaf, Mylapore,” 191.

51 1982 CMS Historical Record (London: Gilbert and Rivington, LD., 1982), 58.


55 “Baptisms at the School for the Deaf and Blind, Ceylon,” India’s Women and China’s Daughters XXXVI, no. 357 (March 1916): 51.

56 “Special Needs,” India’s Women and China’s Daughters XXXVII, no. 373 (September 1917): 102.


58 Ibid., 23.
59 Ibid.


61 Ibid., 103.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 104.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 103.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 104.

70 Carter, “Education and After-Care of the Deaf in Ceylon.”

71 Ibid., 22.

72 Carter, “After Care for the Deaf and Blind,” 103.


74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 “About Us.”


79 Ibid., 1.

80 “Sound in a Silent World,” India’s Women and China’s Daughters, October 1935, 182.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 “Through the Sound Barrier.”
84 Ibid., 14.

85 Ibid., 14.


88 “School for the Deaf and Dumb at Palamcottah,” 180.

89 “Headquarter’s Notes” L, no. 527 (December 1930): 257.

90 “Through the Sound Barrier,” 15.


92 Morgan, “The Deaf Hear,” 181.


94 Ibid.

95 Antia, “Education of the Hearing Impaired in India.”

Works Cited


Ceylon School for the Deaf and Blind.


Chittenden, Charles

Church of England Zenana Missionary Society Homes of the East

The Church Missionary Intelligencer
1899 “Deaf and Dumb Schools.” The Church Missionary Intelligencer, December: 994.

Church Missionary Society

1960 1959-1960 CMS Historical Record. London: Gilbert and Rivington, LD.


1982 1982 CMS Historical Record. London: Gilbert and Rivington, LD.

1983 1983 CMS Historical Record. London: Gilbert and Rivington, LD.

Cox, Jeffrey

CSI Deaf School Chennai

Florence Swainson Deaf School
India’s Women and China’s Daughters
1908 “School for the Deaf and Dumb at Palamcottah.” India’s Women and China’s Daughters XXVIII (270) (December): 179–82.

1916 “Baptisms at the School for the Deaf and Blind, Ceylon.” India’s Women and China’s Daughters XXXVI (357) (March): 51.

1917 “Special Needs.” India’s Women and China’s Daughters XXXVII (373) (September): 102.


1935 “Sound in a Silent World.” India’s Women and China’s Daughters, October: 182.

Looking East: The Journal of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society


Mary, A. Stella

Morgan, Elizabeth
1927 “Lovest Thou Me?” India’s Women and China’s Daughters XLVII (486) (July): 128.


NPR.org.
npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/01/14/575921716/
a-mom-fights-to-get-an-education-for-her-deaf-daughters.

Seth, Dev Raj
A Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.  
University of London.

Swainson, Florence
1918  “A Confirmation at Palamcottah School for the Deaf.”  
India’s Women and China’s Daughters XXXVIII (381)  
(May): 36.

Whately, E.J.
1878  “Leaves from the History of a Missionary Auxiliary.”  