Imperial Childhoods and Christian Mission: Education and Emotions in South India and Denmark

Though Denmark was once an imperial power, it was only ever a minor one. For that and other reasons the imperial past figures but little in histories of Danish nationhood.(1) As other European states extended their influence and expanded their territories overseas in the age of ‘high imperialism’ Denmark was adapting to the loss of territory, through war, to Prussia and Austria in 1864. By its protracted and difficult nature, that process of adaptation tended to obscure the extent to which some of Denmark’s connections with the world outside Europe – not all of them strictly imperial – were characterised by continuity rather than disruption. Momentous for Denmark as a whole, 1864 was, for different reasons, an especially significant date for the Danish Missionary Society; in that year the DMS established a small mission in the Tamil Nadu region of south India. Though the mission’s initial impact may have been slight, according to Karen Vallgårda its repercussions would ultimately be felt not only in the locality but also, to possibly greater effect, in Denmark itself.

Vallgårda’s book covers a period of about 50 years, from 1864 to 1918. In thematic terms, it ranges very widely, encompassing empire, childhood, mission, education and emotions. Essentially it argues for the importance of the DMS and Danish missionaries in south India in the formation of ideas about the ‘universal child’ and in the making and remaking of childhood in India, in Denmark and in the West. While they occupied a marginal position in relation to British colonial authority, Danes in south India acted in ways
distinctive yet also typical of western missionaries: they ‘participated with great eagerness in the cultural labour that went into the ongoing formation of modern Europe through its imperial entanglements’ (p. 11). In that way, empire, as an outlet for Christian mission, continued to matter in Denmark. Lutheran yet interdenominational, varied in its theology and its politics and periodically subject to evangelical revivalism, the DMS influenced Danish society through churches, clubs, functions and a variety of publications. Danish participation in transnational missionary networks meanwhile facilitated the sharing of information, ideas and knowledge about the non-Western world. Importantly, missions established by the DMS in south India, such as that at Pattambakkam (now Melpattambakkam) in 1864, became sites of encounter between missionaries and local peoples, especially those of Dalit castes. That was by no means a new phenomenon; Danish and other Protestant missionaries were active in south India in the early 18th century. Vallgårda seeks to break fresh ground less in terms of her main subject – children and childhood – than in her analytical approach to that subject. Drawing on the sociologically- and anthropologically-focused work of writers such as Arlie Russell Hochshild, Monique Scheer and Ann Laura Stoler and making use of microhistory and prosopography, she foregrounds ideas about emotions and emotional cultures in her analysis of missionary understandings of children and childhood, Western, non-Western and ‘universal’.

Vallgårda’s book is indicative of a relatively recent and still ongoing shift of emphasis in aspects of missionary history: from the public (notably in terms of missionary links with empire) to the private and the affective. Historians are reimagining missionaries in new and interesting ways, as sexual beings and partners, as wives and husbands and as parents. In this context a focus on children and childhood provides the opportunity for new insights not only into the attitudes and actions of missionaries but into their inner lives as well. Children increasingly figure, in a variety of ways, in writing about mission and European overseas empires. In terms of empire India is the focus of particular attention, for reasons such as female infanticide, child marriage, ‘child reform’ and child removal. As to the children of missionaries, they might be the cause of great parental unease. They occupied liminal social spaces and possessed what Emily J. Manktelow has described with reference to southern Africa and the Pacific as ‘slippery’ social identities. Consequently they seemed at risk of contagion, or worse. Vallgårda concurs with that possibility, yet also emphasises missionary children’s capacity for interaction with local people in south India. That interaction was complicated to say the least. And for evidence of it we are reliant mainly on missionary records, textual and photographic. Acknowledging a lack of Indian sources and an absence of sources produced by children, Vallgårda emphasises the necessity of determining as clearly as possible from the records available the values and motivations, actions and attitudes of all the relevant historical actors.

It is through missionary records, then – books, pamphlets and periodicals mostly, but also photographs – that missionaries reveal themselves to us now. Through these records, as identified and analysed here, we may also glimpse local people, such as a boy named Adam who ran away from the DMS boarding school at Pattambakkam in 1865. His actions may be interpreted as a challenge or even an affront to missionary efforts not only to educate and convert but also to compel and control. For all that, his escape likely also confirmed missionary doubts about the susceptibility of Indian children to Christian influence. Those doubts were linked to missionary disapproval of Indian parenting, which missionaries deemed inadequate and even inimical to children’s interests and welfare. The domain of Indian children’s upbringing and education thus became for missionaries ‘a terrain of legitimate interference’ (p. 44). In short, Indian children mattered to missionaries, as they had in the early 18th century. No less than for any other Protestant missionary society during this period, for the DMS education was the focus of intense theological and pedagogical debate. But the missionaries in south India were relatively powerless, in relation to high-caste local elites as well as to colonial authority. They extracted what meaning and significance they could from their educational encounters with local children, presenting their endeavours to supporters ‘at home’ in the best possible light while denigrating local parents. Nowhere was their ambivalence, their powerlessness, their hypocrisy (and ultimately even their humanity) more apparent than in their apparent willingness to rejoice when local children showed defiance towards their parents.

Notwithstanding the book’s close focus on DMS affairs, it also takes account of broader historical change affecting missions. As with missionary thinking about education, change was also apparent via the
increasing feminisation of overseas missions in the late 19th century. Sister Sara of the DMS, who arrived in south India in 1888, was representative of the latter phenomenon. Like many westerners before (and since), she frequently likened indigenous adults to children. That tendency, according to Vallgårda, helped make adults the objects of Danish female missionary intervention. In the interests of raising and reforming ‘the childish Indians’ (p. 105), Sara founded a lace-making school, a pioneering ‘industrial’ enterprise aimed at alleviating poverty and imbuing a work ethic in local Tamil Pariah girls and women. Some individual exceptions apart, she met with little success – as she reported it. Frustration at the lack of progress might, however, be offset by acceptance – that while grown-up in terms of age, local people were but children.

Doubt and self-doubt were integral aspects of missionary service, endeavour and theology. That is understandable given that missionaries invested a great deal of themselves in their work. Vallgårda’s description of that investment as ‘emotional labour’ (a term adapted from Hochschild), is apt, the more so when considering more intimate relationships between missionaries and indigenous children. The case of missionary Augusta Nørup and her foster daughter Kamala is seen as but one indicator of a new emotional culture of the child in the Danish missionary community, evident from the 1890s: ‘one that constituted the child as the object of tender feelings and deserving of protection and care’ (p. 126). As evidenced in Danish missionary writing, that approach marked a shift in attitudes and representation from the 1860s and 1870s: less emphasis on racial and religious difference, more emphasis on innocence; less emphasis on corporal punishment, more emphasis on play. How and why did such change come about? Noting the gradualness and unevenness of change and differences of opinion among historians, Vallgårda cites the influence of evangelical revivalism in Denmark and also within the DMS. Not only that, sentiment increasingly influenced western philanthropic ideas and campaigns focused on children believed to be deprived or in danger. In south India, missionaries’ sentimental concept of childhood served to illuminate more clearly supposed deficiencies in the beliefs and practices of indigenous parents. In some cases missionaries controversially removed or ‘rescued’ children from those parents. Similarly the realm of reproduction and birth became the focus of argument and struggle, informed by agendas not just local, racial and gendered but also national and imperial.

With some adult Indians missionaries had relatively close relations. The presence and influence of Indian nannies (or ayahs) undoubtedly had a complicating effect on household and familial dynamics (pp. 188–93). Yet no aspect of missionaries’ emotional labour, in south India or anywhere else, was more affective than loss, whether through separation or death. Missionaries typically experienced the loss of their children through death as sacrifice but also as a kind of temporary separation. Grief narratives were written, to be shared not merely with family and friends but with mission supporters in Denmark. Partly a means of assuaging sorrow, they also carried an evangelical, moral message. Vallgårda notes a distinctive aspect of the Danish missionary narratives: their direct, emotional specificity (pp. 205–7).

How distinctive or how typical were the experiences and emotions of Danish missionaries in south India? And how much influence did they exert on western ideas about the ‘universal child’ in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? In her final chapter and epilogue Vallgårda examines the dissemination of ideas about India, Indians, children and childhood. Through books, pamphlets and tracts and through exhortations spoken (in churches, schools) as well as written the DMS taught Danish children religion and ‘imperial habits of sensibility’ (p. 211). Nevertheless, some missionaries went against the grain, as it were, and through the medium of religious literature questioned and even criticised Danish and Western assumptions and attitudes about the Other. They encouraged Danish children, however, not so much to empathise as to sympathise with their counterparts in south India. Though children in Denmark might see and perhaps feel the suffering of other children, sympathy also marked social and racial distance and fostered an ‘asymmetrical relation’ between subject and object (p. 229). So it was, that securely ‘anchored’ (p. 18, p. 237) in its home country rather than in south India, the DMS ostensibly exerted an important and enduring influence on Danish attitudes and opinions. Vallgårda acknowledges the difficulty of gauging and proving the extent of that influence; it is indeed ‘a tricky business’ (p. 236). So also is it difficult to gauge how Danish discourse fed into and influenced (probably through transnational, ecumenical networks and other means) western ideas about the ‘universal child’. There is more to be said about the DMS, religion and
society in Denmark and about the way in which Danish ideas fed into global discourses.

Historians increasingly argue for the impact of religion and of overseas mission on the ‘sending countries’ of Europe and north America. The period covered by this book marked what is now seen as a high point in the extent and probable influence of missionaries at home as well as abroad. As it was in Britain, the US and other western countries so also was it in Denmark. That we now know. Vallgårda’s book is immensely impressive. It is distinguished by wide and close reading and by innovative methodology. In critical and convincing ways it complicates missionary interventions and the missionary experience. It does not quite make such a convincing case for the global significance of Danish mission and missionaries to ideas about the ‘universal child’. But it leaves us in no doubt as to the complexity and importance of the DMS and its missionaries in terms of ‘Indo-Danish’, adult and children’s experiences.

Notes


The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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