

A HISTORICAL STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT

Dr. D. MERLIN SUGANTHI

52, Ambai Road, Kulavanigarpuram, Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli - 627005

Dr. S. MURUGAVEL

Formerly Associate Professor and Head, Department of History,

Rani Anna Government College for women, Tirunelveli - 627008

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to highlight the educational and social contributions of Catholic Missionaries in Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu. Christianity in India is as old as that of Christ himself. St. Thomas one of the Apostles of Christ came to India and spread Christianity in Kerala and Malabar coast. After along interval Portuguese Missionaries came to India and converted a number of people in Tirunelveli district into Christianity¹. The Cradle of Christianity in the composite Tirunelveli district were Thoothukudi, the whole coastal areas of the gulf of Mannar upto Kanniyakumari, KamaNayakkanpatti, Kayathar and Vadakkankulam. The first Romancatholic Mission that visited Thoothukudi was in the year 1532. But the mass conversion of Paratavars lived in Gulf of Mannar have taken place in 1536.

Key words : Catholic Missionaries, Francis Xavier, Society of Jesus, Jesuit Mission, father Henri Heneriquez, Robert Nobili, John D. Britto, Joseph Beschi

INTRODUCTION

The History of Christianity in Tirunelveli is traced back to the arrival of Portuguese on the Coromondal coast to augment their trading prospects at the turn of the fifteenth century. The Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries who accompanied the traders to Tirunelveli coast were the first to spread Christianity in the district. The efforts of these Missionaries bore fruit among the community of Paravas fishermen and traders concentrated near the coast. They converted enmass nearly 10, 000 around, 1536, in exchange for the protection of the King of Portugal

against the raids of pirates who made their pearl fishing along the coromandal coast so perilous, as well as against their Muslim rivals².

Mass conversion

The Parathavar conversion to Roman Catholic Christianity took place in the course of a maritime war fought between 1527 and 1539 by the Portuguese and Muslim forces. Paravas were the fishing community found in the sea coast towns of Tirunelveli district. They were in Majority at Thoothukudi. They earned their daily bread by diving for pearls and were the engaged in pearl fishing industry at Thoothukudi. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century the Muslims of Kayalpatnam had obtained on lease the pearl fishing from the Chera King Udayamarthanda Varma and reduced the Paravan divers to slavery Aparava women selling Paniyaram was insulted by a Muslim master in 1532. The Husband and his comrades caught hold of the Muslim and cut of his ear lobes and they killed many of the Muslims. A bloody conflict between the Muslims and the Paravas over pearl fishing rights led to the slaughter of thousands on both sides. When the Muslims secured the help of the Nayak rulers. Dom Juan-Dacruz, a Nayar convert and Merchant of Arab horses from Calicut then in exile at Thoothukudi requested Paravas to seek the protection of the Portuguese of Cochin. In 1532 a delegation of seventy Parathavars went to Cochin. They appealed for protection and contacted the Portuguese Captain against the Muslims. The delegation negotiated an agreement with the Portuguese captain Pedrovaz De Amaralat Cochin, Committing Portuguese Military power to the protection and preservation of the Corporate economy of the Jothi and its settlements, in return for the Parathava conversion to Catholicism. As a result of this agreement, a naval fleet went to Coromandal coast. In December 1535 the Portuguese fleet arrived and after a series of naval battle, the powers of the Muslim Kayalars were gradually extinguished. The Portuguese re-established the wining hold of the Paravars on their pearl fishing rights and settlements. A group of Pad road priests was sent off to the coromandal coast and converted the Parathavars to Christianity. Within Months they were reported to have baptized 20,000 Parathavars at least from thirty villages in the area which the Portuguese referred to as the Pescara. Jesuit records indicate that this took place in March or April, 1536, was followed by mass baptism at a later date of the Parathava inhabitants of Thoothukudi, Vembar and Vaippar, Portuguese encouraged the Parathavars to settled in secure places, which functioned as the Pivotal centers of trade education and religious activity. Thus the Paravas 20,000 in number from the villages along to the cast from Capecomarin to the Island of Rameswaram became Christians once count of its pearl fishery it was called the Fishery Coast.

Missionaries Contributions

Ten Years Later (1546 A.D.), Francis Xavier (1542-1552) a member of the society of Jesus, baptized or rebaptized 15,000, Parathavars began to acquire elements of a Christian culture. He was a catholic Missionary from Spain reached India on Sixth May 1542 and settled at Goa. He worked among the Paravas of Tirunelveli – Thoothukudi and Travancore with a small group of Goa trained interpreters. Many of his letters were written from Manapad on the coast near Tiruchendur. His letters Portray his daily activities in the Coromandal cast He left India in 1552 A.D. and the work was continued by father Henri Heneriquez Superior of the Jesuit Mission, untill his death in 1600 A.D. Thoothukudi, Mannar Island Vemparpunnaikayal, Virapandiyapatnam, Manappad and Periyapatnam become the major Catholic Mission stations. The Parava Catholicism was Latin Catholicism by adoption but Tamilzed Catholicism by practice. The Indoctrination introduced an array of Celestial officials into Parathava society namely Upadesiyars the Konakkupillai and the Vaathiyar.

Father Henri then Riquez (1549-1600 A.D.) was responsible for planting the seeds of the orient list movement. In 1567 Heniquez established a Tamil College at Punnaikkayal. In 1582 the Jesuit imported from Manila statue known as Shenhoradas Nevis translated in Tamil as Panimayamatha (our lady of snows) to the church of the lady of Pity at Thoothukudi.

Francis Xavier left the pearl fishery coast in 1545 A.D. and visited Manila in Philippines on his missionary work. There he visited Augustinian convent and was draw on by the beauty of the statue of our lady of shows in the convent. The Nuns accepted the request of Francis Xavier to send the statue as his gift to the newly converted people of the Fishery cast. But only after his death the statue of our lady of snows reached Thoothukudi on 9th June 1555 by a ship named St. Helena and was placed in the church of our lady of Mercy³.

The costal inhabitants developed a deep attachment to our lady of snows and lovingly called her Panimayamatha. The practice of Mother goddess worship was thus converted into the veneration of Mother Mary.⁴ Punnaikayal was the head quarters of the religious activities and commercial interests of the Portuguese until 1579 A.D. Due to the intrusion of the Vadugars, the Jesuit Missionaries shifted their head quarters from Punnaikayal to Thoothukudi in 1579 A.D. They took efforts to build a church near their residence. This was St. Pauls College dedicated to our Lady of Mercy where the statue of our Lady of shows was placed. The Church was consecrated by the Bishop of Cochin, Dom Henrique De Tavora on 5th August 1582. The first feast of our Lady of shows is celebrated on this day in the Basalia of St. Mary Major situated on mount Esquiline in Rome also. After the conversion of Paravas, the Vijayanagar rulers. The Nayaks of Madurai and their chieftains did not settle entire profit from the fishery coast. The Nayaks of Madurai took control of the entire fishery coast and persecuted the newly converted

Christians. The Vadugars set fire to their settlements including the church of our lady of Marcy⁵. The Natives were forced to flee to Raja Theevu or Moyal Theevu (Hare Island) along with the statue of our Lady of snows. The Vadugars attached the Island too. So the Fisher folk carried the statue and installed it in the church of St. John the Baptist at Sivanthikulam near Thoothukudi⁶. In 1658 Vacavans the General of Dutch army captured Thoothukudi. The Pearl Fishery coast come under the control of the Dutch. They attempted to convert the Paravas to protestantism and to transform completely their social and religious customs. After driving away the Catholic Missionaries the Dutch started to impart Caluthist doctrines to the Catholics in their own-churches. Some Catholic houses Calvinist doctrines were taught. So the fisher folk wanted to protect the statue of our Lady of snows and it was taken to Korkai. Due to aggressive Policy of the Dutch their trade and commerce declined. They felt that without the support of natives they could not improve their trace and commerce so in 1699 the Dutch officials gave permission to rebuild the ruined Catholic churches in Thoothugudi and in the same year the statue of our lady of snows was brought from Korkai to Thoothukudi⁷. With the effort of Father Vigillusmansi, the then parish priest the new Church was build on 5th August 1713. The Thoothukudi Virgin festival was first conducted in 1720 A.D.

Francis Xavier was followed by the Robert Nobili (1606 – 1656). John D. Britto (1674-1693) and Joseph Beschi (1711-1742) unfortunately the great Jesuit order was suppressed by Pope Clement leaving the good work done by it high and dry. Roman Catholic religion spread into the hinterland of Thoothukudi region in the 17th century. Caldwell, writes the next notice I find is of the establishment of a congregation at Kayathar in the interior in 1640. There were probably congregations in the interior before this seeing that forty five persons in Inland places were baptized in 1600. Some manuscript sin formed us that the first convert was Kamanayakkar. He met a priest in grave with his Assistant. After converting him to Catholicism the priest left the place. After some years Kamanayakkar met father St. John D. Britto (1674-1693) and asked him to baptize some of his relatives. Then with the help of De Britto. He had invited some Nadars and Vellalas to live in the Village. The incident were confirmed by a Kettar written to the then Jesuit head Gonaluus by the Priest Louis Demell in 1688. Kamanayakkanpatti became an important religious centre⁸.

Father constant Joseph Beschi later called Viramamunivar (1711-1742) an Italian Catholic Missionary did his missionary work in Kamanayakkampatti, Kayathar and Manapadu. He was imprisoned by the people of Kurukkalpatti village of Sankarankoil taluk suspecting his missionary work. He was rescued by the Christians of Keyathar. He excelled in Tamil language and his contribution to Tamils Indispensible⁹. The conversion of the people continued in the years 1701, 1708, 1727, 1732 and 1756. The converted people in this period were mostly Nadars and Vellalars.

The Society of Jesus was restored in 1814 by Pope Pious VII. In 1838, to Jesuit Missionaries, Father Martin and Louis Du Racquet sent by George XVI arrived at Palayamkottai and commenced their mission work in Tirunelveli. Yet the Jesuit mission suffered a steady decline in its missionary activities partly due to divisions within its own ranks and partly due to the growing influence of Protestants.

In 1644 some Christian families lived in the village of Minkulam and Tirukkalur. This was mentioned by Father Andrew Lotus. In 1714 Father Brandolini founded a congregation in Vadakkankulam¹⁰. But earlier to that in about 1680, the first shanar congregation, began with the conversion of a woman named Sandayi and her husband Gnanamuthu at Vadakkankulam and a church was built there in 1685. This Church was built by Rev. John De Britto who was murdered at Oriyur near Ramanathapuram. In 1745 one Nayer named Neelakandan a chieftain in the army of Travancore state was converted to Christianity. But he was shot dead in 1752. Some of the Vallalas had entered into Catholic religion in this period. Among the Catholics caste differences created many problem. Hence the Vallala Catholics and the Nadar Catholics demanded and pressurized the priests to build different churches for them. But a church was constructed with two parts containing one sanctum sanctorum which was sarcastically called as Trouser Church. Vellalas Mudaliyar Kammalars and Paratavars remained on the Southern side and the Nadars and Pallars on the Northern part during the time of prayer. The Nadars in 1872 opposed this practice. The height of the wall between the two portions of the church was 3.5 feet since the Nadar were four fold in strength than the Vallalas. They transgressed the rule and appealed to the church authority, the Bishop. The Bishop gave them some concessions. The caste oppression and fanaticism were so terrible some of the revered brothers of the secret Heart society of Palayamkottai, of course Nadars were not allowed to enter the church through the southern portion of the church.

In 1910 the Vellalas refused to sing the hymans during the worship, they shouted at the church during the mass and walked out of the church. The Parish Father Adrian Causanai was firm in abolished the caste atrocities. He complained about this incident to the Bishop of Tiruchirappalli. After getting his permission causal ordered to demolish the wall dividing the church. The Vellalars went to the court. The court ordered to rebuild the wall within two months. But finally in the appeal the court dismissed the case and save the Judgment in favour of the church authorities. Because of this caste conflict some of the Vellalars Joined the protestant seat of the American church. Thought he wall at Vadakkankulam dividing. The Church was demolished, cased differences are not vanished among the Catholics. There were 30,000 Roman Catholics, in the Composite Tirunelveli district by 1820.

A.J.Stuart views the role of missionaries in education in the district thus: "The impulse given to education in this district is partly owing to the exertions and influence of missionaries whose schools intended chiefly for Christian converts who usually belong to the lower castes are also largely attended by boys of higher castes attracted by the superior instruction afforded, it is also partly due to the intelligence and appreciation of civilisation shown by that large part of the population which consists of Brahmins and Vellalas."¹¹

In the 16th century the Jesuits, led by St.Francis Xavier, the superior of the Jesuit mission in India were very active in setting up schools in the whole of India including South India for the propagation of their faith. He started the first school in the fishery coast. In 1567, Father A.Henrique Henriquez established a Tamil School at Punnaikayal for young ones who were sent there as catechists and he himself taught the pupils in the school.

The oldest educational institution in Thoothukudi is the Jesuit run St.Xaviers School. Its origin can be traced as far back as 1600 during the Portuguese period when the missionaries started it as a Parish elementary school and Seminary. During the Dutch period spanning almost a century and half due to the suppression of the Society of Jesus, it functioned sporadically and without real growth. The school reopened in 1823 under the superintendance of the French Jesuits of new Madura Mission after the restoration of the Society of Jesus. It was raised to the status of a middle school in 1872 and a high school in 1884. In 1978-79, this school was upgraded into higher secondary school.¹²

In 1842, there were four schools for boys two at Thoothukudi and one each at Meignanapuram and Ettayapuram. Christian missionary societies played a great role in imparting elementary education. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) supported various schools in the Madras Presidency. Most of the schools were in Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli Districts. The society spent nearly Rs.40,000 for its educational activities in 1852 and Rs.30,000 in 1853. It also maintained two Teacher Training Schools one each at Sawyerpuram in Thoothukudi district and VEDIAPURAM in Thanjavur District. The Portuguese mission Ornellss school was started in 1875 and became a 'middle school in 1929.

The Holy Cross School for girls was started in 1906 and was raised up to high school in 1941. The year 1906 witnessed the birth of another school for girls, viz., Viagula Matha Convent School, the forerunner of present St.Aloysios Girls School. In fact it is reported that even before 1906 the school functioned within the convent and in 1905 the sister had opened another school in the north of the town. The Bon Secours Convent established in 1835 within the precincts of our Lady of a Snows Church had its own school for girls. By 1909 the runs of Holy Cross Convent had two schools to take care of one for the European or Eurasian (Anglo-Indian) girls

and the other for Indian girls. St.Mary's College for women was started in year 1948, immediately after the Independence.

The author of 'La Mission Du Madura' records the existence of several other parochial schools in Thoothukudi in the first decade of the 20th century, Thekkur School (Southern side of the town), Vadakkur school (Northern side of the town), St.Antony's school at V.E.Road for the benefit of scheduled caste children and Puckle channel school started in 1911 for the children of the ward. Besides St.Mary's College, a pioneer institution for the cause of women higher education, the Holy Cross High School was subsequently upgraded as Holy Cross Home Science College in the year 1975, created new grounds in the diversification of women's education into more practical vocational areas. In higher secondary education too, priority was given to women's educational institutions as the church could count five higher secondary schools for girls in the town as compared to four for boys. St.Thomas Matriculation is the latest addition to the list. Besides these, 17 elementary and middle schools to complete the network of the educational institutions also maintained by the Catholic church in Thoothukudi.

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