



ENTRY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS INTO MADURAI

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Introduction of Christianity into Madurai

The name Madurai is said to have been derived from the word *Madhuram* meaning sweetness. According to a mythology, quoted in *Madurai Sthala Puranas*, as a sign of blessing and purification, God Shiva sprinkled from his locks drops of *amirtam* (nectar) all over the city when it was first built by the king Kulasekhara Pandya and thence forth the city came to be called Madurai. It is true that the city was unique in the sense that it was one of the oldest cities in South India which enjoyed a continuous political history as the capital under the Pandyas who ruled from the beginning to the 14th century of the Christian era. It was unique culturally as a seat of Tamil culture and civilization, which earned the city the epithet "Athens of South India". This was justified by the fact that as the seat of Tamil Academy, the *Sangam*, it did much for fostering Tamil language and literature. Moreover the city had sheltered generations of saints, statesmen, scholars, poets, artists, craftsmen and merchants. Economically it was unique since from time immemorial, it had been a centre for flourishing trade and had commercial contacts with the countries of both the east and the west. Among the different commodities textile products of Madurai were greatly valued besides pearls, fish and vegetables from the coastal areas. Religiously also it was unique being a flourishing centre for various religions such as the two prominent sects of Hinduism – Saivism and Vaishnavism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam and was abounded with numerous monuments especially temples.

In these circumstances Christianity made its entry into the Madura country. In fact Christianity was first introduced in to the Madurai country by the Portuguese through the Jesuit missionaries, patronised by them. The Portuguese in Goa were responsible for the *en masse* conversion of the Paravas of the Fishery coast. The Portuguese helped the latter to come out of the clutches of the Arab exploitation and mulctary. In return the Paravas embraced Christianity. These converts, over 20,000 in number, thenceforth came under the protectorate of the Portuguese and thereby indirectly brought under the suzerainty of the king of Portugal. To cater to their spiritual needs, John III, the king of Portugal appealed to the then Pope Alexander VI to authorise a priest from the Society of Jesus to South India. Accordingly Francis Xavier was deputed to South India.

Francis Xavier

Hailing from a Spanish aristocratic family, Francis Xavier came down to South India in 1548 as a spiritual and political agent of the Portuguese through *Padroado* or Patronage system. Since his mission work centred on the Paravas he was considered "the Apostle of the untouchables". Most of his untouchable conversions were in the South Travancore State. Since the then 'Christians' were ignorant of anything of Christianity due to the unintelligible Portuguese language he instructed them in the Christian faith and with the help of some elite, translated a small catechism and sermon and thus organised a Christian way of life for them, which could be identified as the "Indian Mission" and started many schools in the coastal villages. The catechists nominated and trained by him to carry on the spiritual work, received stipends from the Portuguese Government. He had a very early death in 1552 and hence was called 'the Saint in a hurry, though his stay in India was transient, his impact has outlived the passage of time. It was true that the cordial relationship that existed between the Portuguese and Vijayanagar Empire in the 16th century ensured a safe and easy passage for the Jesuit missionaries into South India. However, Fr. Antony Criminalli who was detailed for evangelisation in the fishery coast by Xavier fell in 1549 along with his catechists to tribal arrows on the east coast of Ramnad district and became the first Jesuit martyr in India. Thus even during the time of Xavier, opposition to Christianity in the form of assassinations and destructive episodes was common. But still the Jesuits continued their mission with vigour even after the decline of their patrons, the Portuguese, and gained momentum which resulted in the founding of a Mission at Madurai.

Robert De Nobili

Nobili is considered as the real founder of the Catholic Madura Mission. He was the first Jesuit to work under the Archbishop of Cranganore. An Italian Jesuit of aristocratic parentage, Nobili reached Madurai which was the centre of Tamil culture, along with Fernandez in 1606. Madurai was then under the Nayak ruler Muthu Krishnappa whose reign saw the beginnings of Nobili's endeavours for the cause of Christianity. Within six months, he acquired proficiency in the Classical and Literary Tamil and even held discussions with the elite who called on him. His main aim was to raise the status of Christianity in the eyes of the natives by converting the leaders of Hinduism (Brahmins) and there by the whole of the Hindu society in India. He considered Madurai as a place where the hope of spreading the faith was so inviting. He disassociated himself from Fernandez who was a *Parangi* in the eyes of the Indians and declared himself a 'Roman Brahmin', regulated his diet and dress and also renounced the world and its carnal pleasures. By the adoption of the life of the missionary to that of the people (the Brahmins), the appropriation of harmless (Hindu) customs and ceremonies for Christian use and the thorough study of vernaculars and Sanskrit, the language of the sacred books of Hinduism, he attempted to indigenise Christianity. His



adaptation method, coupled with his altered life style, earned him respect from the local Hindus and resulted in conversions of some high caste Hindus. Nevertheless he was so careful as not to offend them in any way. Hence to appease them, he instituted two kinds of priests. One was *Sanyasi*, a high caste priest, to cater to the spiritual needs of the high caste and the other was *Pandaraswami*, priest for lower caste. This differentiation was condemned by many as too much concessions to caste feeling. However his efforts bore fruits in the form of 200 converts from several castes within two years and within five years he baptised 108 Brahmins. Thus he opened the portals of the church to prince, pauper, Brahmin and low caste. Encouraged by the first fruits of his labour, Nobili built a new church in 1610. Nevertheless his adaptation method led to opposition even from his co-workers and ecclesiastical authorities and nearly landed him into the jaws of the Inquisition. However Pope Gregory XV took decisions in favour of his methods in 1623. As far as Madurai was concerned, this controversy resulted in a loss of prestige to Nobili. He was convinced that this ancient seat of Hinduism was not congenial for conversion. His assistant Antonio Vico also felt that one would never encounter obstacles anywhere as great as in Madurai despite the fact that Tirumala Nayak of Madurai was sympathetic towards the missionaries. Since his experiment met with failure in Madurai, Nobili turned his attention towards the north. In 1623 he set out on a long journey through the Salem district and the Trichinopoly where the converts were mainly of low castes.

John De Britto

The most outstanding follower of De Nobili, a greater intellectual and zealot than Nobili himself, was John De Britto, the son of the Viceroy of Brazil. He came to India in 1673 and joined the Madura Mission in the following year. He started his work in Kuttur in Thanjavur kingdom then shifted it to the Marava country (Ramnad) which was a tributary to the Madurai Nayak kingdom. To begin with conversion took place only among the low caste Hindus but gradually it spread among the Maravas and made its head way in to the palace and armed forces. Britto was for group conversions in rural castes and intent on its realisation. This rapid growth of Christianity resulted in his deportation by the then ruler of Ramnad–Raghu Natha Thevar alias Kizhavan Sethupathi.

End of the Madura Mission

The adaptation method, disliked by many, resulted in the expulsion of the Jesuits from Portugal and its colonies. Owing to various representations from Christian kings to the Pope, the Society of Jesus itself was suppressed in 1773 by Pope Clement XIV and thus the Madura Mission came to an end. Hence much of its previous work was undone and the converts relapsed into Hinduism. With the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, Madurai lost its prominence as a flourishing Christian centre. On the whole Catholicism was at its lowest ebb between 1800 and 1830 a period that was characterised by law-suits, ignorance and corruption. From the languished Catholic community many were won over to Protestantism. While some relapsed to Hinduism some were forcibly converted to Islam by Tipu Sultan. However the Society of Jesus was restored by Pope Gregory XVI in 1814 as the result of many representations from the Catholics of Ramnad, Tirunelveli and the Fishery Coast to Pope, clamouring for missionaries.⁸¹ In the meantime in 1811 the new seminary at Pondicherry started to produce Indian priests and in addition to this after the Napoleonic wars, large number of priests came from France too in 1815.⁸² When the missions were reorganised in 1836 the territories in the southern most part of the Old Madura Mission were entrusted to the French Jesuits of Toulouse in 1838.⁸³ Thus the Madura Mission was reestablished in 1838 which could be identified as the New Madura Mission.

Conclusion

The past glory and uniqueness of the Madurai country, which the missionaries had heard much about, had already become a forgotten story. The ground reality was diametrically opposite. The missionaries had a clear cut vision of their mission. Though evangelism was their principal aim they felt constrained by the love of Jesus Christ to alleviate human suffering and misery by providing better facilities of life as their prime concern. Consequently they charted out an agenda of social reforms for the benefit of the natives of Madurai.

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