

The Fitting Dark Age of Jesuit Mission in Madurai

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ABSTRACT:

South India was opened for missionary activities on a large scale. The confluence of religions in Tamil Nadu is an exhilarating subject for study. In addition the native religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and foreign religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam are found here. The proposed paper is intended, to highlight the former Madura Jesuit mission and the political authority overlapped. Also the persecution of convert, the heather converts in the subsequent years; facing opposition from the indigenous elite of the region is highlighted. This article also highlights the problems and challenges faced by the missions.

INTRODUCTION:

During the 16th century Portuguese came into contact with the Indian, along the coast.¹ Madurai the Athens of South India and the radiating centre of an ancient culture, a city known from the beginning of South Indian history for power plenty and prosperity, and a city capital of many dynasties of rules beginning from the Pre-Christian period passed through calamitous vicissitudes of fortune on the disruption of the Nayak rule was in the region.² When the Portuguese came to India the region opened for missionary activities by the

Jesuit Fathers of the Padroado or patronage system. The victories in the western coast lead to the planting of cross in the eastern coast. Vijayanagar assured the Jesuit Father a safe berth in the capital.³ In 1536, the helplessness of the *paravas* of the fishery coast against the harassment of the Arab traders drove them to the arms of the cross.⁴ A Portuguese Jesuit, Fr.Goncale Fernandes came to Madurai in 1595 and he was there chiefly find a way of converting the Hindus and he failed.⁵

In the meantime they found Indian society was divided into various groups which they called castes. They called *jati* or *varna*. Mainly there were four divisions Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. There was untouchability by which low-caste could not be touched by a high caste man. And caste laws strictly enforced like any other laws by the rulers. Those who violated them were strictly punished with fine, imprisonment or ostracized as outcastes.⁶ These intolerable social evil suppressed the people who were considered pollutants.⁷ By the time the Portuguese who entered could not tolerate all this kind of adjust society.⁸ Their arrival marked changes in the attitude.⁹ So the new Christians who were converted had to renounced all these caste distinctions such

as thread worn on the breast, the taft of hair, use of sandal wood, ceremonial bath, child marriage, sati, prevention of remarriage of widows, untouchability etc were suppressed.

The gratitude of *paravas* to the Portuguese for deliverance from the musalmans had an everlasting influence on the course of the history of the southern peninsula.¹⁰ Also the Portuguese intermarried and mixed freely with all section of people and they ate beef, drank wine.¹¹ The new Christian also ate and dressed like them. They were called as *culum Pukkus*. That is those who had entered a new caste not merely a new religion. That caste was called *Paranghis* by the Hindus out of contempt. It was a new caste not merely a new religion. Because of these the low caste Hindus (untouchables) would have no dealings with them, as they may be ostracized from his own caste and social setup.¹² The Portuguese government and religious cadres could not understand the stigma attached to Christianity as *Parangimargam*.¹³

But it had a disastrous effect, which created a barrier between the Hindus and the Christians, that further conversions became impossible.¹⁴ Because no Hindus would believe that they might have any human or divine science.¹⁵ To them *paranghis* discarded the Indian social customs and rules of etiquette. Since the Christian missionaries had some customs, language, dress, diet and other marks made held in contempt. More and more

missionaries came to the painful conclusion, that it was impossible to convert the Hindhu.¹⁶ But the impression of the Portuguese king was that the Nayak was very kind enough to permit the Jesuit fathers to convert the people. This was the situation at Madurai during the arrival of the first Jesuit.¹⁷ He was considered the political and spiritual agent of the Portuguese. When Vijayanagar lost his force and persecuted the Christians, St Francis Xavier brought the situation under control.¹⁸

Hence the power of Portuguese was on the wane, the missionaries were placed in the critical situations pleaded by the good will of the king Venkata, the Jesuit wrote to the Nayak of Madurai in 1595 requesting him to provide safety to the missionaries in his territories.¹⁹ By the time Father Goncalo Fernandez a Portuguese Jesuit in 1595 built a church and school.²⁰ The purpose of his stay was more political than religious.²¹ Until 1606, the Nayak could not understand the nobility of Christianity. At that time Robert de Nobili reached Madurai on 15th November 1606 and he was asked to pilot the mission.²² The strategy adopted by Nobili was to integrate the Gospel values with the local culture. He taking into account the caste and customs of the people started two kinds of missionaries in 1640. One is intended for high caste under the Brahmin *sannyasis* and the other for the low caste under the *pandaraswamis*.²³

It is remarkable to note that, he allowed his converts to remain their cultural mode of living.²⁴ He was determined to penetrate into the ancient Tamil culture.²⁵ From the beginning his work met with stiff opposition. Also the church was not prepared to accept the bold steps. Nobili pointed out to his superiors that the religious faith should not confuse with civil customs. So he lives separately and ate only vegetarian food. Also he marked his brow with sandal paste and wore the sacred thread across the breast as the Brahmins.²⁶ He allowed his converts to remain their cultural mode of living.

From Sivadarma of Madurai he learned Sanskrit, the Vedas and Vedanta.²⁷ This led him to speak with great authority as an *acharya* or master of Christian Law to Brahmins and other leaders of Hindu society. However, from time to time opposition rose and said that Nobili was accused of corrupting Christianity by permitting Hindu practices.³³ He managed to get permission from Rome to use external marks, but it forbade Hindu ceremonies and mantras. He called it as the 'method of accommodation'. Nobili expanded his work to other towns and even started working among Sudras and Adhi Dravidas. During later years he had to face a lot of persecution.³⁴ Apart from such success Robert de Nobili and his colleagues achieved in Madurai, where the 'accommodation theory' facilitated

conversion, the tale is one of almost unrelieved retrogression in the work of missions.²⁸

The government discouraged the policy of giving the people of the land access to the rank of the priest hood.³⁰ Internal conflict assisted external upheaval in the virtual extinction of the Church in many parts of India.³¹ It is difficult, writes a Jesuit historian, to realise the desolation by which India presented in 1800. But there prevailed a general state of stagnation and in many parts of utter ruin.³² There were many acute problems from its inception up to the suppression of the society. Also opposition from the religious leaders, caste system, want of money to support them, wars and pestilences, open persecution are faced by the Madurai mission. Portugal expelled the Jesuits and one hundred and twenty-nine priests from Goa travelled in one small vessel. Missions were closed down and congregation's disappeared. This period has fittingly been called the 'Dark Age', because of the caste distinctions which led to complexities inside the church.

CONCLUSION :

The early Church grew immensely amidst persecution and hardship because of its dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. Close study concludes that caste system remained a stumbling block to the growth of the mission. The measures followed led to the complexities inside the church. The

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