

SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN SALEM

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ABSTRACT

According to the 2011 census the population of Salem was 50,40,157. The bulk of the population is Hindus. Then extra largest religious group is the Muslims. The Christians come third. According to the statistics taken in the year 2013 the Catholic population in the district is 87,235. The rest of the population consists of a few Zoroastrians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and others. Indian society suffers from inequality with regards to the distribution of economic resources. India came under the spell of Christianity since the arrival of St.Thomas one of the disciples of Jesus Christ in 52 AD. Ever since the dawn of research whether historical or otherwise, the history of St.Thomas the apostle in India has taken a predominant place among Christian and non-Christian scholars as well. Benjamin walker, while writing about the origin of Christianity religion in India has said, "Christianity religion is of a greater antiquity in India than in any other country, in the world except Palestine it is older in India than in Rome itself." Pandit Jawharlal Nehru, in his well- documented book, "The Discovery of India" has given the date of St.Thomas coming to India as 52AD.

Keywords: Catholic, Christian, religion, Indian society, etc.,

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Christianity religion in South India in general and in Tamilnadu in particular goes as far back as the first century AD. St.Thomas landed at Cranganore on the west coast and after a brief stay at Cochin he came to the Coromandel Coast. The Apostle preached his faith to the natives of India both on the west coast of the peninsula and on the Coromandel Coast and made converts of them. Thus the earliest Christian settlements in India are to be traced in parts of the Malayala country.

He converted the upper class Hindu families in Cranganore, Palyur Chayal, Nirranamand Quilon. He came to Tamil country to continue his preaching through the monarchs of the Pandiyas and the Cholas, winning over large number by his saintly life and the wondersheper formed. The success of his mission was bound to rouse the hostility of the priests who having vainly tried to discredit him, at last put him to death near at temple of kali, on the little mount (Thomas Mount) near Mylapore, Madras on 3rd July 72 AD aman loved and revered by all from the king to the citizen of lower strata of the society.

The martyrdom of St.Thomas at Mylapore led to the rapid increase of Christianity religion in South India. In recognition to the historical importance, Mylapore was erected as a first diocese in Tamilnadu on 9th annuary 1606 A.D. by Pope Paul V. It was elevated on Arch diocese on 1st September, 1886. Thus South India offered hospitality to the Christians from the earliest decades of the Christian era. Observing on the significance of St.Thomas Mission, Dr.Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India said, "Remember St.Thomas came to India when many countries in Europe had not yet become Christian and so these Indians who trace their Christianity religion of him has a longer history and higher ancestry than that of many of the European countries and it is really matter of pride to us that it so happened." For a long time there was little contact between the Christians of India and their co-religion is in Europe. Christian travelers in the middle ages occasionally complained of paucity of Christians in South India. Friar Jordanus (1321-1330A.D) wrote enthusiastically of the great scope that India offered for missionary activity in the cause of Christianity religion. St.Francis Xavier within a short span of ten years (May 1542 to December 1552) covered many thousand so for miles. He had visited many countries, preached the gospel to countless citizen from so many nations and succeeded in baptizing them. God had wrought miracles through him and his incomparable apostolic zeal made him the greatest Christian missionary since the apostle, St.Paul.

II. WORKS OF MADURA MISSION

After Xavier one of the most brilliant Catholic holy institutions in India was Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) an Italian Jesuit. He entered the Jesuit order in 1595 and came to India in 1604. He began learning Tamil from the Paravas of the Fishery Coast in Tamilnadu. He reached Madurai in 1606 when it was ruled by Tirumalai Nayak. Robert de Nobili adopted the mode of life of Hindu Sanyasis in order to attract higher caste Hindus to Christianity religion. By his adoptive method he converted many Hindu high castes to the Christian faith.

As a result of his unique way of conversion, Christianity religion was accepted in the southern parts of Tamilnadu by low caste and high caste citizen. In 1623, he toured through many parts of Tamil country. During the course of the tour he visited Tiruchirapalli, Senthamangalam and Salem. In June 1623A.D, he arrived at Senthamangalam, the capital of Ramachandra Nayak, the Vassal of Thirumala Nayak of Madurai. Ramachandra Nayak offered him as it to build a church and a presbytery but after consulting God in prayer, Robert de Nobili declined the offer. At Salem Nobili met Tirumangala Nayak, the elder brother of Ramachandra Nayak and also the de throned ruler of Senthamangalam. Robert de Nobili followed Tirumangala, a small town in Dharmapuri and baptized him there along with his family members on 25th December, 1625. On July 31st 1626, Robert de Nobili received the visit of a Pandaram hailed from the sect of Saivism and belonged to valluvar caste. The latter one was impressed by Robert de Nobili's Tamil book, "Sign of True Religion" and got himself baptized with the name "Mukthi Udayan" (Blissfulone). His conversion had a tremendous impact on the evangelical service rendered by Robert de Nobili in Salem area. Maramangalam became an important Christian centre with 40 neophytes. As this centre was then well established he could leave for other places to continue top reach the go spell. So he invited Fr.Martins and put him in charge of Salem, Maramangalam and Senthamangalam which numbered between 100 and 150 Christians. In 1627, he left for Tiruchirapalli. The little congregation she established grew from strength to strength.

Due to the efforts of Robert de Nobili and Fr.Antonio Vico, a church was built at maramangalam in 1628 and another one at Salem.

Subsequently the Christian Mission centre was established in various places in Salem area. Robert de Nobili also established a mission centre at Koilur in Dharamapuri. By 1665 A.D., there were a large number of Catholics at Kongupatti, Ilupuli, Anaikarapalayam, Omalur, Sankagiri, Anthiyur, Mathiyampatti and Ilanagar. Since 1687 the Mysore Mission had alone involved in the holy institutional activities of Salem. Fr. Cinnami started a mission centre at JumpuliKottai (Sampalli) between 1650 and 1660 A.D. He permitted Royan the catechist to construct a church at Novalpatti. This was the first church erected by Mysore mission in Salem. By 1679 there were 7 mission stations function in gunder Annaikarapalayam, Omalur, Manali, Elanagar, Mathiyampatti, Senthamangalam and Salem. During the year 1680 A.D. Fr. Manoel de Souza took charge of Kakaveri Mission Centre.

Fr. De Cunha was put to death by Dazarson Ist of June, 1711 A.D. He was the first Jesuit martyr of Mysore mission in Salem. In the middle of eighteenth century, the Mysore mission reached its zenith. The Mysore Jesuit Mission had eleven missionary residences in Salem of which two centres were found in the kongu area where Tamil was spoken and their main ignites were found in the North where Kannada language was spoken. There were about six priests looking after various mission stations in and around Salem. The holy institutions were assisted by the well-trained catechists. A few of them were Brahmin converts and some of them belonged to their communities.

The Indianization of Christian rites and the incorporation of Hindu customs were subjected to pontifical approval at different periods.

Ultimate Lyon¹³th September 1744, Pope Benedict XII issued the bull of Omvims SollcituDirum declaring Jesuit Mission proceedings to be impious and unlawful. The suppression of the humanity of Jesus and the decline of the missionary activities of the Mysore Mission had a drastic impact on the Christianity religion in Salem area. The suppression of Society of Jesus by the Portuguese Government in 1760, was a true disaster for Christianity religion in general and the Jesuit Mysore Mission in particular.

III. MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES OF THE PARIS SOCIETY OF FOREIGN MISSION

In 1776 the Mission of Mysore was entrusted to the priest of the Paris Society of Foreign Missions with Pondicherry as its headquarters in India. The mission worked hard in various mission stations of Salem, Madurai and Mysore under Msgr. De Tabraca, the Supervisor of Paris Mission. They started a seminar at Pondicherry in order to train the priests to increase the gospel to the areas entrusted to them. Their primary aim was to start the local church with the help of the natives. But before Paris Holy institutions initiated their reconstruction work, persecution of Tippu Sultan caused a serious blow to the Christianity religion in Salem.

He came to Salem in 1792 to accomplish his mission work and here main end in Salem till 1799. It is Fr. Dubo who was responsible for strengthening the Catholic Church in Salem founded by Robert de Nobili. Msgr. Champenois, Vicar Apostolic, Pondicherry entrusted to him the responsibility of the re-establishment of Christian religion and administration of Tirupattur, Krishnagiri, Idappadi, Salem, Kakaveri, Nammakkal and Kalangaud. His zeal in establishing agricultural colonies and also introducing vaccination to eradicate smallpox, in which in spite of the extraordinary tenacity of the citizen, he succeeded in his mission. During 1803–1804 a total of 25,432 natives of Salem were vaccinated. In memory of his gracious service, the natives still remember him by the title Doddhaswamiyaru. M. Launay in his book, "Historic Des Mission De L'Inde" said that in some parts especially at Karumattampatty, he is considered as the prince's son and the gracious of Europeans. According to the account of Fr. Dubo there was 4000 Christians in Salem area.

After the defeat of Tippu Sultan in 1798 by the British, the French Holy institutions extended their activities to Mysore and Coimbatore. One of the most illustrious Holy institutions was Bishop Bonnard, launched India into the Catholic movement. The History of the Catholic Mission of 19th century witnessed a steady progress, Pope Gregory XVI established the Vicariate Apostolic of the coast of Coromandel in 1838 A.D., Rev. Fr. Frico Alias Susainathar and an apostolic priest came to India. Soon he became the Parish Priest of Salem. He visited the mission stations of Salem and wrote a brief account of Salem district in 1838. In 1887 Pondicherry became a metropolitan Province with Mysore and Coimbatore as suffrages. Kumbakonam was cut off from Pondicherry in 1899 and Salem in 1930 and constituted into new dioceses. Thus Salem came into existence as a newly created diocese in 1930 with a Catholic population of 17,600. Foreign Mission Society took upon themselves the heavy responsibility of rendering missionary services in these areas. Roman Catholic mission and protestant missions were very active during the Era of Consolidation of Missions between 1800 A.D – 1965 A.D. About 478 mission bulletins and many missionary periodicals were published from 1860 A.D. to 1963 A.D. There were ten world major Missionary conference shields. World Council of Churches was formed. Young Churches in Asia and Africa were under the control of the west because of funds during 1910–1940. Rome appointed first local Bishops Christian population in the western Church in Europe in on steep face while the church expands in the Eastern countries. During the period 1965–2000 about 160 nations had Indian holy institutions and nearly 50 nations had Japanese holy institutions. This is a testimony for the deep rooted faith. There are grass root missionary movements and more than 427 worldwide independent missions involving in the evangelical mission now.

IV. CONCLUSION

Salem accepted Christianity religion due to their lent less effort of holy institutions in the first half of sixteenth century. They made indelible mark on the socio-economic life of the citizen of Salem area. The early holy institutions who labored in and around Salem area for evangelization took to the ways of living, mode of dress and customs of the citizen. They even took Tamil names. Through their influence the Catholic population steadily increased. They lived as the poorest of the poor and poured the waters of baptism over many thousands and purified their souls in Christ over coming many obstacles in the relentless mission. With regard to the untold sufferings met by the Christians in Tamil country in general and Salem in particular, F.R. Richards in his famous Salem Gazetteers writes, "A misfortune felt as irreparable to the present day, for the mission of India founded at the price of so many privations being deprived of their holy institutions. Many Christian communities were lost and it was not till the beginning of nineteenth century that the work could be seriously taken on hand." Fr. Jean Antoine Dubois, the renowned Paris Missionary was responsible for the re-establishment of Christian religion in Salem.

V. END NOTES

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2. Vijayan P. Bhaskaran, The Legacy of St. Thomas, p.1.

3. B.Shobhanan (ed.), History of Christian Mission In South India, p.54.
4. As per Tradition, St. Peter's founding of the Roman Catholic Church and St.Thomas founding of the Malabar Church are equally distinguished in terms of chronology and their pioneering characters.
5. Thomas Pothacamury, The Church in Independent India, p.10.
6. K.A. Nilakanda Sastri, The History of South India, p.441.
7. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. X, pp.477-478.
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13. *Ibid.*, p.351.
14. W.Francis, *op.cit.*, Vol.II p.45.
15. *Christ Jayanthi 2000*, Souvenir, Diocese of Salem, p.14.
16. Catholic Directory of India, 1994, p.760.
17. Christ Jayanthi, 2000, *op.cit.*, p.18.
18. M.S.Joseph, *The Short History of Salem Diocese*, p.18.
19. D.Feroli, *Jesuit in Mysore op.cit.*, 130.
20. M.S.Joseph, *op.cit.*, p.66.
21. R.Sobhanan, *op.cit.*, p.85
22. D.Feroli, *op.cit.*, p.194.
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27. D.Feroli, *op.cit.*, p.212.
28. Aloysius Soares, *op.cit.*, p.27.
29. Platinum Jubilee Souvenir, 2005, Diocese of Salem, p.26
30. Julian Saldauha S.J., *Patterns of Evangelization in Mission History*, p.21.

