

# ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT OF TAMIL NADU

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## **Abstract**

The Protestant division, one of the major Christian denominations, emerged in Germany in 1529 under Martin Luther, a German priest. Many North German states came under his influence. Five princes and fourteen free cities signed a 'Protestatio' or 'protest'. They were called 'Protestants'.<sup>1</sup> Luther founded the first Reformed Church at Torgou in 1544 in Germany. This new sect spread all over the world<sup>2</sup>. In India, English East India Company and Dutch East India Company were planted in 1600 and 1602 respectively. The Dutch were the first to bring Protestant Christianity to Tinnevely. In 1658, the Dutch Company captured Tuticorin from the hands of the Portugese and installed a church at Tuticorin in 1750. It was the first Protestant church in the district. It did not indulge in Gospel work. In due course, the Protestant influence faded away because of lack of continuous pastoral care.<sup>3</sup>

**Key words :** Protestant, Bartholomaeu Ziegenbalg, Rev. Schwartz, Rt. Rev. Robert Caldwell, Rev. Jaenicke

## **Introduction**

In 1621, Denmark installed a trading centre as Danish East India Company at Tranquebar in the Tamil country. Under the patronage of the King of Denmark, Frederick IV, a Danish Mission was founded in 1705 at Tranquebar. The first Protestant Missionaries of South India Bartholomaeu Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau came to Tranquebar on 9th July 1706 from Halle of Germany through the Danish Mission. After seven years, they established a school at Tranquebar. Ziegenbalg learned Tamil and took more efforts to translate the Bible into the Tamil language.<sup>4</sup> The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) sent a printing machine with Tamil letters and papers to Ziegenbalg in 1711. He printed the New Testament of the Bible in Tamil in 1714. He translated the Old Testament also. It was completed by Benjamin Schultz and printed in 1727. The Tamil Bible is the first major prose work in the Tamil and the first among the Asian languages to have the Bible translated and printed.<sup>5</sup> Fabricius introduced the first Tamil hymn book. These boosted the mission work and hastened the sprouting of churches all over Tamil Nadu. After Ziegenbalg, the other missionaries wanted to come out from Transquebar and extend the mission work in other parts of the Tamil country. This desire extended upto Tinnevely in due course. The king of

Denmark did not share their eagerness and stopped his financial help to the missionaries.<sup>6</sup> The British East India Company also did not offer their support to the Christian missionaries physically or financially. They feared that the missionary activity might spoil their major purpose in India, namely, 'profitable trade.'<sup>7</sup> In this situation the S.P.C.K. in England came forward to offer their timely help to the missionaries. The S.P.C.K. was the first protestant Mission that propagated Christianity in Tinnevely area<sup>8</sup>.

The founder of the first Christian congregation of Tinnevely was Christian Frederick Schwartz of Brandenburg, an S.P.C.K. missionary<sup>9</sup>. Induced by Schultz, one of the translators of the Tamil Bible, at Halle in Germany, after 1746 he came to Tamil Nadu as a missionary. He reached Tranquebar on 30<sup>th</sup> July, 1750 and had his missionary career under the Danish Mission. In 1767, he became the S.P.C.K. missionary in Trichinopoly. He started a mission in Tanjore with three catechists in 1772<sup>10</sup>. Businessmen of Tinnevely area visited Trichinopoly and were converted to Christianity by the Rev. C.F. Schwartz. A Trichinopoly Church Register of 1770 had a name, Lakhsmanan alias Gnanapragasam, who belonged to Tinnevely. One of the Journals of the Rev. Schwartz dated 1771 contained a note about Tinnevely and a name Savarimuthu of Palamcottah. Thus Christianity began to sprout in the soil of Tinnevely. The Rev. Schwartz visited Palamcottah at First in February 1778. He baptized Kohila, a royal Maratta widow of Tanjore, on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1778 at Palamcottah with the converted name 'Clorinda'. She came to know about Christianity through an English military officer, Henry Lyttleton. She is called the mother of the Congregation of Tinnevely<sup>11</sup>.

The first Church Register of Tinnevely dated 1780 contained forty names of converted Christians. It was found by the Bishop of Tinnevely, the Rt. Rev. Robert Caldwell, in Tanjore<sup>12</sup>. The year 1780 was considered as the year of the origin of the Tinnevely congregation. In December 1783, Clorinda went to Tanjore to meet the Rev. Schwartz to get a pastor to Palamcottah. In response to her request the Rev. Schwartz sent visuvasi in the beginning of 1784 and Gnanapragasam in July 1784. In 1784, the total number of the members of the congregation was fifty one<sup>13</sup>. Meanwhile, clorinda took more efforts to build a church at Palamcottah. With the help of the local people and some English men, the construction work was started in 1783. It took one and a half years for completion. On 24<sup>th</sup> August 1785, the new church was dedicated by the Rev. Schwartz. It was the first Protestant Church in the Palamcottah area<sup>14</sup>.

On 29<sup>th</sup> December 1790, the Rev. Schwartz ordained Satyanathan to administer the congregation of Tinnevely. He was the first Indian Superintendent Missionary of Tinnevely. The Rev. Jaenicke accompanied him from 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1791. He was the first resident missionary of the S.P.C.K. Mission in Tinnevely. He came to Tranquebar on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1788 from Halle in Germany and was instructed and trained by the Rev. Schwartz in the evangelistic field. In 1791, the total members of the church touched the figure four hundred. The Rev. Jaenicke visited Padmanabapuram, Poovani, Kalakadu, Ambasamudram, Pabanasam, Courtallam, Cheranmahadevi, Panchalamkurichi and Attur. The Rev. Schwartz sent David of Kalangudi to Palamcottah in September 1796 to assist Satyanathan<sup>15</sup>. David did Gospel work at Vijayaramapuram and Shanmugapuram. As

a result of his effort in 1797 a group of forty people of these two areas accepted Christianity. In August 1799, he purchased a land near Adaiyal and dug a well and built a prayer house there. The new village was named Mudalur<sup>16</sup>. The Rev. Jaenicke passed away on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1800.

In 1802, Gericks came to Tinnevely and joined Satyanathan, but died in October 1803. Satyanathan went back to Tanjore in 1805 and paid a visit to Tinnevely in 1810. He breathed his last in Tanjore in 1815. In March 1816, the first Bishop of Calcutta, the Rt. Rev. Middleton, visited Palamcottah. Till the arrival of the Rev. James Hough in 1816 at Palamcottah, the Christians in Tinnevely were almost neglected. Hough undertook a survey of all the neighbouring villages at the request of the Madras Committee of the S.P.C.K. Mission. He found 3,100 native Christians in Sixty-three different villages. He established Tamil and English schools for boys and girls at Tinnevely, Palamcottah, Melapalayam, Tachanallur, Nazareth, Mudalur and Tuticorin. He built a church in the fort of Palamcottah, later known as 'Chirst Church'. In response to his request in the middle of 1820, the C.M.S. Corresponding committee in Madras sent the Rev. Rhenius to Palamcottah. January 1836, the first Bishop of Madras, Daniel Corrie, visited Palamcottah and ordained the Rev. John Devasagayam as the first Clergyman of Tinnevely. After rendering Seventeen years of Committed service, Rhenius died on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1838<sup>17</sup>.

From 1837 to 1868, the Rev. John Thomas did Gospel work at Megnanapuram, Vellalanvilai and Nalumavadi. The Rev. Pettitt, the successor of Rhenius, was responsible for the construction of new churches at Alwaneri, Dohnavur and Pannaivilai from 1846 to 1849. From 1854 to 1858 Thomas Ragland, one of the notable missionaries, came to north Tinnevely in 1845 and did Gospel work in Virudupatti (modern Virudunagar) and Sivakasi. As a result of his consecrated service, Satchiapuram came into being. Thus the C.M.S. managed to propagate Christianity all over Tinnevely district<sup>18</sup>.

In 1837, the S.P.G. Mission appointed the Rev. Charles as the first S.P.G. Missionary of Tinnevely. He was transferred to Madurai in 1838. The Rev. A.F. Camera succeeded him in May 1838. Mudalur was ministered unto by the Rev. Christian Samuel from 1839. Meanwhile, the second Bishop of the Diocese of Madras, the Rt. Rev. G.J.T. Spencer visited Tinnevely in January 1841. In that year, the Congregation of Tinnevely had about 30,000 members. In 1859, the Rev. Thomas Brotherton, started the mission work at Nazareth. In 1870, the Rev. Dr. Strachan succeeded him. From 1876 to 1908 the Rev. Arthur Margoschis did Gospel work at Nazareth. The S.P.G. Mission ministered at Pillayanmanai, Agapaikulam, Valayadi, Mukuperi, Pragasapuram, Oyyangudi, Mudalur, Nazareth, Pudukottai, Puthiamputtur, Nagalapuram and Idaiyangudi<sup>19</sup>. In 1851, there were 34,928 Christians in Tinnevely (The C.M.S. Mission : 24,613 and the S.P.G. Mission : 10,315)<sup>20</sup>.

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