

# SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN TAMILNADU WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DHARMAPURI DIOCESE

<sup>1</sup>Dr. R. Stanislas, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai

<sup>2</sup>D. Deva sagaya sundaram, Research Scholar, Department of History, Government Arts College, Tiruvannamalai.

## Abstract:

In this chapter, we deal with a brief historical sketch of the spread of Christianity in Tamil Nadu with special reference to Dharmapuri diocese. The impacts of St. Thomas on Christians were very little in Dharmapuri during 16th century AD. The Portuguese made Tuticorin, as their mission Centre. Later into the 17th Century, they began to spread their religion in the interior part of Tamil Nadu. The first Catholic mission to South India was led by St. Francis Xavier who came from Portugal in the year 1542. This paper explains the important role of the Christians missionaries in India especially south India Tamil Nadu.

## Introduction

The Spread of Christianity in India In India, Christianity spread in three waves. First through eastern orthodox churches in the first few centuries with traders from Syria and Persia arriving in Malabar coast, second through catholic evangelization alongside Portuguese invasion and third with British colonialism through Protestant missionaries supported by Western Christian mission boards. While Protestantism was taking shape in the 16th century in Europe and in England, Roman Catholicism was already engaged in mission work in India. Perhaps, it is because of their early arrival and intense mission work, Catholics form the largest group in India; nearly half of the total Christian population. Protestants constitute 40 per cent, 7 per cent are of Orthodox churches and 6 per cent belong to other sects. The first organized Protestant mission in the south was launched in 1706 by the Lutherans under the patronage of the King of Denmark at Tranquebar (now the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu). The German Lutheran pastors, Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau were engaged in this mission. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century, during the period of the spread and consolidation of British rule, that the north of the country witnessed a significant growth in Christian mission activity. In the north-eastern region, where Protestantism dominates, Christianity is largely the product of nineteenth-and twentieth-century conversions. The Protestant churches owe an immeasurable debt to the Evangelical Revivals in the broad sense of the term. The Second Evangelical Awakening crossed the Atlantic from America to Britain in 1858. This produced the new phenomena of the nineteenth century, the interdenominational or nondenominational missionary society. By the end of the century every nominally Christian country and almost every denomination, had begun to take its share in the support of the missionary cause. While missionaries from England were permitted to work by

the East India company, the 1833 charter opened up India to the missionary activity of other nations. In 1852, the American Methodist Church felt the need for sending missionaries to other countries and formed the Methodist Missionary Society. Its mission in India began in 1856.

### **Origin and Growth of the Christian Missions in South India**

The universal character of the Christian churches and the Christian missions underwent a uniform metamorphosis depending on the social and cultural standards of the south. The missions of the Catholics are the Syro – Malabar Catholics, Latin Catholics, the Syro-Malankara Catholics, and the Jesuit Madura Mission. When the number of churches and the Christian population increased the Christians of the respective denomination were organised under their respective missions. Despite the presence of egalitarian ideas of universal brotherhood, the division of the first missionary residence in Goa in 1548.<sup>20</sup> The Dominicans preached the Christians faith in some parts of the islands of Goa, in Mahim and tarapur.<sup>21</sup>

The Augustinians arrived in India in 1572. Soon they built churches in Goa, Cochin, Bassein, Salsette, Doman and Diu. But their principal mission field was Bengal. During the years 1572 and 1626, about 138 Augustinians left Lisbon for Goa.<sup>22</sup> Other religious orders like the Carmelites, the Capuchins and the Theatines arrived in India in the course of the seventeenth century. The Carmelites were put in charge of the Vicariates of Malabar. The Capuchins labored in Surat, Madras and Pondicherry. The Theatines were entrusted with the missions in Golconda.<sup>23</sup> The contribution made by these groups to the Christianization of India had its impact on religion and culture.

### **Francis Xavier, the First Jesuit Missionary**

St. Francis Xavier, ‘the Second Apostle of India’ arrived at Gova on 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1542. It marked the Beginning of the active missionary service in India in general and south India in particular. He summoned the people from the streets with his little bell. From Gova, Francis Xavier sailed with three native Christians to begin to work among pearl fisheries on the coast of Comorin; in the extreme south of the Indian Peninsula.<sup>29</sup> From its very cradle, the Society of Jesus, in the persons of St. Francis Xavier and his brethren, walked in the footsteps of its elders the sons of St. Augustine, St. Dominic and St. Francis of Assisi, and began their Mission work in Goa and along both Southern Coasts of India in 1542. There were five Mission extending from Cape Comorin up to Tibet, namely,

1. The Goa Mission,
2. The Malabar Mission,
3. The Madura Mission,

4. The Mysore Mission, and
5. The Carnatic Mission.

These were later grouped into the 'provinces' of Goa and Cochin. What is now the Diocese of Tiruchirappalli was then the Mission of the Fishery Coast, the southern half on the Madura Mission, and a common 'sphere of influence' between the two, the so-called Marava region, east of Madura<sup>30</sup>. Christianity found here a virgin soil. The Christians who claimed St. Thomas as their apostle lived in Travancore, but were unknown in south – East India. This territory, the Madura Mission, we have in view all through. Within it laboured and died those French, but chiefly Portuguese and Italian Jesuits whose achievements are still the wonder of their successors.<sup>31</sup> When Francis Xavier came to India on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1542, with a letter from the pope appointing him Apostolic Nuncio (special messenger or ambassador of the Pope),<sup>32</sup> Pedro Gonsalves, the Vicar of Cochin personally gave the mission over to him.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the first Jesuit Mission in India was begun by Francis Xavier in the fishery Coast of South India. It was developed by Fathers De Nobili, John De Britto, Beschi and others.<sup>34</sup> Francis Xavier "towers above all others who followed him by his sympathy for the poor and the lowly, by his energy of spirit, by his utter fearlessness in the face of danger and his supreme faith in his mission."<sup>35</sup> His apostolic zeal drove him to bear with all difficulties and barriers to advocate the Kingdom of God<sup>36</sup> and as a result the number of Christians increased and many dioceses were established in places like Cochin, Mylapore and Cranganore. Francis Xavier devoted much of his life to missions in Asia. In 1542, he left for his first missionary activity among the Paravars, katesarkadaiyarpattamkattiyars (head of fishery coast) and mukkuvars, pearl fishers along the east coast of southern India, North of Cape Comorin.<sup>37</sup> The Paravas of this region lived as fishers and pearl divers. Francis Xavier found that there was no organized Christian community in the coast.<sup>38</sup> During his four years of stay in India he laid the strong foundation for the Church. He went to the fishery coast to care for the Paravas living in 30 villages from Cape Comorin and Tuticorin. When he travelled to Travancore he baptised a large number of fishermen called Mukkuvars in the months of November and December 1544.<sup>39</sup> By the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Jesuits succeeded in gathering the Christians together in sixteen large villages. The entire casts of the Paravas became Christians.<sup>40</sup> Later a large number of Paravas migrated to Madurai. The Portuguese Jesuit priest Fr. Goncalo Fernandez S.J was appointed to look after their spiritual needs.<sup>41</sup> Francis Xavier founded the Cape Comorin Mission as he found the Travancore region more receptive to his teachings and later he made Kottar his residential place. He baptised nearly 20,000 Paravas and founded the "fishers' Mission."<sup>42</sup> Then he went to Japan and returned to Goa in 1552, and finally died on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1552, at Sanchen Island near Canton, on founding China Mission. The conversion of the Paravas had its impact on the suburbs of Tirunelveli and the interior of Madurai, the abode of Brahminical learning and culture. The Catholic Mission of Tanjore showed greater interest after Francis Xavier.<sup>44</sup> By the end of sixteenth

century the Jesuits started their missionary activities at Mylapore in 1595, Nagapattinam in 1597, Ginigi in 1598, and Tanjore in 1598.<sup>45</sup> Protestantism entered and the situation of the Catholics became somewhat difficult in served, parts of India.

### **Historical Background of Dharmapuri Diocese:**

In 1776, the Holy Father handed the Madurai Missions and the Malabar Missions to the care of the M.E.P. Fathers. In 1785, Msgr Chapenois, mep. Superior of Malabar Mission was given the responsibility by Rome to look after the entire Mysore Mission, of which the old Diocese of Salem formed a part. In 1794, he was the first Bishop to visit the Diocese of Salem and left there Abbe Dubois, MEP who tried to bring up the Church work. This region continued to depend on Coramandal Missions, and later, on the Apostolic Vicariate of Pondicherry, which became an Archdiocese in 1886. This set up continued till 1930 except for Hosur Taluk, which had been entrusted from 1861 to the care of the Mysore Missions. On August 3rd, 1930, the Diocese of Salem was erected.

Because of the vastness of the Diocese of Salem, the district of Dharmapuri was separated and declared a diocese by the Holy Father Pope John Paul II on January 24, 1997. Most Rev. Joseph Antony Irudayaraj, SDB, a Salesian was appointed as its First Bishop. After having completed 15 years of his ministry, due to an advanced age, he got retirement on 13th January 2012. The Most Rev. Dr. Lawrence Pius is the Second Bishop. And he was installed in the See of Dharmapuri on 20th February 2012. Under his leadership after his motto "To Proclaim the Good News to the Poor" the diocese has seen continued developmental works in many fields. This diocese is the 15th diocese of the Tamil Nadu region.

The History of the Dharmapuri Diocese is closely connected with that of Salem from where the diocese was bifurcated in 1997. In the year 1623, Christianity came into existence in the Diocese of Salem through the famous Jesuit Fr Robert De Nobili, his successors and later on through the Portugese Jesuits of Madurai Missions. In 1654 the Italian Jesuits of Mysore had their residence at Dharmapuri and began to preach the Gospel in the region as far as Tirupattur in North Arcot district. In 1674, St. John De Britto, visited Dharmapuri on his way to Kolei. He stayed at Dharmapuri with his Confreres, being accompanied by Fr Antony Ribero. In 1687, the Mysore Church work began to spread and preach the Gospel in the present districts of Salem and Dharmapuri. In spite of the Pombal decree, suppressing the Jesuits, they carried on working under the jurisdiction of Cranganore. In 1711, Fr De. Cunha, a Father was killed by the local people as he was on his horse back towards the Church work place, near Hosur.



**People:**

An official Census 2011 detail of Dharmapuri, a district of Tamil Nadu has been released by Directorate of Census Operations in Tamil Nadu. Enumeration of key persons was also done by census officials in Dharmapuri District of Tamil Nadu. In 2011, Dharmapuri had population of 1,506,843 of which male and female were 774,303 and 732,540 respectively. According to the 2011 census the population of Dharmapuri District was 1,506,843. The bulk of the population is Hindus. The next 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 87,235.4 The rest of the population consists of a few Zorostrians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and others. Indian society suffers from inequality with regards to the distribution of economic resources. In Salem district still a large section of the people depend on agriculture, the primary occupation. About 45% of the total areas of the district is under cultivation. The majority of them are under the clutches of the moneylenders. The major part of the secondary employment in the district is contributed by small and cottage industries, which are generally, underpaid occupations.

The non-agricultural class consists of persons who derive their principal means of livelihood from primary industries mining, quarrying, processing, textiles, manufacturing of leather, metals and chemicals, tertiary occupations and commerce, transport and communications, health, education and public administration. Hence as elsewhere about 20% of the rich exploit 80% of the people and half of them even remain below the poverty line. They are powerless, marginalized and dehumanized by the rich. The real cause of poverty is inequality, injustice, illiteracy and oppression.

There is the abysmal poverty of the masses in India. More than 30% of the population, that is, some 350 million people live below the poverty line. These people do not have the bare necessities of life. The poor are politically powerless, socially discriminated against and culturally deprived. The process of economic liberalization and globalization has aggravated the situation. During the last decade, the Indian economy made remarkable progress, and yet this has not led to any alleviation of poverty. This clearly points to an unjust distribution of wealth. Poverty is caused not by the wickedness of some rich people but by the operation of a socio-economic and political system, which allows the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, while condemning others to a life of poverty and misery.

The Hindu social organization is composed of several castes. Each caste consists of several sub castes. The sub caste itself is divided into a number of smaller exogamous groups. Some important castes to which people of Dharmapuri district belong are the Brahmins: The Brahmins in the district are heterogeneous in character.

There are many sects and sub-sects among them, such as Telugu Brahmins, Kannada Brahmins and Tulu Brahmins.

Non Brahmins: The major communities in Salem are the Non-Brahmins. The Velars, Vanniyars, Agamudayars, Udaiyars, Reddiars, Kammalars, Komatiars, Janappars, Kavarais, Chettiars, Devangars, Sourashtras, Idaiyars, Kurumbars, Nadars, Sembadavars, Vettuvars, Kusavars, Pallars, Oddars, and Pariyars Communities are important. With the spread of literacy and social awakening among the masses, the rigidity of caste barriers is gradually disappearing, Even inter-caste marriages are common.

Tamil is the major language spoken by them. The other languages spoken in this region are Telugu, Kannada, Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, Sourashtra, Gujarati, English and Sindhi. It is a polyglot district. The influence of other languages is traceable in the Tamil spoken in this district.

### **Christians and Caste**

Apart from language, home grown divisive factor in the Indian church is caste. By precept, Christianity is an egalitarian religion. It proclaims equality of all people in the sight of God and expects its adherents to practice and promote equality, fraternity and social justice. But caste built on the principle of inequality was carried forward by converts into the Christian church. From the very start, Indian Christians had grappled with the caste issue.

Even the missionaries from the West who converted the locals to Christianity had ambiguous attitudes and approaches to the problem of caste. Some of them vehemently opposed condoning caste practises within the church, some others distinguished caste as a cultural practise better to be ignored than condemned. A few others embraced caste divisions with a view to win upper caste people to bring them into the fold of the Church.<sup>6</sup> On the whole, dalits and tribals responded more positively to mission work and joined the Christian church in large numbers.

The reality of caste within the Christian community today is a stark reality even though most Christians do not wish to admit the same. More than half of total Christian population in India and in Karnataka today are dalits, but they prefer to hide their low caste background. The others considered as higher than dalits in the caste ranking flaunt their caste tags, more so if they belong to the upper caste background. However, there is no caste enumeration in the church membership records. The only indication about caste background of Christians is found in historical accounts of conversions to Christianity during the missionary period. It is also possible to link one's caste identity with one's denomination since there was a tacit understanding and agreement among

denominational mission boards for each to restrict their mission work in particular geographical areas and among particular caste groups.

### **Political Background**

Dharmapuri District was never an independent political entity. In early times the north of it was ruled by the Pallavas while the south was included in the Kongu kingdom. In the 9th century the Chola kings annexed the whole and subsequently, it passed under the Hoysalas. In the 14th century the Hindu kings of Vijaya Nagar Empire conquered it, where their sway was acknowledged till the beginning of the 17th century when the district came under the Nayak rulers of Madurai.

The rise of the Wodeyar rulers of Mysore was a turning point in the history of Salem region. The whole of Salem came under the Mysore rule during the time of Chikka Deva Raja [1673 –1704 A.D]. In 1761, Haider Ali became the ruler of Mysore. The whole district fell to the East India Company at the end of the Third Mysore War in 1792 A.D.7 Subsequently it became an administrative division of the British territories in the Madras Presidency. It came into existence first as the district of Baramahal and Salem. The district capital was first located at Dharmapuri. In 1860 the head quarters was shifted to Salem. The district was divided into two districts namely Salem and Dharmapuri in 1965. The district of Namakkal was bifurcated from Salem in 1997 A.D. Some of the eminent leaders like Salem Ramaswami Mudaliar, Sri. C. Rajagopalachari, Dr. VaradhaRajulu Naidu, Sri. E.V.Ramaswami Naicker and Dr. P. Subbarayan played a major role in the political and cultural transformations. Their participation in the political movements in the 20th century and other activities brought the Salem district into the lime light.

### **New Madura Mission**

It was never made clear to what concourse of circumstances the Christians of Madura, Marava and the Fishery Coast owed their restoration to the Jesuits. Launay, M. refers to many letters of Mgr. Herbert to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, asking for the help of missionaries to come to the rescue of the Madura Mission; but none of them mentioned the Jesuits by name. There is no doubt, however, that those repeated requests induced Rome to set out in search of a Religious Order to help the Mission. The idea of the choice of the Jesuits must have come from other quarters. One surmise is that Abbe Dubois, the Director of the Paris Mission Seminary, must have suggested and backed the choice. It is not surprising that it should be so, in view of the cordial relations which the veteran missionary had with the early Madura Missionaries. But whatever be the side form which the idea might have emanated, it was ultimately the sovereign Pontiff who approved of it

and transmitted it to very Rev. Fr. Roothan, the first Superior General of the restored Society of Jesus to make the Jesuits available.

At the request of Pope Gregory XVI, J. Roothann, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, entrusted the Madura Mission to the provincial of Lyons in France, Francis Renualt SJ, who at once sent four French Jesuits in 1837. Joseph Bertrand (1801-1884), Louis Gamier (1805-1843), Louis du Ranquet (1806-1843) and Alexander Martin (1749 – 1840). These pioneering Jesuits reached Pondicherry on 24th October 1837. The New Madurai Mission was under the care of the provincial of Lyons for fifteen years (1837 -1852) only. When the Toulouse province in the South of France was created in 1852, Madura Mission was entrusted to the care of Toulouse.

### Spread of Christianity

Jesus Christ is the hinge on which the doors of history swing. The centuries are measured from his birth. He faced a humble birth and a bloody death to bring salvation to mankind. The public life of Jesus lasted only three years, from 30 to 33AD and was centered on the land of Palestine in which Jerusalem was the most important city. He brought the message of salvation to the chosen people of God, namely the Jews. He had come as the saviour of all mankind. It was by his suffering and death that he would bestow grace for salvation of souls. Since he could not be physically present in the world till the end of time to give grace, it was uppermost in his mind during these 3 years of public life to establish some kind of a society to continue his work in the world till his second coming. It was this idea that enabled him to establish a church.<sup>8</sup> The establishment of the sacraments, a necessary means to receive grace, needed someone to administer them to those who would seek them. He made provisions for this in the institution of the church. The first thing Jesus did was to select 12 men from his disciples whom he called "Apostles." After the resurrection, his apostles collected all the doctrines of Jesus Christ called the holy gospel and spread them in different parts of the world. There were 12 apostles of Jesus, They were

1. Simon Peter, 2. Andrew, the brother of Peter, 3. James, son of Zebedee, 4. John, brother of James, 5. Philip, 6. Bartholomew, 7. Mathew, 8. Thomas, 9. James the son of Alphaeus, 10. Thaddaeus, 11. Simon, the Zealot and, 12. Judas Iscariot. These apostles went about in different directions administering the sacraments in the cause of Christianity. Out of these 12 disciples, Jesus chose Simon, whom he renamed Peter or the Rock, as the head we read in the gospel of St. Mathew thus; "I for my part declare unto you; you are the Rock, and on this rock, I will build my church and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Before his ascension into Heaven Jesus told Peter on the shore of Lake Tiberias in the presence of six apostles, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep"



Here “lambs stand for the faithful and the sheep for the bishop.” Thus Peter became the divinely appointed head of the church.

St. Peter spread Christianity in Rome where he also established a church and became the first bishop. He lived to see the religion of Jesus spread through all the countries known at that time. He saw the church thriving in Rome. He had established there the centre of the church. After the death of Peter in 67 AD all who followed him as Bishops of Rome were like him the heads of the church called the Popes. The credit of popularizing Christianity in Syria, Jerusalem, Palestine and Greece goes to St. Paul. With the death of the last apostle, John in 100 AD and third successor of Peter, Clement I in 101 AD Christianity had spread from Palestine to Syria, Asia Minor.

St. Francis Xavier who pioneered the missionary effort in Asia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, travelling tirelessly to countries as far apart as India, Srilanka, Malasiya, China and Japan. He has many epithets attached to his name. He is known as “Defender of the East” “Protector of Goa” and also “The Apostle of the Indies” (the Indies are the countries spread to the east from the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, including India, Srilanka, China, Japan and Indonesia). Also on 14 December 1927 Pope Pius XI had declared him the protector of the mission and missionaries throughout the world.

### **St. Francis Xavier within a short span of ten years December**

1552) covered many thousands of miles. He had visited many countries, preached the gospel to countless people 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.

Certain historical forces brought the work of the early Mission to a sudden end. A period of disorder followed when the former Christian communities were left to themselves without any pastoral care. No wonder then that some of the aggrieved Christians of Tiruchirappalli sought refuge among the Protestants. The advent of the various Protestant groups at the beginning of the 19th century entering into South India was a factor to be reckoned with. With immense resources at their disposal, they raised Churches, Schools, Hospitals and Orphanages. So the first formidable task of the New Jesuits was to revive and continue the unfinished work of the Mission.

On their return to the Mission in 1838 the Jesuit Pioneers were able to still find some Christian communities holding on to the faith which the fathers of the early Mission had planted in the soil. The first project of the Propaganda as announced in the Cardinal Prefect’s letter to Mgr. Herbert, was meant to constitute the New Mission as a Vicariate Apostolic. The Congregation of Propaganda had already conferred on the Superior of the New Mission Fr. Joseph Bertrand, the dignity of the Vicar Apostolic. But Fr. Bertrand hastened to decline the appointment and requested the Sacred Congregation to allow him to continue that work with a

simple title of the Superior of the Mission under the Jurisdiction of Mgr. Herbert. Everything was settled accordingly; and the Madura Mission, while keeping its separate constitution and limits, was entrusted to the Society of Jesus, but under the dependence of the Pondicherry Vicariate.

The Story of the New Mission is an epic of Challenging growth and expansion. The Christian population which counted about 98,000 in the Mission area in 1838 registered a phenomenal increase to touch a record figure of 285,000 within a century. The boundaries of the Mission along with the population were subjected to delimitation whenever new dioceses were created. Raising up an Indian clergy and gradually handing over to them the Church was the ultimate purpose of the Jesuit Mission. This aim was achieved in a progressive fashion. The new missionaries pitched in the mission in three principal districts, the north, the centre and the south. Trichinopoly Madura, salem and Palamcottah were their respective capitals of these three districts.

The new missionaries of Madura had to face constant opposition from the Padroado priests of Goa. Even though the Jesuits had returned to Madura Mission with proper credentials from the Holy See, the Goan priests refused to accept them.

The second opposition to the Jesuits came from the various Protestant sects who were actively engaged in Mission work in the same region. Some Hindu groups such as the Arya Samaj and the Theosophists were also suspicious of the Jesuit Missionary activities. Above all the chronic poverty of the region, economic backwardness, ignorance, superstition, and the dominance of the caste system were the other enemies against whom the Jesuits had to fight. In the words of one of the Jesuit pioneers, “the Missionaries, who had sown in tears, had begun to harvest in joy.

#### Reference:

- 1) Aloysius Soares, Catholic Church In India, p.8.
- 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) C. Thomas, Political Relations Between Mysore and Carnatic, 1761-1799,
- 5) Souvenir published on the occasion of The First International Conference on the History of Early Christianity in India, 2005, p.51.
- 6) A.M.Mundadan, Tradition of St.Thomas Christian, p.81.
- 7) P. Thomas, Christian and Christianity In Pakistan, p.2.
- 8) Holy Bible, Mathew, 16:18-19.

- 9) Phalaksha, An Introduction to world History, p.61.
- 10) Newton and Horan, Church History, p.14
- 11) Catholic Directory of Salem Diocese, Salem, 2013, p.4.
- 12) W. Francis, Gazetteer of South India, Vol. II, p. 7.
- 13) Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Diocese of Salem, 1980, p.30.
- 14) A. Ramasamy, Madras District Gazetteers, p.118

