



CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT

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Abstract

The History of Christianity in Tirunelveli district is traced back to the arrival of the Portuguese on the Coromandel coast to augment their trading prospects at the turn of the fifteenth century. The Portuguese with Bible in one hand and sword in the other hand arrival on the pearl fishery coast the stretch of the coast from cape comarin to Rameshwaram on the south eastern coast of TamilNadu. Every ship from Lisbon brought not only the Portuguese sailors and traders but also Portuguese missionaries. The Portuguese Roman Catholic Missionaries who accompanied the traders to the Tirunelveli coast were the first to spread Christianity in the district. The efforts of these missionaries bore fruit among the community of Paravas fishermen and traders concentrated near the coast. The first Roman Catholic Mission that visited in Thoothukudi was in the year 1532. But the mass conversion of Parathavas nearly 10,000 lived in Gulf of Mannar have taken place in 1536 in exchange for the protection of the King of Portugal against the raids of Pirates who made their pearl fishing along the Coromandal coast so perilous as well as against their Muslim rivals.

Key Words: Thoothukudi, TamilNadu, Christians, Church.

Introduction

The Christians of the Fishery coast had been trained to recite the prayers both in latin and in Portuguese. Venantius says that Francis Xavier himself after seeing the Paravas deep attachment to mother Goddess Meenakshi, obtained for them the state of our lady of snows from an Augustinian convent at Manila. The Paravas call her Panimayamatha and Parava Matha. The Statue of our lady of snows reached Thoothukudi on June, 9th, 1555 by a ship name St. Helena and was placed in the church of our lady of mercy. The annual feast of our lady of snows there after became the fast of the entire coast.

During the four years that elapsed between the last visit of St. Francis Xavier to the Fishery coast and his death, the work there continued to develop particularly under the charge of Fr. Henriquez who became the superior of mission. When Fr. Criminale an Italian priest was killed at Vedalai in June 1549 in a raid by the Vithalaraya the cousin of RamaRaya of Vijayanagar. Fr. Henriquez built a seminary at Punnakayal, which passed on its best Pupils to the quilon seminary, hospitals both for Indians and Portuguese and Chapels in several of the villages the first regular church seems to have been that built at Thoothukudi in 1582. The feastofour lady of snows which was introduced in 1582 at Thoothukudi has had great repercussions not only on the religion and the culture of Parava but has also affected their politics economy and society.

In 1562 HolyCross church at Manapad was consecrated. In 1568 Fr. Henriquez wrote letter to St. Ignatious Loyola from Punnakayal. He mentions about seven priests two deacons and one Tamil brother in his team. The fruits of the missionary work by the team headed by Fr. Henriquez were the growing catholic community and the churches built by them. According to the Jesuit report in 1571 there were churches in Perumanal, Uvari, Indindakarai, Thalampuli, Kombuthurai, Punnakayal, Thoothukudi, Vempar, Vaipar, Mukkur and Periyapatnam. The first parishes according to the report of 1644 were Perumanai, Periyathalai, Alanthalai, Manapad, Veerapandyapatnam, Punnakayal, Pazhaiyakayal, Tutucorin, Vaipar, Vempar and Periyapatnam, Christian Population was 50,000 and seven hospitals were there.

Facing continuous threats from Madurai Nayaks the headquarters of the Jesuits was transferred from Punnakayal to Thoothukudi in 1579. A small Church of our lady of Mercy was built adjacent to their dwelling place. This Church would in time became the present shrine of our lady of snows. In fact even before St. Xavier came to India in Thoothukudi, there had been St. Peters Church built in 1538. In 1558 the first latin rite seminary was built in Thoothukudi where seminarians first catechumen center was instituted in Thoothukudi managed by a Jesuit priests. Training was given to the catechumens for one full year. In 1600 A.D. Fr. Henriquez died at Punnakayal and buried in Thoothukudi.

With the help of one KamaNayakkar John De Britto (1656 – 1693) converted some Nadars and Vellalas of KamaNayakkenpatti, KamaNayakkenpatti became important religious centre of Roman Catholic. Paralokamatha Church was built by KamaNayakker with the help of John De. Britto.



Fr. Constantine Joseph Beschi (1700 – 1742)

Fr. Constantine Joseph Beschi resided here between 1713 and 1816. Kayathar became a definite Mission in about 1680, but Kamanayakkanpatti superseded it as the missionary residence in 1688. In 18th, Century Gurukkalpatti was the residence of missionary was instead of Kamanayakkanpatti. Fr. Constantine Joseph Beschi popularly known as Veeramamunivar was an Italian. He became an ascetic of Jesuits. He was sent to India in 1700. He made Madurai as his abode. Here he learnt Tamil Telugu, Sanskrit Hindu thami and Persian. He was well known for his popular poem Thempavani. He did his missionary work in Kamanayakkanpatti, Kayathar and Manapadu. The conversion of the people continued in the years 1701, 1708, 1727 and 1732 and 1741. The converted people in this period were mostly Nadars and Vellalas. He arrived in Tinnevely in 1711 and was placed under the resident Missionary of Kamanayakkanpatti. He was posted to Kurukkalpatti. In 1716 he was in Madura and from 1720 onwards was put successively in charge of Vadugampatti and Avur near Tiruchi and afterwards of Tanjore. Hoping to be able to influence Chandashahib who since 1736 had been in possession of Trichi to give his support to Christian. In 1741 Chandashahib surrendered to Marathas. Beschi went to South and in 1742 reached. In Pearl fishery coast, He was imprisoned by the people of Kurukkalpatti near Alangulam in Suspecting his missionary work in 1716. He was rescued by the Christians of Kayathar As a rector of the Collegium orae Piscariae in 1742 he breathed last at Manappadu in Tirunelveli.

Holy Trinity Church at Idaiyangudi

Caldwell built a lovely church and a Bishop's bungalow by its side. The Holy trinity Church was built under Caldwell's personal supervision and even consecrated by him after he became Assistant Bishop at Tirunelveli in 1880. The Holy Trinity Church, Idaiyangudi, this is how the church built by the Caldwell is called today. The decorated Gothic architecture still draws crowds; there are three entrances to the church and the pillars are single stone marvels: the baptismal font is made of caecilian marbles. The chiming bells were a gift from Lord Napier, then Governor of Madras¹. Clambering up the dark spiral staircase, one can see the four famous musical bells installed by Caldwell's brother James Caldwell here perhaps more than 100 years ago, but still in fine fertile².

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Society for Propagation of Gospel (SPG) entered the Tirunelveli field and went on planting Churches besides looking after the existing churches for almost a hundred years till they merged into the Diocesan main stream in 1924. CTE Rhenius was head and shoulders above the rest in the CMS. Apart from building the Holy Trinity Cathedral at Palayamkottai, he planted 371 churches including Meignanapuram, Dohnavur, Pannaivilai and Nallur. No wonder, he is considered the greatest missionary after St. Paul and called "The Apostle of Tirunelveli."

Kayathar Romancatholic Church

Kayathar is situated 30 kilometers from Tirunelveli. The Roman Catholics have a large church in the town. The congregation date from the seventeenth century and includes converts from the Vellalars and Nadars. The Nadars have built a small church exclusively for them. The bigger church which stands on the site originally occupied by the church of the Madura Mission during the time of Father Constantine Joseph Beschi has a fine tall tower visible for kilometers around.

Manappadu Church

Manappadu a coastal village situated sixty eight kilometers from Thoothukudi and eighteen kilometers from Tiruchendur. This town is proud having four churches and a chapel namely. Holy Cross church, St. James Church, Holy Ghost church, St. Antony's church and Holy Host chapel at Amaravaram. Among these four churches Holy Cross church is the most celebrate one.

Manappadu Cave

St. Francis Xavier arrived Manappadu in 1542 A.D. He used a cave on the shore which was known in the pre-Christian era as Valli cave as his abode. Originally this cave was a dwelling place of a Saivaite hermit. St. Francis Xavier toiled among the paravas giving them proper instructions and guidance till 1544. This saint Francis Xavier was very much fascinated by the captains cruss with its raised plat form which enabled him to offer his daily prayers. This grotto is pointed out on the sea ward face of the cliff.

The Manappadu cave has a pillared hall measuring sixteen feet. Four inch × 17 feet. Six inch having a constructed vestibule fronted by a porch all placed axially. But originally the porch and the vestibule had no pillars. Four Pillars, two in each row, divide the main hall into three bays and three pillars are plain and rectangular in section. The Uttiram or beam that runs over the portico or corbel has been transformed into arches rising between the two pillars. Perhaps it is not an original feature. Likewise the depressions

¹ James R. Daniel (ed.), Proceedings Fifth All India Conference of Bishop Caldwell, Research Centre, Idaiyangudi, 2005, p.38.

² Seline D. Augustine, Op. Cit.,



on the smooth, wall surface stimulating riches, three on the northern and one each on the eastern and western sides are probably recent renovation for transforming it into church. The cave has a circular well at the north eastern corner of the hall or mandapa, a feature very much abnormal in the rock cut tradition of Pallavas and Pandyas. As a meter of fact the location of the cave at this point at Manappadu was due largely to the easy availability of spring water on this coast.

Conclusion

RomancatholicChristianMonuments like, The snow Maha Church Thoothukudi, and other churches found on the coastal villages of Vembar, Vaippar, Punnaikayal, Virapandyapatnam, Alanthalai and Manappad. Witness to the fact that Portuguese had more influences in these villages than other parts of the fishery coast. The above said churches were the symbol of the beginning of Romancatholic religion in Tirunelveli district. In 1538 A.D. St. Peters Church built in Thoothukudi. The Panimayamatha or Statue of our lady of snows reached Thoothukudi on June, 9th, 1555 A.D. by a ship name St. Helena and was placed in the church of our lady of Mercy. The statue of our lady of snow was the gift of St. Francis Xavier, the missionary of Jesuit Society to the Romancatholic of Thoothukudi. Fr. Henriquez built a seminary at Punnaikayal. In 1562 Holy Cross Church was consecrated Manapad in 1562 A.D. With the effort of Fr. Henriquez Churches were built at Perumanai, Periyathalai, Alanthalai, Manapadu, Periyapatnam, Veerapandyapatnam, Punnaikayal, Palayakayal, Thoothukudi, Vembar and Vaipar. In 1579 A.D. the headquarter of Jesuits was transferred from Punnaikayal to Thoothukudi. In 1600 A.D. Fr. Henriquez died at Punnaikayal and buried in Thoothukudi. His Cemetery at Thoothukudi served as one of the monuments of Roman Catholic

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