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Lekshmi Research Cell

Lekshmipuram College of Arts and Science

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Msgr. Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil – A Historical Study

Puspha Rani, G.*

Abstract: *A section of historians argue that it is but because of great men's thoughts and actions only history is being created. It is true that the thought and actions of the great men creates political changes, social growth, economic improvement and cultural growth. For instance, in world level we can see a large number of activities of great men and its impacts in the society. Like that in Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu particularly in Marthandam region, Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil born in a rich family and opted priesthood and selected Marthandam region as his mission field and through his thought and actions, he changed the history of Marthandam region. This paper illustrates about Msgr. Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil.*

Keywords: *Congregation, Monsignor, Ordination, Seminary*

Introduction

Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish historian rightly defined that "History is nothing but the innumerable biography of Great Men". It is true that all the political, social and economic changes are because of great men. For instance in ancient India, the thought and action of Lord Buddha, created new religion that spread not only in India but also in countries across the world. Similarly during the medieval period, it is because of Pope Urban II crusades were fought, that killed lakhs of people and created so much of destruction in medieval Europe. Likewise in the modern period, the thoughts and actions of Martin Luther created reformation that spread in countries across the world and changed the course of modern history. In the same way in the modern history of Tamil Nadu, the thoughts and actions of Periyar E.V.R. initiated the self respect and rationalist movements that spread throughout the state and changed the history of modern Tamil Nadu to a greater extent. In the same way Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil by his thoughts and actions changed the history of Marthandam region. This paper elaborates the details about Msgr. Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil.

Life History

Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil, the founding father of the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church Congregation, Marthandam hailed from a small village at Pala in Kerala¹. He was born on 24th May, 1903 as the fifth child of Kuruvila Kuzhinjalil and Maria of Ellavungal². He had four sisters and one brother. The term Kuzhinjalil refers to the title of their family. During his childhood he got better education and he was well versed in Malayalam and Tamil language³. After completing his education, Joseph expressed his passion to become a priest to his parents. With the blessing of his parents he joined in the minor seminary at Pala. Then he was sent to major seminary at Aluva where he

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studied Latin, English and Sanskrit language too. On 17th December, 1933 he was blessed by His Excellency Rev. James Kalancheri, the Bishop of Changanashery Diocese and got his ordination and became a priest⁴. Following that, on 23rd December 1933, he conducted his first Holy Mass. Fr. Joseph worked at first in Ellanthottam church in Kerala as a first parish priest. During that period, the newly formed Malankara Catholic Church did not have enough priests. Therefore His Excellency Rev. Mar Ivanios, the Bishop of Trivandrum invited priest from other diocese⁵. Thus, Fr. Joseph went to Trivandrum and joined in the Trivandrum diocese on 29th June 1934. With the advice of Bishop Mar Ivanios, in 1934 Fr. Joseph reached Marthandam at present Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu⁶.

Condition of Marthandam on the Arrival of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil

Marthandam was an important region in the erstwhile Travancore princely state of India. While he reached Marthandam caste system was deep rooted in the society. According to the census report of 1931 the total population of Travancore was 5,095,973. Different communities like Brahmins, Nairs, Mudaliars, Chetties, Nadars, Pulayas and Parayas⁷ prevailed in the society. Among them high caste Brahmins and Nairs dominated the society. Among the suppressed community in South Travancore Nadar community was the most important one. These people lived in present Taluks of Kanyakumari district like Thovalai, Agestheeswaram, Kalkkulam, Vilavancode and Neyattinkarai. These people suffered much under the caste system.

In addition to that illiteracy was prevailed in the society. Education spread only among the high caste people like Nairs. According to the census reports of 1901, 1911 and 1921 the literacy rate of males in Nair community was 39.5%, 41.9% and 42.9% respectively. But the literacy condition of Nadar male was 15.5%, 18.1% and 20%⁸. Though the condition of males was like this, and then imagine the literacy condition of females of that period.

Superstition was one of the social evils of that time. People used either stick or an iron belt to protect themselves from the evil spirits during night. People believed that they were surrounded by a ghostly company of powers and one presiding over cholera, another over small pox another over cattle disease and so on. Peikoils or demon shrines were numerous. When they were descending in deep wells they were attacked by poison on gas and died. They considered that the act of devil and they believed that during night the devil was calls loudly in order to lure people from their homes into the jungle and to kill them. Moreover the people believed both good and bad omen. The sound of lizard in and around the house was considered a good omen. The howling of owl was considered to be an evil omen. If a death happened in a house on an auspicious day the whole family should leave from the house and to be lived in another house for a period of 41 days⁹. Each family had their own deity and used to celebrate a week to place that deity¹⁰. Thus they believed in demon worship and they practiced superstitious rituals.

In addition to that the economic condition of the people was too very bad. Because in those days people of Marthandam region were engaged in palm tree climbing occupation. These people did not find a source to get three times meals a day.

Further the basic requirements such as food, shelter, dress which were also not available for many. Therefore people were suffered due to poverty.

The condition of woman was very pathetic. They had low social and legal status in the society. Girls after maturity were not allowed to go out for fear that demons would molest them¹¹. In the marriage matter also they never ask the will and wish of bride about her future partner. Thus women's aspirations and desires were totally ignored. They were also denied the right to education. Without education majority of women spent their time mostly within the four walls of the kitchen. The miseries of the widows were untold and they were not allowed to remarry. Newly married people were not allowed to meet a widow¹² and a mother whose baby had died must not even touch the child of another until she give birth to another child.

Added to the existing fuel in those days cholera also frequently affected the society. Cholera was considered as a deadly disease. Because if it spread among the people none of them remain in a particular area. Therefore people feared the same. Soon after the arrival of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil at North Street of Marthandam, cholera entered the area in 1936. Not a single family was left to escape the clutches of mortal disease. In this milieu Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil came to Marthandam and he started his spiritual and social work in that area¹³.

Formation of Mission and Churches

Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil's name was most intimately associated in the History of the Malankara Syrian Catholic (MSC) church in Marthandam region. On 29th June 1934 Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil came for the first time to Marthandam. The New place appeared to him as a vineyard full of harvest. Although the people spoke Tamil, mixed with Malayalam words, it was not an obstacle for him to get into his service. As a vigilant servant of the Lord, Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil made use of every opportunity to extend his mission work to the areas like Marthandam, Kattachivilai or Vimalapuram, Chellamkonam, Vettumony, Pacode, Kulappurem, Kaliyakkavilai, Kulathur, Ambilikonam, Manjalumoodu, Aruviyode, Poonthakala, Kanjirakode, Koonam, Aattoor, Unnamalakadai, Azhakiyamandapam, Soosaipuram, Panachamoodu etc. The people of that locality consisted mainly of Hindu- Nadars, with some scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It was a big task to do the preliminary work among the poor, uneducated people of that locality. He made friendship with many, and this friendship helped him draw them to Jesus. So many people got converted to Catholicism. The baptism register of the Christuraja Malankara Syrian Catholic church at North Street Marthandam records testify that on 21st August 1934, 38 people from 18 families received baptism. A letter written by Mar Ivanios in 1936 proves that Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil had baptized more than 3000 people within two years of his mission work.

For that he constructed several churches in various places such as St. Joseph M.S.C. church at Panachamoodu (3rd July 1934), St. Amalorpava Mary church at Vimalapuram (29th April 1934), St. Thomas church at Ambilikonam (1934), Christuraja Church at North Street Marthandam (1934), St. Joseph church at Kulapparai (1935), St. George church at Chellamkonam (30th September 1936), St. Thomas church at Attoor (5th May 1957), St. Mary church at Kuzhithurai (1958), St. Joseph church at Unnamalaikadai (1960), St. Joseph church at Sasaipuram (1963) etc.

Foundation of the New Congregation Daughters of Mary

The idea of the foundation of Daughters of Mary (DM) was a brain-child of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil¹⁴. During that time, many social problems were faced by the women of this region. Fr. Joseph wanted to alleviate their problems and realized that to achieve his target the best tool would be used by the nuns. For this purpose, Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil asked to Arch Bishop of Trivandrum His Excellency Mar Ivanios having a Congregation of women to help the mission. Arch Bishop Mar Ivanios understanding the zeal of the young priest, granted permission for the same, thus Fr. Joseph went ahead, to his own home parish. There was a noble lady by name Aleyamma Kallarackel, who was so much interested in the progress of evangelization progress at Marthandam. When Fr. Joseph expressed his longing to her, she had a very positive response. Thus with the generosity and dedication of mother Mary Kallarackal D.M, (co-founder) Sr. Agnes Vadakkan D.M Sr. Theresa Kochukalayil (second and third founding members respectively), the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary was inaugurated at Marthandam on 8th May 1938. It was a turning point in the ministry of Fr. Joseph.

Thus, through the construction of churches and the foundation of a congregation he wanted to spread Christianity among the native people. But unfortunately he never get satisfaction. Because the people of that period were submerged in the superstitious believes. Hence he thought that education only could open the eyes of the people and therefore he set aside his mission work and gave due importance to educational, economic and social activities.

Educational Services

During the arrival of Msgr. Joseph, illiteracy was filled in the society. The people of this area had to know even the basic calculation of money. Because of illiteracy and ignorance people faced so many problems. Understanding the condition of the people, he started his educational activities in the society.

At first Fr. Joseph gave more importance to adult education. He thought that through adult education he could change the society easily. But his target was not attained its real goal. Understanding the importance of children education¹⁵ Fr. Joseph started the first mission school named Queen Mary's School in North Street at Marthandam on 2nd December 1946. The DM sisters went to nearby houses and brought a good number of children to school and they were given free dress and study materials. The sisters rendered free service as there was no remuneration for teachers from the government¹⁶. For the purpose of higher education, primary schools were changed as middle school, thereafter it raised its standard as higher secondary level. Now this school is known as Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil Memorial Higher Secondary School¹⁷. Moreover he started several schools at the surroundings of Marthandam region such as Primary school at Kattachivilai (1946), Primary school at Kirathoor (1947), English medium school at Christurajapuram (Marthandam), Pushpagiri etc. Thus he got success in the field of education. Yet he faced a setback because of the lack of financial background of the common people.

Economic Services

Understanding the value of financial growth Fr. Joseph gave more importance to economic activities also¹⁸. For that by his encouragement, sisters started brush manufacturing. At that time, it offered much relief to the people who did not have even one meal a day. The fibers of palmyra leaves and oxtails were used for making brushes. Bee keeping was another area of interest in those days. Hence on the advice of Fr. Joseph sisters sent at Y.M.C.A. Marthandam in order to get the training. Later they imparted this skill to many people in and around Marthandam and it also became a thriving business for many people at Kattachivilai in 1944 and it was shifted to Marthandam in April 1945.

After a while his attention fell on making sand papers. Men went from house to house collecting pieces of glass. Women powdered and mixed them with some other chemicals and made three kinds of powder which were used for making sand papers. Hat making was another handicraft business by which Fr. Joseph tried to ensure a day's wage to the poor. The hats made by them were taken to Alapuzha for sale and it was a much profitable business continued for years. Nevertheless he started sewing, embroidery, mat making, rubber tapping etc. for the financial improvement of the common people. The people involved in such works secured employment throughout the year and sufficient money to live. Thus he tried to solve the financial problem especially poverty from the life of the people of Marthandam region.

Social Services

Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil had always a soft corner to the poor and helpless. Balamandiram, old age home, rehabilitation centre, family orientation centre and daycare centre were some other institution started by Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil and still it offer service to many¹⁹. In 1950 on the advice of Fr. Joseph, D.M. sisters gave protection to some girls in the Marthandam Daughters of Mary Convent itself. Later as their number increased a separate orphanage was constructed for them on 20th August 1962²⁰. Moreover he took some initiative measures for the construction of a boy's orphanage at Kaliyal in Kanyakumari district. Thus he rendered his valuable social services for the betterment of the common people.

Health Services

When Fr. Joseph landed in Marthandam he saw the unhealthy and untidy condition of the people. They had no proper drainage system, toilets, bath rooms and also wells. Thus they suffered very much under unhygienic situation. One day on the way of his travelling in the North Street of Marthandam, a pregnant lady suffered much out of labour pain. People rounded that lady and she wept a lot because of her pain. The family members of that lady thought that it is an activity because of devil. Therefore they called Poojari (temple priest) and he conducted some kinds of witchcraft poojas. But it was ended in failure. In this critical juncture, Fr. Joseph went to that home and he gave medicine to that lady. After that she gave birth to a male child. This incident shows the pathetic condition of the people of Marthandam region in those days in the field of health²¹.

Soon after Fr. Joseph's arrival at North Street of Marthandam Cholera entered the area in 1936. Not a single family was left to escape the clutches of mortal disease²². But the young and daring priest with a heart overflowing with love and compassion for the sick visited the affected families by giving them medical help as well as spiritual help especially by his prayer. He found out grass oil or Pulthailam was a very effective medicine and through this medicine he was able to save thousands of people in and around of Marthandam.

In this juncture Fr. Joseph at first taught to the people for the importance of sanitation. He told them that unhygienic situation only creates more diseases. Hence along with DM. sisters and Herphominaras medicine box, he visited the house of the people, checked the health condition of the people and gave medicine to them²³. Nevertheless Fr. Joseph gave more importance to pregnant ladies and their health. He gave nutritious food to them and also to the poor children. He also gave more importance to protection of environment and preached among the people to wear clean cloth. Moreover he gave financial assistance to the people for digging wells in their houses. He also gave more importance to rain water harvesting in order to increase the level of ground water.

On those days many of people used to go to the convent in the morning and evening for dressing wounds or sores. Therefore on the advice of Fr. Joseph some of the sisters were sent for nursing course. In December 1943, Mother Mary (the co-founder of D.M. convent Marthandam) had to undergo for appendectomy at the C.S.I. hospital at Neyyoor. Again on the advice of him, some sisters were sent to Rawalpindi for nursing course. On 25th September 1944, when the sisters returned from Rawalpindi, they accompanied Fr. Joseph and their work became more effective and efficient. Moreover he used to take patients into various hospitals. In this critical situation he realized the importance of a hospital at Marthandam region. Thus he started the construction work of a hospital. The first mission hospital named St. Joseph hospital was established at Anchal on 17th May, 1953²⁴. In 1962 another hospital named St. Joseph hospital was inaugurated at Panachamoodu, an area without any health facility at that time. The sisters took to run dispensaries and mobile clinic in many other places with the sole intension of providing affordable basic healthcare to poorest of the poor.

Estimate

Thus Marthandam region before the arrival of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil was a very backward place with so much of handicaps. But because of his social services and his concrete works undertaken in and around of Marthandam region made Marthandam as a centre of high literacy, highly cultured and became a developed area with all facilities. All these achievements were happened but because of the Good Samaritan services undertaken by Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil at Marthandam region. Therefore people recognized the efforts taken by Fr. Joseph and they called him as their 'Great Father'. In order to recognize his services Catholic church gave the title Monsignor (Msgr) to him. After fulfilled the will and wishes of God on earth, Fr. Joseph breathed his last breath on 23rd August 1983. He was buried in the church

campus of Christuraja Malankara Syrian Catholic Church in North Street at Marthandam in Kanyakumari district. Though he lost his physical body on earth still he is living in the midst of the people through his eternal services.

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