



DAWN OF MADURA MISSION

DR. A. JESINTHA VILVEENA, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN HISTORY

JAYARAJ ANNAPACKIAM COLLEGE FOR WOMEN (ANTONOMOUS)

PERIYAKULAM

Abstract

The foundation of Madura Mission originates from Robert de Nobili. During the sixteenth century the Jesuit Missionaries came to Bengal with the Portuguese Francis Xavier who devoted his life for reformation. The most important work of Fr. Martinz was Gnana Muthumalai. John de Britto was appointed as the Superior of Madura Mission. It reached an exalted position under Fr. Beschi.

Keywords

Jesuits, Madura Mission, preachers, persecuted, astonished, devoted.

Introduction

“Madurai Province“ derives its name from Madura Mission which stands for two Jesuit Missions, namely the Old Madura Mission and the New Madura Mission. The name Madura is very significant because since its foundation in 1606 all the European Jesuits, both of the old and new society, continued to keep the name Madura and called their mission Madura Mission. Though the foundation of the Mission originates from Robert de Nobili, the Jesuits mentioned here under rendered meritorious services to the Old Madura mission viz.¹

Fr.Francis Xavier-1542-1545;

Fr.Ganzalo Fernandez-1595-1606;

Fr.Robert de Nobili-1577-1656;

Fr.Antony Criminale-1649;



Fr. John de Britto-1686-1693;

Fr. Beschi alias Veeramamunivar-1680-1747 and

Fr. James de Rossi-1735-1774.²

One of the earliest Roman Catholic missionaries to India seems to have been Jordanus. He was sent in 1430 as the Bishop of Columbu or Quilon. Then a host of catholic priests came and the notable among them being Francis Xavier.

Francis Xavier:

Francis Xavier of noble descent was a Spaniard born in 1506.³ Francis Xavier went to the University of Paris and took his M.A. degree at the age of 20. Soon he was appointed to teach Philosophy.⁴ There Francis Xavier developed acquaintance with Ignatius Loyola.⁵ In 1534 Loyola, Xavier and five others took the decision to dedicate themselves to God's services. A few years later, Loyola with the sanction of the Pope established **The Company of Jesus** or Society of Jesus on September 27, 1540⁶ and the members of which are called **Jesuits**. The motto is "To the greater glory of God".⁷ During the sixteenth century⁸ the Jesuit Missionaries came to Bengal with the Portuguese. When the power of the Portuguese declined, the Jesuits left Bengal leaving behind a considerable number of Roman Catholics.⁹ John III, the King of Portugal, sent Francis Xavier to India. Acting upon the direction of the king as well as the Pope¹⁰, Xavier set sail for India in April 1541 from Lisbon.¹¹ On 6th May 1542, Xavier arrived at Goa¹² and he was deeply grieved by the ungodly conduct of the Portuguese settlers. For the next five months, he devoted himself to the work of reformation. His days were spent in preaching in catechizing the young and in visiting hospitals. His zeal and pity won administration and marked improvement took place in the morals and conduct of the community.¹³ From Goa, Xavier went to the South to Capecomarin in 1542.¹⁴ He began by getting the creed, the Lords Prayer and the Ten Commandments translated into the Vernacular. He visited the villages and summoned large congregations attracting especially children.¹⁵ Bell in hand, he would make the children repeat those prayers till they know them by heart. He told the children to recite those prayers to their elders. He followed this method in every one of the thirty villages, traveling bare foot from one end of the sandy land to the other over and over again.¹⁶



Xavier spent his time in these hard apostolic labours. At the same time, he found occasion to baptize another tribe of fisherman living between the Cape and Quilon. He himself reported to St. Ignatius in 1554 that in a month he had baptized more than ten thousand Mukkuvars. For three years beginning with May 1542, Xavier toiled as a missionary in South India. He then went to the Spice Islands of the Indian Archipelago for 2 ½ years. Xavier then returned to Goa and began to organize a mission to China. He met with much opposition in this endeavour and he died in 1552 in the small island of Sancian. His body was afterwards taken to Goa, where it is now preserved.

Fr. Ganzelo Fernandez:

The next Missionary to arrive at Madura was Father Fernandez. The labours of Father Fernandez between 1592 and 1606 A.D. were not crowned with any great success.¹⁷ Fernandez was useful as an intermediary in business with the Portuguese. Fernandez ran an elementary school for boys under a Hindu master. It was one of the few Jesuit schools meant chiefly for the non-catholics where non-catholics masters were employed. He also ran a dispensary but as an evangelist he had not been able to make any impression on the people of Madurai.¹⁸ He experienced great resistance from all classes. The people looked upon the Portuguese as “parangis” or barbarians who ate the flesh of cows, drank intoxicating liquors and mingled with the lowest classes.

Robert de Nobili:

In 1606, Robert de Nobili the nephew of Cardinal Marcellus II visited Madras. Robert de Nobili was born at Rome in September 1577.¹⁹ Father Robert’s joined the Society of Jesus at the age of 20. He left Portugal in 1604 and reached Goa.²⁰ It was a painful and dangerous voyage. This is evident from the letter of Robert de Nobili dated 20th January 1606; “...our journey was full of dangers and hardships and attended by some serious accidents. In spite of great dangers, finally we landed at Mozambique. At last, we reached Goa, 14 months after our departure from Lisbon. As the viceroy insisted on having in his company I had much less to suffer than my other companions”.²¹ In January 1606, Nobili went to Cochin and from there to the Pearl Fishery Coast, where he stayed for six



months.²² Nobili settled down at Madurai as an Indian Sanyasi²³ came to Madurai on 15th November 1606 along with Fr. Albert Laerzio. He began to master Tamil. He gave up his European style of living and adapted instead those of the Brahmins.²⁴ During 1607 to 1612, he laid the foundation of a genuinely Indian Church.²⁵ This led to the establishment of the Madurai Mission. In the early years its jurisdiction was too wide and it covered the districts of Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Madurai and Tinnevely.²⁶ During his sojourn in Madurai, Robert de Nobili lived on strict vegetarian diet. Impressed by this the Brahmin elite surrounded him. The fame of Nobili soon spread far and wide. The natives were astonished at the purity of his Tamil and captivated by his oriental learning and versatile intellect.²⁷

Nobili had a flair for Indian languages especially Tamil and Sanskrit. He is considered to be the first oriental scholar in the modern sense of the term. He kept on learning Sanskrit till his death in 1656. It is no wonder that he wrote several books, composed hymns and prayer, songs in Sanskrit. His "Information", a Sanskrit work itself is enough to prove his depth in Sanskrit.²⁸ The Life of Our Lady was composed in Sanskrit in verse form.²⁹ Nobili's books are Philosophical and Theological, the most important being **Gnanopadesam Kandam** or **Spiritual Teaching, the Attuma Nirnayam Disquisition on the soul, the Divya Madirigai Divine Mood Tushana Tikkaram, Rufutation of Blasphemy, Punerjenma Chepam, Refutation of Rebirth and Gnana Sanchivi spiritual medicine.**³⁰ **In prison, he composed the Attuma Nirunayam and Akkiana Nivaranam**(removal of ignorance).³¹ Nobili had mastery over the Yajurveda.³² He then pursued his way to Sendamangalam, a principality under the Nayaks of Madura. He was well received by the Prince. From there Nobili went to Salem. Here he was received with coldness.³³ The year 1640 saw a persecution start at Trichy and spreading to Madurai. It was occasioned by the refusal of Pariya Christian to give his daughter in marriage to a rich non-christian of the same group. At the request of the later Venkatraya Pillai the brother in law of Thirumalai Nayak had arrested Fr.Immanuel Martins with four of his neophytes. They were thrown into prison, tortured and then driven out of the town. At about the same time, Fr.Nobili and Fr.Maya were imprisoned at Madurai³⁴ on 22nd July 1640 along with his companion Separtiao de Maya by Venkatraya Pillai an official of TirumalaiNayak.



However on the intervention of Tirumalai Nayak, the two sanyasis were released.³⁵ With the knowledge of French, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish and Tamil, Fr. Sauliere was able to translate the works of Nobili into English.³⁶ De Nobili retired from the Mission in 1648 due to old age and blindness. It is said that he had baptized about 100000 Tamilians.³⁷ It was thought advisable to post him to Ceylon as Superior of the Mission to that island. Due to deterioration in his health, he was transferred from there to Mylapore in Madras. Here he built himself a small cottage and spent his last days in the company of his first converts and old associates. His time was divided between literary composition, prayer and contemplation.³⁸ After a very brief span of rest here, he died on 16th January 1695.³⁹ He was beyond doubt the greatest of the Missionaries sent out to India by the Society of Jesus. In short, he was the real founder of the Madura Mission.⁴⁰

FATHER MARTINZ

Fr. Martinz was one of the pioneers of the Madura Mission. He served 31 years in the Madura Mission. The most important work of Fr.Martinz was **Gnana Muthumalai**. Fr.Proenza attributes the following works to him

1. Meditations to excite and nurture devotion
2. Dialogue between a Christian and a Hindu.
3. Explanation of the ineffable mystery of the Holy Trinity.
4. Contempt for the world.
5. Several lives of Saints.
6. Christian doctrine adopted from the works of Cardinal Bellarmine and Fr.Marcos George and the
7. Mirror of Examples.⁴¹

He died on 22nd August 1656 at the age 63. His loss was great blow to the Mission. Rev. Fr. I.S. Chancellor said “de Nobili had planted and Martinz watered”.⁴² Proenza mentions the benevolence of Chokkanatha the Nayak ruler of Madura in his letter of 1662 as “...graced by the justice and good administration of the young king, we could continue our work in liberty and peace” Alvarez, another Jesuit met Chokkanatha Nayak and explained the true precepts



of Christianity and the mode of life, led by the Missionaries. The Nayak ruler impressed by the speech of Alvarez honored him and promised his protection.⁴³

JOHN DE BRITTO

Jean Hector de Britto was born on 1st March 1647.⁴⁴ His father Salvador de Britto occupied a high office at the royal court of Lisbon. His mother's name was Beatric Pereira. His boyhood was spent at the court of King Alfonso VI and later in the court of king Peter II.⁴⁵ He joined the order in 1662. Ten years later he was sent out to India and was appointed as Superior of the Madura Mission. He acquitted himself so well in this capacity that the Bishopric of Cranganore in India was offered to him. But he declined the high post and chose in 1691 to serve as a simple Missionary in the Marava Country. In 1683, John de Britto was appointed as the Superior of Madura Mission.⁴⁶ The letters of Britto testifies to the fact that in 1686, he had baptized two thousand and seventy natives of the Marava country. In the same year he set out with six companions namely; Siluvai Nayakar, Kanagappan and Arulanandam, Catechists Thambiya Pillai, John's personal attendant, Suren, a neophyte and Sathianathan Chetty.⁴⁷ The Christian preachers were severely persecuted there. Kumara Pillai, the Governor- General and the first Minister of the Marava king Kilavan Sethupathy ordered the capture of Britto and it was done when he passed Mangalam along with his Catechists.⁴⁸

Maravas tortured and chained them hand and foot. They were about to be implaced on stakes. However, the Sethupathy freed with a stern warning of death sentence if they ever dared to preach Christianity in the Marava Country. Despite the threat to his life, Britto continued his work. Britto succeeded in setting many converts to Christianity, the notable among them being a Marava prince named Tadiya Teva, the supposed heir to the Marava throne. The conversions made by Britto was resented by the Sethupathy who decided to take revenge on Britto. He ordered for the destruction of all Churches in his kingdom and the arrest of Britto and his followers.⁴⁹ On 8th January 1693, Britto was arrested with his companions and they were imprisoned in Ramnad on 11th of January. Tadiya Tevar made futile attempt to release Britto from the prison. Britto was sent to Oriyur⁵⁰ on 31st January 1693, which is located eight miles south of Tondi. On the 4th Februry 1693, the order of the execution of Britto was given by Murugappa Pillai, the Chief Minister which reads as; " considering that this



guru (religious leader) prevents the worship of our Gods, in the name of the king, I order you to cut off his head”⁵¹ On his charge, Britto was beheaded and his head and limbs were hung up as a warning to all Christians.

FATHER BESCHI

After the Martyrdom of Britto, the condition of the Marava Mission was precarious. But in 1707, father Joseph Beschi another celebrated Jesuit Missionary reached India to continue the works of Nobili and Britto. Father Beschi was also the most distinguished among the Jesuit for learning and intellect.⁵² Beschi was born at Castiglione delle Stoviere in the province of Venice, on the 8th of November 1680 and christened Constanzo Giuseppe Eusbio. After completing his literary studies and one year of Philosophy, he entered the novitiate of the Jesuits at Novellaria in October 1698. From September 1700 to 1701, he taught the lowest grammar class at Racenna. From 1701 to 1710 was the period of intellectual training according to the Jesuit system. In 1701-1703, he completed the course in Philosophy. From 1703-1705, he taught the middle and highest grammar classes and the Humanities. In 1706, he underwent a course of Theology and was ordained as a priest in 1709. After finishing the fourth year of Theology in 1710 he prepared himself to go abroad and work for the religion of Christ. He was then 30 years old. In May 1710, Beschi left Lisbon enroute to Goa on a Portuguese vessel. He reached Goa in October 1710.⁵³

At the time of Beschi’s arrival in the Madura Mission in 1711, the political situation in the Tamil country was unsettled. At Tanjore, the Mahratta Prince Shahji persecuted the Christians and hence he was called as the “Nero of Tanjore”. At Madurai, Vijaya Ranga Chokkanataha the grandson of Queen Mangammal who ascended the throne in 1706 spent his time in debauchery and histrionic amusements. In Marava country, Vijaya Ragunatha Sethupathy (1711-1725) who was in power was hostile to Christian community. Further, the Missionaries had to face the problem caused by the other native princes and the Moors.⁵⁴

Fr. Beschi was known for his proficiency in Tamil. Beschi wrote in 1727, the book entitled **Vedavilakkam**.⁵⁵ He also wrote a commentary on the **Kural** in Tamil. His



largest work was a Tamil-Latin Dictionary composed in 1726.⁵⁶ Fr.Beschi's another reputed work was the **Thembavani** which dealt with St.Joseph. The poem is divided into 36 songs contains 3615 stanzas. His other works were **Kural**, **Chinthamani**, **Ramayana** and the **Naladyar**.⁵⁷ Fr.Beschi arrived at Tinnevely in 1711 and was placed under the resident of Kamanayakkanpatti. Then he was posted at Kurukkalpatti(near Sankarankovil) where he narrowly escaped death at the hands of the inhabitants.⁵⁸ Beschi's mode of life resembled that of his illustrious predecessor John de Britto and his name was perhaps even better known in South India than that of Robert de Nobili. Among all the Jesuit Fathers, who came to India, Beschi was probably the most outstanding for learning and intellect. His knowledge of Tamil was profound. He was equally familiar with there high and low dialects.⁵⁹ Beschi did not use Sanskrit words in his Tamil works; and rather aimed at acquiring a perfectly pure and idiomatic style. His book was read with delight by all sections of the Tamils, Christians and non-Christians alike.

The Madurai Mission reached an exalted position under Fr.Beschi. The congregations spread throughout the Tamil country and the number of Christians increased to 2,00,000.⁶⁰ Thus no one can forget their contribution. One of the most illustrious figures in the history of the Indian Missions namely Joseph Constantine Beschi, "...a man of the most extraordinary mental aptitudes, one who possessed the art of entirely hinduising himself".⁶¹ In 1759, the Society of Jesus was suppressed in Portugal for political reasons.⁶² The effects of the suppression of the society in Europe were felt in India. In 1759, Jesuit fathers who lived in Goa were put in prison by the Portuguese. The impact was felt in Madurai too.

Conclusion

The dismal of Jesuit Missionary from Madurai at the order of Portugal did not affect the growth and progress of Christian faith. The local preachers continued their work⁶³. The Madurai Mission founded by pioneer Jesuits in 1592⁶⁴ was revived on 8th July 1836. Pope Gregory XVI revived Madurai Mission by a Brief. The Madurai Mission again became a distinct vicariate.

Endnotes:



1. **Golden Jubilee Souvenir**, Jesuit Madurai province, 1952-2002, p.39.
2. Stanislaus Ponrad S.J., **Archdiocese of Madurai**, Nobili Pastoral Centre, Madurai, 1983, p. 2
- 3.P.Rayanna, **St.Francis Xavier and His Shrine**, Imprimatur, Goa, 1989,p.73
4. S.K.Battacharya, **Christian Mission, Missionaries and Indian society**, New Delhi, p.66
5. P.Rayanna, **op. cit**, p.73
- 6.Thekkadath, **History of Christianity in India**, Vol-II, Bangalore, 1982, p.7
- 7.J.H.Carlton, Hayes, **Modern Europe upto 1870**, Delhi, p.169
- 8.P.N.Chopra, T.K.Ravindran, N.Subramanan, **History of South India**, Newdelhi, 2003, p.187
9. S.K. Battacharya, **op. cit**, p.66
10. F.R.Hemingway, **Madras District Gazetteers**, Trichinapoly, Vol.I, Madras, 1907, p.74
11. M.Ruthnaswamy, **Jesuits in India**, Trichinopoly, 1940, p.149
12. S.J.Joseph Dahlmann, **Missionary Pioneers and Indian Languages**, Trichinopoly, 1940, p.470
13. **Madura – A Tourist’s Guide**, New Delhi, 1991, p.190
14. George Schurhammer, **Francis Xavier, His Life and Times**, Vol-II, India (1541-1545), trans. M.Joseph Costllo, S.J., from original German Edition (Italy-The Jesuit Historical Institute, 1977), p.295
15. **Madura – A Tourist’s Guide**, **op.cit**, New Delhi, 1991, p.190.
16. **Idem**, p. 190
17. **Ibid**, p. 191
18. C.B.Firth, **Introduction to Indian Church History**, Madras, 1968, pp.108-110
19. **Madura – A Tourist’s Guide**, p.190
- 20.S.Rajamanickm, **Robert de Nobili on Indian Customs**, Palayamkottah, 1972, p.4
- 21.Letter of Robert de Nobili to Fr.C.Aquviva, Cochin, 20th January, 1606, pp.9, 10
22. H.R.Pate, **Madras District Gazetteers**, Tinnevely, Vol-I, Madras, 1917, p. 89
23. A.Sauliere, S.J., **The Life of Fr.Robert de Nobili, S.J from original and contemporary sources**, 1577-1656, p.10.
24. H.R.Pate, **op.cit**, p.89.
25. A.Sauliere, **op.cit**, p.11.
30. **Ibid**, p.180
31. John Castes, S.J., **Missionary Methods of De Nobili**, Trochinapoly, 1925, p.1.
32. E.R.Baierlein, **Land of the Tamilians and its Mission**, Madras, 1875, p.116.
33. Vincent Cronin, **A Pearl of India, the life of Robert de Nobili**, London, 1954, pp. 247,248.
34. Joseph Thekkedath, **History of Christianity in India**, Vol.II, Banglore, 1992, pp.221, 222.
35. Vincent Cronin, **op.cit**, p.247.
36. S.Rajamanickam, **The first oriental scholar**, Tirunelvely, 1972, p.12.
37. **The Jesuit Mission in Madura**, p.51.
- 38.**Madura A Tourist Guide**, **op.cit**, p.198
- 39.S.Neil, **The Story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan**, Diocesan Press, Madras, 1972,p.44
- 40.**Madura**, **op.cit**, p.198
- 41.J.Bertrand, **La Mission Du Madure**, Vol-III, p.109
- 42.**The Jesuit Mission in Madura**, p.51
43. **Ibid**, pp.52, 53
44. Albert M. Nevett.S.J, **John de Britto and His Times**, Gujarat Sathyaprakash, Gujarat, 1980, p.2
45. L.M.Zaleski, **The Martyres of India**, Mangalore, 1993, p.202
46. **Madura A Tourist Guide**, p.201
47. Diary Written by P.Royanna, Shenbaganoor Archives, **op.cit**
48. R.Sathyanatha Iyer, **History of the Nayaks of Madura**, Oxford, 1924, p.200
49. Nelson, **op.cit**, p. 217
50. **Ibid**, pp.220, 221
51. Thekkadath, **op.cit**, p.447
- 52.P.Thomas, **Chriatian and Christianity in India and Pakistan**, London, 1954, p.74
53. L.Besse, **Fr.Beschi of the Society of Jesus, His Times and Writings**, Trochinopoly, 1918, pp.12-14
- 54.Manuscript, Life of Father Beschi, Unpublished Material, kept preserved in the Shembaganoor Archives p.15
55. Emmar Adaikalasamy, **op.cit**, p.316
56. **Madura A Tourist Guide**, **op.cit**, p.202
57. J.Datilmann, S.J, **Indian Languages and Early Catholic Missionaries**, 1500-1800, pp.1-12



58. H.R.Pate, **op.cit**, p.93
59. Nelson, **op.cit**, pp.298, 299
60. P.Thomas, **op.cit**, pp.75, 76
61. **Madura A Tourist Guide**, op.cit, P.202.
62. **Ibid**, P.201.
63. P.Thomas, **op.cit**, P.77.
64. Charles.A.S. Chleek's letter to Madurai Diocese dated 24-10-1998.