

Impact Of Conversion Among The Parathavars Of The Pearl Fishery

Coast: A General Survey Of Select Socio-Cultural Changes

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Abstract

The Parathavars adopted Christianity in the first half of the sixteenth century. Christianity being a religion that was reintroduced into India by the West European powers was in general though to have grossly changed the lifestyle of the converts. But in fact, the process of conversion helped the Parathavars to rediscover and realize the strength of the local self-government against which even powerful missionaries were not able to establish new systems. Gradually priests like Henri Henriquez remodeled their approach with the converts and understood the value and meaning of native institutions. Hence they organized the converts into sodalities patterned in line with the local self-government. The cultural core of the people that stood on the premise of kinship pattern and marriage relationship based on that did not undergo substantial change. In fact, the missionaries requested the 'Holy See' to make changes in the rules of the Church to accommodate local practices. The present article deals with issues related to these.

Keywords: Francis Xavier, Pattangattins, Parathavars, Converts, Self-Government, Catholic, Latin.

Introduction

The merciless attitude of the fellow natives and the inimical confrontation of the Muslims instigated the Parathavar community to adopt Christianity en masse with the guidance and protection of the Portuguese. Conversion enabled the converts to share the religious domain with the Portuguese. But the tangible difference in terms of physical appearance, language, socio-cultural traits, etc stood as a bulwark between them. The Roman

Catholic Church made attempts to bring forth uniformity of socio-cultural practices among the followers to jettison the differences. Among several steps, it urged the maintenance of Latin as the common spiritual language. Further, it also expected the followers to imitate the lifestyle of the universally created Latin language-speaking people. But, these aims could not be accomplished in the case of the Parathavars for the spiritual language failed either to appeal or to reach their minds. Meanwhile, the dedicated proponents of the Catholic faith such as Henri Henriquez learned the Tamil language and brought out instructional texts in that language. In such a context characterized by contradictions, whether the sixteenth-century conversion of the Parathavars caused structural changes in the patterns of caste dynamics, as well as religious practices, remains a subject matter for debate.

It is also widely viewed that true conversion of personal belief could only take place in a context where personal freedom is available for a person to decide the choice of religion; otherwise, it can also be termed as ‘cultural colonialism’ among others. Scholars like Ngugi Wa Thiango viewed colonialism as a cultural bomb that could neutralize a man’s faith in his native environment, language, the unity of his society, his personal abilities and the potential to struggle against oppression.¹ Therefore, the present study employs the hypothesis “the intentions of the Roman Catholic Church and the response of the native Parathavars were not marked by mutual compatibility” through which the general impact of conversion has been surveyed in the present article. The primary sources of the study include Letters of Francis Xavier, Manuscripts of Berchmans Mota, Travelogue of Caesar Fredric and field data collected through interviews. The ideas of scholars like Jeyaseela Stephen, Decla, Ines G. Zupanov, Patrick Roche, Veeramuthu, T.S. Subramanian, Richard Zimler, G.A. Oddie,

¹ K.N. Panikkar, *Coloniamum Panpattu Matramum* (translated in Tamil by K.R. Sankaran) *Ungal Noolagam*, January 2012, p. 80; *Ngugi Wa Thiongo* is an African poet and author of the book ‘Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.

Rowena Robinson, T.K. Oommen, Hunter P. Mabry, N. Athiyaman, and Poneelan have been borrowed to enrich the study.

Reinventing Traditional Organization: The Tamil people were said to have had an appreciable system of local self-government.² The collective decision taken at the grassroots level after deriving an opinion of all vested interests were logically viewed as correct and remained unassailable at the highest level since being part and parcel of a situation, they had the first-hand knowledge about the local occurring and also of the character of individuals who purport such events.³ To ensure the smooth functioning of the system, high qualifications – more of moral nature – were fixed for the headman and the members although no monetary benefit was attached to the holding of office. In the beginning, the missionaries as great as Francis Xavier himself did not understand the nature and rules of the local self-government.⁴ They appointed persons of their choice as Pattangattins⁵ who may have been even unpopular among the people over who they were sent. The people being denied of their role to select these officials culturally had no compulsion to accept their authority. Therefore, these officials irrespective of their efficiency were unable to exercise their role. In fact, they had to spy on the spiritual activities of the people and identify the culprits involved in idol worship of native deities. In the case of their doing that it may

² Ibid., p. 86.

³ Interview with Mr. R. Michael Fernando of Punnaikayal on 10/09/2010.

⁴ *The Travels of Marco Polo*, p. 301, Letters of Francis Xavier from Manapad dated 14 March 1544, from Tuticorin dated 14 May 1544 and from Punnaikayal dated 12 September 1544. In the observation of Marco Polo, no form of promiscuous behaviour was considered to be an immoral act in the region. In the experience of Francis Xavier, he observed several unacceptable habits associated with the Parathavar men that included spending on dancing-girls – probably devadasis. By nature – according to Xavier – these people were also found to be difficult to understand.

⁵ Letter of Francis Xavier from Manapad dated 14 March 1544; Pattangattis were severely warned and threatened by Francis Xavier of arrest and deportation. He derived such strength and support from the ecclesiastical headquarters located at Cochin.

amount to resentment from the side of the people and result in social ostracism. However, the failure in the execution of their duties resulted in provoking the wrath of the missionaries and Francis Xavier threatened them of arrest and further proceedings.⁶ The Portuguese viceroy came forward to encourage the Pattangattins by providing salaries and allotted 4000 golden panam for that purpose.⁷

The Pattangattins were not the only ones to be blamed but also the Franciscans, Dominicans, the Capuchins and others actively catering to the spiritual need of the sailors from 1498 to 1534.⁸ In 1534, the Goa Diocese was established which attained the status of an Arch-Diocese in 1557. Yet, there had not been any mechanism to evolve a uniform understanding of the basis of Christianity among the people. Individual priests had their own vision and understanding which sometimes went incompatible to the main body of tenets established in the Diocesan. Therefore, while Francis Xavier expressed his disaffection over idol worship in 1544,⁹ another missionary that visited the Pearl Fishery Coast in 1552 opined that the Christians would be able to sustain without even the guidance of a missionary as they have organized themselves in line with early Christian communities¹⁰ that defended the faith before the Roman state recognizing it. Not only was a change of such nature only an impossibility but again in 1582, Henri Henriquez was said to have punished the Parathavar people by denying them the benefit of listening to the Holy-Mass for their adherence to unchristian practices.¹¹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ S. Jeyaseela Stephen, Op. Cit. p. 89.

⁸ Ines G. Zupanov in Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Sinners and Saints The Successors of Vasco Da Gama*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 135 – 161.

⁹ Letter of Francis Xavier from Manapad dated 14-03-1544.

¹⁰ S. Jeyaseela Stephen, Op. Cit. pp 89-90.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 91.

In the third quarter of the sixteenth century, taking the existing socio-psy chic situation into cognizance, Henri Henriquez devised certain strategies employing the rudiments of the local self-government to smoothen the process of the Parathavar people's integration with Christianity. In the first place, it was said that he did not use the element of compulsion¹² either to convert or accept Christianity alone as the only true faith. By this, it can be inferred that even he did not force the new Christians to attend the Holy -Mass on the day of Sabbath. Rather, he identified those sincere people who could be relied upon to practice 'Sabbath' and 'confession' from time to time. He organized these people into 'sodalities.'¹³ The members of the 'sodalities' were made to emerge as spiritual referral points for others as the formers were strongly expected to model their lives to be rooted in the simple principle 'love of God linked to loving one's own neighbors.' Henriquez formed the 'Confraternity of Charity' with married people as members.¹⁴ The members at times of suffering mutually helped each other and also had access to education and scope to improve literacy skills.¹⁵

Cultural Core Untouched: There had been two major areas that remained out of the purview of Henriquez's strategy. They were the marriage and the caste system respectively. He felt that it was too much to expect the Parathavar people to make a compromise on that front. As far as Indian marriages were concerned, caste endogamy was the general norm. But an eligible bridegroom could not hope to make a matrimonial alliance with any eligible bride within the caste. Particularly in Tamil society, the first choice was always within the kinship. As far as the Parathavars were concerned, they had the practice of bride marrying the

¹² Ibid. p. 48

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

mother's brother as well as cross-cousin marriage in the first degree.¹⁶ Although in Europe there had been similar practices, the Roman Catholic Church proscribed such practices. Therefore, Henri Henriquez made an appeal to the Holy See to make rules on consanguinity liberal.¹⁷ The nomination of Godparents during the baptism rites was thought to minimize marriage within kinship as the Godchild becomes a full brother to the Godparents children. But in practice, the Parathavar people chose only such persons to be Godparents with whom either matrimonial alliance could not be made or the children could not be married owing to age difference or absence of children in the opposite sex.¹⁸

The Baptism rites had the seeds of developing a friendly relationship¹⁹ between castes for the Godparents can be chosen from any caste. In the case of Henri Henriquez, he was reluctant to interfere in the caste system either outside the Church or within it.²⁰ Equality had been the cornerstone principle of Christianity. Yet, as an eminent priest as Henri Henriquez did not insist on that in a location populated by the Shanars, Pariahs and other lower castes. It so appears as there had been motives behind the tacit approach. On the one hand, the loss of status relegated to the level of outcaste had to be compensated. On the other hand, as Brahmins were the upper castes within the Hindu social system, by virtue of having adopted Christianity ahead of others, it was only justifiable that the Parathavars should emerge as equivalent to them in the new religion as 'Principal Christians.'²¹ This should be observed by other castes. Moreover, unlike in Hinduism, in the new religion, the Parathavars were able to

¹⁶ Interview with Mr. Parabaran (22), Fisherman, Manapad on 8-01-10; on the day of the field visit one such marriage took place in Manapad as reported by the informant. But marriages of these kinds are becoming uncommon.

¹⁷ S. Jeyaseela Stephen, Op. Cit., p. 90.

¹⁸ Interview with Mr. William Villavarayar (34), Tea Stall Proprietor of Pazhyakayal on 10/09/10

¹⁹ Interview with Mr. Joseph Gregory Babylaus Fernando (72), Resident of Veerapandianpattanam on 02/01/2010.

²⁰ S. Jeyaseela Stephen, Op. Cit., p. 48.

²¹ A. Patrick Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel-A Social Study of the Paravas of the Coromandel*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1984) p. 52; he uses the idea in an intra-caste context.

reach even the altar while others were not allowed by them. It was only logical that they prevented such move by other castes in the Churches at the least maintained by them. By and large, it gave way for the domination of the Parathavars over others who were given a clear signal of the available scope for raising their social status if the conversion was made en masse. But it did not take a course in that direction making 'Latinization' stand in crossroads.

Marriage and Socialization: Marriage ceremonies had been a major instrument to demonstrate a communities' social status.²² There had been compulsions to depict that the status of the caste has further improved with the conversion. No doubt, like any upper caste of India, the Portuguese patriarchy also had the practice of secluding a girl of marriageable age and young wife from the sight of men which found its way into the Parathavar society. Locally, the role of the barber in marriage ceremonies continued and in addition to other responsibilities he served the bridegroom by carrying the umbrella and unfolding the carpet which was symbolic of the assertion of the higher status of the caste.²³ The only condition was that the barbers should have also converted to Christianity. Apart from these, marriage ceremonies were accompanied by musical bands of the Western type.²⁴ They were also made only to make a living out of playing music only in Christian ceremonies and disallowed to perform in the functions of other religions. However, during marriage occasions, they started playing music from the house of the bride and groom but had no role within the Church when the sacred thread was tied whereas in Hindu tradition the Indian musicians reach the peak of their playing specifically at that point. The Parathavars imitated the pomp and show followed

²² R.N. Joe d' Cruz, *Korkai*, P. 447-450; the bride-groom is accorded the status of an emperor on the day of the wedding.

²³ For elaborate details See H.R. Pate, *Tinnevelly District Gazetteer (1916)*, (Tirunelveli: Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, 1993)

²⁴ S. Jeyaseela Stephen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 166.

by the Portuguese during the wedding occasion and in many cases, the bridegrooms' family calculated the dowry based on the expenses incurable from the conduct of the ceremony.

To the advantageous side of women, the Roman Catholic Church strongly stood against child marriages.²⁵ It insisted on girls getting married only after attaining puberty. The celebration of puberty function was also disallowed.²⁶ Nevertheless, the taboo of visiting temples during the menses period was not to be followed. The Church also viewed the marriage vow seriously and did not allow divorce without a valuable reason like infidelity and infertility. Thus monogamy as an institution was strongly established. The Church provided an exemption for women from attending the holy-mass during periods that followed the delivery of a baby as also the woman who assist in looking after the delivered child.²⁷ However, as pointed out already, the Roman Catholic Church could not make a breakthrough in the abolition of dowry though it encouraged widow remarriage. The tying of the sacred thread²⁸ – mentioned as Thali in Tamil – continued to mark the conclusion of the marriage commitment. But insisting of a particular colour and the determination of the number of small threads that constituted the main thread was declared superstitious. Similarly, planting of trees to avoid evil-eye and smashing of coconut to attain better fortune in Hindu tradition were considered superstition. In the place of the Hindu images in the Thali, Mother Mary's image was introduced. Latin rites performed in the Church took the place of Sanskrit incantations. The wedding dress of the bridegroom was more akin to that of a Western gentleman whereas the costumes of the bride reflected Indian customs.

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 176-179.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ S. Decla, *Muthukulithuraiyil Porchukeesiyar* (Tamil), (Chennai: New Century Book House, 2009), pp. 102-104.

²⁸ For details about this See James Hornell, *The Indian Chank in Folklore and Religion*, *Taylor and Francis*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (June 1942), pp. 113-125.

It was made mandatory to conduct a baptism for a child at the earliest. But the imitation of practices similar to Hindu tradition such as the placing of salt in the mouth of the child was to be avoided.²⁹ There were various other superstitions associated with the upbringing of an infant about which there had not been any decrees. The names of the children have to be derived from the Roman origin and not patterned on Hindu deities with the excuse of ancestry. There had been a strong tradition in the Roman Catholic Church of socializing the children by educating them in observing moral principles.³⁰ The nuns and interested lay members – predominantly young females – during Sabbath were endowed with the responsibility of instructing the children in religious lines. Accessing literature of other religions was forbidden for it may cause confusion and disturb clarity.³¹ It may cause a spirit of comparison which the Church did not prefer as there remained the scope of religious symbols being misinterpreted. Male children of good conduct and obedience could assist the priest during his conducting of the Holy-Mass as also escort him during visits to families deprived of livelihood without discrimination on the basis of caste.³² For him, the priest was the role model to be emulated. Yet, these did not liberate the minds from relating events and occurrences in Karma lines.

Conclusion

The process of religious conversion landed the converts in rediscovering their traditional organization of local self-government through which the successors of Francis Xavier such as Henri Henriquez, Antony Criminale, Luis Mendez, and others attempted to implant the Christian way of life. However, they were not able to touch the cultural core as

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 176-179.

³⁰ Letter of Francis Xavier from Manapad dated 4 March 1544 and dated 12 September 1544; importantly instruction on the 'Ten Commandments' was stressed by Francis Xavier.

³¹ S. Jeyaseela Stephen, Op. Cit., pp. 176-179.

³² Ibid.

far as the intra-kinship marriages were concerned. The marriage ceremony as in the Portuguese or Latin practice was accompanied by musical bands suggestive of the change remaining superficial. The Church came forward to socialize the people in new values as the dossier of Apostolic Vicar, Cardinal Charles Maillard de Tournan wished. But even today puberty function is conducted without the interference of the Church by the Parathavars with hardly any consciousness of it being proscribed once. In sacramental matters, they were unable to make a breakthrough by putting an end to the idol-worship but indirectly were responsible for the spread of several myths that were akin to those in Hinduism. Hence the hypothesis “the intentions of the Roman Catholic Church and the response of the native Parathavars were not marked by mutual compatibility” stands valid.