

Christianity In Kottar – A Study

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Abstract: *Christianity in Kottar is the history of Catholicism in the Diocese of Kottar. Christianity in this study area has many denominations such as Catholicism, the Church of South India and minor divisions such as Salvation Army and the Pentecostal churches. This study is limited to the history of Catholicism in the Diocese of Kottar.*

Key words: *Christianity, Kottar, Catholicism, Diocese*

INTRODUCTION

Catholics in the world

More than one sixth of the world population i.e 18% of the total mankind is included in the Catholic Church. The Pope is the head of this church. As the head of the church resides in Vatican, Rome, this church is called the Roman Catholic Church (R.C. Christians). The word Catholic in general means including a wide variety of, as the name itself clearly says, the Catholic Church, comprises in itself all nations, races and principalities. In the early, there is no distinction among the haves and have not. In short there is no distinction based on caste, colour, nation or race. So any countrymen could be elected pope.

Coming of Christianity to Kottar

Dr. V. Lawrence in his 'History of the Catholic Church in Kanniyakumari District' says that Christianity was brought to India by one of Jesus Apostles, St. Thomas in 52 A.D. It had happened fifteen hundred years before the start of Reformation in 1517 A.D. The remnants of the coming of St. Thomas could be found in Chinna Muttom and Thiruvithancode.

Syrian Christians

The first group of Christians followed oriental rites and trace their origin to Saint Thomas. So they are also called St. Thomas Christians. They were also called Syrian churches because of the missionary activity of Syrian missions and the support they received from the Syrian churches of West Asia.

The Syrian Christians are still very prominent in North Kerala. They are well educated and financially well to do. So they shine in politics too. But it is a sad thing to note that they consider themselves superior to other Catholics who were converted later on by Francis Xavier and refrain from mingling with them. As for them the latter are untouchables and low caste Christians.

The Syrian Christians are called Pre-Padroado Christians. The Padroado, Christians were those who sought and got the patronage of the Portuguese whom St. Francis Xavier belonged to. These are also called Xavierian Christians because St. Francis was the one who was instrumental in bringing these people into the Christian fold. The coming of Saint Thomas was the first wave of Christianity in India, the Second wave was the coming of the Portuguese and of St. Francis Xavier and the third wave was the coming of European Missionaries belonging to both Catholicism and Protestantism. In this third phase or wave, Christianity began to spread into the interior parts apart from the fishermen.

The sweat and toil of the foreign missionaries like the Jesuits and the Franciscans were the cause of the spread of Christianity in Kottar. The services of the coastal fishermen called 'Kuttaikarar' or 'Chavalakkarar' cannot be ignored. They were the head loaders of fish from the coastal areas. They went into the interior to sell the fish. When they were unable to return to their hamlets the same day, they stayed somewhere in the interior and went to their hamlets the next day, early in the morning. Soon, it came to pass that they married and settled in the interior villages. Indirectly they became the evangelists, people began to be converted to Christianity and many of the interior parishes sprang up.

Coming of Saint Francis Xavier

It will not be complete if we do not make a special mention of the coming of St. Francis Xavier. He landed in Goa in 1512. He stayed there for a few months and learnt 'Malabar' languages (Tamil and Malayam). On his visits to the Parava villages on the coast, Xavier was requested by the Mukkuva fisher people to come and baptize them. Xavier in November 1544 set out baptizing these people starting from Poovar. He ended up at Pallam. By that time he had baptized about 10,000 mukkuvas. Since his diplomatic services were needed in Jaffna, Ceylon, he requested Mansilahas, a cleric at Punnaikkayal to go to Manakudy and baptize the people. He too did so.

The Jesuits from Europe came to India in 1545, 1546 and 1548. In 1557 the second diocese in India, after Goa, was erected. It was Cochin. It comprised practically the whole of Southern Peninsula, Burma and the island of Ceylon. (Sri Lanka).

The Franciscans worked North of Cochin and the South was under the care of the Jesuits. The Bishop of Cochin writes on Jan 2, 1598, that there were 14,000 Catholics in 30 churches under the care of the Jesuits.

When, in 1838, the vacant Diocese of Cochin was suppressed by Rome, there were in the present Diocese of Kottar 17 churches and chapels and about 7500 Catholics along the coast.

1. Bishop Lawrence Pereira:

His Excellency was the First Bishop of the new Diocese of Kottar Born Kanyankulam in Kerala, he became Bishop in 1930 and held the reins of the diocese for eight years. At that time there were only 25 parishes in the diocese and Kadiapattanam was one among them. In his time the 'Fish Contract' was in vogue in many villages in the diocese, He went to his eternal rest on 5th January 1938.

2. Bishop Thomas Roch Agniswamy:

His Excellency was the second Bishop of Kottar Born in Trichy. This Jesuit priest was appointed Bishop on 06.10.1939. He was a God fearing man of prayer and simplicity. He held the reins of the diocese for 32 long years. He retired on 17.02.1977 and lived in the Jesuit House in Dindigul. He passed away on 07.05.1974.

When Sir. C.P. Ramasamy the Diwan of Travancore wanted to nationalize all the private primary schools he opposed that move tooth and nail and declared on 11.12.46 that even if the government denied grant in aid he would run the schools. Many schools belonging to some other Christian denominations were surrendered. The Bishop successfully ran the schools and finally the Diwan retracted. He participated in the second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. He initiated the priests of the diocese in the documents and the spirit of the council documents.

3. Bishop Marianus Arockiasamy:

Born in Puthoor in the diocese of Kumbakonam, His Excellency became the Bishop of Kottar in a solemn function held at the Bishop's House Campus on 17.02.1971. He renewed the face of the diocese in the light of the second Vatican Council. He encouraged lay Apostolate. He wrote a few renowned historical pastoral letters. He was a very good administrator an eloquent speaker and the voice of the deprived and the downtrodden people.

He promoted inter-religious dialogue. After the Mondaikadu, Puthoor firing he along with Kuntrakudy Adikalar and Mr. Ahamedkhan constituted the 'Thiruvavul perevai'. In 1973 he instituted the parish, pastoral councils in the parishes. In 1984 the Diocesan lay Apostolate Commission was constituted and a layman from the parish of Kadiapattanam was appointed its secretary. After 16 successful years of bishopric he was elevated Archbishop of Madurai.

4. Bishop Leon A. Tharmaraj:

His Excellency was the first son of soil to become the Bishop of Kottar. He took canonical possession of the diocese on 05.02.1989. He was Bishop for 16 years. He dedicated himself for the uplift of the diocese. He was a man of simplicity, spirituality and sacred ministry. In 2000, to mark the Christu Jeyanthi Jubilee he convened a General Council of people of different walks of life and took important decisions regarding the life and ministry

of the diocese. At the time of tsunami he expended himself to rehabilitate the people. He was loved and held in high esteem by all the people. He went to his eternal rest on 16.01.2007.

5. Bishop Peter Remigius:

His Excellency was the Bishop of Kumbakonam before he became the fifth Bishop of Kottar on 24.08.2007. He is nationally and internationally known for his executive talents. He considers spiritual and social activities as his two eyes. He is widely travelled and has a reputation for administrative acumen. Now he lives in a house in the Bishop's House campus.

6. Bishop Nagarene Soosai:

The present Bishop of the Diocese of Kottar is Bishop Nagarene Soosai. Born in Rajakkamangalthurai, he took canonical possession of the diocese on 29.06.2017; the day on which Bishop Remigius retired. It is customary that the bishops hold office until they complete 75 years. After 75 years of age, they have to submit their resignation to the pope who appoints another priest, bishop of the diocese. The retired bishop is called bishop emeritus.

CONCLUSION

The coming of Christianity especially Catholicism, in Kanniyakumari district has received mixed reactions from scholars. Some of them say that it has uplifted the people especially the coastal people. Others say that it has killed the leadership equality of the people. The argument put forth by these scholars is that the priests play the dominant role in the village (parish), whereas the people (parishioners) are dumb spectators. It was totally true a few decades ago. Then most of the people were uneducated and if and when a govt. official came to the village (parish) for any purpose, he had to depend on the priest for details and clarifications.

As time went on, people entered schools and colleges and got educated. Now they know many govt. orders regarding their vocation and the education of their children.

But even now, many coastal villages depend on their parish priests for guidance and the final word; because he is the head of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) which runs the administration of the whole villages.

Now there is a move to have dual administrative system: one to look after the religious matters with the priest as head and the other to look after other matters. This arrangement is on anvil and proper rules and regulations are needed to avoid clashes between these two setups.

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