

Christianity on the Coast

Some of Thirunelveli's early Christians

By: Lt.Col. (Retd). A J Vijayakumar

Arrival of Christianity in coastal south India

According to legend, Christianity arrived in South India around AD 52 through St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Christ. However, European missionaries, who arrived in the 16th century, propagated Christianity in the area.

St. Francis Xavier (April 7, 1506 – December 2, 1552) was the pioneer in preaching Christianity in the coastal areas of Kanniyakumari, Tirunelveli and Tuticorin districts. The fishermen in the coastal areas of the districts were called 'Paravar' or 'barathar', 'paravai' meaning the sea in old Tamil. There are numerous mentions of 'paravar' in the famous epic 'Silappathikaram' of Ilango Adigal.

Paravas were thus the first whole community in India to convert to Christianity in the mid 16th century. The name 'Fernando', or 'Machado' are well known. These and other surnames were acquired from the Portuguese, who influenced the Paravas.

The King of paravas at that point of time in history was Vikramaditya Pandian based out of Veerapandianpattinam later the ruling family and their office moved to Tuticorin based on Dutch request.

The Paravars

The Paravars were a Tamil fisher caste who inhabited the fishery coast extending from Cape Comorin Kanya Kumari to the isle of Mannar (Rameswaram) along the gulf that bears the name. The Paravars plied the trade of fishing which included pearl fishing, diving for pearls to the bottom of the deep where they could stay for many hours.

They were also fearless people who knew the sea as their mother, 'Kadalammai' as they used to call in Tamil. They could venture deep into the sea for days knowing the currents, winds and the tides. They knew very intimately where the sea was treacherous and where they could sail swiftly and where and what fish could be caught in abundance.

The Paravars paid a small tax to the state for permission to scour the deep for pearls. In the first quarter of the 16th century, this contribution which was paid to the Pandyas (Tamils) till then, came to be shared by the two powers between whom the coast was divided – the king of Travancore, Chera Udaya Martanda, who

annexed the southern half of the coastal territory and the Vanga Tumbichi Nayak, who possessed himself to the north.

Fight for dominance – Muslim overlords and the Portuguese

In 1516, however the state dues were farmed out by a Muslim overlord who on account of the profits he has realized, became the virtual master of the coast (Documentacao vol.- II p361). According to Barbosa, he was so rich and powerful that the people of the land honored him as much as the king. He executed judgement and justice on the Muslims without interference from the constituted authority. The fishers (parathavars) toiled for him for a whole week at the close of the season, and for themselves for the rest of the time except on Fridays when they worked for the owners of the boats (Dames, The book of Duarte Barbosa Vol.-II pp123-24).

The Portuguese, who were the masters of the seas, coveted this business and soon wrested it from the Muslim overlords. In 1523, João Froles, whom the Portuguese king appointed as Captain and Factor of the fishery coast, succeeded in farming out the dues of 1,500 cruzados a year (Corea oriente Portuguese vol.-II PP 778-79,786-87). The Muslim elite wouldn't yield to their rivals without a struggle. But the brunt of their attacks was visited upon the Paravas. For in their attempt to balk the Portuguese of their gains, they constantly harassed the poor fishers.

In consequence, the Portuguese had to maintain a flying squadron to beat off the attacks of the Muslim Corsairs-as they termed their enemies. Just at this juncture, Vijayanagar, which had earlier connived at the occupation of the coast by the King of Travancore and Tumbichi Nayak, vigorously intervened in support of the Pandya king. The Vijayanagar forces inflicted severe defeat on the Travancore army, and with the appearance of Vijayanagar on the fishery coast there was cessation of hostilities between the Portuguese and the Muslims (Silva Rego -Oriente Portuguese Vol.-II pp362-65).

About the year 1536 an incident occurred which threatened to throw the coastal people into the throes of a violent internecine warfare. In a scuffle between a Muslim and a Parava at Tuticorin, the Paravar had his ear torn out by his adversary, who out of sheer greed for the ring it bore, carried with him.

The incident sparked off a civil war between the Paravars and the Muslims, and it was soon apparent that the Paravas would be beaten in the struggle. A Muslim flotilla guarded the coast making it impossible for the Paravas to ply their trade, and offering five fanams (panam, the then currency, even today in Tamilnadu its common for the Tamil to term money as panam) for a Parava head (Luceana , Historia da Vida do padre S.Francisco Xavier , vol.-I liv II , cap .VII).

Conversion of the Paravas to Christianity

Happily for the Paravars, there happened to arrive at Cape Comorin (present day Kanya Kumari) at this time João da Cruz, a horse dealer who was high in Portuguese favour. João da Cruz, who was waiting payment for his deal at the cape (Kanya Kumari), was approached by the Paravas for advice. Cruz could see no way of saving them from their predicament other than conversion to Christianity. For then they would be entitled to the protection of the Portuguese and could, as a matter of right, invoke the aid of the Portuguese Padroado. The Paravas had no alternative but to agree and Cruz led a deputation of twenty pattankattis (leaders) of the Paravas to Cochim to wait on Pero Vaz, the Vedor da Fazenda (Reeve), and Miguel Vaz, the Vicar-General. These pleaded the case of the Paravas before Nuno da Cunha, the Governor, and it was decided that they be helped against their Muslim opponents. Accordingly a Portuguese squadron appeared before Cape Comorin (Kanya Kumari).

The Muslim flotilla sought safety in flight and the Paravars freed from bondage could from now on ply their trade independently of the farmers, both Muslim and Portuguese. In the meantime, Cruz persuaded the King of Travancore not to object to the conversion of the Paravas in a body to the Christian religion, assuring him that if he was friendly with the Portuguese he could depend on his supply of war steeds, the mainstay of the army in those days.

The Paravars apart from getting converted also had to shell out 60,000 fanams to Portuguese as protection money. This was further used to induce more conversions. Miguel Vaz thereupon visited the Paravas accompanied by four priests and administered baptism to about twenty thousand people. In a few years, the number rose to eighty thousand men, women, and children and the Christianity spread among these people, settled both on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts (Documentação Vol.-II PP 257-59; Schurhammer, art. cit. pp304-07). The Paravas now had the protection of the Portuguese fleet and could follow their profession undisturbed.

The Portuguese called the area where the Paravas lived as "Costa da Pescaria" - or Land of the Pearls. Their spiritual, cultural and literary excellency brought out the first Tamil book to modern print media. The Tamil Bible, 'Cardila', was printed in 1554 and made Tamil the first language into print for any Indian language. This was even before the first printing machine arrived in Goa, India in 1556. Cardila was printed at Lisbon by the command of the Portuguese government with the motivation by the visits of three Paravars Vincent Nasareth, Joj Kavalko and Thomas Cruz from Tuticorin, India to Portugal. The funding for the press came from the Parvar community of Tuticorin thus planting the Roman Catholic Faith in Pearl Fishery Coast of Tamil Nadu.

Spread of christianity

St. Francis Xavier

St Francis Xavier arrived in Goa and after a stay of five months in Goa, he left for the Pearl Fishery Coast about six hundred miles from Goa, taking with him three Tamil Students from the college (One of them was in Deacon's order the others were catechists to serve as interpreters). They arrived in Tuticorin in September 1542. Xavier living in and proselytized from a sea cave in Manapad.

St. Francis Xavier made the catechistical instruction interesting by his singing and by making the children sing. The instruction is ended by the Salva Regina, begging the aid and help of the "blessed lady".

Catechists and Teachers:

St. Francis Xavier appointed catechists and teachers in all the villages to continue the conversion work he had begun. It was his method to be liberal to the teachers and catechists, to pay them a part of their salary in advance and to encourage them in every way. At the same time he let them feel that they were carefully watched and must be on their guard not to fail in their duty. They were to baptize newborn infants, preside at the prayers and perform other offices of the kind.

To meet the heavy expenses of paying the teachers and catechists St. Francis Xavier had recourse to a stratagem.

Four hundred crowns a year had been set-aside for Queen Catherine of Portugal from revenue of the Pearl Fisheries and the sum was supposed to provide Her Majesty with slippers. St. Francis Xavier seems already to have persuaded the governor to pay it over to him, so sure were they both that the pious Queen would gladly let him have it for the salaries of the Kanakapillais (catechists are known even today by this name along the Fishery Coast – they are doing small works in Catholic churches). In asking her permission to consent to what had been done, he reminded her that she could have no better shoes or slippers to climb into Heaven than her charity towards the children of the Fishery Coast. For many years the Queen's slipper money was donated by her to this mission.

It is true that the Paravars were baptized eight years before the arrival of St. Francis Xavier. But it was only after the arrival of Francis Xavier that the conversion and evangelical activity proceeded with all the gusto.

Building of Churches

Once the fishermen of the southern coast became Christians (catholics), the priests started constructing very beautiful churches in these fishing villages all along the

coast – starting from Tuticorin to Kanniyakumari. These structures are huge and would easily be the envy of similar structures – in their size and grandeur.

Huge churches can be seen even today in these fishing villages from Tuticorin to Kanniyakumari - Manapad, Veerapandian Pattanam, Palayakayal, Punnaikayal, Uvari, Koothankuzhi, Idindakarai, Perumanal, Kootapuli, Kanniyakumari.

The church of Our Lady of Remedy in Kanniyakumari; the church and the grotto of our lady of Lourdes in Idindakarai.



The catamarans

The fishermen's life revolved around taking out to sea in a catamaran, made of three logs of special trees brought all the way from the Kerala country by sea. They would be seasoned by letting them stay in the sea for a couple of months and then the carpenters would start to work shaping the wooden logs by chiseling out the shape with broad chisels.

A catamaran would be made of 4 logs; 2 logs created the flat bottom, one log on each side finished the structure.

They would use sails made of thick cloth strengthening them with locally made materials. One technique they use to strengthen the sail cloth is by dipping them in boiled water mixed with the juices from tamarind seeds.

Church and the fishermen

The church played a major role in the lives on the fishermen. At one period the fishermen had to give one sixth of the catch to the church on a certain day of the week.

Also, as the bible have numerous references to the fishermen who later became apostles of Christ, the life of fishermen blended easily into the Christian way of life.

Idindakarai

One of the coastal villages which had embraced Catholicism even before the coming of St. Francis Xavier to the Pearl Fishery Coast is Idindakarai. Jesuit records has its name as Idindakarai or sometimes especially in the 1571 records as "Idintha Kallu" (Broken stone). Henri Antriquez who succeeded St. Xavier as the Provincial Superior of the Pearl Fishery Coast, built a church dedicated to Sts. Peter and Paul at Idindakarai in 1552. The army of the Madurai Nayaks destroyed this church in 1553. Fr. Antriquez once again built the church in 1558. Fr. Silvera, the Jesuit Superior of the Goa Mission, complying with the request of Fr. Antriquez, sent a beautiful picture of St. Peter for the church at Idindakarai in 1571.

As the ancient church of Sts. Peter and Paul situated at the coastal border of Idindakarai was abandoned, a new church was built and dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes on the 2 nd of February 1906 . The expense of the building was Rs. 20,000. Its centenary anniversary was celebrated on the 11 th of February 2006 .

Relations with the people of other faith

The most endearing and interesting feature of the life in the villages and the one neighbouring these are the enormous brotherhood and peace they sahred with the fellow bings in the nearby villages. The people of the nearby Koodangualm, to the northwest were Hindus while the village of Vijayapathi to the north east were muslims. They lived in absolute harmony and peace as brothers, all subject to extreme poverty as the others in the region.

/*****/