

KOTTAR: CENTER FOR CATHOLICISM IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

Dr. P. FLORAS MARY

Associate Professor of History,

Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous), Periyakulam, India

Ancient India was no stranger to the lands of Christian antiquity. Jawaharlal Nehru says “few people 38aptize that Christianity came to India as early as the first century after Christ, long before Europe turned to it, and established a firm hold in South India.”¹ The present Diocese of Kottar is territorially almost co-extensive with the civil district of Kanyakumari on the southern-most tip of the Indian sub-continent, hemmed in between the Arabian Sea on the west and the Western Ghat mountains on the east and spread over an area of about 1684 square kilometers, about one fourth of which is covered with exuberant hills and scenic forests. Politically the area of the present Diocese of Kottar was for a long time part of the ancient kingdom of Venad and later of the Indian State of Travancore - Cochin, until the general reorganization of Indian states in 1956 made it possible for her to be merged with Madras State which is presently known as Tamilnadu. Linguistically, Tamil has always been the main language of the people with some admixture of Malayalam towards the north. The origin of Christianity in this southern-most district is dim with age. Tradition goes the influence of Christianity in the strips of the sandy tract stretching from Cranganore to the Cape Comorin, due to the visit and work of the Apostle St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. Under his instruction “As my father hath sent me, even so send I you” (St. John, 20:21), the disciples of the Lord proceeded in different directions to preach the Gospel. “Saint Thomas set sail for India to preach the teachings of his Lord and baptism the people in the name of the Father and His son and the Holy Ghost”.²

The apostle is said to have landed in 52 A.D. at the port of Cranganore in Malabar, founded seven churches in the Arabian coast and stayed in the southern most part of India for a few days on his way to Mylapore where he was murdered on 21 December 68 A.D. The remnants of a church at Kumari Muttam locally called *Thommanpalli* (Church of St. Thomas) and the old church at Thiruvithamcode are considered to be the most ancient churches in the district and they are said to have been consecrated by St. Thomas himself.³

The first epigraphic evidence of Christian influence in the district is found in two stones unearthed at Cape Comorin. From the inscriptions we learn that the Christians were given protection from their rival Hindu kinsmen and some revenues were allotted to the

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, Bombay, 1984, p.273.

² Rev.Fr. Herman D Souza. *In the Steps of St. Thomas* Jan 1983, p.25

³ J.S.Michael. *Kumari Mavatta Thevalayankal* 1971. P.14

church of St. Thomas there. Of the dates, 1494 and 1526 found on the stones, the first definitely refers to a period prior to the landing of Vasco-da-Gama at Calicut in June 1498. Nagam Aiya asserts that in 1439 there were Christian communities scattered all the way from Cochin to Cape Comorin. Fr. Hosten goes further to say that such settlements were to be found from Cape to Mylapore.⁴ Durate Barbosa writes that "At this Cape Comoly there is an ancient church of the Christains which was founded by Armenians (Syrians) who still direct it and perform in it the divine services of Christians and have crosses on the altars. The mariners pay a tribute to it and the Portuguese celebrate mass there when they pass by Cape"⁵. There are many tombs, among them there is one which has written on it a Latin epitaph. The date of the inscription is not mentioned. Lord Stanley thinks it may refer to pre-Portuguese 39aptized. The opening of the route to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 paved way for greater and steady influence of Christianity. In 1534 the Diocese of Goa was established by Pope Paul III. At this time the persecution of Muslims drove the Paravars of the Pearl Fishery Coast to seek the protection of the Portuguese in Cochin. The protection was promised on condition that the Paravars should embrace Christianity. As a pledge of their good faith thirty five leaders from all their villages went to Cochin and were 39aptized there by Fr. Michael Vaz, the Vicar General of Goa in December 1535. The parish priest of Cochin with four other priests was sent down to the Pearl Fishery Coast where, in the following years about 20000 were converted by them into the fold of Christ. The planting of the cross in the territory of the Diocese of Kottar is to be dated from that year. With the arrival of the Portuguese the Paravars of the pearl fishery coast including those at Cape Comorin, Kovalam and Rajakkamangalam in South Trancore were 39aptized in 1535 AD. To work among the Paravas St. Francis Xavier, a noted professor of the Sorbonne University of Paris came to the southern tip of the peninsula in the year 1543. In fourteen months he worked continuously along the coast naming it "the mission of Cape Comorin".⁶

St. Francis Xavier at Kottar

The Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier, one of the most impressive historic monuments of India containing a small chapel of our lady where Xavier used to celebrate Holy Mass, is situated at Kottar, eleven miles north of Cape Comorin.⁷ Visitors from different places always stop a few moments at this renowned pilgrim centre generally known as second Goa, where the body of St. Xavier is kept. The monument erected in honour of this great Apostle of India is on the highway between Trivandrum and Kanyakumari.

Kottar is now a part of Nagercoil Municipality; but it is the oldest part of the town. It was a commercial centre of fame from days of yore. The ancient Greek writer Ptolemy (150 AD.) describes it as a metropolis with considerable trade. In the words of Dr. K. K.

⁴ Anthony Korah Thomas B.A.,(Hons), *The Christians of Kerala* (A brief Profile of All major Churches published in 1993, P.65

⁵ Bro. Varghese Savari-I, *Behold your Mother* – 1990, P.22.

⁶ Philip Hughes, *A popular History of the Catholic Church* 1954. p.27

⁷ Venancious S, *Thiru Thalam Kottaru*, Nov 1988. p.4

Pillay, "the commercial importance and the ever increasing wealth of Kottar undoubtedly attracted many an invader. Indeed during the Palmy days of the Pandyas, the Cholas, the Vijayanagar and the Nayak rulers, Kottar formed a bone of contention between the invaders and the local rulers".⁸ St. Francis Xavier selected this place of fame for his evangelic work in the erstwhile Travancore State. The invasion of Travancore by Vithala a Vijayanagar viceroy was closely connected with the life of St. Francis Xavier. The Travancore State Manual of Nagam Aiya states as follows; "The Raja of Travancore was indebted to Xavier for deliverance from danger, a panic having, it is said, been produced in the ranks of the Badagas by the maiden appearance of Xavier in front of their leader, crucifix in hand. Thus the Badagas failed in their attempt to conquer Travancore. In exuberance of joy the then king of Travancore named Unni Kerala Varma welcomed the saint and addressed him, "I am called the great king and hence forth you shall be called the Great Father".⁹ A contemporary letter from Portugal dated 22nd October 1545 reads thus: "A Rajah has given orders throughout his kingdom that all are to show obedience to his brother the Great Father as though it were to himself, all who wish are free to become Christians. He also gave him much money; but Xavier distributed it all among the poor. Along the coast he has built forty five Churches".¹⁰ The small chapel of our lady which was housed in the Cathedral at Kottar is the most important among them.

References

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9. Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Indian Orthodox Church on Overview*, p.12.
10. P.J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, p.20.

⁸ Padmanabhan.S, *Three Historic Churches in Kanyakumari*, Published on 25 Dec 1978. p.29

⁹ Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Indian Orthodox Church on Overview*, p.12.

¹⁰ P.J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, p.20.