

## THE WORKS OF MADURA MISSION UNDER THE RULE OF THIRUMALAI NAYAK (1623-1659 A.D)

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The Nayak rule of Madurai is the most glittering period in the history of Madurai. They gave peace and prosperity to the Madurai country for years. The Nayaks were the successors of the Vijayanagar rulers. The Nayaks identified themselves as one among the people of Tamilnadu, and their rule filled the vacuum created by the existing of the Muslims. The Nayak period served as the background of some of the developments of the later years. Thirumalai Nayak's attitude towards the Christian missionaries was one of toleration and even protection. The Christian missionaries established churches. The Madura Mission was founded by father Robert de Nobili in 1606. He met Tirumalai Nayak himself and secured permission for unhindered conversion. According to Father Proenza, Tirumalai Nayak loved and protected the Christian religion, whose excellence he recognized: but he never dared to accept the consequences of his conversion.

The letters of the Jesuit Mission to Rome are the primary epistolary sources which contain information regarding the administration of their various ecclesiastical centers. These reports or letters are written in Italian, Portuguese, and Latin. These writings are of great value as they are coming from highly educated men who lived in this country and had the opportunities to mingle with the people. These letters throw much light on the religious, social, economic, and political conditions of South India in the seventeenth and apart of the eighteenth centuries.

### Madura Mission

At the outset of 17<sup>th</sup> century the Jesuit missionaries in Madurai actively worked in many directions towards the social upliftment of the masses. They pursued their missionary activities in Tamil country with great zeal. The term "Madura Mission" refers that Jesuit missionary's developmental activities with its headquarters at Madurai. Later the members of the Madura Mission extended their yeomen services to the eastern half of the peninsula.

The ancient Madura Mission was the chief outcome of the Indian Mission founded by St. Francis Xavier whose missionary work was limited only to the fishery coast where the native communities like paravas, kadeyars, and mukkuvars. The efficient organization commenced by Francis Xavier and developed by Henry Henriquez had yielded a fruitful conversion of 45,000 fervent Catholics at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the early stages the Tamil country missionaries could not do much or drew a blank. The Gospel was not successfully propagated because of Fr. Gonsalvo Fernandes, a zealous Portuguese missionary who had cultural backlash and so was strict with the foreign customs and traditions. He did not mingle with the natives. As a result, there developed social stigma,

and they tarred with for being “parangis” a term of contempt coined by the Tamils because of their conviviality with the people of low castes.

### **The New Madura Mission**

Robert De Nobili established Madura Mission during the reign of Muthukrishnappa Nayak. It was called as the New Madura Mission which was accomplished in 1606.

Fr. De Nobili was born in the city of Rome in 1577 of a noble family. At the age of nineteen, he forsook the world and entered the Society of Jesus. From his entrance into the Society, the missions of India interested him, and he begged his superiors to send him to these missions. Having obtained their consent he embarked about 1604 at Lisbon. His first labors were devoted to caring for the natives who lived along the southern coast of India. In 1606 his attention was directed to the Brahmins who had defeated all attempts to convert them to Christianity. De Nobili threw his whole energy into this work.

### **De Nobili's Efforts for the Conversion of the Natives**

At the outset, Nobili made observations on Indian character. He found that the Hindus had a great aversion to foreigners, and this hindered them even from listening to the message of the Gospel. The Parangi, name given to the Portuguese, means low and infamous class of men, with whom no Hindu could have any intercourse. The reason to the aversion was because the Portuguese violated the most sacred customs of India namely eating meat and drinking wine: and above all, they dealt with the lower castes, and the pariahs. De Nobili noted all this and realized that if Christianity was to be successful among these people, it must be presented differently. With the consent of the Arch Bishop of Canganore, he assuaged the misgivings of the Brahmins of Madura that he was not a Parangi nor a Portuguese, but a Raja or Prince from Rome and a Sanyasi or religious devotee; and he began to live from that day forth the life which is commonly lived by Hindu ascetics of the strictest and most reputable sort.

To lift the Church from the low position, he tried a new method, the method of adaptation to the culture of the country. With the help of a renowned Brahman teacher de Nobili soon mastered the sacred language of the Hindus, namely Sanskrit. He also learned Tamil and Telugu. He was meticulous in his methods. He began to live like Indians, calling himself a “Roman Brahman.” He left his home in Madurai and dressed as a Hindu sage. He set up a “mutt” on the outskirts of Madurai, an ancient abode of Hindu gods and learning in South India. He wore a sacred thread across his body and grew a kudumi like a Brahman. He applied sandal paste all over his body and took sleeping on the floor. He took vegetarian food, and stopped his European lifestyle began to lead a life prescribed in the Brahman books.

Meanwhile, De Nobili built a shrine; it looked like a Hindu temple. He called it “kovil” in Tamil term. Nobili conducted prayer but described it as “pujai”. The fruits and sweets are the offerings in the Nobili’s “pujai.” It was considered as sacrament. He had composed Christian hymns in Tamil on the basis of Hindu devotional music. His

compositions contained the names of angels, saints and apostles. Some hymns are translated into Tamil. His devotional hymns and songs at the time of births, marriages and deaths. Festivals like Pongal were also Christianised in the same superstitious manner.

### **Successful Results**

Robert de Nobili began his attention particularly on conversion. Due to his continuous effort he succeeds in converting a Brahman to Christianity. He argued with a Hindu sage or spiritual adviser about the amplitude of Christian philosophy and finally confessed himself to become a convert. Afterwards, he became an active preacher of the gospel. Then Brahmins, priests, courtiers, rulers, and most respectable professionals had begun to heed the preachings of Nobili and believed on a new way of salvation.

### **Support by the Palayakars**

Even Tumbicchi Nayakkan, the chief of all the Tottiyans from Veipar to Vijayanagar, of the most powerful clan then resident in the country was anxious to become a disciple and was only prevented by fear of the king's displeasure. The progress of Christianity was everywhere rapid. The gurus who had lost the foes customarily paid to them by their disciples, but withheld by those disciples when converted to the Christian faith, grew angry at their disciples but withheld by those disciples when converted to the Christian faith, grew angry at their issues, other gurus became alarmed. The chief priest of Thumbicchi Nayak accepted Christianity and rendered the land to built a Church. Granting land to the church created clouds of persecution. However the storm passed over without any bloodshed. It was resulted the need for powerful protection for the church. A local land lord named Herme-katti wish to give protection but not ready to convert. He largely patronized Robert and took great delight in his society.

### **Trials and Tribulations**

Robert De Nobili counted other missions and missionaries in the field of conversion. He found some of his competitors were jealous of his success. Fr.Fernandez, a contemporary clergy at Madurai sent a memorandum to the mission superiors, against the process of conversion of De Nobili. The other missionary workers accused the activities of Nobilit. The Franciscan a missionary working in a adjacent provinces spread hoax that Nobili became a Hindu. As a result the authorities at Goa were forced to a decision. At last in 1613, De Nobili received a letter from the Provincial of his mission. It contained 34 orders and observations, which De Nobili was ordered to stop the major moves on his work on gospel.

### **Missionaries and the Kallars during the reign of Tirumalai Nayak**

After a period of unimaginable persecution the members of missionaries were pushed to seek asylum in jungles. The Kallars of this region gave possession of their life and property. These men of brave seem to have listened readily to the preaching of the gospel of missionary people. Under the circumstances of lawlessness the preachers had done their job without any hindrance. Originally the Kallars are Hindus by religion, and accepted the

missionaries of western countries. The Clergies got success in converting many of the Kallars into Christianity. The records of the Madura Mission and the letters of ecclesiastical leaders showed that the native Kallars had converted into Christianity in large numbers. Extensive learning, knowledge of the regional language, long stay in Madurai region helped the clergies to have accurate observation on the social and cultural life of the people. The Kallars of Madura country sprang up here and there in the midst of their wild retreats and long spears with which they used to attack and trembling merchant. They driven off herds plundered cattle. And it was probably in consequence of their change in their habits, that Tirmalai Nayak granted the Kallars considerable lands for their cultivation at free of tax.

The whole conversions which the missionaries attempted to make roused the indignation of the people and some of the Palayakaras led to many untoward incidents i.e persecution on clergies happened. Tirumalai Nayak rescued them from these situations and ordered that they should be allowed freedom of action in their work. Nobili soon afterwards left the Madurai country to Jaffna patnam De Nobili's works were not always free of difficulties, for he had much to suffer from the fanaticism of the pagan priests. He was calumniated; imprisoned and threatened with death. Later the king, met him in person assured his protection from his enemies.

### **Last days of Robert de Nobili**

Robert de Nobili succeeded in spreading the Gospel throughout the whole of South India in a short time. Nobili was eminent in three languages, namely Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu. By this acquired skill he astounded the natives of the country.<sup>23</sup> No one equaled Fr. Robert the elegance of speech, the energy of diction, and facility of elocution. He spent in the desert of the Mission, not forty days only, but forty years, till the time when having become almost blind and infirm, he was ordered by his Superiors to take rest in some other place in the Province. He sent to the kingdom of Jaffna Patnam from where he later transferred to the college of San Thome. It is there that he spent his last years. Christians and Hindus designated him only by the name of Holy Father. During his last sickness, he displayed the same patience, which he had practiced all his life. He was faithful to his custom of practicing every day and spent lot of time with loving friends and serenity on interior or exterior peace. His blessed soul departed to heaven on the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1656.<sup>25</sup>

### **Other Missionaries of Madura Mission**

Shortly afterwards Father Antony de Vico and Father Manoel Martin worked on Nobili's mode of life and preaching on the same lines. Father Vico died in 1638 who was succeeded by Fr. Sebastian de Maya, who was imprisoned in 1640 by the rulers at Madurai with de Nobili, while Father Martins remained at Trichinopoli. In 1640 the arrival of Father Balthasar da Costa changed the working style of Madura Mission. He started to work for the Lower Classes. Out of the tireless work of mission, in 1644 the number of converts in the Madura, Trichinopoli, and Satiamangalam districts rose to 3500. Among them 1000 from higher castes and 2500 from were pariahs. At that time, there were five priests working on

the mission, It gave subsequent progress in gospel on 1680 the number of converts altogether was reckoned at not less than 80,000.

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