

## **A Study of the Pandaraswamy Movement in the Marava Country 1663 - 1773A.D.**

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### **Introduction**

The Jesuits played a vital role in bringing Christianity into the Tamil Country. St. Ignatius of Loyola started the Society of Jesus with six members in 1540 on Sep. 27, with the approval of Pope Paul III. St. Francis Xavier was one of them. The members of this Society are commonly known as Jesuits. At the request of the Portuguese king, St. Ignatius sent St. Francis Xavier to India. He came to Goa in 1542<sup>1</sup> and He and his companions worked in many parts of India such as Mylapore, Kuzhithalai, Tiruchenthur, Nagapattinam, the Coromandal Coast, and the Fishery Coast, Srilanka, China and Japan. So he is the great apostle of the Indies<sup>2</sup>

#### **i. Establishment of Pandaraswamy Movement**

Fr. Robert de Nobile; came to Madurai and started the Madurai Mission in 1606. He is rightly called by the people “Thattuvu Pothakar”. Before his missionary activities people had a wrong notion that Christianity was a religion of low caste people only. But Fr. Nobile changed this idea. He gave the correct guidance that Christianity belongs to everyone in the world irrespective of his caste colour, political and economic situation. He wore Sunyasi robes. He was a pure vegetarian. As a result encouraged by this kind of adaptation 120 converts mostly of high caste Nayakars including 12 Brahmins converted themselves to Christianity in 1611.<sup>3</sup> After Fr. Nobile Fr. Provenza continued his evangelization work in Madurai Mission.

Fr. Balthazar da Costa is the founder of this Mission of Pandarasamis. He writes, “since the Brahmin Sannyasis could not convert the lower classes of people even when the harvest was abundant a new mission was started for the low class”.<sup>4</sup> Balthasar Da Costa. Fr. Nobile obtained the approval of his religious and ecclesiastical superiors and officially launched the new experiment in the middle of 1640, choosing Fr. Balthasar Da Costa who came from Portugal, the founder of another group which adopted a different method of preaching the gospel to the low caste people dressed in yellow ochre garbs.<sup>5</sup> Fr. Antony de Provenza, who joined this mission in 1653, was also from Portugal, the Second one and worked in Marava Country.<sup>6</sup>

#### **ii. Jesuits Work in Marava Country**

##### **1. Fr. Provenza [1626- 53-66]**

Marava Country was a forest area with a scanty rainfall. Often it was affected by the natural calamities. In this circumstance Fr. Antony de Provenza was allotted to the Marava country to preach the Gospel to the Marava people, by the Madurai Mission. He entered the Marava in 1663 during the period of Raghunatha Setupathi<sup>7</sup> who allowed Fr. Provenza to do so freely in his kingdom. They were ready to accept, the Gospel, because the Goodnews offered them peace of mind and some relief to their economic sufferings. Soon there were some 250 Christians there. The political arrest which followed badly affected the Christian community of Marava so he went outside. He worked in Tiruchirappalli Marava, Chengapati and Tottiam etc. He died in Tottiam in 1666.

No missionary had gone to the Marava country for 18 years because of the terrible persecution in 1669. After Fr. Provenza there was nobody who had lived and preached Christianity in Marava land till Fr. John de Britto. In the absence of the Jesuits the zealous catechists continued the missionary work in the country till 1686.<sup>8</sup>

##### **2. Britto's Missionary works in Marava land**

After a long wait, on May 5, 1686 he crossed the frontier at a place called Panangudi near Kalaiyar Kovil and entered the Marava Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Now Kallar people were living there.<sup>10</sup> To help him in his missionary work he had trained six catechists. They are Suran [who belonged to Vellalar caste], Siluvai nayak [who belonged to Nayaker caste], Kanakappan [who belonged to Vellalar caste], Sathiyathan [from Vanniyar caste], Nallathambe [Dalits] and Arulappan [Dalits]. These catechists would go into the villages, instruct people in the rudiments of the Christian religion and prepare them for baptism. Having thus prepared the ground they would invite their guru who would come in person and administer baptism to the neophytes. The wives of the catechists paid special attention to the women and children and taught them catechism. They also taught them to say the Rosary and Christians prayers. These catechists would go into the villages instruct people in the rudiments of the Christian religion. He prepared them for baptism. He heard thousands of confessions. He baptized 4000 catechumens in Vallamudugarpatti, certain part of Nanakudi region; <sup>11</sup> Now Kallars, Dalits are still to be found there in Nanakudi (Near Devakottai)<sup>12</sup>.

This was the modus operandi of Arulanandar. With the help of these catechists his work went very fast and people came from far and wide to listen to his

teaching. Encouraged by this immediate success he now pushed on to Vellanankulam [North Marava Mangalam]. By July 17, 1686, that is within a period of two months and a half he received into the Christian fold as many as 2070 people. Soon the Christians flourished in Marava. Andavoorani is one of the ancient Parishes of the Marava. Fr. Britto administered sacraments and converted a good number of people.<sup>13</sup> Now Dalits, Udayars, Yadhavars, and Christians lived there<sup>14</sup>. An account of success in the mission. So Fr. Britto and his disciples were arrested by. Kumara Pillai, the minister of the Sethupathi. The prisoners were then taken to Kalaiyarkoil. Finally he and his disciples were released and he went to Lisbon in 1687.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Fr. Louis de Mellow (1687 – 1691)**

Fr. Antony de Mellow succeeded Fr. Britto in 1687. He worked in Kandalur. When Fr. de Mellow was working there, everything in the country was in disorder and there was civil war. He worked in the Christian community in Marava. So he was arrested by the Kilavar Setupathis' soldiers and was put in jail for 15 days. Fr. Rogerd' Andrew, Superior released Fr. de Mellow with the help of Mangammal the ruler of Madurai. He went away and died in Avur in 1691 Feb 4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>16</sup>

### **4. Fr. Britto is re-entry into Marava country**

After the death of Fr. De Mellow Fr. Britto again came back to Marava Nadu in 1691 at Muniur. Fr. Britto continued works without publicity. This news reached the ears of Setupathi and his new Minister Murugappillai. The reappearance of the Christian Sannyasi in his kingdom infuriated the Sethupati.

Thadiya Thevar was the poligar of a petty kingdom called Siruvalli. The man was very rich and influential in the Sethupathi's court. But he was suffering from a deadly disease. Siluvai Nakker the catchist sent by Fr. Britto cured the disease of Tadiya Tevar. So he wanted to meet the Sunyasi himself, and receive baptism. But he had five wives. According to the Christian principle one man may have only one wife. So Tadiya Tevar dismissed all except the first wife. Kathali who happened to be one of the other wives of Tadiya Tevar, complained very bitterly to her uncle Kilavan Setupathi. He took this matter into his hand and wanted to put an end to all this matter.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly Fr. Britto was beheaded at Oriyur in 1693, Feb 4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>18</sup> I had the pleasure of meeting one of the descendents [S.Kaliyammal, W/O Subramani, belong to Pallar caste] of Perumal who had the responsibility of beheading St. John De Britto on Feb 4<sup>th</sup> 1693. Perumal was partially blind, and was not

happy to ill-treat Fr. Britto. But Fr. Britto encouraged him saying that it was only his duty to do so. It was reported that blood from Arulanadar's neck fell on his eye and he was given his eyesight and so every Wednesday he used to come to the spot of Fr. Britto's martyrdom, to pray and thank Fr. Britto thus it was a Hindu who actually started the devotion to Fr. Britto at Oriyur.<sup>19</sup> Local tradition claims that St. Britto passed through the village of Kurmilangudi in his last journey to Oriyur from Ramnad. The village of Kurmilangudi was converted to the faith very soon after the Saint's martyrdom.<sup>20</sup> Now Dalits and Dobhi Christians are still to be found there.<sup>21</sup> The Christians of Oriyur begin only from 1693 when St. Britto was Martyred there but soon after the Martyrdom it became a sacred spot. Pilgrims started to flock there and pray to the holy martyr. Now Dalits Christians are to be found there.<sup>22</sup>

### **5. Fr. Francis Laynez (1693 – 94)**

After the death of Fr. Britto, Fr. Francis Laynez came into Marava, in 1693 during the period of Kilavan Sethupathi. He baptized 400 catechumens. He was made superior in 1691 the conversions increased in Marava. In 1694 he baptized 9000 catechumens in Marava. In 1700 he baptized 500 gentiles in Arantangi with the permission of the prince of Arantangi. Now vellalars, kallars, chetteeyars, dalits, and other castes are still to be found there. In 1701 there were 4725 Christians in Marava. He baptized 300 to 400 catechumens in a single day. He converted many thousands to Christianity in Marava. He confirmed 23,000 catholics many of whom were from the Marava. So he was arrested in 1704 by the Kilavan Setupathi. But by the intervention of the Raja of Tanjore, the missionary and his companions were released. In 1704 he was sent to Rome. He worked in Bengal for 5 yrs. And he died in Bandal near Hugli in 1715.<sup>23</sup>

### **6. Fr. Xavier Maria Borghese (1704 – 1708)**

Fr. Borghese came into Marava during the period of Kilavan Setupathi in 1704. He baptized 2340 persons in Marava. He was transferred to Vadakenkulam on account of ill health. He died in 1708.

### **7. Fr. Peter Martin (1708 – 11)**

Fr. Peter Martin came into Marava during the period of Kilavan setupathi in 1708. In 1708 Fr. Peter Martin arrived with his catechist Sathiyanaatha Pillai at Sarugani. He converted 20 Maravar Christians there. In 1708 he baptized 300 persons in Marava. In 1709 he baptized 4000 persons in Marava alone. During his period Vijayan Setupathi succeeded Kilavan Setupathi in 1710. From the beginning he was favourable to

Christians. But he turned against Christianity because of the conversion of his brother-in-law Tiruvallu Devan and his solidiers. Fr. Martin built a church at Arantangi with permission of the prince of Arantangi. He stayed at Sarugani and surrounding converted nearly 20 Maravas. But his health impaired. He became dizzy and began to vomit so he was sent to Vadugarpatti a less laborious mission station. He was replaced by Fr. Cappelli in 1712.

#### 8. Fr. Cappelli (1712 – 1715)

Fr. Cappelli entered into Marava during the period of Vijayan Setupathi in 1712. He had joined Madurai Mission in 1711. He worked and built a church in the name of St. Francis Xavier in Kalukar Kodai in 1711. He baptised 608 persons in Uttampuram. Vijayan Setupathi ordered the Christians who refused the worship of Hindu Gods to have their nose, ears and fingers cut away. He wanted to meet Setupathi and convinced him to stop the persecution but his Superior prevented him. So he went outside of the Marava. The health of Fr. Cappelli deteriorated. So Fr. Joseph Vieyara was sent to look after the health of Fr. Cappelli. Although Fr. Cappelli improved in health he was persuaded to take native medicine. But the medicine man put poison into the medicine as desired by the local enemy. His health took a turn for the worse, and he soon died, in 1715. After him the missionaries, in charge of the Marava region could not move about the country as persecution was raging everywhere. Only the catechists went round preaching the gospel. Those persecutions went on till 1730.<sup>24</sup>

#### 9. St. Fr. James de Rossi (1736 – 1774)

In 1736 Fr. Rossi came to Sarugani and continued the evangelization work during the period of Kattaya Tevar. He was also known as “Sinna Savariyar” as his zeal was similar to that of St. Francis Xavier for the people of Marava. He took up residence in Sarugani. In a hut for himself. Now Vellalar, Chetteeyar, Nadar, and Dailt chritions are still to be found there. In the middle of rivers, wild animals, and thick forests. The people responded by coming to him in these difficult circumstances for their spiritual needs and took part in the festivals. The converts of Fr. Britto also joined these groups.

Kattaya Tevar was favourable to Christianity because Fr. Bertoldi had predicted a few years back that he would ascend the throne of Ramnad. So Kattaya Tevar received, Fr. Bertoldi with great honour. At this time there were 25,000 Catholics in Marava. He baptised 876 adults and 2032 children.

The days of Kattaya Tevar were indeed a glorious chapter in the annals of the Marava

Christians. Fr. Rossi founded strong Christian centres at Suranam and Sarugani. Pallars were converted to Christianity in Suranam. He did 650 miracles in the name Fr. Xavier, Fr. Britto, Mary etc. Fr Rossi was then evangelizing the Marava and ministering to the Udayar Christians who come from the Tanjore region newly.<sup>25</sup>

In 1745 he baptized 630 adults and 1356 children. In 1746 he baptized 773 adults and 204 children. In 1747 he baptized 557 adults and 1732 children; in 1748 he baptized 260 adults and 653 children. In 1749 he baptized 443 adults and 1024 children. He converted not only low caste people, but also the high caste and the royal princes. He converted Udaya devan the prince of Marava.<sup>26</sup> He died in 1774 in Sarugani. He was the last missionary in old Madurai mission.

Even after the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, there were increasing numbers of Christians in Marava. The zealous catechists were fully involved in the mission work. In 1780 there were 35,000 Catholics in Marava.<sup>27</sup>

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