

2014

ISSN 2278-5655

Aarhat Multidisciplinary International Education Research Journal (AMIERJ)

(Bi-Monthly)

Peer-Reviewed Journal

Impact factor:0.948

Aug-Sep Issues

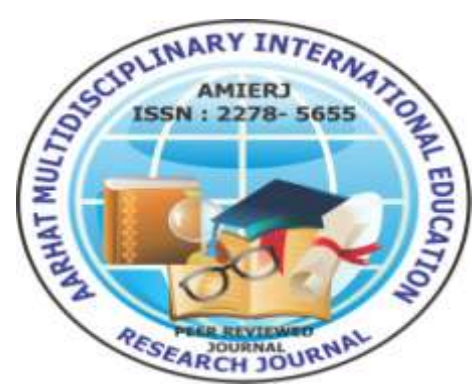
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Ubale Amol Baban

PEER-REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL



[Editorial/Head Office: 108, Gokuldharm Society, Dr.Ambedkar chowk, Near
TV Towar,Badlapur, MSief



JESUITS IN MARAVA COUNTRY A GLANCE

Social Work

R. Rathiga, Research Scholar

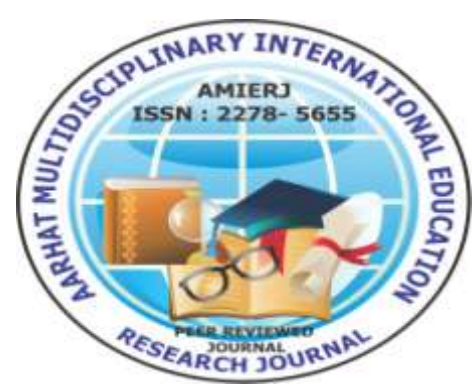
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According to oral tradition among Tamil Christians also backed up by Christian missionary organizations, the earliest Tamil converts to Christianity can be traced to the 1st century when the apostle Saint Thomas visited South India. St .Thomas established a settlement of Christians baptized by him at Mylapore [the Portuguese meliapore] in modern Chennai which led to the place being known as Santhome. St .Thomas mount in Chennai, the place where St.Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ, was believed to have been martyred is an important pilgrimage site for Indian Christians. Although Christianity came to Tamil Nadu from the time of Saint Thomas the Apostle, the revival of Christianity dates back to Francis Xavier. Because of the perseverance and hard work of the missionaries, many Tamilians have become Christians, who are the second largest in number after the Christians in Kerala.¹

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 Sep. 27, with the approval of the 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. And at once devoted himself to the reformation of the nominal Christians whom he found there. After changing the face of Goa' he came down to the South along the coast of Travancori and Cape Comorin.² St.Francis Xavier , followed his own method and helped the Paravas of the Fishery Coast in spite of the political turmoil that prevailed there. Francis Xavier converted about 20,000 Paravas, besides the Kadeyars and Mucovers.³ 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. . Till 1601, the Jesuits Society had only one Province in India, at Goa. It was only in 1601 that a separate Province for the South was established, called the Malabar Province, of which Cochin served as the headquarter⁴. Roman Catholicism was introduced by the Portuguese through the Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century.

A century earlier, Fr. Robert de Nobili; came to Madurai and started the Madurai Mission in 1606.⁵ He learned Tamil very well. He was a scholar in Sanskrit and Telugu also. On the whole he has written more than 52 books in theology and philosophy. Some of his books are Athuma Nivaranam, Agnana Nivaranam, life of our Lady, life of Christ and Thattuva kannadi etc. He is rightly called by the people "Thattuva Pothakar". Before his missionary activities people had a wrong notion that Christianity was a religion of low caste people only. The Portuguese Missionaries who came before Nobili without knowing the social distinction or customs moved very freely with the low castes, especially with Adi Dravidas who were considered untouchables. These Adi Dravidas were forbidden to live with other people as they were the servants for the caste people. Since the Portuguese had contacts with them they were also considered vile, base and loathsome. The Portuguese entered the church with shoes, which was not liked by the Indians. The Portuguese were beef-eaters which was repugnant to them. Because of these reasons the Missionaries were considered paranghis , which was the most abominable word in those days. But Fr. Nobili 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 87 Bhramins and many more Nayakars converted themselves to Christianity in 1607 –11.⁶ After Fr.Nobili Fr. Provenza continued his evangelization work in Madurai Mission.

[I]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.⁷ He was born of Nobel parents at Remella in Portugal in 1626. He went to study at the Euora University. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1644. He came to Goa in 1647. He served the mission in various capacities to everybody's satisfaction. He was respected and loved by all He joined in Madurai Mission in 1653. He was also member of Pandaraswamy group. So he was called Pandarswamy.⁸ He entered the Marava in 1663 during the period of Raghunatha Setupathi. He became its superior in Madurai Mission in 1665. His ambition was to preach the gospel to the poorest among the poor. Raghunatha Setupathi allowed Fr. Provenza to do so freely in his kingdom. They were ready to accept , the Gospel , because the Good news offered them peace of mind and some relief to their economic sufferings. Soon there were some 250. Christians there. Remarkable among these converts were two brothers Mudiappan and Arulappan. Arulappan cured the Setupathi of a dangerous tumor and a certain army captain

The political arrest which followed badly affected the Christian community of Marava so he went outside. He worked in Tiruchirappalli Marava, Changapati and Tottiam etc. He died in Tottiam in 1666. ⁹ No missionary had gone to the Marava country for 18years because of the terrible persecution of 1669. After Fr. Provenza there was nobody who had lived and preached Christianity in Marava land till Fr. John de Britto. During this time the spritual needs where met by the Fathers working in Mullaipadi, Avur and Kandalur, who had baptized groups of the Kallars and Nadars who lived in the region of Pudukkottai , Devakottai, Thirupur. In the



absence of the Jesuits the zealous catechists continued the missionary work in the country till 1686.¹⁰

John De Britto was born in Lisbon on the first of March 1647, in an aristocratic family, like Fr. Robert De Nobili.¹¹ When he was eleven years old he fell ill beyond recovery, but by the intercession of St. Francis Xavier he was cured. In gratitude, John decided to join the Society of Jesus. Accordingly, he joined the society in 1662 as a Novice in spite of many oppositions.¹² After he became a priest. During the course of his formation he desired to be a missionary in India like St. Francis Xavier and so he sought the required permission of the Superior General of the Society of Jesus and he got it. Then he met Fr. Balthazar da Costa, a Portuguese, who came from India to recruit men to gather the whitening harvest in the Madurai mission field. John was the first one to offer his services.

On March 25th, 1673 Seventeen Jesuits, seven priests, nine Scholastics and one Lay-brother, sailed from Lisbon for India. After a long journey of six months they reached Goa on the 4th September 1673. On account of the fatigue, lack of ventilation, inadequate sanitation and overcrowding, only four priests and four scholastics survived, others became the victims of charity¹³.

After their sojourn at Goa, the missionaries came to Ambalakat by boat in 1674.¹⁴ In the meantime John began to adopt all the Tamil customs of wearing and usage, That is he made himself all things to all in order to win all to Christ.¹⁵ Fr. John Tamilised his name as 'Arulanandam' and he is called Arulanandaswamy.¹⁶ Fr. Britto entered the Madurai Mission in 1674. Imitating his predecessors, he Indian On March 25th, 1673 Seventeen Jesuits, seven priests, nine Scholastics and one Lay-brother, sailed from Lisbon for India. After a long journey of six months they reached Goa on the 4th September 1673. On account of the fatigue, lack of ventilation, inadequate sanitation and overcrowding, only four priests and four scholastics survived, others became the victims of charity¹³.



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At the beginning of the year 1681, Fr. Britto was in the kingdom of Gingi (Kuttur) where he remained till Lent and celebrated the feast of Easter. It was at this time that Christians came in largest numbers. Then he left for Cholamandalam in the kingdom of Tanjore. He remained in the thickest parts of the jungle or even in the houses of the Christians and administered them as well as he could. But as he could not do everything, his greatest sorrow was to see many dying without the last sacraments as they had no one to help them. To meet this great danger to which souls were exposed, more men were required and as they did not have them, he was afraid that this mission may not flourish. In that year he baptised about 680 gentiles.¹⁸

At the beginning of 1683, Fr. Britto was at the extreme south of the kingdom of Tanjore , on the frontiers of Marava , in the province of Cape Kalimere. There he administered sacraments to many, assisted the dying, and baptized all those he found sufficiently instructed by the catechists whom he had posted in that province.¹⁹ but also in the neighbouring regions, it pleased God to turn it to the credit of our religion.²⁰ As soon as the affairs of Tanjore district were settled and peace was restored to the Christians, Fr. Britto devoted his attention to the conversion of Marava Kingdom.²¹ The Christians had to go to Mullipadi to receive the sacraments and fulfill their paschal duties. But on account of the wars between the Sethupathi of Ramnad and the Nayak of Madurai, the Marava Christians found it impossible to go to Mullipadi. The only other place they could go to without much inconvenience was Karayampatt.²² Karayampatty in known



as Kadinavayal and there a church of St. John de Britto. This church is a memorial of St. Britto's missionary activities at Kadinavayal and its surrounding areas.²³ Arulanandar liked the Maravars for their courage and straight forwardness.

On May 5, 1686 he crossed the frontier at a place called Panangudi near Kalaiyarkoil and entered the Marava Kindom.²⁴ Now Kallar people were living there.²⁵ To help him in his missionary work he had trained six catechists are Suran[belonged to Vellalar caste], Siluvai Nayak [belonged to Nayaker caste], Kanakappan [belonged to Vellalar caste], Sathiyathan [Vanniyar caste] ,Nallathamby and Arulappan[Dalits]. He baptized 4000 catechumens in Vallamudugarpatti, certain part of Nanakudi region;²⁶ now Kallars, Dalits are still to be found there in Nanakudi(Near Devakottai)²⁷ Fr. Britto sacraments and converted a good number of people.²⁸ Now Dalits, Udayars, Yadhavars, and Christians lived there²⁹ . Arulanandar and disciples together with the faithful of Thokkanendal, Anakruai and Serthur celebrated Holy mass in St.Mary Magolelene's church near Vellankulam.

Kumara Pillai gave inhuman torture to Fr. Britto and his disciples. Finally the prisoners were taken to Kalaiyarkoil. They were shut up in a small temple Kumara Pillai got everything ready for the execution but an urgent letter came from the Setupathi asking Kumara Pillai to postpone all engagements, and proceed to the capital at once. Four days they were taken to Ramanathapuram and the Kilavan Setupathi enquired of him about his teaching in the court. Finally he and his disciples were released . And he went to Lisbon in 1687.³⁰

iii. 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 war. He worked in the Christian community in Marava. So he was arrested by the Kilavar Setupathis soldiers and put into jail for 15 days. Fr. Rogerd' Abrew Superior got released Fr. de Mellow with the help of Mangammal the ruler of Madurai . He went away and died in Avur in 1691 Feb 4th.³¹



Fr. Britto re-entry into Marava country

After the death of Fr. De Mellow Fr. Britto again came back to Marava in 1691 at Muniur. When the Christians heard that a priest had come to their village they were over Joy and flocked to him for instructions and to receive the sacraments. In 1692 the conversions of Marava and Agambadaiyars also increased. Fr. Britto severe persecutions Jesuits 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.³²

Thadiya Thevar was the poligars of a petty kingdom called Siruvalli.³³ The man was very rich and influential in the Sethupatis court and he was first taken to Hanumanthakudi and from there to Ramnad.³⁴ According to local tradition, on the way at Nelmeni, Arulanandar was thirsty. Then and there a spring arose there. Even today it exists and they call it Pacham Thangi Urani.³⁵ On January 29, 1693, Arulanandar was taken from Ramnad to Oriyur through Uppur, Pudumadam, Thondi, Kurumilankudi and Pullur. He had to walk the sixty-four kilometers in the hot sun, fifteen soldiers escorting him all the while. Whenever they marched he too marched; whenever they stopped he too did so.³⁶ the villagers even today and they testify to the fact that they have not experienced a famine ever since.³⁷ this village an old inhabitant pointed to a place where a huge tree had once stood under whose shade Arulanandar had rested and quenched his thirst.³⁸ he was taken from the prison of Oriyur. 3rd February 1693.³⁹

Fr. Britto was beheaded at Oriyur in 1693, Feb 4th.⁴⁰ The local tradition claims that St. Britto passed through the village of Karmilangudi in his last journey to Oriyur from Ramnad. The village of Karmilangudi was converted to the faith very soon after the Saint's martyrdom.⁴¹ Now Dalits and Dothi Christians are still to be found there.⁴² The Christians of Oriyur begins only from 1693 when St. Britto was Martyrdom there but soon after the Martyrdom it became a scared spot pilgrims started to flock there and pray to the holy martyred. Fr. Rossi built a church, in a present structure, with its Portuguese style in 1770. For the same reason that the martyr was not yet declared "Blessed" the missionary dedicated it to St. Francis Xavier. That title was



changed however in 1852 when Fr. Britto was beautified and it became the chapel of Fr . John de Britto. Around that year the mud chapel was transformed into a fine brick construction it is in good repair even now. Later there was built another church in 1947. After Fr. Britto was declared a Saint.⁴³

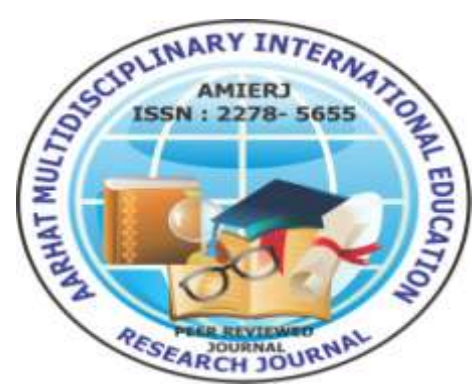
(iv) Fr. Francis Laynez (1693 – 94)

After the death of Fr. Britto , Fr. Francis Laynez came into Marava , in 1693 during the period of Kilavan Sethupathi. He was born in his born in 1656. He came to India in 1681. He joined Madurai Mission in 1683. He worked in Kattur and Menara. 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. 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 was ordained Bishop of Mylapore in Lisbon in 1708. He returned to India in 1710. He visited Bandal, Kolkatta Takka and Chittagong. He worked in Bengal for 5 yrs. And he died in Bandal near Hugli in 1715.

(v) 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.

(vi) 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. 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 Tiruvalu Devan and his soldiers. Fr. Martin built a church at Arantangi with permission of the prince of Arantangi. He stayed at Sarugani and around the areas converted nearly 20 Maravas. Ambalakaras around Ponnalikkottai. Vijayan Setupathi imprisoned Fr. Peter Martin and his catechists in the jail of Kalaiyarkoil. After 2 months he released and banished him in 1711. He became dizzy and began to vomit so he was sent to Vadugarpatti a less laborious station. He was replaced by Fr. Cappelli in 1712.

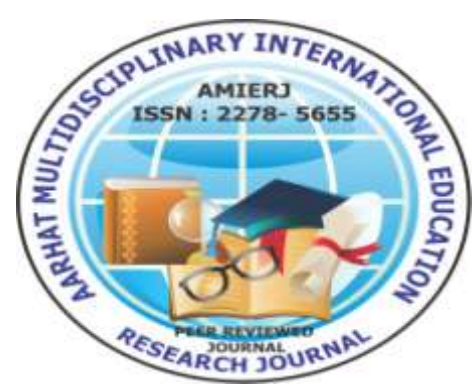
(vii) Fr. Cappelli (1712 – 1715)

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 Uttamapuram. 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. 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 1730.⁴⁴

(viii) St. Fr. James de Rossi (1736 – 1774)

Fr. James de Rossi was born in Italy in 1701. He entered the Noviciate in 1721. He came to India eager to serve in the Madurai Mission. 1734 he came from Goa to Cochin. Then he went to Ambalakadu and prepared himself studying Tamil, in order to work in Marava country.

Rossi's works in Marava land.



From Ambalakadu he went to Thoppur to meet the Superior of the Jesuits and to obtain permission to work in Maravaland. From there he went to Maravaland through Thuthugudi and Manapadu in 1736. In this time the Christians were in trouble due to persecutions, accusations and attacks. In the vast area of the Maravaland. Fr. Rossi's tomb, erected into a chapel like monument, became a place of pilgrimage to which Christians and non-Christians alike flock to venerate their father in the faith and pray for favours. He was the last missionary in old Madurai mission.⁴⁸ Even after the suppression of the society of Jesus in 1773, there were increasing number of Christians in Marava. The zealous catechists were fully involved in the mission work. In 1780 there were 35,000 Catholics in Marava.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Marava was mostly inhabited by Dalits. These were low caste and out caste. They were oppressed by the higher caste and the rulers. Who were often at war with one another? Besides this they were famine droughts floods and contagious diseases. In this situation Jesuits come to preach a new Order of Society. There will be no caste, no oppression and rich will share the goods with the poor. There will be peace on earth and after this life. There will be rewarded for the good people with eternal life with God. This was attractive to the people in general and many. Therefore the Missionary and Christians were persecuted. So Fr. Britto as a leading Jesuit Missionary was persecuted. Then he was warned and sends out of Marava land. He went to Portugal and came back to the Marava land and he did miracle of healing Tadiya Tevar, Who was a Polygamist, on conversion he put away his junior wives who complained to the Raja, so he was arrested and put to death at Oriyur. But conversions continued under other missionaries in the face of severe persecution. The Organization of the church under the hierarchical system of the Catholic Church was and is now also able to face persecution and still grow. 'The blood of martyrs is the seeds of the Christianity.'

End Notes:



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8. M. Arumaraj, Seventeenth century Tamilagam as gleaned from Jesuit letters, Trichy, 2002, P.318.
9. The Annual letter of Fr. De Provenza 1663 – 65.
10. Ramanathapuram District Gazetteers, P.92
11. S.Rajamanickam, The First Oriental Scholar, Madras, 1972, P.10
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13. He was the sole heir to one of the noblest families of Portugal. Moreover the royal family also objected on his health grounds.
14. Ambalakat was very close to Calicut. There was a newly established seminary for the Indian Jesuits. Printing of Tamil books was undertaken there.
15. I. Cor.9 : 23, ‘Omibus factus sum ut omnes Christo Lucrificaciam’.
16. It was a newly established Jesuit residence in the old Madurai Mission , situated about 10 miles from the Bay of Bengal.



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23. Interview P. Joseph M,A B.ET, Muppaiyur, 12.02.2012
24. P. Joseph M,A B.ET, Anand Gangai Thutoo; Malar 5 ; Sep. 2011; P.
25. Interview with Fr. Marivalan, Parish Priest of Oryiur, 12.3.2010.
- 26.P. Joseph M,A B.ET, Anand Gangai Thutoo; Malar 5 ; Sep. 2011; P.
27. Interview with Fr. Marivalan, Parish Priest of Oryiur, 12.3.2010.
- 28.P. Joseph M,A B.ET, Anand Gangai Thutoo; Malar 5 ; Sep. 2011; P.
29. Interview with Fr. Marivalan, Parish Priest of Oryiur, 12.3.2010.
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34. P. Joseph M,A B.ET, Anand Gangai Thutoo; Malar 6 ; Jan. 2012, P.



35. Interview P. Joseph M,A B.ET, Muppaiyur, 12.02.2012.
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**Aarhat Multidisciplinary International Education
Research Journal (AMIERJ) (Bi-Monthly)**

Peer-Reviewed Journal Vol No III Issues IV

AUG -SEP 2014

ISSN 2278-5655

