



## CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES TO THE UPLIFTMENT OF DALITS IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT FROM 1956 TO 2000

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### Abstract:

Christianity had found its way into India in the very early years of Christian era, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Regarding the origin of Christianity in India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had noticed that "you may be surprised to learn that Christianity came to India long before it went to England or Western Europe, and when even in Rome, it was despised and proscribed sect. Within 100 years or so of the death of Jesus Christ, Christian Missionaries came to South India by sea. They were received with courtesy and permitted to preach their new faith. They took advantage of the situations prevailed in the state and converted a large number of people, and their descendants had lived there with varying fortunes, to this day. Most of them belong to the old Christian sects which have ceased to exist in Europe."<sup>1</sup>

In South India, St. Thomas, an Apostle of Jesus Christ was the pioneer- in preaching Christian faith and established seven and a half Christian communities.<sup>2</sup> They are established on the west coast from Chavakkadu in the north to Thiruvithamcodu in the south.<sup>3</sup> The *establishment of these churches* had a major role on converting the native Hindus towards the Christian fold. The seven churches are located in the various parts of the present Kerala state namely Maliankara, Palayoor, Kottakavu, Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Quilon and Nilackal.<sup>4</sup> The church established in Thiruvithancode in present Kanyakumari district is accorded to the status of a half church or Ezharapalli. According to tradition, the apostle St.Thomas died as a Martyr at Mylapore in Madras.<sup>5</sup> Even though churches were established in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD., the social structure of the society arrested the adoption of the new faith and only limited persons adopted Christianity.

### Introduction of Christianity in Modern India:

The introduction and spread of Christianity in modern India is closely tied up with the history of her colonization by the western power that originally came to India for trade. The discovery of new sea route to India by the Portuguese traveller in 1498 paved the way for the western nations to establish their colonies in India in the pretence of trade. Even though they came to India for trade and commerce purpose, they had the motive of spreading Christian faith also.<sup>6</sup>

In 1510, friars and monks were sent out from Portugal for the spiritual welfare of the trading company's servants. Churches and monasteries appeared and the Portuguese soldiers were about terrorizing into baptism, people who knew nothing of Christianity. The cultured class turned away from it and the others accepted it either out of fear or motives of material gain. Christianity came to be contemptuously referred to as the Parangi religion of the Franks, the term used to denote especially the Portuguese, and also any kind of European.<sup>7</sup> In due course of time, most of the European countries, which came to India for trade and commerce purpose brought and favored their native missionaries to work in India. These missionaries with the help of their administrators and the reputed schools of the district. Priority for job opportunities was provided to the people of Dalit community in their educational institutions and other sectors. Their contributions to the upliftment of the Dalit community in Kanyakumari district is notable.

In addition to these churches various other independent churches blossomed out in the later half of the 20 century. Many churches concentrated on the depressed class people and achieved their target. Among them The Pentecostal Mission and Ceylon Pentecostal mission, The Baptist Church are the most important one. They are fully dedicated for the development of the downtrodden people.

### Role of Christian Associations:

In providing welfare measures for the Dalits, the Christian associations had a major role. From the initial stages it used all the loop holes to uplift the Dalit community. The State Christian Association as well as the District Christian Associations had a similar role in uplifting them. In the conference of Christian leaders of all parties of Tamilnadu in 1966, the joint council appealed to all political parties and government to eradicate the various handicaps suffered by the Dalit communities.<sup>8</sup> It noticed that the Christian churches and its adherents made a valuable contribution to the medical, educational, social and cultural progress of the country through numerous institutions from which millions of citizens have derived benefits irrespective of castes and creed.<sup>9</sup> It mentioned that the Christian converts the Harijan and Backward communities by way of loosing educational concessions and other monetary facilities (housing grants, loans) which, but for the conversion they are eligible for. It recommended to the Madras and other state governments to grant such educational and other concessions only on the basis of poverty and economic distress and not based solely on religion or caste

especially in secular state like ours. They met the then Chief Minister of the state and explained the need of extending concessions to the Christian converts of Scheduled Castes. Same idea was expressed by the then chief minister of Madras State Shri. Kamaraj. He stated that 'either Christian or Hindu, the problem are the same. Solution should be brought to the Harijans in national level'. By stressing the same concept, the Joint council of Catholic Association, Madras also submitted petitions to the state government.<sup>10</sup> The following resolutions has been taken in the meeting and submitted to the government.

'This conference of Christians brings to the notice of Government that, the matter of granting concessions to the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Backward Communities, discrimination is shown against those belonging to the Christian religion and considers that this is not only against the basic principles of a secular state, but also offends the great Indian constitution which in its preamble and under Article 15 seeks to protect every citizen from all discriminations. This representative conference affirms that all aid and facilities given to all backward communities including the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes should be only on need.<sup>11</sup> So by mounting pressure, the congress party expressed its view on the interview with the congress president K. Kamaraj by the Madras Christians.

The deputation represented the following points.

- ✓ Harijans and Backward communities should not be shown any discrimination in regard to government aids and concessions on conversion to Christianity
- ✓ All India congress panel to be constituted to go into the grievances of Harijans, Backward Communities, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims, should also hear the grievances of Christian community.
- ✓ The congress should adopt as many Christians as possible in their party as their candidates in the coming general election.

The congress president affirmed repeatedly that so far as Harijans were concerned, he should see that all concessions and aids to which the Hindu Harijans are now entitled, will be extended to converts of other religion also in Madras state in the first instance.<sup>12</sup> In respect of the other states, Hindu Harijan converted to Buddhism and other religions will also be recommended by him for the grant of such concessions as on all - India basis. Similarly various political parties also urged the government to enlist the Christian converts from the Scheduled Castes as a member of Scheduled Castes and provide all concessions. The municipal councillors of Thoothukudi region wrote a letter to the then Chief Minister of Madras state Shri. Bhaktavatsalam stating that, although the Indian constitution guarantees that there shall be no discrimination on the grounds of religion and notwithstanding, many representations made in this regard by the Christian organizations and Christian leaders, it is unfortunate in deed that Christians of Scheduled Castes, Most Backward Classes are not being given same concessions as Hindus belonging to these classes. It also noticed that through a memorandum in the year 1957, the people of "Paravan" community were classified as 'Scheduled Castes'.<sup>13</sup> But no effect was given to this government order which was eventually suspended by another order in the same year which reclassified and upgraded 'Paravans as Most Backward Class'. But incidentally, the Christian Paravans of Kanyakumari district continue to receive the same benefits at least as Hindu Backward class.<sup>14</sup> So the joint council repeatedly stressed the government to provide concessions on the basis of economic stability and not on the basis of religion.

#### **Kottar Social Service Society:**

Besides, the role of non governmental organizations are noteworthy in promoting the interests of the Dalits. The efforts of NGO's are benefitted to the Dalits in one way or the other. Kottar Social Service Society is prominent among the NGO's in Kanyakumari district. As a part of their service and to uplift the downtrodden people this society was established. Most of the job opportunity that arises on this society was provided to the members of the church only. It was formed on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1972 by the Catholic Diocese of Chagnassery.<sup>15</sup> It was administered by the administrative committee of Zero Malabar Catholic Church. The then Arch Bishop Rev. Mathew Kavakattu took the initiative of establishing the society and he acted as the first president of the society.<sup>16</sup> The enthusiastic support and constant involvement of the members of the church and the officials of the diocese made the establishment a great success. The aim of establishing the concern is to perform works relating the charity for those who are in need, irrespective of caste, creed and community. Moreover they aimed for the improvement of living condition of farmers and labourers irrespective, of their occupation. Even though it undertakes welfare measures and developmental, programmes for sections of the society, the main concentration was laid on the upliftment of Dalits.<sup>17</sup> Dalit Developmental Programme was an important measure adopted by these organizations to uplift the said communities. This programme came into existence in the year 1992.<sup>18</sup> In their concern, the Dalits are the most unfortunate fellowmen who were subjected to all discriminations. They want to raise them from the utter poverty and save their breather from the social discrimination. Even though it was the time changes began to take place in the society, many leading personalities hesitated to involve directly in promoting Dalit welfare on the fear of social setup.<sup>19</sup> But the society took very effective measures for promoting the welfare of the downtrodden people. Their main objectives are

- ✓ To organise and federate the Dalits
- ✓ To promote Dalit leadership
- ✓ To create access to small savings and credit facilities
- ✓ To accelerate their socio-economic development
- ✓ To establish linkage with other groups
- ✓ To raise their social status
- ✓ Organising the target people at village level;
- ✓ Federating them at the block level
- ✓ Awareness education and joint action
- ✓ Training to trainers, leaders and members
- ✓ Promotion of thrift and saving
- ✓ Promoting a youth wing of the target people
- ✓ Availing government facilities for development
- ✓ Availing easy access to credit facilities
- ✓ Availing welfare measures from different donors
- ✓ Financial assistance for basic and higher education

The most important activity of the KSSS is the implementation of “Save a Family Plan Scheme” with the association of HDFC Housing loan section through which houses were constructed for the poor homeless Dalits. ‘Dalit Women Education and “empowerment Programme’ (Dweep) is another important developmental schema initiated by the ‘Palmaryah Workers Developmental Society’ in the year 1999 with the financial assistance of a German agency named ‘World Day of Prayer’. The motivation behind the scheme was to enhance the women among Dalit community in the socio economic fields. This programme was brought to end in the year 2003. Similarly ‘Adivasi Development Initiative’ (ADI) is also an important measure adopted to develop the so called downtrodden community. It addressed the grievances of the Dalits and provided welfare measures for certain extent. Through this programme, concentration was laid on the welfare of the Dalit people, who are residing in the most under developed areas. The volunteers provided free medical aids, arranged loan facilities, provided training classes and various other developmental activities.<sup>20</sup> They created awareness about the possibilities and the governmental measures that are initiated for the betterment of them. With all these measures of government as well as non government organizations and Christian associations, the Dalits in Kanyakumari district attained an unexpected growth and equality prevails among all sections of the society.

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