

# The Laity as the Backbone of Madurai Mission (1673-93)

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## Introduction

The whole Church is missionary and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the people of God.<sup>1</sup> Portugal had such a privileged position in the world as to send missionaries to several countries for the purpose of evangelization in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Those missionaries travelled to far-flung countries so as to proclaim the Word of God regardless of intractable difficulties which they had encountered. In India, the European Jesuits who had been at mission-work in Malabar ever since the sixteenth century, moved with keen interest towards the interior of Tamil region at the dawn of the seventeenth century keeping Madurai as the genesis of their missionary enterprise. The initial settlement of the Portuguese Christians on the outskirts of Madurai and, the migration of Parava Christians from the fishery coast to the inland city of Madurai for trade paved the way for Madurai mission.<sup>2</sup>

The missionaries devised a *modus operandi* in order to sow the seeds of Christianity. The guiding principle was not to exert any force but with firm approach of conviction, making them rooted in the fundamentals of the new religion. Pioneer missionaries like Francis Xavier, Henricus Henriques and others, though not much employed diverse methods like their subsequent missionaries, definitely utilized the native competent people who eventually became their devoted catechists in their missionary expedition, in

an attempt to get assisted in translating the essential Christian tenets.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequent to the mission of Henriques in the second part of the sixteenth century, the ministry of evangelization was not much flourishing in the fishery coast and extending the mission to the interior regions certainly was not thought of. Following the foundation of Madurai Mission by Robert de Nobili, an Italian Jesuit, the missionaries began to adopt certain methods to stabilize it with indigenous resources, so that the mission would eternally perpetuate even without any support of the foreign missionaries in future. In fact, the idea of training the indigenous persons for future evangelization evolved more from the foresight of the great missionary de Nobili who was profoundly convinced that the involvement of natives and their Christian testimony would be more convincing as well fascinating than the Europeans themselves.

In the wake of the mission-stalwarts of the seventeenth century, predominantly like Gonçalo Fernandez, de Nobili, Balthazar da Costa, Antony Proença and Andrew Freyre, John de Britto came to the Tamil region in 1673 to turn his long cherished dreams in to reality.<sup>4</sup> We come to learn from the annual report of Fr. Freyre written in 1676 that the total population of Madurai Mission was about seven million, and the number of Christians was about fifty thousand with nine priests and twenty five catechists working.<sup>5</sup> Fr. Freyre, some time later, took de Britto as his missionary companion to his prior mission station called Colei, the part of the Gingi kingdom where he initiated his apostolic mission.

## **1. Dearth of Missionaries**

The mission was facing a difficult situation in the course of time owing to a shortage of missionaries, so the assistance of the

laity to sustain the mission became imperative. The annual letter of Andrew Freyre written in 1666, spoke of only five missionaries to Madurai Mission. Later, the situation seemed to have a bit improved in the period of de Britto. He wrote that there were thirteen presbyteries of which five had no resident priests. In the succeeding year, the number rose to seven. In 1684 twelve residences were maintained by nine priests.<sup>6</sup> Twenty five catechists assisted them in their missionary activities, serving about sixty churches and chapels excluding those destroyed during the war.<sup>7</sup> In the vast territory of Madurai, those few missionaries were unable to cater to the needs of the neophytes. Hence the missionaries had to heavily depend upon the native resources for its continuity.

## 2. Methods and Ministry of Christians

### 2.1. Institution of Catechists

The ministry of John de Britto, a Portuguese Jesuit, culminated in martyrdom in Marava land, India and thus he became the first saint of his mission country.<sup>8</sup> De Britto, the great missionary worked as *Pândaraswamy* about twenty years in several parts of the Tamil region. He believed that the success of the mission depended on the good will of the laity. As each missionary used to do, he chose the Christians of high standing amidst the non-Christians, who certainly were men of great talents and virtues, for the ministry of evangelization. As there were two categories of missionaries, since de Nobili's time, there were also two classes of catechists known as *Upadésiars* and *Pândarams*, ministering to the high castes and low castes respectively.

The veteran missionary Balthazar da Costa writes: "These catechists are the colleagues whom we call *Pândarams*; this is not something we ourselves have invented; our Fathers have already made excellent use of this method in Japan and elsewhere".<sup>9</sup>

*Upadésiar* is meant for the high caste as he hailed from the upper caste society, and *Pândaram* was for the low caste. Such demarcation was not always rigid in practice. In some cases, both *Upadésiar* and *Pândaram* served to Christian communities, irrespective of caste distinction, with an extraordinary tact and prudence. A low caste *Pândaram* could do so much to the high caste community and a Brahmin *Upadésiar* with his tactful approach was of great help in dealing with the low caste. Another significant method employed to transmit the religion was through the literature of the vernacular. The missionaries realized that if their mission enterprise was not to be lost in future, it should be perpetuated through the publication of their methodologies, apologetics, catechetics, dogmatics, the lives of saints, and devotions.

## 2.2. Different kinds of Ministry

The lay Christians had different roles to play. Some all the time accompanied the missionaries on their journeys assisting them and giving instruction to the neophytes while others took up the responsibility of building up the local community in faith. In the villages, once the missionaries founded a community of neophytes, they first built a small thatched house for prayer or a chapel entrusted to the care of a local Christian, distinguished for his religious fervour and social influence, to take care of the liturgical functions for that particular community. He was to conduct the prayer meetings, teach catechism to the children, prepare the people for the sacrament of confession before Holy Mass, and attend to the sick and dying.

Another group of catechists known as itinerants unattached to any specific community or to a church, were always at the

disposal of the missionaries. They were sent wherever their service was needed. Prior to the arrival of the missionary at a particular place, they used to visit the village in order to give religious instruction to the neophytes. Special techniques were employed for the instructions by way of speeches and songs for making the assembly well disposed to the missionary who would complete it with the liturgical celebrations. A veteran missionary Saulière eulogises them in these words: "These travelling catechists were men of outstanding virtue, who knew and lived their religion. Well-versed in Christian doctrine and local apologetics, they were also familiar with the tenets of the various sects, to which some of them had once belonged, and they knew the weak point of their opponents' armour. Every one of them had his own special gifts; one was a renowned speaker, another poet, a third a famous singer; all those talents were turned to good account in their efforts to spread the Gospel".<sup>10</sup>

As reported in the annual letters, these Christians helped the missionaries in so many ways; they introduced the missionaries to the headmen of the village; they kept them informed of any imminent peril; they alerted them at hard situations; they volunteered to visit the new catechumens and neophytes; they assisted them in revising the census. In places, where there was a shortage of missionaries, the catechists shouldered the responsibility of evangelization.

The Christians were the first teachers of the missionaries concerning the language, traditions and customs coupled with numerous details about it. New missionaries were to go through some kind of training given by the local experts, and these teachers themselves eventually became the devoted disciples of the missionaries in carrying out the mission.

### **3. The Missionary Traits of the Christians**

#### **3.1. Passionate Involvement**

Even missionaries were greatly edified by the dedication and determination of their Christians. The neophytes entirely threw away not only their age-old revered practices but also exhibited a character-change in public life. Less attached, more obedient, and less proud and more considerate, they were looked upon as saints. The missionary Vico writes: "As for the other Christians they are making great progress, and some of them are not only good Christians, but I look upon them as saints, I cannot account otherwise for their courage, their humility, their tears of devotion, their frequent prayers, their inclination to divine things and their great desire to bring others to God. All this gives us great consolation. Most of them go to the sacraments every week or at least every fortnight with fervour and devotion which edify us to such a degree that we consider all our labours, and the persecution we endure well rewarded".<sup>11</sup> They were so loyal to their Christian faith that they were ready to suffer for Christ. Some were absolutely cut off from the rest of the families; their houses were raided and plundered by the police and other forces.<sup>12</sup> Such ordeals did not shake their faith at all.

Together with them, some of the neophytes were passionate in bringing new disciples from the scattered villages to the missionaries. In every situation, they lived a life of sanctity. Extraordinary cures and marvels substantially changed their attitudes which enabled them to become more rooted in their faith. These lay apostles even taught the missionaries by their ardour and courage, ensuring their readiness even to die for the sake of new religion which they had just embraced. Although the majority of the converts undoubtedly came from the depressed sections of

the society, they had the courage and strength to witness to the faith even in the face of hostility and persecution. Some of the catechumens in times of persecution had to pay a heavy price for their new faith but nothing could quiver their faith.

### 3.2. New Way of Life

The non-Christians perceived a complete transformation in the lives of new converts who kept their new manner of life up with great edification. The neophytes began a life of apostolate in the new surroundings. They were regular in devotional practices such as examination of conscience, confession and communion. The non-Christians were struck by the radical change evident in the lives of Christians. Lãito, a missionary, in his letter to his provincial cites an instance. A new catechumen, who had been proud and pompous before his conversion, became humble and modest. And his neighbours were convinced that the religion introduced by *Sanyâsi* had power to transform men.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, these Christians co-operated with the missionaries in the evangelical activities and generously shared in the joys and struggles of their neighbours. The courage and valour with which some of them faced various adversities amazed their contemporaries.

Together with the Christians, the missionaries were fighting against so many social evils like polygamy, practice of *Sati*, untouchability, and unjust cast discriminations. Many of the uneducated were prone to accept superstitions. Physical illnesses were often attributed to evil spirits. The missionaries preached with such spiritual power that the message gave healing and strength to the listeners. The missionaries spent a great deal of time with the people, listening to the stories of their lives, sharing their hardships and encouraging them to shake off their superstitious practices. They were unquestionably men of selfless service.

### 3.3. Witnessing to Christ

The Christians were bold and daring at hard situations. Sometimes because of conversion, Christians were subjected to harassment, humiliation and hardships. Their houses were looted and their chapels were burnt down. Some of the de Britto's disciples namely Arulanandam, Muthappan, Gnanamuthu, Kanagappan, Arulan, Shuran, Sattyananda Chetty and Siluvai Nâyakar<sup>14</sup> underwent all types of persecution beyond description. They were the real heroes of faith.

They were chained and thrown behind the bar but their faith was unshakable. For the sake of the gospel, they endured unspeakable suffering. Death held no terrors for them. Siluvai Nâyakar lost his eyes in the wave of violence. Mariadossan, the son of Siluvai Nâyakar was kept a prisoner with fetters on his feet with his fellow Christians. Kasthuri Panikkar and Arul who, tried to prevent the slaughter of de Britto, had their ears and noses hacked off. John, a Brahmin catechist of de Britto was so much tormented that missionary Fr. Lainez reports as "even the Brahmin catechist did not spare blows and ill-treatment of all kinds, so much so that even today he is not entirely recovered".<sup>15</sup>

Pious activities and popular devotions enabled the Christians to come together as one community of believers. These gatherings helped them to persevere in their faith and to bear witness to Christ. Prescribed prayers were recited every day. On Fridays they had meditation on the passion of Our Lord, on Saturdays on Mother Mary, on Sundays on the given gospel texts. Special prayers were supplemented to the prayers of the Mass. Moreover, they were trained to sing sacred hymns on various occasions: lamentations for funerals, songs of joy for weddings and songs of merriment on festive occasions.

#### 4. The Recruitment and Training

Although they had no formal academic training, they did a marvellous job in the mission field. Indeed, some of them were men of extraordinary talents. As there were not enough printed hand-outs in Tamil, the people used the hand written copies of de Nobili and other manuals composed for the edification of the Christians. Some were good at composing songs in the vernacular. From the annual letters we come to know that the missionaries were extremely happy with the work of those zealous Christians. Filled with apostolic fervour, many of them were the real heroes of faith and the right arm of the missionaries. At that time there were no special institutions as a training-centre for catechists. Nevertheless the missionaries took time and trouble to train them to be effective teachers of religion.

History proved that the ministry of the laity was successful and ever flourishing. Their commitment to the progress of the mission was striking. They were authorised to perform special duties for the benefit of the local congregation to whom they were entrusted and their service to the growing church within the assigned territory was fabulous. They were instrumental in maintaining cordial and harmonious relationship between the missionaries and the people. The general pattern followed was that catechists were the first ones to be sent to a promising village where they spoke with the people about the merits of listening to the missionaries prior to their visits. The missionaries once again sent them to prepare the people for baptism and other sacraments. Had the missionaries come to the villages without the assistance of catechists, the people would have looked askance at them. People were ready to shake off their reservations and prejudices against Europeans. Some of them were assigned to look after a particular settlement or a village during their absence. The teamwork and

involvement of the laity in the work of evangelization was indispensable. Their labours had far-reaching effects. Catechists often functioned as village accountants, chiefs and interpreters and useful advisors to the priests concerning the culture, customs and traditions of the people.

## Conclusion

The reports and letters of the missionaries are the reliable sources of information about the converts in Madurai Mission during various phases of its evolution. The overall number of the Christians by the year 1644 was around four thousand, which in the subsequent period of twenty two years, increased to fifty thousand by the year 1676.

After the arrival of John de Britto, the number of baptisms was still increasing. At the close of the seventeenth century, according to the missionary Fr. Peter Martins, the followers of the Christian religion numbered around one hundred and fifty thousand, with an average of five thousand baptisms every year. Taking into an account of the socio-cultural and political considerations of that milieu, it was an incredible success. The number of Christians increased more and more after the inauguration of the ministry of *Pandaraswamy* and because of the active involvement of the lay Christians. Therefore, if the Mission-story of Madurai is so famous in church history, the credit goes not only to the great missionaries but also to the laity who were the backbone of the Mission.

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### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> PAUL VI, *Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 59, 8 December 1975, in AAS (1976) pp. 1-76. Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity Ad Gentes*, 35: AAS 58 (1966), p. 983.

<sup>2</sup> The territory of the Madurai Mission in the seventeenth century extended over the south-eastern lowlands of the Indian peninsula encompassing the old kingdoms of Madurai, Tanjore, Vellore and Gingi namely the ancient Pândya and Chola kingdoms which are defined by the natural boundary of the river Cauvery, the Western Ghats and the Bay of Bengal.

<sup>3</sup> *Documenta Indica*, vol. I, pp. 579-80; DI, II, pp. 155-156; also Cf. The letter of Henriques to Fr. Simoni Rodriguez and his companions of Portugal, Cochin, January 12, 1551, ARSI, Goa 46, f. 197 and Goa 10 I, f. 195.

<sup>4</sup> G. Boero mentions the two letters of de Britto, how earnestly had he written to his General appealing permission to work at the mission stations in India. He writes: "Gia fin da quando studiava la filosofia in Coimbra, sotto il di 19 novembre 1668, e 5 marzo 1669, aveva scritto due fervorosissime lettere al P. Generale Gianpaolo Oliva, nelle quali, dopo aver contato della sanazion prodigiosa ottenuta per intercessione di S. Francesco Saverio, e dei vivi desideri messigli in cuore, com' egli credeva, dal medesimo santo Apostolo, di dedicarsi interamente alla propagazione della fede, supplicava con umilissime istanze di concedergli la grazia di andare alle Indie, ove sperava, per usar le sue parole, che gli si aprisse una via sicurrissima." Trans. by G. BOERO, *Compendio della Vita, Giovanni De Britto, Martire*, Terza Edizione, Tipografia Monaldi, Roma, 1851. p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> The annual letter of Fr. Freyre to the General, Colei, May 8, 1677. ARSI, Goa 54a, f. 353; A few years later, Fr. Louis de Mello in his annual letter to the General concludes that the number of priests working in the mission was only eight. The annual letter of Fr. Louis de Mello to the General, Madurai, November 11, 1686, ARSI, Goa 54, f. 465.

<sup>6</sup> The primary residences were namely Agaram, Kuthur, Colupatty, Mullipady, Vadugupatty, Anakarai Paleam, Ellamangalam and Kavanakkarai. Those stations were so scattered that it belonged to various kingdoms namely of Andhra Nâyak, the King of Mysore, Ecoji of Tanjore, Sambaji, Prince of Ramnad. The annual letter of de Britto to the General Charles de Noyelle, Madurai, May 9, 1684, ARSI, Goa 54, f. 436.

<sup>7</sup> The annual letter of de Britto to the General Charles de Noyelle, Madurai, May 9, 1684, ARSI, Goa 54, f. 436.

<sup>8</sup> Ioannes de Britto, Sac. Prof. S.I.(Lisboa 1 mar.1647 – Oriur 4 feb.1963), Martyr. Beat. 21 aug. 1853; Breve Beat. 18 maii 1852; Acta Pii IX I, Pars I, 1846-1854, pp. 336-372 – Can. 22 iun. 1947; Bulla Can.; AAS XLI (1949), pp. 128 – 140. Prot.; 224 – Arch : G 14.

<sup>9</sup> The letter of Balthazar da Costa to the Provincial of the Malabar province in 1643, Trichirappally, J. Bertrand, *La Mission du Maduré, d'après des documents inédits, Notions sur L'inde et les Missions*, Paris, 1847, vol. II. P. 318. Fr. Joseph Bertrand who was born in France in 1801, came to India in 1837 and served as the Superior of the New Madurai Mission. He became very sick and went back to France where he published letters *de l'Ancienne Mission du Maduré (4 vols.) and Lettres de la Nouvelle Mission du Maduré (2 vols.)*.

<sup>10</sup> A. Saulière, *His Star in the East, Robert de Nobili S.J.* (1656), RAJAMANICKAM, S (revised and re-edited), Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1995, p.429.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Letter of Vico to the Provincial Laerzio, Madurai, September 26, 1611, ARSI. Trans. by A. Saulière, *His Star in the East*, pp. 197-198.

<sup>12</sup> The Letter of Nobili to the Provincial Laerzio, Madurai, October 25, 1608, ARSI, Goa 54a.

<sup>13</sup> The letter of Lãito to the Provincial Laerzio, Madurai, September 25, 1609, ARSI.

<sup>14</sup> Siluvai Nâyakar was related to the renowned Thirumalai, the Nâyak or Rajâ of Madurai. The family is well distinguished for its Catholicism. At least twelve of its members, eight of whom were Jesuits, have devoted their lives either as priests or as lay- brothers to the service of the church. Father John Mariathas, a lineal descendant of Siluvai Nâyakar who was stationed at Idaikatur in the Ramnad District, said that tradition in his family maintained that, after De Britto had returned to Marava in 1692, Siluvai Nâyakar had prepared several thousands for baptism who were admitted into the church by him. About this time, Siluvai Nâyakar became blind and lived at Avur. De Britto visited him once. His son, Mariadossan, carried on his work as catechist later. With De Britto, Siluvai Nâyakar had been cast into prison in Ramnad. Cf. H. DOERING, *From Royal Page to Martyr: The Blessed John de Britto 1647 - 1693*, Bombay: B.X. Furtado, 1933, p.117.

<sup>15</sup> The letter of Fr. Lainez to the General Thyrus Gonzales dated July 22, 1693, ARSI.