INTRODUCTION

The spirituality of St. John Baptist De La Salle is inseparable from his unique spiritual experience. He thought of his life, as a passionate dialogue and a struggle with the living God who had been part of history for the sake of the world. John De La Salle himself underwent a spiritual awakening when he was thirty years old. The moment proved climatic with God’s spirit directing him to undertake a special mission. The task spelt out was towards creating a community of men who would consecrate themselves to God involving themselves in the educational service of abandoned youngsters.

John Baptist De La Salle did not evolve a philosophy of life. He rather looked for remedies to solve difficult obstacles in life. This pragmatic course of action proved instrumental to establish Brother’s Institutions run in the Christian way for the marginalized, the poor, the forsaken children of humanity to evolve into children of God\(^1\).

To the enlightened De La Salle, Divine providence was the moving force in all the situations he had to oversee and participate. He saw God in all the things and all the events of his life. This faith was exercised through his inborn gifts such as in his abilities to analyse exhaustively, act decisively and be sensitized in the art of handling children. According to Brother Blain had the Founder been allowed to anticipate all issues and formulate plans that were too complex to unravel, he might have met with a dead end\(^2\).

Thus De La Salle never limited himself to his own institute. He devoted himself to the activities of the Brothers. The gradual structuring and spiritual

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\(^2\) Jean Baptist Blain, “The mind and heart of John Baptist De La Salle, Lasallian Publication”, USA, 1735, p.91.
guidance of his community became the thrust area of the director’s entire life. The whole exercise was self educative. The ceaseless conflicts and the repeated crises instead of crippling the visionary’s desire made him all the more progressive and determined. From his self emptying unto death and his experience to God, he took refuge in a life of freedom to be able to mould the brothers and the forsaken youngsters.

His spiritual teaching was worked out entirely in terms of the Brothers being groomed spiritually. In the course he does not offer us abstract deductive spirituality. He is associated with Brothers in their concrete situations, professional duties and in their limitations and weaknesses. Consequently, he outlines his experiences along ecological strains. An ardent devotee of the Bible he sees reflected in the religious text his own life and the Brothers’ trials and tribulations to the singular plan of God, the Almighty.

La Salle’s spiritual teachings’ thrust area is on the Brothers, who as members of the Institute are the mediators with the young helpless community. In their liberation is lodged the transformed experience proclaimed in the gospel and becomes instrumental towards fulfilling the promises of God.

By nature De La Salle was neither an ideologist nor a visionary. A concrete experimentalist he was temperamentally sensitive to needs. It is here that his involvement with Roland brought him into the arena of the movement of schools. His exposure coupled with experience made him venture into the field of special education. De La Salle was sensitive to the differently abled and marginalized children. As a consequence De La Salle laid the foundation for the ideal Lasallian school. The characteristics of this pioneer school is highly commendable. The Lasallian school was beyond barriers, caste, creed, colour and nationality Christian in commitment. Its policies and practices laid

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emphasis on religions instruction. In De Lasalle’s vision the Brothers became instruments for church and society to fight against the catastrophic consequences of ignorance and poverty⁴.

Hence Lasallian education mooted by the founder is rooted in the economic, social moral and religions sphere of the poor working classes. Infact De La Salle has pointed out in his ‘memoirs’ that poverty prevents parents from bringing up the children properly. “These unfortunate children..... accustomed to an idle life for many years have great difficulty when it comes time to seek work”.

To take action when the situation warranted was a part and parcel of Lasallian thinking. Personally this is evident in the various foundations he developed in addition to the free schools. To meet the needs of Parish of Saint Sulpice, De La Salle, in 1699 opened a Christian academy – A unique Sunday School, religious and technical institutes for young men working during the week. On the request of the church and civic authorities De La Salle established at Saint Yon, three different types of residential education programmes for the poor supporting them through fees and tuition. However his real originality was not in opening tuition free schools but was vested in his administrative skills. This is highlighted by him providing schools with dedicated and trained teachers. De La Salle kept in touch with these experienced teachers and helped them in times of necessity. His dynamism of thought has given birth to a new generation of brothers, who are free and flexible in thinking to respond to special situations. The popularity and foresightedness of his venture lured even well educated and professional men to join his congregation⁵.

⁵ Ibid., p.160.
John Baptist De La Salle’s journey is an all inclusive programme that demands the evolvement of a specific identity on his part leading him on to unknown ways that he had not envisaged. De Salle has himself confessed the absence of any particular intention in his book “Memoirs of the beginnings. It is needless to say that De La Salle in the making was a man of outstanding faith in God. His trust in the Almighty was infinite that he was alert to signs since whatever indicated was God’s approval of his plans. This dimension of faith led to the change and growth that took place in De La Salle. What is more the change was basically dynamic. “This is his most outstanding trait. To quote his biographer he is a man with his eyes wide open, attentive to life, available for whatever cause, he felt himself called to do”. His heart also responded to this calling. His vulnerability is what placed him at the cross roads of conversion – from canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, to be an educator and perform the noble job of being the teacher for teachers.

When John Baptist de Salle was twenty-eight years old he was lucky to run into Adrien Nyel, zealous to establish schools for the poor. He folk alerted him to the trials ahead in running a school. He also offered to help him towards surmounting the obstacles.

De Salle felt heartsick at the needs of the teachers. He was quick to sense they were a disorganized, uncultured set-up, with no idea of pedagogy. However he never thought then this was destined to be his life mission.

This noble idea impelled him to perform everything in his prowess to improve the teachers quality-wise. The remedial measures undertaken by him transformed his thinking. He housed the teachers in his mansion despite his family’s objections. He performed these acts without ever considering what was likely to follow. Consequently he abandoned his family, his social equals,

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his canonry his fortunes to be on par with the needs of the teachers and the children – a self involvement which brought about of validative thinking in his vision of life.

This proved to be the climatic moment when he became a companion to them which later on evolved into the Lasallian mission. The alliance proved to be one of mutual interaction towards the evolution of De Salle Mission and the First Lasallian community. This experience finally came to fruition as the Lasallian Association. This Exodus meant a real setting out. It is abandoning a world, a system of values. It resulted in putting themselves at the service of those needy pious souls and to put themselves at the service of others.

Where it is a departure outward it also marked a departure inward. It was a totally new environment where they had no roots. They were forced to apprehend a totally new scenario of meagre economies. Their families downfalls brought out a New School. It proved to be a new world altogether. It worked out to be the beginning of a school adopted to life, one in which boys enjoyed attending, where each individual was appreciated on his merit, the focus being the individual and not the mass.

De La Salle was by temperament both prudent and pragmatic to perform his job casually. Besides he was also inspired by God. These inborn characteristics made him found an Institute for young, forsaken and downtrodden children. His splendid, executive ability helped him to steer through detrimental forces and pernicious doctrines. Jansenism had gained the upper hand in France and had in turn fostered dissensions and promoted Gallicanism which in turn proved detrimental to Faith and Loyalty to Church and its doctrines.

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The incessant foreign wars, the violence of the soldiers, the dethroning of authority had a demoralising effect on all sections of society. Famine and ruin, loss of loved ones in battlefield, left behind a gloom of turmoil. Vice was prevalent in all classes of people, destroying their faith in God and the timely presence of De La Salle brought in remedial measures of lasting value. With his clear thinking and foresightedness he formulated a religious congregation of enlightened men which was the only solution to stem the tide of irreligion, vice and ignorance. The educational reforms, his starting of free schools, technical centers and colleges supplied with zealous teachers are thus meaningful milestones. Implanting virtues in the minds of the students and parents proved regenerative. He also foresaw that the guiding spirit of the Institute should remain forever the same. He also realized his Institute as a permanent organisation working towards the welfare of the community. It should have a character as a social force answering to the conditions and needs of any age and any country.

Thus De La Salle displayed his genius in giving his Institute a special character and forged a particular identity and thereby investing it with a special character. He evolved a teaching body, consecrated to the working of a popular education. He turned out to be the author of a psychological pedagogy which included principles to be adopted by the teachers in the field of educational reforms. By making the vernacular, the basis of all instruction De La Salle appealed to the intelligence of the child, paving way for the study of national literature. By doing so he opened up the avenues of real knowledge and delight that was so far unavailable to the eager multitude. He thus established that he was a profound thinker, a genius in the work of popular education catering to the demands of society.

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Limitations of the study:

Lasallian contribution covers the entire world. The study of the same would be very voluminous, therefore the scholar his limited it to Tamil Nadu. Hence, to the limited capacity, the scholar has concentrated only on Tamilnadu’s Regional growth of the mission. This is the limitation.

Statement of problem:

The thesis entitled “History of St.John Baptist De Lasalle mission in Tamil Nadu” spotlights on the leading role played by John Baptist De Lasalle and his assemblage of enlightened Brothers’ congregation towards social, educational and spiritual upliftment of the marginalised and unempowered. Lasalle realized his mission will be fulfilled by initiating programmes that “Educates in values” and “hopes”. The lessons imparted evolve completely transformed educative missionaries who apart from being storehouses of knowledge, renew society to undertake a journey in search of truth.

Scope of the study:

This thesis makes an earnest effort to identify the extraordinary achievement-oriented journey of John Baptist De Lasalle’s meaning to life. De Lasalle’s illuminative career was replete with diverse paradigm shifts that brought in astonishing changes that revolutionised attitudes towards education, society, religion and spirituality.

Honestly speaking they spell out the diverse initiatives undertaken and upheld by the Saint-in-Making towards the conceptualisation of truth.

De Lasalle’s original teaching community was a haphazard mix-up of persons who though motivated with a messianic flavour had to battle with lots of financial and emotional constraints. But the individual journeys sparked off
by a charismatic leader “began the Lasallian programme to concentrate on abandoned children and helpless grown ups devoid of instructions, but badly in need of salvation.

The missionary icon’s spiraling career was not a miracle achieved on the spur of the moment. It was a passionate rejoinder to a deep inner calling towards unconditional surrender. His prayers, recollections are part of his quest towards individualistic perfection. They are conscious ascetic practices towards achieving inner perfection. Martyrs and saints are not born but made. They have their own hassles to surmount, temptations to be waived aside before becoming a part of God’s design. Total self-surrender, rejecting the glory of sainthood or canonisation is achieved at a great cost. It is unconditional surrender to God’s directive.

Commitment to the Lasallian mission is one of sharing and being imbued with a sense of fraternity. It is this spirit of fraternity which functions as the axis of the association in today’s world with its changing scenario. It can be considered to be the Elixer of life. The Lasallian commitment is not with the job alone, it is a spirit that gets translated to relationships, establishing in turn a band of solidarity between persons, in short being interdependent.

It is nearly 340 years since John Baptist De La Salle, launched an educational movement that has now become a banian tree sheltering the abandoned children of the artisans of the poor. As he became sensitised to the prevailing human and spiritual distress, he launched schools which became transformed into the initiatives of the brothers.

John De La Salle was also an educationalist in making. To admire his contribution, one has to be familiar with the Lasallian pedagogy, interlaced with spirituality. He was sincerely convinced that the aim of education is all encompassing making the human persons self reliant and selfless. This is what
Mahatma Gandhi did to India “Education I mean the all round drawing out of the child body mind and spirit”. He is firm on the specific roles played by teachers and the brothers in particular. It is justice tempered by mercy towards bringing the family spirit, with the teacher being both a father and mother in their governance of the children.

The study reveals that De La Salle order functions with the vision and a mission inspired by the teaching of the founder, St. John the Baptist De La Salle. His followers go in for concrete plans of action. They are hard working and their service of self abnegation have brought immense relief and infinite happiness to millions of destitute homes, stationed all over the world. What is very remarkable is the Brothers’ continued presence in heart lands of Tamilnadu. This is a ray of hope to millions of stranded humanity. The scope of this study is to focus on this perennial quest that will continue to buoy up humanity in the future.

Hypotheses:

De La Salle wanted to serve the God through services to humanity. The paths he chose to serve this purpose was education, health service, social upliftment of poor people, particularly the downtrodden ones. This only motivated him to open educational institutions with emphasis on learning, character building and sympathy nourishing among student community. He merged classical values to modern teaching techniques totally and successfully. The study, is bed-rocked on this hypothesis.

Methodology:

Historical methodology has been adopted to trace out the origin and growth of John Baptist De La sale Mission is Tamil Nadu. The study also adopts analytical approach to the administration and concern of the De La Salle Mission. Besides, an analytical study of the source materials serves the purpose
reconstructing the past in spirit of free enquiry and with a view presenting as
objective an account as it is humanly possible and also necessary tables are
given.

Sources of Information:

Primary as well as secondary sources shed light on the History of
St. John Baptist De La Salle Mission in Tamil Nadu. The Primary and
secondary sources for the present study are available in religious Archives at
Madurai, Trichy, Chennai, Bangalore, Mysore, Calcutta, Mangalore,
Cannanore and abroad. The published works are available in all the libraries of
Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Further, interviews with
brothers associated with the problems of helpless people and the perusal of
private collections helped to evaluate the services of Lassal mission.

The secondary sources include numerous books published by Various
Scholars, journals, articles and unpublished projects and dissertation and
newspaper articles.

Chapterisation:

This thesis deals with all aspects connected with John Baptist De La
Salle. It gives us fresh perspectives into the life of De La Salle and the
founding of the De La Salle mission and its origin. It has given waitage to De
La Salle Educational pedagogy. It has also thrown light on the educational and
social services rendered towards suffering humanity. The vital rules of the
governance of the mission, is also expansively treated in the spiritual journey
of this great saint.

The first chapter briefly describes the “Life of John Baptist De La
Salle”. Its also brings out his decision to receive the tonsure to enter
brotherhood. It focuses on the visionary zeal and spiritual commitment of the
future saint and on the role played by God to make his entire life meaningful. His chance encounter with Nicolas Roland and Adrien Nyel proved to be turning factors in his life. It also includes the establishments of schools, the formulations of rules and governance in running schools. His heartfelt concern for the destitute humanity and his plans to find solutions is explained in detail. His life was one of ups and downs for he was rejected by the ecclesiastics and his own fellow brothers. His deep faith in God made him battle with heavy odds and finally he was canonised for his Herculean efforts in the year 1900 by Pope Pius XII.

The second chapter gives a graphic description of the History of the Lasallian Mission. This is witnessed in the blossoming of schools in France, Spain, Italy, Canada, USA, England, Singapore and host of South African countries. They had also a chance of penetrating into India, but the initial efforts failed and they went back to Colombo. But the brothers were fortunate to re-establish their ties in India. They established houses in Madurai, Theni, Dindukal Telecherry, Karaikal, Calicut, Mahe, Cannanore, Mangalore, Agra. Thoothukudi a natural Harbour provided opportunities for the brothers to start Saint Or nellas High School. With ample assistance and well wishers, the Ornellas school under the supervision of the brothers is making significant progress in the field of education, personality development and sports. It also caters to the needs of the downtrodden.

The third chapter makes inroads into the pedagogy of De La Salle, which is mandatory in all the schools run by the brothers. It also brings out his profuse thinking on the conduct of the Christian schools and voices the pains undertaken by him to groom teachers into role models. It also gives a graphic picture of the learning process, the curriculum to be adopted. The Lasalle instinct which believes in the flexible, management of school hours highlights his emancipated thinking. A highly personalised teaching programme is
compulsory for all teachers towards both enlightening, disciplining children and also providing them an atmosphere of ambiance. Religious instruction is the nucleus of De La Salle’s education of philosophy. A holistic approach is considered very important in handling students hailing from different stratas of society. Individual attention to the students is considered a must towards their evolvement into full fledged citizens of the future.

The fourth chapter gives a refreshing insight into the singular educational vision of John Baptist De La Salle. In fact the Lasallian Mission in education has assumed global propositions. It is quality education of the highest calibre, leading to full fledged personal development. It can also be considered a turning point in the field of educational empowerment. Important milestones covered include Saint Pius X Boys town, Madurai St.Joseph’s Boys Village, St. Lasalle Higher Secondary School, St. Joseph’s Higher Secondary School.

The fifth chapter elaborates on the Social Services of Lasallian Mission. The centre of all evangelization is the double commandment of love. It is passion for God and also a passion for humanity. It is what St. Augustine has outlined in his “confessions” Love of God is the first among the commandments, but love of neighbour is first among all practical actions. The social services done by the Brothers are concretised endeavours of La Sallian activities in the form of outreach programmes. One form is the Joseph Development Trust – a Charitable Trust under the directive of Brother Kimpton in and around Tamilnadu, India. They established Farmer’s Forum, Youth clubs, Tuition centres Day care Centres and Balwadies. They also took special interest to house the street children and abandoned children by giving them Vocational Training and foster in them a spirit of independence by removing their psychological phobias. Puduvasantham, Puduyugam, Puthumanal are projects initiated to put an end to child labour, mentally retarded children towards rehabilitating them into society. Health Programmes are run on a
charitable basis to cater to the aged, the women and the lepers who have been sidelined due to social taboos.

Another service-oriented organisation is Reaching the Unreached. This association was registered under Tamilnadu’s Societies Act 1978 with the Headquarters in the tiny village Kallupatti in the Western Ghats. The programmes range from children’s and educational programmes, clinical services, nutrition rural health development, housing programmes, water development and cement unit. The set-up is geared towards providing decent quality life especially to women, children, old, sick homeless, the unemployable and those pressurised by unavailability of water. “To live to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is purpose in life there must be purpose in suffering too”.

26 December, 2004 remembered as ‘The Black Sunday’ proved catastrophic with Tsunami claiming nearly 1,50,000 human lives in Indonesia and the adjacent South Indian Coastal regions. The Brothers who were at the annual retreat, instead of sending condolence messages as the rest of the world had done, evolved strategies to take stock of the situation. The Brothers of La Sallian school Thoothukudi brought relief to the suffering victims. Brothers were despatched in batches to Nagapattinam, Kanyakumari and Thoothukudi. Brother Thomas Michael, the Chairman with his meticulous planning was able to render the services worth all the efforts by organising medical camps to avert epidemics.

The sixth chapter forms the crux of the entire doctoral thesis. His spiritual travelogue is a gradual evolution of religious vision, his sense of vocation, his sensitivity to the divine voice, discerned in the crying needs of the poor. It can be alternatively described as responding to the call of an apostolic mission and Christian Ministry for young persons in need of salvation. De La Salle had also the brothers in mind towards sustaining them very often in their
thankless and disagreeable task which they had to perform during their service in the schools. Faith, zeal and the welfare of community are not three separate entities but tightly knit components towards realizing the glory of God. He outlines meditation, self discipline, serious doctrinal study, reading of the Sacred scriptures where in the experience of God is shared. Thus the spiritual vision of De La Salle has survived for the future generation of Brothers to achieve an institutionalised form. The brothers can be looked upon as inheritors of the Lasallian legacy entrusted with his spirit to spread it through out the world towards ensuring its survival.

The seventh chapter highlights on the administrative ability of De Lasallian network in Tamil Nadu. The major priority of every Religious congregation is to have an efficient formation programme. The plan comprises a proper balancing act between theoretical. Knowledge and practical implementation of it. Efficient personnel are installed towards concentrating on the ecumenical dimension of the Lasallian mission. As the Lasallian’s are “Catechists by vocation ‘the educators have to be necessarily knowledgeable about the students, churches, with their changing perspectives becoming’ reconciled bridges to which Catholic Church is committed.

All the chapters are summarised in the conclusion. They provide interesting insights to bring out that De La Salle is a gift of France, to nations all over the world. He is a boon granted by Christianity to humanity, an evangelist, an educational reformer, father of modern pedagogy. He was a fervently convinced man and had a specific destiny; it was the prime duty of the teacher to inculcate this truth by cultivating and developing the theological virtues in the souls of children.