CHAPTER II

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN TAMIL NADU: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH OF INDIGENISATION

This chapter presents a brief history of the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu. Its main objective is to analyse the methods adopted by the missionaries in introducing Christianity in the Tamil region and the role of the Church in indigenising Catholicism there. It is not intended here to reconstruct the Church history according to a set chronological framework; rather the focus is on those key actors who played a critical role in initiating and sustaining or resisting indigenisation, and their strategies for establishing Catholicism. This brief history, it is hoped, will provide the setting against which our analysis of the various aspects of indigenisation will become clear.

PADROADO

(1498-1542)

When the Portuguese colonised Goa and the coastal regions of the present day Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the Portuguese clergy accompanied the soldiers and the administrators primarily to provide them with spiritual care. Subsequently, they developed an interest in converting the natives to Christianity. The soldiers, administrators and priests were under the direct care and control of the King of Portugal. The Pope only exercised moral control over the priests. There was a close link between the military-cum-administrative powers and the clergy. Hence, the process of conversion gave a privileged position to Christianity vis-à-vis the native religion. The churches were built in the Portuguese style, the interior of the church was also modelled along the Portuguese lines,
and the liturgical language was Latin. The converts were forced to adopt many of the Portuguese socio-cultural practices.

The conversion of the natives to Catholicism gained momentum in Tamil Nadu with the arrival in 1543 of Francis Xavier, a priest belonging to the Jesuit order. Xavier made a mark in the history of Catholicism by travelling far and wide and baptising thousands of natives. The main thrust of the missionary movements during this period was on making gains in terms of number.

The coastal regions of Tamil Nadu were inhabited by the Paravas, Mukkuvar and other low ranking fisherfolk and labouring people. Their original homeland ran along the Gulf of Mannar, from southern Ramnad to the extreme tip of the Coromandel Coast, known as the ‘Fishery Coast’ in Portuguese literature. It comprised of twenty-two villages, chief among them being Kayalpatnam, Tuticorin (now called Thoothukudi), Vaipar and Vempar. The Paravas or Bharatars of the pearl fishery coast are one of South India’s maritime communities. The primary occupations of the Paravas were regular fishing and pearl fishing, the latter being an organised industry in Tuticorin and the neighbouring coastal region of Tamil Nadu. The Paravas’ conversion to Christianity took place in the course of a savage maritime war fought between 1527 and 1539 by the Portuguese and the South Indian Muslim rulers who were allied with the Zamorin of Calicut. The Paravas sought the protection of the Portuguese, as the Arab Muslims were exploiting them, and in return they, as a caste, embraced Christianity in 1538. Thus, the Portuguese involvement on the fishery coast had a profound effect on the history of the Paravas (see Firth 1998 and Roche 1984).
After their conversion, for about six years, till the arrival of Xavier, the Paravas remained without any religious instruction. During those years they were left free to carry on their religious practices. Only with the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries from 1545 they were given Christian faith formation.

Xavier, who had patronised this community, did not attempt to acquire any systematic grasp of the Hindu theology. With the help of the natives who had an understanding of Portuguese, he got the prayers translated into Tamil. He appointed catechists (religious instructors) in every place to instruct the Catholic Paravas. The missionaries who came after him followed his footsteps in dealing with the converts (Firth 1998:58).

Apart from the translation of prayers into Tamil, there was hardly any effort at adapting Western Christianity to the culture and outlook of the converts. The receiving of baptism often meant the abandonment of much of one's cultural ties with the past. This was particularly so in the territories directly governed by the Portuguese. For example, the new converts were even given Portuguese names and surnames such as Lorenzo Fernado, Felix Wilfred, etc. Generally missionaries at that time were inclined to see idolatrous practices and superstition even in social customs which were quite harmless, and hence they sought to suppress them (Thekkedath 1982:485). There were, no doubt, exceptions to this line of thinking, as Robert de Nobili who, for example, differentiated between idolatry and mere customs of the region, and who realised that becoming a Christian need not involve the adoption of a new cultural identity.

Placed at the lower rung of the caste hierarchy, for the Paravas, conversion meant identifying themselves with the ruling class. While they built their new identity around the
Christian symbols, they retained the native cultural practices. Bayly (1992:323-47) observes that much of the trappings and organisation of the Parava festival were taken from the utsavams (temple feasts) of the great Sri Subrahmanyasami temple at Tiruchentur, twenty-four miles from Tuticorin. This temple has long been cited as a reference point in the creation of the Paravas’ ceremonial cult tradition. It was this fusion of the Christian motifs and native traditions, which gave the Paravas a coherent caste identity and enhanced their social status (see ibid.).

For the Hindus, the ‘new’ religion which the Paravas embraced was parangi maarkam (religion of the Portuguese). Parangi is the Tamil version of ‘Feringhi,’ which referred to the Portuguese (and the Europeans, generally), and it became coterminous with the Christian faith (Firth 1998:111). Parangi, however, was not a complimentary term, since it referred to people who were defiled by their eating of beef and drinking of wine (Rajamanickam 1987:303). Since, the parangis were considered as polluting as the Paryans and Pallans (the untouchables of Tamil Nadu), from the very beginning Christianity was identified with an inferior, polluting group and came to be known as parangi maarkam (Cronin 1959:43 and 45).

It is necessary to clarify here that while conversion in the coastal area was connected with the Portuguese, the spread of Christianity in the hinterland of Tamil Nadu did not result purely from a campaign of the Portuguese-directed missionary proselytising. Bayly (1992:380-84) observes that the initial spread of Christianity in this region was transmitted through indigenous network of trade and pilgrimage by the Catholics of the coastal region. Catholicism that had filtered inland from the coast was largely syncretic
and cult oriented. The first Jesuit missionaries who penetrated into the hinterland already found churches there.

**THE JESUIT MISSION**

In Madurai, an ancient centre of Tamil culture and language, Fr. Concalo Fernandez, belonging to the same order as Francis Xavier, took on religious leadership. He catered primarily to the Portuguese Catholics and the converted Paravas settled or visiting Madurai for business. Fernandez accepted the identification of the Portuguese with *parangi*, and of *parangi* with Christianity. Being ignorant of Tamil, Fernandez (as other Portuguese priests did) asked any candidate for baptism whether he wished to enter the *parangikulam* (community of *parangis*), instead of ‘do you want to be a Christian?’ Not surprisingly, he was unable to make a single conversion in his ten years of work. His inability to convert has been attributed to his reluctance to compromise on the Christian teaching of equality; some have attributed this to his European superiority complex (Neill 1984:280). It is against this background that Robert de Nobili (here after de Nobili), a Italian Jesuit missionary, entered Madura Mission in 1606. The Mission gradually extended itself over nearly the whole of Tamil Nadu except the coastal strip (Thekkedath 1982:211). In this period de Nobili sought to disassociate Christianity from the colonial trading powers and present a soteriological message of the Gospel in indigenous cultural form.

De Nobili’s approach to the dissemination of Catholicism was based on two principles: firstly, following the traditional principle ‘convert the king subjects will follow.’ Secondly, in order to convert the Brahmins one has to understand their beliefs,
customs, sacred literature and even adapt their life-style. This second method was revolutionary since de Nobili’s attempt to understand the indigenous customs and rituals led to a change in the attitude of contempt towards the natives earlier held by the missionaries (Deliege 1990:53). De Nobili took a different approach from that of the Portuguese missionaries, who he found ‘not only endeavoured to Christianise the Indians, but they tried to Lusitanise them’ (Rev. D. Ferroli, quoted in D’Souza 1975:122).

De Nobili tried to acquaint himself with the language, culture and religion of this region. As Rajamanickam (1967:83-86) puts it, ‘adaptation becomes indispensable when the Gospel is preached in places where the social customs are entirely different and de Nobili understood this too well.’ Thus, de Nobili and his missionaries disassociated themselves from the low-caste Parava converts, their Portuguese missionaries and the colonial trading power, all of which had consigned Christianity to an inferior status. Rather, his mission was to set about indigenising Christianity. Since he viewed religion as a matter of spiritual reality, beliefs and worship, he presented the soteriological message of the Gospel in an Indian social and cultural form (Mosse 1986:36).

Sensing the resistance of the natives to the all-polluting parangi maarkam, de Nobili adopted the life style akin to the local priestly class. He made an intensive study of the Tamil and Sanskrit sacred scriptures and composed a series of learned Tamil treatise and devotional poems. His aim in these works was to reach an accommodation between the Hindu and Christian scriptural traditions. He realised that the teacher of spiritual values in India is the sannyaasi.² Accordingly, he chose the life style of an Indian sannyaasi (renouncer). In addition to the priestly vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, he maintained absolute abstinence from meat, fish, eggs, wine, etc., and had
one meal at 4 p.m. cooked by a Brahmin cook. He gave up using chairs and cots, wearing hat, and travelling on horseback. He adopted the dress of the local samyaaasi, the kaavi (ochre-coloured garb), in place of the black cassock and exchanged his leather shoes for wooden sandals. More important, de Nobili wore the sacred thread across his shoulders with a cross fastened to it. He anointed his forehead with sandal paste, and went about carrying a water-gourd in his left hand and a bamboo stick with seven knots in his right (see Picture 2.1) (Rajamanickam 1967:84).

In brief, says Zupanov (1999), de Nobili enthusiastically renounced polluting substances (meat and alcohol) and polluting persons (low-caste people) in order to penetrate among those whom he considered his equals. His converts addressed him as aiyar (guru) and named him ‘Tattuva Bodhakar’ (the Teacher of Reality) approving of his ways and teaching. De Nobili continued to be known under this name for the rest of his life (Cronin 1959:71 and 127). Thus, the strategy adopted by de Nobili was to integrate the Gospel values with the local culture.

De Nobili’s methods were quite in line with the religious revival in the southern parts of India in the early seventeenth century, when many gurus (religious teachers) were going around. He too was accepted and looked upon as one such guru by the upper-caste people. When a few Brahmins were convinced of his teachings, they came forward to be baptised. In turn, de Nobili allowed them to keep some symbols of affiliation to their caste by claiming that they were not religious but social customs. He believed that some of the native customs could be integrated into the Catholic rites. He Christianised the religious customs of the converts: the sacred thread blessed by a Catholic priest, from which a cross or a medal was hung; sandal paste blessed by the priest applied on the forehead; kuTumi
(tuft of hair) for men; and bath as a symbol of inner purification (Hambey 1997:212). He substituted the Church ceremonies with local rites, and Christian prayers with the Hindu mantrams (chants). For example, in conducting a marriage, he substituted the ring of the Christian tradition with the taali, the marriage badge worn by the Hindu women. To the taali a cross was attached (Neill 1984:289). He encouraged the celebration of the poMkal (harvest) festival by the Catholics and allowed them to cook rice and boil milk at the foot of the cross which was planted for that purpose. He is said to have built a church in indigenous style and called it kooyil (a place of worship among the Hindus) (Rajamanickam 1967:86).

De Nobili translated the names of European saints and rechristened them with Tamil names: Fidelis became Visuvasam (faith or the faithful one); Deus Dedit, Sivadarma (follower of Jesus); Honoratus, Arasarappan (devotee of the Lord); Constatius, Dairyam (courage); Peter, Malaiyappan (the rock); Hilary, Muthudyan (the pearl); Joachim, Devaram (a collection of devotional songs in honour of Lord); Lazarus, Devasagayam (God my help); Elizabeth, Devannamal (mother of God), etc. His most notable achievement was the creation of a new Christian vocabulary for the region’s converts in which all the key words and phrases were drawn from the existing terminology of ‘high’ scriptural Hinduism. He Christianised certain words and infused into them a new meaning: for example, puucai (the Mass), veda pustakam (prayer book), mantra(m (prayer), and prasaatam (denoting grace, the gift from god) (Rajamanickam 1967:86).

In sharp contrast with most of the earlier Portuguese missionaries, de Nobili attempted to present the gospel in a form less alien to the Hindus among whom he worked; he sought to evolve an indigenous Christian theology. Analysing de Nobili’s
treatise on Christ as the divine guru, Clooney (1988) notes that de Nobili rejected the *avataara* theory of the Vaishnavites and adopted the position of the Siddhantins which views Siva as a *guru*. According to the Saivite School (Saiva Siddhanta),

Siva stands outside his creation of which he is only a causa efficiens. Incarnation would make him subject to Karma and Samsara, over which he is ruler. But in order to help his devotees to reach his final goal, the complete union with Siva, he occasionally assumes a human shape and appears in disguise, as a religious preceptor, as a Guru, often with the name *Satguru*, ‘the true Guru.’ ... Nobili thus in his choice of the image of the guru carried with it the threads of the whole fabric from which it was excised (ibid. 33 and 34).

De Nobili considered the caste system as a form of social categorisation parallel to the distinctions of class and rank in Europe. He was of the opinion that the religion which he taught, did not require a person to renounce caste. He, thus, allowed the Christians to follow their caste customs (Firth 1998:114). He even set himself as a Brahmin *sannyaasi* separating from the lower castes.

De Nobili and his companions sought to deal with the problem of ministering the lower castes and the untouchables by creating a separate set of missionaries on the line of *pandaarams* (non-Brahmin renouncers), and these missionaries were called as the *pandaaracaami*. Thus, there emerged two sets of missionary priests: one modelled after the Brahmin *sannyaasi*, to minister to the Brahmins; and the other, the *pandaaracaami*, ministering to the lower castes. These two sets of missionaries rarely mixed or stayed together. The life style of the *pandaaracaamis* was also different from that of the Brahmin priests. The former was not conversant with Sanskrit and were meat eaters (Cronin 1959: 251).
In 1744 this distinction even became official when Pope Benedict XIV recognised the creation of ‘pariah missionaries.’ Separate churches were built and the whole structure of the Catholic Church was shaped on this model. The Catholics carried forward their caste divisions from Hinduism, and the untouchables too remained as such within the Catholic Church (Deliege 1990:53). Ultimately, with the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1759, the system of two sets of missionaries catering to the religious needs of the upper-caste and lower-caste converts was abandoned.

Many accusations were levelled against de Nobili for compromising and syncretising the Christian faith. Fernandez opposed de Nobili’s move to Indianise (Brahminise) Christianity. He pleaded for retaining the ‘originality’ of Christianity (as brought from the West) and accused de Nobili of compromising with the caste system which upholds inequality among Catholics, calling it anti-Christian (see Firth 1998:114-16).

Cardinal Eugene Tesserant records that ‘the Portuguese intervened and de Nobili was arrested and tried by the Goa Inquisition on a charge of heresy’ (quoted in D’Souza 1975:123). However, ‘a timely brief from the Pope which required that his case should be investigated by a round table conference which would include fellow Archbishops and other theologians, saved Fr. de Nobili from the clutches of inquisition’ (Vincent Cronin, quoted in D’Souza 1975:123). Supporters began to converge on either side of the controversy and the matter was referred to the Vatican.

De Nobili argued that there was no harm in the wearing of the Brahminical sacred thread and smearing of sandal paste on the forehead, and that the practices related to caste were social customs and mores of the people. He defended the method adopted by him as
similar to the method followed by the followers of Christianity in the West. He showed how several pagan customs of the Greco-Roman world had found an honourable place in the Christian religion. He interpreted the caste system by drawing parallels with the European estate system (Fernandes 1981:18).

The papal decision in favour of de Nobili and his method was declared in the year 1623:

We grant ...to the Brahmins and other gentiles who have been and will be converted to the faith the permission to wear the thread and grow the kudumi as distinctive signs of their social status, ... we allow them to use the sandal paste as an ornament, ... provided however, that to remove all superstitions and all alleged of scandal, they observe the following regulations and conditions... (quoted in Anchukandam 1996:104).

Thus, the Vatican upheld the approach of de Nobili saying that the indigenous life-style adopted by de Nobili did not amount to Hinduisising Christianity.

Nearly a century passed without anybody seriously questioning the papal decision in favour of de Nobili and his method. It looked as if they were beyond controversy, but suddenly they became the targets of ever-increasing bitter criticisms (see Ferroli 1951:377-487). The resulting controversy over the acceptability or otherwise of de Nobili’s methods is known as the ‘Malabar rites controversy’ (Hamby 1997:212).

Despite the controversies which de Nobili provoked, his work had a lasting impact on the idiom of Christian discourse in South India (Bayly 1992:390). It was de Nobili who found a way beyond the limitations of parangikulam Christianity. His methods were followed by a small group of Jesuit missionaries who had a positive approach to the local culture and thus some of them entered into the world of Indian religion, learning Sanskrit,
the then language through which philosophy, theology and science were discussed and taught. Thereafter the de Nobilian method became the official method of the Jesuits in South India (Rajamanickam 1972:46).

Deliege (1990:53) is of the view that it was probably the use of the de Nobilian methods which succeeded in converting many high caste people such as the Vellalars, Udayars and Maravars. Wilfred (1993:11) accords de Nobili a place above the other missionaries in the venture of adapting Christianity to the native culture by saying ‘no history of theology in India worth its name can be written without reference to de Nobili. He was the pioneer in the history of Christianity in India who initiated “Indianising.” He was the pioneer in the study of Sanskrit and the founder of modern Tamil literature.’

Sauliere (1956:16) says:

If the Christians of South India have not been torn away from their own people, if they still live the same social life as their Hindu brethren, following the same customs, wearing the same dress, sharing their joys and sorrows, their hopes and aspirations; if, in a word, no one can with justice point at them the finger of scorn and question their loyalty to the land of their birth, it is largely due to Fr. Robert de Nobili.

Matteo Ricci, another Jesuit, also followed similar methods in China, where he sought to adapt Christianity, save in essentials, to Chinese values and traditional practices (Cronin 1984).

Another significant person, who shared with de Nobili the indigenising attitude, was John de Britto (here after de Britto), a Portuguese missionary. De Britto disassociated himself from the coastal power of the Portuguese and the Dutch and entered Maravanadu (Ramnad), which was beyond the sphere of colonial political influence. He was the most
prominent figure of the Madura Mission and a *pandaaracaami*. Prior to his arrival the other European missionaries only carried out ‘exploration and skirmishes’ (Ponnad 1983:134). His work was mainly confined to the rural areas of interior Tamil Nadu, especially the villages under our study. He took the Tamil name Arulanandar (*Arul* - grace and *anand* - joy).

De Britto led a simple life and walked barefoot. He did not want to make any compromise with regard to the basic tenets of Christianity. This is proved in the case of the conversion of the Marava prince Tadiya Devar. This prince had five wives and had to give up four of his wives in the wake of his conversion to Christianity. The youngest wife was the niece of Sethupati who brought all troubles that cost de Britto his life. He was beheaded in the year 1693, when he converted a local chieftain in Ramnad (see Nevett 1980). He was canonised in the year 1947 and he is portrayed as a ‘deified hero tutelary.’ This missionary saint-martyr is still the focus of an active devotional cult in the Tamil hinterland (Bayly 1992:399). His shrine is located in Oriyur, a village in Ramnad District. The stories of his heroic wanderings, his disregard of danger, his miraculous powers to heal and to exorcise, and his martyrdom are popularly presented in the village dramas. His shrine is well known for animal sacrifice (see Chap. 8). Even to this day it is believed that the famous centres of Christianity in the Tamil hinterland are due to the labour and blood of de Britto.

The next remarkable person was Fr. Joseph Constantine Beschi (here after Beschi), an Italian missionary, who came to the regions of Tamil Nadu in the year 1711. Michael (1996:57) points out that de Nobili Indianised the apostolate, while Beschi Tamilicised it. His notable contribution was in the area of Tamil literature. He followed the footsteps of
de Nobili in his approach to the native Christians and in his life style. He chose the Tamil name Veeramamunivar (the Valiant Sage).

The first church that Beschi built at Konankuppam was dedicated to Mary and was called in Tamil Periyanaayaki (after Paarvati, the consort of Siva, in the Hindu pantheon, who is also known as Periyanaayaki). The statue of Mary installed there resembles a Tamil woman dressed in sari, wearing ear rings and finger rings. He built another church at Elakkurichi and placed Mary as its patron. He Tamilicised Mary with a purely Tamil name, that is, Adaiakalamatha (Mother of Refuge). The decorations of this church resemble those of a Hindu temple. He followed the Hindu customs of pilgrimage and celebrating the feast of the patron in these churches. He incorporated the practice of making poMkal during the village feast of the Hindus with that of the patron’s feast of the Catholics (Gnanaprakasam 1988:171).

In his poetry, Beschi uses Hindu religious terminology to present the Christian religious themes. For example, in his ‘Thempavani’ (Life of Christ), Christ is described as Mekavaakanaatan, meaning one who has the cloud as his vehicle. This is in keeping with the Hindu religious lore where of every god has a vehicle (vaakanam). Jesus is said to hold the spear, which echoes the idea of Murugan holding a spear. To refer to Christ as the one who rules the world with his wheel reminds one of Visnu with his cakra (wheel). Mary is given attributes like teeva ambikaiye and ariya amala iisvariye, which elevate her above the ordinary mortals (ibid. 176-79).

What is to be noted is that the missionaries adopted an accommodative approach towards the practices of the Brahmins and non-Brahmin castes. The accommodation, however, was not unlimited. While they welcomed those practices that were in
consonance with the Christian beliefs; those that did not resonate with the Christian beliefs were resisted. For instance, while they welcomed practices such as poMkal (harvest festival) celebration, car processions during the annual village patron's festival, etc., they resisted practices such as seeking the help of sorcerers. Thus, Catholicism during this period was marked by a good deal of accommodation. In some cases, missionaries actively reformulated the native practices such as koottu (a folk art form) to popularise the life and teachings of Jesus and the saints. Simultaneously one witnesses a concerted effort to de-Hinduise the natives by describing the Hindu deities as idols, meaning that they are not authentic powers of the almighty. This process continued in the Catholic Church for nearly three and a half centuries.

There were certain measures of adaptation and accommodation that went against the vital spirit of Christianity. The deep-rooted caste system was one of the formidable challenges that the earlier missionaries encountered in Tamil Nadu. They had no instant solution to this problem that contravened the basic tenets of Catholicism. The retention of caste diluted the Christian idea of universal brotherhood. The missionaries who endeavoured for the assimilation and understanding of Hinduism found it difficult to break down the formidable barrier of the caste system. Those who had converted from the higher caste continued to retain their claim to superior status and did not mix with the low-caste Christians. Thus, caste distinction and discrimination, which were an integral part of the Hindu social system, extended their tentacles to the Indian Catholic Church, too (Houpert 1937:41).
CATHOLIC ASHRAMS

In the twentieth century a more indigenised form of Christianity was observed. This came through the establishment of Catholic ashrams modelled after the ashram lifestyle of the Hindus. Attracted by the values of Indian sannyaasa, some Catholic priests adopted the sannyaasic life-style. The pioneers were Fr. Jules Monchanin and Fr. Henri Le Saux, followed by Fr. Bede Griffiths. Monchanin attempted a deep and total adaptation of the contemplative life of the Hindu sannyaasin and dedicated himself to the quest of the absolute. Thus, he opened the way to the deepest form of spiritual union between Christianity and Hinduism (J.C. Weber 1977:8 and 9). Le Saux visited several Hindu ashrams and lived in them. Ramana Maharsi, the sage of Arunachala in Tamil Nadu, had a great influence on Le Saux. Arunachala was really his spiritual birth place because it was during his life in the caves of Arunachala that he awakened to the mystery of non-duality within the ‘cave of his own heart’ (Vattakuzhy 1983:378).

The pioneers’ sought to translate the Benedictine monasticism into a sannyaasic form in India, to find synthesis between them. They realised that

The goal of monastic life in the East and the West is essentially by the same. Saint Benedict requires of a monk that he should “truly seek God,” and it is this search for God, or Quest of the Absolute...which remains always and everywhere the characteristic mark of the monk (Griffiths 1980:433).

While adopting indigenous ashram life-style, the ashramites combined contemplative spirituality and social action that is in line with Gandhian ashram (see Chap. 9).
THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The Second Vatican Council, which took place during 1962-65, is regarded as a landmark in the history of the Catholic Church. As regards the indigenisation of Catholicism in India, and elsewhere, the Church began playing a more positive role after this Council. Reviewing the history of the Catholic Church in India, one finds that there have been efforts to introduce an indigenous character to the religious beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church much before this Council. Indigenisation, in fact, is an inevitable process in the evolution of a religious community and Roman Catholicism is no exception. What this Council did was to officially recognise such a process.

Among the many things deliberated during the Second Vatican Council the issue of inculturation (localising the Church in terms of rituals, leadership, language, etc.) assumed great significance, especially for Churches in Africa, Asia, and South America. Latin ceased to be the liturgical language, modes of worship went through change, and the Christian theology began to integrate local theological and philosophical traditions. This phase of the history of Catholicism can be characterised as a period of integration in India. It sought to reduce the distance between Christianity and Hinduism: From the logic of 'instrumentality' (indigenous methods to convert people), Catholicism switched over to the logic of 'complementarity' (bridging the gap between Christianity and the native religions). Thus, Catholicism in South India, which had moved from a position of domination in the first phase (Padroado) to one of integration via accommodation in the second phase (Jesuit mission), began to enhance its own vision and deepen its experience in the third phase (Second Vatican Council).
CONTEXTUALISING THEOLOGY

In 1980s, world-wide Catholicism passed through yet another stage. With increasing evidence that religion was a part of the liberation struggles in the Third World, Catholicism became an instrument of popular resistance and a source of inspiration to sustained struggle (Pieris 1988:100). Some priests engaged with indigenisation were influenced by the ‘liberation theology’ originating from Latin America. Foregrounding the exploited masses, in the line of Marxian analysis of society, leading theologians in Latin America infused class orientation in theology and worship (Agera 1989:97). In the institutionalised Church, too, the Church came to be projected as the sign of liberation.

Influenced by ‘liberation theology,’ several Indian theologians too began stressing the need for contextualising theology and worship in India. They placed Dalit (the most oppressed group of people) as the focal point of their theological praxis. The emphasis here is on an anti-caste ‘social gospel,’ solidarity with the poor, and participation in their struggles for liberation (see Antony Raj 1992, Mark 1994 and Joe Britto 1997). This approach of a section of the clergy fundamentally departs from both the de Nobilian adaptation method and the ashram-oriented theology. It is beyond the scope of this study to go into the theological implications of the various strategies for indigenising Church in India.
Conclusion

Brief as it may be, from the foregoing historical sketch of Catholicism in Tamil Nadu, it is clear that indigenisation has been central to Catholicism for nearly four centuries. It has always remained an issue that gave rise to intense debate not only within India but also outside. The process of indigenisation has been dynamic in that it has passed through many stages expressing it in different forms. The dynamism observed in indigenisation can be attributed to the many models adopted by the missionaries down the centuries. The model adopted by Robert de Nobili and some other missionaries of his time was different from that used by the missionaries working in Goa. These models gave expression to different forms of indigenisation depending upon by the socio-political contexts surrounding them.

In the earlier phase of its history Christianity approached the Hindu religion from a position of 'domination' and tried to preserve its own 'pristine' form. Later, when Christianity spread to different parts of Tamil Nadu, it adopted a position of 'accommodation' in order to expand its missionary activities. It permitted a process of Christianisation of Hindu religious symbols and rituals. During the last fifty years or so, it has embarked on a process of 'acculturation' where by it has adopted not only the Hindu forms but also the Hindu meanings of these forms.

In the following chapters we shall examine the socio-religious practices of the Tamil Catholics and the meaning contained in them. We shall also analyse the methods adopted by the Catholics in negotiating their native practices. While doing so, our objective is not to arrive at a theological statement on the nature of contemporary Catholicism, but only to present an analysis of Catholicism as a lived-in religion among its Tamil adherents in South India.
Endnotes

1. Under the Padroado system, the Pope entrusted the King of Portugal with ecclesiastical affairs. The King decided the religious order that should take care of the Christians under his territory and granted maintenance for the same. The missionaries were restricted in their dealings with the native Christians (Houtart and Lemerciner 1981:106).

2. In Sanskrit, the word sanhyaasi refers to ‘one who resigns or abandons all,’ that is, a renouncer. In Tamil poetry the sanhyaasi is portrayed as one who has no desire for gold (ponnaacai), land (mannaacai) and women (pennaacai). Traditionally, it was the fourth and last stage of life recommended for the Brahmins. However, there were other men aspiring for the same ideal but practised it differently. They lived in monasteries praying, studying and training disciples. Their mode of life was open to men of all castes (Cronin 1959:46).

3. In the traditional Hindu order, the Brahmin priests did not serve the lower castes. The latter, therefore, had their own priests drawn from their respective castes or any upper caste other than the Brahmins, especially from the Vellala caste. While the Brahmin priests were addressed as caami, these non-Brahmin priests were addressed as pandaaracaami. The Christian missionaries, set to serve the lower castes, combined both these terms and called themselves pandaaracaamikal.

4. In the eighteenth century the term ‘Malabar’ was used by the Portuguese to refer to the people and the languages of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. During the controversy with regard to de Nobili’s methods this term was used almost exclusively to refer to the Tamil people and their culture (Hambey 1997:212). The controversy is known in the Church history as The Malabar Rites Controversy, although geographically Madurai, the actual centre of the controversy, is far removed from Malabar. This is understandable in the light of the fact that the entire region was under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Angamally-Cranganore, situated in the Malabar Province of the Jesuits. This controversy would in subsequent years result in a protracted struggle between the Jesuits and the Capuchins, with understandably negative consequence for the Catholic Church’s missionary efforts in South India (see Ferroli 1951:418-87).
5. The term 'Council' is technically used in theology and canon law to refer to an occasional meeting of ecclesiastical persons having juridical power to make joint decisions of a doctrinal or disciplinary character that bind the constituencies represented. The standard Catholic enumeration recognises twenty-one ecumenical councils from Nicaea I (325) to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The Second Vatican Council was the twenty-first ecumenical council in the history of the Church. Important functionaries of the Church, namely, the bishops, cardinals, theologians from world over met in Rome with the Pope presiding over the gathering (Dulles 1994:235).
Picture 2.1

Robert de Nobili as a Sannyasi (Source: Cronin 1959).