CHAPTER – I

LANDMARK AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF VAILANKANNI

Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church, on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, 350 Kms. south of Madras, and 12 Kms. South of Nagapattinam, is called the ‘Lourdes of the East’. Like Lourdes in southern France, Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church is a Marian Shrine, attracting millions of pilgrims from India and abroad. On an average year, 1.5 to 2 million devotees visit this church.¹

According to the New Testament of the Bible, Elizabeth, who gave birth to John the Baptist at her old age calls Mary the Mother of the Lord.² Day by day the Church of Vailankanni Arockia Matha draws more and more of people towards God’s loving presence.³ Since it is the work of God’s mighty hands, no human power can put off the burning flame of faith in the troubled hearts of the devotees who flock to this beautiful artistic and peaceful church.

In the Bible one can find a wonderful argument made by Gamaliel, a Jewish expert in ally with the Jewish elders of Sanhedrin who wanted to put an end to the faith of Christianity, immediately after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. “If this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourself fighting against God”.⁴ Any wise person will certainly conclude,

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³ Interview with Ragavan, Welcome Lodge, Vailankanni on 3rd November 2006.
by observing the continuous flow of pilgrims to this world famous Church throughout the year, that it is the work of God.

Vailankanni

Location

The place Vailankanni is like a town in which one can find a kaleidoscopic picture of different culture. In spite of it being a small special grade Panchayat, it accommodates the countless people who visit daily. It is situated at a distance of 12 kilometers to the south of Nagapattinam, a port town, in South India.

Topography

The natural settings at Vailankanni are really very inspiring. The unending waves of the Bay of Bengal looks and sounds like a music channel that sings the glory and praise of God. By the right side of the main Church, at a distance of 200 metres, runs the river Vellaiar that is one of the branches of river Cauvery. Since the Vellaiar ends at the sea, during summer also the river is full of the backwaters of the sea. The sea at the eastern side, and the river at the southern side, facilitates the devotees to enjoy a cool and pleasant breeze and create a silent atmosphere for prayer and meditation. Thus the natural settings around the Vailankanni Church attract the tourists and devotees from different parts of the world.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Interview with R. Sundar Rajan, Reporter of Indian Express and Dhinamani, Nagappattinam on 19\(^{th}\) October 2006.
The etymology of Vailankanni

The word Vailankanni is simply understood as a name of a place, village or town. Etymologically speaking, the word Vailankanni denotes the river, Vellaiar, a small river which runs at the southern side of the Church.\(^6\)

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\text{Vailankanni} \quad - \quad \text{Vellai} + \text{Kanni}
\]

\textit{Kanni} in Tamil gives three different meanings

1. \textit{Kanni} = young virgin
2. \textit{Kanni} = trap
3. \textit{Kanni} = small canal (\textit{Vaaikkal} in Tamil)

Seaport at Vailankanni

According to the Madras District Gazetteer there were not less than eleven ports on the coast of Thanjavur district, of which eight were open to foreign trade. Thirumulavaal, Tranquebar, Nagappattinam, Vailankanni, Topputurai, Point Caliber, Muttippet and Adhirampettinam were those eight ports, had direct contact with foreign traders.\(^7\) Therefore, Vailankanni was a familiar sea port for the Portuguese and other foreign sailors.

Oral Tradition

According to the oral tradition that prevails in Vailankanni, there had been sea trade for several centuries and there had been a house called ship owner’s house. Dhanalakshmi, a descendant of the ship owner’s family states that a ship called ‘Mahalakshmi’ was missing for two years (17\(^{th}\) century AD) and it was found later.\(^8\)

\(^{6}\) Interview with Benjamin, a Tamil Scholar, Dindivanam on 9\(^{th}\) October 2006.
\(^{8}\) Interview with Dhana Leksmi, Ship Owners family, Vailankanni, 1\(^{st}\) September 2007.
The Pandaga Salai Street

The street in which ship owner’s house was located is called as Pandaga Salai Street in Vailankanni till today. The Tamil word ‘Pandaga Salai’ denotes the storehouse. There had been a storehouse in Vailankanni at the end of the Pandaga Salai Street, on the bank of the river Vellaiyar, which is at the edge of Bay of Bengal. The descendants of the ship owner’s family say that they utilised the Pandaga Salai to store up the precious commodities like salt, pepper and rice. From that storehouse they uploaded the cargo on the boats and then to the main cargo ship.
The Broken Sign Post of Pandaga Salai Street

From the evidences, that are found in Madras District Gazetteer it is learnt that no ships, small or large anchor closer than one and a half miles, as there is a heavy ground swell. Goods were brought from the ships to the shore in cargo boats of various sizes up to ten tons of weight⁹.

The above said proofs reveal the fact that there existed a seaport in Vailankanni, which facilitated the foreign trade and the contact with the foreign culture and faith.

Political Background

The early history of Nagappattinam and Vailankanni is connected with the Chola’s history. The late Kanakasabhai Pillai has inferred from a study of some of the early Tamil poets before the advent of Cholas. The country was occupied by the ferocious Naga race. According to him the domination of the

⁹ FR Hemingway, op. cit, p. 5.
Naga race extended up to Nagappattinam which is just 10 Kms away from Vailankanni.

**Punal Nadu (Land of Floods)**

The capital of Cholas was Uraiyur, Kaveripumpattinam which is about 50 Kms from Vaialankanni was at that time a great sea port. The Chola country was called *Punal Nadu* or the land of floods,\(^{10}\) since there were no dams to check the furious floods in the river Cauvery, the Chola land including Vailankanni would have been affected by frequent floods in the early days.

**A Brief Account of the Political Events**

Karikala Chola, whose reign has been assigned to the period from AD 50 to AD 95. His name ‘black foot’ was due to an attempt murder him by fire, which, though unsuccessful scorched and blackened his feet. His father died before his birth and he had difficulty in securing the throne. His son Killivalavan succeeded him. Then his brother Perunarkilli succeeded him and reigned in for history of Cholas\(^{11}\). From the information that is found in Madras District Gazetteer, one may learn that the Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang heard of the Chola country in AD 640 though he did not visit it\(^{12}\).

Later Rajaraja’s reign started in AD 1006 – 1007, and was succeeded by his son Rajendra Chola in AD 1011 – 1012. Till AD 1044 Rajendra Chola ruled and he shared his throne with his son Rajadhiraja Deva who succeeded as early as AD 1018 and continued to rule after Rajendra Chola’s death till AD 1053. Then Rajendra Deva ruled in AD 1053 – 1064 and was succeeded by the

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\(^{11}\) *Ibid*, p.15.

\(^{12}\) *Ibid*, p.18.
powerful king Vira Rajendra Deva who ruled till AD 1069. Till AD 1310 the Chola kings ruled the territory. In AD 1310 the invasion of Malik Kafur took place. Till AD 1365 Mohammadan kings reigned and were defeated by the forces of Vijayanagar. And thus Vailankanni and Nagappattinam were then within the limits of the Vijayanagar kingdom when Vasco Da Gama was followed by Alavarus Gabral in AD 1501\textsuperscript{13}.

**Advent of Christianity in India**

During the few centuries before and after Christ, India was on friendly terms with Greece and Rome. Indian merchants regularly visited western cities like Antigone and Alexandria and in turn India welcomed to her trade centers merchants from these regions. This contact with foreign countries definitely influenced not only the Indian history but also the Indian culture and life pattern. The conquerors and invaders who found their way to India very quickly merged with the people and accepted their way of life. One of the phenomena was that many central Asian invaders who conquered India became converting to Buddhism which flourished right from the time of emperor Asoka till the great revival of Brahminic Hinduism during the Gupta period (AD 320 – 490)\textsuperscript{14}.

There are two views among the scholars about the origin of Christianity in India. According to one view Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus founded Christianity in India. The other would ascribe the arrival of Christ in India to the enterprise of merchant and missionaries of the east – Syrian Persian Church. Those who propound apostolic origin do not deny the role of the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p.26.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p.21.
Persian Church in reinforcing Indian Christianity. According to some western tradition, Thomas, following the well-established trade routes, reached India some time in the middle of the first century AD. He converted many to Christianity including the members of royal families.

Later he suffered martyrdom and was buried in Mylapore in a place called, Santhome in Chennai. Later his mortal remains were transferred to the west (Edessa) where they were deposited for veneration. The writings after the Council of Nicea give importance to the popular view of Thomas’ apostolate in India. According to Indian tradition, Thomas came to India by sea and first landed in Cranganore about the year AD 52 and converted high class Hindu families of the present state of Kerala.\(^{15}\)

He then moved to China and then came down to Coromandal coast (south east coast of India) where he suffered martyrdom near Little Mount in Chennai. As the tradition goes, Christians from Malabar to West Asia and even from China used to go on pilgrimage to Mylapore Cathedral to venerate the tomb. The Thomas Christians of Kerala claim their continuity from apostolic period. From manuscripts, inscriptions and oral traditions, it is widely accepted among scholars today that the Church has been in existence in India since the early days of Christianity.\(^{16}\)

At the Thomas day celebration in New Delhi on December 1955 Rajendra Prasad, the then President of Republic India, made the following observation in his speech, “Remember, St Thomas came to India when many of


the countries in Europe had not yet became Christian. And so Indians who trace their Christianity to him have a longer history and a higher ancestry than that of Christians of many European countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened…”

**Padraodo Missionaries**

‘*Padraodo*’ mean missionaries who were given patronage by the Portuguese. In 1492 Christopher Columbus (1451 – 1506) sailed west across the Atlantic Ocean. His aim was to find a sea route to the rich lands of the Far East the lands of spices and silks. Under the royal patronage of Henry the Navigator, the prince of Portugal voyages and explorations were encouraged.

In 1487, a Portuguese sailor called Barthalomew Dias touched the Cape of Good Hope in Africa. Ten years later Vasco Da Gama went even further. He sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, up the south east coast of Africa and reached India in 1498. He made second voyage in 1502. Since the overland routes had fallen in the control of Turks, the Portuguese and the Spanish became interested in finding an alternative sea route to the riches of the east and succeeded.

The Christian church became powerful during the middle ages in Europe. Many men and women chosen to devote their lives to Church by becoming monks or nuns. They lived in monasteries or nunneries and most of them took the adventurous step to go overseas as missionaries.

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The Cross and the Crown, Faith and Empire worked together in the history of Portuguese. When the Portuguese navigators discovered the sea route round the Cape of Good Hope and brought Europe once again into direct contact with countries of Southern and Eastern Asia, the Popes entered with several agreements with the kings of Portugal regarding the evangelization of these lands.

The Portuguese kings too showed great interest and zeal in promoting the Christian faith. The immense territories of southern and eastern Asia and Africa were therefore placed under the Portuguese ecclesiastical jurisdiction of *Padraodos*. Portugal was the chief ecclesiastical authority appointed by the Pope to take care of the Christian population in India, and the Diocese of Goa was formed. As *Padraodos* were responsible for sending missionaries, in each ship that sailed from Lisbon to India, there were priests belonging to various religious orders like Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and diocesan priests traveled. After reaching the Indian shore, the *Padraodos* missionaries had their shelter in the fortresses, which the Portuguese had established and fulfilled the spiritual needs of the Portuguese sailors and the Indian Christians.

**Challenges to the Padraodo Missionaries**

The *Padraodo* Missionaries faced innumerable problems. Language was one of major obstacles they had to face. In spite of the ignorance of native language i.e., Tamil, they were successful in their propagation of faith and in

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establishing the churches on the Coromandal Coast. There were already thousands of Christian converts on the Coromandal Coast, who still did not know anything about Christianity. The missionaries realized the need of learning the mother tongue of the people, among whom they worked.

The Indian caste system which is based upon the birth of an individual was also another serious obstacle which so hindered the fast growth of Christianity in Tamil Nadu, according to Sharroch, a protestant missionary 23, “It is the birth which separated men like sheep and cows”. A Jesuit missionary Fr Burzes writes.

“…one can by exploits acquire honor and wealth, but that nobility cannot be acquired in that way; it is a pure gift of birth; neither can the big give it, nor an individual buy it. The King has no power on the caste”. 24

The tradition bound families were not allowed to give up their ancestral religion and embrace Christianity. Some times the relatives of the newly converted Christians even threatened the life of the missionaries. Moreover, the caste consciousness of the natives was the biggest challenge to the missionaries. The caste Hindus were not ready to forgive the missionaries for having contact with the unfortunate untouchables. The missionaries who had embraced Christianity which believes in equality, fraternity, tolerance, universal brotherhood and love could not and did not discriminate the downtrodden and the poor. The people of Tamil Nadu during the 16th and 17th centuries AD generally lived in poverty, remained illiterate, and had even no

24 Ibid, p.181
medical care. Climate, food habits, shortage of drinking water, which was always dirty, were also unbearable inconveniences that the missionaries had to face.\textsuperscript{25}

John De Britto who was born in Lisbon on 1\textsuperscript{st} March 1647 in an aristocratic family, as Fr Robert De Nobili, was one of the bravest missionaries who died for Jesus Christ. His father Don Salvador who was the Vicarious of Brazil under King John, died in 1650. His widowed mother, Dona Brites looked after the children with much care and diligence. John was naturally docile and amiable, even at that early age, he was eager to translate his knowledge into action. After the death of the Portuguese King John, he was appointed at a companion of the heir apparent to the throne of Don Affonso. When John De Britto was 11 years old he fell ill beyond recovery, but with the intercession of Francis Xavier he was cured. In gratitude, John decided to join the Society of Jesus. Accordingly he joined the Society in 1662 and met Fr Balthasar Da Costa, a Portuguese, who came from India to recruit men.

After his landing in India John De Britto preached bravely the everlasting and life giving words of Jesus and converted a large number of people enduring his untold trials and tribulations. On the way near Mangalam Fr John De Britto along with his catechists fell into the hands of the soldiers of Kumara Pillai, Commandant General and Prime Minister of Kilavan Sethupathi. The soldiers confiscated all that they had and the moment Kumara Pillai saw Fr John De Britto. He burst out into a fit of passion and started insulting him and calling him a poisoner, a sorcerer, and all sorts of ugly names.

Later the furious Maravas, chained them hand and foot, bound them to the trunks of trees to outrage and torture. They passed a full night and a part of the following day in that condition. As the customs and practices prevalent in Tamil society were terrific problems for the missionaries, John De Britto who advocated against polygamy had to face the capital punishment pronounced by Thadiya Thevar. Later on 4th February 1693 John De Britto was executed at Oriyur which is around 150 km away from Vailankanni.

Dedication and Commitment of the Missionaries

The Coromandal coast and the interior Tamil country of the 17th century witnessed the advent and growth of Christianity, which marked an important change in the religious history of people. Though the Christian Missionaries who were alien were insulted and isolated by the natives, they took up the cause of the religion and preached it in the courts, towns and in the villages. In spite of the caste barriers, religious superstitions and political upheavals, the Padraodo Missionaries could succeed in their missionary endeavours by their perseverance, tolerance, dedication, commitment, and love for Jesus Christ.

Though they were alien to the Indian custom and stood against the caste barriers they adjusted themselves to the real situation by which they could win over thousands of souls to the Christian fold. They even went to the extent of retaining the caste system among the converted Christians. The opposition to Christianity was challenging and the highly educated missionaries managed it.

Moreover, the Jesuits in India established the custom to meet the rulers periodically and keep in touch with them. Immediately after their arrival, they attempted to meet the Mughal king Akbar. They succeed in their efforts in 1580. Akbar received the first Jesuit Mission at Fatehpur Sikri. From Jesuit letters it is observed that Akbar had very cordial relations with the Jesuits. Jahangir too was quite well disposed towards the Jesuits.

As in the north, in the south also the Jesuits attempted to penetrate into the interior regions. In 1593, the Jesuit outpost at Santhome, Mylapore provided the starting point for a mission to the ruler of Vijayanagar. It was well received by Venkata II and the Fathers of Society of Jesus were held in great esteem at his court. The king Venkata Rajulu had allowed the Jesuit Missionaries to build a church at Chandragiri.²⁸

**Trade and Faith on the Coromandal Coast from 16\textsuperscript{th} - 17\textsuperscript{th} C. AD**

The Coromandal coast, which starts from Point Calimere and extends upto Punicat and beyond were with in the territory of Vijayanagar rulers during this period. Punicat in the north and Nagapattinam in south were the two chief harbours along this coast. Of the two Portuguese settlements established on the Coromandal by this time, one was at Mylapore (renamed at Santhome by Portuguese) and the other at Nagapattinam. The Portuguese used Punicat as port before Mylapore was discovered in 1517. Nagapattinam was a flourishing commercial city.

It was governed by an ‘adhigari’ (official) of Vijayanagar. Its harbour was the best along the whole coast. Large quantities of rice were collected here

and transported every year to the west coast. The land was fertile and the food was cheap. The harbour carried on trade with many far-eastern countries. According to Mathias Mundadan, “the Chinese brick built Pagoda was found in Nagapattinam as the reminder of Chinese trade which flourished till 15th century”. 29

When the Portuguese arrived as in the other ports, it was the Muslims who controlled the trade in Nagapattinam and the whole Coromandal coast. Perhaps there were also some eastern Christians engaged in trade, when exactly the Portuguese established themselves at Nagapattinam is not clear.

By the end of the period according to a survey there were around 2,000 Portuguese with their slaves dispersed all along the coast of whom some hundred were in Nagappattinam, 500 in Mylapore about 1500 were in Masulipattinam and other harbours; the rest were on board of their ships. These Portuguese were engaged in trade and other occupations like sailing to various places like Orissa, Bengal, Chittagong etc. They were practically free from any control by the Portuguese Governor; neither the captain of Coromandal who generally resided at Mylapore, nor the Captain of Nagapattinam exercised any authority over them. 30

In 1518 Fr Alvaro Penteado, a Portuguese Padraodo Missionary wrote that there were several clerics on the Coromandal coast, but they were more interested in trade than in saving the souls of the people. Many Franciscan chronicles claim that Franciscan missionary monks went to Nagapattinam with the first Portuguese and they built a monastery and two churches before AD

29 Mathias Mundadan, op. cit, p. 401.
1540. They have converted about 3,000 people. However, this claim has no documentary evidence to support it. By the observations made on the Madras District Gazetteers it is learnt that missionary activities in the Coromandel coast in 10th century AD was carried on by four different bodies; namely, the Roman Catholics, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, the Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission and the Wesleyans.\textsuperscript{31}

The Italian traveler Caesar Frederic, who visited the Portuguese settlement at Nagapattinam in 1570 AD shows that the Christian religion had taken a strong hold by then and was viewed with considerable tolerance by the Nayak Rajas. The life of the missionaries attracted the attention of the native rulers. The friendly attitude of rulers like Akbar, the Mughal emperor, Thirumalai Nayak and Queen Mangammal of Madurai and Narasimha Raja Udayar of Mysore allowed the missionaries of the gospel to preach freely in their territories and to Christianise the people.

Queen Mangammal was always benevolent towards the Christians. Thirumalai Nayak granted them the right to build churches and to settle wherever they needed. Sevappa Nayak of Thanjavur too was kind and generous towards the Padraodo missionaries and granted ten villages to them to erect churches and dispensaries. But the Portuguese were not at all permitted to erect fortress in the Coromandal coast.\textsuperscript{32} Thus the internal as well as external political patronage helped the missionaries for their progressive propagation.

The Portuguese sailors came to India with great and clear motivations, commercial and missionary in character. As merchant adventurers they aimed

\textsuperscript{31} FR Hemingway, \textit{op. cit}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{32} KA Neelakanda Sastri, \textit{op. cit}, pp.104 – 105.
at the control of the sea-borne tract of India, and as missionaries, they determined to propagate Christianity. In their efforts and endeavors, the Portuguese region extended its support to the Portuguese commercial activities in general and missionary activities in particular. This political support encouraged them to perform their activities in a successful way. In addition to the royal patronage, they even received the papal support, which strengthened their efforts and endeavors. The king for their services and maintenance supplied large funds. This was the basic reason why the Portuguese merchants too shoulder missionary activities side by side with their commercial enterprises.

It is quite interesting to note that the Portuguese commercial activities and missionary activities went on hand in hand along the Coromandal coast during the time of Nayaks of Thanjavur (1535 to 1675 AD). Hinduism also flourished under the Nayaks. Christianity too was propagated, Christian centres and churches were expanded in the Coromandal coast. The most active and successful missionaries in 16th and 17th centuries in the Coromandal coast were the Franciscans. They were the first to set up their residences and churches in India. According to the missionary reports, the Franciscans were the first to settle at Mylapore in AD 1536. Fr Antonio Padraodo, the Franciscan priest took initial step to teach the converted Christians and even preached the gospel to the Hindus and built a church for the new converts. It is quite obvious to note that wherever they had their residences, there they have erected their churches for worship. Vailankanni too is one among such churches patronised by the

Franciscan missionaries. The people of Tamil Nadu during 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries AD lived generally in poverty, remained illiterate and lacked minimum care including medical care. Under such circumstances, the Jesuits worked among the poor and the downtrodden to redress their hunger and thirst. In later period, the Jesuits of Madurai founded St Joseph’s College at Nagapattinam in 1846 AD. Due to frequent storms and floods, the same college was shifted to Tiruchirappalli.

**Mother Mary in the midst of Apostles**

According to the biblical reference and Church records in the year 33 AD Jesus Christ was crucified. Near the Cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister Mary, the wife of Cleopas and Mary Magadalane. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, said to his mother, “Dear Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother”. From that time on, this disciple took her into their home.

The early Christians joined constantly in prayer, along with Mary, the Mother of Jesus. After the death of Mary, the early Christians started a fervent devotion to her. Later the devotion to Mary Matha crept into India along with the missionaries.

**The Portuguese Missions**

In the 13\textsuperscript{th} century AD when the political situation in Christian Europe, was troubled by the many attacks from the Mongols. Pope Innocent IV sent missionaries to convert the Mongols and all the Muslims as well. These

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34 Interview with Bishop S.L. Gabriel, Thanjavur, 3.10.2007.  
missionaries moved further east into other parts of Asia and were successful in starting a mission in China. One of the important routes to China from Europe was by sea and whoever went by this route had to pass through Indian ports. Then, through the Bay of Bengal, Malaya and Indo-China, they could reach China. Thus India became an important point on the route to China.

The Portuguese officially established their colony in India in AD 1505. In AD 1510 they conquered Goa and made it their capital. Bassein near Bombay and Cochin in south India were other Portuguese centres. As a result of the Portuguese missions, there are two groups of Christians namely, the Konkan coast Christians of Goa, Bassein and Mangalore; and the Coromandal Christians, the fisherfolk of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

The Portuguese Sailors as the founders of Vailankanni Church

J. Tekkedath, in his book ‘History of Christianity in India’ states that Vasco Da Gama discovered the sea-route to India in AD 1492. Vasco Da Gama came out with the enthusiasm of a Crusader. He had on board a chaplain (priest) to attend to the spiritual needs on the expedition. He had a tremendous faith in Jesus and Mother Mary. Wherever he landed he raised lasting monuments to the cross. Imitating his spirit, the Portuguese sailors of 16th and 17th centuries, became the founders and benefactors of so many shrines of Our Lady in Africa, in India and in the Far East including Vailankanni. Some English writers actually called the Portuguese better church builders than empire builders. They might be both.

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38 Ibid, p. 33.
According to George Moraes, the Portuguese concentrated on conversion and baptism. They were in constant conflict with the Muslims who controlled the pepper trade. The Portuguese had come to India in search of the pepper routes in the first place. Hence these crusades served as a part of the conflict. Malaca was captured, and many Muslims were massacred (1511 AD) and Europe rejoiced over it all. However, the Portuguese wanted to show that their colonisation was also missionary and evangelical. Therefore the local people had to be baptised.\(^\text{40}\)

**Vailankanni within the limits of Vijayanagar Kingdom**

Vasco Da Gama was followed by Alvares Cabral in AD 1501. This second Indian expedition brought eight Franciscan missionaries, who became the pioneers of modern missions in India. On the eight Franciscan mission, Gabral brought out to India, one converted and baptised a Raja of Calicut, another Raja of Cochin, another King of Cannanore and yet another a prince of the royal house of Marsinga (Vijayanagar). Vailankanni and Nagapattinam were then within the limits of the Vijayanagar Kingdom.\(^\text{41}\)

**Vailankanni, at the arrival of the Dutch**

J. Thekkadeth, states that in the 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) centuries, there were some isolated Christian communities in and around the port city Nagapattinam, Tranquebar, Cuddalore and Pondicherry. The Portuguese settled in Nagapattinam some time between AD 1518 and AD 1530. When Francis Xavier visited in AD 1545, he could see the established church in these areas.

\(^\text{40}\) George Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India*, The Examiner Press, Bombay, 1964, p. 120.

\(^\text{41}\) Ibid, p. 121.
Following the Franciscans, the Jesuits, the Dominicans and Augustinians did missionary apostolate till the first half of the 17th century AD. On the political side there was widespread opposition from the Nayaks of Thanjavur (King of Thanjavur). The Dutch captured the town in AD 1658 from the Nayak and the Catholic missionaries were expelled. However the Church of Vailankanni, the famous Basilica today, remained intact under the patronage of Franciscans.\textsuperscript{42}

The Dutch made Nagapattinam the capital of their Indian colonies.\textsuperscript{43} The Dutch were especially opposed to the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. They called it as Mariolatry, something worse than idolatry. The question now rises up in one’s minds is, how the devotion to Mary in Vailankanni could escape from the wrath of the Dutch. Probably because Vailankanni and part of Nagapattinam (present RC Church) was outside the limits of Dutch territory, and within the direct jurisdiction of the Indian Raja of Vijayanagar. In spite of persecution, the Catholics, in and around Nagapattinam, were able to preserve their Faith and devotion to Mary Matha. There were about 4000 strong Catholics in AD 1771, towards the end of Dutch period when Fr Rosario was their Parish Priest.\textsuperscript{44}

**Vailankanni under the Diocese of Mylapore (1606 – 1953)**

The earlier account of Christianity is known from the letter written by the inhabitants of Santhome (Mylapore) to the King of Portuguese in AD 1538. The letter reveals the fact about the population of 1,80,000 Indian Christians, who were all fishermen. During the famine in AD 1583, many people from the interior areas had gone to Santhome and sold themselves to Portuguese. It was

\textsuperscript{42} Joseph Tekkadeth, *op. cit*, pp. 195 – 197.
\textsuperscript{43} SR Santos, *Vailankanni*, Don Bosco Press, Thanjavur, 1933, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{44} *Ibid*, p. 15.
reported that Jesuits baptised about three thousand of these people. In AD 1606 Mylapore was erected as a Diocese by the Bull signed by Pope Paul V and the first Bishop of Mylapore was Dom Sebastino De San Pedro Nagapattinam – Vailankanni was under his ecclesiastical jurisdiction.45

**Vailankanni Arockiamatha Church under Nagapattinam Parish (1534 – 1771 AD)**

Nagapattinam means city of snakes, sacred reptiles much spoken of Hindu mythology. James Grant, author of Cassell’s ‘History of India’, ascribes to Nagapattinam the discretion of possessing a towering Hindu temple of ancient date which was said to have been built by the devil in a single night.46

There is no historical evidence to show that Thomas, the Apostle visited Nagapattinam in the course of his missionary work in Tamil Nadu. One knows that Francis Xavier visited Nagapattinam twice in the year AD 1545. A word about Francis Xavier might be appropriate here. He is called ‘The Apostle of India’, ‘Patron of the Missions’. He came to India in AD 1542 and labored much among fisher folk who were converted to Christianity in 1535. He also evangelized Goa, Cochin and several parts of India. He traveled widely in and out of India. In his time new Jesuit houses were established in Santhome (Mylapore), Cochin, Bassein and Quilon. He left India in AD 1552 to proceed to China but while waiting in the harbour of Sancian for four months, he breathed his last, in a straw hut that was not his own.47

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45 SR Santos, *op. cit*, p. 2.
The Society of Jesus was represented at Nagapattinam by Fr Francisco Perez of whom Francis Xavier writes:

“When I consider the abundant harvest a single man is daily reaping for the Catholic Church (Fr Perez) I feel overwhelmed with confusion and disturbed to the bottom of my soul for my own laxity… Nevertheless what envy his most is not his zeal for souls but his incomparable humility. As for myself I regard Fr Francisco Perez as one of the greatest saints the Church possesses today”. 48

Until the suppression of the Jesuits in 177349, the Jesuit priests had laboured hard in the vineyard of God in and around Nagapattinam along with Franciscans and Augustinians. In fact during 16th and 17th centuries, it was not unusual to find missionaries belonging to different missionary bodies working hand in hand with one Episcopal head the Bishop. It is quiet possible that some of these missionaries might have visited Vailankanni in the course of their mission work. But unfortunately there is no record about the matter. All such records might have been destroyed by the Dutch traders who captured Nagapattinam from the Portuguese in AD 1660. It is feared that the Dutch might have destroyed many of the precious documents, records and archives maintained by the Catholic missionaries. So it is difficult to write actual account of the events which took prior to and immediately after the arrival of the Dutch in Nagapattinam.

According to S.L. Gabriel, Nagapattinam was governed by a captain who holded office for three years. He was in charge of the administration of

justice and had jurisdiction not only over the Portuguese themselves, but also over the Indian Christians.\textsuperscript{50} So far as Christian law is concerned, the Nagapattinam Christian colony flourished for over a century, so long as it was under Portuguese hegemony. As long as the presence of the Dutch at Nagapattinam, Vailankanni made little progress. With the advent of the British in AD 1783 Vailankanni began a new era of prosperity.\textsuperscript{51}

**The First Chapel at Vailankanni**

According to the local oral tradition, during the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century there lived at Vailankanni village a poor widow with her only son who was lame by birth. In order to earn money for their living, the widow used to keep a buttermilk pot with her son at a spot called ‘Nadu Thittu’, where there was a huge banyan tree. Nadu Thittu was, somewhat higher than the surrounding ground. Probably for this reason, the place was called Nadu Thittu. The boy used to sit there and sell buttermilk. The cool shade of the tree attracted the passers-by and the lame boy’s stall gradually became known to many people.

One day the lame boy was seated anxiously waiting for his customers. The day was extremely hot and no one turned up to buy buttermilk. As he was looking for customers, he suddenly found standing before him a very beautiful lady, holding in her arms a still more beautiful child. The sweet smiling lady approached the poor cripple boy and asked him for a cup of buttermilk for the baby. The lame boy felt immensely happy and proud to be privileged to oblige such a distinguished customer. Without any hesitation, he gave her a cup of buttermilk. She started feeding the child with buttermilk. The lame boy


\textsuperscript{51} SR Santos, \textit{op. cit}, p. 15.
observed all these. The lady looked at him with pity and turned to the child in her arms. She pleaded to the child to cure the lame boy who had quenched his thirst. The Mother’s request was granted in no time. The lame boy did not realise the miracle that had been worked in him, but he was gazing at the Mother and the child. She gratefully smiled at the boy for the drink and requested him to do her an additional favour.

The lady asked the boy to go to Nagapattinam and inform a certain rich Catholic gentleman that she desired to have a chapel built in Her name at Vailankanni. With a look of veneration and self-pity the boy pleaded that it was physically impossible for him to walk. The woman graciously smiled at him and made it clear that he was no longer lame. On this, the boy jumped up with joy and realized his ability to walk. In fact, the boy ran as fast as he could proceed towards Nagapattinam.

The boy reached the town. There he met the Catholic man and revealed the message of Our Lady. The man had no difficulty in believing him, because he himself had a similar vision of the Lady in his sleep on the previous night. That good man had already made up his mind to build a small chapel in Vailankanni in honor of the Blessed Virgin as directed by her in the vision. He went with the boy to the place where the boy had met the lady with the child. The people of the locality were stunned at the miraculous cure of the lame boy. The Catholic man of Nagapattinam soon set up a thatched chapel in Vailankanni. It was fitted with an altar and a beautiful statue of Mother Mary with the Infant Jesus in her left arms was placed on the altar.\footnote{Ibid, pp. 4 – 5.}
Soon the news spread everywhere. Christians and non-Christians flocked to the spot. Many favours were granted to the people who came to pray in Vailankanni. Because of the striking cure of the lame boy and other subsequent cures, Mother Mary came to be known as ‘Vailankanni Arockia Matha’ (Our Lady of Good Health Vailankanni).

Till to date all those who come to this church with unshakable faith and trust in God, find their intentions and ardent desires being fulfilled. Therefore, it is needless to doubt about the authenticity of the above oral tradition about the lame boy and the two more oral traditions which speak about the vision of Vailankanni Arockia Matha to a shepherd boy, and the storm-tossed Portuguese ship.

**Our Lady’s Tank (Matha Kulam)**

*The view of Our Lady’s tank in early days*
Another tradition tells about a little shepherd boy who was on his way on a very hot day from Vailankanni to Nagapattinam, carrying a pot, full of milk for his master. As he was very tired and wanted to rest a while, he placed his pot of milk under a banyan tree on the bank, quenched his thirst at the tank, and sat down to rest a while under the cool breeze of the tree. Soon he fell into a sweet slumber. At that time he had a bright vision of a beautiful lady standing before him, holding a lovely child in her arms. He became spell bound. Her serene beautiful face with divine appearance astonished him immensely. The child’s face was bright and glorious as the rising sun. Fascinated by this rare phenomenon, the shepherd boy was deeply moved and was at loss of words. His heart was filled with a sense of awe-mingled with reverent fear.

The woman greeted him with a motherly smile and asked him to give some milk for her child. “How did she know that I am carrying milk in my pot? How can I dispose of my master’s milk? These questions terminated him. He felt that it was impossible for him to deny her that simple request. He thought of finding an excuse to explain the matter to his master. Though he was pre-occupied with these thoughts for a moment, he joyfully gave her the milk and then noticed the smile of satisfaction from the baby’s face.
The shepherd boy rushed to Nagapattinam carrying the remaining milk in his pot. There he reported the completely strange happenings to his master and the reasons for his unusual delay. He begged him to excuse him for the shortage of milk in the pot. However, they were astonished when they lifted the lid of the milk pot; it was full to be brim with milk. In spite of it, the shepherd boy insisted as earnestly as he could that he had given away milk from the pot to the beautiful woman. The master found it so strange and he rushed to Vailankanni with the boy. The woman of unspeakable beauty with a still more beautiful child in her arms gave them the Darshan (apparition).

The story of this miraculous happening soon spread like a wild fire in Vailankanni, Nagapattinam and the neighbourhood. The Christians at Nagapattinam who heard about it, were certain that the Kaatchi (vision) was that the Blessed Virgin Mary with Child Jesus. From that day the tank near Anna Pillai Street at Vailankanni came to be known as Matha Kulam (Our
Lady’s Tank$^{53}$. To this day, it is known by that glorious name. Millions of pilgrims visit the tank with faith and reverence. Devotees believed that she has blessed them all with her gracious graces. Whether worries or diseases, everything disappears as the mist, at the sight of the morning sun.

The present church at Matha Kulam was constructed in the year 1982. This was designed as a framed structure with RCC columns, beams and slab. Walls are constructed with country bricks in cement mortar and plastered with cement mortar. Thickness of wall is about 9 inches. Ceiling height is 16 feet. All wooden members are country wood. MS grills are provided for all the windows. Flooring is finished with marble. Inside wall is painted with distemper and outside with cement paint. All wood and iron members are painted with synthetic enamel paint. The area of the ground floor is of 1635 sq ft and the cost of construction @ Rs. 450/- Rs. 7,35,750/-$^{54}

The Sailors’ Chapel

According to the oral tradition that prevails even today, the first chapel at the present site of the magnificent church was built by the Portuguese sailors in the 16$^{th}$ century AD. They were sailing from Macao (China) to Colombo in Sri Lanka. While crossing the Bay of Bengal they were caught in a terrible storm. The sea was furious, the waves lashed high. The fate of their ship was likely to end. The sailors were helpless. As their ship was sinking their voyage on this earth was nearing to an end. But they did not lose their hearts. They lifted up their hearts to God. They began to pray fervently to Mother Mary. They vowed to build a church in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mother Mary

$^{53}$ SL Gabriel, op. cit, p. 5.
$^{54}$ Auditors Report, Vailankanni Church, 31$^{st}$ April 1985.
wherever they could land safe. Their prayer was heard. They reached the shore at Vailankanni, went inside the thatched chapel that had been built already by the Nagapattinam Catholic gentleman, and knelt before the image of Vailankanni Arockia Matha with the Child Jesus in her arms, but for whom they might have been at the bottom of the sea.

The Portuguese sailors soon set about the best way of fulfilling their vow to build a permanent chapel for Mother Mary. As they were settling about the suitable place, Vailankanni Arockia Matha appeared to them and pointed out the place for the proposed chapel at the very spot where the majestic Shrine Basilica stands today. With their own hands, they dug the foundation for a decent church, which might be strong enough to perpetuate their gratitude. From here and there they secured the necessary materials and finally succeeded in building a church measuring 24 ft by 12 ft with windows and roof and tower in the usual Western Gothic style.

The construction was over. Now they were at total dilemma; whether they should transfer into it the statue from the thatched chapel or import a new one from their homeland. However, one morning the Portuguese and the local people saw to their great wonder, the sacred statue of Arockia Matha from the thatched chapel transferred to the new chapel’s altar. They could never discover who was responsible for the transfer; hence, they piously believed that Arockia Matha had seen to it herself.

The sailors were not satisfied with all they could do for the chapel. They kept constant touch with Vailankanni, and in their subsequent visits furnished it
with many other improvements.\footnote{SL Gabriel, \textit{op. cit}, p. 11.} Among them one may be mentioned the rich and rare porcelain plates illustrating wonderful historical scenes from the Holy Bible. These plates from China may still be seen fixed round the high altar, where the Vailankanni Arockia Matha majestically and gracefully stands. Finally, according to the oral tradition, the Portuguese sailors started the custom of celebrating the annual feast of Vailankanni Arockia Matha on the 8\textsuperscript{th} September, the feast of the Nativity of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as the commemoration of the very day of their safe landing at Vailankanni.\footnote{Interview with Mgr. SL Gabriel, Former Bishop of Tiruchirappalli on 23\textsuperscript{rd} September 2006.}

\section*{Vailankanni, the New Parish}

The code of Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church gives the following definition for the term ‘Parish’. A Parish is a certain community of Christ’s faithful stable established within a particular church, whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor.\footnote{The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, \textit{The Code of Canon Law}, Canon Law 515, First edition, Collins Liturgical Publications, London, 1983, p. 92.}

Initially Vailankanni was a part of Nagapattinam Parish. As pilgrims poured in Fr Antonio De Rozario, the then Parish Priest of Nagapattinam Catholic Church was appointed in AD 1771 as the first parish priest of Vailankanni. Then Vailankanni was raised to the status of an independent parish. As Fr Antonio De Rozario was Parish Priest of Nagapattinam for a good many years he had considerable experience about the locality and in building up churches. Before Vailankanni became an independent parish, the priest from Nagapattinam would come and reside in Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church.
only during September, the month of pilgrimage. On 8th September every year the Thiruvizha (grand feast) of Vailankanni Arockia Matha was celebrated in a grand manner and it has been continued till day. The evidence to prove that Vailankanni was raised to the status of an independent parish is found in the Register of Mylapore.\(^{58}\) The evidence to prove that Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church was under the Nagapattinam Parish is found in the following letter:

“According to the above order of the very Rev. Fr Provincial, I have inspected the Books we have in the Provincial Archives and found in the Book called-Paradima-fol, 79, the foundation of Parochial Church of Nagapattinam, which is as follows:- “In the city of Nagapattinam, taken by the Dutch, the Convent (church and residence) our order had in that city, was transferred to and replaced by the Church of Nossa sen hora de Immaculate Conceicao, built by Fr Francisco do Oriente. It exists at present with almost four thousand souls. The Parish Priest Fr Antonio do Rozario of our order, who administrates also the church of Our Lady of Health, situated at the Bay, in the place called Velanganny”, above referred to, this is what I found and do report.

(sd) Fr PGMCIO DASSNIA, TRINDADE, Provincial Secretary”\(^{59}\)

As one learned from the above documents, Vailankanni was raised to the status of an independent Parish in AD 1771. It is fitting to give the chronological list of Parish Priests of Vailankanni.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{58}\) Register of Mylapore Archbiocese, p.79.

\(^{59}\) SR Santos, op. cit, p. 19.

### Table I
Chronological Order of Parish Priests of Vailankanni

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1771</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr Antonio De Rozario</td>
<td>Franciscan Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1774</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>Fr Joseph De SantaRza De Viterbo</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>Fr Antonio De Rozario Commissary</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1779</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr Louis Dos Remdios</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1783</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>Fr Antonio De Rozario Commissary</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1788</td>
<td>December</td>
<td>Fr Antonio De Jesus Mary Jose</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr Antonio De Rozario Commissary</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr Jos S. Roza De Viterbo</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1814</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>Fr Constantino De Jesus Maria Commissary</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>Fr Thomas Da Piedada</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>Fr Francis Xavier Mascarenhas</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>Fr Felipe De Jesus</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr Francisco Das Dores</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fr Felipe De Jesus</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>Fr Clemente Das Dores</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>Fr Isidore Manuel Allemao</td>
<td>Diocesion – Priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>Fr Jose Felis</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>Fr Felipe Mery Joaquim Dias</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>Fr Ignacio Antonio d’Andrade</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>Fr Miguel Francisco Fernandes</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>December</td>
<td>Fr Joaquim Jose Louis</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>Fr Guilherma Jose Dias</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>December</td>
<td>Fr Joaquim Jose Louis</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>Fr Martino Valeriano De Sa</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr Joaquim Francisco Da Piedade Dias</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>Fr Camillo Fernandes</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fr Sebastiao Xavier De Noro</td>
<td>Parish priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr MV Rodrigues</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fr Maria Susai</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr Thomas Vaz</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Fr SL Gabriel</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>December</td>
<td>Fr MM Sammanasu</td>
<td>Rector &amp; Parish Priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fr G. Arul Irudayam</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fr A. Xavier</td>
<td>Rector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fr F. Antony Samy</td>
<td>Parish Priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fr B. Arockiadoss</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above list of priests shows that the Franciscans of the Santhome Diocese of Mylapore and the province of Goa were in charge of Vailankanni from the beginning up to AD 1847. Then the secular priests (Diocesan Priests) of the Diocese of Mylapore took charge. The change came about because of the suppression of the Religious Orders in Portugal and Colonies in AD 1834, under influence of Free Masonary. Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church renders wonderful service to the poor in particular, with the same spirit of the Franciscan missionaries. The Franciscan origin and ownership of this church perpetuated by the place of honor given to two Franciscan Saints; Antony of Lisbom and Francis of Assissi.

The holy images of these two saints are found at the side altars on either side of the miraculous image of Arcokia Matha at the High Altar. This is another evidence to show that the Vailankanni Parish was under the control of the Franciscan Order. According to the Parish records, the Parish was handed over to the Diocesan priest in AD 1890. Therefore, the secular priests of the Diocese of Mylapore were in-charge of Vailankanni until November 1952; when the new Diocese of Thanjavur was founded; the Diocesan priests of Thanjavur Diocese became the custodians of this famous church. The three commissaries (District Superiors) mentioned in the list as Parish Priests of Vailankanni, point to the importance of the shrine at that time.

As days passed, the number of devout pilgrims visiting this church increased. The fame of Vailankanni spread gradually. The wonderful and inexplicable miracles increased great in number. People, who happened to

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Ibid, p. 22.
witness them or had first hand information about them, carried pleasant memories with them and communicated them to their near and dear ones. Thus, the fame and glory of the gracious Vailankanni Arockia Matha spread throughout the land. Year by year the number of devout pilgrims increased. Many came with eager and earnest prayers for favors, graces, blessings and immediate help. Some more came with hearts filled with gratitude to give thanks to the miraculous mother for favors granted. In addition, by the introduction of faster and more convenient transport facilities like, the steamship, the railway train, and metalled tar roads, the number of pilgrims to this shrine increased.⁶³

**Vailankanni in the phase of the New Diocese**

Until 1952 according to the records of Vailankanni Church, the Parish churches of Nagapattinam and Vailankanni were under the Diocese of Mylapore. At that period, the Diocese of Mylapore was administered under what was known as the Portuguese ‘Padroado’. Under the Padroado system, the civil government of the king of Portugal in Europe met all the expenses of the Diocese of Mylapore. At the same time, Pope also had the ecclesiastical control over the Diocese of Mylapore. In other words the King of Portugal looked after the material needs of the Diocese of Mylapore while the Pope looked after the spiritual needs of it. In the year 1949 this dual system came to an end; the Portugal patronage of the Diocese of Mylapore was stopped once for all. The Diocese of Mylapore was placed under the Sacred Congregation for the propagation of faith under the direct control of the Pope with its headquarters in Rome. In 1951, Dom Manuel Guerreino, the seventeenth and

⁶³ Interview with Mgr. SL Gabriel, Former Bishop of Tiruchirappalli on 23rd September 2006.
the last Bishop of Mylapore was transferred as the Bishop of Angola in the province of Mozambique in Africa.\textsuperscript{64} It was during that period the Holy See in Rome erected a new and independent Diocese called the ‘Diocese of Thanjavur’ comprising the southern portion of old Diocese of Mylapore. Thanjavur town was chosen to be the head quarters of the new diocese. On 19\textsuperscript{th} March 1953, Mgr. R. Arockiasamy Sundaram, was consecrated at Madras as the first Bishop of the new Diocese of Thanjavur. He assumed charge of his Diocese at Thanjavur town on 24\textsuperscript{th} March 1953. During that period Vailankanni and Nagapattinam were under the civil District of Thanjavur. Obviously, Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church came under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Thanjavur.\textsuperscript{65}

**Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church gains the status of Basilica**

A Church that is being raised to the status of Basilica is the greatest honor that can be conferred on a church. The word *Basilica* comes from Greek, and it signifies a ‘Royal Hall’.\textsuperscript{66} In course of time this word has come to mean large and beautiful hall. In ancient times kings from all over the world in general and from Rome in particular, erected large halls for administrative purpose. The Indian rulers too constructed a good number of such large halls where the kings used to have the royal ‘Dharbar’ e.g. Thirumalai Nayakkar Mahal in Madurai. The Indian temples also hold similar halls, e.g. ‘Madurai Aayiramkal Mandapam’ (A Joint Hall with Thousand pillars). The first hall bearing the name of basilica began to exist in Athens. But after the fall of the Greeks, Roman Empire looked up a new phase. Julius Caesar artistically built

\textsuperscript{64} SL Gabriel, *op. cit*, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, p. 38.
up the ‘Hall of Basilica Julia’. It was built mainly for the administrative purpose. It is somewhat similar to the ‘Dharbar Halls’ in India.\textsuperscript{67}

Followed by that he erected beautiful churches at Bethlehem the birthplace of Jesus Christ and at Nazareth\textsuperscript{68} where Jesus Christ was brought up by Mary and Joseph and hence Jesus is called by the name, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’.

At present, a Basilica is a constructed church, usually built with the front facing the East. It is required that a church in order to be called a ‘Basilica’ should contain some work of art, or should house the body of a saint or a celebrated image much venerated in the land or be a famous place of pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{69}

In India there are a few minor basilicas; the Basilica of Our Lady of Mount Bandra in Mumbai, the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa wherein the undecayed Body of Francis Xavier is kept intact, the Basilica of Thomas in Mylapore – Chennai, Basilica of Vailankanni Arockia Matha Shrine, Basilica of Our Lady of Health in Bangalore, Basilica of Miraculous Mother of Poondi in Thanjavur District, Tuticorin Our Lady of Snows Basilica and Tiruchirappalli Holy Redeemers Basilica.\textsuperscript{70}

Mgr. RA Sundaram, the first Bishop of Thanjavur Diocese petitioned to the Holy See Pope John XXIII to pass an Order, to raise up the Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church to the status of Basilica and to enrich it with all the privileges attached to Basilica for the spiritual benefit of pilgrims. In 1962 His

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{69} Interview with Mgr. SL Gabriel, former Bishop of Tiruchirappalli on 23\textsuperscript{rd} September 2006.
\textsuperscript{70} Interview with Fr G. Arul Irudayam, Former Parish Priest of Vailankanni on 25\textsuperscript{th} September 2006.
Holiness Pope John XXIII graciously issued orders raising the church to the exalted state of Basilica. Thus, the Vailankanni Matha Church began to be linked to the St Mary’s Major Basilica of Rome.

The Present Church

It is learnt how Vailankanni Arockia Matha Church attained the status of Basilica, and thus the name and fame has spread everywhere. Now one shall analyze the present structure and style of the church building as such.

The term ‘Church’ means ‘House of God’. Kadavul is the Tamil word for God. Kadavul in Tamil means, ‘the omnipotent God’. This word therefore, gives us the indication that the ancient people of Tamil Nadu were monotheists. Monotheism is a most important principle of Christianity. In fact the Bible states, “I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me”. Constructing ‘House of God’ was a common practice in the ancient world. King David, the second King of Israelites gathered a lot of precious materials in order to build a majestic temple for God in the city of Jerusalem. But he could not succeed. He was followed by his son Solomon. Solomon, the great and wise king built the temple of the Lord Yaweh, in Jerusalem.

Interview with F. Antony Samy, Parish Priest of Vailankanni on 25th September 2007.
Interview with Benjamin, Tamil Scholar, Lumen Institute, Dindivanam on 3rd September 2006.
The synonyms for the word ‘House of God’ are the following: Church, Temple, Kottam, Anthanam, Ambalam, Koil, Palli. Koil in early days meant king’s palace and fortress. According to JJ Morris, King Imayavaramban was a great builder of fortress. There were wide moats all round the fortress providing additional protection against invading forces. Outside these moats around the fortress, the area was fully planted with a thick growth of protective trees known as ‘Kaval Maram’ to safeguard the defending soldiers.76

Like the ‘Kaval Maram’ of the ancient period, a huge, upright pole is found at the left side of the main entrance of the Arockia Matha Church. It is called the Kodi Maram (flag pole) planted at the distance of the twenty feet away from the main church wall. The huge pole and its colourful flag with the image of Matha produce the look of a mast in the Portuguese ship.

76 JJ Morris, Kerala in First Millennium AD, J.J.M Publications, Quilon, 1984, p. 43.
It is already explained how the Portuguese sailors had a miraculous escape from the grip of the roaring sea and stormy wind, by the gracious power of Vailankanni Arockia Matha and their construction of the chapel in Vailankanni. The original sailors’ chapel was tiny one measuring 24 ft by 12 ft.\textsuperscript{77} In course of time there was a considerable improvement of communications by steam-ship, by rail and metallic road, utilising the above facilities pilgrims began to flock to Vailankanni. Consequently the body of the church was enlarged to 70 ft by 22 ft, without including the ancient little sanctuary and the high altar which were preserved intact. The devotees who experienced miracles in Vailankanni began to make advertisement of the famous church of Arockia Matha all over India. Mendicants who used to move around from village to village propagated the glory of Vailankanni Arockia Matha. Moreover the numberless devotees who came to Vailankanni on foot, returned their homes singing from door to door and from village to village the glories in favours of Vailankanni Arockia Matha. Day by day the crowd was increasing. Hence in 1920 another 20 ft was added to the main church. In addition, two huge gothic towers at the entrance of the main church facing the church were built.\textsuperscript{78}

In 1933 two new wings were constructed to the right and to the main altar. A spacious sacristy (where priests put on the religious dresses for the liturgical services) was built just behind the High Altar.\textsuperscript{79} Thus the church began to give the shape and figure of a cross. The miraculous statue of Vailankanni Arockia Matha, right over the centre of the ancient main altar.

\textsuperscript{77} SR Santos, \textit{op. cit.} p. 8.
\textsuperscript{78} SL Gabriel, \textit{op. cit.} p. 30.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid.} p. 30.
remains untouched and unaltered. ‘Arockia Matha’ at the High Altar is the centre of attraction. Just above the High Altar, there stands an inspiring, glorious and majestic gothic dome and it enhances the beauty of this great church.

The Inner view of Vailankanni Main Church

The Main Altar of Vailankanni Basilica

The width of the dome is 24 ft. The height is 82 ft. The dome has eight skylights. They filter the sunrays which, because of the colour uses, blend to cast glamour of majesty and splendor over the sacred spot. In the wings, there are two altars in gothic style, donated by Arulanandasaamy and Ponnuasamy of
Thanjavur. On these altars, which are on, either side of the miraculous image of Arockia Matha, the images of two famous saints Antony of Lisbon and Francis of Assisi are enthroned.

**The architecture of the Vailankanni church**

The towers and the dome of this church reflect the *gothic* style of architecture. According to Sambantham, the *gothic* style of architecture originated from Europe, the Jesuit Missionaries brought it to India, and they taught this skill to an illiterate maistry Savarimuthu of Tirunelveli, who later built two famous churches, namely Madurai St Mary’s Church (1840) and Tiruchirappalli *St Lourdes’s Church of St Joseph’s College (1882).* Thus, *gothic* style of architecture is widely used in the construction of the Christian churches in India.

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80 Interview with Mgr. SL Gabriel, former Bishop of Tiruchirappalli diocese on 23\textsuperscript{rd} September 2006.
Now it is easy to analyze the measurement which will give an idea of what the church is now. The length of the church from the main door on the east, to the sacristy door on the west, is 182 ft. From one end of the wing to the other across the sanctuary is 112 ft width of the wings and the sacristy is 24 ft. The width of centre main hall, in front of the High Altar is 22 ft. The height of the two wonderful gothic towers, which stand majestically at the entrance of the church, is 93 ft. The outer of the church is decorated with artistic flowers made out of the lime mortar. The main church is having only the ground floor. Walls are constructed with country bricks in lime mortar and plastered with cement mortar. Thickness of wall is 36 inches. Basement is 24 inches above the ground level. All wooden members are of teak wood and windows are MS grilled.

In 1977 the roof with Mangalore tiles, was completely damaged in cyclone. Immediately, on the same year, the whole church was terraced with RCC beams and slabs. The floor of the church was finished with marble and

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82 Interview with Fr G. Arul Irudhayam, Former Parish Priest of Vailankanni on 21st September 2006.
decoration work was done up to side level of windows. Every year walls are painted with cement paint and distemper. Wood and iron members are finished with synthetic enamel paint. The church is maintained well and the white washing is done every year just before the September annual feast. The open terrace of the church is covered with architectural tiles. At the middle of the two majestic gothic towers at the entrance two large church bells have been fixed.

Illuminated Basilica