INTRODUCTION

The study area covers the present Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu. Before independence, it was part of the then princely state of Travancore. After independence, by the abolition of the native states Act of 1949, the neighbouring states of Travancore and Cochin merged and formed the State of Travancore and Cochin. Again due to the demand for the re-organization of the states on linguistic basis in 1956, the State of Kerala was formed with the area of Malabar being merged with the State of Travancore–Cochin. The four taluks of southern Travancore, namely Agastheeswaram, Thovalai, Kalkulam and Villavancode, where most of the people speak Tamil, were formed as Kanyakumari District, and on 1st November 1956 merged with the Madras State.¹ For the merger, Movements were started under the leadership of Mr. A. Nesamony, a prominent politician, who belonged to the Church of South India.²

Kanyakumari District has a total area of 1684.4 square kilometres lying between 05’ and 77 36’ of the eastern longitude and 8 03’ and 8 35’ of the northern latitude. Bounded by Tirunelveli District in the east and

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Kerala in the north, but the sea had washed away the west and south. The population of the District as per the Census of 2011 is 18,53,727.³

The District has the highest population of 992 persons per square kilometer as against the state average of 372. The highest percentage of literacy is 63.86, next to Chennai city, far above the state average of 46.76 percent and it is attributed to the impact of Christianity. A close scrutiny of the Census from 1951 to 2001 indicates the unprecedented rise of Christian population. The steady growth of Christians from 38 per cent in 1951 to 40 per cent in 1961, from 48 per cent in 1971 to 52 per cent in 1981, and from 58 per cent in 1991 to 60 per cent in 2001 – 2011 to 65 per cent, undoubtedly was due to missionary initiatives.⁴

The backward communities of this area were converted to Christianity under the able leadership of missionaries of various denominations. Nineteenth century witnessed severe social evils and injustice on the backward and downtrodden communities. They were denied to cover their bosoms and wear upper clothes. For centuries caste Hindus considered it an insult if lower caste women dared to appear before

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them covering their bosom. The socio-cultural and politico-economic disabilities enforced vigorously the labeled depressed communities of this region greatly to favour the missionaries to engage themselves actively not only in preaching the Gospel but also in motivating them to introduce various welfare measures to uplift the people. The missionaries rooted Christian faith in the Indian culture and in the religious life of the people.

The spread of Christianity in Kanyakumari was a landmark. The Church played an active role in shaping and sharpening the socio-economic life of the people. The grass – root level organizing structure of the Catholic Church today is the Basic Christian Communities. The transformation they brought into the Church questioned the monopoly of the Priestly hierarchy and its arbitrary stand on issues affecting the welfare of the people.

CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF KOTTAR

The Catholic Diocese of Kottar established in 1930 marked a turning point in the history of Catholic Christians in Kanyakumari District. The

7. Ibid.
new Diocese was carved out of the Diocese of Quilon to promote the propagation of Catholic faith within the confines of Nanchilnadu. Bishop Lawrence Pereira was consecrated as the first Bishop of the Diocese of Kottar. The newly formed Diocese had 95,000 Catholics, 25 parishes, and 32 priests. The second Bishop T. R. Agnisamy was consecrated in Rome on 29 October 1939. As a man of simplicity, he established a father–children relationship among the people in the Diocese. Under him numerous community expansion works were undertaken in places, mainly in the mission centres, as neither did the coastal parishes nor did the settled parishes of the interior gave scope for fresh conversions. When he took charge of the Diocese in 1939, there were 39 parishes, but at the time of his retirement in 1971 the number of parishes were 68, the number of Churches and chapels had risen from 123 to 257, the number of priests increased from 41 to 117, and the number of convents from 10 to 49.

The third Bishop Marianus Arockiasamy took charge on 17th February 1971. He became the modern dynamic architect of the Diocese of Kottar. He kept many personal contacts with the people in various walks

12. Ibid., P. 106.
13. Ibid., p. 114.
of life, particularly with the religious, whom he inspired, encouraged and offered spiritual help with his pleasing personality. He introduced inculturation and decentralization of diocesan administration through the Basic Christian Communities. Bishop Leon A. Tharmaraj was elevated as the fourth Bishop of Kottar and took charge on 5th February 1989. By his vision and mission, the Basic Christian Communities became the way of life of the Diocese. The present Bishop Peter Remigius took the canonical possession of the Diocese on 24 August 2007. The process of decentralization in their regime ceased to be merely an issue of administrative reforms but became an object of mass mobilization and popular participation in the Parishes, Vicariates and Diocesan levels.

This study aims at finding out how much the Diocese of Kottar developed by the Bishops Marianus Arockiasamy and Leon A. Tharmaraj established the decentralised structures in the Diocese through Basic Christian Communities. As Bishops, the heads of the local Church, their mission was to promote lay leadership in the Church and society. They

17. Ibid., p. 35.
devolved 75 – 80 per cent of their mission plan outlay for projects and programmes to be formulated and implemented by local Parish administrations. A mass movement – popularly known as Basic Christian Communities for decentralised planning – was then launched to empower local self structures to prepare plans in a transparent and participatory manner.  

This thesis has been prepared after a thorough investigation of the field of Basic Christian Communities namely Anbiyams in the Diocese of Kottar during the period from 1978 to 2013. The performance of the Bishops stand out superior to that of its predecessors and successors, and this thesis is critically analysed on the development of democratization of diocesan administration during these 35 years.

**BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AND DEMOCRATIZATION**

Basic Christian Communities otherwise called as Anbiyams in Tamil was introduced in the Diocese of Kottar in 1970. From 1987 onwards it began to function systematically in the grass – root of all the parishes of the Diocese. Anbiyams have been accorded top priority in the Diocese. The Anbiyams has come to stay as the democratic way of life,

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and it became a decision making centre from bottom to top in the Diocese.\textsuperscript{22}

This has been an excellent forum for people’s participation and community–based programs. It plays a pivotal role in the diocesan administration.\textsuperscript{23} It is a forum to hold fair discussions on issues related to the society and Church and collective planning for social change. Anbiyam has been involved in the preparation, motivation and evaluation of 3250 cells in 175 Parishes and its substations in the Diocese of Kottar.\textsuperscript{24} The Diocese of Kottar understood the importance of democratic decentralization and paved the way for the development of the Vicariate centres namely Kottar, Colachel, Mulagumoodu and Thiruthuvapuram. After the establishment of Anbiyams in twenty seven zones, there has been a rise in the participation of people in different fields of the Vicariates. The Diocese has set up many structures in order to realize Diocesan goals in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Conclusions of Diocesan Synod – 2000, Bishop’s House, Nagercoil, 2001, p. 25.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Maria David, A., \textit{Beyond Boundaries: Hindu Christian Relationship and Basic Christian Communities}, Delhi, 2009, p. 117.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Annual Report of Anbiyam, Bishop’s House, Nagercoil, 2013, p. 75.
\end{itemize}
decentralization through the Basic Christian Communities. Though it is an ideal in its own right, its instrumental significance depends upon the linkages with socio-political and cultural life of the people. It is an attempt to solve some of the keenly felt need of grass-root people through mass participation. The intensely participatory Anbiyam activists and empowering nature of Diocesan decentralization experiment makes it worthy of study by advocates of democracy everywhere.

HYPOTHESIS

The research work analyses the various factors that contributed for the decentralization process. In the past, the Diocese of Kottar ignored the Catholics to participate in the activities of Church and society except spirituality. As man is always innovative; the democracy does not also remain static, but it keeps changing in tune with the progress of man’s innovative mind. As far as the Diocese is concerned, it has to promote all newly emerging trends. Bishops Marianus Arockiasamy and Leon

25. Family movement, charismatic movement, Social Action Movement, Societies, Bible discussion group, the legion of Mary, the St. Vincent De Paul Society, etc., have close personal relationships, but there is no community of life among the members. Religious communities like Jesuits, Dominicans, etc. all themselves as communities. However, they differ from BCC, because they are open only to those who wish to embrace the religious life; they live in households, rather than in different houses in neighbourhood. Hence, BCCs are meant for grass-root organizations in planning and decision making.
A. Tharmaraj in their period acquainted well in fulfilling this obligation on their part. They could achieve all-round developments of the Diocese as their ministerial colleagues worked hard for social transformation. They cooperated with Bishops to issue a number of circulars to the parishes to develop Basic Christian Communities, in view of decentralizing diocesan administration. With the full support and cooperation of the Diocesan mechanism, the Bishops initiated Anbiyams. It marked the beginning of a remarkable period in the annals of the Diocese of Kottar, which is noted for far reaching changes in the socio-religious life of the people.

Basic Christian Communities and its participatory structures operate at Parish, Vicariate and Diocesan levels. With this frame work, democracy is defined in all Parishes, Parish Pastoral Councils, Vicariate Pastoral Councils and Diocesan Pastoral Councils due to the monopoly of Priests in the Diocese. Increasingly, they have come to agree whatever may be in principle, *laity now argue*, in practice one must appease religious and cultural sensibilities because such sensibilities are so deeply felt.

The Diocesan priests made special efforts to co-ordinate Basic Christian Communities with the aims and goals of the Diocese. The priests perceived Anbiyams as the only means to reform the Church and society. They wanted to give proper motivations to Catholics for their involvement.
The study reveals the fact that the social transformation in the Diocese is mainly due to the contribution of the Basic Christian Communities in decentralization. Further it is known that, socio-religious and interrelationship among the people and the Anbiyams came into being.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse critically the nature, scope and meaning of the term Basic Christian Communities in global and local context.
2. To revaluate the functions of the Basic Christian Communities in Kanyakumari District.
3. To study the organizing structure of grass – root level Catholic Christians and the hierarchical networks.
4. To assess the contribution of the Basic Christian Community for economic and social developments.
5. To understand the changing roles of the lay people and the priestly hierarchy.
6. To estimate the role of Anbiyam, its impact on the life of the people, and to explore how much social change has taken place in the society through the democratization of diocesan administration.
7. To evaluate the activities of diocesan administration, after the establishment of the grass-root structures in the Diocese.

SCOPE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Bishops Marianus Arockiasamy and Leon A. Tharmaraj had the dream of developing the Diocese of Kottar not only to preach the word of God but also to promote participation of the people in Church and society. In all spheres they were fortunate to become the Diocesan Bishops in 1971 and 1988. They were best administrators to push forward the vision and mission of the Church. By their hard and sacrificing works, they succeeded in establishing Anbiyams throughout the Diocese. As practical Bishops, they found the effectiveness of the Anbiyams and initiated steps to implement all the programs allotted through Anbiyams. Their Vicar Generals and Anbiyam Directors implemented the programs and brought about participatory development in the District, and thus, a study of the Basic Christian Communities under their reign assumes importance.

Christianity did a great contribution to the social change of Small Christian Communities since 1960s. It is being increasingly recognized that micro-level planning and people’s participation are essential for efficient progress in the living conditions and sustainable development of the local population. It is hoped that this study will provide the first level
of information from the communities for the purpose of planning to social change. It is also possible that the contents and approach adopted for decentralization in this study will encourage Catholics all over the country to study Anbiyam.

An understanding of this study enables the readers to analyze and understand the forces that shape the present method of Anbiyam and to formulate solutions for various problems faced by the society. It is a fervent desire that readers will find this study useful and thought provoking. May be it will also encourage Catholics of the other Districts of Tamil Nadu and beyond to do research in their respective Districts.

The acute unemployment and widespread poverty, especially in the rural areas of Kanyakumari District, which had been prevailing in the last quarter of twentieth century, had been demanding of the then governments to initiate concrete steps to address these twin issues. The two Bishops, M. Arockiasamy and Leon A. Tharmaraj took up the task of promoting democratization of diocesan administration in the Diocese. However, this process is an ideal and Basic Christian Communities are in need of necessary supports.

Several non-formal studies have already been undertaken about the Basic Christian Communities in the district of Kanyakumari under these
Bishops. But normal study on this was not systematically done so far. A study on the grass – root development of any region will be complete only if it covers all the aspects connected with the establishment and the nature of structures. Especially the Diocesan programmes are the structures executed from the Basic Christian Communities. In this aspect, this study covers all facts of socio – political and cultural development through Anbiyam which these Bishops had brought about. It is part of humble effort to explore ways to promote peoples participation in the diocesan administration. Hence, the scope of this study is to assess the clergy reaction to democratization of diocesan administration in the light of Anbiyam attitudes towards Christianity.

One of the initiatives arising from the study is to prepare a thesis on democratization approach and the researcher has undertaken field studies in various parts and structures of the diocese. It is of special interest to laity as well as the students of Church history and other historians and scholars today.

**DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

The thesis is designed into seven chapters excluding an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction a brief sketch about the District, Catholic Diocese of Kottar, Basic Christian Communities and
democratization, Hypothesis, Objectives, Scope of the Study and Methodology adopted for the preparation of the thesis are dealt with. The first chapter ‘Historical background of the Diocese of Kottar’ analyses the cultural background of Kanyakumari District, growth of religion and culture of the people, cultural profile of the coastal people, the profile of the Catholic people of the interior and adaptation of local culture and conversion. It brings out how the Catholic Church developed as an indigenous cultural religion from the beginning. People from all sections of the society embraced the new Diocese attracted by the inculturation. Its official encounter is engaged with world realities.

The Diocese of Kottar took up the task of establishing Basic Christian Communities. Its concept and meaning were explained in the Biblical context. Its general features and organization structures were discussed sociologically and historically. The BCCs have admirably succeeded in concretizing the new vision of the Church as the people of God as proposed by Vatican II. Original ideal of Christian life is rooted from New Testament of the Holy Bible. The programme of Basic Christian Communities which originated in Latin America is gaining momentum and popularly in many parts of the world. India also promoted these communities as a form of Christian life. In Tamil Nadu, the Parish renewal
ministries were established on the line of Vatican II and achieved many things in history. All these are examined in the second chapter, ‘Historical profile of Basic Christian Communities’.

The third chapter ‘Grass – root level Christian structures in Kottar Diocese’ analyses Basic Christian Communities as carrying out the council documents. It was introduced in Kottar Diocese as a religious movement in renewing Church and society. It emerged as Anbiyams, focusing on local Church as a communion of communities. The Diocese of Kottar took it as a challenging innovative task for the multifarious growth of the Diocese. Anbiyam had succeeded in making every parish of the Diocese a highly suitable one for achieving anything as its personalities are behind.

The fourth chapter ‘The territorial and administrative structures of the Basic Christian Communities’ describes the territorial divisions of the Diocese, various structures of decentralization, rules and regulations of election of Parish Council, vicariate regional administration and diocesan administration. It focused attention on decentralization process and people – centred Church.

The fifth chapter ‘The relation between Christian Community and Church administrative hierarchy’ deals with administrative structures of BCCs, functions of the Parish Coordinating committee, various stages of
training programmes for establishing BCCs, activities of BCCs, Parish Coordination Council, Vicariate Co-ordination Council and Coordination Committee of the region. Anbiyam Commission played a decisive role in the progress of the socio-economic and religious transformation in the Diocese.

The sixth chapter ‘Basic Christian Communities and Integral Development Societies’ is popular among the Christians in a large scale, in the social work field of Kottar Diocese. Its objectives, structure of Kuzhithurai Integral Society, Basic Integral Society and its powers and functions, executive of Villavancode Integral Development Society, Kuzhithurai Integral Development Social Services and its functions and etc. are presented as such socio-economic developments are indeed an emergent sign of the Diocese.

The seventh chapter ‘Social Response of the Basic Christian Communities’ resolves to eradicate the social evils and work for the upliftment of the downtrodden, through the vision and mission motivations of Anbiyam. There are clear cut instructions and guidance for sensitization and the concern for the needy has become the regular feature of the BCCs. They work for the poor towards empowerment programmes. Finally, the study comes to the conclusion stating that the primary agent of
democratization of diocesan administration is the Basic Christian Communities. They are the ideal focus of decentralization with which to start.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology adopted in the present study is narrative and analytical and facts are presented with objective look out. An orderly and relevant narration of events, presentation of facts as they are in a chronological form and the contribution made by the Diocese of Kottar based on relevant data. By and large, record based study has been developed for this work. However, the records which provided the information were in different forms. The information regarding the democratization process had to be shifted out from the papers. Personal interviews help a lot to gather certain important data. This endeavour is historical. As far as the information on the institutions and commission for Anbiyam were concerned, it would be gathered by a simple method. The information gathered from Annual reports, Magazines, monthly leaflets and field reports shed light on the proposed study.

The situation with the Diocese with regard to information has been gathered from their historians. The Diocesan circulars, Magazines of the parishes, Souvenirs and Kottar News Letters were the only records
pertaining to decentralization. In such cases, method of collecting the necessary information from personal interviews with most suitable persons in the field of Anbiyam and Kuzhithurai Integral Development Social Service was adopted.

**SOURCES FOR THE STUDY**

The study is largely based on primary sources. Secondary sources also used. The primary sources are circular letters, personal interviews and reports from the Diocese of Kottar. Various unpublished theses on the history of the Diocese of Kottar are also consulted. The secondary sources mainly are the published books.

The information that the researcher gathered from the periodicals has helped to form an idea of the late Bishops’ personality and religious career. The Tamil leaflet ‘Adithalam’ (Official news letter of Anbiyam) gives a fund of information regarding Anbiyam contributions, and Kottar News Letter information are of immense value to understand the conditions of the Church and its approaches.

The information regarding setting up of Basic Christian Communities and democratization, diocesan administration is available in the reports of Diocesan Pastoral Commissions, Vicariate Pastoral
Commissions and Parish Pastoral Council specifically in the written reports of Basic Christian Communities and its coordination in the levels of Parish, Zones, Vicariates and Diocese. The researcher spent five years and gathered data through participation in meetings and celebrations. He recorded some of the commentaries and speeches during the programs.