Chap 2
MISSIONARY LIFE IN TAMILNĀD
Missionary Background:

The missionary and literary life and labours of Father Beschi were conditioned by those of his predecessors and colleagues in the Jesuit Madura Mission. And these in turn were conditioned by the social conditions and political upheavals of South India during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

Christianity in India of course is as old as Christianity itself, and older than Christianity in the West. When the ancient communications between East and West were reestablished by the arrival of the Portuguese admiral, Vasco de Gama, at the port of Calicut in 1498 a new phase of Catholic Missionary activity began and in this, the newly founded Order of the Society of Jesus took the leading part. The great missionary St. Francis Xavier landed and went blazing the trail all along the coast. Leaving Tamilnad for other fields he appointed the Venerable Father Antony Criminale as the Superior of the Mission. When this venerable man sacrificed his life at the point of the spear for his flock, he was succeeded by Father Henry Henriquez (1520 - 1600). The latter was a lover of Tamil. He revised the then popular Tamil Christian prayers and wrote the first Catholic Tamil books. In his 53 years of work he had so won the heart of the people that for many years after his demise his name was the sacred word by which they swore and sealed their contracts.
In 1602, the Jesuit Mission of Malabar was raised to the status of a Province of the Society of Jesus and the missions of South India, Ceylon, Bengal and Malaca were attached to it.

In the labours of St. Thomas and St. Francis Xavier, remarks Beschi in his Vēṇa Vilākkam, the rays of the sun of the Catholic religion had just touched the borders of Tamilnad; it is with the new mode of apostolate started by Robert de Nobili that the full sun began to appear inside the country. Robert de Nobili the great missionary and scholar accompanied the Jesuit Provincial, Fr. Albert Laerzio to Madura in 1606, saw with his prophetic insight the sorry state of Christianity in the Tamil mainland and due to faulty methods of encounter between East and West. The ways and manners peculiar to Europeans as meat-eating, shoe-wearing in sacred places and other social customs and mores were identified by the Indians with the message and contents of Christianity. The warrior from the noble lineage of Italy, the brave nephew of the brave scholar, saint Cardinal Bellarmine, Robert de Nobili proposed to his superior that he was ready for the sacrifices entailed in the arduous task of stripping the Christian message from its peculiar western trappings that were not to the taste of Easterners. What followed was a Kurukshetra of Christian mission history. And finally De Nobili was vindicated. A master of Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit as were in vogue in his days, De Nobili turned an Indian Sanyasi and
he was followed by a few other brave men like Dr. Sebastian de Maya, Antony Vico, Emmanuel Martins, Peter Machado and Joseph Arcolini. Their influence spread to such an extent that the Queen Mangammal of Madura could reply to the king of Tanjore who objected to her tolerance of Christian missionary activity in these words: "As some were allowed to eat rice and others meat, so also it was lawful for each man to practise or adopt whatever religion seemed to him the best." 2

**Political Background:**

The body of Jesuit missionaries called the Madura Mission laboured in different regions as the Marava, Tanjore, Tiruchirapalli and others with their headquarters at Madura. For our purpose we may just start with the beginning of the regency of that great "femme politique", Queen Mangammal. The ever changing kaleidoscope of South Indian Politics shows Mangammal on friendly terms with the Moghul Emperor but at loggerheads with the rulers of Tanjore and Ramnad. Shahji of Tanjore takes the offensive and captures a few towns belonging to Madura. Mangammal declares war on Tanjore in 1700 and defeats Shahji but the good offices of the minister of Shahji brings about not only peace but an alliance of Tanjore and Madura. These new allies prepare an invasion of Mysore together to punish Chikkadeva Raya
known for his "vigorous campaign and territorial expansion" for trying to divert the Kaveri waters to his kingdom by constructing a dam across the river. Neither the projected dam nor the prepared invasion materialise. But it turned out into a skirmish against the king of Ramnad, Raghunatha Sethupati who was endeavouring to throw off the suzerainty of Madura. Sethupati came out victorious with his numerically stronger army against the army of Mangammal distracted and exhausted already by several wars. Emboldened by this victory and by the floods and famine in the Tanjore territory, the king of Ramnad invaded the Tanjore kingdom, defeated its army and annexed Arantangi. Meanwhile the King of Travancore who had been paying tribute to Madura rebelled, and obliged Mangammal to start an invasion of Travancore. She died in 1707. The evils of her regency are interred with her bones, but the good she did lives after her and bears witness to her regency in the shape of shady roads and welcome tanks studding the Madura region to this day.

Vijayaranga Chokkanatha came to the throne of Madura after the Regency of Mangammal. Pious but unbalanced he led his kingdom to the verge of ruin. An inscription of 1710 says that a temple servant threw himself from the tower in protest against the unjustly exorbitant taxation, thus shaming the officials to their senses. Nature's vagaries added to this misrule and during the famine of 1710 and 1720 Salem and Coimbatore were irretrievably lost to the kingdom of Madura.
Vijayaraghunatha came to rule over the kingdom of Ramnad in 1710. But Bhavani Sankara, the illegitimate son of his predecessor gave him no end of trouble, and in this mischief making he was supported by the Raja of Pudukottai. Vijayaraghunatha died the victim of an epidemic, having appointed Tanda Teva as his successor. Now the army of Madura and Pudukottai supported Tanda Teva. The King of Tanjore backed Bhavani Sankara, but soon instigated by a dismissed chief of Bhavani Sankara, he invaded Ramnad and took him prisoner to Tanjore in 1729. Now the Marava country was partitioned; the territory north of Pambar taken by Tanjore, the remainder shared between Kattaya Teva who came to the throne of Ramnad and another chief Sasi Varnan who became the Raja of Sivaganga. Two years of respite followed. But war clouds gathered again with the invasion of Tanjore by the Moghuls. The latter came sweeping down as they had done from time to time previously, laying waste the fertile lands of Cholamandalam, plundering, raping, scattering death and destruction. The king of Tanjore obliged to give a large tribute to the Moghuls made up the loss by squeezing that sum from his subjects. Then he turned against Kattaya Teva whom he himself had helped to place over Ramnad territory. He pretended to re-establish Bhavani Sankara on the throne of Ramnad. But Kattaya Teva was warned in time by one of the tribute payers of Tanjore, Prince Pandaram and was able to muster enough Maravan artillery to
resist the Tanjore invader. Prince Pandaram was cruelly murdered by the son of the king of Tanjore. And Tanjore was threatened with internal division and civil war. The roads were all cut up and Tanjore army itself was besieged. Forced by circumstances the king of Tanjore sought the help of Kattaya Teva of Ramnad, making restitution of all the territories he had annexed from Marava. 5

Back in Madura, Vijayaranga Chokkanatha who had no male issue from his eight wives was succeeded by his first wife Minakshi in 1732. But Bangaru Tirumala, a cousin of the late Chokkanatha contested with Minakshi for the throne. Some of the ostensibly faithful officials of Minakshi especially Narappa Ayyar, her prime minister, secretly lent their help to the claim of Bangaru. Though the plot was discovered the shrewd prime minister escaped punishment. Bangaru continued to plot to depose Minakshi. At this juncture, the Nawab of Arcot sent his son Safdar Ali and his son-in-law Chanda Sahib, about the year 1734, to get tribute from Madura and Tanjore or to reduce the kingdoms. But Bangaru bribed Safdar Ali to his side. Minakshi however was able to secure the good will of Chanda Sahib who is said to have sworn by the Koran that he would defend her interests at any cost. He fulfilled his oath in his own way. Having gained control in 1736, of the territories of Minakshi, and having strengthened his position in Tiruchy, Chanda Sahib sent an army to take Dindigul which was then held by Bangaru, and he himself marched to Madura and defeated Bangar
But Minakshi was not enthroned but imprisoned by Chanda Sahib. She put an end to her life by taking poison. "The death of Minakshi brought about the practical extinction of the rule of the Nayaks of Madura." Bangaru had recourse to the Mahrattas for aid. But he was murdered by Anwaruddin. His son Vijayakumara fled to Sivaganga and his descendants lived in obscurity. This was the chaotic political history of Tamilnad which formed the background of Fr. Beschi's missionary and literary labours. It was indeed a chaotic complication and not a simple drama with one hero, one heroine and one villain.
NOTES

1. V. Cronin. 'A Pearl to India', p. 34. Rupert Hart Davis, London, 1599.

2. R. Sathyanatha Ayyar, History of the Nayaks, p. 219

3. Ibid. p. 207

4. Ibid. p. 222

5. L. Besse. 'Fr. Beschi' (His times and writings, p. 121), St. Joseph's Industrial School Press, Trichinopoly, 1918.

Catholic Missionaries and Indian Literature and Language.

Following the way of Christ who became man to serve man, the Catholic missionaries who came to serve Indians have all along tried to become Indians, by first being sincerely interested in things Indian - literature, religion, culture etc. - and then contributing their very best to these. St. Francis Xavier who worked in India from 1542 to 1552 gave the lead in the process of Indianisation; with the help of interpreters he translated Christian prayers into Tamil, urged and encouraged men like Fr. Henry Henriquez to compose grammars and lexicons; his advice to his confreres was: "Adapt yourself to their (Indians) capacity; make yourself all to all, so as to win all to Christ." 1

In 1559 the Jesuit fathers obtained the translation of a great part of the 18 puranas and sent it to Europe. The work of Vyasa and other doctors in Hinduism were also translated and several Hindu books were collected and brought to the Jesuit College and these translations are now preserved in the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus (Goa 46)². A little later the famous visitor Fr. Alessandro Valignano S.J. wrote his three Indian Summaries and his 'Historia del Principio y Progreso de la Compania de Jesus en las Indias Orientales' - which is valuable for its informations on Indian Geography, Ethnology and History.

More important is the work of Fr. Giacomo Fenicio S.J. (1580 - 1632) 'Livro de Seita dos Indios Orientais' which is in eight books, treats of the beliefs, religious feasts, rites
and ceremonies of Hindus; contains 32 quotations from poetical works in Tamil. 3 Noteworthy is the work entitled 'Historia do Malavar' written by Fr. Diogo Gonsalves who was in Malabar for nearly 40 years from 1591 onwards. Divided into four books the work is a mine of information on the customs, traditions and conditions of Malabar in the 16th century.

Fr. Thomas Stephens, S.J., the first Englishman known to have come to India via the Cape of Good Hope worked nearly 40 years (1579 - 1619) in Goa and Salsette. He learned Marathi to perfection, translated the Portuguese book of Christian doctrine by Fr. Marcos Jorge, wrote a grammar of the Marathi language, and more admirable still, wrote a Marathi epic called 'Christa Puran' which treats in two parts of the Incarnation of Christ and His redemption of mankind. Writing to very Rev. Fr. General of the Society of Jesus Fr. Aquaviva, Fr. Stephens said: "I have for many years longed to see books printed in Indian types, as was done in the Malabar Mission." As he could not find one to cut the characters in Devanagari, his Purana which was first published at Rachol in 1616 had to appear in Latin type. 4

The first to have achieved mastery of the Sanskrit language was Fr. Robert de Nobili. His facility to speak three languages - Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit - is acknowledged by men like Fr. Antony de Proenca, the superior of Madurai Mission. In Sanskrit he translated or composed various prayers for the occasion of marriages and other functions. His work on the
the life of Mary, the Mother of Christ, his text of the first three Vedas, the only ones he knew, with their commentaries, and the course of Scholastic philosophy in Sanskrit which he hoped to teach Brahmin students preparing for priesthood were lost when he was made prisoner at Madurai.\(^5\) Max Muller said of him: "I can speak of De Nobili as the first European Sanskrit scholar."\(^6\) The Catalogue of 1648 affirms that Fr. De Nobili had written many very good books in Sanskrit and Tamil (multos et optimos composit libros).

From the same Catalogue we learn that Fr. Antonio Vico, the faithful companion of De Nobili, Fr. Emmanuel Martinez and Fr. Antonio Proenza were studying Tamil and Sanskrit. In 1660, the historian of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Daniello Bartoli received a book given by Fr. Francisco Gracia. Partly in Portuguese and partly in Latin, the book contained stories like that of King Harichandra, discussion on the knowledge of Gods, origin of the world, caste etc., and translations from various puranas like Sabha purana, Aranya purana etc.

Fr. Mauduyt, who is said to be buried near Kanjeeipuram,\(^7\) wrote from Eludurgam, on the 18th Feb. 1705: "Having found in this city, as I hope, a good occasion to learn the language of the learned, which some important people call Granthonic, but which the really learned call Sanskrit, a language which has excellent and fixed rules and which is, as they say, altogether divine, but according to the general opinion most difficult to learn, unknown to most, understood by very few, yet most useful
and even necessary to missionaries. I applied myself as soon as possible to its study according to my abilities, and my labour was not in vain -- (Arch.S.J.) Fr. Ducrose wrote in 1727 from Krishnapuram, that he was studying Samskrutham, without neglecting Indian Philosophy. "There are people here", he says, "who have forestalled Fontenelle, Spinoza and Malabranche." Fr. Calmette, an intrepid collector of Sanskrit manuscripts, could quote texts from the Vedas in his discussions with the sastras of Chick-Ballapuram, wrote Sanskrit verses, is credited with a translation into Sanskrit of Fr. De Nobili's Catechism. Fr. Dupont who was an astronomer, geographer, canonist and Sanskritist, undertook in 1734 at the request of Raja Jay Sing, a journey to Jaipur with Fr. Boudier for astronomical and geographical researches. In his letter to Fr. Holde (23-11-1740) he gives a penetrating account of the various branches of Sanskrit literature, the four Vedas, the grammars, the six philosophical systems and Indian astronomy. In 1738 he edited a Sanskrit grammar based on the Ashtadhyayi of Panini, which was copied and sent to the French Academy about 1771. Fr. Coeurdoux was one of the precursors of Indian philology, as he was able to indicate the family relationship between Sanskrit and Latin and Greek. From the letter correspondence he had from India with the French academicians like Abbe Barthelemy and Anquetil Duperron, it seems evident that he was the author of a small dictionary, Telugu - French - Sanskrit. Max Muller says that he "must have had a very profound knowledge of Sanskrit."
It was when Fr. Calmetta and his companions were putting together an Oriental library that the storm of the Suppression of the Jesuits came to scatter their collections.

Fr. Ernst Hanxleden, S.J., who is now known in Malabar as Arnos Padri arrived in Goa in 1701 as a Jesuit Novice. During his missionary life of over 30 years he contributed much to the Malayalam literature. According to Fr. Paulinus he is the author of 'Grammatica Granthamica' which first appeared in Europe, of 'Vocabularium: Malabarico-Samosradorama-Lusitanum', of Grammatica Malabarico-Lusitani, of 'Nalaparva' - four famous hymns in Malayalam metre about the four last things, of a poem on St. Genoveva, of 'Umade Tukam' - a poem on the sorrows of the Bl. Virgin Mary of 'Mishihade Pana' - life of Christ in easy and elegant metre, of the Ave Maris Stella put in Malayalam metre. Fr. Hanxleden's name and his poems will be remembered as long as the language lasts.

Tamil in particular.

The contribution of Catholic Missionaries to Tamil in particular has been really unique. The lead was given by the missionary par excellence, St. Francis Xavier who is said to have prepared a catechism in Tamil in 1544. In 1544, two years before the printing press was introduced into India, the first Tamil booklet was printed in Lisbon; it contained the ordinary prayers of Catholics together with some points of religious instruction; the Tamil text was written in Roman script,
with the translation into Portuguese; the translation and the transliteration were done by three Indians who were then in Lisbon. In 1556, the Jesuits in Goa started the first printing press which did its printing in Latin and Portuguese. The first attempt at casting Tamil types was made in 1577 at Goa; as it was not successful, a second and satisfactory attempt was made in Quilon in 1578 and on the 20th October 1578 the first Tamil book was printed entitled 'Doctrina Christam'; it contains the ordinary Catholic prayers and a few more doctrinal points than the first booklet printed in Lisbon; it was prepared by Fr. Henriquez assisted by Fr. Manuel of St. Peter. In 1579 another book was printed in Quilon, 'Doctrina Christam'; it was a translation of the Portuguese Catechism of Fr. Marcos Jorge, S.J. Then in 1586 was printed in Tuticorin or Ponnaikayal a monumental Tamil work of 669 pages; it was the 'Flos Sanctorum' of Fr. Henriquez. It is the translation partly of the Flos Sanctorum of the Firar Diego del Rosario and partly of the Flos Sanctorum of Lipomani and partly of the 'Lives of the Apostles' by Perion.

Fr. Henriquez (1520 - 1600) is "the first known European to have initiated a scientific study of the Tamil language and to have written copiously in Tamil. He is said to have proposed the erection of a Tamil University at Mannoor Ponnaikaiyal as early as circa 1560; in his letters he speaks of compiling for print a Grammar of the Tamil
language and a Vocabulary of Tamil words and terms. There is a tradition that of his printed works the names of fourteen have come down to us.¹³

Fr. Robert de Nobili, the founder the Madurai Mission was perhaps the first to have written down in prose, philosophical and theological discourses and sermons. Towards the end of his life he was almost blind, but he spent this period in building up a Christian literature in prose and verse.¹⁴ He wrote Gnanōvaḍēsam (Spiritual Teaching) which is virtually a Summa Theologica in five parts (Kāṇḍams). He wrote also Aṇgāṇa Nivāraṇāṇam with a view to dispelling the ignorance concerning the one true God and the path He has shown; it was printed in Tiruchirapalli, in 1891. In his book Tivviya Mādirīgai he expounds the divine model of Jesus Christ; it was printed in Pondicherry, in 1870. Fr. M. Rajamanikkam, S.J., has edited recently De Nobili's Thushana Tikkaram (refutation of doctrinal errors) and Puṇar Jenma Āchēbam (refutation of rebirth). There are other books credited to Dr. Nobili, but not fully proved genuine, like Gāṇa Lakōhanam, Gāṇa Viḷakkam, Talks about eternal life, Sāngopānga murai anusāram, Spiritual canticles and poems, and Dialogue on Faith for the instruction of children.

In 1792, Fr. Paulinus of St. Bartholomeew wrote¹⁵ that Fr. Proenza's Tamil dictionary was printed at Ambalakat in 1679, with the wooden types cut by Ignatius Achamoni, a native of Malabar. He speaks also of the 'Arte Tamulica' a grammar by
Dr. Baltasar da Costa which was printed in Verapoly in 1685.
Fr. Emmanuel Martinez, who died in the same year as De Nobili (1656), left also a large legacy of Tamil manuscripts, the chief among them being Gnāṇa Muthū Mālai (the Spiritual Garland of Pearls). Later Fr. Maynard wrote the Nittya Anittyā Vithiyāsām (the difference between the eternal and the temporal), which is a popular devotional work among Catholics even today. Fr. Rossi, known as Siṇṇa Savēriyar wrote 52 sermons on St. Joseph, to be read on the 52 Wednesdays of the year. He wrote also controversial books, and a course of instruction for the faithful to help them keep the faith alive when the number of Missionaries was inadequate. Such books were written on palm-leaves and constituted a sacred treasure of every church. Their value was so much appreciated that the Christians when praying to God for a particular benefit would make a vow that if their prayer be granted they would transcribe one or more of the oleis and present them to some poor church or chapel.

In this connection it may not be out of place to refer to the vandalism effected by the Dutch at their capture of Cochin in 1662. Tavernier, himself a Huguenot, writes: “You know that at the taking of Cochin, the Jesuits had in that city one of the fairest libraries in all Asia, as well for a great quantity of books sent them out of Europe as for several rare manuscripts in Hebrew, Chaladaic, Arabic, Persian, Indian, Chinese and other oriental languages...... But to tell you
what became of this library. General Von Goens made no conscience to expose it to the ignorance of his soldiers, so that I have seen the soldiers and seamen tear several of these beautiful volumes to light their tobacco. 17
NOTES


9. Ibid., Vol.II, p.319


12. Rev. Dr. Xavier S. Thaninayagam - The first books printed in Tamil (Tamil Culture, July 1958, p.288 and ff.)


15. Paulinus a San Bartholomeae, Indica Orientalis (Examen Historicum, XII)


17. T. Whitehouse, Lingerings of Light, London, 1873, p.168. How the Tamil books of Catholic missionaries were appreciated and used for their style, by the Lutheran Missionaries is exposed in the Chapter on Beschi's prose works.