CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

Several new trends in historical thinking have emerged with the passage of time. The entire spectrum of recent writings in history throws up a challenge to the conventional methods where readymade corpus of sources is available. Retelling history in a mere descriptive way has already been rendered an anachronism and has been replaced with an analytical approach. History is anthropocentric and charm has been added by Subaltern Study which gives much importance to the everyday life of the working masses. The German term subaltern as a theoretical concept describes the identity of an oppressed and exploited group. Hence it has opened up new vistas of exploration and has accelerated the growth of many a branch of study such as Anthropology, Sociology, History, Economics and Politics.

In tune with this modern trend of increasing interest in subaltern studies, this topic “Spread of Christianity Among the Piramalai Kallars of Madurai District”, dealing with one of the early settlers in Madurai in TamilNadu, South India, has been selected with a view to bring to light the dark pages of the history of a valiant community which once enjoyed a time honoured status but later on was reduced to the level of a despised community with the stigma of criminal tribe. The European prejudices are deeply embedded in the history of the Kallars. Owing to the inherent
limitations of their attitude, distortions are very commonly found. Hence the need to examine this old cultural complex dispassionately arises so that the community which deserves a special place in Tamilnadu history could be rendered justice. This community which could have been regarded as 'South Indian Rajputs' has been relegated to the background in the history of Tamilnadu despite their important role played during the South Indian rebellion and the Indian National movement. Hence an unbiased probe into this dark area of Tamilnadu history becomes necessary to bring it to light and this aspect makes this work unique in character. In fact the "Spread of Christianity among the Piramalai Kallars of Madurai district" is perhaps the least studied subject by any historian as such. Dr. Hugald Grafe, a present day church historian, says that scholarly investigations on the openness of this community to Christianity are still wanting. It is mainly because the available works on these Kallars are either secular or non-Christian in character. Hence with the scope for a diligent examination this topic has been selected for a pioneering rather maiden effort on this religious aspect with historical and analytical approaches.

At the outset it should be kept in mind that even though Kallars are called by different names like Esanattu Kallars, Visangunattu Kallars, Seruvasal Kallars, Ambalakara Kallars, Piramalai Kallars etc. no special significance can be attached to their names except for the regions they live in. In Madurai alone, the Kallars are divided into two endogamous groups territorial in origin.
(i) **Kilnadu Kallars or the eastern country Kallars commonly known as**

**Melur Kallars.**

(ii) **MelNadu Kallars or the western country Kallars commonly known as**

**Piramalai Kallars.**

Hence in this Thesis the word Kellar would refer to the Piramalai Kallar as well.

**Statement of Problem**

A rare grafting, an incredible reality, but a true phenomenon that the Kallars, known for their martial character, untamable nature and aggressive behaviour with a flair for knives and sickles, had been attracted towards a religion with diametrically opposite values and principles such as love, compassion, sacrifice, forgiveness etc. These contradictory values and views of both Christianity and this community which made them stand poles apart, kindled the curiosity in the researcher to analyse the factors which were responsible for their conversion.

It is a common dictum that Christianity flourishes where there is oppression, poverty or deprivation. But this does not seem to be too true with the Kallars. The Kallars were / are known for their high sense of social superiority, irrespective of their economic status, and pride in the dignity of their community whose independence was tantamount to truculence in earlier times. Traditionally the
Kallars served the rulers in times of war as a corps of reconnaissance and harassment and engaged themselves in cattle raid which was a conventionalized signal for warfare. At other times they served them as spies and guerilla troopers. As skilled vanguards, risking their lives for the sake of their masters, they commanded respect in society so much so that the term Kallar was used in singular number honorifically. During times of peace and settlement some of them were employed as *kavalkarars* (village guards) of domestic and public property in villages. Thus they settled down in society as semi-warriors and semi-agriculturists. They had organized themselves into a village federation and were never in tune with the rulers of Madurai right from the Nayak period to the British rule. The rulers including the British found it an arduous task to subdue them and exact tribute from them. Thus they had never been a suppressed lot.

In due course this community was reduced to poverty which synchronized with the fall of the ruling dynasties. With their occupation as soldiers gone the Kallars fell into evil days. Owing to the inhospitable nature of their land agriculture was rendered insufficient for their maintenance and hence they felt justified to employ their expertise to earn their livelihood. The recidivism of the Kallars went on unabated and at times it appeared as though the British Raj was powerless against the Kallar Raj. To bring these people to naught with calculated moves the British cut across the very basis of their subsistence living through their
enforcement of denudation of arms and abolition of kaval system. Despite their poverty stricken and hapless situation, this community which was exceedingly zealous of rites, rituals and Hindu traditions was much averse to Christianity in view of the persecutions which was sure to follow every conversion. They feared ostracism more than death itself. Had they embraced Christianity for the sake of bread and butter, there ought to have taken place a mass conversion. But on the contrary only a few responded positively to the call of the missionaries in the beginning and only gradually the number swelled. Hence it could very well be deduced that they had not embraced Christianity just due to poverty.

The only factor left behind is deprivation. A few questions as to the nature, causation and effect of deprivation may arise. These are some of the moot questions to be analysed. There ought to have been a driving force that made this setting of the Thames on fire possible. Hence a probe into the possible reasons and motives behind becomes imperative and that forms the nucleus of this Thesis.

**Review of literature**

Louis Dumont, a French Sociologist, in his book *A South Indian Sub-Caste: Social Organisation and Religion of the Piramalai Kallars*, available in
many libraries, has made a professional and sophisticated analysis of their social concept and has contributed much to a better understanding of their complex social institutions. However its focal area is confined to just two villages of the Piramalai Kallars and is out and out non-Christian in character.

C.N. Natarajan's, Piramalai Kallars of Tamilnadu - A study of their Marriage, Kinship and Clan System, a Ph.D. Thesis of 1978 housed in Madurai Kamaraj University Library, Madurai, is highly informative regarding their social concepts since it has dealt with the subject from the sociological point of view.

A. Ganapathy's The History of the Kallars of Melur Region, a Ph.D. Thesis of 1987, also available in Madurai Kamaraj University Library, Madurai, is a wonderful piece of work but it deals mainly with the Melur Kallars and is also out and out non-Christian in character. However with regard to the origin and etymology of the Kallars in general, it gives substantial information.

The Piramalai Kallars - Their Social, Moral and Religious Background and the Presentation of the Christian Gospel, is a B.D. Thesis by Rev. G.J.R. Athistam, submitted in 1950 and housed in United Theological College (UTC) Bangalore. This small work of less than 35 pages is very much general in character giving much importance to the missiological aspect only. However its value cannot be undermined as it does supply some useful pieces of information about the
life of the Kallars which have been incorporated and duly acknowledged in this Thesis.

So also a recent work, an M.Th. Thesis in Missiology by P.Ramanathan under the title *Spiritual Warfare Among the Kallars*, submitted in 2005 and housed in South Asian Institute of Advanced Christian studies (SAIACS) Bangalore, is nothing but a missional appraisal, giving importance to their vision and mission among the Kallars.

Though all these works have supplied useful information, they are very much limited and highly superficial and have no direct bearing with this topic is concerned, thus adding to its uniqueness.

**Sources of Information**

**Primary Sources**

The Primary sources consist of the official documents of the Government of Madras and the private accounts of the missionaries.

For the secular (non-Christian) aspect of the Kallar history, the official records of the Madras Presidency form the most important source of information. Preserved in the State Archives, Chennai, these records such as Gazetteers, Census Reports, Manuals, Newspaper Reports, various Government Orders connected with
Criminal Tribes Act and Kallar Reclamation, Working Reports of the Criminal Tribes Act, Administration Reports on Kallar Reclamation and Settlements, Assembly Proceedings, Petitions and Telegrams prove to be of great help for the reconstruction of the history of the Kallars prior to the introduction of Christianity among them.

For the ecclesiastical aspect, the Annual Reports of the AMM published from Pasumalai, Madurai, for various years (1834 - 1921) housed in Tamilnadu Theological Seminary Archives (TTS) at Arasaradi (Madurai); the Missionary Herald published annually from Boston, available in American College Library, Madurai; Minutes of the meetings of the AMM, Personal Letters of the missionaries, Comity arrangement among Missions – all kept preserved in the UTC archives, Bangalore; Caritas, a family magazine of the Jesuit Order found in the Seminary at St. Joseph’s College, Trichy, and the Seminary at Arul Anandar College, Karumathur (Madurai) – all these furnish valuable information, though limited, on the activities of their respective mission among the Kallars. Written in simple English, these records throw profuse light not only on the religious activities of the missionaries but also on the then socio-economic and political scenario in an interesting way. Undeniably the accounts of the missionaries prove to be very reliable and valuable since corroborated by official records.

Personal interviews with elders of the Kallar community and pastors connected with the community also have helped in the reconstruction of this history.
These interviews provided extensive opportunities for interaction with people who were eye witnesses and had direct contact with the missionaries as beneficiaries. In fact it was nothing more than an attempt of rescuing from oblivion the information possessed by living characters before it should be lost for ever. Since it is permissible for any researcher to rely upon less important but equally compelling sources like tradition, myth or even distorted information in the absence of written records all these had been taken into account. However bias has been eliminated in order to arrive at bare truths.

**Secondary Sources**

Many secondary sources are available in Tamil also for the study of the life of the Kallars. Important among them are Venkatasamy Nattar's *Kallar Charithram*, Muthu Thevar's *Muvendra Kula Thevar Samuga Varalaru* and Sivanandi Servai's *Muvendra Kula Charithai*. All these furnish a good deal of information about the origin, development and the life of the Kallar community. However all these are very general in character and no trace of the Kallar contact with Christianity could be seen in them. These books are available in so many libraries such as Central Library, Madurai, Regal Talkies Library, Madurai, Thevar Sinthanai Mantram, Madurai, and in the private collections of many Kallars.
There are ever so many published works in English to throw light on the non-Christian side of the Kallar history. Important among them are Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* in 7 volumes which is a scholarly field work in the history of social organization, available in S.T. Hindu College Library, Nagercoil and Roy Burman & Co.’s *Encyclopaedia of Indian Tribes and Castes* in 24 volumes, available in Madurai Kamaraj University Library, Madurai. *History of the Madras Police Centenary 1859 – 1959*, Mullaly's *Notes on Criminal Classes of the Madras Presidency*, Muhammad Abdul Ghani's *Notes on the Criminal Tribes of the Madras Presidency* – all available with T.N. Archives Library, Chennai, explain vividly Kallar crimes and their criminal activities.

For the study of the religious aspect a number of valuable books are available. Important among them are *History of Christianity in India* from CHAI Publication in 5 volumes, J.S. Chandler's *Seventy Five Years in the Madura Mission*, J.J. Banninga’s *Notes on the American Madura Mission since its Seventy Fifth Anniversary*, Houpert C. Joseph's *The Madura Manual*, M.X. Miranda's *The Jesuit Experience in Tamilnadu*, J.S. Ponniah's *The Christian Community of Madura, Ramnad and Tirunelveli*, Fenger J. Ferd's *History of the Tranquebar Mission* etc. These books, available in Tamilnadu State Archives Library, UTC Library, TTS Library and Gurukul (TELC) Library at Purasawalkam, Chennai, supply
valuable information, though limited, about Christianity in connection with the Kallar community and thus have a direct bearing with the topic.

**Limitations**

At the outset, it must be confessed that the search for original, often unpublished sources, was not crowned with a grand success. The transition of the Kallars from ferocity to a community has not been recorded properly and housed in any of the archives. In spite of running from pillar to post enough of primary records could not be obtained. There are many reasons for this.

The first and foremost reason is the lack of historical sense among the Kallars. Recording of events had never been their practice. Even their cultural, religious and clan-behaviour had been passed on from generation to generation through oral transmission only. Even today they are not in the habit of recording their panchayat proceedings. The tragicomedy is that most of them are not even aware of the names of their fore fathers and the first converts of their family. So it is but natural that they could not recall the names of the missionaries who were instrumental for the conversion of their ancestors. The questionnaire supplied to them failed miserably as a source of information since they had not taken it up seriously. This lapse on their part made this study an arduous task entailing much research in libraries and archives.
Secondly the non-availability of adequate primary records was a major handicap. The temporary closure of the Jesuit archives at Shenbaganur, one of the probable places for scholars for getting Christian records about the Kallars, added to the difficulty.

As far as TELC is concerned, the desperate search for records of their missionary activities among the Kallars in their Seminary (Gurukul) at Purasawakkam, Chennai, Tranquebar Bishop House at Trichy, T.B.M.L. College Library at Poraiyar and TELC Higher Secondary School Library at Usilampatti (Madurai) etc. ended in terrible disappointment. Except for some photographs of the missionaries concerned no worth while record could be collected from those places. This fact gets vouchsafed by an incident that took place when Rev. Dr. D. Winkler, a missionary cum professor of the LELM was asked to contribute some materials to the Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the TELC. As nothing was available in India he had to depend on a selection of records sent from Leipzig. Even among the available Christian literature about the Kallars most of them are either in German or Swedish thus making it unattainable. To make matters worse, most of the records are in a dilapidated and brittle condition.

Even with the available Christian sources in English no adequate records pertaining to different castes could be found. Moreover for the missionaries, Kallar or Piramalai Kallar or Maravar – all meant one and the same and were all referred to as
thief caste or robber caste only. Even in churches no caste wise records of the members are available. Hence furnishing of precise statistics on the conversion of the Piramalai Kallar could not be thought of.

Finally there was the problem of authenticity of information. Some of the informers preferred to narrate what was good and pleasant for them rather than the truth. Hence the researcher had to sift the grain from the chaff from the available information.

In spite of some of these factors which proved to be stumbling blocks for the reconstruction of a comprehensive and cogent history of the Kallars and Christianity, with unflinching determination and perseverance a bold step has been taken towards unveiling this aspect of the Kallar history which is otherwise likely to be forgotten or not taken notice of.

Hence with the available materials this topic “Spread of Christianity among the Piramalai Kallars of Madurai District” has been analyzed to the best of ability by following a methodology which is partly historical and partly analytical not out of any fascination for complexity but out of necessity. This Thesis is a sincere attempt to research in the real sense of the term and present a continuous and systematic account of the spread of Christianity among the Piramalai Kallars which has not so far received the attention it deserves.
Chapterisation

This Thesis has been arranged in seven chapters including Introduction and Conclusion.

In the Introductory chapter statement of problem, review of literature, sources, limitations and methodology are analyzed.

The Second chapter Historical background of the Kallar community deals with the different theories of origin of the Kallars, the etymology of the term Kallar and their settlement in Madurai.

In the third chapter Life of the Piramalai Kallars prior to the introduction of Christianity the socio-economic, cultural and religious background of the Kallars has been described elaborately. The general traits of the Kallars, their customs and tradition which were tied up with every stage of their life cycle such as birth, puberty, marriage and death, their clan system, their crimes and their cults are given due importance.

The fourth Chapter Entry of Christian Missions into Madurai is mainly about the advent of Christianity and Christian Missions in India in general and Madurai in particular. In this chapter the then prevailing socio-religious conditions at Madurai as seen by the missionaries, the establishment of the three Missions
connected with the life of these Kallars and their services to the society in general are
dealt with elaborately.

The fifth Chapter **the Kallars and Christianity** forms the nucleus of the
Thesis. It focuses on the attitude of the Kallars towards Christianity in different stages,
the methodology adopted by the missionaries to win over them and their hardships,
analysis of the reasons for conversion, the persecutions the converts endured and the
various activities of the missions are explained vividly.

The sixth Chapter **Impact of Christianity on the Piramalai Kallars**
analyses the change in their attitude, mind-set and their over all development in
various walks of life.

In the **concluding** chapter the summary of the findings and suggestions
are included.