

**IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES ACTIVITIES IN
FRENCH PONDICHERRY**

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Abstract

The Christian missionaries established their branch in Pondicherry since 1660 A.D. and the Jesuits arrived and started their activities in 1675 A.D. While the former took care of the religious needs of the Europeans and their children, the latter, the foreign missionaries too joined the fray. The proselytize policy of the French appealed particularly to the down compressed among the native Hindus, who have thronged the Christian missionaries with the hope of achieving some social status and to take benefit of the new opportunities thrown open by the commercial activities of the French company. Thus they built beautiful church for the Capuchins. As a result of conversion, in 1715 A.D. the native Christians population in Pondicherry numbered to two thousand and it almost tripled by January 1726 A.D. Again the support offered by the French attracted the native Christian population from other places too, to come and reside in their colony. In 1747 A.D, scarcity raged in the Pondicherry region and the Jesuits took to conversion with a vengeance and in this Monsieur and also Madame Duplix went all out to support them. As such, the proselytize policy (attempt to convert someone to one's own religious faith) earned the French several supporters among the natives and served as a very powerful one.

Key words: Missionaries, Duplix, Conversion, westernisation

During the beginning of the eighteenth century the activities of the missionaries in Pondicherry was not well and the religious enthusiasm took an ugly turn and was unfortunate. The Francois Martin issued an order prohibiting the ceremonies of both the Hindus and the Muslims during the fortnight of Easter and on Sundays in March 1701 A.D. Then the Jesuits intervened in the religious life of the locals and desecrated their temples in 1702 to 1705 A.D. which resulted in mass departure of the natives from Pondicherry. During these three years some 2,000 families left the town. Besides, they remonstrated the French company for minting Pagodas bearing the image of the Hindu God Vishnu on it and condemned their action as unchristian like. And also the Hindus were not allowed to construct the new temple

and repair or to add new annexes to their existing temples. The King's council of France determined on 14th February 1711, that the post of the courtier, the highest to which any Indian was eligible under the French organization of trade should be given to a native Christian alone under the power of the Jesuits. A native Hindu, Nainiappa Pillai who served as Courtier at that time was given six month notice to convert himself to Christianity. But he refused to convert so he thrown out from the office and he was imprisoned. Unfortunately, he lost his life while in prison. And also two third of the Hindu population of Pondicherry including Guruvappa, Nainiappa's son and Thiruvengadam pillai father of Ananda Ranga Pillai fled to Madras and other places at that time.

Thus the French continued to practices the policy of irritating the natives since they dared to differ from the rulers on their religious believes. And then Ananda Ranga Pillai who proved to be the right person for the post of courtier otherwise, had to wait on his hooks for the years to come. By persuasion and by threat, the French attempted to raise the Vedapuri Eswaran temple, the symbol and hope the native Hindus to the ground. On 17th March 1746, some miscreants entered the Eswaran temple and desecrated its precincts. Protest of the headmen of caste was put down by Dupleix by show of force. The sepoys who professed Islam, were employed to block their way, in case they intended to restructure the drama of mass migration from Pondicherry. The last straw on the back of the Hindus of Pondicherry was mounted by the destruction to Vedapuri Eswaran temple in September 1748 A.D.

Impact of Christian Missionaries in Pondicherry

The Missionaries propagated Catholic religion, for conversion of natives there were two schools of thought among the Missionaries with regard to the policy. The one school of consideration felt that there should be no interference of the native Christians in following their Indian customs and manners and other school of thought advocated conversions along with the westernisation of the natives in the matter of culture, manners etc. The earlier Jesuit Missionaries were in favour of following the latter policy. The latter policy was followed in such an active manner that they were accused of Hinduisation of Christianity in Rome by Robert De Nobili, John Bntto and the famous Tamil savant Joseph Constantine Beschi. In fact De Nobili concentrated on converting Brahmins, while the others converted mainly the high caste.

One of the active advocates of the policy of retaining the Indianness of Indian converts was the late Rev. Father Heras, one of the distinguished historians of India. This visionary policy was recently endorsed by the second Vatican Council. The pendulum had swung*to the other extreme limit. A powerful section of the Catholics advocated a policy of Indianisation' almost with revenge. The early missionaries might have followed a policy of retaining Indianness of the native converts as a matter of expediency with the aim of converting mainly caste Hindus.¹⁶ The adaptation of caste Hindus was done in order to give respectability to a foreign religion like Christianity. It must be admitted that such a policy had paid dividends as today Christianity is more respected in the South than in the North and it is not looked down upon as the low caste religion or foreigners-religion. Among certain higher castes in

Tamilnadu they have no compulsion to inter-marry with a Christian family so long as the purity of the caste is rigidly adhered to. It is a sad fact that inspite of Christianity being a Western religion and a progressive religion, it succumbed to the caste convention of the hidebound society of those times. One cannot say the same thing in respect of the spread of Islam. The Protestants were always more liberal in the performance of caste distinctions.

Ananda Ranga Pillai in his Diary has stated the segregation existed in the churches i.e, how the Catholics had kept all the caste distinctions of the Hindus and how the scheduled castes were segregated in the churches. The Scheduled castes were not allowed to sit along with high caste Christians yet Europeans and Eurasians were allowed to sit with them but not scheduled caste Catholics. Ananda Ranga Pillai noted in his Diary how the attempt of a priest to put down segregation of scheduled castes in the church was irritated by the caste Christians. In 1745A.D. a European priest from Karaikal instigated the low caste Christians to rebel against their segregation in the house of God. The senior priest of the Church had the barrier wall in the church demolished but the caste Christians objected to this new development and refused to attend the religious services and boycotted the church. The priests were forced to go and demand to the French Governor to make the caste Christians enter the church by force. The caste Christians attended the church a few days later after a barrier of chairs was put up in the place of the wall. This caste segregation persisted not merely in the church but even in the graveyards. There was an occurrence when even a church was closed indefinitely due to a quarrel over the segregation of pariah Christians. A modern French writer had stated that even the European Jesuit priests treated the low castes no better than the caste Christians. They did not allow low caste Christians to enter into their houses. They felt humiliating to go to their dwellings to administer the last sacraments and low caste Christians had to be brought to the streets and the priests were careful never to touch them when they administered the last sacraments. The Jesuit priests had to observe untouchability in order that they may not lose their own caste with caste Christians. The French do not seem to have! helped Christian community economically. The Christian community was not rich compared to the Hindus. It was in the latter half of the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth century that many Christians educated in French and they got some special treatment in respect of Government employment. When Ananda Ranga Pillai was asked to convert some of the Hindus, he gave a blunt reply “ only of late year, a few Christians have been able to build brick houses and to save a few hundred rupees. This is not so in the case with Hindus. They are the Company’ s merchants. All the renters of the outside villages are Hindus. Christians hold no such posts. But since Hindus do, how can you suppose that I could convert them?”

Ananda Ranga Pillai felt that Christianity for Hindus was not respectable since the native Christians were not wealthy people. The European contact with Christians was looked down upon by some sections of the Hindus. Mgr. Champenois, a contemporary Missionary wrote.; “ For nearly twenty years in the districts the relationship with the Europeans had lowered the faith much more than they had enhanced. The Christians have suffered much from the military expeditions and from

their connection with Europeans.” It must be mentioned to the credit of the later missionaries that it was due to them that the scheduled caste Christians are now much better off cost-effectively than their counterparts among the Hindus in the town of Pondicherry.

The scheduled caste Christians had many opportunities of employment in the French military and other occupations during the latter part of the French rule. They had become wealthier. However, it is still a fact that scheduled caste Catholics are not meant as priests and cannot enter the convents as nuns in the south. Rise only in Pondicherry we see the first convent, established exclusively for scheduled caste nuns; and it is only in the Diocese of Pondicherry we can see a few priests belonging to scheduled caste Christian community. The position has not changed, even now in other parts of South India. The French did not encourage the settlements of Protestants and other denominations of Christians in Pondicherry. The Superior, of St;Paul’ s Church wanted the French Governor to evict the protestants not merely from Pondicherry villages but even from certain places in the Arcot Kingdom. Even Ananda Ranga Pillai had to agree, to check the spread of Protestantism. The very fact that the converted Indian Christians continued to adhere to their rigid caste distinctions show that the French culture had hardly any impact. But, there were certain French customs and manners with regard to dress, costume, food and table manners among the French educated families of Christians as well as Hindus. The Indian Christians mainly remained Indian in their manners and customs.”

In 1937 A.D, the French administrative efforts for taking away of casteism in the colony, promulgated by the *Decret*, abolished the mentioning of caste in *the Etat civil* records (i.e, birth, marriage and death) and the mentioning of caste in government documents. By the *Arrete* of 20th August 1940, the suffix *Cherry* (nomenclature of pariah villages) was changed into *Peth*. “ The measures did not alter very much the status of the pariahs but helped to improve their living conditions within or close to the urban settlements.”

The French attempted to assimilate a section of the Indian society so that it would be a bridge between themselves and the majority of the Indian community, in political economic and socio-cultural spheres of life. However, their effort to replace those who were not responded favourably to the French overtures with the section which came forward, to play the role of intermediaries, was not completely successful, as they could attract only the poor and down-trodden section of the society.

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6. *Maravar* is another warrior tribe that is related to Tamil Muthurajas.p. 154.
7. During the Sangam period generally the fishermen s were called *Mukkurar*.
8. *Kallar* also known as *Kalian* comes from the Tamil word *Kallam* meaning “ Thief, Robber, One who steals” .
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