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## DEVASAHAYAM PILLAI :A FERVENT CATHOLIC LAY MISSIONARY AND PATRON SAINT OF SUBALTERN CLASSES IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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### ABSTRACT

*From the beginning of the world until today, there are many millions of people who have been born in this world and if all those who have come and stayed, we would not have had a place on this earth. No one escapes the general justice that all who are born must one day die, but the loss of a few acquires special merit. In the history of Tamil Nadu, many individuals have sacrificed their lives to create an egalitarian society. There are good number of historical persons who really withstood for good values. Devasahayam was one such line. Even though he was born in a high society, he considered his life as a sacrifice for the sake of Christianity, but he accepted the sufferings caused by accepting Christianity amid the untouchability, caste oppression, and the tax burden imposed on the poor and simple people in the rule of Marthanda Varma, who ruled the Travancore kingdom at that time. In this paper an attempt is made to trace the different aspects of his life and how he withstood for good values which were really challenging.*



**KEY WORDS :** Devasahayam, Marthanda Varma, Kanyakumari District, Catholic, Natalam.

### INTRODUCTION :

The area of the present district of Kanyakumari formed the original nucleus of the state of Travancore also known as Thiruvithancore.<sup>1</sup> The district thus was part of the then Travancore- Cochin State until the linguistic formation of the States of India in 1956, when it was annexed to Tamil Nadu, thus showing that the area of the District is one of the most ancient Tamil areas. So Kerala and Tamil Nadu, Malayalam and Tamil, converge here and give birth to a unique blend of "Tamil-Malayalam" and a salubrious climate for intellectual and interfaith harmony.<sup>2</sup> It had the idea of an egalitarian society without inequalities.<sup>3</sup> Christianity was introduced by St. Thomas, an Apostle of Jesus Christ into the Kanyakumari District, and later spread by the great missionary, St. Francis Xavier, who resided at Kottar in 1544 A.D. while doing missionary work in the neighbouring areas. Jesuit Missionaries of Madurai and Neman<sup>4</sup> Missionaries, and in particular the movement initiated by the conversion, life and martyrdom of Devasahayam brought about the conversion of many villages in the interior parts of the district to Catholic faith. Protestant missionaries arrived later.<sup>5</sup> The district now has the third largest Christian population among all districts in India and it accounts for one-fifth of the Christian population

of Tamil Nadu. The Diocese of Kottar, Tamil Nadu and even the rest of India is rejoicing today that the name of Devasahayam has been placed side by side with the names of St. Thomas, the Apostle, St. John de Britto and St. Gonsalo Garcia, the Martyrs of India and that Devasahayam is recognized as the first Indian to have obtained the palm of martyrdom on the Indian soil, the first Layman saint and the first married person to be canonized in India and the first Saint from Tamil Nadu.

### EARLY LIFE OF DEVASAHAYAM

Devasahayam alias Nilakandapillai was born to Vasudevan Namboothiri and Devaki Ammal on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1712 in a Hindu Nair family following the maternal line in Killiyur Vattam Natalam, present day Kanyakumari District. Natalam is located on the Tamil Nadu-Kerala border and Tamil and Malayalam languages are spoken by the people living here. Neelam, Nilakandan Pillai was proficient in both these languages. As his mother tongue was Malayalam, he spoke Malayalam at home and Tamil outside. His father, Vasudevar Namboothiri, was a Brahmin native of Kayamkulam in Kerala and served as a member of the Thiruvattaru Sri Adhikesava Perumal Temple Committee. Neelkandan, whose mother hailed from Thiruvattaru region, was brought up by his paternal uncle in the Hindu Nair tradition of his maternal lineage. Neelam or Neelkandan means Hindu God Shiva. Neelakandan was an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva and Pathirakali. He learned vernacular and archery at an early age. From childhood he got rid of vices and built his life with virtue. He was active and had the natural ability to fight evil. He made himself a great man by his high education and advanced knowledge. Travancore royal families and military commanders belonged to the Nair caste, so Neelkandan's Nair family was also influential in the court of MarthandaVarma, the King of Travancore. Neelkandan started his career as a warrior at a young age. After that he worked as an officer in Padmanabhapuram Neelakanda Swamy Temple and finally as a treasury officer in the palace. Nilakandan, who was energetic and prudent, was working in the Udayagiri Fort under an officer named Ramayan Thaliwa, the Diwan of Travancore.<sup>6</sup> During these days, he used to perform daily *pooja* and worship to his favourite deities Shiva and Anandavalli at Udayagiri Fort and was a *Dharmakarta* who annually donated to the repair the infrastructure of the temple.<sup>7</sup>

### SOCIAL MILIEU : THE CASTE SYSTEM IN PRINCELY STATE OF TRAVANCORE

The description of the background of the life, activities and death of the servant of Devasahayam is necessary for a correct understanding of the facts relating to his martyrdom and the message of his life and death to the world. The social situation concerned the formation of the different communities, their position in the social strata and their mutual relations.

It was not only physical contact that contaminated, but sight itself could also contaminate. Therefore, the high castes believed that they should not see the people of the low castes when they were expected to be particularly pure. People of the Vannan caste considered themselves invisible. They had to work between midnight and dawn and were forbidden to go out during the day.<sup>8</sup> Untouchability was one of the serious and complex problems of the Indian social system and was also practiced throughout Travancore. The practice was based on the caste prejudices of purity and impurity. Those of the upper castes, especially the Brahmins and the Nairs, were considered contaminated if they came into contact with people of the lower castes. For example, if a Brahmin touched a sudra, he could only enter the house after a bath. If he touched a Pulayan, he had to bathe immediately and even change his thread. Thus even a Nair became impure from physical contact with those of lower caste and had to bathe to purify himself. This caste practice was also among the people of the oppressed classes. For example, if an untouchable touched an Ezhava, the former had to take a bath. Thus, the scourge of caste repression spread in such a way that the oppressed themselves became oppressors in some way. Low caste people had to stay away from high caste people. For example, Mateer reported that in Travancore, a Shanar (Nadar) must maintain 36 steps (feet) from a Brahmin and 12 feet from a Nair. A Pulayan had to keep 96 feet from a Brahmin and 66 feet from a Nair. When the Nambudiri Brahmins or the Nair nobles went out into the public streets, an attendant went in front of them shouting "Po, Po", which meant "go away", so that the low caste people would not approach the

high caste.<sup>9</sup> The lower castes were prevented from holding wedding processions and living in tiled houses, and the upper castes took away the fruits and vegetables grown by the lower castes. The lower castes were forced to supply wood. Pollution or *theettu* was observed in all public places, public wells, government buildings, *chatrams* and schools.<sup>10</sup>

### TAXATION ON LOW CASTES

The Travancore government has imposed a poll tax on low caste people. There were taxes collected on each person. The king also imposed that tax on people who had died.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the government imposed a tax called the *Sirkarpattom* Tax on the palm trees that the Nadar used to tap toddy. The Nadar had to pay taxes for the huts they had built in the lands of the high castes. In addition to that, they had to pay taxes for the government to hold wedding ceremonies in their homes. They were also called upon to perform services to the Hindu caste.<sup>12</sup>

### SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Low caste women were not allowed to wear gold ornaments or dresses above the waist. Unprivileged people were prevented from putting doors on their homes. Furthermore, they were unable to sit in front of high caste people. The owner and his wife were called god *thamburanor* and *tamburatti* goddess. They spoke to themselves as *adiyan* or your slaves and *adiyangalor* those who lie at the feet. They did not call their rice as *choru* but *karikkatti* or porridge. They asked for permission saying not to take food but to drink parchment or water. They had to call their homes *chalas* or huts, children *kidanqal* or calves and money as *chembukkasu* or copper coin. If a tenant meets his *lanmi*, he must stay at a distance and then bow. He could not have the pleasure of wearing full-size slippers or dothis or a turban. High caste people did not want to see prosperous or educated low caste people or use an umbrella with a handle. It was a social custom for low caste people to obtain permission from their high caste landowners for marriage ceremonies in their families. Excommunication was the penalty for those who violated the orders of their owners. It was considered *asswajanavirodham* or enmity with one's caste and *desavirodham* or enmity with the residents of a *desam* or village. In such a case, a tenant would sometimes be forbidden to go to the tanks, use the common wells and obtain the service of the barbers or laundromats. Those who helped or sympathized with them would also face the same punishment or be fined.<sup>13</sup>

Human slavery was common and largely observed in the Princely State of Travancore. The caste Hindus kept innumerable slaves under their direct control. They were bought and sold. However that did not bring an end to the sufferings of the low caste people in the society. Slavery was rampant during the lifetime of Devasahayam Pillai that even the Christian Portuguese and Dutch indulged in slave trade and considered it a profitable one. However, slavery was one of the reasons that were driving many of these low castes into the Christian fold.

### ACCUSATION OF BRAHMINS ON DEVASAHAYAM

Devasahayam, who converted to Christianity, incurred the wrath of his community. Especially Padmanathapuram Padmanabha Swami Temple Brahmin Gurus spread various slanders about Devasahayam. Belonging to the Nair clan, Devasahayam embraced Christianity and fraternized with the lower class people. The upper castes and government officials thus reacted with hatred towards Devasahayam. They again forced him to convert to Hinduism citing the Travancore government order of the day that high caste Hindus should not convert to Christianity. But as soon as he had left them, the Brahmins, who were slanderers, informed the king of this news. Following Devasahayam, many Brahmins were afraid to embrace Christianity and met King Marthanda Varma and expressed their fear and objection to Devasahayam. They appealed to the government that if this situation continued, the Christians would destroy Vedas and Puranas of the Hindus, and famous Padmanabha Swami temple would be pulled down and closed. Travancore Dewan Thalawa was falsely accused of having close relations with Europeans and political enemies and leaking government secrets. King Marthanda

Varman, who greatly respected the Brahmins, immediately ordered Devasahayam to be imprisoned so as not to offend them.

### UNTOLD MISERIES LIFE

In order to threaten and warn the people, Devasahayam was made to sit backwards on a buffalo and wore a flower garland around his neck and insulted him and took him around for sixteen days and mocked and taunted him. Many times he fell down from the buffalo and suffered serious injuries. Some people threw dirt and stones at him. Wherever he was forced to abandon the Christian creed, miracles took place among the people blessed by him. A neem tree in which he was tied at a place called Peruvilai sprouted. Due to this incident, Devasahayam's fame spread rapidly among the people and the frightened king sent orders to his soldiers to kill him secretly instead of openly. Estakiyo, the General who had prepared Devasahayam for Christian life, was greatly distressed to see all that was happening. King Marthanda Varma, who had heard of Estakiyo's action, sent a message to Devasahayam secretly asking him to act decisively and warned him. Devasahayam asked his beloved wife, who met him in prison, to remain steadfast in her Christian faith. Devasahayam tied iron chains all over his body and dragged him due to which he was unable to walk and often stumbled and fell and suffered injuries all over his body. The soldiers who dragged him beat him with banyan branches, tamarind sticks and thorns. Due to this, the flesh was torn in 35 places on his body and as the days went by, the tortures on Devasahayam increased. They locked him up in the prison and tortured him with boiling water mixed with chillies and pepper. They tied him up where the locusts were. They also threw venomous snakes and scorpions into his prison. During his three-year prison life, he was never allowed to take a bath and thus bravely endured all kinds of ailments.

### DEATH OF DEVASAHAYAM

The government official was stripped of the clothes of Devasahayam, arrested and dragged to the palace. There his relatives, friends and fellow officers begged him to give up Christianity. But he said that if he lost his life to follow Christian faith with determination, he would surely have heavenly life. Dewan Ramayan Talava, who witnessed this event, told the king that Devasahayam was very firm in his new faith. Again the king spoke to Devasahayam but without giving room for anything he remained firm in his Christian faith. King Marthanda Varma was annoyed and he ordered Devasahayam to be imprisoned. The place was 5 feet height and 4 feet wide and the entrance was two feet high. Devasahayam was thus imprisoned in a small dark room. Despite being imprisoned for several months, Devasahayam remained firm in his faith. The king, who lost his faith, considered Devasahayam's disobedience as treason and sentenced him to death.

### A PATRON OF THE SUBALTERNS

The Kottar Diocese had accelerated all arrangements for the canonization of the martyr Devasahayam after miracles happened to many people who prayed at the tomb. Cochin Bishop Joseph first sent a report to Rome in 1756 that Devasahayam had been killed for Christianity and presented it to the Pope. This was considered the beginning of his canonization. In the year 1993, the proceedings for the canonization of Devasahayam Pillai were initiated by the then Bishop of Kottar Diocese, Leon Dharmaraj. In the year 2004, he was elevated to the position of Servant of God. In June 2012, Pope Benedict XVI elevated him to venerable status. On the second day of December 2012, Devasahayam was announced as the benefactor in a raucous ceremony held at the St. Carmel High School campus in Nagercoil. On 21<sup>st</sup> February 2020, Pope Francis signed the canonization of Blessed Devasahayam. He was formally canonized at the Vatican on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022. Thus, a commoner from India got the honour of being elevated to the status of a saint. Kottor St. Xavier Church where Saint Devasahayam was buried. Kaatadi hill where he was killed. St. Michael the Archangel Church, Puliyurkurichi, a rock temple dedicated to him. And the Church in Natalam, the town of his birth, was dedicated to him.<sup>14</sup>

To conclude, one gives life and another gets life. This saying was true with the life style of Devasahayam Pillai who by shedding his blood restored many to newness of life. The people who were

in darkness came to light. The holy father of the Catholic Church pope Francis in his message insisted on the equality of all people, despite caste differences. It is also so fitting that the meaning of the word 'Devasahayam' in Malayalam is 'God is my help'. His exemplary life style became an example for all Christian people especially to lay people who need to learn from that the witnessing life style of him. Many people in the modern world have their heroes to follow and leaders to follow their style. This great lay Christian missionary gave social transformer. His bold and broad heart and strong faith which kept him moving to have a social change. The faith which Devasahayam had was strong even in the days storms and difficult situation .In those days, he withstood with the bold faith. It was the need of the hour that people have to be liberated from the clutches of untouchability and caste problem.

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