



ADOPTION METHOD AND ITS IMPACT ON CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

Christianity was brought into India by St. Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ in 52 A.D. By calling themselves as St. Thomas Christians and Syrian Christian, they occupied the highest position in Kerala where they played an active role as agriculturists, traders and soldiers in the army. They enjoyed many rights and privileges from the rulers. They were noted for their adoption to the customs and manners of the native people. When the Portuguese arrived on the Malabar Coast following the discovery of sea route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1498 A.D. they were welcomed by the St. Thomas Christians. There arose enmity between them, due to the Synod of Diamper which was convened in 1599 A.D to Latinize the St. Thomas Christians. Following St. Thomas many religious Orders came to India for the spreading of the Gospel to the natives. Among them, the Jesuits contributed much for the propagation of Christianity. But active propagation began only after the arrival of the Jesuits. St. Francis Xavier, Robert de Nobili, John de Britto and Constantine Beschi were the most important Jesuits who contributed a lot to the expansion of Christianity in India. They followed their own methods to convert the people into Christianity. The adoption method was followed by Robert de Nobili, the founder of the Madurai Mission. The methods adopted in the Madurai Mission attracted a huge number of people and they become Christians and contributed a lot to the society.

KEYWORDS: monotheistic religion , Indian tradition , Syrian Christians.

INTRODUCTION

Christianity, a monotheistic religion, was taken to the nook and corner of the world by the apostles of Jesus Christ. According to Indian tradition, St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, came by sea and at first landed at Cranganore in 52 A.D. He converted the high caste Hindu families in Cranganore and Quilon. After preaching the gospel to the Partians, Madians, Persians, Hycanians and Bactrians St. Thomas founded seven churches at Malinkara, Kottayal, Palayur, Gokamangalam, Niranam, Quilon and Chayal. He moved to the Coromandel Coast and reached Mylapore, where he converted many high caste people to Christianity which led to his death at St. Thomas Mount in 72 A.D.

The first and the most ancient group of churches have their origin; to St. Thomas who called themselves as St. Thomas Christian were Syrian Christians. The strength of the community was increased by a number of immigrations of Christian from western countries. Active propagation of Christianity began only after the advent of the Portuguese and the Jesuits. With the formation of the Madurai Mission in 1606 A.D. by Robert de Nobili, Christianity began to spread into the interior part of Tamil Nadu. The labours of Thomas and Xavier, the Catholic religion reached the borders of the Tamil country. It is only with the attempt of Robert de Nobili Christianity entered into the interior parts of the land.

EARLY LIFE:

Nobili was born at Rome on 2nd September 1577 A.D.¹. The Nobilies were important personalities in Orvieto as Governors, Consults and 'Capitani Governo' for fifteen generations. His Grandfather Vincenzo had been created a count of Vivitella and General in the Papal army, his father Pier Franscesco continued the family military tradition. It is true that Robert de Nobili's ancestors lived in Montepulciano, but his father Pier Francesco settled in Rome after marrying Clarice Cioli, a Roman. Robert de Nobili was related to two Popes and two Cardinals². He was particularly influenced by the life of his uncle Cardinal Robert de Nobili, whose name he bore. In 1596 A.D Robert de Nobili joined the Society of Jesus. His Novice master in Novitiate, Father Nicholas Orlandini predicted him that he would join the Indian Mission and do great thing for the service to God. In 1599 A.D Robert de Nobili entered for his 'Philosophical Course' during which he studied logic, science, astronomy, metaphysics, psychology and ethics.

In 1603 A.D he was ordained as priest before he had completed the final year of his three year syllabus. At the beginning of 1603 A.D he was to start for Portugal on his way to India. When this becomes known there was loud protest everywhere. In this juncture, Nocholoas Orlandini, his Noviose-Master requests his superiors to send him to India. Starting on 28th April 1604 A.D from Lisbon he traveled in a Portuguese ship and reached Goa on 20th March 1605 A.D³. For the next five months, Robert de Nobili lived at the college of St.Paul, continuing his theological studies. He passed his examination in theology and by the end of 1605 A.D was free to start his missionary work. After his study in the Pearl Fishery Coast, Robert de Nobili was stationed at Madurai where he formed the Madurai Mission.

FOUNDATION OF MADURAI MISSION:

The Madurai Mission, the most glorious of all the Eastern Missions, was formed by Robert de Nobili in 1606 A.D. It had its origin from to be name of the city, Madurai in South India. It formed a part of a geographically well defined region of the peninsular India, the Madras South-East Division, lying South and East of Mysore. It was bound by the river Cauvery, the Western Ghats and the Bay of Bengal. The maximum length was 240 miles from the East to West and 600 miles from North to South and it had the area of 16,500 square miles⁴. It comprise of the districts of Madurai, Ramnad and Tirunelveli, one half of Tirucirappalli and Pudukottai.

It gradually extended itself over nearly the whole of Tamilnadu except the coastal strip. The Madurai Mission was formed to convert the high caste people, Brahmins to Christianity. Robert de Nobili investigated the causes for the failure of Fr. Goncalo Fernandez and he stratified the reasons for his failure and decided to adopt a different method, known as "Adoption Method" which was based on the customs and manner of the natives.

ADAPTATION

Robert de Nobili made a thorough inquiry regarding the customs of the people. In this regard he was compelled to adopt several features. Robert de Nobili discovered that the great obstacle for the failure of Fr.Goncalo Fernandez was his manner of dressing. He wrote about this to Fr.Provincial and Archbishop for permission to change the dress. In October 1670 A.D he obtained permission to give up wearing the black Cassock, which was the despised dress of the "*parangis*" and put on the usual dress of an Indian "*Sanyasi*". Robert de Nobili also began to live like the Indian *Sanyasi*⁵. He gave up meat, fish, egg and wine from 15th November 1606 A.D. He restricted himself to one meal per day consisting of rice, milk and vegetables.

He ate food by sitting with his legs folded and in front of him on the ground with spread leaf of bananas. He ate with his fingers by using the right hand and his left hand remains clean, so as to take the drinking vessel at the end of the meal. Robert de Nobili wore sacred thread like the Brahmins. It differed from the Brahmin thread. Instead of three threads, he used five, three golden and two silver ones, and a cross is suspended in the middle. The three golden threads represent the Holy Trinity and the two silver ones the body and the soul of the adorable Humanity of Our Lord⁶. The cross in the middle represents the passion and death of Jesus Christ. He also used sandal paste by explaining that it was used to adorn the forehead.

DISASSOCIATION

Robert de Nobili followed the principles of disassociation to prove that, he was not a *parangi* but a Roman *Kshatriya*. To prove this he also bore the Tamil name *Tattuva Bodagar Swami* and called his religion as Satyavedam. He decided to build a house and chapel for himself. The site was given to him by Errama Chetty, a captain of the Nayak of Madurai. The people called his house the *madam* of Aiyar.

Inculturation

Inculturation is a dynamic relation between the Christian message and a particular culture, an insertion of the Christian life in a cultural community where it takes root and produces new riches. It designates the same process of indigenization. Through indigenisation most of the Brahmins were converted to Christianity by the Syrian Christians of Malabar. This inspired Robert de Nobili to adopt inculturation as a method to convert the Brahmin to Christianity. He Christianized all the marriage and burial ceremonies and the Pongal festival⁷. He used *Prasadam*, instead of grace, and *Kovil* instead of *lareja*. He used *Pooja* for mass.

Translation

Robert de Nobili confined his activities within his little cabin. He had to dedicate every morning himself to the Lord. He consecrated time to write refutation of some of the chief doctrines of the Hindus in Tamil. He translated the names of the Christian saints and made them sound Tamil. Thus Fidelis became Visuvasam, Honoratus became Aasaarappan, Peter became Malaiyappan, Lasarus became Devasahyam Elizabeth became Devannamal etc⁸.

Declaration

Robert de Nobili attracted the educated through his principles of declaration. This was used to the learned men of Madurai. He made use of this opening by declaring that this veda still existed. It had been completed and perfected by another veda. This was the veda which he had to preach, *styaveda*. He declared that he had come from a far off country to preach it.

Objection and Reaction:

The methods adopted by Robert de Nobili attracted the natives and several people accepted Christianity. It increased the name and fame of Robert de Nobili. It brought jealousy both among the Hindus and his own fellow missionaries. The year between 1610A.D and 1623A.D was period of testing for Robert de Nobili and to the Madurai Mission. This period was marked with objection and reaction both in India and in Europe. This objection led to the convening of many consultations and conferences both in India and Europe and finally solved by a Papal Bull in 1623A.D. The Brahmins and the *pandarams* bitterly opposed Robert de Nobili because he was converting many people to Christianity from Hinduism.

The conversion of Sivadharama, an Andhra Brahmin shocked the Brahmins in Madurai. It gave rise to a new problem. The Brahmins held a meeting to examine the conduct of Robert de Nobili. The meeting was

attended by about 800 Brahmins including Sivadharama. The meeting charged that Robert de Nobili was an atheist. Sivadharama argued against the charges against Robert de Nobili. This completely changed the opposition and all of them to withdraw. Robert de Nobili had to face opposition from his own converts. Fifteen of his converts rebelled against him because they were made to believe by a Parava Christian of the Pearl Fishery Coast that in putting salt into their mouth during the baptismal ceremonies. Robert de Nobili had made them lose their caste.

Among the sixty converts, fifteen of them stopped coming to the church⁹. Robert de Nobili issued a manifesto written on an *olai* and fixed it in front of his house which contained details about his birth, and his aim to arrive India. He recorded that he was not a *parangi* and not born in the lands of the *parangis* nor connected with the *parangi* race. Thus through his intelligence, Robert de Nobili solved all the problems raised by the natives. Fr. Goncalo Fernandez was strongly opposed to all adaptation of Robert de Nobili's methods and innovations. It also affected Christianity.

Consultation and Conference:

The First theological Consultation was convened at Goa in 1610A.D to investigate the complaint of Fr. Goncalo Fernandez. According to them, the methods followed by Robert de Nobili were superstitious, scandalous and illicit¹⁰. According to the order of Fr. Nicolas Pimenta, Fr. Albert Laerzio convened a consultation to discuss the problem of the sacred thread. All the participants except three Portuguese were of the opinion that the mission was to continue without any change; however they desired that Robert de Nobili should drop the thread.

The Second Theological Consultations at Goa decided that Robert de Nobili's way of acting was a negation of the true faith, that his converts were not true Christians and that the superiors were bound under pain of mortal sin to suppress the Madurai Mission. Though Fr. Nicholas Pimenta wanted to suppress the Madurai Mission thoroughly, he asked Robert de Nobili to explain answers objections if any. Robert de Nobili sent the 'Apologia' to Fr. Nicoloas Pimenta. The period between 1610A.D and 1623A.D was a severe below to the growth of Roman Catholic Christianity in South India and it paved the way for the establishment of other Christian denomination in South India on the Model of Madurai Mission.

The Papal Bull

To evaluate the Madurai Mission and the new methods of Robert de Nobili, The Goa conference was convened on 4th February 1619A.D. It was presided over by the Archbishop of Goa, who was also the Primate of Indies. After hearing the opinion of the participants the reports were dispatched to the Grand Inquisitors. Finally the problem was solved by Pope Gregory XV on the basis of the Commission, which gave ecclesial sanction to Robert de Nobili's method¹¹. This victory to Robert de Nobili made him as a pilgrim.

Religious Expansion:

The Madurai Mission entered into new phase 1624A.D. It was during the rule of Tirumalai Nayak, Robert de Nobili conceived the idea of expanding his activities. The Madurai Mission soon came to have several different centers at Sendamangalam, Salem, Moramangla, Tiruchirappalli and Kilaneri. Robert de Nobili shifted his activities to the north, first to Sendamangalam. When he reached Sendamangalam in 1623A.D he was received by Ramachandra Nayakar. He promised to offer land to construct a church in Sendamangalam. When the Nayak was laid up with fever Robert de Nobili gave him a written sentence from the gospel. By the blessing of God the Nayak recovered. From this the Hindus called Robert de Nobili as a great magician. The Nayak of Sendamangalam instructed his officials not to disturb the Christians any more.

From Sendamangalam Robert proceeded to Salem, the capital of Salapath Nayakar. The chief of Salem assigned him a house in the finest quarter of the town, the Brahmin quarter. Subsequently Robert de Nobili was called to Cochin and he left Fr. Martinz at Salem. At the time of the arrival of Robert de Nobili Moramangalam was ruled by a petty king. Robert de Nobili suffered a lot because of the opposition of the Brahmins. But he got the support of the disposed ruler of Sendamangalam and his family. They were baptized on 25th December 1625A.D. Another distinguished convert was Nallatambi, brother of the Nayak of Moramangalam. He built a house and church in Moramangaloam in 1628A.D. When he was called by Fr. Vico, Robert de Nobili left Fr. Martinz in charge of the Christians at Moramangalam.

Robert de Nobili reached Tiruchirappalli in 1627 A.D. He converted both high caste and low caste people. Among them one was belonging to the Kammala community. He was baptized as Muthudaiyyar. He was the first Harijan received baptism from Robert de Nobili. He built a church and a hostel in 1628 A.D.¹². He baptized a soldier, a respectable man of the Vellala caste. The year 1640 A.D saw a persecution at Tiruchirappalli. Though there was persecution in Tiruchirappalli, there was rapid progress in conversion.

Robert de Nobili was in Madurai in 1638 A.D. During his stay in Madurai, Robert de Nobili toured the neighboring village and converted the people into Christianity. Among them the most important village was Kilaneri. The Idaiyars of the village were converted to Christianity. He also converted a dancing master and several *devadasis*. In 1645 A.D Robert de Nobili was sent to the college of Jaffna in Sri Lanka where he lost his normal vision. Then he died at Mylapore on 16th January 1656A.D at the age of eighty.

CONCLUSION:

Robert de Nobili contributed a lot for the Roman Catholic Church and to the Tamil society. By liability the Madurai Mission in 1606A.D, Robert de Nobili converted a number of Brahmins and other high caste people to Christianity in Madurai and the neighbouring territories. He desired to convert all the people in South India to Christianity. The laws of the country prevented his desire. It resulted in the introduction of many innovative principles in the Madurai Mission. He disassociated himself from other Christians and lived like an Indian *Sanyasi* with the intention to establish social equality.

On the other hand, to accept the social customs of this country, a well planned church was built, where both low-caste and high caste people were allowed to attend the service in separated sessions. When his methods were officially recognized by the Pope in 1623A.D, Robert de Nobili visited several villages and places in and around Madurai. He converted a large number of people, and established churches wherever he visited and converted the people when he left one place to another place to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of his colleagues was appointed to look after the Christians in that particular area.

END NOTES

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