



THE ROLE OF JESUIT MISSIONARIES AT PUNNAIKAYAL

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ABSTRACT

Punnaikayal played a very dominant role in South Indian Catholic Missions. Many Jesuits have been visited this place. Among them, Francis Xavier, Mansillas, Criminale and Henriquez were notable missionaries. The settlement of the Portuguese paved the way for the missionary activities on the fishery coast on a large scale. Punnaikayal is a big fishing village situated on the estuary of river Tamraparni (also known as Porunai), the chief river of the Tirunelveli district. Xavier was the first Jesuit in South India to establish a commanding influence on the newly converted Christians. He was considered the political and spiritual agent of the Portuguese of the Fishery Coast. Colonisation and the spread of Christianity went hand in hand in the Pearl Fishery Coast. The Franciscan missionaries spread Catholicism in the fishery coast even before the arrival of the Jesuits. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary arrived at the coast in 1542. He was followed by several missionaries but very few missionaries have left great impact on the people. The work of the Jesuit missionaries who strengthened the faith of the Paravas in Catholic faith and who upgraded the economic position of the Paravas. The religious zeal of the Jesuits gathered the people of different caste, creed and religion. Thus the services of the Jesuits missionaries were notable and valuable in Punnaikayal.

KEYWORDS: Punnaikayal, Francis Xavier, Antony Criminale, Henrique Henriquez, Jesuit Missionaries, Christianity, Paravas, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Punnaikayal played a very dominant role in South Indian Catholic Missions. Many Jesuits have been visited this place. Among them, Francis Xavier, Mansillas, Criminale and Henriquez were notable missionaries. Francis Xavier was the founder of the Indian Jesuit Mission. Portuguese Jesuit Missionaries came to Tamil coast only in A.D 1542. The settlement of the Portuguese paved the way for the missionary activities on the fishery coast on a large scale. The political weight of the Portuguese in South India particularly with the Vijayanagar Empire helped the Jesuit fathers to gain acceptance and respect of the native power and the people. It opened a new era of Christian's enterprise.

ORIGIN OF PUNNAIKAYAL

Punnaikayal is a big fishing village situated on the estuary of river Tamraparni¹ (also known as Porunai), the chief river of the Tirunelveli district, which drains from its source Pothigai to its mouth in the

Gulf of Mannar and it is 75 miles long. The river Tamraparani finally reunite is less than half a mile, from Papanasam eastwards to its mouth at Punnaikayal on the Gulf of Mannar². The Gulf of Mannar is the portion of the Indian Ocean lying between the western coast of Srilanka and the eastern coast of Tamilnadu. Its northern limit is the chain of islets and rocks like Adam's Bridge³.

There are some theories connected with the name of the village Punnaikayal. The Tamil word "Kayal" means a lagoon or back water opening into the sea and the name seems especially appropriate to any place situated. On that's lying about the delta of Tamraparani river⁴. The name of Kayal was naturally given to a town erected on the margin of a Kayal and this circumstance occasional the adoption of the name Punnaikayal⁵.

According to tradition once the land was surrounded by punnai trees so it was called as Punnaikayal. Punnai means – Indian laurel⁶. In these days the famous harbor Pazhayakayal next to that of Korkai was immersed by seawater. Instead of Pazhayakayal, a new harbor was constructed nearby place, that place came to be known as Pudukayal (the tamil, the word 'pudu' means 'new') and it would readily pass into Punnaikayal.

FRANCIS XAVIER

Xavier was the first Jesuit in South India to establish a commanding influence on the newly converted Christians. He was considered the political and spiritual agent of the Portuguese of the Fishery Coast⁷. He landed in Goa on 6th May 1542 where he worked for a few months before turning to South⁸. He took with him three young students of the seminary who came from the fishery coast and knew the language of the Paravas as well as same Portugues.

On 21st August 1544 the saint was in Punnaikayal and carried his missionary activities, without interpreter because Antonio the interpreter went to Manapad due to sickness. When Xavier came to Punnaikayal for the first time, the Paravas had been accustomed to make offerings to idols and to magicians and astrologer in order to obtain favour and ward off misfortunes. Even after their baptism they continued to do the same things⁹. Xavier had instructed them in the faith; they were expected to give up such practices.

Xavier and his helpers had created a brief catechism in Tamil language. He went from street to street ringing a bell, calling together the people and instructing them by means of Tamil version of catechism which he had committed to memory. He was not content merely that people be baptized Christians but that they should have Christian faith. This required a capacity on their part to affirm the beliefs of Christians and to live according to the rule of the church. As he finished teaching in a village he appointed an apt lay leader to be in-charge there and to continue to practice the people daily in their new creed and prayers, and liturgical practices. Then he moved on to the next village and the next and it was endless. Since Xavier felt the need of the presence of a few more Jesuits on the fishery coast.

FR. ANTONY CRIMINALE.

In December, 1544 Xavier proceeded to Goa and then to Malacca. Xavier wrote letter to Ignatius of Loyola to send more missionaries to the fisheries coast. A Portuguese vessel brought the three new Jesuits in 1544. Antony Criminale an Italian Jesuit, Henry Henriquez, John De Faria a Spaniard and a few other priests from Europe to help Francis Xavier the founder of the Indian mission. When Xavier left the fishery coast in 1545 for Malacca he ordered Antony Criminale to go to the fishery coast in March 1546. Criminale was the first missionary who learned to read and write Tamil. One year later he was joined by Henri Henriquez and others. In the year 1548 from January to February Francis was back again on the fishery coast for a visit. He appointed Criminale as his successor and superior of the Indian mission, among the Paravas of the fishery coast, on his departure to Japan¹⁰ Criminale took up the thread where Xavier left abruptly. He continued his work with spirit and zeal¹¹.

The year 1549 brought an unexpected change in the mission on the fishery coast; Antonio Criminale lost his life at Vedalai in a military conflict between the Portuguese and Vadugars. Shortly afterwards, the missionaries elected Henriquez as their new Superior¹².

HENRIQUE HENRIQUEZ

After the death of Criminale the missionaries elected Henriquez as their Superior of the Fishery Coast Mission of Madurai in 1549. He worked on the fishery coast for the remaining fifty years of his life and without doubt he was the most influential priest in the Southern Coastal Mission during its formative years. The period between 1550 to 1600 was called the "Golden Period" of Fishery Coast within these 50 years a lot of wonderful works had taken place under Henriquez. In 1568 Henriquez (1549) wrote a letter to Ignatius Loyola from Punnaikayal about the work of his team of 20 members of the society included 17 fathers and 3 brothers¹³.

Many new churches, social service centers, shrines, training centers for the catechist and so on were established.¹⁴ Henri Henriquez established the first Brother House and the Priest House of the Pearl Fishery Coast in 1550 at Punnaikayal. But both were destroyed due to war by Vadugars in 1552¹⁵.

Henriquez established the First Hospital of the Pearl Fishery Coast in 1550 at Punnaikayal. Rodrigues Coutinho, the Portuguese Captain of the Pearl fishery coast at that time was very helpful towards this work. This hospital was the object of the enthusiastic admission of all the people of that area whether Christians or Hindus, since they had never seen anything of this kind before. In 1551, a seminary was founded at Punnaikayal¹⁶.

In 1567 the first Tamil College was instituted at Punnaikayal because the place seemed more appropriate than Mannar. Pupils were sent from Goa Henry Henriquez was appointed as the professor. The Jesuits and some students from Goa learned Tamil in this college¹⁷.

In 1556 the first printing press was opened in Goa by the Jesuits. But the Goa press did its printing in Latin and Portuguese. The famous Italian Jesuit Alexandra Vallignano provincial of India was one of the diligent promoters of missionary printing. In 1577 Tamil print letters were brought Goa to Punnaikayal. The first Tamil printing press was set up at Punnaikayal. It was the splendid work of a Jesuit Priest. John De Faria on 20th October 1578¹⁸. The Christian prayer books were printed in Tamil language.

Because of the hard work of Henriquez, the following books composed by Henriquez in the language of Malabar (Tamil) were published¹⁹. They are Thambiran Vanakkam (Christian Doctrine) printed in 1578 at Quilon and Kirisithiyaani Vanakkam. Thambiran Vanakkam was the first book printed in Tamil among the Indian languages. The other books are Kirisithiyaani Vanakkam and Pavasankeerthanakaiyedu, or Kompeciyonayaru (Confessionario). The books Adiyar Varalaru, Flos Sanctorum in 1586 were printed at Punnaikayal press²⁰. In 1578, he established first Tamil printing press in Punnaikayal with the support of the people of the Pearl Fishery Coast.

CONCLUSION

The Renaissance and Reformation brought sailors, explores and missionaries to India also. Several missionaries belonging to the Padroado, Protestant, Danish and the Dutch missions entered in Tamilnadu. Colonisation and the spread of Christianity went hand in hand in the Pearl Fishery Coast. The Portuguese Colonisation took place in the fishery coast in the beginning of the sixteenth century. The settlement of the Portuguese paved the way for the missionary activities on the Fishery Coast on a large scale. The Franciscan missionaries spread Catholicism in the fishery coast even before the arrival of the Jesuits. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary arrived at the coast in 1542. He was followed by several missionaries but very few missionaries have left great impact on the people. Francis Xavier, Henriquez period was known as the "Golden Age" in the history of missionary activities. The work of the Jesuit missionaries who strengthened the faith of the Paravas in Catholic faith and who upgraded the economic position of the Paravas. The religious zeal of the Jesuits gathered the people of different caste, creed and religion. Thus the services of

the Jesuits missionaries were notable and valuable in Punnaikayal. In today's context this integrated personality is very much needed not only in the Catholic Church but also in the society.

ENDNOTES :

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