



THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY AND ITS MISSIONARY SERVICES TO THE PEOPLES OF UVARI

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Abstract

Uvari is a small village is located in between Thisayanvilai and Periyathalai. In this village, there are two community people are living for a long time. Christians and Hindus are dominantly living in this area. From the historical record, Many people belong to Hindus religion has been converted to Christianity after the arrival of Christianity into this village. Christianity became popular among the people due to the preaching and various social services are done by the missionary peoples of Churches in and around the Uvari village. This paper deals with the present religious condition of the people of Uvari after the arrival of Christianity and its various divisions.

Keywords: Uvari, Christianity, Tirunelveli, Religious status, Religious Condition.

Introduction

Uvari is a small fishing town with 3200 people is situated 40 km away from Nanguneri in the south-east direction of Tirunelveli and it is 70 km away from Tirunelveli town. According to ancient Tamil history, the citizens of Uvari were called Bharathar's of the Neithal (ocean) World. Uvari's historical name was Ober Pattanam which was ruled by the Pandyan dynasty before they were converted to Christianity by the Portuguese. More recently, in the 1530s, Portuguese and Spanish missionaries from Goa had a strong influence when the Bharathars converted to Christianity as a Roman Catholic's. The priests, acting as godfathers, gave surnames such as Fernando to all Roman Catholic Bharathars as they were converted by the Portuguese.

According to local myths, a crew of a Portuguese ship which sailed near Uvari about 450 years ago contracted cholera. In an attempt to avert death, the ship's carpenter carved an image of Saint Antony of Padua from a block of wood. Soon after, the entire crew regained its health. When the ship docked at Uvari, the sailors placed the statue inside a hut in the village. In the 1940s, the villagers built a church with the original statue of St. Anthony holding the Infant Jesus in his hand, on the original altar. St Anthony is said to perform many miracles daily, therefore church was upgraded to a shrine. Uvari is visited by Hindus and Christians from all over South India.

The St.Xavier's church is situated a few meters away from the seashore and Kappal Matha church. It is said that the St. Xavier church was constructed in the 16th century A.D. As the time passed by, on seeing the increasing population, Fr. Rayappar constructed a new church in the year 1908. In 1917, the new church reached the finishing stage. Due to an unexpected calamity, a roof of the church has been damaged. And, many conflicts and disturbances took place between the rival groups, the people of Uvari that caused some unpleasantness happenings in the place, soon later normalcy was restored in Uvari.

Conversion to Christianity in Uvari

The people of Tuticorin district have converted themselves to Christianity after the arrival of Portuguese in the ancient period. They have extended services to propagating Christianity among all the peoples in all the areas and nearby places of Tuticorin. They had a significant contribution in spreading Christianity in Uvari. They also preached about the main principles of Christianity to lower caste people living in this place. Portuguese built a very big church in the name of St. Antony to worship Jesus Christ. As a result, many minority people living in the surrounding places instigated to convert into Christianity religion. St. Antony Church was built like shelter at an initial stage. Later, this church was built and modified by an architect of Portuguese in the year 1710. It was cared by a hermit namely Joseph Firosha of St. Francis Church from the year 1774 to 1814.

St. Antony Church

St. Antony Church is located on the seashore of Uvari. This is one of the most famous tourist places in south India. St. Antony was more dedicated to offering religious service to the people of Tamil Nadu. So, he left from his place to India in a ship and entered into Goa on 6th may 1542. He was asked to take over the headship of a college in Goa but he neglects it as he had another aim. His main aim was to serve the people in Uvari. So, he moved to Tamil Nadu and reached Manapad for the first time with his three students. However, there are some disputes among historians regarding the first place where St. Antony visited. But they accept and given place to stay with his student in Tuticorin for four months. In order to preach good things to people, St.Antony appointed a group of employees. He stayed in Muthu Kuzhithurai for two years. By his efforts, he made many people as a pure Catholics.



In the remembrance of St. Antony, a care was established by Swami Rosary Correa with the help of Hon. J.V. Barnanthu. There is a special worship people are doing in the care December 3rd of every year. The care became weak as they were no care given to it. Later, it was rebuilt by Swami Iruthayaraj with the help of Uvari people who were living in Bombay and some students. However, his efforts became useless as the care was damaged severely and it was removed completely. The church was made up of cottage till the arrival of Portuguese, the church was build up by the architectural style of Portuguese. In the year 1908 the entrance was also build up and then later the Church was rebuild as a bigger one during the time of Swami Charles Barnanth. Years after years by Bishop Amalanathar laid the foundation for the new church building in the year 1999. Later the building work was supervised by Fr. Iruthayaraj. The Church new building was opened by Bishop of Tuticorin. Lakhs and lakh of people are visiting this church to visit and see the miracles of St. Antony.

St. Andrew's Church

This church was constructed in Uvari nearer to St. Andrew Church. This church belongs to Tuticorin and Sathankulam. This church established to do best services for the people of Kuzhithurai – one of the divisions of several small villages. One of the important divisions was Periyathazhai. Uvari was one of the villages Among Periyathazhai till 18th Century. A separate priest was appointed to take care of Periyathazhai area and its surrounding villages. After 1712, one more priest was appointed to extent religious services to the place. The name of the priest who took care of missionary services in this place was Swami Senses. After 1838, many priests of France missionary came to Madurai for their missionary service in Tamil Nadu. They made certain changes in the structure of this division system. They made a new division including six places namely Uvari, Koothankuzi, Idinthkarai, Anjal, Perumanal, and Kootapuli. As the priests were unable to care for all the six villages, they decided to rejoin Uvari with Periyathazhai. Later, Uvari village belonged to Periyathalai division till 1906. As a result, the number of Catholics increased in Uvari. So that it needs a separate priest to take care of preaching in Uvari. As a result Uvari was made as a single division and Swami Irayappar became the priest of Uvari division. He was the one who was the reason behind the all the development in Uvari.

St. Mary's Church

St. Mary Church is one of the beautiful and attractive churches of Uvari. This church was established by Goa Missionaries in the year 1903. Before the establishment of this Church, it was a school and inn for virgin women. People of Uvari village consider September 18th of 1919 as a most important day. Because on that special day St. Mary had shown her power by a revolution. More information regarding this can be seen in the register of Uvari may home. People are celebrating September 18th on which day the revolution took place. Later, unfortunately, St. Mary's church was damaged by sea erosion. So that the people decided and planned to establish a new church. The foundation was laid by Rev. Thomas Barnanth on 25th January in 1970. People of Uvari came forward voluntarily to help do some financial help to establishing the new church. Thus the church was established in a different structure. It was build up in the shape of a ship and its ceiling looked like an aero plane. People are calling church as a Ship of Mary Church (Kappal Matha Church).

Lurch Mary Gaby

A beautiful Gaby (French name, meaning of Gaby is: Women of God) for mother Mary as desired by the people of this town was constructed and opened on 1st February 1958, mainly due to the initiative taken by A.S. Bernard who collected sufficient amount through donations with the help of pastor, priest, Bubalarayar. Now, this Gaby considered as one of important worship place in Uvari. People from different places visit and pray for mother Lurch Mary in this Gaby. Many festivals are celebrated here to honor the Mother Lurch Mary.

Conclusion

Uvari is one of the modest coastal towns among other coastal villages in Tamil Nadu. The religious condition of Uvari has been changed due to the arrival of Portuguese and many saints. Christianity became popular among many peoples in this place because of the preaching and services are done by various missionary people in this area. The majority of the people living in this place are following Christianity and regularly visiting churches to worship God.

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