



A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND SURVEY OF THE CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA (CSI) CHURCHES IN TUTICORIN DISTRICT

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Abstract

The history of Christianity in Tirunelveli is traced back to the arrival of the Portuguese on the Coromandel Coast to augment their trading prospects at the dawn of the 15th century. The Portuguese Roman Catholic Missionaries who accompanied the traders to the Tirunelveli Coast were the first to spread Christianity in the district. The Church of South India is the second largest church in India based on the population of members, next to the Roman Catholic Church, and also the largest Protestant denomination in the country. The main aim of this research study is to analyze the historical background of Church of South India (CSI) churches in the Tuticorin District.

Keywords: *CSI, Church of South India, Tuticorin, Christianity.*

Introduction

Tuticorin is traditionally known for pearl fishing and shipping activities, production of salt and other related business. This is a port city in the southern region of Tamil Nadu. This is a natural port, from this place freedom fighter V.O. Chidambaram operated the Swadeshi shipping company during the British rule. Now Tuticorin is a bustling town with business activities. Tuticorin is one of the oldest sea ports in the world, was the seaport of the Pandyan kingdom after Korkai and later it was taken over by the Portuguese in 1548, captured by the Dutch in 1658, and ceded to the British in 1825. The lighthouse was built in 1842. In 1582 the Portuguese brought the statue of Our Lady of Snows to Tuticorin. The faith of the Fisherfolk of the entire caste residing from Kanyakumari to Rameshwaram was strengthened and they were united together. Pinnakayal was the headquarters of the Portuguese. Later on, it was shifted to Tuticorin in 1580.

The Church of South India (CSI) is the successor of a number of Protestant denominations in India, including the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the Church of Scotland after Indian Independence. It came into being by a union of Anglican and Protestant churches in South India. It combined the South India United Church (union of the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians); the then 14 Anglican Dioceses of South India and one in Sri Lanka; and the South Indian District of the Methodist Church. With a membership of over four million, CSI is one of three united churches in the Anglican Communion, the others being the Church of North India and the Church of Pakistan.

CSI Churches in Tuticorin & its Historical Background

There were many churches in the Tuticorin district possess numerous historical backgrounds. Among them, five Church of South India (CSI) in Tuticorin are the most ancient than other churches in this place. Our Lady of Snows Shrine Basilica, Arockia Matha Church, Holy Cross Church, St. Popes Church, and St. Mark's Church are five CSI churches in Tuticorin with the historical backgrounds.

Our Lady of Snows Shrine Basilica, Tuticorin

Our Lady of Snows Shrine Basilica is located at Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, India. This church is also called as Panimaya Matha Church. This Church is a famous church built by the Portuguese in 1711. It is one of the Catholic pilgrimage centers in India dedicated to the Our Lady of Snows a title given to St. Mary. The Shrine name refers to the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. The history of Shrine Basilica is closely connected with the history of the conversion of the Paravars (Tuticorin), the native people of the Pearl Fishery Coast. Our Lady of Snows was fondly called in Portuguese as Nossa Senhora das Neves which means our Lady of Snows. She has been given the unique title of Yelu Kadalthurai, Yega Adikala Thai in Tamil which means the Mother of Refuge for the seven major coastal villages, viz Vembar, Vaippar, Thoothukudi (Snows Basilica, Tuticorin), Punnaikayal, Virapandianpatinam, Tiruchendur and Manapad (Thoothukudi District).

In 1982, when the Church of Our Lady of Snows celebrated the 400th anniversary, Pope John Paul II raised it to the status of Basilica through his apostolic letter *Pervenute illa Dei Beatissimae Genitricis Effigies* dated 30 July 1982. It is the greatest honor for a church to be raised to the status of a Basilica. The Greek word Basilica signifies a Royal Hall. In course of time, this word has come to mean a large and beautiful hall. In ancient times, the whole world in general and Rome, in particular, erected large halls for administrative purposes. The first hall bearing the name of Basilica existed in Athens. But after the fall of Greeks, the Romans popularized it. It was Julius Caesar who artistically constructed the hall of Basilica Julia for administrative purposes. They are somewhat similar to the Durbar Halls in ancient Indian places. Every year on 5th August the church festival is conducted in a grand manner which attracts a large number of devotees from all faiths.



Arockia Matha Church, Adaikalapuram

Adaikalapuram parish was formed out of the settlement surrounding and depending on Adaikalapuram charity institute. The church is in the center of Adaikalapuram, and by the church, the parishioners are blessed to improve their lifestyle. Adaikalapuram parish was formed out of St. Joseph's Charity Institute and so the people were depending on the same institute for their needs. The people celebrated their annual feast in St. Thomas Becket's Church, which is situated in the Institute. When the population of Adaikalapuram began to increase in number, it became necessary that the people needed a separate church and priest for them. On 19th March 1938, Rev. Fr. Joseph Roche, the director of St. Joseph's Charity Institute laid a foundation and a church built with coconut leaf. Our Lady of Refuge was the patroness of the parish then. The people were very much happy and celebrated all the liturgical devotions in that church. Due to increase in the population in this area, the diocese had decided that Adaikalapuram should be announced as a parish, It is in 1952, Adaikalapuram parish was instituted and Rev. Fr. Paul Bastian was appointed as the first Parish Priest by Most Rev. Thomas Fernando, the Bishop of Tuticorin Diocese.

Holy Cross Church, Manapad

Manapad is a coastal village located in the southern part of the Indian subcontinent. This thinly populated village is deep rooted in the history of Tamil Nadu from time immemorial. It is about 58 km. south of Tuticorin, which is one of the major seaports of India. History states that in 1540, a Portuguese trading vessel, while sailing around the Cape of Good Hope on its way to the East, encountered a violent storm splitting its sails and snapping the hind mast, leaving it at risk of foundering. Manapad was mostly inhabited by the Bharathiar who had embraced Christianity in 1532; but, for want of missionaries, the neophytes remained nominal Christians, until the arrival and ministration of St. Francis Xavier, The saint who arrived in Manapad in October 1542 found two spots which impelled him to choose Manapad as his favorite haunt during his sojourn in the Pearl Fishery Coast. One was the presence of a grotto carved out of the rocky ledge, which he preferred to use as his abode. Francis Xavier as he was called performed many miracles that positively impacted the lives of the local community to such an extent that the people in and around Manapad started venerating Xavier as a saint long before he was canonized by the Church. After more miracles, the church of the Holy Cross was built in 1581, encasing the Captain's Cross. Contributions towards the building of the church were spontaneously given by the inhabitants and Rev. Fr. John de Salanova, the parish priest of the only church in the village (then dedicated to the "Queen of Heaven"), was able to complete construction long before the scheduled time.

As witnesses to its glorious past, Manapad guards four churches. Of all the churches, Holy Cross Church is the most celebrated by the people of Manapad. Rev. Fr. Dennis, Guchen in his book as 'Cinquante Ans Au Madure' (Fifty years at Madurai) says, "Built in honor of the True Cross of Our Lord, this sanctuary enjoys a grand reputation in the whole of Madurai. It is the Church of the Holy Cross of Manapad. Fr. Laurent who had ruled the Christendom of Manapad for 28 years from 1852 to 1877 had much labored to enlarge decorate this church. These stone monuments which serve as Churches of God still stand as silent witnesses to the past glory of Manapad.

St. Pope's Church, Sawyerpuram

Sawyerpuram is a town Panchayat in Tuticorin district, Tamil Nadu, India. Since missionary, Dr. G. U. Pope ministered in this place the population is predominantly Christian. This place is a historical and religious place. It was first a settlement of persecuted Christians on land provided by Mr. Sawyer, an Anglo-Indian layman in the employ of the East India Company. The village thus formed in 1814 was gratefully named him as Sawyerpuram. The Christian settlers quickly organized themselves, children. However, it was with the advent of intrepid young Dr. G.U. Pope in 1842 that in 1844 the renowned "Sawyerpuram Seminary", which for a long time was the nursery of hundreds of Indian clergymen, teachers, and catechists. Dr. G.U. Pope's efforts were equally directed to the extension of the Church. He carried the light of the Gospel into every neighboring village, and stationed catechists trained by himself in Christian doctrine to minister to the needs of the congregations. He built the All Saints Church at Subramaniapuram enduring extreme hostility and insult. The lovely red-brick Holy Trinity Church at Sawyerpuram was built by Rev. Huxtable and Rev. Sharrock and dedicated on 11th November 1877 by the Most Rev. Johnson, Metropolitan of India. Sawyerpuram was also the venue of the SPG's first experiment in "Medical Evangelism". From the small beginning of a clinic set up in 1854 there sprang up St. Raphael's Hospital, which became increasingly popular and did signal service during the outbreak of epidemics following of 1877-1879. The hospital came under Indian leadership when Dr. A. Joseph assumed charge of it and served faithfully till 1896.

St. Mark's Church, Christianagaram

James Kershaw Best bought a land for the construction of the most beautiful church in Udangudi to glorify the name of Jesus Christ. On 17th September 1845, Bishop Spencer from Chennai laid the foundation for the construction of the present St. Mark's Church in Udangudi. Rev. James Kershaw Best completed the construction work of the church with all interest in



1849. The height of the church tower was 39 feet. On 25th January 1849, Rev. Edward Sargent, (later he became the Bishop) the C.M.S. missionary conducted the church dedication service and a special message was given by Rev. Robert Caldwell who later became the bishop. The first service was attended by eleven missionaries and 1100 Christian people. In 1989, the 150th anniversary of the church was celebrated in a grand manner. Similarly, the church anniversary function is celebrated every year.

Conclusion

Tuticorin is the one the district in Tamil Nadu where the Christians are living in the large number. The research study provides the in-depth details of the historical backgrounds possessed by the five important Church of South India (CSI) churches in the Tuticorin District. This is not only a few old CSI churches in this district, but many other churches in this district provide an important religious service to the people. All the churches here have been doing great deeds for Christianity and its attributes to the people for a long time.

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