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SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN VADAKKANKULAM

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ABSTRACT

This chapter delves into the historical emergence and spread of Christianity in Vadakkankulam village, often referred to as 'Little Rome'. It traces the origins of the village to the settlement of a Christian woman named Sandhayee in 1680 AD and her providential meeting with St. John de Britto. The study explores how the Holy Family Church evolved from a small thatched hut into a significant spiritual hub within the Madurai Mission. Furthermore, it examines the unique process of proselytization across various communities including the Nadars, Vellalars, Kammalars, Kaniyans, Paraiyars, and Paravars - and highlights the church's role in the socio-religious transformation of the region.

KEY WORDS: Vadakkankulam, Holy Family Church, Madurai Mission, Pearl Fishery Coast Mission.

INTRODUCTION

Vadakkankulam is popularly called “Little Rome” because of the profound activities and intense services of the Holy Family Church to the people of this locality. The local tradition maintains that Vadakkankulam village, which lies under the feet of the Western Ghats, originated only in and around 1680 AD. As the first immigrants to Vadakkankulam are professed to be Christian, the origin of Christianity in this village owes to the same date. The Parish of Vadakkankulam is the first congregated Parish in the diocese of Thoothukudi. In addition, this Church is more significant, for it was among the 14 early catholic churches congregated by the Madura Mission. Vadakankulam is the first parish of the innermost area that merged with Pearl Fishery Coast Mission, and it was the last of the southwestern border of Madurai Mission. This Church is historically significant since it was the first Nadar congregation of the Thoothukudi diocese. In the last quarter of the 17th century, Vadakkankulam emerged as a new village with the settlement of a Christian nodal lady in the foothills of the Western Ghats.

THE FIRST ROOT OF CHRISTIANITY IN VADAKKANKULAM

The origin of Christianity in Vadakkankulam and the village’s origin can be traced from a single event and a concurrent development. The village came into existence by the settlement of a lady from the eastern coastal area at the east foot of the Ghats. As she belonged to the Christian religion, Christianity originated in Vadakkankulam. Almost all the evidence holds this same historical information. About 1680 AD, a Nadar caste woman named Sandhayee, along with her husband Gnanamuthu Nadar, got settled in the forest area of Vadakkankulam. Still, her native place was Thoppuvilai, a village now under the rule of Anaikkarai Parish on the eastern coast. Both the husband and wife were already Catholic Christians. They had married their daughter to Ananda Nadar from Perungudi near Vadakkankulam village.

The first thing Sandhayee did in the middle of the forest was to construct her hut after cutting some trees and plants. After making their abode a place to stay, Sandhayee raised a Cruzadi with palm leaves facing her house. She lighted three candles, which were always burning in the Cruzadi. This Cruzadi had been dedicated to the Holy Family of Jesus Christ. Sandhayee and her husband worshipped the Cruzadi every morning and evening without fail.

The year 1683 AD was full of troubles for Fr. John de Britto. He was appointed as the head of the Madura mission. Fr. John De Britto had a conventional year in 1684 AD in which things happened much more like the previous year. However, in May 1684 AD, he found an infrequent event and didn't stay there after it. With extreme dismay, he found Madurai to be a threat to the glory of the mission and moved to search for a new headquarters. By the end of 1684 AD, he completed his visit to the congregations of the South. He began visiting the north from Srivilliputhur, Sangarankovil, Tirunelveli, and Ottapidaram. Some writings show that De Britto had gone even to the east, closer to Vaipar. But he didn't find any secure place to construct a proper administration. Owing to the severe harassment of the Dutch on the eastern coast, he diverted his attention to Kamanakkampatti, which was under the rule of the Zamindar of Ettayapuram. So, De Britto firmly decided to form the administration of Palayamkottai province in the middle of Kamanayakkampatti with the protection of the Zamindar. After completing his visit in the south, De Britto left for Thoppur, which was in the Travancore Kingdom, to meet the Provincial. On his return from Travancore, De Britto once again planned to visit the eastern coastal regions.[1]

With this strong desire, the father rode his horse towards the Parish of Anaikkarai. On his journey to Anaikkarai, De Britto's historical meeting with Sandhayee occurred in the middle of the forest of Vadakkankulam. The year 1684 AD can be considered as the first milestone in the

history of Christianity in Vadakkankulam. During this year, Sandhayee happened to meet Father John de Britto, and he assembled at the Vadakkankulam Church.

Rev.Fr. Louis De Melho, in his letter to Rev. Fr. Generalin 1686 AD, narrated this event as follows, Father John De Britto had gone to visit all the southern provinces and entered into one locality, which was under the reign of the Madurai Kingdom, where up to that time no missionary had attempted to preach the gospel. Since there seemed to be no habitation, Chapel De Britto stopped in the shade of a Palmyra tree and started his horse ride towards Anaikarai. At this unexpected and fortunate time, Sandhayee was busy picking up cotton in her garden. Luckily, she saw Fr. De Britto riding on his horse back towards the east through the forest of Vadakkankulam. Soon, she rushed to meet the missionary.

Also, Sandhayee rushed quickly up his way and caught his attention when she wished the father. In a few words, Sandhayee told the missionary about her settlement in this wild forest. She also requested him to visit her house and to bless the Cruzadi. De Britto was very excited to see a Christian family in the middle of the forest. The father eagerly agreed to visit the newly settled village and bless the Cruzadi. Sandhayee immediately took him to their settlement. She showed him her abode, the Cruzadi, and the new town, which had recently been habituated to four other families. Among the four families, one of the houses belongs to Sandhayee's son-in-law, Ananda Nadar. Fr. De Britto had keenly noticed the Cruzadi founded by Sandhayee. The father blessed the Cruzadi and their house with abstinent prayers.

Subsequently, Sandhayee solicited the missionary to construct a church within her settlement. De Britto also ensured to form a congregation here very soon. He considered this locality the most proper place to have a halting centre between the fishery coast of Travancore and the Madurai Kingdom. Immediately, he felt disposed to take a favourable step in building a church

here. Sandhayee was prosperous, possessing several cattle and other landed properties, so she did not want to delay the church's construction. Sandhayee immediately started constructing a small Chapel about 12 feet in breadth and 20 feet in length. The church was built with palm leaves at the place in which she first erected the Cruzadi.[2] She gave the Holy Family as the patron of this Chapel. Sandhayee represented a happy consequence, which could result from the residence of one missionary at Vadakkankulam.

Meanwhile, the families from the neighbouring villages started to settle down in Vadakkankulam and the village gradually began to develop in size. The missionary who built a church in this new village of Vadakkankulam was Fr. De Britto. The father merged this new Church into the congregation of Kamanakkampatti. Rev.Fr. Xavier Mary Borghese was the first Parish priest of Kamanayakkampatti at that time. For many years, Xavier Mary Borghese governed both the congregations of Vadakkankulam and Kamanayakkampatti with great zeal and admirable sagacity. Through the endeavours of Fr. Xavier Mary Borghese, the field of apostolate increased immensely. Eventually, it was necessary to divide the congregations into two distinct Parishes. Thus, in 1698 AD, Vadakkankulam was separated from Kamanayakkampatti and made into a new Parish.[3]

This seemed to be a thankful harvest to the labours of Xavier Mary Borghese. Rev.Fr. Bernard de Sao was sent to Vadakkankulam as the first Parish priest in the same year of 1698 AD, and he was a fervent missionary and tireless in spreading the glory of God and the salvation of the soul. While supervising the congregation of Vadakkankulam Fr. De Sao visited the Travancore Kingdom. As a result of his continuous tours, Fr. De Sao laid the foundation of the Nemom Mission at the Travancore Kingdom.[4] Having helped Fr. Xavier Mary Borghese divide the two congregations Fr. De Britto was about to leave for Thanjavur. In the meantime, he learned that a

group of Nadar caste farmers were ready to convert themselves to Christianity, who belonged to the nearby villages of Vadakkankulam. Fr. De Britto came to their village, taking with him a few catechists, and he had openly preached the gospel. One night, when the father was preparing for the baptism of 200 women, the villagers, who were provoked by the Brahmans of Perungudi, surrounded Fr. De Britto because the non-Christians advanced to put an end to the preaching of the gospel by the father.[5] The Catechumen ran away, and the father was assaulted with all sorts of insults and severe blows. He was even put into prison along with his catechist for some days, but soon they had been released. Fr. Fernand De Sao, "the first Parish priest of Vadakkankulam set himself ready to conquer the difficulties like a valiant captain".[6] He softened the hearts of the barbarians. The father tamed their wild nature with extraordinary avidity and won by converting them to Christianity. This father did not enjoy the fruits of his labour long because he was transferred soon after one year to Kamanayakkampatti by the district superior. Rev.Fr. Xavier Mary Borghese, who worked in the parish of Kamanayakkampatti, was sent to Vadakkankulam in 1700 AD, and he subsequently kept the post at Vadakkankulam for five years.

The process of proselytization in Vadakkankulam has its unique nature. Here, the conversion of Hindus to Christianity took place only after the settlement of Sandhayee belonged to the Nadar caste, which is the foundress of the Vadakkankulam as a village. She started converting her caste men to Christianity. The Vellalars came to settle down in Vadakkankulam after accepting the Christian gospel. The other castes, like Kammalars, Paravars and Paraiyars, whose families came to Vadakkankulam for profession, wholeheartedly accepted Christianity. All those who came to make their lives in Vadakkankulam were free to do their work and follow any religious faith.

With the loving attitude of Fr. De Britto, Vadakkankulam became a full-bloomed parish, and it emerged as a great spiritual centre at the time. This Parish's early fathers strained hard to convert the Hindus to Christianity at Vadakkankulam. Sandhayee, the first immigrant to Vadakkankulam, had impeccable virtues, and she could make herself respected by everybody, even in difficult circumstances. She worked as well as a devout catechist. She attracted many people from her caste quickly and even asked them to convert to Christianity. Sandhayee frequently visited the neighbouring Nadar villages and prayed for their betterment. Sandhayee, a good Christian, possessed an excellent character, and the Nadars of the nearby villages loved her attitude. They also started to convert themselves to Christianity. Later, these new Nadar converts began to settle in Vadakkankulam.[7]

It's felicitous to note here the writings of H.R. Pate, A congregation of Nadars (Shanars) that appears definitely to have been formed by 1685 AD Vadakkankulam. This was under Fr. Xavier Mary Borghese, and the work of the conversion amongst that caste progressed rapidly in the south of the Nanguneri taluk. By its number and its wealth, the Nadar caste of the new residence admirably adapted to Christianity. They could easily observe the Christian practices. Over time, the Nadar caste of the neighbouring villages fell into matrimonial alliances with the Nadars of Vadakkankulam. Thus, the Nadar caste became the major Catholic strength in the Vadakkankulam Church.[8]

The Vellalar settlement was fifty years late in development to establish Christianity in Vadakkankulam. Gnanaprakasam Pillai was the first Vellalar to convert himself to Christianity in Vadakkankulam.[9] His Hindu name was Chidambaram Pillai. His wife also embraced Christianity along with his conversion. In 1743 AD, when Fr. Thomas Baptist Bhutari was the Parish priest, the husband and wife settled at Vadakkankulam. The native place of the first Vellalar convert is

Vittalapuram village, located east of Palayamkottai, and on seeing the spiritual life of his relatives from the villages of Kuruvinatham, Kottampatti, Tenkasi, Tirunelveli, their Pasuvanthanai, Kombadi and Tittampatti wholeheartedly accepted Catholic Christianity.[10] They all made permanent residences in Vadakkankulam along with their caste Christians. As time passed, these Vellalars entered into marriage alliances with Trivandrum, Aralvoymoli, and Ramanathichan Puthoor, Ramapuram, and Rajavoor families.

The Kammalars from Vadakku Valliyur came to settle down in Vadakkankulam. According to an old tradition maintained by the Kammalars of Vadakkankulam, a Hindu Kammalar left Vadakku Valliyur and permanently settled in Vadakkankulam. That Vadakku Valliyur Kammalar family was believed to have been driven out of the village by their fellow men because of their hindrances to the idol worship of their relatives in the town. As a result, this family was forced to leave the village. Subsequently, Kammalar came to the new town of Vadakkankulam. Migrated Vadakku Valliyur family was baptized into Christianity in the Holy Family church. This family members were the first Kammalars convert in Vadakkankulam. Even now, the descendants of these families remain good Catholic Christians in Vadakkankulam.[12]

The Kaniyan caste is another Christian community of VadakkankulamThe oral tradition of the caste reveals that the Kaniyan caste people originally came to Vadakkankulam from Kamanayakkampatti. It is believed that some of the Kaniyan cast members were baptized into Christianity at Kamanayakkampatti when Jesuit fathers congregated in this village. After the Parish hood of Kamanayakkampatti, Vadakkankulam became a newly created Parish. To earn a livelihood in this new village, the Christian Kaniyan people came to Vadakkankulam and settled in the middle street. Even after their settlement in Vadakkankulam, many Kaniyan caste people were converted from Hinduism to Christianity.[13]

The Paraiyar community was another vital clan of Vadakkankulam Catholic Christianity. A house of the community was found on the eastern side of the early families of Vadakkankulam even when Sandhayee was alive. It is still believed that Aravalaimadan was the first man to settle with the family of Sandhayee. His hometown was Amalapuram village near Dohnavoor. The reason for his settlement was nothing other than for profession. Sandhayee baptized him in the Holy Family Church. He became the first Christian Paraiyar convert in Vadakkankulam.[14]

Another important caste that professed Catholic Christianity in Vadakkankulam is the Paravar caste. The advent of the Paravars in Vadakankulam was witnessed only during the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1757 AD, Devsahayam Pillai, the great Indian martyr, was baptized in the Holy Family Church of Vadakkankulam.[15] After his martyrdom, the Paravars of the Western coast visited Vadakkankulam Church regularly for a holy pilgrimage. Later on, some of their families permanently resided in Vadakkankulam. At present, the Paravars consider Vadakkankulam as their native place. [16]

This is the conversion process by which Vadakkankulam Church got many Catholics from all the communities. It is peculiar that all the castes originally of Hinduism and settled in Vadakkankulam embraced Catholic Christianity. Despite the religious services of the Holy Family Church, the people of the surrounding villages also got their baptism in Vadakkankulam. Over time, Catholic Christianity had spread from the Vadakkankulam church to the villages of Terku Kallikulam, Anandapuram, Avaraikulam, Gokulam, Keelkulam, Kumarapuram, Parameswaram, Ramalingapuram, Radhapuram, Subramaniyapuram and Veppilangulam. Though these villages had a Hindu population, some portion of its people accepted Christianity as their religion. These villages are considered subsidiary villages attached to Vadakkankulam Holy Family Church.

CONCLUSION

The history of Vadakkankulam is inseparable from the history of its faith. What began as a humble settlement by a solitary Christian family under a Palmyra tree transformed into a beacon of Catholicism in Southern India. The unique nature of conversion in Vadakkankulam was not merely a religious shift but a social integration where various castes found a common identity under the Holy Family Church. From its early days under the Madurai Mission to its influence on neighboring villages like Terku Kallikulam and Radhapuram, Vadakkankulam remains a testament to the enduring legacy of early missionaries and the unwavering faith of its first settlers. Its title as 'Little Rome' is thus a well-earned reflection of its deep-rooted spiritual heritage.

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