

Religious History of Kerala in the Portuguese Period

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Introduction

The Portuguese were financial followers of the Catholic faith and they considered it their mission to spread Catholicism and establish the supremacy of the Pope of Rome in all the countries, which came within their sphere of influence. The Gowda Saraswat has immigrated to Kerala from and established themselves in Cranganore, Cochin, Chertalai, Alleppey, Kayamkulam etc. The Jews also came in for ruthless persecution at the hands of the Portuguese in Kerala and hence they left their ancient settlement at Cranganore in 1565 and established themselves in such places as Parur, Chennamangalam, Mala, Cochin etc. The White Jews Synagogue built in Mattancheri about 1567 was partially destroyed by the Portuguese. The Muslims were the inveterate enemies of the Portuguese even in their home and therefore, the latter followed a ruthless policy of religious persecution.

Latinisation of Kerala church

The Portuguese followed a policy of generous toleration towards the Christian church in Kerala and its followers. They started a vigorous campaign of Latinisation. Missions were preached and baptism and other sacraments administered according to Latin rite. In 1557 the diocese of Cochin was founded for the Latin Christians who originally belonged to the Syrian church as well as for the converts from Hinduism, Those who were newly converted to the

Latin rite as a result of the labours of the missionaries also came under the jurisdiction of the Cochin Diocese.

Synod of Diamper(1599)

The most important event in the history of the Kerala church in the Portuguese period was the Synod of Diamper convened in 1599 with a view to extirpating what was called Nestorian Heresy and bringing the Christian community of the land under the supremacy of the Roman church. Alex De Menezes the Archhbishop of Goa presided over this Synod which was attended in all by 813 delegates of whom 133 were Kattanarsor Priests ,20 deacons and 660 laymen chosen by members of each Parish. The Syrian books were scrutinized and offending passages expunged by the Synod. Heretical books were burnt. The mass of the Syrian liturgy was altered in conformity with the Latin mass. The Synod severed the age long connection of the Kerala church with the patriarchate of Babylon and established the supremacy of the Roman Pontiff over the Kerala church. Those who followed the Latin rite comprised the Cochin Diocese and those who still clung to the Syriac rite continued in the old Syrian Diocese of Angamali. After the Synod of Diamper Archbishop Menezes accompanied by five Jesuit visited all the important churches as far as quilon and he left for Goa in November 1599

Revolt at Coonan Cross(1653)

The success of the Synod of Diamperwas only shortlived. There arose before long a violent quarrel between the Syrian Christians and the Portuguese authorities. The appointment of European Latin Bishops to the Syrian Diocese of Angamali by the king of Portugal in exercise of the powers vested in him in this regard by the Pope was resented by the Syrians,

though they acquiesced in it under pressure at the Synod of Diamper. The Syrians badly felt the need for a Bishop of their own rite. In 1653 the Jacobite Patriarch of Babylon sent to Kerala, in response to a request by the Syrians, a Bishop named Ahatallaa. The Portuguese detained him at Mylapore on his way. The news of the detention of Ahatalla created indignation in Syrian quarters and large numbers of Syrian Christians stormed the gates of Portuguese Cochin. A rumour also spread that Ahatalla WAS drowned by the Portuguese authorities. The excited Syrians assembled in thousands in front of an ancient cross in Mattancheri tied a lengthy rope on it and holding on to it swore that they would never more obey the Latin Arch bishop or the Jesuits. This is known in history as the Oath of Coonan Cross. The Syrians then proceeded to Alangad and consecrated their leader Archdeacon Thomasas their Metropolitan. This event marked a turning point in the history of the Kerala church as it led to the emergence of two distinct sections among the Christians- the Romo-Syrians, who continued to owe allegiance to the church of Rome and the Jacobite Syrians who denounced the authority of the Pope. The former came to be popularly called Pazhaya kuru and the latter Puhankuru. The Revolt of the Coonan Cross had its impact on the loyalties of the Syrian Christians all over Kerala. Out of 2 lakhs Syrian Christians only 400 continued to owe allegiance to the Latin Archbishop. The Archdeacon was widely regarded by the Syrians as their only Archbishop and they continued to conduct their worship under him according to Syrian rite. Thus the Portuguese attempt to Latinise the Kerala Church was only partially successful.

Revival of the Bhakthi Cult

The Portuguese period saw the revival of the Bhakthi movement in Kerala. The Portuguese period was one of the political violence, social decadence, and economic depression. The

local chiefs were engaged in interminable quarrels among themselves and intrigued with foreign powers to ruin their own brethren. The period saw the Janmi and Devadasi systems at their worst and this made the moral degradation of the people complete. The introduction of artillery and other new weapons of warfare puzzled the common man and made him crave for mental and spiritual solace. Under these circumstances the common people developed a feeling of utter disgust for the status quo and craved for a new message of hope and good cheer.

New leaders emerged on the scene with emphasis on the doctrine of Bhakthi as the supreme means of attaining salvation. A number of literary works were produced with Bhakthi. Vishnu in the form of Krishna and Rama came to be glorified in the works of the writers of the age. The most outstanding exponent of the Bhakthi cult was Tunchat Ezhuthachan, the Father of Malayalam Language. He wrote such devotional works as Adhyatma Ramayanam, Mahabharatham, Harinama Kirtanam etc. in which he preached to the common people the doctrine of selfless devotion and surrender to God in the form of Vishnu. Ezhuthachan's Ramayanam became the most popular poem in the Malayalam language and it won for him the same place in Malayalam as is held by Kambar in Tamil and Tulsidas in Hindi.

In addition to Ezhuthachan, the 16th century produced two other great scholars who made their valuable contributions to the growth of the Bhakthi cult. They were Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri and Puntanam Namboodiri. Melpathur wrote the famous Narayaniyam in Sanskrit. It is a devotional work of 1036 verses dealing with the major incidents in the Bhagavathapurana. The Bhakthi cult found its supreme literary expression in the Malayalam works of Puntanam viz., Gnanappana, Srikrishnakarnamritam, and Santana Gopalam. His place in Malayalam literature is comparable to that of Surdas in Hindi. The

increasing prominence of the Guruvayoor Temple as the centre of Krishna cult was a salient feature of the Portuguese period.

Some of the Local Rajas also promoted Bhakthi cult. The most prominent of these was Manaveda, the Zamorin of Calicut. A fervent devotee of Vishnu he spent a large part of his life in the temple of Guruvayoor in the company of Melpathur. His Krishnageethi in Sanskrit describes in 8 cantos the story of Krishna written after the model of Jayadevans Geethagovindam. Puradam Thirunal Devanarayana the ruler of Chempakasseri was another ruler associated with the Bhakthi movement

The famous Vilwamangalam Swamiyar who figures in the traditions connected with such temples as Guruvayoor and Ambalappuzha also lived during the age and enjoyed the patronage of these two rulers. Vilwamangalam was a pious devotee of Vishnu who claimed that he could always visualize the deity in his mystic trance. He is said to have helped both Manaveda and Devanarayana to see God Vishnu in person. The vision, it is said inspired the former to write the Krishnageethi, and the latter to consecrate the temple of Srikrishna at Ambalapuzha

Thus the Portuguese period marks an important epoch in the history of the Bhakthi Movement in Kerala.

Key words:

Bhakthi: Absolute devotion to a personal god

Diamper: Udayamperur

Kattanar: priest

Pazhayakuru:who followed allegiance to Church of Rome

Puthankuru:who denounced the authority of the Pope

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