



The Mission and Impact of St. Francis Xavier in India - An Analysis (Cultural History)

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Abstract

This paper is a brief study of St. Francis Xavier's mission in India. It also explains his contribution as a Roman Catholic missionary in the growth of the church in India. The study also focused on describing the strategies Francis Xavier had used to impact Indians on that era. It throws light into how far He was influential in evangelization work, most notably in early Modern India.

Keywords

Macua, Paravas, Fanoens, Inequitriberim, Valia Padre, Kanakkappillai, Melinchi .

Introduction

The Catholic Church also known as the Roman Catholic Church, is the largest Christian Church, with 1.378 billion baptized Catholics worldwide as of 2021. It is among the world's oldest and largest international institutions. The Catholic Church has profoundly influenced Western philosophy ,culture ,art and music and Science. The Christian religion is based on the reported teachings of Jesus who lived and preached in the 1st century AD in the province of Judea of the Roman Empire. Catholic theology teaches that the contemporary Catholic Church is the continuation of this early Christian community established by Jesus Christ.

St. Francis Xavier, was a Spanish Catholic missionary and Saint who co -founded the Society of Jesus. Born in the town of Xavier, Spain, he was a companion of Ignatius of Loyola and one of the first seven Jesuits who took vows of poverty and chastity at Montmatre, Paris in 1534. Francis Xavier, the greatest Roman Catholic missionary of modern times who was instrumental in the establishment of Christianity in India.

Francis disembarked in Goa, the centre of Portuguese activity in the East. Much of the next three years he spent on the southeastern coast of India among the simple, poor pearl

fishers, the Paravas. About 20,000 of them had accepted baptism seven year before, chiefly to secure Portuguese support against their enemies; since then , however, they had been neglected. Francis travelled tirelessly from village to village instructing and confirming them in their faith. In 1584, he sent three evangelists to the three primary Indian places to set up missions and to spread Christianity.

The arrival of St. Francis Xavier to the Travancore coast formed the most significant phase in the formation of Christian faith in the territorial areas of the present Diocese of Trivandrum. Francis Xavier reached Goa on 6 May 1542.¹ During the next three years he studied the problems of conversion and developed techniques of missionary activity to cope with the new situation. He established the College of St. Paul in Goa.²

For a decade Francis Xavier worked ceaselessly to convert pagans and to reform old Christians. Francis Xavier refers to the conversion of Macua (Mukkuvas) fishers living in the following 13 villages in the Travancore coast, in one of his letters to his friend Francisco Mansilhas.³ The villages baptized by Francis Xavier were the following : Puvar (Poovar), Colancor (Kollankod), Valevate (Pallavilatura) now known also as Vallavilatura, Tuttur (Tuttururai), Puduture (Puthurai), Temgnapatao (Taingapatnam), Uniao (Injam), Morala (Midalam), Vaniacur (Vaniakudi), Colache (Kolechel), Careapatao (Kadiapatnam), Calmutao (Muttamtura) and Patao (Pallam).⁴ During the mission of Francis Xavier , he is said to have baptized 30,000 people in Southern India.⁵ Unni Kerala Varma of Travancore was a friend of St. Francis Xavier.⁶ St. Francis Xavier called the Maharaja by the name *Iniquitriberim*.

During this period, Achuta Raya of Vijayanagar sent Saluva Timma to attack Travancore. Then Unni Kerala Varma sought the help of the Portuguese through the influence of Francis Xavier. But he promised Unni Kerala Varma only his prayers, since He was a missionary and not a soldier.⁷ In the battlefield, Francis Xavier appeared before the advancing army with the crucifix in his hand. He played an important part in striking terror in the ranks of the advancing army. Finally he also took a decisive role in the peaceful settlement of the conflict.⁸

¹ Francis Xavier came vested with responsibilities not only as mission superior (later in 1549 first provincial) but also as Papal nuncio.

² K J John, The Road to Diamper; An Exhaustive Study of the Synod of Diamper and the Emergence of Roman Catholics in Kerala, pp.88-89.

³ Letter dated 18 December, 1544 to Fransisco Mansilhas, J. Costelloe, pp.104-106.

⁴ A. Valignano,(ed.), Monumenta Xaveriana, Vol.II, P.375.

⁵ K.Gopalachari, (ed.), The Gazetteer of India, Vol.I, P.488.

⁶ J.M.Villavarayan, The Diocese of Kottar, p.31.

⁷ Mattom, St. Francis Xavier and Unni Kerala Varma, p.6.

⁸ K.K.Pillai, Studies in the History of India with special reference to Tamil Nadu, p.539.

The Maharaja was very much pleased and in return for the great service rendered by Francis Xavier, the Maharaja bestowed on him the title of *Valia Padre* i.e., the great priest. The Maharaja also promised to protect the interests of the Christians. Francis Xavier records thus: “they (the King) are all so well dispersed towards the affairs of the Christians....and gave his approval to everything that would help these Christians”. He also refers to two thousand fanoens (panams) which the King gave him for the construction of churches in his land.⁹

The missionary methods and lifestyle of Francis Xavier also formed an important factor in the formation of the Christian communities in Travancore. K.M. Panikkar notes thus: Xavier’s mission of interest because he may be considered to be the first missionary, in our modern sense.¹⁰ Francis Xavier moved among the so-called untouchable communities as one among them. He led a simple life without any formalities. He did not spend time and energy for the erection of costly chapels and commodious churches. Wherever he made converts, a cross was erected first and then a booth of branches and palm leaves which was in due course replaced by a proper church built of stone and cement. In the year 1544, he had built 45 such churches in Travancore.¹¹ He founded many basic congregations and prepared the people for the conversion.

Francis Xavier moved from village to village, converting thousands to the Christian faith and maintaining close contact with them. The sick people were healed, the dead were buried, and the newborn were taught catechism and counselled. The primary motto of Francis Xavier was to convert them and ameliorate their social condition and to raise their standard of life.¹² The new conversion movement made a remarkable impact in the society.¹³

The contribution of Francis Xavier for the spread of education in South India was immense. The new converts faced a lot of problems such as the lack of proper instruction. It was remedied with the construction of schools at important places and it contributed to the spread of education. Through these schools, their knowledge of the new faith was also deepened.¹⁴ The Christian teachings were communicated in the native languages, Tamil and Malayalam.¹⁵ He had a high concern and wide vision for the growth of the native clergy and an increase of catechists indicated his wide vision.¹⁶ In his letter dated 18 December 1544, to Masilhas, Francis Xavier instructs him “get ready to go and visit the Christians of the coast of Travancore whom I have already baptized and in each village set up a school for the

⁹ Letter of Francis Xavier 7 April 1545 to Fr. Fransisco Mansilhas, cited in Joseph Costelloe, p.125.

¹⁰ K.M.Panikkar, A History of Kerala, 1498-1801, p.168.

¹¹ V. Nagam Aiya, Travancore State Manual, Vol. I, P.297.

¹² P. N. Chopra et al, (eds.), History of South India.,Vol.III, P.277.

¹³ Selvester Ponnunmuthan, Impact of Christianity as a Liberative Force in the Social Milieu of Kerala, p.415.

¹⁴ George Schurhammer, p.465.

¹⁵ J.Wicki ‘The Portuguese Padroado in India in the 16th century and St. Francis Xavier’, in Perumalil H. C. (ed.) Christianity in India, pp.63-64.

¹⁶ L. M.Pylee, St. Thomas Christians and the Archdiocese of Verapoly, p.21.

children with a teacher to instruct them".¹⁷ Francis Xavier had foreseen the potentiality of children in evangelization and showed special concern for them. He exhorted the priests to show much love for the children who come to the prayers and to avoid offending them, overlooking the punishments which they deserved.¹⁸ Francis Xavier adapted himself to the mental capacities of the new converts. He translated the Catechism into the native language (probably in Tamil). First he learnt it by heart and went through all the villages of the coast, calling around him by the sound of a bell as many as he could. He assembled them twice a day and taught them the Christian doctrine.¹⁹ The fact that he took a special interest in the poor people redounded to his popularity.²⁰

In his mission work, Francis Xavier was assisted by lay leaders like the *kanakkapillai* and *melinchi*. The system introduced by Francis Xavier continues even to this day. The *Kanakkapillai* was to teach catechism, to make arrangements for all Holy Masses, to assemble people for prayers, to administer baptism in case of emergencies, to keep register of births and to enquire about impediments of marriages.²¹ The *melinchi* was to ring bells for masses and locally make announcements, for death and to publish the general decisions of the parish.

The *melinchi* was paid allowances for his services. In his efforts to reach both the ruling classes and the humble elements in Asian societies, Francis Xavier had many tactics that his successors could emulate and impress upon. His mass conversion campaign, his remarkable courage, his incredible endurance, his almost limitless capacity to withstand personal austerities, his eternal optimism, his profound sense of spirituality and personal humility, his incisive understanding of political power and his uncompromising leadership set standards that his successors would strive to match as they pursued their destinies in theatres where he had pioneered.²²

In the coastal villages of Trivandrum, the Christian faith of the fishermen began to gather more momentum. Though there were Christians at Valiathura, the port of Trivandrum and its vicinity, the King of Travancore permitted to erect a church only in 1563. The reason for withholding the construction of the church was that the Brahmins in charge of Sree Padmanabha Swami temple did not want a church to be built there, and they had been pacifying the king not to issue permission.²³

According to Francis Perez S.J. between the coasts of Quilon and Trivandrum, there were about four or five thousand Christians in 1568. Fr. Francis Perez baptized five hundred of them,

¹⁷ Albert Jou, *The Saint on a mission. The Life of St. Francis Xavier*, p.101.

¹⁸ Selvester Ponnuthan, (1996), *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio-Religious Context of Trivandrum, Kerala, India*, pp.133-134.

¹⁹ H. J. Coleridge, *Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, p.58.

²⁰ J. Wicki, op.cit.,p.64.

²¹ Selvester Ponnuthan, (1996) op. cit., p.134.

²² Dauril Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise. The Society of Jesus in Portugal and its Empire and Beyond, 1540-1750*, p.43.

²³ Letter of Bro Louis de Gouveia, S. J. Quilon, dated 12th January, 1564. Jesuit Archives, Shenbaganoor.

who were from Mampally. But there was only one church for the whole population. The reason for this was that the Rani of Attingal, a subordinate to the King of Travancore did not allow the construction of churches; since she feared that the Portuguese might afterwards build a church there. Nevertheless, overruling the objections of the Rani of Attingal, the King of Travancore granted permission to build a church in September 1569.²⁴

When Fr. Valignano passed through Mampally in 1575, he found the life of the Christians almost like the non-Christians, not observing the feast days, hardly ever going to church and marrying like Hindus. This was nothing but the lack of instruction to be given by priests to rectify these defects.²⁵ Again in 1577, some chief men of Mampally received baptism.²⁶ The gradual deepening of Christian faith was hated by the natives especially the caste Hindus. In the years 1571 and 1574, the Senior Rani of Travancore at Attingal was frightened at the growing power of the Portuguese and set on foot an agitation against the Christians, in the course of which three churches were burned down.²⁷

The establishment of the places of worship for the new converts provided them with confidence and self-prestige. After conversion to Catholic faith, Francis Xavier assembled the newly converted faithful in thatched sheds where a huge cross was also placed. These structures were called 'Ramadas' by the Portuguese. These Ramadas were gradually superseded by stone churches.²⁸ To assure the new converts more confidence and a feeling of oneness, many new churches were built at the time of Francis Xavier.²⁹ The church at Mampally, near Anjengo, presently under the Latin Diocese of Trivandrum and the church at Kottar were built by St. Francis Xavier. The Portuguese were great church builders. In 1603, from Quilon to Comorin the Jesuits had 35 churches and they built 7 more churches in the same year.³⁰ Realizing that the pride of a Christian village is its church, the people were also taught to offer their share in the building of churches. The expenses for the building of the churches and for the maintenance of priests were met through the following ways³¹:

- The Kings of Travancore allowed the fathers to collect fines which were given to him for crimes committed by the Christians.
- Church collections like vari, i.e., dues for funerals, marriages, baptisms etc.
- Offerings to shrines for favors received.

²⁴ Letter of Fr. Peter Correia, S. J. dated 16th September, 1569, Quilon, Jesuit Archives, Shenbaganoor.

²⁵ *Annual Letter of 1576 for Quilon and Travancore, Jesuit Archives, Shenbaganoor.*

²⁶ *Joseph Thekkedath, History of Christianity in India, p.125.*

²⁷ G. T. Mackenzie, p.15

²⁸ C. M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore, p.279.*

²⁹ D. Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar, Vol.II, p.342.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

Ferrolì points out that to cure the drinking habits of the followers, Francis Xavier ordered that each one of them, if found drunk, should be fined one *fanam*, which went to defray the expenses for the building of the church and for the maintenance of the priests³².

Conclusion

St. Francis Xavier was a zealous “missionary on the move”. He worked in India for 10 years, from 1542 to 1552, which is called the “Xaverian Decade”. India has also been the birthplace of missionary theories and the testing ground of Jesuit principles and policies. The Indian mission of Jesuits lies at the very origin of their order. It is to India that Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, sent his greatest son, Francis Xavier, in 1542, and to him and his successors, he gave that inspiration and those directives which became the foundation of the Jesuit mission and method in India.

Jesuit involvement in education in India has a precious history and prestige. It is part of the larger global educational network. The Jesuits have been pioneers and vanguards in providing education to the rural poor, Dalits and tribals. He was extensively involved in the missionary activity in Portuguese India. He also played a decisive role in the advent of the Christian faith and its growth in South India especially in Travancore and its surrounding premises.

Francis Xavier was beatified by Pope Paul V on 25 October 1619 and canonized by Pope Gregory XV on 12 March 1622. In 1624, he was made co-patron of Navarre. Known as the “Apostle of the Indies”, “Apostle of the Far East”, “Apostle of China” and “Apostle of Japan”, he is considered to be one of the greatest missionaries since Paul the Apostle. In 1927, Pope Pius XI published the decree “Apostolicorum in Missionibus” naming Francis Xavier, along with Therese of Lisieux, co-patron of all foreign missions. The day of Navarre in Navarre, Spain, marks the anniversary of Francis Xavier’s death, on 3 December.



³² Lts. Ward & Corner, *Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States*, Vol.II, pp.7 & 31.