ABSTRACT

The history of Christianity in Kerala till the arrival of Portuguese depends on the post Portuguese findings its beginning with two Apostles, namely, St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew. There is a strong living tradition that St. Thomas the Apostle came on the West coast of India, especially to Kerala, made many conversions. The Latin order became the predominant Christian order in the State. They are composed of St. Thomas Christians who embraced the Latin Rite during the Portuguese regime. St. Francis Xavier is known as the second Apostle of India, and majority of Latin Catholics were the descendants of the converts from the Fishery coast at the hands of St. Francis Xavier. The Catholic Missionaries had to flee away from Travancore areas, due to the advent of the Dutch, who were anti-Catholic. After the expulsion of the Dutch, the Catholic provincial was established in the Travancore State. In 1886, the Quilon Diocese was merged to the diocese of Goa and then to Malabar or Verapoly Vicariate. In 1930 the Kottar Diocese was formed from the Diocese of Quilon. After the formation of Kottar Diocese and its successful functioning under the native clergy has greatly influenced the persistent demand for a Latin Diocese at Trivandrum. By separating the four taluks of Chirayinkil, Nedumangad, Trivandrum and Neyyattinkara from the Quilon Diocese, the new Trivandrum Diocese was established in 1937.

Keywords: Ethhuvittupillaimar, Paravas, Catholics, Quilon.

Travancore's interaction with Europeans demonstrated in the economic exploitation of the country on the one side and another side, it also unleashed the forces of production from feudal captivity and facilitated her interface with many of the beneficial aspects of colonial modernity viz. Western administrative system, English education and a new value system based on democracy, rule of law and Christian ethics.

Our knowledge about the history of Christianity in Kerala till the influx of Portuguese depends on the Post Portuguese findings its beginning with two Apostles, namely, St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew. There is a sturdy living tradition that St. Thomas the Apostle came to India, especially to Kerala, and preached the Gospel. The traditional belief is that St. Thomas founded Seven Christian Communities at different places. However, the post Portuguese period give light to strong Chaldean relations existing with the Syrian Christians of Kerala at least from the 4th century. The conversion movement in Kerala were the conscious attempts of certain section of the people for their emancipation, and that the missionaries and the British authorities were agents which promoted that emancipation.

The term Latin Catholics is generally identified with the powerful European and American Church that follows the Latin Liturgy. Its liturgical rite is of the Roman church. In Kerala, the Latin Catholic community is considered as one of the backward classes. They are composed of St. Thomas Christians who embraced the Latin Rite during the Portuguese regime, Anglo Indians, the converts from Hinduism such as Mukkuvas, Nadars, Ezhavas, and Dalit.

The Roman Emperor, Constantine deputed Thophilus a native of Maldives Islands to India in 354 A.D. to preach the gospel, by this time the Persecution of Christian refugees to Malabar Coast and after their advent reinforced the Christian community there. By the 6th century, Theodore, a monk who visited India reported the existence of Church and community at Mylapore and the monastery of St. Thomas in India. Joannes De Maringoly, Papal Legate who visited Malabar in 1348 testified the existence of a Latin Church at Quilon. In 1439 A.D., there were Christian communities scattered from Cochin to Cap Comorin.

The arrival of Portuguese underwent drastic changes among the Christian community in India. The Christians before them belonged to the Syrian rite and later on owing to the encouragement of the Portuguese, the Latin order became the predominant Christian order in the State. Between 1535 and 1537 a group of Paravas, they were the major fishing community settled on the Coast of Bay of Bengal, who required protection under the Portuguese were converted to Christianity.

St. Francis Xavier is known as the second Apostle of India, the majority of Latin Catholics were the descendants of the converts from the Fishery coast of Kerala at the hands of him, and much contributed to the spread of education in India. In the coastal villages of Trivandrum the Christian faith of the fishermen began to gather more momentum. Though there were Christians at Valathura, the port of Trivandrum and its locality, the king of Travancore permitted to erect a Church only in 1563, because, the Brahmins in charge of SreePadmanabha Swami temple did not want a Church to be built there. According to Fr. Francis Perez, S.J., between the coasts of Quilon and Trivandrum, there were about four or five thousand
Christians in 1568. But there was only one church for the whole population, the reasons for this was that the Rani of Attingal, a subordinate to the king of Travancore did not allow the construction of Churches. Later 1569, overruling the objections of the Rani of Attingal, the king of Travancore granted permission to build a church.

The Malabar province of the Society of Jesus with Cochin as headquarters was constituted in 1602. Under this province there were 36 churches spreading form Quilon to Cape Comrin in the coastal belt. A number of Churches in Travancore were brought under the Padroado according to the instruction of the provincial of Malabar province in 1644. Two years later, the Cochin port was captured by the Dutch and the Portuguese were sent out.

The Catholic Missionaries had to flee away from these areas, due to the advent of the Dutch, who were anti-Catholic. After the expulsion of the Dutch, the Catholic provincial was established in the Travancore State. Roman congregation of the propagation of faith recoupled the eclipsed energies of the Missionaries and formed new missions in 1622, who began to penetrate into the interior parts of the country. The conversion of the Nair’s were given much priority and due consideration. As a result several Nair’s embraced Christian faith especially around Nemom, about 8 Km. South of Trivandrum. Ethhuvittupillaimar, the feudal chiefs began to persecute the Christians of Nemom mission and their properties’ were pillaged. This was due to the conversion of Devasahayam Pillai. Due to ordeals he became a Martyr on 14th January 1752. The missionaries found it difficult to convert the higher castes like Brahmans and thus they turned to the people of Nadar caste who according to the missionaries are of humble tribe.

It is an important land mark in the history of Kerala Christian missionary activities. Though the faith was growing the Christians were put to sufferings and thereby the Franciscans of Quilon had to look after the Christians of Travancore.

Fr. Martin and Fr. Monsset, the two Jesuit missionaries came to India in 1838 and they settled in Travancore. Pope Leo III established the hierarchy of the Jesuits in India on 1st September, 1886. The Quilon Diocese was merged to the diocese of Goa and then to Malabar or Verapoly Vicariate. The merging of Quilon Diocese with Verapoly Vicariate was finally confirmed by a Decree of Pope Pius IX, dated, 15th March 1853. As upshot of a covenant between papacy and Portuguese Government in 1886, the Cochin diocese was revived. The areas from Pallithura in the North to Erayumanthura in the South was given under the jurisdiction of the Cochin Diocese. Later mission stations were opened in Trivandrum and Nagercoil areas, as a result, thousands of people were converted to Christianity.

The Quilon Diocese was created in 1886, and Aloysius Maria Benzigar became the Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese in 1900. He became the Bishop of Quilon in 1905. His excellent leadership and dedicated service resulted the rapid spread of Catholicism in Quilon. The work of Carmelite Missionaries who made a missionary harvest by working in the non-coastal villages, converting Nadars, Ezhavas and Dalits to Catholic faith. They followed their missionary activities for more than two hundred and seventy years.

South Travancore became a fertile field of conversion activity of the Carmelites, mainly because the areas coming under the Quilon Diocese at the turn of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries were comparatively free from the ecclesiastical confrontations. And the secondly, the London Mission Society, under the protestant Church, had not been very much active in Trivandrum during this period. However the tireless endeavor of the dedicated Carmelite prelates in the Quilon Mission was also an encouraging factor for the evolution and formation of the Diocese of Trivandrum, which became one of the finest missions of the Catholic Church in India.

From 1901 to 1930, there was a steady flow of Belgian, Italian and Spanish Carmelite missionaries, to the Diocese of Quilon were working in South Travancore, including the regions of Trivandrum, Neyyattinkara, Nedumangad. Celebrated among the foreign Carmelite missionaries and besides them, there were many zealous native missionaries mainly Fr. Peter Bernard Pereira, who later became the first native Bishop of Trivandrum Diocese, also did wonderful work in the mission area of Trivandrum. A new phase of missionary enterprise took place with the re-erection of the Diocese of Quilon and especially with the arrival of A.M. Benziger as the Bishop of Quilon in 1900.

During the time of Bishop Benziger took earnest efforts for starting many educational institution, Charitable Organizations, convents and Orphanages. It was in this background and with such a mental make-up and confidence in the native clergy, that Bishop Benziger propose the division of the Diocese of Quilon into three parts-namely Quilon, Trivandrum and Kottar. The Diocese of Quilon then comprised of the whole of the civil district of Quilon, Trivandrum, and Kanyakumari excluding those old Padroado Parishes which were still under the Diocese of Cochin. In 1929 Bishop Benziger, because of the massiveness of the Diocese, asked the Holy See for the establishment of the Diocese of Trivandrum. Together with the proposal Bishop
Benziger has also sought the permission of the Pope to discharge him from the responsibility of the Bishop of Quilon. On May 26, 1930, Kottar Diocese was formed from the Diocese of Quilon, this Diocese branched off first, outside Kerala in Kanayakumari District of Tamil Nadu, was a historically important place in the Travancore State. After the formation of Kottar Diocese and its successful functioning under the native clergy has greatly influenced the persistent demand for a Latin Diocese at Trivandrum. Later the efforts taken by the Quilon Bishop, Alyosius Maria Benzigar, on 20th September 1931, the Jacobites under the leadership of Archbishop Mar Ivanius and Bishop Mar Theophilas were reunited with the Catholic Church. At the Quilon Bishop’s House Chapel, both the Bishops with priests and other companions were received to the Roman Catholic Church on that auspicious day. As an early as 1919, Bishop Aloysius Maria Benzigar of Quilon recommendation materialized only after his retirement. The present areas of the Trivandrum diocese was formed by transferring the territorial jurisdiction of the areas which belonged to the two oldest Diocese earlier-Cochin and Quilon.

Trivandrum, the capital of the former Travancore Cochin State and the present Kerala State was made the capital of the Trivandrum diocese. The Diocese instigated to function on 5th December 1937, by separating the four taluks from the Quilon diocese. In 1952, the Diocese was temporarily enlarged with the addition of the small strip of coastal areas from Pallithurai to Erayumanthura. The integration of these territories with the Trivandrum Diocese was confirmed on 20th May, 1955, with include the four taluks of Chirayinkil, Nedumangad, Trivandrum and Neyyattinkara in the Trivandrum District with eight coastal villages including villages in the Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu. The Reorganization of the State on linguistic lines and the formation of the State of Kerala on 1st November, 1956 also made impact on the ecclesiastical administration of the Diocese. Till the formation of Kerala, the Kanyakumari District formed part of the Travancore –Cochin State. The Parishes from Erayamanthura to Thoothoor which were situated in the Kanyakumari District and which was formed part of the Latin Diocese of Trivandrum were placed under the Tamil Nadu State. The new arrangement necessitated by the above regions in civil and revenue administration.

Historically, culturally and geographically, the area coming under the Southern Portuguese Padroado mission was part and parcel of the State of Travancore. The Diocese was one of the largest in terms of area and population in Kerala, with the essential of historical and cultural diversities. Later the question of bifurcation of the Diocese of Trivandrum made its origin as early as 1974. Finally the division of Trivandrum diocese was happened, the new Diocese, Neyyattinkara was formed in 1996. But in short, Trivandrum Diocese is one of the Nine Roman Catholic Diocese of Kerala and it became one of the biggest Diocese in the whole of India as regards the Catholic population.

References
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