

INTRODUCTION

Eastern Coast boundary of India is the kingdom of the Pandyas along the Bay of Bengal is called Sethu land or the Marava Country. Among the last seven groups of Marava were called as Sempu Nattu Maravas ruled this country with the title of Sethupathi. They were the guardians of the 'Sethu Bridge'. So they were named as Sethupathi. They belonged to the Marava community. They were brought from the village of Pogalur near Ramanathapuram. Maravars formed a great majority of the population.¹

Ramanathapuram is in the State of Tamil Nadu and occupies a very strategic position. Its history dates back to Paleolithic age. The stone artifacts excavated around the coastal areas in the district suggest that the district had been the abode of Paleolithic culture. Good quantity of quartzite stone implements has been unearthed in different parts of Ramanathapuram district. The Paleolithic man largely depended on quartzite which occurred in Ramanathapuram. In the coastal regions of the district ridges of granular quartz rock of metamorphic character occurs. In the Old Stone Age, man lived in caves and caverns in different parts of Ramanathapuram District.²

By the middle of the 16th century the Portuguese established settlements in the regions of Tuticorin, Vaipur and Punnaikayal. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary landed in Tirunelveli in 1542 and carried on missionary work. The Madurai Nayaks were indifferent to the happenings in coastal regions in the beginning.³ Claiming sole right over fishing, the Arab Muhammadans prevented the Paravas from their 'life business' of fishing.⁴ Having lost their right over fishery, the disgusted Paravas rebelled against them and that led to frequent quarrels and finally to a sudden outburst of clash – the reason

¹ S.M.Kamal., *History of the Sethupathies*, Sharmila Publisher, First Edition, Ramanathapuram, Dec.2003, p.18.

² A.C.Logan, *Old Chipped Stone in India*, 1906, Pp.17-18.

³ Robert Caldwell, *History of Tirunelvely*, Jetley, New Delhi, 1881, p.71.

⁴ K.A.Nilakanta Sastri, *Culture and History of the Tamils*, 1964, p.156.

being a quarrel between a Parava woman and a Muslim youth. In Tuticorin, a Parava woman who was selling rice cake (Paniyaram) was insulted. So the husband questioned it which led to a great street brawl between the two communities. The Paravas attacked with lethal weapons and killed Muslim women and the frightened Muslims fled away to save their lives.⁵ The infuriated Muslims retaliated vehemently with a great vengeance to totally exterminate the Paravas and attacked them indiscriminately killing more Paravas. When the latter complained to the ruling authorities, the Muslims bribed the Hindu ruler Udaya Marthanda verma of Truvancore and Prince Pandya of Kayattar (under whom they lived) with valuable gifts and obtained the verdict in their favour, and also continued to persecute the Paravas who were caught between land and sea.⁶ The local feud between Muslim merchants and Paravas promoted the Paravas to opt for mass conversions in bands; the entire Parava community became Christians and gained the support of the Portuguese. The Portuguese in turn, firmly established themselves in the coast with the support of the Paravas.⁷ Only at this stage, the Nayaks felt the irksomeness of the presence of a foreign power near their territory. To counteract the influence of this foreign power, Muthu Krishnnappa Nayak decided to establish a strong power near the Portuguese establishments.

Besides, the Portuguese began to benefit by all the dues and revenues of the coastal area. The Madurai Nayaks felt this economic loss and they thought that a strong power in the neighborhood of the Portuguese territory would be a safeguard against their further extension. Religious factors also prompted to the establishment of a 'buffer state'. Meanwhile there was total disorder in the Marava Country due to fraternal feuds. There was intense unrest and anarchy all over the region. As a result of the prevailing anarchy the route to Rameswaram became unsafe, due to number of infected the way

⁵ Joseph Thikkadath, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol.II, Bangalore,1982, Pp.394-95

⁶ Rajendran.A., *Dalit Christians' Movement in Tamil Nadu Since Independence*, Unpublished PH.D Thesis, Tiruchy ,2004, p.28

⁷ Robert Caldwell .,op.cit, p.71.

layers.⁸ The pilgrims constantly petitioned the ruler, the Nayak, to make the road safe for the travelers.

Owing to all the aforesaid reasons, Muthu Krishnappa Nayak appointed in 1605 A.D., one Sadaika Deva Udayen Sethupathi as his vassal to take care of the troubled Marava Country. The Sethupathi was entrusted with the task of subduing the rebellious chiefs and was also given a free hand in dealing with the chiefs, on agreeing to pay a fixed tribute. He fortified Ramanathapuram and Pugalur and arranged for armed escorts to the pilgrims. The turbulent chiefs of the surrounding areas were subdued and a strong government was established at Kalaiyarkoil, Pattamangalam and other places.⁹

Muthu Krishnappa Nayak was pleased with the Sethupathi and he appointed Sadaika Thevar as the chief of the Poligars of Ramanathapuram and the viceroy of Marava Country sprinkling the water of Ganges on his head and gave him the insignia of dignity. With this, the history of Sethupathies is commenced in Ramanathapuram.¹⁰ Then Kuttan Sethupathi (1622-1636), Dalavai Sethupathi (1636-1645) came. After the death of Dalavai Sethupathi, Tambi (an illegitimate son of Kuttan Sethupathi, Raghunatha Sethupathi and Narayana Thevar (Nephews of Dalavai Sethupathi), claimed the throne. Fortunately Tirumalai Nayak of Madurai interfered in time. He divided the whole kingdom into three parts Ramanathapuram was allotted to Raghunatha Sethupathi. Sivaganga was allotted to Thambi and Tiruvadanaï was allotted to Tannaka Thevar and Narayana Thevar (brothers of Raghunatha Sethupathi) conjointly. The three rulers ruled conjointly for 10 years. Tambi and Tannaka Thevar died shortly. Now Raghunatha Sethupathi became the ruler of the whole of Ramanathapuram in 1645. During his period Fr Provenca entered and preached the gospel freely in his kingdom. Raghunatha Sethupathi died in 1670. Raja Surya Thevar (eldest son of Raghunatha Sethupathi)

⁸ Sathianathaier, R. *The History of the Nayaks of Madurai*, Oxford University Press, Madras, 1924, p.92 .

⁹ S.M.Kamal., op.cit., p.20.

¹⁰ Tayler, William, *Catalogue Reissenne*, Vol. III, Madras, 1957-62, p.27.

succeeded him, ruled only for 6 months. After his death his youngest brother Athana Thevar became Sethupathi. He also ruled for 3 months only. Both Raja Surya Thevar and Athana Thevar died without any heir. At this time Kilavan Sethupathi became Sethupathi at the age of fifty with the help of Chokkanatha Nayak. He declared himself independent.¹¹ From the beginning he was favourable to Christianity. A number of Marava Chieftains became Christians. This led to severe persecution of the Christians.

The evangelisation work of Fr Britto is remarkable during the period of Kilavan Sethupathi. Christianity flourished in Marava country even after the martyrdom of Fr Britto. The Sethupathis himself repented later on sympathized with Christianity in his last days. Famine, natural calamities came in his last days. He died in 1710. Tiruvudaya Thevar succeeded him in 1710. In the beginning he was favourable to Christianity. Later on he turned against Christianity because of the conversions of his brother – in – law Tiruvaluanathan and his soldiers. He died in 1720.¹² Kilavan Sethupathi had no son; so he nominated Tanda Thevar (his eldest sister's son). He ruled for 4 months only because there was a dispute among his relatives. Bavani Sankara (the son of a concubine of Kilavan Sethupathi) also claimed the throne. Tanda Thevar fought Bavani Sankara with the help of Tondaiman and the Madurai Nayak in Arantangi. Bavani Sankara was frightened and ran away to Thanjavur. Tanda Thevar became the Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram. But Bavani Sankara sought the help of the king of Thanjavur by promising to give him the land of north Pamban. Once again Bavani Sankara met Tanda Thevar with the help of Thanjavur general Ananda Rao Peshwa. Finally Bavani Sankara defeated Tanda Thevar and put them to death. Bavani Sankara became the ruler of

¹¹ Ramasamy.A, *Ramanathapuram District Gazetteer*, Tamil Nadu Gazetteer of India, Printed by the Director of Stationery and Printing, Madras, 1972, p.222.

¹² Bertrand, J. *La Mission du Madura*, Vol. III, Librairie de Poussielgue, Paris Rusand, 1848, p233.

Ramanathapuram. He ruled for nine years, his corrupt administration only hastened his fall.

Sasivarana Periya Udaiya Thevar a famous poligar son of Nalukottai Periya Oodaya Thevar met Kattaya Thevar the uncle of Tanda Thevar, both of them planned to drive out Bavani Sankara from Ramanathapuram. Kattaya Thevar, Sasivarna Periya Udaiya Thevar got support from the king of Thanjavur, because Bavani Sankara had not kept his word in 1729 and the allied forces defeated Bavani Sankara at Uraiyur. The Thanjavur forces captured north of Pamban, the rest of the kingdom was divided into five parts in which three were given to Kattaya Thevar and other two were given to Sasivarna Periya Udaiya Thevar who became the founder of the Sivaganga Kingdom. Kattaya Thevar ascended the throne in 1729. He was very liberal in his religious policy and charitable endowments, he died in 1736. Sivakumara Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (son of Kattaya Thevar) succeeded him in 1736, and he died in 1748. His minister Dalavai Vellayan Servaikaran nominated Rakka Thevar (a cousin of Katta Thevar) his unpopularity led to his fall and replaced him with Vijaya Ragnunatha Sethupathi, He ruled for 13 years died in 1762, Vellayan Dalavay also died. The Dalawayship passed on to Damotharan Pillai, he nominated Muthu Ramalinga Devar (his sister's son) who was the child of Muthu Thiruvai Nachiyar. Since Muthu Ramalinga Thevar was a young boy, his mother ruled in the name of her child.¹³

By this time the Nawab of Arcot established his authorities over Madurai, the Nawab planned to force Sethupathi to accept to be under his jurisdiction, but the Marava forces defeated the plan of the Nawab. Again the Nawab of Arcot invaded Ramanathapuram and defeated the Marava forces with the help of Joseph Smith, the General of the East India Company. Regent Muthu Thiruvai Nachiar was taken as prisoner to Tiruchirappalli; and they were kept under the custody of the English. This

¹³ S.M.Kamal., op.cit., p.40-57.

marked the end of the Sethupathi's rule in the Marava country. The Nawab of Arcot ruled eight years in Marava country. The Nawab of Arcot began to be powerful. Soon the English also appeared on the scene.¹⁴

Theme of the Study

The study deals with the evangelisation works of the Jesuits in Marava country from 1663 to 1773. The Marava country was a forest and backward area. The country was often affected by famine, epidemics and other natural calamities, which induced the Jesuits to preach the Gospel to the Maravas who naturally turned their thoughts towards an eternal peaceful life to come and readiness to receive the gospel. As a result, thousands of people converted themselves to Christianity. They flourished in Marava country due to the hard work and self sacrifices of the Jesuits.

Objectives of the study

1. To study the political, social and economic condition in the Marava country.
2. To analyse the conversion activities of the Jesuits in the Marava kingdom.
3. To examine the organization of the Church in the Marava region.
4. To analyse the role of Pandaraswamy's organization and their conversion.
5. To assess the religious and socio-economic effects of conversion.

Hypotheses

- ❖ The Jesuits wanted to spread Christianity in the Marava land against hard challenges and heavy odds.
- ❖ The Madurai Mission sent their most able missionaries like John de Britto and Balthazar da Costa and others into Marava land.
- ❖ John de Britto made Christianity to reach the common People
- ❖ In the midst of heavy persecution, Christianity flourished in the Marava country.
- ❖ The conversion and the patronage of Christian missionaries led to political disorder.
- ❖ The missionaries suffered much more in Marava country than in other places.

¹⁴ Ramasamy.A, op.cit., p.225.

Study Period

The chronological limit of this research is from 1663 to 1773. The significance of the year 1663 is that the Marava country was allotted to Fr Antony Provenca of the Society of Jesus, for evangelisation work in 1663. The significance of the year 1773 is that the Society of Jesus was suppressed by Pope Clement XVI throughout the world, under the influence of one Pombal, the Prime Minister of the Portuguese Kingdom and his sympathizers in the European kingdoms influenced by the Bourbons.

Statement of the problem

- ❖ The study is related to the sources of Christianisation in the Marava country.
- ❖ The Jesuits wanted to spread Christianity in the Marava land against hard challenges and heavy odds.
- ❖ Therefore the Madurai Mission sent their most able missionaries like John de Britto in to the Marava land
- ❖ He was able to make a headway in the Marava country but the conversion of a Marava prince, evoked a serious protest in the Marava country.
- ❖ As a result persecution continued; yet Christianity flourished in the Marava country subsequently.

Sources of information

Both the primary and secondary sources are consulted for writing the thesis entitled “Christianity in Marava country from 1663 to 1773”. The primary sources related to the topic are found at Madras Archives, Shembaganur Archives, and Palm leaf record at Marava Country. The letters of Fr Antony Provenca, Fr John de Britto, Fr Francis Laynez, Fr Peter Martin and Fr James de Rossi are used throughout the study. In the archives several printed reports, orders and documents are available, besides the above interview, field visits, and other non-conventional sources have been used. The

sources also comprise of Ramanathapuram Manual, District Gazetteers and Govt. Orders. The secondary sources comprised of Books, Journals and News paper.

Area of the study

The Marava country consisted of the present Ramanathapuram, Pudukkottai and a part of Tirunelveli district. Its boundaries were the Fishery Coast to the south east (the Palk Strait); to the north of the former kingdom of Thanjavur, the state of Pudukkottai, and to the west the former kingdom of Madurai. Maravas formed a great majority of the population. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people. There were a number of ports available. Fish, limestone, gypsum, salt were available here. As a result trade and commerce developed in this area. The economic condition was not satisfactory; and yet the Sethupathis managed to keep peace and order in their kingdom.

Chapterisation

The study is divided into six different chapters besides introduction and conclusion. Chapter one titled 'The Political History of Sethupathies' describes the history of the sethupathies from the early times down to the abolition of Zamindari system all over India, like the Nayaks of Madurai, they governed Ramanathapuram in a great modern administrative setup.

Chapter two titled 'Socio and Economic condition' is in fact occupying the significant portion of this research work. It attempts to describe the socio, economic and religious condition of the Marava country. This region witnessed the settlement of different groups of people. Therefore the cultural and religious diversity became inevitable. In this chapter also presents a brief picture on the social condition of Marava region. Maravas had their own mode of dressing and cultural pattern. Their society and economy seems to be identical and unique as described in this chapter.

Chapter three “Arrival of the Jesuits in Marava country” describes the works of Jesuits missionaries in the Marava country. They Jesuits also involve themselves in the political activities in order to do their peaceful missionary services.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to explain the organization of Pandaraswamy movement, since they occupy very rich position. Native people thought that Christian religion is a religion of foreigners, hence, change was inevitable. Missionaries from foreign countries changed the appearance and other things as acceptable to Indian culture and not their basic principles and ideas. Pandaraswamy movement became the major reason for the religious conversion.

In this fifth chapter under the heading ‘Social and Cultural Changes in Marava Country’ describes the introduction and propagation of Christian religion in Marava country as well as in South India brought many changes both socially and culturally. The social and cultural beliefs were the major blockades for the spread of Christian religion. Therefore the additional works of missionaries were to bring some social and cultural changes in Marava country.

The final chapter illustrates the Organisation of the Mission. The Jesuits were the pioneers of Christian Missionaries in India have had well organized missionary structure. With the help of their well structured organization they continuously involve themselves in the missionary services in Marava country. And finally the study ends with the conclusion. The study also present glossary and sufficient appendix.