

CHAPTER - V

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES IN MARAVA COUNTRY

The Portuguese were the first to impose the alterations of a newly emerging and evolving colonial order in India. The term Christians is a very broad one constituting Roman Catholics, Syrians, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans etc. Hence delimitation has been imposed; separate identity is spelled out and in this work one shall deal with Roman Catholics.¹

It is a fact that the Tamil society of a given period (Chronology) is the web of inter-relationship that exists among various individuals and social groups of the Tamil country (the geographical area). Society and culture are closely related but both are distinct. The former is the patterns of association and relations through which persons influence or motivate one another, whereas the latter comprises certain products of these regulations in the form of communicable values, norms and standards. Socio-cultural changes had been intensive because the interaction of the Portuguese missionaries was exhaustive.

Some works have been produced so far on the Catholic Church history of India and their worth is to be assessed because they also deal with caste, conversion and society in a limited way. The work of Felix Alfred Plattner is essentially written to locate the past and place it within the context of the Christian tradition. Aloysius Soares emphasized on the key personalities and key debates at particular points of time and traced the history of the church from the perspective of the present. Thus these two works do not move away from the traditions of Christian way of writing history besides

¹ K.A.Nila kanda Sastri., *Development of Religion in South India*, Madras, 1963,p.152.

catering to the needs of a few, dealing with part of the history of the church and not attempting to cover the history of the Christian people in its entirety.

The Portuguese missionaries noticed some common social evils prevalent in the Tamil society on the coast and they planned to introduce some reforms. First they found that several marriages took place between the close relatives on the Tamil coast. Because of the prevailing ecclesiastical prohibition for such marriages, Fr Henriques felt the need to request the Holy See to allow such marriages among the Paravas in the third and fourth degrees of consanguinity and affinity. He was of the opinion that it was already much if the Christians could be persuaded to avoid marrying first cousins. To demand more from these Parava Catholics would be too heavy a burden on them. Thus missionaries were very understanding and initially careful in handling the affairs before introducing any drastic social reforms among the Paravas.

Further in several other matters also, the canon law was not enforced among the Paravas. To cite, one may say that the rule of annual confession was not imposed as late as in the year 1558 for the simple reason that there were not sufficient number of priests to hear the confessions of the people. Those Christians who were guilty of clandestine marriages were punished but only very lightly. The Christian feast days of obligation were made very few. There were also no obligatory feast during the season of lent.

The Portuguese had not taken any efforts for doing missionary work in the Tamil coast from their arrival in India in AD 1498 till the year 1534. Only a few missionaries of the Franciscan and Dominican orders arrived on the Tamil coast to take care of the Portuguese traders. The establishment of the Diocese of Goa in 1534 gave them some space so that unified missionary enterprise could be undertaken in the Tamil region.

The Paravas, the fishermen of the Tamil coast were the first converts by the Portuguese missionaries in 1537. The event of their conversion laid the foundation for

the Portuguese pastoral work and their mass conversions also had a great impact in the coastal politics of Tamil Nadu. These new converts retained many of the distinctive features of the earlier social and Hindu religious life. Thus in reality, religious conversion of the Paravas initially had not sought much impact in the practice of Christian religion by the individuals. These details are well recorded in the letters of Francis Xavier. For him, Parava conversion to Christianity in the Sixteenth century Tamil Nadu meant the breaking away from all pre-existing beliefs and social ties.

Some aspects of the activities of the Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century had been projected in the correspondences and communications of the missionaries of the later period. It is recorded that the Portuguese never understood in the beginning the differences between the castes. They never troubled themselves to differentiate between the high and low castes. They employed freely the Pariahs and the fishermen and made use of them to satisfy their various needs. This conduct of the early Portuguese shocked the natives and they became very prejudicial to this religion. They (Hindus) considered the people of Europe as a despicable and miserable lot with whom one cannot deal without dishonoring oneself. In another instance it is stated that the idolaters reasonably perceived the missionaries as persons who wanted to destroy the religion of the country.

The Paravas who became Christians declared the King of Portugal as their ruler and the charges leveled on the Christian converts were subjected to forces that denationalized and westernized. Thus one can see how westernization could be seriously mistaken for Christianity in the sixteenth century. This made the Jesuits of the Madurai Mission successful in evolving an Indian Christian culture that is thoroughly Tamilian and distinctively Christian with a minimum of the western influence in the seventeenth century.

The study of missionary history by several scholars in the past has been centered on single individuals and their conversion work in establishing Christian communities, building various chapels and churches. This type of writing tends to view the converts as separating from their surroundings by the act of conversion and any remaining ties to their previous world of beliefs and social connections as evidence of unsuccessful conversions. Of late the study of Christian conversions had been seen in a broader framework of social and economic history. In this connection the works of Susann Bayley and David Mosse for the first time emphasized not on the missionaries or on what the missionaries expected from their converts but rather on what the converts expected from the missionaries and how they used what they have learnt from the missionaries in new and unexpected contexts. Another significant feature of these studies was that they placed missionary process as adaptation and mutual dependency rather than as breaks with previous relationships. We shall examine how adaptation was followed by the Portuguese Jesuits in the process of conversions in Tamil Nadu.²

Caste System and Attitudes of the Tamil Christians

The word caste is derived from the Portuguese word '*casta*' which means lineage.³ The Portuguese applied the term caste very appropriately having understood the Indian system. In Hinduism caste is referred to varna meaning colour. Caste in India at that time referred to a social stratification along the lines of descent, that meant an individual born into a given social category remained there for life. Thus caste was inborn and it determined his social status. The rigid system also did not allow an inter-caste marriage. The violation of the rule led to the expulsion from the caste. Many natives who become Christians had been ostracized and boycotted either by the parents or by the family since all marriages were caste endogamous. Thus natives have realised

² S.Jeyaseela Stephen., *Caste Catholic Christianity and the Language of Conversion Social Change and Cultural Translation in Tamil Country*, Klapaz Publications, Delhi, 2008, pp.16,93,102

³ D.Eshwara Pillai., *Bhakti Elakkiyam Samuthaya Parvai* , Tamil University, Tanjour , 2000, p.20.

that caste was a big obstacle after conversion to survive in the Tamil Christian society. There was no unity among the various castes of Christians who were also divided into right and left hand castes like the Hindus in Tamil society. The left hand caste that comprised of drummers, pipers, tom-tomers, Chuckilis, Beri Chettis, Vanniyars, Devangars and Panchalattars, (Kannalars, Kollars, Carpenters) represented an inferior status while the right hand caste said to be superior status included Mudalis, Pillais, Komutti Chettis, Kavaraï Chettis, Idaiyars, Agamudaiyars, Vellalars, Kaikoalars and Padmasalis. Some of the castes stood for a number of sub-castes and communities bunched together on the basis of commonage of interests.

It is mentioned in Portuguese records that the Hindus of one caste could not partake of any dish which had been prepared by members of another caste nor drink in their house. This practice continued even among the Christians. The gap between the Christians of low castes and high castes remained wide in spite of the efforts taken by the missionaries to narrow it down.

Since caste system was tolerated among the Tamil Christians, each caste was allotted a separate place in the church by the missionaries. There was a wall inside the church to segregate the upper caste Christians, Europeans and Eurasians from the low caste Christians. Therefore the wall was removed and the high caste Christians protested. They refused to enter the church for worship. The high caste Christians quarreled with the priests for keeping the proposed church exclusively for themselves. The high caste men came forward even with the suggestion of paying for the priest to serve in that proposed new religious services because the high caste men did not listen to the suggestions of the priests. So they stood outside the church showing their protest. The high caste converts in Tamil country always wanted to maintain distance away from the low castes and the Untouchables. The missionaries were also obliged to give in as they found no way to bridge the gulf between the two. Within the same Church the

communion table and the altar had been common to all although the Pariah Christians and high castes were separated by the pillars and stone benches. Even there were separate doors for entry and exit in the church. The same situation prevailed in many places in Marava country. Catholic priests had given some concessions to the high caste Christians without totally compromising the egalitarian principle of Christianity. It was felt by the high castes that a considerable concession had been granted to the low castes and the untouchables to have the entry into the same church since Hinduism had invariably kept them away from temple entry, the high caste characteristics. Distinct areas were also used for burial and separate cemeteries for the Pariahs had existed.

Thus, there arose a complex situation and the missionaries had the high task of convincing the high caste Christians that separation between them and the Pariahs would be maintained in the churches. On the other hand the missionaries also had to convince the Pariah Christians that discrimination would not be allowed in the churches and if at all allowed only to some extent and not permanently. In fact, the fear that segregation might be abandoned someday among the Catholics would have deterred the high caste Hindus from converting newly to Christianity. These things had a great impact on the progress of the missionary work and permanently sealed the future of the conversions.

Social Changes and Low Caste Christians

The psychological reactions of inferiority inflicted upon the depressed classes who were not allowed to live in villages nor touch any person of caste nor enter the temple were understood by the Portuguese Jesuits. They considered their missionary call to render service in the name of Christ to these low castes. The Karma doctrine in Hinduism that the degradation of low castes was due to their misconduct in the previous birth had to be rejected. Thus the low castes who had no opportunity earlier to respond to the stimulation of nature and environment were attracted towards Christian teaching followed by active Christian worship that had been introduced, a privilege which was

earlier denied to them by the entry into the temple. Thus 'loving God accessible to all' alien to the established Hindu beliefs and the sharing privilege in worship through removal of social injustice gave a new force into their lives and it became strong enough to loosen and destroy their inhibitions. In the year 1638 when Fr Martin attended the provincial congregation in Cochin, he had been requested by Fr Pedro de Basto to concentrate on the conversion of the Paraiyars.

It has been generally pointed out by scholars till date that mass conversions of low caste Hindus were taking place. It is equally important to study how conversion of a single man by change of religion became one of the most incisive events in his or her human life and those who accepted Christianity did not only experience a sweeping change in their own lives but also became carriers of change in the surroundings. There are instances to show in records that they were able to bring more conversions in the process. To cite an example, Nandipandaram of Chengam was converted first and this was followed by his relatives and thirty others who received baptism. Thus a new Christian community was formed in Chengam in the year 1664 as reported by Fr Provenca. Similarly in a village near Tiruchirappalli (name not mentioned) a woman called Sandanammal became a Christian. Her spirit of faith, prudence and charity enabled to convert some members of her own caste. The converted Christians also led an exemplary life acting as a catalyst for spread of Christianity in Tamil Nadu. The Christian religion capable of bringing such a change was felt by them as a true one and the low castes were compelled to acknowledge it. Thus family as a basis for conversion was felt by the Portuguese Jesuits since they saw the family like caste was a major force of resistance to Christianity.⁴

⁴ S.Jeyaseela Stephen, *op.cit*, Pp.108,110,111

Maravas

The **Maravas** were found chiefly in Tinnevelly and Ramnad Districts, where they occupied the tracts bordering on the coast from Cape Comorin to the northern limits of the Ramnad Zamindari. The Maravas must have been one of the first of the Dravidian tribes that penetrated into the South of the Indian Peninsula, and like the Kallars of Madurai and Ramnad they had been little affected by Brahmanical influence.⁵ In the beginning they gave the British a tough time. It is recorded that to this class belonged most of the Poligars or feudal chieftains who disputed with the English. They were unanimous about their indifference to tilling and toiling and indicate in clear terms that they were for looting and easy living.⁶ They deemed themselves superior to Nadars, Pallars and Paraiyas who were all considered as untouchables and prohibited from entering temples of any kind. They had not only free access to temples but also they themselves were guardians of many temples like Rameswaram.⁷

They were in charge of **Kaval**⁸ for which they were entitled a **Mamool**⁹ by which every householder or occupier of a mud hut must pay the Maravas half a **Panam**¹⁰ and those who were the owners of cattle must pay one **Panam** per year called as **Kudikaval**.¹¹ According to the **1891 Census**, the Maravas formed only 10 per cent of the population of Tamil Nadu and yet they committed seventy per cent of the decoities which had occurred in the previous five years.¹² It is noted in the Madras Police Report, 1903 that a large section of the Marava population in Tinnevelly District was criminal by

⁵ K.P. Bahadur, *Caste, Tribes and Outline of India*, Vol.4, Ess Ess Publications, New Delhi, 1978, pp.57-59.

⁶ T.V. Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts : Summaries of the Historical Manuscripts in the Mackenzie Collection*, Government Press, Madras, 1972, pp.133-134.

⁷ T. Chandrasekaran, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Tamil Manuscripts in the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library*, Vol.9, Government Press, Madras, 1954, pp.2942-2944.

⁸ Kaval means watch and ward duty.

⁹ Mamool means usual customary payment.

¹⁰ Panam - means traditional Indian money.

¹¹ Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol.VII, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1975, p.31.

¹² T.R. Sessa Iyengar, *Dravidian India*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1982, p.193.

predilection and training. On the principle of **Set a thief to catch a thief**, the Maravas were paid to keep their hands from picking and stealing, and to make restitution for any thefts that might possibly take place, notwithstanding the vigilance of the watchmen.¹³

Among them, the **Kallar** was an important sub-caste whose men were referred to as ladrones (thieves) because several individuals of it formerly professed robbery.¹⁴ Though some of them turned Christians, still many of them retained their former appellation.¹⁵ Decoity was their favourite pastime. By nature they were so implacable that they would inflict severe punishments upon themselves just to retaliate such punishments on their enemies. The law of retaliation was rigorously observed in the Kallar dominated areas.¹⁶ If there happens to be a quarrel and one of the parties cuts his ear or pulls his own eye out, or kills himself, the other party must inflict the like punishment upon himself or on some of his relations.¹⁷

The women also carried this barbarious custom for a long time. For a slight affront or a biting remark, they will go and break their heads against the door of the offending person, who is obliged to inflict exactly the same punishment upon herself.¹⁸

If one woman poisons herself by drinking the juice of a venomous herb or plant, the other who was the cause of it, is obliged to do the same and should she prove reluctant to do, the rest would set fire on her house, run away with her cattle and perpetually torment her till she felt full satisfaction.¹⁹ This was only one side of a coin;

¹³ L.S.S. O'Malley, *India's Social Heritage*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1976, pp.96-98.

¹⁴ George W. Spencer (ed.), *Temples, Kings and Peasants – Perceptions of South India's Past*, New Era Publications, Madras, 1987, pp.85-101.

¹⁵ K. Gowri, *Madurai Under the English East India Company 1801-1857*, Raj Publishers, Madurai, 1987, p.185.

¹⁶ C.D. Maclean (ed.), *Glossary of the Madras Presidency*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1982, pp.474-475.

¹⁷ John Wilson, *India Three Thousand Years Ago*, Pioneer Book Services, Madras, 1985, pp.67-70.

¹⁸ M.S. Govindasamy, *The Role of the Feudatories in Pallava History*, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, 1965, pp.27-39.

¹⁹ S. Kadirvel, *History of the Maravas*, Madurai Publishing House, Madurai, 1977, pp.24-26.

they were very good soldiers and a Marava would be worth about an army. In 1656, they proved their might by expelling the Muslims with the support of Tirumala Nayak.²⁰

The Maravas were converted in the Ramanathapuram region by John de Britto. Britto succeeded in converting Thadiya Thevar, the Poligar of Siruvalli domain who was a cousin of Vijaya Raghunatha Kilavan Sethupathi. Fr Martin mentions that 8000 Hindus were converted in Marava country between 1640 and 1680. The number of conversions effected in the year 1686 was two times higher than the previous year according to the Jesuit Annual Letter written and sent from Madurai to the Jesuit Superior General in Rome. The Sethupathi, therefore prohibited the preaching of the Gospel to the Hindus in his kingdom. However, the missionaries defied his order and continued their activities.²¹

The Christian missionaries in particular gave them shelter, provided them with better living conditions and a better quality of life. There was a change in the converts' way of life but unfortunately, the Christian social order remained more or less the same as the Hindu social order.²²

Normally a convert follows the caste customs and the ceremonies in their life cycle celebrations such as birth, puberty, marriage and funeral. For marriages every caste follows its custom except for the nuptial blessing in the Church.

They also follow the food and dressing habits, as their Hindu counterparts. In some instances, if the converts fail to comply with the caste customs, they were ostracized. Hence the practices of social distance, untouchability and social stratification were not uncommon even among the Christians. The existence of the caste practices today in the Christian community can be seen by two supportive view points: (i) the

²⁰ R. Sathyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madurai*, University of Madras, Madras, 1980, pp.95- 96.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.102.

²² *Report of the Harijan Converts Welfare Enquiry Sub-Committee*, constituted by the Catholic Union of India, Cochin, 1973, p.28

sociologists view points and (ii) the observations of the Church leaders and others²³ Firstly, sociological studies have shown that the Hindu beliefs and the practices of the caste system were also in the non-Hindu Communities such as Christians. Srinivas says that the conversion to Christianity often only changed the faith but not the customs, the general culture, or the standing of the converts in society.²⁴ Secondly, the Christian leaders accept the existence of the caste practices in the Christian community and they have shown a great concern for the social life of the community.

Caste system with all its prejudices was not destroyed but was unfortunately prevalent among the Christian converts also. They continued, to be treated by their neighbours as Untouchables and were victims of the same social and economic disabilities as their Hindu brethren of the same category. These Christian converts followed, the same usages, customs, manners and habits of life characteristic to each particular caste.²⁵ The high caste people did not accept the low castes having human dignity and divine grace, so with this unacceptableness of low castes, the high castes did not give equality in the churches, cemeteries, schools and village feasts".²⁶

Social change has received added impetus in the decades before and after the attainment of India's Independence. This is not an isolated trend confined to India only. In every society, changes have been occurring in the social process.²⁷ It should also be remembered that with the development of modern science, technology and industry, there is a definite swing towards change in the social life of mankind. The role of

²³ Antony Raj, *Discrimination against Dalit Christians*, Madurai, 1992, p.19.

²⁴ M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1972, p.60.

²⁵ The Memorandum prepared by the follow-up Action Committee of the National Convention on the Plight of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin, pp.4-5

²⁶ G.Casmir, *Lenten Message, (A pastoral Letter to the Archdiocese of Madras, 1993)* in Tamil Nadu Catholic Bishops' conference statements, p.110

²⁷ B. Kuppuswamy, *Social Change in India*, Delhi, 1972, p. 4.

Christian Missionaries in stimulating social reform movements and social changes is fairly well known.²⁸

The problem of reform in the context of India is basically a problem of changing the society from a traditional agricultural society into a modern one. The main problems facing the Indian society is the improvement in the poverty of the masses and their standard of living. Confidence and ability to master the environmental forces, physical as well as social, has to be developed.²⁹

The poverty of the people is startling. The principal factors which still bind India to poverty are extravagancy and ignorance. The most striking feature of the rural population of India is the absence of the sense of thrift and saving. This fact by itself, together with illiteracy and indifference to change combined to keep the living standards of the people very low. In recounting the causes of waste one cannot leave out of reckoning the large expenditure upon festivals and ceremonies.³⁰ People expected either God or the Government to make good all their own deficiencies. Manual labour was still associated with loss of dignity.³¹ Available resources were wasted due to customs and prejudices. The poverty of the Indians really sprang from the same roots as the ignorance of hygiene. Excessive adherence to social customs and observances, to the detriment of public health made the problem of improving sanitation at once so acute and so difficult of solution.³² With an increase of receptivity of the classes to new ideas and with the improvement of the social and economic status of the masses, it is hoped that India's backwardness will be remedied.³³

²⁸ Sarkar Sumit, *Biographical Survey of Social Reform Movements in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, Delhi, 1975, p. 14.

²⁹ K.T. Paul, *The British Connection with India*, 1927-28.

³⁰ Bro. Brady, *Tour of the Madura Mission 1847*. NMML, Vol. I., p. 156. (MPA)

³¹ *Caritas*, Jan. 1942, p. 15.

³² J. H. Nelson, *District Manual of Madura*, 1868, op. cit, p. 168.

³³ M. Dodwell, *South India – Education*, 1914-15, p. 500.

The condition of the untouchables and the depressed classes was still more deplorable. They were subjected to humiliating insult and social disabilities.³⁴

The persistence of disease combined with inadequate conditions of communication and certain traditional ideas generated the problem.³⁵ However the poor cultivator was frequently willing in theory at least to admit that education could improve his material well being.³⁶ But it is not easy to convince the people who are daily faced with the problem of poverty and who need the labour of their children, that the ultimate benefit of education was the immediate material sacrifice involved. Willingness on the part of the rural people to recognise the values of education itself was a welcome trend.³⁷

Social problems demanding attention were the excesses of intemperance, which some times led to violence and crime. The rural folk had a strong temptation for intoxicating drinks and drugs. The drink-evil brought misery to the victim, his family and the society. Intemperance had always been held in the highest contempt in the community.³⁸ The Government policy in this matter seemed 'to take care to minimize the temptation to those who do not drink and to discourage excesses among those who do'. Government activities to reduce the evil were supplemented by the well-directed efforts of voluntary bodies, especially the Christian missionary societies. These agencies fostered an attitude of mind among the addicts which was calculated to result in permanent improvement.³⁹

The Catholic Church itself was making decisive efforts to get out of its state of siege mentality and settle down assuming more positive relationship with the liberal

³⁴ Patel Rajini (Ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient Longmans, Delhi, 1970, p. 285.

³⁵ M. Dodwell, *South India – Education*, 1914-15, p. 500.

³⁶ Report of Mr Campbell, Collector of Bellary, Cf., P. J. Thomas, *The Growth of Higher Education in Southern India*, Madras, p. 12.

³⁷ Rev. Murdock, *Memorial to Lord Ripon on Education in India - 1882*, p. 73.

³⁸ *Thirukural*, Chapter - 93: 921-30.

³⁹ *Statement Exhibiting the Moral and Material Progress and Conditions of India –1922-23*, p. 229

secular culture.⁴⁰ Traditionally the Jesuits in the Madurai Mission were involved in evangelization as their predominant apostolate. The Society itself had been founded for the defence and propagation of faith and for rendering any service in the Church for the greater glory of God and the common good.⁴¹ But the Jesuits were not 'status quoists' by any standard. Living in a dynamic society they had to change themselves and effect changes in the society which they served. The contemporary social and religious trends in the country did not fail to attract the attention of the missionaries. The Jesuits of Madurai were profoundly influenced by the prevailing atmosphere of reform and change around them. The spiritual mission of the Society and its social functions, without being contradictory to each other, fused and enriched each other. The Christian message was interpreted in such a way that it might be relevant to the needs of the time. The basic ideology of the Society's social mission was to create the Kingdom of Christ on the earth.⁴² The Gospel indicates very clearly that Christ in His life and teachings made an option in favour of the poor and the oppressed.⁴³ In the light of Christian traditions and the teachings of the Church, the Society of Jesus in Maduraii also made a decisive involvement in favour of social change and the service of the poor and the underprivileged.⁴⁴

The ideological basis of the Society's social mission was further strengthened by traditions of continuous concern for the social welfare of the humanity since the days of St Ignatius himself. The Founder of the Jesuits sent the early novices on a long pilgrimage, when they had to beg for their food and serve in the Roman hospitals.

⁴⁰ Boken-Kotter, Thomas, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, New York, 1977, p. 275.

⁴¹ Formula of the Institute- Society of Jesus (3) (1).

⁴² Jesuit Scholars, *Religious Hinduism – A Presentation and Appraisal of St Paul*, Bombay, 1964, p. 27.

⁴³ Houtart Francis and Lemercinier, *Church and Development in Kerala*, Bangalore, 1979, p. XIV.

⁴⁴ Mgr. Canoz, *Extraits du dernier Rapport annuel de Mgr. Canoz*, Trichirappally, dated 8.10.1862, ADP Tome XXXIV, p. 352. (MPA)

Abandoned women and homeless destitute were sheltered in Rome by the Jesuits. This continuing commitment has become part and parcel of the Society to this very day.⁴⁵

The Social action of the Madurai Mission began first at the level of the local parish. The Parishes were the nucleus where the missionary met and interacted with the community. The Parishes nurtured the Christian Communities. It was these local communities which the Jesuits attempted to build and develop before they could introduce the social changes and new ideas among them. The Jesuits found the rural community very poor and ignorant, divided by casteism and held in the grip of ill health and superstition.⁴⁶ The Mission strategy was therefore to uplift these miserable wretches from economic backwardness and improve their living conditions. As the agents of change, the Jesuits created new and healthy attitudes and values among the people. They prepared them slowly for meaningful participation in their social and religious life. They were made to understand the dignity of labour and the value of hard work. Opportunities were provided in the community level for the people to imbibe positive values. To foster unity among the congregations common sharing and love feasts were introduced. Village festivals and common events of the parishes were made use of in order to bring the people together. Traditional aspects of culture in the community were properly encouraged. The Jesuits found that village ceremonies were essential to bind the people to the religion and nourish their piety and faith.⁴⁷ Superstitious beliefs and faith in sorcery and astrology were the most distressing disorder among the rural Christians. All efforts were taken by means of Parish Associations and intensive instructions to help the ignorant people understand the meaning of their faith. In this way

⁴⁵ J. Broadrick, *The Origin of the Jesuits*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1940, p. 54. Cf Thekkedath Joseph, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. II, Bangalore, 1982, pp. 262-64.

⁴⁶ J. H. Nelson, *Madura District Manual*, op. cit, p. 85.

⁴⁷ J.C. Houpert, *The South Indian Mission*, op. cit, pp. 204-5.

the Society was trying to reconcile the ways of the tradition ridden society with dynamic and egalitarian values.⁴⁸

Caste system in Ramanathapuram

Ramanathapuram district is one of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. Castes found in Tamil Nadu in general and Ramanathapuram district in particular may broadly be grouped into three categories: Brahmins, non-Brahmins and the Scheduled Castes. While the Brahmins are considered the highest in the caste hierarchy, the non-Brahmin castes are considered the middle level castes. The more visible middle level castes include the land owning castes such as Vellalar, Ahamudayar (*Servai*), Maravar (*Thevar*), Kallar, Konar (Yadavar) and the Telegu speaking Naidus; trading castes such as Chetteeyar, artisan castes like Kusavar or Kuyavan (Potter), Kotthan (mason), Thachan (carpenter), Kollan (blacksmith), Thattans or Nahai Aasari (goldsmith); and the servicing castes such as Ambattan (barbers) and Vannan (washer men). The more visible castes among the Scheduled Castes in Ramanathapuram district are the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars.

While most of the Brahmins strictly observe vegetarianism, most of the middle level castes except the Vellalar and to some extent the Chetteeyar do not adhere to such restrictions. It may be noted that adhering to vegetarianism is one of the ways by which one asserts his/her superior position in the caste order. Among the meat eating Hindus, the beef eaters are considered to be inferior to mutton eaters and even to pig eaters. Even today these middle level castes maintain, not fully in urban areas, complete distance from the Scheduled Castes. Of these middle level castes, a few such as Ahamudayar, Maravar and Kallar together known as *Mukkulathor* (three castes) are relatively more visible particularly in Ramanathapuram district as they are not only the owners of

⁴⁸ Letter of Fr L. Garnier, to a Father of the Society of Jesus, dated, July 1842, LEEC, Vol. I, pp. 356-72.

cultivable land, large in number and more assertive but also known for committing atrocities on the Scheduled Castes.⁴⁹

The relationship between the higher castes and the lower ones has always been very hostile and in such relationship the losers are often those at the bottom of the caste ladder and the gainers are those above due to, as stated before, unjust and unequal distribution of power and status. Any attempt on the part of the lower ones to alter the given power positions met with dire consequences.

The Pallar caste is said to be the ancient community of Tamil Nadu. The people of this caste are considered to be the great cultivators especially of wet land of Tamil country. The term Pallar seems to have been derived from the word *Pallam*, meaning a pit or low-lying region. Since wet land is usually found in low lying area and the Pallars were often engaged in cultivation of such land, they came to be known as Pallam and latter as *Pallan* and *Pallar*. It is argued with sufficient support of literature that the Pallars of today were actually known as *Mallar* belonging to the Dravidian race about 2300 years back and were the rulers of Tamil country during the 14th and 15th centuries. It is also asserted that they are the descendants of Pallavas who were ruling the Andhra and Tamil countries once. Since they were known for charity, heading and presiding village panchayat meetings and being kind, they were referred to as Vellalar; and for their ability to control flood, they were kudumban. Putting all these qualities together, the Mallar (Pallar) call themselves Devendra Kula Velalar. There are over 84 branches among the Pallars. The Mallar were called Pallar only after 15th century by more powerful tribes from other parts of South India with a view to degrading their social status.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ A. Ramaiah, *Protest Movement and Scheduled Caste Identity: The Impact of Constitutional Provisions on Scheduled Castes in Selected Villages of Tamil Nadu*, PhD. Thesis, CSSS/SSS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 1998, p. 92.

⁵⁰ S. Guruswamy, *Tamil Ilakkiathil Pallar (Mallar) Devendra Kula Velalar*, Mandram, Coimbatore (Tamil) 1993, p. 392; also see Ramaiah (note 2), 1998, pp. 70-73.

Economic and political powers were intact in the hands of Maravars and Ahamudayars - the two middle level dominant castes. All the Scheduled Castes including Pallars did not have land of their own and depended on the former both for their livelihood and physical security.

None of the Scheduled Castes were allowed even to walk through the residential area or through the village's main street running through the residential areas of the dominant castes. They had to walk a long way along the periphery of the village to reach their huts. They were not allowed to enter any of the village temples visited by the caste Hindus and had no right to perform any rituals even out-side the premises of such temples. The Pallars had a separate temple (but open to all castes) called *Maravar Mahan*, meaning son of Maravar (the dominant caste). The name of this temple itself indicates that the caste Hindus were equal to a god and the Scheduled Castes had to respect and worship them. The Pallars had to address the caste Hindus only as *Saami* (God), whereas even a ten year old caste Hindu boy addressed the Pallar man of 80 year old by his name or even by his caste in a derogatory manner because of his superior caste status. This is also true in the case of using the community well meant for all castes. The Pallars were prohibited from fetching water from well on the pretext that their vessels and buckets would pollute the water by their touch. The pond used by the caste Hindus for bathing was not even to be approached by the Scheduled Castes. Each Scheduled Caste had its own burial ground located far away from that of the caste Hindus and they were not allowed to take funeral processions through the main street of the village.

The term *Parayan* is derived from the Tamil word *parai* (drum) as certain Parayars act as drummers at funerals and village festivals.⁵¹ They are also engaged in

⁵¹ Government of Tamil Nadu, *Gazetteer of India: Tamil Nadu State- Ramanathapuram District*, Madras, 1972, p. 154.

cultivation, grass cutting and weaving. The fifteenth century literatures indicate that the Parayars were also engaged in tanning and skinning leather which in the view of classical or Brahmanical Hinduism is considered to be defiling and polluting.⁵² During the eighteenth century they also worked as tank-diggers, construction workers, servants, transport workers and a few as soldiers in armies. This period has been described as the golden age for Pariah.⁵³ The Parayars worship the common *Grama Devata* (village deity) such as Ellamma, Mungilamma, Padaiyattal or Pidariyamma.⁵⁴

Although in the southern part of Tamil Nadu the Parayars are considered below the Pallars in the caste hierarchy, in the northern part particularly in Thanjavur district the Parayars do not acknowledge the latter's supremacy over them. Whatever be the history of the Parayars, in Ramanathapuram district most of them are, in the present days, merely landless labourers. Compared to the Pallars, they are still fewer in number in most of the villages of this district. For earning their livelihood, they continue to do their job of playing drums on both auspicious and inauspicious occasions of the caste Hindus and Pallars as well. They also earn their livelihood by making and selling certain palm leaf household items. Though in the past they seemed to have engaged in diverse fields of activities which had no social stigma, their association with leather works and drum beating, and their habit of eating beef seemed to have had a greater impact in pushing them down the caste ladder. The Pallars in most of the villages of this district consider themselves to be above the Parayars in their social status and also treat them as untouchables. They allege that the Parayars side with the caste Hindus during caste clashes and, hence, even label them as betrayers. They use the Parayars as symbol of

⁵² Karashima, *The Untouchables in Tamil Inscriptions and Other Historical Sources in Tamil Nadu*, in: H. Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Manohar, New Delhi 1997, pp. 23-24.

⁵³ Washbrook, *Land and labour in the late eighteenth century South India: The Golden Age of Pariah*, in: Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1993, pp. 78-80.

⁵⁴ *Government of Tamil Nadu* (Note 6), 154.

abuses although the only major difference between them and the Parayars is that the former refrain from eating beef while the latter relish it.

Falling next to the Parayars in the caste hierarchy are the *Chakkiliyars*. They form an appreciable number in the district. Though no literature seems to be available to indicate their historical origin, it is maintained that they might be immigrants from the Telugu or Kanarese districts. Their gods include Madurai Veeran, Mariamma, Muneeswara, Draupathi and Gangamma. By taking into account the kind of caste status they have been ascribed to and the life style they have been leading for the last several decades, it may be said that the Chakkiliyars are even below the Parayars in the caste hierarchy. It is believed that they originally held a high position in the caste hierarchy but were latter degraded.⁵⁵ Their traditional occupations are sweeping, scavenging and removing the dead animals, tanning and making foot wear. They also play drums and a wind instrument which looks similar to *shenoy* - a famous North Indian musical instrument and is usually played by higher caste people for auspicious occasions. In some villages, Pallars prefer the Chakkiliyars instead of the Parayars to play drums on the occasion of their *Kula Deivam* (clan God) festival although they do not allow the latter inside their temple. However, the Parayars' interaction with Pallars is very limited.

The Pallars have been defined as a class of agricultural labourers. Accordingly, the Pallars are held high in the Scheduled Castes hierarchy but all other Scheduled Castes are looked down upon by them. Moreover, they have the history of being the rulers of Tamil country during 14th - 15th centuries.⁵⁶

As a result even now the old reforms continue in some places for example in Oriyur Medu in the row of the high caste Vellalar one may find the descendents of

⁵⁵ *Government of Tamil Nadu* (Note 6), 155.

⁵⁶ K. Gough, (1969), Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1971; M. Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979.

Perumal (who beheaded Fr Britto) belonging to the Pallar caste have also a house. This was a sign of permanent social changes.⁵⁷

As a social advancement the Christians of Thangacchi Madam and Kamutha Kudi like Pallar, Paraiyar mingle with Hindus of higher caste for marriages and festivals as equals. The Hindu low caste people are not allowed to do so. This is also a point of social change introduced by Christians.⁵⁸

Cultural effects of conversion to Christianity

The perspective of these studies is determined, therefore, by a search for signs of life and growth among the Christian communities investigated. Such signs were sought in the response of village Christians to the pressures of their (traditional) environment and to the (Christian) traditions. The perspective of these studies is determined, therefore, by a search for signs of life and growth among the Christian communities investigated. Such signs were sought in the response of village Christians to the pressures of their (traditional) environment and to the (Christian) traditions which they have both inherited and in one way or another made their own. The concern is with features in their mode of living that mark them off as Christians. Even if village Christians continue to be integrated in various forms of social strata and organizations, at times or in certain aspects they ought to stand out separately. If not, there is a genuine apprehension about the continued existence or integrity of the Church. Both studies suggest remedies, based on theological reflection, for situations deemed unacceptable from the Church's point of view. Their distinctiveness was not clearly evident; what they were as Christians appeared closely linked to who they were as participants in village society. Like other distinctive groups in the village, Christian community existence had two sides: one separate and distinctive; and the other at one with the rest of the village.

⁵⁷ Interview with S. Flora Rani, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, dt 2.4.2011.

⁵⁸ Interview with A. Mari, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, dt 6.4.2012.

The reasons given by Christian informants for popular Hindu customs being found among Christians may be arranged in three groups. First, there was the influence of predominantly Hindu surroundings, including the weight of kinship and friendship. Not only is it difficult for adult converts to change their customs, especially in times of crisis, the unity of family and village are important considerations for many. Largely, this was due to the Christians' thorough involvement in the inter-caste society of the village and the inter-village community within a particular caste. There is not a single Christian in these villages who does not have many Hindu blood relations and 'in-laws' in nearby villages. The second had to do with personal desires - to enjoy good food and sweets, and generally participate in the joy and merriment of Hindu festivals. A number of Christians found Hindu ceremonies efficacious in promoting personal and family well being. The third general reason was perceived as a lack of education, in other words, an inability to read the Bible and a lack of true knowledge that they are a people set apart and chosen by the Holy God. The teachers and pastors who have been appointed to look after the congregations do not do it properly and so Christians take part in the customs of the Hindus. Nevertheless from the authors' perspective significantly, the object of the average Christian's belief seems to have been more distinctive than his/her conduct. The Lord Jesus is accepted by villagers in general as being one of many *Swamis* and no distinction in quality is made between *Yesuswami* and any of the other *Swamis*, including the Muslim saints. Jesus is one among many such powerful lords. Yet even the average Christian, whose ideas about the Christian God are very vague and considerably influenced by Hindu beliefs, feels that through his membership in the Christian community he is especially related to this particular Swami, Jesus Christ, and many Christians feel that their 'Lord', above the village goddesses and yet closer at hand than the vague supreme deity. Narayana is a powerful helper in time of trouble and a source of blessing. Neither the village Christian nor his non-Christian neighbours see much that is 'distinctive' in his personal Christian name, but both of them recognize a very real and

distinctive power in the name of Jesus. Therefore, the authors conclude, because Christians have such a low wall of protective Christian 'culture' around them, Hindu influence easily penetrates the Christian community, but the same absence of a protective wall makes it relatively easy for Christian influences to filter through to the others.

The Jesuit experience witnesses a search for a cultural role. The Society of Jesus, like the Church, has a role to play in the cultural renewal of the nation and its first concern was to adapt itself better to the needs of the country and to overcome the handicaps created by its alien organizations and structures in the externals. The Church itself, though it bears a Greek name 'Ecclesia' derived from the Greek Civil Assembly and is ordered by the Roman Spirit of the authority and law, is the successor and heir to an Oriental people set apart from all the peoples of the earth to be the bearers of a divine mission. The Church standing for a universal spiritual society is destined to embrace both the East and the West. St Ignatius Loyola rightly perceived the needs of the Church in his era and constantly sought the means to meet them.

The Jesuits were searching for an Indian identity and in that process were making contributions to the cultural situation. They strove to be men who possessed balance and depth in their thinking. They could communicate to others with credibility their own convictions regarding the meanings and values of life. They were trying to identify themselves with the people amongst whom they were 'sent' by contributing to their history by their shared experience.

In view of the trend towards identification, one may well ask, what is it that distinguishes the Christians from their neighbours. What constitute the Christians as a people distinguished from the other peoples in their adherence to the Christian religion with its distinct creed and customs. Their belief in Jesus Christ, their Reverence for the word of God, their forms of corporate worship --- these set them apart from all other

communities. The Church to whom the members belonged is a human community, but it is primarily defined by its response to God's act in Jesus Christ. Membership of the Church is determined not by human descent but by the New Birth that God grants to those who accept Jesus Christ as the Lord and Son. Therefore judged by its standards of faith and worship and by its response to eternal challenges, the Church in the Madurai Mission was a living member of the Church universal.

The Christian community in the Mission had grown steadily in size and has made significant advances in Education, Economic, and social standing. The growth of indigenous leadership was encouraging. During its infancy the Community depended almost entirely on the foreign Missionaries for guidance in faith and worship and looked to them for education, employment and production. The community adopted some of the Western cultural forms and attitudes. Only slowly did it grow in self confidence and began to develop a mind of its own. The members of the Church sought to establish new patterns of relationship with the people among whom they lived. The Church, the community of the Christian people as a minority community must emerge from a period of dependence and seek to find its place in the life of the region. As such the history of the Christian people in Tamil Nadu is marked by two tendencies. One is the result of strong desire to be a separate people, a distinct Community. The other trend is a desire for identification and acceptance as neighbours and fellow citizens.

First of all the very physical presence of a Church building and its environment gave the community an identity. The Church was the centre of Christian life. Around the Church the people gathered, met each other and shared with one another. In the early stages of the growth of the Mission, the life the Christian communities was confined to the Christian only. It may be called the 'Mission-Compound Phase' of Mission history. When the number of Christians was so few it was natural for many to spend a great deal of their time in the Mission compound. Many of them were employed as servants,

teachers, and catechists and as ‘disciples’ of Missionaries.⁵⁹ There was little real conflict with the old environment. Initially they were isolated from their non-Christian friends and relatives. Under these circumstances they attached the greatest importance to their Churches. Christian worship became a regular and beneficial feature of community life.⁶⁰ As the Christian community grew up into maturity, isolation was broken. The Christian people extended their influence beyond their own environment and became a leaven of the whole society. In this way the Christian community got out of its ghetto and adapted itself to the cultural life of the region.⁶¹ It was here the Jesuits Missionaries were present and played the role of the agents of adaptation and Indianisation. It is a process of the adjustment of the Church to its environment. New Values, Attitudes and Symbols come into play to suit the needs and changes. All customs and practices which are socially useful and compatible with Christianity were gradually absorbed. It was necessary for the Church to be Christian first and foremost, not to be Western or Eastern.⁶²

The Jesuit found that a negative adaptation was obviously an unsatisfactory solution. He wanted the more authentic tradition of the Christian Church, of preserving the ways and customs of the new converts in so far as they were not opposed to Christian witness.⁶³ The Jesuits of the Madurai Mission endeavoured to adapt Indian styles in Church art, music, painting, sculptures and architecture. The process of adaptation was then extended to the teaching of philosophy and theology and finally to the external manner of the Missionary’s living. They retained the practice of giving the newly baptized people indianized Christian names.⁶⁴ The Jesuits themselves liked much to be known by such names. In the liturgical services and village festivals the traditional local

⁵⁹ Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, London, 1960, p.116-120.

⁶⁰ G.E. Ganss, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁶¹ *Letter* of Fr A. Canoz to the Provincial of Lyons, dated August 1843, LEEC, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 179.

⁶² *Letter* of Fr Cyril, to a Jesuit Missionary in the House of Vals, dated March 1844, LEEC, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 54-70.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶⁴ Extracts from an essay read in the Philosophate of the Sacred Heart College, Shembaganur, *Caritas*, September, 1947, p. 107.

colour was allowed to continue provided it conformed to Christian norms and good taste. Most Jesuits loved Indian festivities especially when there was a touch of folk arts in them.⁶⁵ Village music and folk dances attracted them very much. Devotional and liturgical music in the villages captured the imagination of the Jesuits more than anything else. These fine works were the specimen of the Portuguese Baroque style of the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries. At the advent of the restored Society in Madurai most of the old Churches were in the possession of the Padroado.⁶⁶

Jesuits were responsible for the replacement of the old mud walled chapels in the rural areas by more solid structures. With the help of the local contribution and foreign donation some magnificent Churches had been built.⁶⁷ When the Mission developed other services like education and social activities there was a corresponding increase in building activities.⁶⁸ The Jesuits of the early Madurai Mission are reported to have presented painted pictures to local rulers.⁶⁹

The Jesuit Superiors of the Mission were aware of the tradition in the Society which had utilised the non Christian classical literature and Christian Humanism. They encouraged the study of local languages, Indian History, Indian classics and the comparative study of Hindu Doctrines and Philosophy in the curriculum of the seminaries. The purpose was to have an effective and balanced 'adaptation'.⁷⁰ Insisting on the need for understanding other Religions Swamy Abishikananda says: "Religious pluralism in India is not likely to disappear from the world at least in the foreseeable

⁶⁵ D'Souza Jerome, *Christianity in India*, Cf, Speeches and Writings of Fr Jerome D' Souza, *op. cit*, Pp. 209-216.

⁶⁶ S. Manuel, *The Jesuits and Tamil*, St Mary's College, Jubilee Souvenir, 1889-1939, Pp. 1-12.

⁶⁷ Fernando Venancius, Fourth Century Volume of the Church of Our Lady of Snows 1582-1982, Tuticorin, 1982, p. 28.

⁶⁸ J.C. Houpert, *The Madura Mission Manual*, *op. cit*, p.126.

⁶⁹ *Caritas*, July, 1949, P.74.

⁷⁰ The Question of Adaptation in India, Speeches and Writings of Fr Jerome D' Souza, *op. cit*, p. 271.

future. The Church must take that fact in her appreciation of her mission of universal salvation.⁷¹

Adaptation to Indian ways in the external manner of living of the Jesuits also became one of the concerns of the Jesuits. The Indian Mission had adapted a standard of life considerably higher than that of the masses of Indian people.⁷² The Jesuits of the former Mission grappled with the problem of Indian languages and mastered them in such a way as to become scholars and grammarians.⁷³ They wrote not only Prayer books but also produced printed works of Tamil Grammar and Religious literature.⁷⁴ Robert De Nobili became a linguist great equally in Sanskrit and Tamil.⁷⁵ He was soon followed by the more learned and talented Fr Beschi whose versatile genius and erudition have left an indelible impress on every branch of Tamil literature.⁷⁶ Thus there was a continuous tradition of Jesuit efforts in contributing to the enrichment of Tamil literature and culture. The Classical languages were the vehicles of communication and the repositories of ancient history and knowledge.⁷⁷ Later the Indian Universities were laying emphasis on the classical languages and their importance.

The Jesuit search for a cultural identity began to bear fruits. The primary concern of the Society was and is always that the Gospel which they preached must be incarnated in the culture of the land.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Sacred Heart College Shembaganur – A Sketch, *Caritas*, November, 1935, pp. 141-150.

⁷² Fr Johannes at Calcutta tried to interpret the Vedanta to Christians and Christ to Vedantists. M. Rathinaswamy, *India After God*, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁷³ Strickland, W., *The Jesuits in India*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁷⁴ A. Jean, *Le Madure' etc.*, *op. cit.*, Tome-II, p. 52.

⁷⁵ M. Arokiaswamy, Christian Contribution to Indian Culture, Truth Shall Prevail, Reply to Niyogi Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

⁷⁶ Mascaranhas Rampola, *Kristava Tamil Thondarkal*, Trichinopoly, 1972, pp. 1-23.

⁷⁷ Mayilai Seeni Venkatasami, *Kristavamum Tamillum* (Tamil), Madras, 1936, p. 97.

⁷⁸ Fr T.N. Siqueira, *Edited the New Review of Calcutta*.

The Grand example of the cult of the Christ martyr St. John de Britto at Oriyur

The pilgrimage tradition at the shrine of St John de Britto in South India provides a poignant illustration of the problems in matching empirical data with a preconceived interpretive paradigm. Drawing on the pilgrimage practices and performances in this shrine this essay will examine the twin concepts of liminality and communities to the religio-cultural context of Tamil Catholics.

The Shrine, the Saint, and the Festival

Situated at the extreme northeast end of the district of Ramanathapuram district the shrine of John de Britto at Oriyur is a popular pilgrim center for Tamil Catholics of the region. The history and popularity of the shrine are related to the events surrounding the martyrdom in 1696 of John de Britto a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, who spearheaded a mass conversion movement in a portion of southeast Tamil Nadu known as the Marava Country. Tradition holds that soon after arriving in India. Fr Britto earned a reputation as a holy man of great power. He became as such, a threat to Sethupathi, the Raja of Ramanathapuram that the king had the missionary's head impaled on a stake after decapitation. Oral tradition maintains that the king later repented his action and carried stones for the construction of the shrine. It is also reported that shortly after the martyrdom of Britto, the king and his entire household became Christian and the wife of Udaya Thevar (Governor of Oriyur) was to Catholicism and was buried near the site of martyrdom.

The beheading of Britto had its own political dimensions. Through his campaign of mass conversion Fr Britto came to be perceived as a source of awesome sacral and political powers. Local rulers perceived Christianity as a basis on which to build new political alliances; a variant of the martyrdom legend view alludes to this political dimension. The executioners beheaded the saint, so goes the legend, then, cut off his hands and feet and tied them to the execution post because they feared his power. His limbs had to be tied down to immobilize his power and spirit. Fr Britto became a focus and a source of power and

dynamism. This is why it was not enough to kill the missionary Fr Britto's limbs had to be nailed down so as to immobilize his vengeful spirit. Fr Britto could not be neutralized as to source of danger to the Ramanathapuram realm unless his body was immobilized: only this could de-activate his power as a rival dominion –builder. The development of the Britto cult in the Marava Country and the popularity of the Oriyur shrine are closely linked to his martyrdom and his assumed sacral powers, especially his fertility powers. A rich collection of legends and folk songs celebrate these life giving powers. According to one legend a rooster sacrificed to Britto crowed even after it was beheaded. A folk song celebrates this theme: Even now the beheaded rooster crows in the sacred shrine of Britto.⁷⁹ The fertility motif is also evident in the legends concerning the coloration of the soil surrounding the shrine. Whereas the soil in the immediate vicinity of the site of beheading is red (an area of one square km) all other areas in the vicinity have black soil. Oriyur residents and devotees attribute this unique phenomenon to the martyrdom of Britto, whose blood is believed to have transformed the site into a sacred centre of extraordinary fertility.⁸⁰ 'The saint's blood' taken into the earth and turned it red. The earth representing his blood then became a source of healing and fertility.⁸¹

The dominant caste groups of the region namely Kallar, and Udayar collectively known as Marava caste and their diasporic population distributed in the adjacent districts of Thanjavur, Pudukottai, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli constitute the principal cultic constituency of Britto and his shrine. A notable feature of the Britto cult is that it is centered on caste identities rather than religious affiliation. Thus, regardless of their individual religious affiliation, all members of these caste groups Catholics and Hindus alike regard him as their favorite clan/family deity (Kula Teyvam). Special marks of honor and affection are accorded to the saint during the festival season. Members of these communities who have moved to urban centers return to the shrine during the festival season to perform passage rites and a wide

⁷⁹ Interview with Mr. Sebastiar, villager, Kalaikulam, Ramanathapuram, 20.3.2011.

⁸⁰ Interview with Miss. Savariammal, villager, Ramanathapuram, 20.3.2015.

⁸¹ Interview with Mr. Mari Muthu, Typist in Madurai High Court, Ramanathapuram, 23.3.2015.

array of vow rituals. So extensive is Britto's patronage among the Marava caste groups that he is affectionately called the 'Marava Saint'.⁸²

Occupationally, Pallars are farmers and unskilled laborers, where as the Vellalas, have had more formal education than the Pallars. The Vellala Catholics were brought by European missionaries from distant Vellala Villages to help with catechetical instruction. Though Udayar and Kallar Catholics do not reside in Oriyur, there is a heavy concentration of them in the neighboring villages. As for caste status, Pallars, Udayars and Kallars are considered lower than Vellalas.⁸³

The extraordinary sacral powers of St John de Britto and his martyrdom site have transformed the remote village of Oriyur into a famed regional pilgrimage centre. Tens of thousands of pilgrims and devotees of diverse religious affiliations from all over Tamil Nadu go on annual pilgrimage to this sacred site where animal sacrifice' is a regular feature. On any Wednesday a group of pilgrims offer animal sacrifices at the shrine. However, large-scale goat or chicken sacrifices occur during the three annual shrine festivals: feast of the martyrdom of St Britto (4th February) the anniversary of the canonization of Britto (20th June), and the feast of the Nativity of Mary (8th September). Church authorities estimate that over 50,000 pilgrims visit the shrine during this festival, when the volume of goat sacrifices reaches its peak. During the September festival in 2007 nearly 600 goats were slaughtered at the shrine.⁸⁴

Pilgrims adopt one of the three modes of travel to the centre: walking, bullock cart, and bus. These three modes of travel in turn suggest the three types of Oriyur pilgrims: ascetic, traditional, and modern pilgrims. The particular mode of travel chosen by a group of pilgrims not only serves as a vehicle for affirming their social status, religious fervor, and caste

⁸² J. Raj Selva, *Popular Christianity in India Rating between the Lines*, New York, 2002 Pp. 85-86.

⁸³ Interview with S. Arulananthar, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, 20.3.2011.

⁸⁴ Interview with A. Mary, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, 22.3.2011.

identities but profoundly affects, if not defines their ritual performance. These groups often have a communal or collective religious intent.

Communal meal

Communal meal is prepared with the sacrificial meat. Before partaking in the meal family members take a ritual bath, circumambulate the shrine with coconut saplings in their hands and approach the martyr's altar to offer candles and other token offerings either as petitionary prayer for specific favors sought or as thanksgiving for favors received. After the distribution of the sacred meal to the poor, family members and relatives partake of the communal meal, which has dual significance. Religiously, it expresses the pilgrims' desire for communion and fellowship with the saint. Socially it helps strengthen family ties and the kinship bond.⁸⁵

Hair-shaving rites

Hair-shaving is the simplest and most popular devotional activity at Oriyur. Though hair-shaving may be done at the shrine throughout the year, the festival season is considered especially auspicious.⁸⁶ Oriyur pilgrims may perform this rite for any one or more of the following five different reasons thus the hair functions as a multivalent symbol: 1) The rite may be performed as a petitionary or promissory rite in which the devotee offers his/her as a token offering for favors sought. In this case, the hair serves as a form of "down payment" to the saint. 2) As thanks giving or fulfillment rite for favors already received. Hair can serve as the full payment of debt. 3) As a dedication rite the newborn child's first crop of hair is offered to Britto as a token of loyalty and devotion to the martyr as well as insurance of his protection and assistance for the child. Hence the hair takes the form of an insurance premium. 4) As pilgrimage devotion through which pilgrims affirm their faith in and loyalty to the patron saint, a shaved head serves a devotional emblem to the pilgrims and their neighbors. 5) Even if they

⁸⁵ Interview with *P. Antony*, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, 26.3.2011.

⁸⁶ Interview with *P. Devaraj*, Business, Devakottai, 26.5.2011.

do not pray for any specific favors. Some devotees have their head shaved just because it is a family tradition. In the two last instances, hair function as an annual tax or tribute owed to the patron saint for his continued protection for the devotee and his/her extended family.⁸⁷

During the September festival, a continuous stream of devotees flows to the church-sponsored tonsure houses for the hair-shaving ceremony, where several professional barbers—many of them Hindu—are pressed into service. On the last day of the festival, an average of 600-700 devotees have their heads shaved.⁸⁸ The rite itself is simple and straightforward, devoid of any religious or liturgical components. Conspicuous by his absence is the shrine priest who has no part or function in this rite. However, according to an elderly catechist of the shrine, in the past the priest used to cut off a few plaits of hair prior to the actual hair-shaving. Today the shrine priests have no such symbolic roles. In fact, many shrine priests deliberately distance themselves from these popular practices, even though the vast majority of devotees who take tonsure at Oriyur are Catholics. Besides Catholics, many Hindu pilgrims also observe this rite. Following the hair-removal, pilgrims bathe, apply sandal paste on their head, circumambulate the shrine, and offer prayers, candles, flowers, fruits, grains and other offerings at the altar of Britto. Depending on the context, the promissory note (Muri), which contains the terms and conditions of the pilgrim's promise, is submitted along with other votive offerings when the contract between Britto and the pilgrim is either initiated or fulfilled. If the contract has not been fulfilled, either by the saint or the devotee, then the muri is burned privately or torn to pieces, indicating that the transaction has been nullified.⁸⁹

The following testimonials by two Catholic devotees capture the essential spirit of the rite. With a coconut sapling in hand and sandal paste generously dabbed on her newly shaved head, Flora Rani of Murugatharampatti said to me. "I have been married for several years but did not have a male child. Last year I submitted a Promissory Note to Britto in which I

⁸⁷ Interview with Miss. Malar, Lotus Matric School, Devakottai, 26.5.2011.

⁸⁸ Interview with Miss. Priya, Housing Board Matric School, Ramanathapuram, 26.5.2011.

⁸⁹ Interview with S. Arulraj, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, 29.3.2011.

promised I would shave my hair and carry a coconut sapling around the shrine if he would give me a male child. Through Britto's blessing, this year I gave birth to a son. "Pointing to the child in her arms, she continued." This child is Britto's gift to my family. As promised. I shaved off my hair and carried coconut sapling as thanks giving for his favor.⁹⁰

A Muthu of Ramanathapuram, who is a regular pilgrim to Oriyur, stated: "I got married in 2006 and had one daughter. But we did not have a male child. My neighbors suggested that I go on a pilgrimage to Oriyur and offer a vow to Britto. So I came to Oriyur on pilgrimage in 2011 wrote a muri, prayed for a male child and promised Britto that, if my prayer would be answered, our entire family would shave our heads and sacrifice a he-goat to Britto. The saint gave us a male child the following year. We fulfilled our promise and offered a he-goat during the festival season and shaved our heads. Presently I have acute pain in my right hand and I have come to pray for healing. I just wrote a muri for seven rupees and will carry a coconut sapling around the shrine. I have full confidence and faith that my hand will get better through Britto's blessing."

Though, formerly the coconut sapling rite was observed only when praying for children, today the coconut sapling functions as a generic symbol for various fertility and healing needs. A variation of the coconut sapling rite is the "cradle ceremony". Pilgrim families who have received a child through Britto's favor carry the child in a make shift cradle made of cloth and sugarcane stalks and circumambulate the shrine three times after which candles, money, fruits, flowers and other cereal items are presented as thanksgiving offerings. Whereas the coconut sapling rite may be performed either as a promissory or thanks giving rite, the cradle ceremony is exclusively a thanksgiving rite.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Interview with S. Flora Rani, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, 2.4.2011.

⁹¹ Interview with A. Mary, villager, Oriyur, Ramanathapuram, dated 6.4.2012.

The Cattle procession rite

On the last day of the September festival, the men wash their cattle in a nearby tank and decorate them with ornaments, garlands, and vermilion powder, after which the entire extended family, including children, women, and cattle, assemble in front of Britto's martyrdom shrine to offer homage and thanks for favors received and/or to solicit his continued protection for themselves, their land, and cattle. The shrine priest then prays over and blesses the congregation with holy water, again reluctantly with coconut saplings in their hands, family members lead the cattle in a colorful procession around the shrine three times and place the coconut saplings around the shrine three times and place the coconut saplings inside the shrine as votive offerings. According to a conservative estimate over 100 such processions take place during the September festival of particular relevance for us in this essay is the make up and caste identities of devotees who observe this rite and the social themes embedded in it. Observed by both Hindu and Catholic devotees, participation in the cattle procession is based on family, village and caste identities. Only members of a particular family, village, or caste are allowed to process together. Although there is no explicit prohibitive code, there is an understanding among pilgrims that outsiders do not join the procession. Furthermore, while other shrine rituals are performed by devotees of diverse socioeconomic status, the cattle procession is specific to devotees from the farming community. Since their livelihood and well-being understandably depend on the health and fertility of their cattle. The general congregation of pilgrims witnesses this colorful ceremony with mixed feelings of piety and curiosity. Thus in addition to its religious value, the cattle procession serves an important social function in that it provides a sacred context and occasion for the pilgrims to display, affirm and strengthen their caste identities, family ties and social status.⁹²

⁹² A.Anbu Rose, *Oriyur Journal of Samman Phathai*, Oriyur, 2006, p.9.

Conclusion

Recent cross cultural studies on pilgrimage have shown that “pilgrimage is above all an arena for competing religious and secular discourses for both the official co-operation and the non-official recovery of religious meanings for conflict between orthodoxies, sects and confessional groups for drivers towards consensus and communities and for counter movements towards separateness and division”. This case study lends support to this thesis. At the shrine of John de Britto the identity and powers of the saint and his shrine are construed differently by different constituencies. For example, the identity and status assigned to the saint by the Church hierarchy significantly differ from those invested by the Catholic laity. This clash of conflicting perceptions between the hierarchy and the laity played out in the pilgrims is further compounded by the saint’s multi religious clientele and their differing perceptions of the saint and his shrine, whereby Hindu and Catholic devotees invest in the saint their respective perceptions, meanings and ideas, some of which are drawn from their shared cultural data band, while others are drawn from their own religious tradition.

In this sense, the Oriyur pilgrimage tradition serves both as a mirror and as a window a three way mirror to insiders and a window to outsiders. To insiders, pilgrimage provides a virtual context in which the liminality of pilgrims (Catholics and Hindus), the saint, and Church leaders gains public ritual expression. To outsiders, it serves as a window to the multiple characters the fluid identities, the complicated relation the complex negotiations and the enduring tensions that define popular Catholicism. To that extent Turner is right in arguing that pilgrimage is a ‘meta social commentary’.