

## **History of Early Christianity in Tamil Nadu:**

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### **Introduction:**

While writing about early Christianity in India, why should Tamil Nadu be mentioned in a special way? A simple answer is that Christianity not only began in Tamil Nadu, but it also continued to exist.

Notable remarks by learned scholars are given here.

India's first Prime Minister, a learned Panditji, in his autobiography has well written that Christianity existed in India, the Southern end of India, ever since the first century:

"Few people realize that Christianity came to India as early as the first century after Christ, long before Europe turned to it, and established a firm hold in South India. Although these Christians have their head in Antioch or somewhere in Syria, their Christianity is practically indigenous and has few outside contacts."

### **Panditji wrote in his Discovery of India:**

"India, it must be remembered, in spite of the dominance of the Hindu faith, took various shapes and forms: Apart from Jainism and Buddhism which have largely faded away from India, it has been observed by Hinduism, that there were Christianity and the Hebrew religion. Both of these had probably reached India during the first century and both had found a place in the country. These were a number of Syrian Christians and Nestorians in South India and they were as much a part of the country as anyone else."

### **V. Nagam Aiya recorded in the 'Travancore State Manual' (1906) the following:**

"There is no doubt as to the tradition that St. Thomas came to Malabar and converted a few families Nambudiris, some of whom were ordained as priests such as those of Shankarapuri and Pakolamattam. For in consonance with this long standing tradition belief in the minds of the people of the apostle's mission and labours among the high-caste Hindus, we have before us today the fact that certain Asyrian Christian women, particularly of a place called Kunnamkolam, were clothed as Nambudiri women do, move about screening themselves with huge umbrellas from the gaze of the profane as those women do, and will not marry, except perhaps in exception cases and that too only recently but from among dignified families of similar aristocratic descent. This is a valuable piece of evidence of conduct of the community corroborating, the early tradition extant on the coast."

Bishop Stephen Neill, a missionary in South India for many years who wrote a valuable history of the church under the title, "The story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan" asked a question: "When did the gospel arrive in India?" He has also given the answer as: "In the far South West of India, isolated between the ocean and the mountains, lives the most ancient of Indian churches, the church of the so-called Thomas Christians.

He further said, "there is no a priori reason for dismissing the claim as mere mythology".

In his book, 'Biography' Bishop Severin, an excellent resource person for church history students, has said:

"It was St. Thomas, one of the chief disciples of Christ, who first brought Christianity to the Malayalam speaking area at a time when the language spoken there was Tamil. Malayalam developed into a separate language only a few centuries later. He came in 52 A.D. in a merchant ship, landed in Kodungallor post, and propagated the Christian religion for the first time in India. Afterwards, at several times numerous Christians from Syria immigrated to Malabar, converted local inhabitants and enlarged the Christian community."

The following words of Gilbert Slater are worth nothing regarding early Christianity in India.

"Christianity is a much larger factor in the South than in the North. By tradition the Indian church was founded by St. Thomas the apostle, and if the tradition is inaccurate, it is not misleading with the respect to the probable date of the first teaching of Christianity in India. The so called "Syrian Christians" have their stronghold in the states of 'Travancore and Cochin, and neighbouring parts of Madras Presidency'.

### **Tami Nadu and Tamil:**

Before Tamil developed into a separate language as Malayalam and the then Tamil Chera country became the state of Kerala, the region of Tamil Nadu had enjoyed a greater portion of India as South India. We are concerned with the early history of Christianity in Tamil Nadu. The classical Tamil Language is considered to be mother of the Dravidian languages, like Malayalam of Kerala Telugu of Andhra Pradesh, Kannada of Karnataka and also Tulu. During the British period, the Madras Presidency covered almost all of South India.

In the closing of B.C. centuries and the early centuries of the Christian era, the Tamil Language had south of India as its geographical region. For a balanced appreciation of the Tamil Language it is worth reading 'The Primary Classical Language of the world' by Prof. G. Devaneyam' 'The Tamils from the earliest times to 600 A.D. by P. T. Srinivas Iyengar; 'The Dravidian Element Indian Culture" by Gilbert Slater. Eighteen Hundred years ago History of the Tamil by V. Kanakasabhai.

Sanskrit language after establishing its influence in the North made inroads into the South; but the language and its religious culture did not allow an easy access since the Tamil languages, people and culture were more civilised and disciplined. In other words, the Dravidian South had tremendous influence on the encroaching Aryan culture.

### **Dravidian or Christian influenced civilization:**

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, India's greatest Philosopher has said the following in his work, 'Hindu View of Life'.

"The Vedic culture which resembles that of the Homeric Greeks or the Celtic Irish at the beginning of the Christian Era or that of the Pre-Christian Teutons and Slaves become transformed in the epics into the Hindu culture through the influence of Dravidians. The Aryan ideas of worship during the

earliest period was to call on the Father sky or some other shining one to look from on the high on the sacrifices and receive from the offering of fat of flesh, cakes and drink. But soon Pooja or worship which was a striking feature of the Dravidian faith was accepted by the Aryans. The ideas of vegetarianism and non-violence (ahimsa) also developed ... contact with the highly civilized Dravidians led to the transformation of vedism into theistic religion."

**Gillert Slater has said after a careful research** "there was in India at the time of the Aryan invasion, a Dravidian civilization of a more elaborate and developed character than the civilization if civilization it can be called of the Aryan".

### **Historical Back ground of Tamil Nadu:**

The historical religious background of Tamil Nadu needs to be understood for an unbiased appreciation of the Christian gospel as it was proclaimed by St. Thomas, the apostle in the latter part of the first century A.D. or earlier by the Pentecostal day believers (Acts.2 : 1-47; 8:4).

As observed by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Tamil Nadu had a highly developed civilization of the Dravidians. Before the coming of Christianity in the first century A.D., Jainism and Buddhism entered the arena and both came from the north at which time Aryanism was taking root in the north. Both did not profess God and on the other hand they did not accept ritualism, sacrifices and the social disparity of the invading Aryanism.

Both Jainism and Buddhism produced enormous didactic literature in their respective fields, on the line of their teachings and philosophies. During the advent of the Christian gospel there were in the Tamil country Jainism, Buddhism and the beginning of Aryan contact beside the Sangam literature and culture.

### **World Empires and Tamil Nadu The King of God:**

It is wrongly thought that India was not known well by the western countries and hence they questioned the fact of St. Thomas coming to India. But India had well maintained commercial and cultural relations with the rest of world.

There were several ancient Tamil and Malayalam words found in the bible. For example, In the Hebrew Bible the word, 'Tuki' was used for peacocks. It is 'Toki' in Tamil and Malayalam. Cinamon and Cassia were much in use among the Hebrews. These were produced in Madras and Ceylon. (See Exodus 36:1 - 24). Logs of Indian teak were found in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar.

The spices, precious gems, ivory, gold and other rare materials of India attracted merchants from all parts of the world even before the dawn of history. In the Old Testament of the bible we read this in II Kings 28.

In the Book Daniel Chapter two, the prophet, while interpreting the dream of Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonian empire spoke about the following empires:

1. The Babylonian Empire, 606 – 539 B.C.
2. The Med Persian Empire, which conquered Babylon 539 – 331 B.C.
3. Greece of Macedonia under Alexander who conquered the Medopersian in 334. (331 – 146 B.C.).

4. The Roman Empire which conquered the Greeks after the fall of the Greek Supremacy 146 B.C. 476 A.D.
5. The Kingdom of God i.e. eternal A.D. 34 – 2; (Acts 2:1 - 47) not of this world.

This Kingdom of God, which is the Church of God, established in Jerusalem in 34 A.D. is the eternal kingdom which is not of this world. During the Roman rule, the gospel was preached throughout the Roman Empire and Paul the apostle to the gentiles did his best in Rome itself (Acts. 28). The great commission of Christ (Math 28: 20) started finding its fulfilment, beginning from Jerusalem and to the very end of the earth (Acts. 1:8).

The Tamilian antiquity with the world empires and the western world is something that should be understood, in its proper sense and in this connection Dr. G.M. Moraes says: "it is an established fact that even before the dawn of history there were considerable intercourse between the Indian sub-continent and the western world."

### **Babylonian Empire:**

We have earlier mentioned about the Babylonian Empire that has much reference to the biblical accounts. "There are references to the colonization of the Jews in Cranganore in the sixth century B.C. as a consequence of the mass exodus of the Jews who were freed from the Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar (1604-562 B.C.). Here we must note that Cranganore was the place that St. Thomas landed in A.D. 52. There is reference in the Jataka, (the birth stories of Buddha) to Indian merchants who were called the 'panis', who traded with Babylon, by which name the summer came to be known.

Regarding the decoration materials for Solomon's temple there is a mention that they were brought through Ophir of Bombay.

### **Medo – Persian Empire:**

India was brought into political relationship with the west when the Achaemenid, the Persian dynasty came to power, in the Medo – Persian context. Cyrus the great pushed his eastern conquests as far as the slopes of the Hindukush on the north west frontier of India, between 550 and 538 B.C. Darius consolidated these conquests and extended the boundaries, of the empire further to the east between 577 B.C. and 509 B. C. Darius has included India in his reign along with Gandhara and Sattgydia among the provinces reduced by his army and tributary to him. There was constant intercourse between India and the rest of the Persian empire that stretched from the Punjab to the shores of the Mediterranean.

Xerxes (486 – 465 B.C.) employed Indian troops when he invaded Greece in 480 B.C. The Greek officials and mercenaries served in various parts of the Persian empire, including the Indian province, which inclined South India as well.

### **Greek Empire:**

When Alexander the great, overrunning Iran, marched into Punjab to reduce this easternmost province of the Persian empire, India was brought into direct contact with Europe.

The Contact between the Greeks and Tamilnadu since the Sangam period is well known. In the north, during the Gupta Empire the political relations between the Greeks after Alexander's death in 323 B.C. through Nicator his greatest general stands as a source for the spread of the Hellenistic culture in Asia centering around Syria. The episode of Megasthenes centered around Pataliputhra cannot be ignored.

Arnold Toynbee, the eminent historian's testimony that the basic Greek in which the New Testament was written in the first century of the Christian era was spoken and understood from Travancore to the hinterland of Marsailles is worth nothing.

### **The Indo-Parthian:**

The Greeks were gradually supplanted by the Parthians as rulers both in Afghanistan and in the Punjab. The expansion of the Parthian Power into India could have possibly taken place only in the reign of Mithradates II (124-88 B.C.). The kingdom of Kabul was said to have passed from the Greeks to the Parthians.

Rome, during this period comes to the political theatre of the empire forming a trend. Qdore II had a victorious time with the advancing Romans. He after his scores with the Romaus, turned his attention to the Indo-Parthian kingdom whose representatives had been flaunting the Asacid title: "King of Kings". Azes occupied the throne in 30 B. c. and he seems to have ruled for a long time in the annals of Indo-Parthian history. It was during his reign, the remmants of the Greek Kingdom of Kabul and East Punjab was annexed to the Indo Parth. Azes was succeeded by Gondophemes. Dr. George Mark Moraes after a careful investigation of the historical back round of St. Thomas landing in India has said aptly.

"Thus, the evidence we have gathered from the sources historical, suemismatic, and inscriotional, goes to show beyond any shadow of doubt that Gondophernes reigned in the first half of the first century A.D. This is a fact of supreme importance for the history of Christianity in India, because of the division of the world among the disciples of our Lord, for the purpose of the propagation of the Gospel, to the Kingdom of Gondophrnes fell to the lot of St. Thomas."

The missionary enterprise of St. Thomas with Gondophernes as portrayed in the apocryphal work of the third century A.D. 'Acts of Thomas' cannot be reasonably rejected. After his work with Gondophernes St. Thomas is traced back to Malabar or Tami Nadu.

### **The Roman Empire:**

The last, and the most important world empire that has to do with out search is the Holy Roman Empire. This empire had connections beginning from the birth of Christ Jesus until his death on the cross. His birth was recorded through the Roman census and his death was proclaimed in the Romish controlled Governor Pilate's open court trial almost around 34 years of Jesus' life and redemptive ministry.

In the first half of the first century, the discovery of the monsoon winds had further increased the trade between the west and he parts of South India. Many recent discoveries have proved beyond

doubt that Roman trade centers existed along the coasts of South India. Some of the coins found in 1946 in Eyyal, a few miles north east of Cranganore, were those of Nero Claudius, Jiheritus, Augustus and Mark Antony.

August Ceaser (B.C. 31 to A.D. 14), the unchallenged ruler of Rome strengthened the empire. IT was during his time that the Roman world census was taken, and the birth of Christ in Bethlehem was recorded. (LK.2:1).

After him, Tiberius, the Roman Emperor (A.D. 14-37) and son-in-law and step son of Augustus reigned.

His region was marked by many treason trials and executions, Christ Jesus was crucified during his treason and trial rule. The Kingdom of God was established in Jerusalem in 34 A.D. Nero the cruel Roman Emperor ruled (A.D. 37 - 68). He was infamous for his cruelty and his reign witnessed a fire that destroyed half of Rome and he put the blame on Christians to persecute them.

Claudius (A.D. 274 - 337), the Roman emperor took a different measure to deal with Christians. Constantine the great Roman Emperor (A.D. 274 - 337), became a Christian and Christianity became a state religion but that status did not last long. He moved his capital from Rome to Byzantium which was renamed as Constantinople. This resulted in two capitals. In 395, the empire was divided between the two sons of the emperor Theodosius and two emperors ruled for a time in old (Rome and New Rome (Constantinople). In 476, the last Roman Emperor in the west was deposed. This had to do with the old Rome. Thea east Roman emperors retained their court at Constantinople. The government of the empire from Constantinople kept the centre of gravity in church matters that swung to the east; the min stream of Christin history then continued eastern rather than western.

We are concerned with the eastern side of the Christendom. Between 451 and 590 Christianity was the official religion of the emperors. The eastern churches held the Balkam, Asia Minor, Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia. But western Christianity was mainly a mediteranian religion.

We confine the spread of early Christianity in India and in Tamil Nadu particularly to the sixth century A.D. According to Thurston's catalogue, the gold coins found at Pudukkottai (probably about 1898) has the following date:

During the reign of	Augustus	51 Coins
During the reign of	Tiberius	193 Coins
During the reign of	Gaius	5 Coins
During the reign of	Claudius	126 Coins
During the reign of	Nero	123 Coins
During the reign of	Vespasian	3 Coins
During the reign of	<b><u>Total Nos.</u></b>	<b><u>501 Coins</u></b>

The export of Roman coins commenced on a large scale either in the reign of Augustus of Tiberius. The gold and silver coins poured into the chief marts f the west coast of India during Nero's time.

These coins in the soil of Tamilnadu are evidences to prove that the gospel was freely preached in the country through commerce and other means by interested persons of the first century.

Now the question arises as to when and by whom did the gospel come to India and Tamil Nadu. Ka. Naa. Su. After an appreciable analysis of the data has obtained and given the following information for the question:

“A.D. 49 or thereabouts was the date of the arrival of St. Thomas in North India. A.D. 52 – arrival of St. Thomas in Malabar. A.D. 62 the martyrdom of St. Bartholomew. A.D. 72 the martyrdom of St. Thomas in Mylapore.”

It seems, from the information that we have seen already, the Christian gospel was brought to India and Tamil Nadu much earlier than the dates mentioned above.

Among the nations that represented the Pentecostal festival in Jerusalem during the establishment of God's Kingdom, the Church in A.D. 33, Parthians find the first place. (Acts. 2: 1-47). At that time India was a part of the Parthian Kingdom known as Indo Parthian. Those Parthian Jews (from India) were well to do to travel up to Jerusalem for the festival. Some of them should have been among the 3000 that formed the first church. And hence, it can easily say that they brought the gospel first to India.

Because of the persecution that was triggered by Paul's persecution, the disciples were scattered abroad (Acts. 8:4). Those who were thus scattered, shared the gospel wherever they went. These are not mere conjectures but observed through the historical that has been presented.

### **St. Thomas 'Foot Prints:**

In South India, the Jews had seven or eight important settlements. History tells us that there were Jewish colonies in Carmagnore. Parur, Palayur, Quilon, Muttom, Chenot and other places. Is it a strange coincidence that the seven churches founded by St. Thomas in South India are situated in or near these Jewish colonies?

The Pentecostal day's miraculous apostolic gifts of St. Thomas undoubtedly helped him both to present the gospel and establish churches. Therefore, it was not difficult for him to fulfil the great commission in India and specially in Tamil Nadu.

The first six centuries of Christianity in Tamil Nadu seem to be the golden age of Christianity. Dr. John Samuel observes that the 1500 years of A.D. is the golden period of Christianity in India and that it could be restructured if we are prepared to work hard in this direction.

To put it in a nutshell, the changes that had taken place in the early Christian era on religions: Buddhism and the birth of the Bakthi movement specially in the name of the Saiva and Vaishnava religion are ample evidence for early Christian influence in Tamil Nadu. These matters need more investigation and the honest restructuring of the Tamil religion and culture for a proper appreciation of reality and national integration, respecting one another and giving credit to the reading of the Truth.

It seems very obvious that the gospel proclaimed in the first century and the following centuries till the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. transformed the then existing religions into a highly civilized Tamil religion and culture. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan termed it as Dravidian civilization which according to him transformed the Aryan religion and culture.

### **Painful Neglect: But Survived:**

Writers who wrote the history of Tamil religion and culture have as a matter of fact totally neglected this reality and thus the influence of the Christian gospel was packed in darkness. But as Benjamin Walker has said truly:

“.....the cumulative proof as it has been adduced by the experts in their respective field, leaves little room for doubt that Christian influence on Hinduism during the early and medieval period was both deep and widespread. The parallel between certain aspects of the two religions, so close and exact at times, cannot be dismissed as coincidence. Christian influence during the latter medieval period is considerably observed for a number of reasons, but the leaven that had been bountifully added by Christian activity in the early period continued to lighten the heavy dough of Hindu thought for centuries after Christian theology coloured the teachings of Hindu bhagats ..... And generally shaped the work of South Indian poets and mystics as seen in the masterpiece of Tiruvalluvar”.

The school of 18 Tamil Siddhars is another example for the Christian influence of early period.

The Institute of Asian studies under the direction of Dr. John Samuel had published several volumes to highlight the history of the Tamils. Books under the title. “The count down from Solomon” “The Tamils down the ages” in 4 volumes in about 2000 pages by way of comparative literature authored by Prof. Epsiba Jesudasan is a matchless contribution.

### **Conclusion:**

The early Christianity in Tamil Nadu took different shapes and thereby left its stamp in them. However, as Siddhar Agasthyar had stated Tamil Christian literature were destroyed by nature's calamities. Now the time has come for discovery of the early Christianity in Tamil Nadu.

### **End Notes:**

1. Subramaniam Ka. Naa. : The Catholic Community in India, p.l.,
2. Ibid., P.1.
3. Ibid., P.3.
4. Neill, Stephen: The story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan, P. 16.
5. Ibid., P. 16.
6. Subramaniam Ka. Naa, : The Catholic Community in India, P.2.
7. Gillert Slater, The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture, P. 170.
8. Gnanaskhamani, V.: Agasthyar Wisdom Commentary, P.25.
9. Gillert Slater, The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture, P. 80.
10. The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India, PP. 26-27.
11. Moraes. G.M.: A History of Christianity in India, PP. 13, 14.
12. The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India, PP. 27.
13. M.M. Moraes. : A History of Christianity in India, PP. 14.
14. Ibid., P.14.
15. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam, : The Catholic Community in India, P.4.
16. G.M. Moraes. A History of Christianity in India, PP. 20-22.



17. Ibid., P. 24.
18. St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India, PP. 3.
19. M. Deanesly, A. History of the Medieval Church. P. 2.
20. V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, The Origin and Spread of the Tamil, P.93.
21. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam, : The Catholic Community in India, P. 8.
22. Encyclopaedia of St. Thomas Christian India, PP. 27.
23. Souvenir: First International Conference on the History of Early Christianity in India, P.2.
24. Benjamin Walker: Hindu World PP. 240 – 241.

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