



Review Paper

Fr. Joseph Taffrael and North Malabar; Religious and social changes among the depressed classes

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Abstract

Christian missionaries are apostates who preach the gospels of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth and bear witness to the words of the Bible. Missionary life is full of many sacrifices, insecurities, worries, and anxieties. Despite not having a proper source of income, there were many Jesuit missionaries who helped many lives in North Malabar; they were inundated by poverty and disease alike. These missionaries were able to give new life and new hope to the downtrodden that were oppressed by the quagmire of the caste system. Even in the midst of their hardship life the missionaries who touched the marginalized people with medicine, food and clothing have not been adequately considered in history. It is clear that Christian missionaries played a selfless role in the upliftment of the lower castes in Malabar. However, the contributions of the Basel missionaries were recorded in history, and the contributions of the Jesuit missionaries went unrecognized. In many places and also in literary records, missionary work is seen as mere conversion. There is no doubt that it is in the interest and agenda of the elite to exclude the contributions of Christian missionaries from the mainstream study of history to prevent the continued growth of missionary interventions and to re-create slavery by avoiding missionary struggles for human rights. As a result, the liberation value and anti-caste elements of missionary work are cleverly ignored. Therefore, this paper examines the contributions of Jesuit missionary Fr. Joseph Taffrael, who established altruistic love and service of conscience and dedicated his life to the social renewal of North Malabar. This paper exhibits how did Fr. Taffrael worked to enable them to socialize and build a spirit of harmony among the Pulaya community in North Malabar? With the support of books, memoirs of missionaries and church records the article observes that Fr. Taffrael played a pivotal role in making social consciousness among the lower class people of North Malabar and brought structural changes in their life.

Keywords: Caste system, colonial medicine, proselytisation, education.

Introduction

There are two perspectives among scholars on the origin of Christianity in India. According to one source, the Christian Church in India was the contribution of St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. Another read is that the advent of Christianity in India was the exertion of Christian merchants and missionaries from the Eastern Syrian and Persian Churches. However, it is extensively believed that India is the realm of St. Thomas. According to Cardinal Tisserant, Christianity has been widespread in southern India since ancient time¹. There is no doubt that the history of Christianity in India is as old as the history of Christianity itself. Many missionary groups representing various Christian denominations have come to India over the centuries.

From the sixteenth century onwards, Jesuit missionaries sought to find solutions for the social problems of the lower class people of Malabar along with their religious propaganda. Meanwhile, Protestant missionaries, including the Basel

Mission, have been arriving in the area since the 18th century. With the arrival of the Portuguese, the work of Christian missionaries spread rapidly in India. Prior to the British conquest of Malabar, only Catholic missionaries were involved in conversion and social work among the lower castes of Malabar. Of them the predecessors were Jesuit missionaries who acted in accordance with the motto "To the Greater Glory of God"². Although Father Peter Caironi SJ, the founder of the Chirakkal Mission, started his mission in North Malabar, it was Father Taffrael of Italian descent who expanded these missionary works to various parts of Malabar. In many places and histories, missionary work is seen as mere conversion. As a result, the liberation value and anti-caste elements of missionary work are cleverly ignored.

There is no doubt that it is in the interest and agenda of the elite to exclude the contributions of Christian missionaries from the study of mainstream history, to prevent the continued growth of missionary interventions, and to re-create slavery by avoiding missionary struggles for human rights.

Review of Literature

In the book *Jottings of a Poor Missionary*, Fr. Joseph Taffrael revealed his missionary life by creating an exemplary example of human love and service. This book, which is like an autobiography, gives a lot of information about Fr. Taffrael missionary life in Malabar. The contributions made by Jesuit missionaries to alleviate the poverty of the starving and to germinate new hope are immeasurable. Robert Eric Frykenberg gives us a detailed account of Christian missionaries in India. David Hardiman provides a critical analysis of how missionaries approached the lower class people with medicine and religion. *Christian Missions and Conversion: An Historical, Sociological and Anthropological Study of the Depressed Castes of India, 1850-1950* article explains the emergence of a new social consciousness among the lower castes after Christian conversion. The author says that the growth of education and professional mobility provided by Christian missionaries began to work in a progressive direction on some of the basic concepts of equality and high social mobility in society. Why missionaries educated the underprivileged has always been a relevant question? Christian missionaries' contribution for the education of depressed classes' article discusses the idea that it was intended to deepen the Bible, acknowledge the services of missionaries, and facilitate conversion.

Christian missionaries

Christian missionaries are those who want to serve in various fields. While some were barred from leadership positions, a group of missionaries worked to find a generation that was willing to work for the growth of the church. Others were commissioned to lead others to faith in God through religious doctrine and works. Among them were missionaries who dedicated their lives to missionary ideas through prayer and writing. In the early days of missionary activity, missionaries had no definite source of income. Such was the first experience of the missionaries, from Peter Caironi, the founder of the Chirakkal Mission, to Father Joseph Taffrael³. Fr. Joseph Taffrael was born on March 15, 1905, in the historic village of Fontanelli, far from Venice, Italy, as twelfth son of a farmer, lived 58 years in India, spent 44 years in Kerala, and built 43 mission centers. When World War I broke out, Father Taffrael's family left Fontanelli and moved to Oderzo. Later, as the war surged, Joseph Taffrael, who had visited the army camp several times to offer the Eucharist and became acquainted with the clergy, was given the opportunity. In April 1921, at the instigation of his sister Giovanna, he began his monastic life. He joined the Jesuit congregation on 14th August 1925. Arriving in Bombay in September 1930, he was first employed as a teacher in Mangalore and later in Kozhikode. In the early days of his missionary life he underwent many trials. During World War II, the Italians were taken hostage by the British governor. Among them were several missionaries, including Father Taffrael. He was released in 1944³. After 44 years of missionary work in

Kerala, Fr. Taffrael served as a missionary in 43 mission centers.

He is popularly known as a home giver who has donated over a thousand houses and over 2000 acres of agricultural land to the downtrodden people of North Malabar. Kerala Finance Minister KG Adiyodi while attending the Jubilee celebrations of Fr. Taffrael in Pilathara 1986 where he spoke about Fr. Taffrael as he become a legend who has rendered commendable service in the field of social service³. Fr Taffrael worked hard to establish a new social order for the upliftment of the socially and economically backward sections, especially the Pulaya (Gandhiji addressed them as Harijan). He lived an exemplary life for all to live firmly in the faith and grow in the spirit of God through prayer. When a missionary visits the villages to preach the gospel, people are stunned to see him. They accept him as a 'white angel'. This may be because of the missionaries' dress, colour, language, and way of life. It was a curious sight for many to see Joseph Taffrael walking with a medicine box accompanied by children. Children were often the guide on the journey. There have often been insults and stoning on such travels. It is very clear from his *Jottings of a Poor Missionary* how he faced and survived the complexities of missionary life in North Malabar.

Conversion

The word conversion has been used in Christian history in many ways. However, in a broader view conversion is defined in two main ways. Firstly, non-Christians are converting to the Christian faith. Secondly, the conversion from the Catholic faith to the Protestant faith or vice versa⁴. Fr. Taffrael's missionary work was carried out among the Pulaya people of Malabar who were marginalized in the name of caste. Castes at the top of the range were considered pure while those at the bottom were considered polluted⁵. The ancient Hindu text *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu) is seen as the source of caste inequality in India. The caste system gives a certain rank to individuals. These strict caste groups are believed to have originated from the Hindu god Brahma. The Brahmins are said to have originated from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his hands, and the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from their feet⁶. The castes above the limit were considered clean while those below were considered unclean. *Manusmriti* justifies the caste system on the basis of social class⁶. Also, as seen in the following verses, the laws against the lower castes are recorded in the book: the lower castes who try to sit in the same seat as the upper castes will be stamped. The caste system treated the lower castes cruelly; at the same time the missionaries ate together with those who were excluded from society. Communication between them was brought closer through the activity of sharing a common food. While living with people who were divided by caste system, Fr. Taffrael also became one of them. There were very few of them who could eat every day. As a rule, they start working in the morning without taking anything. In the evenings, when they get a meager wage, they go to the shop and

buy a handful of rice, some chillies and some salt to prepare a sumptuous meal. In a letter to the Jesuit authorities, Taffarel describes the difficulties of missionary life. Quoted "Now when I come across daily such starving people and suffering children my heart aches. How can I treat myself well, let alone comfortably? It was very hard in the beginning to get used to it, but what can one not get used to? I was not used to doing without coffee at all, Now I am, I was not used to eating rice with water, curry and nothing else; now I am. I was not used to living without bread, vegetables, fruits, meat, soup, milk, eggs, and what not; now I am. I was not used to sleeping without mattress, and bed sheets on the floor or a hard plank; now I am"⁷. It is widely believed that eating food prepared by Dalits or Pulaya/lower class and eating with them has polluted the dominant castes⁸. It was not only the body and presence of the Dalit that was considered polluted; even the food cooked by Dalits was denigrated as unclean and dirty. The touch of the missionaries had a profound effect on the lives of the Dalits and the notoriety of not being able to touch their bodies was shattered. Missionaries ate with the converted Christians in their thatched huts⁵. As Shuman observed, "the act of eating and sharing food together is called commensality, an activity that not only protects the physical body, but also creates and strengthens social bonds"⁹. The dynamic power of the word - the written word (the Bible) and the spoken word (from the missionaries) - worked strongly in the hearts of the lower classes; in the words of Sanal Mohan, it acted as knowledge of opposition. Such paradoxical knowledge became enlightenment for the Dalits or Pulaya / Harijans to nurture them and they developed new behaviours, new habits, moral consciousness and a new understanding of them¹⁰. Missionaries could not tolerate injustice and therefore supported Dalits in their cause. There are incidents in the missionary reports where missionaries challenged the practice of bonded labor which was one of the essential aspects of the structure of caste system. The involvement of missionaries in the lives of Dalits and their support for Dalits in matters of justice led the dominant castes to look at them with contempt. Mission records and oral accounts demonstrate incidents of growing animosity of the dominant castes towards missionaries⁵. We were cursed that was the thought of lower classes. The lower castes only had the knowledge that they were born from the feet of Brahma, should be slaves to the upper castes. You are dear to God. The words of the missionaries that they are children of God nurtured in them a revolutionary thought. However, these people converted to Christianity for various reasons. The conversions that took place in India were fraught with many temptations. This is said to be a reason to convert to Christianity to escape the harsh caste system. Many became Christians for material gain (financial aid).

Father Peter Caironi S.J, the founder of Chirakkal Mission, started the proselytisation activities in North Malabar. In the old Chirakkal taluk of Kannur district, 12 Dalits in Dalil area were baptized on October 28, 1937, and started a new faith revolution. Following him, many Jesuit missionaries made

unparalleled work in the field of conversion. The Chirakkal Mission and the Mattul Mission have always been Jesuit conversion missions. The chirakkal Mission was started by Fr Caironi. Fr Sequeira who founded the Mattul Mission. The Charge of the Mattul Mission was later entrusted to Fr Taffrael. Fr. Joseph Kottukapalli commented on the Mattul mission, saying, His successors could not take a single step forward from where Fr. Taffrael left off in 1952. The Chirakkal Mission and the Mattul Mission are part of the Indian National Movement and should go down in history. It should be noted that Fr. Joseph Taffrael raised his voice for the Pulaya people of North Malabar the same time as Gandhiji fighting for the rights of the Harijan community and temple entry as part of the national movement. Many became Christians as a result of Fr. Taffrael's efforts. The energy of his actions was the call of God to "go and preach"³. At the initial stage of his missionary works in north Malabar area individual conversion happened. Later Fr. Taffrael encouraged family conversion instead of single conversion, because the person who converted to another religion was excluded from his family and community, which put a lot of stress on him. The number of Christians in Matul was very small. As a result of Taffrael's efforts, it has grown to over a thousand. Similarly, the number of Christians at Thavam in Kannur had increased to 1100. When missionaries were often unable to present the word of Jesus Christ to the non-Christians in its fullest sense, they provided financial assistance and converted them to Christianity. Fr Taffrael often carried out the same conversion program in North Malabar. But this missionary did not have the exact financial resources to carry out conversion mission. Following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Fr. Caironi, Fr. Taffrael also relied on American missionaries. As a result of Fr Taffrael's conversion work, many workers and employers converted to Christianity. For example, P. Thimmayya, a landowner and upper caste man from Coorg. It is undisputed that conversion took place in North Malabar under the leadership of Fr Taffrael. Here, too, there were people who had always opposed conversion. Criticism arose from various quarters that he had provided financial assistance and health care to convert the Pulaya community to Christianity. Mahatma Gandhi said that "it is not appropriate to do good deeds for the people to mislead them with the intention of making them part of Christianity"³. But Fr Taffrael justified his conversion by believing that Christ came into the world with the goal of establishing the kingdom of God on earth, worked among the people, and chose the cross. The biggest problem faced by the converts to Christianity, especially the Dalit Christians, was the neglect and persecution of the upper class Christians. When this experience continued for the Dalit Christians who migrated from Travancore to the Iritty region of Kannur district, in 1960 Taffrael came among them as a savior. Perhaps knowing the warmth of the unconditional love of these Dalit/Pulaya Christians in the Iritty region, he wanted his final resting place to be at Kottakapara in Iritty. The life of Lasser in Matul is another proof that he never backed down from the problems faced by the Pulaya Christians who converted to Christianity. Lasser served in the military during World War II and was

baptized in 1949 by Fr. Joseph Taffrael. Fr Joseph Taffrael paid off all his financially difficult debts. Lasser and his family were subjected to brutal persecution from their neighbors and upper class Hindus. He was publicly insulted and imprisoned on charges of theft. The poor Lasser was granted bail as a result of the persistent efforts of Fr Taffrael and was later acquitted by the court. In his autobiography, he mentions that a girl named Devayani had a similar experience. Devayani later became known as Louis Margaret, a nun in the Ursuline Church. The above evidence shows that he nurtured conversion in a very extensive way.

Medicine

The missionaries correctly understood that preaching the gospel alone could not convert people to Christianity, but when people realized that the missionaries cared so much for them; their hearts would open to the gospel¹¹. Perhaps because the work of Christian missionaries was centered on conversion Michael Jennings commented "Missionary groups used a variety of methods to make disciples. They built schools and hospitals, engaged in public health campaigns, carried out charitable activities for the poor, and donated cheap social welfare programs as their most effective tools. The establishment of hospitals and dispensaries is one of the most effective means of attaining the spirit of many Christian missions"¹². Missionaries often used the medical field to gain the favour of the common people and to maintain good relations with them. Poonam Bala and Biswamoy Pathi argue that Christian missionaries aim to spread Christianity and colonial empowerment in India with the help of modern medicine¹³. Fr Taffrael had precise plans for the smooth growth of the faith community in north Malabar. He offered a modern health treatment called Dechanes. Fr Taffrael's dechanes treatment was instrumental in his early missionary work. The treatment had three distinctive features. It was a very inexpensive, easy-to-manage and effective treatment. Anyone could use and manage this medicine without great technical knowledge. Children often accompanied Fr. Taffrael when he went from house to house to give medicine to patients. This treatment has greatly helped Fr Taffrael to overcome the issues while he faces opposition from the non-Christian community. Not only Hindus but also Muslims were among those who opposed Fr. Taffrael's missionary work. Many who were strongly opposed to the conversion and hostile to the converted Christians later approached Fr. Taffrael for medical help and maintained friendly relations. He sought the help of nuns in the field of health care, as well as in the field of education. The lack of hospitals often distressed the people of North Malabar. The vast majority of the people in the Mattul area were suffering from various ailments. There were even people who lost their sight due to lack of specialist treatment. Fr Taffrael was keen to build schools and hospitals wherever he could as part of the mission. He had constructed a dispensary, gynac ward, outpatient ward and nursing home in Kannapuram under the name of St Martin de Porres. In 1960, he started a school and dispensary in Kottukappara and Vellarivayal in Iritty, which

was populated by Dalit Christians. Although Fr. Taffrael started modern medicine in Malabar as a tool for the spread of Christianity, many people of different castes and religions received his medical help. The people of North Malabar, especially the Pulaya caste, practiced various rituals. These people believed that many diseases were caused by the curse of God. Therefore, Fr. Taffrael sought to cure their illness with his medicine as well as to cure the satanic thoughts that had consumed their minds with the word of Jesus Christ.

Education

The inadequacy of education was reflected in the lives and beliefs of the lower castes in Malabar. The caste system in Kerala for many years gave the elites the courage to control the society or to exploit the lower castes due to the lack of education of the lower castes. The education imparted by Christian missionaries to the lower castes in India has been fiercely debated at the academic level. Missionaries set up mission schools for the children of converts, but soon found that even non-Christian students flocked to these educational institutions. Schools were one of the best ways to prepare hearts for the gospel message. Here, the missionaries not only sowed the seeds for new good human soil, but also through the children, who were often connected with their parents¹⁴. Taffrael made unparalleled educational contributions to the lower castes of Malabar. The Lower Primary School, which operated in Mattul, was upgraded to Upper Primary. The Carpenter's School in Pilathara was established in 1970-71, a testament to Taffrael's emphasis on vocational education as well as basic education. It also aims to provide a livelihood for several unemployed youths. An aided school was started in 1983 at Chemmancheri in Kasaragod district which was educationally backward.

During his 44 years of missionary work he was able to establish 12 schools. Many of them were only for the upliftment of the socially backward. He was able to give days of hope to the dalits who were denied formal education. For the lower castes that were excluded from the caste society that relied on the hierarchy of domination, Fr. Taffrael provided an opportunity to experience an alternative realm of modernity and equality.

Women empowerment

Women's empowerment has always been a topic of discussion. Women's empowerment is the process of transitioning women from a state of oppression to social, political and economic upliftment. There the oppressor and the oppressed are equal¹⁵. One of the key indicators of women empowerment is the decision-making power of women in the home¹⁶. In general, women in India are relatively powerless and often enjoy a lower status than men. But the socio-economic environment of Indian women today was not the same until the middle of the twentieth century. Very few women even had a formal education.

V.S. Azaria confirms, "It is Christians everywhere who have broken the chains that bound women and set them free to know and understand the world"¹⁷. Women's empowerment was one of the problems faced by Fr. Taffrael in his missionary work in North Malabar. Fr Taffrael saw many women leading hellish lives in the midst of missionary work among the Pulaya People. Taffrael realized that the superstitions and superstitious practices that existed among them may be to some extent the cause of their inferno. They were forced to work on meager incomes. Those women who had no consideration or position in society and even in their own family were ignorant of their empowerment. Widows, unmarried and mothers of children deprived of paternity were a contemptible sight before Fr. Taffrael. Widow Remarriage was rare. Many husbands were not faithful to their marriage. In the Mattul area of Kannur district, there were more women than men due to unemployment. There were no industrial enterprises in the Mattul area. The coconut trade and other small trades were monopolised by the Muslim community. So the men of this area went to Coorg (kudak) in search of work. Many people have died from diseases like malaria from perilous workplaces in Coorg. The workers who died in this way did not get any financial assistance from the employer or the government. Many families orphaned by the death of the head of the family had approached Fr. Taffrael for financial assistance. There were also women who led immoral lives to provide an early meal for their children. Taffrael began to work to provide them with better living conditions. Women were given cleaning jobs in church compounds. A fixed amount was paid every Sunday. However, since it was after Holy Communion, they regularly attended Mass. Women's empowerment does not mean giving women a good education or creating more jobs for them. Women need to understand for themselves the logic behind gender equality and women empowerment¹⁸. Realizing that there was no fundamental change in these women other than temporary relief from financial aid or small jobs, Fr. Taffrael set up a nunnery in Mattel and, with the help of nuns, sought to instill confidence and courage in Playa women. The admission of girls in the schools established in the Kanuri district for the children belonging to the Playa community who have converted to Christianity had been ensured. Undoubtedly, Fr. Taffrael succeeded in bringing about a revolutionary change in the life pattern of the Pulaya women of North Malabar.

Conclusion

There are many Christian missionaries who have worked to provide socio-economic security for those doomed to live a hellish life in the horrors of caste system. Christian missionaries understood or defined the cultural life of India on the basis of their dual terms "refined" and "uncivilized". The evidence and oral descriptions discussed above show how the lower castes in North Malabar were treated as untouchables and their social distance was determined. Fr. Joseph Taffrael was the Messiah of the poor and a guide to many missionaries who led a life of self-sacrifice to work for the social upliftment of the lower castes in

North Malabar as well as to convert them to the Christian faith. In this paper, I tried to seek the life of missionaries through the missionary life of Joseph Taffrael. Fr Joseph Taffrael has always been a role model for those who are reluctant to reach out to people who are denied basic needs, including drinking water. In this article, I have argued that Pulaya people relationship with the missionaries, including Fr. Joseph Taffrael, brought about a significant social change among in this community. Many Pulaya converts have experienced social equality, which has been manifested in the form of social interaction through community dining, living, and conversations with people outside their community. When the lower class people of North Malabar, who have been neglected by all, testify that Taffrael came to us with love and affection, we can understand the great impact that this foreign missionary had on their lives. This missionary played a major role in helping the Pulaya people, who had lived only as slaves; realize that they too deserved the freedom granted by law.

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