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SOCIO - ECONOMIC STATUS OF CATHOLICS IN THE DIOCESE OF SALEM

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Abstract: Man has progressed step by step from the cave age to the jet and nuclear age. Now the world has ushered a new age, which is rightly called the 'Technetronic' Age, which is shaped not so much by the tradition as by the impact of modern science and technology. Mrs. Indra Gandhi, addressing 38th United Nations General Assembly Session on behalf of India and 100 other Non-aligned nations very aptly said, "Our plea for peace is not out of superior virtue but because peace is indispensable, because the present military technology threatens the extinction of the human race. No peace today, no life tomorrow. We must realize that in our world, the only form of existence is co-existence with all peoples and countries".¹

Keyword: Socio-economic , Diocese of Salem , Technetronic , nobility in heart.

INTRODUCTION:

If there is nobility in heart, there will be beauty in character. If there is beauty in character, there will be harmony at home, if there is harmony at home, there will be order in the nation, if there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world thus says a thought provoking adage².

India, the land of spirituality, is the origin place of many religions. Religion plays of predominant role in the life of man. It helps the human beings to lead their daily lives in harmony with themselves and with others, and to lead a life of peace and happiness. Man finds perfect happiness in the Supreme Being, namely God who is the object of all religions of the world. The manifestation of ultimate reality can be seen in "History" as well as in Nature. Keshav Chandra Sen, one of the exponents of spiritual interpretation of history says, "The universe exhibits on all sides marks of design and beauty, adaptation and method. Each object shows God's handiwork. But God is not manifested in matter alone. There is another revelation. There is God in history. He who created and destines the affairs of nation".

The impact of Jesus Christ (4BC-30AD) who was born 2000 years ago, on human history is so obvious and enormous. He is the founder of the most influential religion namely Christianity and the Christian church. He is the hinge on which the doors of history swing. The centuries are measured from his birth. His disciples spread the gospel in every nook and corner of the world. St. Thomas Didymas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ came to India and spread Christianity in Malabar Coast in Kerala and Mylapore in Tamilnadu³.

"Observing on the significance of the St. Thomas Mission, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India said, "Remember St. Thomas came to India when many countries in Europe had not yet become Christian and so these Indians

who trace their Christianity of him have a longer history and higher ancestry than that of many of the European countries and it is really matter of pride to us that it so happened"⁴.

The next stage in the preaching of Christianity in Tamilnadu began with the coming of Portuguese on the western coast of India in about 1498A.D. They occupied a few trading posts. Soon all the Portuguese trading posts along the Indian coast from Bombay to Tuticorin were made as the Catholic Christian centres⁵.

In the beginning of 17th century Southern Kongunadu a part of Salem district under Madurai Nayakkars accepted Christianity. One can definitely proclaim on the basis of corroborating evidences that Christianity stepped into Salem in 1623 due to the tireless efforts of the Jesuit missionary Robert De Nobili (1557-1656). He baptized Ramachandra Nayak, the chieftain of Sendamangalam and also converted a soldier into Christian faith⁶. This incident marks an epoch making event in the history of spread of Christianity in Salem. Since then this region has seen the presence of many missionaries of Society of Jesus and of the Paris Foreign Mission as well as of the Diocesan clergy.

The Diocese of Salem comprising the civil districts of Salem and Dharmapuri was established on 26th May, 1930 by Pope Pius XI canonically under the guidance and the painstaking efforts of missionaries of Paris Foreign Mission Society⁷. The diocese of Salem was erected initially with 11 parishes to cater to the needs of Catholic Community. The legacy and the mission of the missionaries are continued by the Indian brethren. The diocese of Salem has consistently grown in all aspects in various forms of ministries-spiritual, educational, social and pastoral. The significant contributions made by this small Roman Catholic community comprising diocesan clergy, the religious priests,

brothers and sisters and the lay people in Salem in the spiritual, social, economic and educational and other humanitarian fields of national life deserve special mention here.

The Spread of Christianity In Salem:

The city of Salem is believed to have been established by Cheraman Peruman, Kongu Chera thus giving rightly the epithet "Cherlam" meaning the place of Chera⁸. Sieving through the etymological interpretations and conflicting claims regarding the origin of the word Salem, one is confounded with an array of meanings of the word –land of Cheras, land of mountains, land of weavers etc., The bulk of the population is Hindus. The next largest religious group is the Muslims. The Christians come third.

Work of Madura Mission:

The foundation of Madura Mission had a tremendous effect on the social history of Salem. Robert De Nobili (1577-1656), an eminent and dedicated Jesuit was the first missionary who visited Salem to spread Christianity founded Catholic Church there⁹. At Salem Robert De Nobili met Tirumangala Nayak, the elder brother of Ramachandra Nayak and also the dethroned ruler of Senthamangalam. Robert De Nobili followed him upto Tirumangala, a small town in Dharmapuri and baptized him there along with his family members on 25th December 1625¹⁰.

On July 31st 1626 Robert De Nobili received the visit of a pandaram hailed from the sect of Saivism and a man belonged to Valluvar caste. The latter one was impressed by Robert De Nobili Tamil book, "Sign of True Religion" and got himself baptized with the name "Mukthi Udayan" (Blissful One). His conversion had a tremendous impact on the evangelical service rendered by Robert De Nobili in Salem region¹¹. By 1665 A.D., there was a large number of Catholics at Kongupatti, Ilupuli, Anaikarapalayam, Omalur, Sankagiri, Anthiyur, Mathiyampatti and Ilanagar¹².

Attempts of Mysore Jesuit Mission In Spreading Christianity:

The foundation of the Mysore Jesuit Mission by Fr. Leonardo Cinnami in 1650 formed a turning point in the history of spread of Christianity in South India. The geographical adjacent of Salem to the Mysore kingdom and the urge to spread Christianity led the Jesuit missionaries of Mysore Mission to concentrate in Salem region¹³. Fr. Vencent Durake, Fr. Rodriques, Fr. Cinnami, Dr. De Paiva, Fr. Cunha and Fr. Franciso Dos Reys were important Mysore missionaries who laboured tirelessly for the spread of Christianity in Annaikarapalayam, Kakaveri, Senthamangalam, Koviloor and various other mission stations in Salem¹⁴.

(c) Missionary Activities of the Paris Society of Foreign Mission:

In 1776 the mission of Mysore was entrusted to the priests of the Paris Society of Foreign Missions with Pondicherry as its headquarters in India. The missionaries worked hard in various mission stations of Salem, Madurai

and Mysore under Msgr. De Tabraca, the supervisor of Paris Mission¹⁵. Fr. Jean Antonie Dubois, the renowned Paris missionary was responsible for the re-establishment of Christian religion in Salem for a short span of 7 years between 1792 to 1799. Various benefits which he conferred upon his flock may deserve special mention here. His zeal in establishing agricultural colonies and also introducing vaccination to eradicate smallpox, in which inspite of the extraordinary tenacity of the people, he succeeded in his mission. During 1803-1804 a total of 25, 432 natives of Salem were vaccinated. In memory of his noble service, the natives still remember him by the title Doddhaswamiyaru. M. Launay in his book, "Historic Des Mission De L Inde" said that in some parts especially at Karumattampatty, he is considered as the prince's son and the noblest of Europeans¹⁶. Thus the painstaking efforts taken by the Madura Mission, Mysore Jesuit mission and the Paris Society of Foreign Mission were responsible for the spread of Christian religion and the establishment of churches during the early days and the consolidation of Christian community till the creation of the Diocese of Salem.

Origin, Development and Administration of the Diocese:

According to everyman's encyclopedia the term 'Diocese' means a district under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction and care of a bishop. The diocese is the basic cell in the church and centres on the Bishop surrounded by his priests and his people. In the Catholic Church the dioceses are erected by the Pope in Consortium of Bishops¹⁷. In 1899 Pope Leo XIII created the diocese of Kumbakonam by the dismemberment from the archdiocese of Pondicherry. Thus the parishes in Salem region with about 45,000 Catholics were divided between the diocese of Kumbakonam and Mysore for thirty years from 1899 to 1930¹⁸.

On 26th May 1930 the dioceses of Salem and Dharmapuri was erected by Pope Pius XI canonically, with Rev. Henry Prunier (1930-1949) a dedicated priest of Paris Foreign Mission Society as the first Bishop of Salem. The diocese has grown steadily in all walks of human life under the pastoral care and the untiring labours of missionaries and later under the able guidance of Indian Bishops V.S Selvanather (1949-1947), Michael B. Duraisamy (1974-1999) and S. Singarayan (from 2000 to till date).

The Salem diocese is divided into ecclesiastical parts known as parishes. Parish is the basic unit of the church administration. The parish priests are appointed by the bishop to look after the parishes in the diocese. Very often a parish priest has one or more assistant younger priest to assist him in his routine duties of the parish. His pastoral duties, apart from administration of sacraments and preaching include catechizing the children, supervising the census of the parish etc¹⁹. The diocese of Salem functions under a well-organized administrative system. Though the Bishop enjoys all the powers, he exercises them through the different officials like the Vicar General, Judicial Vicar, Priests' Senate and Episcopal Vicar. They are his collaborators in the administration of the diocese. Vatican Council II states, "Priests and laymen who are attached to the diocesan administration should be mindful that they are collaborating in the pastoral work of the bishop and the mission of the

diocese”.

Religions Services:

The religious services of the Salem diocese are the fore most among the various service-oriented activities rendered through the ages. The bishop, the clergy, the men and women religious orders and the lay faithful are involved actively in promoting the religious services of the diocese. In discharging pastoral duties, the first place is held by the diocesan priests for they have fully dedicated themselves to the services of parishes entrusted to them. They are not only co-operators with the bishop for rendering pastoral work but also play the role of block development officers in their respective parishes in the diocese.

Catholics are a sacramental faith community. Most Catholics understand that celebration of the sacraments is the primary way to experience the grace that comes from God²⁰. The discharging sacramental duty is the most important religious service of the priest serving in a particular parish. It is through the following sacraments that the priests bring about the encounter of the individual with God, i) Baptism ii) Eucharist iii) Confirmation iv) Holy Orders. It is through the presets that these spiritual tasks are taken place in the whole diocese.

A) Service through Epiphany Center:

The second Vatican Council says “By divine favour especially in modern times human genius has produced from natural material astonishing inventions in the field of technology”. The press, cinema, radio, television and similar media are classified as instruments of social communication. It is an essential part of church mission to preach the news of redemption with the aid of the instruments of social communication²¹. To attain this goal, Bishop Michael B. Duraisamy (1974-1999) established Epiphany Centre in 1977 in the premises of Infant Jesus Cathedral, Salem to facilitate seminars, retreats, pastoral programmes, the activities of various diocesan commissions, programmes of the pious organizations and to promote fine arts and cultural activities. It is also of a place for prayer and meditation, cultural activities and inter-religious dialogue. Further, eight track sound recording studio and an auditorium with the capacity 1500 seats are available there. This centre has accomplished nearly four decades of noteworthy service in the field of Christian communication and social uplift of the people of this region²².

Services of inter-religious dialogue commission:

Integration of India depends on inter-religious harmony because it is a land with multi religious faith and cultural groups. India has welcomed the streams of people of diverse religions, cultures and languages. The various kingdoms that came up in the north and the south of the country have enriched our country with their distinct religions and culture. The great personalities like Gandhiji, Tagore and Arabindo Ghosh have stressed the need for inter-religious harmony, tolerance, mutual respect and common brotherhood under the common destiny of humanity. Gandhiji said, “The different religions are like different branches of a single tree each distinct from the other though

having the same source”. In the long run the success or failure of India to keep its unity and integrity will greatly depend on its ability to ensure wide spread participation in decision making genuine pluralism and minority protection²³.

An Inter-Religious Dialogue Commission is functioning actively in Salem Diocese to foster inter-religious understanding among the people of this region. Its main objectives are

- i) To cultivate a profound attitudinal change among the Christians
- ii) To facilitate issue-based services like functional literacy for upholding human dignity and transcending all religious barriers.
- iii) And to organize a diocese care group to mobilize the people to strengthen the relations with the people of other religions.

In the Inter Faith Dialogue meetings which are organized frequently in a religious spirit and the special invitees belonging to various religions highlight the significance of their religious principles. As a result of arranging the inter-religious dialogue the unity, solidarity and the understanding among the various religious communities have been strengthened to a great extent in the areas, which come under the jurisdiction of the Salem diocese.

Educational Services of the Diocese:

In the modern period education has become a powerful instrument not only of personal realization but also of national development. It is the prime force of the welfare of a nation and of mankind in general. The destiny of India is now being shaped in the classrooms. In the era of science and technology, it is the education that determines the level of prosperity, welfare and security of the people. It is considered as an important component of human development. Hence, the decree of Vatican Council II read “The church has a great role to play in the progress and development of education since she is concerned with the whole of man's life”. According to Swami Vivekananda “Education is the manifestation of perfection in man”. Education guides the human beings to seek the truth and live a life of purity. Development, as one understands the term today is not simply economic growth. It is more of attaining a certain level of social justice and socio-political consciousness which lead to a structural transformation²⁴.

Prior to the advent of the missionaries, the universal system of education was not practiced. In the caste-ridden society, the opportunity for education was provided only to upper caste and rich people. The lower caste and poor people were denied the educational opportunity. The Christian missionaries made consistent efforts to uplift the social and economic condition of the people through education besides they strived hard for liberating the downtrodden and reducing the social inequality by imparting education to the rural masses. The efforts of the British to introduce western education in India and the support extended by the British government in India favoured Christian missionaries to

continue their service²⁵.

The diocesan priests, the religious brothers and sisters in the diocese of Salem have made strenuous efforts for imparting value based life oriented education in this region. They are convinced of the view that the best service they could render a nation for its socio-economic development is the dedication of their lives to the training of its youth with high ideals. To its credit, the Diocese of Salem has 3 Higher Secondary Schools, 10 Middle Schools, 31 Elementary Schools, 5 English Medium Schools, One Nursery Schools 3 Matriculation Higher Secondary Schools and One Technical Education School. Total number of schools run by the diocese is 54. Besides this there are 77 schools run by both the religious brothers and sisters in the diocese.

Education of women given by religious orders at schools and the women rehabilitation centres is a fillip to women to emerge from ghetto mentality and to take their lawful place in the society. As Sarojini Naidu says, "The mission of the Indian womanhood is to keep alive the hearth fires, the altar and the beacon fires of the nation". The congregations of brothers and sisters mould the young minds with certain life skills and attitudes to live a meaningful life. They also run schools even in the remote areas of Salem district for the benefit of backward communities.

Social and Medical Services of the Diocese:

One of the missions of Catholic Church is to render social service especially to the sick, poor and the needy. Highlighting the difficulty in carrying out this task, Pope Pius XI said. "No easy task (social service) is imposed upon the clergy, wherefore; all candidates for the sacred priesthood must be adequately prepared to meet it by intense study of social matters"²⁶. The modern welfare state is built on a strong frame work of social activities. The bishop, the diocesan clergy the religious communities and the lay faithful of the diocese have been actively involving in social welfare activities since its inception.

One of the mission of the diocese is to liberate the poor from poverty and to bring them hope and joy. With the aim of promoting welfare activities for the uplift of the poor and the downtrodden in the diocese, the Salem Social Service Centre was established in 1968. The society undertakes charity programmes and regular programmes. Most of the individual and community projects are undertaken with the help of donor agencies such as CRS, CARITAS, India and UNIDAS. Some important programmes implemented under the charity programmes are digging and deepening of wells, construction of low cost houses for economically marginalized people, child oriented feeding programmes and rehabilitation of Srilankan repatriates. Nearly 8000 rural people in and around Salem region obtain direct benefits out of these charity programmes. The society also undertakes regular Programmes such as Mother and Child Health, Maintenance of Home for Orphans, Nurseries and Creches, Mathar Sangams and Health Care Centres, Credit unions, Scholarship Programmes, S.C and S.T Awareness Programmes and Bridge Foundation Loan Schemes. On account of these animation programs the poor people in the villages are organized and 210 self help groups have been

formed for both men and women. Among these 113 groups have emerged as credit unions. After the creation of Dharmapuri diocese out of Salem diocese on 28th Feb.1979, Dharmapuri Social Service Society became independent for its activities and is now working for the uplift of the economically backward people of Dharmapuri²⁷.

Religious congregations are also involved in rendering social service. Both men and women belonging to religious community houses are actively engaged in various forms of social ministries. Some of their socio-welfare centres are Anbu Illam an asylum for street and working children, run by the Salesian priests, the Rural Development Centre run by Brothers of Holy Cross, Idhalaya Juvenile Home for Girls run by Fransiscan Sister, St.Mary's General Hospital and Leprosy Eradication Centre run by the Salesian Sisters and St.Mary Magdelene Polio Centre run by the Sister of Immaculate Conception. To its credit Salem diocese runs 8 Hospitals, 24 Dispensaries, 20 Hostels, 1 Polio Centre, 3 Asylums for Mentally Retarded, 2 Leprosy Eradication Centres, 3 Home for Aged, 3 Orphanages and 35 other social service centres for the welfare of the poor section of the society.

CONCLUSION:

History is a marvelous collection of stories of the achievements of great men. This diocese has its share of Catholic men and women who dared and faced challenges and ultimately succeeded in their mission of establishing a diocese. Thus the steady development of the diocese and its influence on the lives of both Catholics and non-Catholics have shed luster on this part of the country. The diocese's presence is felt mainly due to its admirable educational service, charitable and social welfare work for all without distinction of caste, creed, or religion. Its contribution to the nation building is stupendous. Its doctrine, administration and prayer services, Inter-Religious Dialogue and the attractive forces of truth and goodness play increasing measures in the lives of the people of this region. The entire credit of the growth of the diocese from its inception to the present day is due to the untiring service of the missionaries, the sagacious guidance of the bishops, the clergy, the zealous religious and the enlightened laity of the diocese of Salem.

The Salem diocese which was erected in 1930 with the population of 45,000 Catholics has now grown with the Catholic population of 87,140. They have attained more dignified socio-economic status through receiving qualitative and job oriented education. As the universal education can definitely empower women and raise their status, a reorientation of women education is essential at diocese level. The past successful achievements of the Salem diocese are indeed the guarantee and hope for a still brighter future for the cause of the people of Salem.

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