

EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIANITY IN RAMESWARAM ISLAND – A STUDY

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Abstract: This article is a humble attempt to study about the spread of Christianity in Rameswaram Island. Rameswaram Island is one of the holy places for Hindus. However, the people of Rameswaram Island followed Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity along with Hinduism. Even though Christianity entered in this island as the last one, now it has occupied the second largest religion next to Hinduism in this island. The depressed class person of the island was converted into Christianity in the beginning of sixteenth century A.D. The Christians and other religious people attained the western education, health service and government services only through the Christian missionaries at first in this island. As a result, the people of Rameswaram Island attained a significant development in their socio-economic life.

Keyword: Rameswaram island, British rule, Tamilnadu, Christianity.

INTRODUCTION:

Prologue

Rameswaram island is one of the gloriest and holy places for the Hindus in India. There are two holy places for the Hindus. They are Varanasi which is in north India and Rameswaram which is in south India. Hindus believe that their visit to Rameswaram is a holy visit and there they worship Sri Ramanatha Swamy temple paves way to attain heaven after their life. Sri Ramanatha Swamy temple is constructed with three corridors, among which its third corridor is the very lengthiest corridor in the world. Its architecture is based upon Dravidan style.

Even though Rameswaram island is a very significant centre of the Hindus from ancient time to till date. The people of Rameswaram island followed Buddhism and Jainism also from hoary past. Besides, Muslim rulers made their invasions in India since 8th century A.D. On the other side the traders of Arabia came to India for trade in the same century. So, Islam also started to spread in this island through the Muslim invaders and Arabian traders.

Since 16th century A.D. the European traders came to India and following them the Christian missionaries also entered India. Consequently, India came under the European rule and their religion Christianity also began to spread in India, including Rameswaram Island. This article reveals about the entry and spreading of Christianity in this island, the details of Christian churches in the island, development of administrative body of Christian religion, Christian festivals and the present condition of Christianity in this island.

GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Rameswaram Island is situated in Ramanathapuram district, Tamil Nadu, South India. The whole island is

a separate taluk. Rameswaram is the headquarters of the Taluk. (9010' and 90 20' North longitudes and 29012' and 79025' East longitudes). The whole island has an area of 188.4 square kilometers. It is located 43 kilometers away from the east of Ramanathapuram, 150 kilometers from Madurai, 272 kilometers from Palani, 302 kilometers from Thanjavur, 381 kilometers from Coimbatore and 644 kilometers from Chennai. According to the Census Report – 2001, the total population of the island was nearly about 68778 (Male – 35436 and Female – 33342).

The main land extends up to Mandapam in the Ramanathapuram District. The island is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal. It is separated from the main land by the Pamban Canal, which extends between Mandapam and Pamban. The island starts from Pamban situated on the western side of the Rameswaram island. The island is connected with the main land by two Bridges. One is Pamban Viaduct Scherzer Train Bridge, another one is Road Bridge. The bridge, named after Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India was opened on 2nd October 1988. These two bridges were constructed in Pamban Canal between Mandapam and Pamban. Indira Gandhi road bridge is connected with National Highways No.49 which passes through via Pamban, Thangachimadam, Rameswaram and Dhanuskodi and the train bridge is connected with Pamban railway station. New railway line is extended up to Rameswaram via Thangachimadam.

The whole island is divided into one town panchayat. Rameswaram is the headquarters for the Rameswaram Town Panchayat. Pamban and Thangachimadam are the headquarters for the Pamban Panchayat and Thangachimadam Panchayat. Respectively Rameswaram Town Panchayat comprises of the following villages and hamlets such as Rameswaram, Dhanushkodi, Ramakrishna

puram, Pudhuroad, Karaiyur, Sudukattan Patti, OlaiKuda, Sambai, Mankadu, Gandhamadhanaparvatham, Vadakadu, Thiechithar Kollai, Kattupillayar Koil, Atthikadu, Semmamadam, Sallimalai, Thenkuda, Notchivadi, Narikuli, Kilakadu, Aththikadu, Verkottu alias Verkodu, Earakadu.

Thangachimadam Panchayat comprises of the following villages and hamlets such as Thangachimadam, Thanneer ootru, Peikarumbu, Ariyar kundru, Meyyampuli, Verkadu, Nalupanai. Pamban Panchayat comprises of the following villages and hamlets such as Pamban, Akkal madam, Kundukal, Pananthoppu, Therkuvadi. Rameswaram island was under Ramanathapuram taluk up to 1982. Thereafter the whole Rameswaram island was made as a separate taluk. Rameswaram became the headquarter of the taluk.

ETYMOLOGY

Mostly the name of the villages in Rameswaram island including Dhanuskodi are said to be associated with the epic Ramayana. The place name Rameswaram is a combination of two words Rama and Iswaram. Lord Rama, the hero of Ramayana, created Iswara in sand in the form of Linga, a symbol of Lord Siva and worshipped it. According to Ramayana, Ravana, the king of Srilanka, abducted Sita, the wife of Lord Rama. Rama invaded Srilanka and killed him. While returning to Rameswaram with Sita, Rama was advised by holy men to create a Linga in sand and worship it to purge himself of the sin of brahmahatya (Brahminicide).

Consequently, Rama fixed an auspicious time to worship the Linga. He sent Hanuman to Mount Kailas to collect the Linga. But Hanuman could not come within the auspicious time. Therefore, Sita installed a Linga made up of sand on the coast of Rameswaram, which was worshipped by Rama. That Linga is called as Ramalinga or Ramanatha or Rameswara. So, this place is known as Rameswaram and the whole island is also called after the name. The island of Rameswaram is in the shape of a bow and is called Rama's bow. Each end is called 'kodi' which means 'tip' of the 'bow'. The name 'Thanus' in Sanskrit means 'bow' and 'kodi' in Tamil means 'tip' i.e. tip of the bow. Dhanuskodi is also called as Sethu, which means a bridge on causeway. It is a place where Lord Rama constructed the causeway to reach Sri Lanka. The story goes that Lord Rama returned from Sri Lanka and destroyed the bridge with his bows.

SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN RAMESWARAM ISLAND

During the first quarter of the 16th century A.D., the Portuguese settled in the island for two purposes – one was to have trade and another was to spread their religion. Christianity was introduced in the island by St. Franzis Xavier, a noted Professor of Sorbonne University of Paris, France who came to the island in about 1544 A.D. He converted the Hindu Karaya (Kadayas) to Christianity in Rameswaram Island.

Fr. Antony Criminolee came to Ramanathapuram region from Itlay in 1546 A.D. as a Jesuit missionary. He preached the gospel to the Paravas. His great zeal for service was appreciated even by St. Franzis Xavier. Antony Criminolee visited Rameswaram Island in 1546 A.D. He

converted the Hindu Kadayas to Christianity at Akkalmadam near Pamban, and settled in Vedalai. When he was preaching the word of God to the people at Vedalai, he was pierced by arrows from the soilders of the Nayaks of Madurai, because the Nayaks of Madura wanted to prohibit the upcoming of Portuguese and their religion in the Eastern coast. A fight had started between the Nayaks of Madura and the Portuguese at Vedalai, when Antony Ciriminalee preached the Christianity to the people.

Besides it is said that Antony Criminalee helped the Portuguese force. So, he was beheaded and his head was thrown in front of the Lord Muruga temple at Thiruchendur. The Christians could find out his body only after a few days. He was twenty nine years old when he died as a martyr; many people prayed to this martyr and received blessings from the Lord. In 1644 A.D., Thirumalai Nayak (1623-1659 A.D.), the ruler of Madurai invaded the principal areas of Ramanathapuram which were under the Sethupathi rulers. Jadaikka II (1636 – 1645) had a strong naval force. So, Thirumalai Nayak got the Naval support of the Portuguese and gave them permission to build more than seven Churches in the land stretching from Rameswaram island to Thondi. As a result St. James Church was built by the Portuguese at Verkadu near Thangachimadam. Following which St. Francis Xavier and many Christian Missionaries visited here to spread Christianity. Fr. Laporte was one of them, he built the St. Antony Church in 1875 A.D. at Pamban.

Trichy Diocese

In 1887, Trichy became a separate Diocese. It controlled all the Christian Churches of southern part of TamilNadu. So, the east Ramanathapuram became a separate Parish which was under the direct control of Trichy Diocese so for. Subsequently, one of the Roman Catholic Churches in Rameswaram island was under the direct control of Ramanathapuram Parish and the Trichy Diocese. In course of time, Christianity started to spread all over the district.

Thangachimadam Parish

Thangachimadam became a separate Parish in 1909, bifurcating the Ramanathapuram Parish. Thanga chimadam Parish covered the Rameswaram Island from Katchatheevu in the east Vedalai in the west. Fr. Seggretain was the first priest of Thangachimadam and he rebuilt the age-old chapel at Verkadu which was dedicated to St. James. The head quarters of Thangachimadam Parish was St. James Church at Verkadu which was very near to Thanga chimadam. Hence, the head quarters of Thangachimadam Parish was only St. Jame's Church of Verkadu.

In 1922 A.D., Fr. Boddelle was appointed as the priest of Thangachimadam Parish. He came from France to St. James Church at Verkadu. He is the first priest who stayed and served in the island. He built a new Church at Thangachimadam near Thanneer Vootru village. He completed the Church construction and he opened it on 12th March 1930 A.D and it was dedicated to St. Theresa of Infant Jesus. Apart from that, Fr. Boddelle shifted the head quarters of the Thangachimadam Parish from St. James Church at Verkadu to St. Theresa of Infant Jesus Church at Thangachimadam.

Madurai Diocese

In 1938, the Diocese of Madurai bifurcated from the Diocese of Trichy. Peter Leonard was appointed as the first Bishop for the Diocese of Madurai. Subsequently, the Parishes of Ramanathapuram district along with the Parish of Thangachimadam came under the direct control of Madurai Diocese. When Fr. Boddelle was priest of Thangachimadam, the Holy Cross or Christian Nuns Organization was formed in 1939. The society started to spread Christianity in the island. It's service centre was established in the compound of St. Theresa Infant Jesus Church, Thangachimadam. Many nuns started to spread Christianity through their social service in this island. Besides a huge amount of Paravas entered into Rameswaram island from Mookaiyur who were already converted to Christianity.

Majority of the people of island got western education, western medical treatment and Government jobs due to the guidance of Fr. Boddelle. After Fr. Boddelle, many priests and Christians missionaries came to this island to spread Christianity. Due the increase in the Christian population, the Parish of Thangachimadam was divided into six Parishes later.

Mandapam Camp Parish

Due to the civil war broke out in Sri Lanka in 1983 A.D., the refugees came to India and stayed at Mandapam camp. The Christians were more in number among the refugees. Moreover, they were not allowed to go out of the camp. So they demanded separate Parish at Mandapam camp. As a result, Mandapam camp became a separate Parish in May 1986. This Parish was extended upto Vedalai in the west and Mandapam in the east. Subsequently the whole Rameswaram island functioned as a separate Parish from Thangachimadam.

Sivaganga Diocese

On 25th July 1987, the Diocese of Madurai was divided into two Dioceses, one in Madurai and the Sivagangai. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Christians came under the direct control of the Diocese of Sivagangai. In 1987, due to the immense strength in the Parish of Thangachimadam, for the second time it was divided into two Parishes. Hence, Rameswaram became a new Parish, as it was bifurcated from Thangachimadam Parish. Fr. D. David was appointed as its first Parish priest. Thangachimadam Parish was extended up to Pamban in the west and Meyyampuli village in the east. The remaining parts of the island came under the control of Rameswaram Parish.

Pamban Parish

On 22nd May 1990 Pamban Parish was bifurcated from Thangachimadam Parish. As Thangachimadam Parish governed a greater number of people, it was divided again for the third time. The Mandapam camp Parish was divided into two Parishes for the same reason. On 5th May 1996, Mandapam Parish bifurcated as a new Parish from the Mandapam camp Parish. Finally, Thangachimadam Parish was divided into one more Parish. Communal problems at this region were the root cause of the establishment of the new Parish. There were only Kadayas and the Paravas who

followed Christianity. The Kadayas were the natives of the island. The Paravas had migrated to the island from Mookaiyur, Muthukulathur Taluk, Ramanathapuram District.

T. Soosaiyapperpattinam Parish

The Paravas started to dominate the Kadayas in all Church activities in the island. Subsequently in 1978, the quarrels broke out between the Kadayas and the Paravas. The Kadayas took great effort to occupy the Church of Thangachimadam Parish. It is situated in and around the Kadayas habitations, but the Paravas settlement is far away from the head quarter. Hence, they approached Sivaganga Diocese. As a result, the Church decided to erect a new Parish in the Paravas areas. At present, St. Xavier Church and its surrounding areas are called as T. Soosaiyapperpattinam. It became a separate Parish since 15th July 2005.

**Roman Catholic Churches in Rameswaram Island
Santhiya Rayapper Kovil (St. James Church)**

Thangachimadam Parish, started in 1909 A.D. had its head quarters at Santhiya Rayapper Kovil (St. James Church) at Verkadu near Thangachimadam. It was constructed in 1544 A.D. In the beginning, it was in a thatched shed. But later, it was shifted to a building, constructed by the Portuguese in 1644 A.D. Fr. Segreton did renovation work in this Church. Then it was renovated by Fr. Boddelle after 1922.

It is said that St. James Church is the first Church of this island. However, the earlier Church was totally demolished on 16th July 1993. Thereafter, a new Church was erected in this location on 19th May 2000. It is dedicated to St. James. He was known as St. Yahooop or St. Yagob. The word St. Yagob is colloquially called in Tamil as Santhiya Royapper. This Church is worshipped by the Hindus and Muslims. It was constructed with a tower, Hindu symbol; a crescent, an Islam symbol and the cross, a Christian symbol. Hence the church is a symbol of religious harmony.

St. Theresa of Infant Jesus

It was built in 1930 with the effort of Fr. Boddelle. He took a consistent effort to spread Christianity in this island. It become a centre for social service centre because of the efforts of the nuns who belonged to the Holy Cross organization. They started Schools for girls, a Medical dispensary and an orphanage centre etc., St. Theresa of Infant Jesus became the head quarters of the Thangachimadam Parish with the effort of Fr. Boddelle. The old Church was demolished and the present Church had construction work started on 25th July 2002 and it opened on 15th February 2004. It was opened by S. Edward Frances Bishop of Sivagangai.

St. Joseph's Church

It is said that it was established during the second quarter of the sixteenth century A.D. There after it was reconstructed by the Portuguese. Then it was renovated in 1977. The old Church was demolished and a new one was built on 2nd February 1985. This Church became the head quarters for the Rameswaram Parish in 1987 A.D. Besides, a

Higher Secondary School is run by the Parish and it controls up to Dhanuskodi and the surrounding area of Rameswaram.

St. Antony Church of Katchatheevu and Rameswaram

The church was constructed by Seenikuppan, a fisherman of Thondi, Ramanathapuram district in 1907 A.D. at Katchatheevu. Generally the fishermen believe that St. Antony is a protector of their race. There is a belief that the fishermen are safeguarded by St. Antony when they go for fishing near Katchatheevu, Seenikuppan constructed a Church at Katchatheevu which was dedicated to St. Antony. In the beginning, it was constructed with a thatched shed. In course of time, the fishermen started to construct a building in the form of a Church on 2nd February 1951. It was also under the direct control of Thangachimadam Parish.

Now and then, the priest of Thangachimadam Parish went to conduct the mass in this Church. The fishermen alone attended the mass. In course of time, those coming from Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka also started to visit the Church. On 10th March every year, a festival is celebrated in this Church. Priest of Thangachimadam Parish, the fishermen of Rameswaram island as well as fishermen of Sri Lanka participate in this function. Moreover, traders from India and Sri Lanka also participate in the festival. People of Ramanathapuram district have relatives in Sri Lanka. The festival provides a chance to meet them in Katchatheevu and hence it became a meeting centre for both the countries. Besides, they are allowed to meet there without producing visa formalities. Due to the civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983, the Government of Sri Lanka strictly prohibited the entry of the Indians in Katchatheevu.

The fishermen of Rameswaram island could not forget St. Antony Church of Katchatheevu. So they went to Katchatheevu and in memory of St. Antony, they took a bit of soil at St. Antony Church and returned to the Island, installed a Church at Karaiyur in Rameswaram 1983. It was completed and opened on 22nd June 2000. This Church is now under the control of Rameswaram Parish. There are other Churches under the control of the Rameswaram Parish. They are the Infant of Jesus Church at Olaikuda, Queen Mary Church at Sudukattu Patty, St. Antony Church at Narikuli, Divine Mary Church at Aththikadu, St. John-De-Britto Church at Thenkuda.

Ruined Churches at Dhanuskodi

There were two Churches at Dhanuskodi. One was dedicated to St. Antony and the other to Lurthu Mary. These Churches were erected during the period of Fr. Boddelle (1922–1952 A.D.) and were placed under the direct control of Thangachimadam Parish. These two Churches were devastated by a great cyclone on 23rd December 1964. Later, a Church was constructed by the fishermen, who came from Kila Manalmelkudi and Mela Manalmelkudi, Kilachal in Kanyakumari District. They constructed a new Church at Muhuntharaya Chatram near Dhanuskodi and dedicated it to St. Antony.

St. Antony Church

St. Antony Church was constructed in 1875 as the first church in this area and renovated later at different

periods. In the beginning, it was under the Parish of Thangachimadam and became a separate Parish in Thangachimadam on 25th May 1990. This Church is situated on the way of Therkkuvadi from Pamban. Our Lady Health Church (Punitha Arokkiya Annai Church) was constructed at Pamban in North Coast. Foundation stone for the Church was laid on 20th May 1990. It was completed and opened on 13th October 1993. Besides it runs St. Antony Primary School at Pamban. There are two more Churches – One at Akkalmadam which was dedicated to St. Xavier and another one at Kundukal dedicated to Infant Jesus.

Soosaiyapper (St. Joseph) Church

This Church was dedicated to St. Joseph. The name of St. Joseph is called in Tamil as Soosaiyapper. This Church is situated on north coast of Thangachimadam and the surrounding area is called Soosaiyapper Pattinam. It was constructed in 1962. The old Church was demolished and the construction work of the new Church was completed on 5th February 1992 and the church was opened on the same day.

Protestant in Rameswaram Island

Protestants are major sects in Christianity. It is said that during the close of 19th century A.D., the Protestant Christians began to spread their religion in Rameswaram Island. Besides, they spread their religion through social service and started construct Churches. St. Mary Church was constructed at Pamban by the Protestants in 1875 A.D. It was considered as an early Church of Protestants in Rameswaram Island. Subsequently, this earliest Church of protestant was demolished and the foundation to construct a new Church was laid on 5th November 1992 A.D and opened on 21st April 1999 A.D. Besides one more Church is constructed near Muslim street in Rameswaram. It is named as C.S.I. Island Mission Church. The Protestant sects of Pamban, Therkuvadi, Akkalmadam and Rameswaram visit the church. The C.S.I. Missionary also runs a middle school at Pamban from 1896 A.D.

The Pentecost

The Pentecost, a sect of Christians, started to spread christiandy at Thangachimadam, Pamban and Rameswaram. Within a very short period this sect of Christians spread all over the island and its branches are found in all over the island. Its head quarters is found at Meyyampuli. According to their religious belief, they do not worship statue or cross. Hence, they never construct Churches. Besides, the followers of Pentecost never wear ornaments.

Christian Festivals in Rameswaram Island

Christians in Rameswaram Island celebrate their festivals as usual like the Christians in the other parts of the country. Mention must be made on the following churches like Santhiya Rayapper Church in Verkadu village near Thangachimadam and St. Antony Church in Karaiyur, Rameswaram in memory of St. Antony Church in Katchatheevu are mentioned in particular the familiar churches of the Island.

St.Santhiya Rayapper (St.James) Festival

This festival was started by the Portuguese in memory of St. James, who was one among the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. Every year, they celebrate it on June 24th the date on which St.James expired. People hoist the flag on 16th July to begin the festival. On 24th July, a holy prayer is conducted at night and the statues of St.James and Jesus Christ are taken in procession in a decorated car. The festival is celebrated throughout the night of 24th July. On the next day, a special prayer is conducted. In the evening the festival ends with the unfurling of the flag. The Hindus and Muslims join hands with Christians during the festival. Further, the Hindus from various places like Ramanathapuram, Sivaganga and Virudhungan districts also participate more in number and present coconut saplings as offerings. Moreover, people come there a week before the celebration and stay in thatched huts and conduct prayer.

Festival of St.Antony's Church

Festival of St.Antony's is celebrated on 13th July every year in memory of Saint Antony. On the night of the celebration a special prayer was conducted for St.Antony. Further, the decorated statue is taken in procession around the Church. They select a fishing boat taking lots and place St.Antony's statue in it. Then the boat is decorated with electric serial lights and taken into the sea one by one. At night the sea and coastal areas of Karaiyur are glittered with lights.

St. Antony festival is similar to that of the Theppa Thiruvila (Pond festival) conducted by Hindus. Yet another salient feature is that the fishermen and the owners of the boats and streamers gather together despite caste and religious barriers. The uniqueness of the festival is that the boat used in the function may belong to either Hindus or Muslims or Christians.

CONCLUSION

Rameswaram island is a holy place for Hindus. However, from the ancient time, the people of Rameswaram island started to observe new religions and construct its symbol in different places of the island (like Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Sikhism). From the beginning of the sixteenth century A.D. Christianity also entered in this island through the Portuguese traders and the Christian missionaries of the European countries. In the beginning, they met some problems to spread Christianity in this island. However they never withdrew from their task. Fr.Francis Xavier, Fr.Segretain and Fr.Boddle had a vital role in the spreading of Christianity in this island. Fr.Antony Criminallee sacrificed his life for the same work. Besides, the Christian missionaries not only spread their religion but also they did lot of social services like establishing orphanages, educational institutions and hospitals etc. Moreover, the western education and allopathic medical treatment system were introduced at first by the Christian missionaries in this island. As a result, even though Christianity entered in this island later than Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Sikhism. Christianity developed and occupied the second largest population in this island next to Hinduism.

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An Inscription, is found St. Joseph Church, T. Susaiyapper Pattinam, Thangachimadam. field study on 8th July 2008.

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An Inscription is seen in South side wall of St. James Church, Verkadu, field study on 9th July 2008

An Inscription is seen in North side wall of St. James Church, Verkadu, field study on 9th July 2008

Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious symbols are found in front gate of St. James Church, Verkadu.

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i) Now the campus of St. Theresa of child as Jesus Church is named of Fr. Boddelle compound. ii) An extension area of Thangachimadam is named as Fr. Boodelle Nagar (Fr. Boddelle's town) which is situated near to St. Theresa church, Thangachimadam.

There is an inscription in south side wall of St. Theresal of Child of Jesus Church, Thangachimadam, field study dated 9th July 2008

There is an inscription in North side wall of St. Theresal of Child of Jesus Church, Thangachimadam, field study dated 9th July 2008

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An Inscription is seen on left side wall of St. Mark Church (C.S.I. Church), Pamban, field study dated 20th August 2008

An inscriptions is seen on Right side wall of St. Mark Church (C.S.I. Church), Pamban field study dated 20th August 2008

An inscription is found in C.S.I. Island Mission Church, Rameswaram.

Information collected from Rev. A. Samson Paul Gnanaraj, P.C. Charirman, Pamban Pastorate, Correspondent, C.S.I. Primary School, Pamban.

Plate No. 22, a view of head quarters of Pentecost at Meyyampuli

Information collected from Fr. Augustin, Priest, Thangachimadam Parish, Thangachimadam, dated 2nd May 2008.

Dinakaran, Madurai, dated 24th July 2001.

Punitha Yakappar Thala Varalaru (St. James) (Tamil), Rameswaram, 2007, pp. 1-6.

An Inscription is seen in St. Antony Church, Karaiyur, Rameswaram; Information collected from Fr. Amal Raj, Vicar General, Bishop's House, Sivagangai dated 12th May 2008