

Social Development in French India in Pondicherry Territory by Foreign Missionaries during 19th & 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

The French Jesuits, having been expelled from Thailand in 1687 due to political revolution, took shelter at Pondicherry. Mr. Francios Martin the then Governor of Pondicherry, invited them to take care of the native Christians at Pondicherry. They started Carnatic & Coromandel Mission. Having Pondicherry as their headquarters, when the society of Jesuits was suppressed, Rome entrusted the Carnatic mission to the Society of Paris Foreign Mission (MEP). On 18th September 1777, Fr. Beigot took charge of the Mission as its first Superior with a team of 15 priests. Fr. Beigot audaciously started his work. At that time illiteracy and ignorance was prevailing all over Pondicherry. The MEP Missionaries contributed a lot not only for education but also for the upliftment of the lives of poor people. In 1827 Viscount D. the French Governor invited the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny (from France) to establish schools, orphanages, hospitals etc. In the same manner sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga focused their attention only on the education of the Harijan girls. The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (blue sister) Sisters was launched by Fr. Dupies during 1846 and 1847. In 1885. Calves School was opened and its incharge was Fr. Renevier. The Colonial College under the direction of Fr. Godet and then of Fr. Vacant was followed by Fr. Barbe. In 1877 Petit Seminar High school with new syllabus was opened. Due to the efforts of Fr. Laouenan in 1892 there were 161 Elementary schools. The Petit- Seminare- College, in the hands of Fr. Escanda Senior, recorded in spite of the official opposition, an era of remarkable prosperity. In 1922, there were 900 students. A new building was constructed. In 1925, there were 1000 of them, divided into three sections: (i) French (ii) English and (iii) Humanities. The missionaries sacrificed their lives not only for the upliftment of the poor people but also for education, especially that of Women.

Introduction

The French Jesuits, who were expelled from Thailand in 1687 due to political revolution, took shelter in Pondicherry. Mr. Francis Martin, the then Governor of Pondicherry, invited them to take care of the native Christians at Pondicherry¹. The Missionary contribution in the field of Education was immense in Pondicherry by the Capuchins and Society of Jesus during the 18th century. In 1764, the Society of Jesus was suppressed in France by an order of Louis XV. The Capuchins of Pondicherry cherished for a while with the hope of taking the place of the Jesuits in the Carnatic Mission. But the French Government did not want to suppress the activities of the Jesuits in its Colonies. .

Jesuits of the Carnatic Mission were forced to hand over their mission to M E P. in 1776. At that time illiteracy and ignorance was prevailing all over Pondicherry. People of Pondicherry were mainly employed in agriculture, weaving and labours.² There were many discrimination among the people based on caste, creed and economy. All the schools were functioning either in Teacher's house or under the tree.

The sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny were invited by Foreign Mission Society of Paris (M E P) to start Centers Institutions, Orphanages, Schools, Leprosy Asylum, Hospitals to meet these challenges. The same type of Apostolates were started by Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters and sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga in the forthcoming year. They also carried on similar works, established and strengthened the measures of church in the state of Pondicherry³.

The training of the local clergy is the first aim of the Society of the Foreign Mission; but the realization of the principal aim supposes the training of young seminarians, and as such, the education of the youth in general is akin to this primary end: Not only the education of boys who may become priests, but also the education of girls, who will become mothers and who, as such will have a primordial influence on the family and on the familial education, which is absolutely necessary, as a basis, to any education. No wonder then that the MEPs were as keen about the education of girls as about the one of the boys.

The study has been carried out with the following objectives: They are:

- To study the local history of Pondicherry.
- To study how the Missionaries came to Pondicherry.
- To study the Mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga and Sisters of Immaculate of Heart of Mary and its activities.
- To find out the measures taken by the Missionaries to improve the condition of the downtrodden people and their contribution to build a new society heralding equal status and human dignity for all.

I. Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny - Education of Girls

In 1827 Viscount Desbassyas (the French Governor) was fortunately inspired to invite to Pondicherry the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny. The first three to arrive in the Apostolic prefecture (under the Capuchins) were Sr. Xavier Tronchain, Sr. Seraphine Ducordeau, Sr. Dorothy Chevrier. Immediately, they opened in the French Town a day – school first and then a boarding house and a free school following the directives of their founder Blessed Mother Javouhey⁴. That same year, always under the impetus of Mr. Desbassyns, they opened also several charitable institutions, not only for the European children, but also for the Indian girls. Besides courses of French and Catechism, they were teaching needlework, weaving, knitting, etc.

From the very first month, the Sisters of Cluny achieved great success. The Capttiane Vaisseau Curdier wrote on the 24th of December 1828 that the Sisters have been very successful with the young girls of this country. On 6th December 1828, on the Prize Distribution Day, the boarders staged the tragedy Athalie which was considered to be a great achievement. In 1827, Mr. Desbassyns had written to the Minister for the Navy, asking him to send some more religious Sisters to Pondicherry. Two more sisters were sent. This reinforcement enabled him to create new schools and to develop the already existing one. By a decree dated 24th August 1829, a private school for the Eurasian girls was opened.

Ordinarily Girls schools were entrusted to sisters. In the Pondicherry Mission, in 1844, except for the schools run by the sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, they were only vague schools managed by the Carmelites and made up mostly of the children of the orphanages. To fill up that gap, particularly in keeping with the spirit of the Synod, Mgr. Bonn had decided to find a congregation of Indian sisters who would specialize in education and instruction of young girls That was completely against the Hindu Prejudices which were opposed, as much as they could to the uplifting of women. Many institutions were established by the congregation of the sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny which had its headquarters at Pondicherry. It was owned by the educational institution of the sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, Pondicherry a body registered, under the Societies Registration act 1860 and having its registered office in Pondicherry. The education of girls in the hands of the sisters was progressing very well. The sisters of Cluny were successful with their establishments in the French colony⁵.

They had, in 1892, a Boarding and a Day school for Europeans and Indian girls, a primary school and a Needle work for the Eurasians, a Lace – work school and an Asylum for Indian girls. In the territory of Karaikal they were managing 7 primary schools and one each at Chandranagar and Mahe. In 1886, the Sisters of Cluny assumed the direction of the Hospital of Karaikal, founded in 1855. They were working also in the Hospital and in the Leprosy Asylum in Pondicherry.

(ii). Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzage

During this period the Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzage were only 27 in number. They focused their attention only on the education of the Harijan girls.⁶ They had one school in Pondicherry and one in Vellore, where they had taken the place of the sisters of Good Shepherd in 1875. An Orphanage School was added to their congregation in Pondicherry, They too opened another school in Madras .The Sisters of St. Louis de Gonzaga, also did very well. They continued to influence and train the children under the direction of good and competent Fr. Giraud till 1903. They were managing a school and an Asylum in Pondicherry, and a school in each of the centers at Nellithope, Oulgaret and Vellore.

The French government was interested in developing study of their own language. So they encouraged the Sisters to educate the girls by giving them regular subsidy but on condition that French would be taught in their schools. The government was pleased with the progress of the schools more so because of the introduction of the French in the curriculum. No one had expected the sisters to have such a grand success with the harijan girls.

(iii). Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

The congregation of the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary (familiarly called Blue sisters in Pondicherry) was launched by Fr. Dupies I in 1846 and 1847. convent obtained fairly good results in the education of young girls during the period of the Superior Mother Theresamma. In 1892 the sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary had three schools in Pondicherry.

Under the direction of Fr. Dupuis, and, from 1871, of Fr. Bergez, the work of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary were growing in quality and in number.⁷ In 1871, the French Government recognized their Schools in Pondicherry, Ariankuppam, Oulgaret and Nellithope, and granted substantial subsidies. In 1872, a “Board of Notable” was appointed to supervise their schools in the French colony.

In 1883, a branch school, attached to St. Eugenie School was opened in Pondicherry. In the same year, the Sisters were settled in Karaikal. In 1886, they opened their convents at Villianur and Bohoor. In the year 1883, the Government published a decree against the Non - recognized Congregations. Mgr. Laouenan applied for the necessary authorization, but the Government kept the issue pending. However, everything went on as before, without any official interference.

To keep things go smoothly between these Congregations, in 1885 Mgr. Laouenan divided the Vicariate for them: the Sisters of Cluny were given Pondicherry, the French Town and Karaikal, the whole French Territory; the Sisters of Immaculate Heart of Mary had Pondicherry, the Indian Town and the surrounding villages, the Sisters of St. Aloysius Gonzaga could go anywhere, since they were taking only Harijan children.

Education of the Boys

The Catholic Mission always played an important role in the field of education. Wherever the Church was established, schools for boys and girls were also started. In fact the priests of the MEP mission took keen interest in the matter of education. Fr. Barbe, out of his own resources, added a few more building at the college of Karaikal to accommodate more students. At Pondicherry in 1870 some leaders decided to have a school completely free and atheistic.

They got the permission from the Government to open a Higher Elementary School where all the teachers were secular'. But the school, in two years time was closed and the Government refused to set it up again. In 1875 a Hindu Mr. Calve-Suppraya Chettiar, tried to start one. He requested Mrg. Laouenan to place at the disposal of the school, the former St. Michael Cemetery. When the Bishop refused to offer the land for the school, Mr. Calve requested the Bishop to take up the direction of the school itself. After some hesitation, the proposal was accepted and Fr. Renevier was put in charge of the school. In 1885, this Calve School was opened to all children, irrespective of their religion or origin. However, Mr. Calve gave the school to the Colonial Government which appointed a layman as the Director of the school. With this, the "College Calve"⁸ was completely beyond the influence of the Mission.

In 1877, the inspection of schools in the French Colony was entrusted to a missionary of the Vicariate, but only up to 1880. The Colonial College, under the direction of Fr. Godet, and then of Fr. Vacant and later of Fr. Barbe, continued normally. In 1877, Indian students were admitted to it, without any caste distinction. In 1878, at the request of some important people who objected to the Colonial College but wanted, however, the same standard of instruction for their children, the "Petit Seminary High School"⁹ was improved. A new syllabus was introduced. The general standard of studies was raised. In 1883, the boarding attached to it, was closed. The number of students was then 500. In 1880, the subvention of 3000 francs which was granted till then by the government, was suppressed. The Mission was to go through a period of difficulties and struggles against the rising of secularization in France.

In the British Territory, the Vicariate of Pondicherry had only three "High Schools". They were at Vellore, Tranquebar and Cuddalore. And it must be admitted that these Schools were not up to the standard because of lack of students (each school had only 15 to 20 students) and qualified teachers. However Mgr. Laouenan was very much interested in the education of Boys. As to the Elementary Schools, the Government introduced important reforms in 1879, in its system of education. New rules were set up for the opening of the Primary Schools.

The teachers who were to be appointed had to be qualified and recognized by the Government. Mrg. Laouenan demanded that the priests follow the requirements asked by the Government and make use of the facilities offered by them. In 1861 there were only 27 Elementary Schools in the British Territory, but due to the efforts of Mgr. Laouenan the number increased. In 1892 there were 161 Elementary Schools.

In 1892 there were 161 Elementary Schools in the diocese Those little Schools from purely apostolic point of view, were certainly more important than the High Schools and the Colleges. Most of the Fathers tried more and more to open schools, of that kind, in their villages, and gradually, quality came to be added to quantity. At Pondicherry, the Petit- Seminare- College, in the hands of Fr. Escanda Senior, recorded in spite of the official opposition, an era of remarkable prosperity. In 1922, there were 900 students. A new building was constructed. In 1925, there were 1000 of them, divided into three sections:

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Conclusion

The MEP missionaries along with the Sisters of various congregations sacrificed their lives for the education and upliftment of Pondicherry. They played a vital role in constructing a new society which was shiny with equal status and human dignity. Thus it can be said that missionaries have left their foot prints in all the fields especially in Education. Thank to MEP missionaries for their wonderful work they done in the field of Education and they had were the pioneers in a number of things.

Footnotes

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