

EVANGELIZATION OF THE JESUITS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ANTONIO CRIMINALI

By

Theeba A

*Associate Professor of History, Rani Anna Government College for Women
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India*

Abstract

Ignatius Loyola founded the Society of Jesus on 27th September 1540. The Jesuits were able to convert millions of people to Catholicism. Francis Xavier, Henrique Henriques and many others spread Christianity in south India. Antonio Criminali was one such Jesuit who came to India to spread Catholicism. During the process of evangelization, he was murdered in a war near Vedhalai and his body was not found. He could be termed as a 'Forsaken Jesuit', because nothing was done to locate his remains or to pursue further research over the issue. This article analyses about the evangelization of Jesuits with special reference to Antonio Criminali.

Keywords: *jesuits, criminali, evangelization, paravas, caraiyar, badagas, nayaks, portugese.*

Introduction

India is a land of rich culture, tradition and heritage. It attracted foreigners all over the world due to its fabulous wealth and treasures. Persians, Turks, Mongols, Huns and later Europeans swarmed into India to loot and plunder. The Jesuits on the other hand entered into India to convert the natives to Catholicism and they too succeeded to a great extent. They paid a lot of meritorious services and some of the Jesuits lost their life also. John-De-Britto has been remembered by everyone as a martyr next to that of St.Thomas, but there is another martyr before John-De-Britto, that is Antonio Criminali. He was forgotten and forsaken by the Jesuits also. This

article tries to explain about the evangelization of the Jesuits in general and Antonio Criminali 'The Forsaken Jesuit' in particular.

Christianity in India

The shadow of the cross and Christ fall on the land of Bharath in the First Century A.D. (Tom 464). According to Malabar tradition, Christianity was introduced in India by the apostle Thomas in A.D.52. In the 15th century when there was a quest for overseas discoveries and adventures, the Crown of Portugal volunteered to undertake the implanting of cross in the far-off lands which its mariners discovered (Joseph 288). The Portuguese were the

first Europeans to establish their power in India, with the sword in one hand and cross in another (Panikkar 158). As the Portuguese came to India both for spices and soul, almost every ship that sailed to India had numerous clerics who belonged to different religious orders such as Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians etc (Indegenous Rel. Congrns 11). Under the Portuguese political and military protection, these missionaries were able to convert the Indians first in Goa and later all along the coasts of both Malabar and Coramandal. Apart from Malabar area, Christianity spread at a commendable speed only in the sixteenth century in the east coast of Tamilagam. Political instability and insecurity of the people paved the way for the smooth spreading of Christianity. For several years after conversion they were Catholics only for namesake. Among this kind of circumstances, Fr. Francis Xavier, Fr. Antonio Criminali and Fr. Henrique Henriques went around the fishery coast and taught them prayers and guided them to live a real Christian life.

Society of Jesus

Counter Reformation in Europe introduced some reforms in Catholicism. Ignatius Loyola's 'Society of Jesus' was one of the active institutions which worked for the

good of Roman Catholic Religion (Francis 31). Ignatius Loyola was a Spanish soldier. He liked by most of the men of his time, dreamt of bravery, fame and wealth. He was severely injured in the battle of Pamplona and was forced to retire. While in rest he read so many books, which completely transformed his life. He wanted to serve God not the king. 'For Greater Glory of God' (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*) became his motto. Giving up all his possessions and ambitions, he and his six companions took the vows of religious life. They were officially approved as religious priests on 27th September 1540 by Pope Paul III (Francis 32). Jesuits travelled all over the world and evangelized the people. They imparted education to the poor and the down trodden.

Conversion of Paravas

Due to political and economic instability the Paravas of the pearl fishery coast were converted into Christianity. The Mass conversion in 1536 was not followed by any organized missionary work in the fishery coast. The scanty presence of the Franciscans fathers did not bring any change in the lives of the Paravas. Only after the arrival of Xavier in 1542, a true Christian life was promoted among them (Xavier 61). The Himalayan task was very systematically schemed, organized and

carried out by Xavier and his successors. After visiting all the Christian villages, Xavier narrated his experiences in his letters to the then superior General, Ignatius Loyola. The former wrote that there was no one to instruct the new converts in faith, they could say nothing more about their faith than that they were Christians. To put it in Xavier's own words, they did not know the difference between their right hand and their left (Xavier 60). Since Xavier did not know Tamil, he assembled those who were more knowledgeable and sought out individuals who understood both his language and native language. These individuals helped Xavier to translate Latin words into Tamil (Xavier 63). He began with rudimentary catechism that consisted of the sign of the cross, confessing that there were three persons in one God, the creed, the commandments, the father, Hail Mary, Salve Regina and the Confiteor (Xavier 62). He used to move with the bell in his hand around the streets of each village and called upon women, gentlemen, laborers, slaves and children to come out of their houses and gathered them in one place and taught prayers (Xavier 45). The Jesuit missionaries taught both catechism and moral instruction to the fisher folk. The exemplary life of the neo Christians put even the Portuguese to shame (Joseph 46).

Achievements of Jesuits

The missionaries established elementary schools near the churches in all villages. Local children were mixed with the Portuguese children in the schools. Each year the viceroy gave 4000 pieces of gold to the persons who were very diligent in teaching the Christian doctrine in the village (Joseph 17). After the conversion of the paravas, the Portuguese customs, arts and ceremonies were naturally imported into the fishery coast. The Christian religion itself, as was presented under the guise of the Portuguese sense, viewed the paravas as highly differentiated from the rest of the Christians in Tamilnadu both in social and in religious practices (Venantius 154). Though the Jesuit priests had an ardent desire to spread the goods new yet they were not liberated from their racial inclination towards the 'superior culture'. Xavier was very sad that he could not convert many Brahmanas. He mentioned in one of his letters that after having worked tirelessly for two years, he could convert only one Brahman (Xavier 70). After witnessing the attitude of the Jesuit missionaries, conversion took place among other communities also. In 1595, about 800 Hindu embraced Christianity. The officials of the Nayak of Madurai also become Christians. The Jesuits were particular in converting the coastal communities like

mukkuvars and caraiyars. The Caraiyars lived in Kombuturai, Punnaikayal and Mannar in the northern part of the fishery coast. They were employed as pearl fishers by the paravas. They had been converted even before the arrival of Xavier (Caldwell 225).

Xavier also baptized the caraiyars in six or seven villages. In his letter dated January 15th, 1544 he says:

“As to the number who became Christians you may understand then from this, that it after happened to me, to be hardly able to use my hands from the fatigue of baptizing; often in a single day I have baptized whole villages” (Caldwell 226). Though the work which Xavier had done on the fishery coast and in Travancore was enormous, still more remained to be done. As helpers he had only a few secular priests, and still fewer members of the society. He started, therefore to write to St. Ignatius in Rome and to Fr. Simon Rodriguez in Lisbon, urging them to send workers to the lord's vineyard (Ferroli 128). The impassioned appeals did not remain unheard. A few men came from Europe to India, to share Xavier's labors. Some remained in Goa, some in Cochin, others on the fishery coast. Among them were, Fr. Antonio Criminali, who was appointed superior of the Mission on the fishery coast (Heras 151).

Antonio Criminali

Antonio Criminali was born on 7th February 1520. He is the very first martyr of the Society of Jesus (Arch Diocese 132). He was born in Sissa, in the diocese of Parma, Italy. He received his early education from the local parish priest and later went to Parma to study for the priesthood and was ordained a sub deacon at the age of eighteen (Henry 22). He became acquainted with Fr. Peter Favre when the latter came to Parma in 1539 to Preach. He made the spiritual experiences for thirty days under Fr. Favre's direction. Antonio did not join the society after the retreat although some of his friends did. In September 1541, he made his parents' farewell and dressed as a pilgrim, walked and begged his way to Rome. He arrived in Rome two months later and immediately went to see Fr. Ignatius. He was humble to ask to be admitted as a candidate when he spoke to the founder and instead merely requested to help the fathers by doing various household chores. Fr. Ignatius gladly took him in as he perceived Antonio to be a young man ready to do God's will (Jesuit).

Shortly after Antonio's arrival in Rome, he learnt that his mother had died and that his father was deeply distressed and feared that he too would die from grief. Fr.

Ignatius sensitive to others problems and needs, suggested Antonio to return home to comfort his father and at the same time assured Antonio that, he would be accepted as a novice on his return. As it transpired Antonio's visit to Sissa to see his father was not long because his father recovered from his depression. So, Antonio returned to Rome and left for Portugal to complete his studies at the University of Coimbra and was ordained there on 6th January 1544 (Vazhavan 5).

Voyage to India

Ignatius Loyola sent Fr. Antonia Criminali to assist Xavier. He and his companion embarked on 22nd April 1544, but their ship was forced to return to the port because of a violent storm. They finally secured another passage on 29th March 1545 and arrived in Goa, India on 2nd September 1545. There he was assigned to work along the fishery coast from Ramnad to Cape Comorin near Malabar, an area of about 130 miles long by the mission superior, Fr. Francis Xavier. Although Fr. Criminali was young, only twenty six years old he was appointed as a mission superior. Throughout the three years in India he established stations and left a priest or a catechist in charge of each village. Fr. Criminali would make monthly visit to each station on foot disregarding

the heat, cold and rain. He was loved by all including non Christians because of his gentle and amiable character. Fr. Xavier in a letter to St. Ignatius wrote like this *'Antonio Criminali is at Cape Comorin, with six others of the society. Indeed, he is a holy man, and seems to have been born to work in these lands. Men like him can achieve a good deal. I wish you would send us more of them. He is superior of those at Cape Comorin and is beloved by native Christians, pagans and Moslems. But the love that our lord has for him is beyond telling'* (Vazhavan 6).

Criminali in Vedhalai

Fr. Antonio Criminali who was in charge of the Malabar mission and visited the villages of east coast in 1549. He saw the newly converted paravas and cariyars in the Mannar area. The cariyars who were pearl and chunk fishers like their Moorish neighbors readily accepted baptism, as their fellow castes had done in the south. Three leagues farther east along the flat, sandy coast was Vedalai famous for the victory which De Sousa had achieved over the moors there in 1537 (George 348). From Vedalai the tongue of land stretched for another league and a half to the east still it reached the shallows of chilaw which separated caylon from the mainland. Within the shallows was a chain of reefs 4

½ leagues is length, stretching from the island of Rameswaram in the west to that of manner in the east. According to the Hindus, there reefs, which were a barrier to shipping were the remains of a bridge which the ape god Hanuman had built for the army of Rama (George 349). There was also a dam and a passage constructed for the Hindu pilgrims to visit Rameswaram Temple. Contrary to the advice of Fr. Criminali the Portuguese commander Joao Fernandez Correa had established a toll gate to collect fees from the Hindu pilgrims who crossed by boat. This greatly inconvenienced the pilgrims who complained to their Brahmana priests who in turn informed Viswanatha Nayaka and he deputed Vithalaraya, (Heras 156) who deputed the Badagas.

Badaga Invasion

The Badagas already committed atrocities against the paravas and Xavier had witnessed it. Vithala undertook his second invasion to the northern part of Fishery coast in 1549. Six thousand Telugu soldiers marched against Vedalai. They were helped by the Muslims who had been driven out of the fishery coast by the Portuguese (Krishnaswami 239). The Portuguese captain and his garrison sought refuge in the islands off the coast. Fr. Antonio Criminali helped the paravas to get into

the boats to safer place. Fr. Antonio Criminali refused to board and stood with the remaining 400 victims who were surrounded by the badagas (Vazhavan 6).

Martyrdom

As he could neither advance nor retreat, Fr. Criminali knelt down in their midst and raised his hands in prayer and waited for the blow to come. One of them jabbed him with a lance, while others ripped his cassocks off. When they left Fr. Criminali with blood streaming from his wound, he tried to make his way to the St. Vincent chapel to die but was soon surrounded by badagas again. This time one of them thrust a lance into his breast and as he struggled to the chapel, a badaga rode by and severed his head from his body and carried his head and cassock and placed them as an offering on their shrine's alter (Heras 157). Fr. Criminali's body was later buried hurriedly in a very shallow grave by the Christians who feared that the badagas would return and subject the body to further indignities. Two days later they returned to bury it deeper, waiting for the day when they could place it in fitting tomb. Sadly when the time came to transfer Fr. Criminali's body to the church, the Christians could not find the body despite all attempts. Either they had forgotten where the actual burial place was or the

strong monsoon rains could have lashed over the sandy beach changing the contours so drastically that the Christians could not recognize where the place was (Vazhavan 7). Fr. Criminali was 29 years old at the time of his death. He is the first martyr of Jesuit and second martyr of India after St. Thomas. The death of Fr. Criminali was due to the greedy aspirations of the Portuguese to gain more wealth. They considered material benefits more than the ecclesiastical services. They failed to protect the Jesuits and the poor converts who lost their lives. According to local traditions, more than 400 paravas and Caraiyar lost their lives with Fr. Criminali. But we do not have any written evidence about them (Arul Santhiyagu). At present many people are coming to the Holy place of Vedalai where the martyr shed his blood (Jayaraj). Though, the Jesuits converted and evangelized the local people. They could not settle the caste problems. There were often clashes between the paravars and caraiyar (Francis 40). The foolish activities of Portuguese led to the downfall of the evangelical activities of the Jesuits for sometimes. The Jesuits were suppressed in 1773 (Justin Prabhu). The

services rendered by the Jesuits are remarkable and their educational institutions are still in top positions throughout India.

Conclusion

In addition to evangelization, the Jesuits did lots of services to improve the education in India. They worked with common people and engaged in more social works. Their community development programmes are highly commendable. Irrespective of all their services the episode of Antonio Criminali remains as a speck in their eyes. With their large research facilities they could have collected the details about the martyrdom of Criminali. His name is not brought to limelight by the Jesuits. People of Vedhalai still believe that Criminali is among them and most of the people in and around Rameshwaram name their male child as Criminali. Whereas, Christians of outside Rameshwaram seldom hear about him. Still now some people are searching for his remains. It is suggested that if the Jesuits initiate the Archaeological Survey of India to undertake research in Vedhalai, some fruitful evidence could be gathered.

References

- Arch Diocese of Madurai Origin and Development*, Nobili Pastoral Centre, Madurai, p.132.
- Arul Santhiyagu. Parish Priest Thangachi Madam, Personal Interview. 11 March 2018.
- Caldwell, R. *A History of Tinnevely*. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1982.
- Ferroli, D. S.J. *The Jesuits in Malabar*. vol. I, Calicul, 1939.
- Francis, A. 'Jesuit Letters and Tamil Social history', *Tamil Kalai Journal (Tamil)*, vol. 3, no.1, 2, 1985.
- George Schurhammer, S.J. *Francis Xavier, His Life, His Times*. vol. II, India, 1541 – 1545. Translated by Joseph Costelloe, M. S.J., The Jesuit Historical Institute, Via dei Penitenziei, 20, Rome, Italy, 1977.
- Henry Heras. *South India under the Vijayanagar Empire*. vol. I, New Delhi, 1980.
- Henry James Coleridge. *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*. vol. I, 4th ed., London, 1927.
- Jayaraj. Parish Priest, Thangachi Madam, Personal Interview. 11 March 2018.
- Joseph Wicki, editor. *Documenta Indica*. vol. XVII, (1595-1587), 1988. p.17.
- Joseph Wicki, editor. *Documenta Indica*. vol. XII, (1580-1583), 1972.
- Justin Prabhu, S.J. Personal Interview. 12 March 2018.
- Krishnaswari, A. *The Tamil Country under Vijayanagar*. Annamalai Nagar, 1964. p. 239.
- Letters of Xavier, January 15, 1544. pp. 45-65.
- Letters of Xavier, October 28, 1452. pp. 60-65.
- Panikkar, K. M. *A History of Kerala 1498 – 1801*. Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, 1959.
- Saints and Martyrs, S. G. Anthony Criminali, The Jesuits, Jesuit Singapore Website. www.jesuit.org.sg.
- The Indigenous Religious Congregations India and Ceylon*. Madurai, 1948.
- Thekkedath, J. *History of Christianity in India*. vol. II, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 1982.

Tom Dowley. *The History of Christianity*.
England, 1964.

Urbania, Roma, 1977. (Unpublished
Thesis). pp. 154 – 155.

Venantius Fernando, S.J. *The Impact of the
Portuguese Padroado on the Pearl
Fishery Coast*. Pontificia Universities,

Vettivayal vazhavan. *Arul Manakkum
Thirukovilgal*. (Tamil), Sivagangai,
2014. pp. 5-7.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Theeba A is presently working as an Associate Professor of History in Rani Anna Government College at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India. She received Ph.D from V.O.C. College at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, in Questions and Answers in Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly from 1952-1976. She has presented 15 papers in National seminars and 3 papers in International seminars besides online publication. She has acted as resource person in National and International seminars. At present she is guiding six scholars. She is the NAAC coordinator of her college since 2017.
