

Original Research Article

Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil an Exemplary Missionary in the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church

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Abstract: A section of historians argue that it is but because of great men's thoughts and actions only history is being created. It is true that the thoughts and actions of the great men create political changes, social growth, economic improvement and cultural growth. For instance, at the world level we can see a large number of activities of great men and their impacts on society. Like that in Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu particularly in Marthandam region changes happened because of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil. He was born in a rich family and opted for priesthood and selected Marthandam region as his mission field and through his thoughts and actions, he changed the history of Marthandam region. This paper illustrates the services rendered by Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil for the promotion of Marthandam region.

Keywords: Catholic Mission, Church, Congregation, Educational History, Malankara, Missionary, Social transformation, Women's Empowerment.

Introduction

Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish historian rightly defined that "History is nothing but the innumerable biography of Great Men". It is true that all the political, social and economic changes are because of great men. For

instance, in ancient India, the thoughts and actions of Lord Buddha, created a new religion that spread not only in India but also in countries across the world. Similarly, during the medieval period, it is because of Pope Urban II crusades were fought that killed lakhs of people and created so much destruction in medieval Europe. Likewise in the modern period, the thoughts and actions of Martin Luther created reformation that spread in countries across the world and changed the course of modern history. In the same way in the modern history of Tamil Nadu, the thoughts and actions of Periyar E.V.R. initiated the self-respect and rationalist movements that spread throughout the state and changed the history of modern Tamil Nadu to a greater extent. In the same way Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil, a Malankara Syrian Catholic Missionary, by his thoughts and actions changed the history of Marthandam region. This paper elaborates the details about Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil and his services in the Marthandam region.



Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil (1903-1983)

Life History

Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil, the founding father of the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church and the Congregation of Daughters of Mary at Marthandam hailed from a small village at Pala in Kerala. He was born on 24th May 1903 as the fifth child of Mr. Kuruvila Kuzhinjalil and Mrs. Maria Ellavungal. He had four sisters and one brother. The term Kuzhinjalil refers to the title of their family. During his childhood he got better education and he was well versed in Malayalam and Tamil languages. After completing his education, Joseph expressed his passion to become a priest to his parents. With the blessing of his parents, he joined the minor seminary at Pala in Kerala. Then he was sent to a major seminary at Aluva in Kerala where he studied Latin, English and Sanskrit languages too. He was blessed by His Excellency Rev. James Kalancheri, the Bishop of Changanashery Diocese and got his ordination and became a priest on 17th December 1933. Following that, he conducted his first Holy Mass on 23rd December 1933. Fr. Joseph worked at first in Ellanthottam church in Kerala as a first parish priest. During that period, the newly formed Malankara Catholic Church did not have enough priests. Therefore, His Excellency Rev. Mar Ivanios, the Archbishop of Trivandrum invited priests from other dioceses. Thus, Fr. Joseph went to Trivandrum and joined the Trivandrum Archdiocese on 29th June 1934. With the advice of His Excellency Archbishop Mar Ivanios, Rev. Fr. Joseph reached Marthandam at present Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu in 1934.

Condition of Marthandam on the Arrival of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil

Marthandam was an important region in the erstwhile Travancore princely state of India. While he reached Marthandam, the caste system was deep rooted in the society. According to the census report of 1931 the total population of Travancore was 5,095,973. Different communities like Brahmins, Nairs, Mudaliars, Chetties, Nadars, Pulayas and Parayas prevailed in the society. Among them high caste Brahmins and Nairs dominated the society. Among the suppressed communities in South Travancore, Nadar community was the most important one. These people lived in present- day Taluks of Kanyakumari district like Thovalai, Agestheeswaram, Kalkkulam, Vilavancode and Neyattinkarai. These people suffered much under the caste system.

In addition to that illiteracy prevailed in the society. Education spread only among the high caste people like Nairs. According to the census reports of 1901, 1911 and 1921 the literacy rate of males in Nair community was 39.5%, 41.9% and 42.9% respectively. But the literacy rate of Nadar male was 15.5%, 18.1% and 20%. Though the conditions of males were like this, and then imagine the literacy condition of females of that period.

Superstition was one of the social evils of that time. People used either sticks or an iron belt to protect themselves from the evil spirits during the night. People believed that they were surrounded by a ghostly company of powers and one presiding over cholera, another over small pox, another over cattle disease and so on. Peikoils or demon shrines were numerous. When they were descending in deep wells they were attacked by poison on gas and died. They considered it an act of the devil and they believed that during night the devil calls loudly in order to lure people from their homes into the jungle and to kill them. Moreover, the people believed both good and bad omen. The sound of lizards in and around the house was considered a good omen. The howling of owls was considered to be an evil omen. If a death happened in a house on an auspicious day the whole family should leave the house and live in another house for a period of 41 days. Each family had their own deity and used to celebrate a week to please that deity. Thus, they believed in demon worship and they practiced superstitious rituals.

In addition to that the economic condition of the people was too bad. Because in those days the people of Marthandam region were engaged in palm tree climbing. These people did not find a source to get three meals a day. Further the basic requirements such as food, shelter, dress which were also not available for many. Therefore, people suffered a lot due to poverty.

The conditions of women were very pathetic. They had low social and legal status in the society. Girls after maturity were not allowed to go out for fear that demons would molest them. In the marriage matter also, they never ask the will and wish of the bride about her future partner. Thus, women's aspirations and desires were totally ignored. They were also denied the right to education. Without education the majority of women spent their time mostly within the four walls of the kitchen. The miseries of the widows were untold and they were not allowed to remarry. Newly married people were not allowed to meet a widow and a mother whose baby had died must not even touch the child of another until she gives birth to another child.

Added to the existing fuel in those days cholera also frequently affected the society. Cholera was considered as a deadly disease and so the people feared the same. Soon after the arrival of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil at North Street of Marthandam, cholera entered the area in 1936. Not a single family was left to

escape the clutches of mortal disease. In this milieu Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil came to Marthandam and he started his spiritual and social work in that area.

Formation of Mission and Churches

Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil's name was most intimately associated in the History of the Malankara Syrian Catholic (MSC) church in Marthandam region. Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil came for the first time to Marthandam on 29th June 1934. The New place appeared to him as a vineyard full of harvest. Although the people spoke Tamil, mixed with Malayalam words, it was not an obstacle for him to get into his service. As a vigilant servant of the Lord, he made use of every opportunity to extend his mission work to the areas like Marthandam, Kattachivilai (Vimalapuram), Chellamkonam, Vettumony, Pacode, Kulappuram, Kaliyakkavilai, Kulathur, Ambilikonam, Manjalumoodu, Aruviyode, Poonthakala, Kanjirakode, Koonam, Attoor, Unnamalakadai, Azhakiyamandapam, Soosaipuram, Panachamoodu etc.



Rented House of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil at North Street in Marthandam

The people of that locality consisted mainly of Hindu- Nadars, with some scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It was a big task to do the preliminary work among the poor, uneducated people of that locality. He made friendship with many, and this friendship helped him draw them to Jesus. So many people converted to Catholicism. The baptism register of the Christuraja Malankara Syrian Catholic church at North Street Marthandam records testify that on 21st August 1934, 38 people from 18 families received baptism. A letter written by His Excellency Mar Ivanios in 1936 proves that Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil had baptized more than 3000 people within two years of his mission work.

For that he constructed several churches in various places such as St. Joseph M.S.C. church at Panachamoodu (3rd July 1934), St. Amaloorpava Mary church at Vimalapuram (29th April 1934), St. Thomas church at Ambilikonam (1934), Christuraja Church at North Street Marthandam (1934), St. George church at Chellamkonam (30th September 1936), St. Thomas church at Attoor (5th May 1957), St. Mary church at Kuzhithurai (1958), St. Joseph church at Unnamalaikadai (1960), St. Joseph church at Susaipuram (1963) etc.



Christuraja Malankara Syrian Catholic Church at Marthandam



St. Joseph's Malankara Syrian Catholic Church at Panachamoodu



St. George Malankara Syrian Catholic Church at Chellamkonam

Founding of the New Congregation Daughters of Mary

The idea of the foundation of Daughters of Mary (DM) was a brain-child of Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil. During that time, many social problems were faced by the women of this region. He wanted to alleviate their problems and realized that to achieve his target the best tool would be used by the nuns. For this purpose, he asked Archbishop of Trivandrum His Excellency Mar Ivanios having a Congregation of women to help the mission. The archbishop, understanding the zeal of the young priest, granted permission for the same, thus Rev. Fr. Joseph went ahead, to his own home parish. There was a noble lady by name Aleyamma Kallarackel, who was so much interested in the progress of evangelization at Marthandam. When Rev. Fr. Joseph expressed his longing to her, and she had a very positive response. Thus, with the generosity and dedication of Rev. Mother Superior Mary Kallarackal D.M (co-founder), Rev. Sr. Agnes Vadakkan D.M, Rev. Sr. Theresa Kochukalayil (second and third founding members

respectively), the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary was inaugurated at Marthandam on 8th May 1938. It was a turning point in the ministry of Rev. Fr. Joseph.



The Convent Constructed by Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil

Thus, through the construction of churches and the foundation of a congregation he wanted to spread Christianity among the native people. But unfortunately, he never gets satisfaction. Because the people of that period were submerged in superstitious beliefs. Hence, he thought that education only could open the eyes of the people and therefore he set aside his mission work and gave due importance to educational, economic and social activities.

Educational Services

During the arrival of Rev. Fr. Joseph, illiteracy was filled in the society. The people of this area had to know even the basic calculation of money. Because of illiteracy and ignorance people faced so many problems. Understanding the condition of the people, he started his educational activities in the society.

At first Rev. Fr. Joseph gave more importance to adult education. He thought that through adult education he could change society easily. But his target was not attained its real goal. Understanding the importance of children's education Rev. Fr. Joseph started the first mission school named Queen Mary's School at North Street in Marthandam on 2nd December 1946. The Daughters of Mary sisters went to nearby houses and brought a good number of children to school and they were given free dress and study materials. The sisters rendered free service as there was no remuneration for teachers from the government. For the purpose of higher education, primary schools were changed to middle school; thereafter it raised its standard as higher secondary level. Now this school is known as Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil Memorial Higher Secondary School in order to venerate the services of Rev. Fr. Joseph.



Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil Memorial Malankara Syrian Catholic Higher Secondary School at Marthandam

Moreover, he started several schools in the surroundings of Marthandam region such as Primary school at Kattachivilai (1946), Primary school at Kirathoor (1947) etc. Thus, he got success in the field of education. Yet he faced a setback in his services because of the lack of financial background of the common people.

Economic Services

Understanding the value of financial growth Rev. Fr. Joseph gave more importance to economic activities. For that by his encouragement, sisters started brush manufacturing small scale industry. At that time, it offered much relief to the people who did not have even one meal a day. The fibers of palmyra leaves and oxtails were used for making brushes. Bee keeping was another area of interest in those days. Hence on the advice of Rev. Fr. Joseph, sisters of the daughters of Mary convent sent at Y.M.C.A. (Young Men's Christian Association) in Marthandam in order to get the bee keeping training. Later they imparted this skill to many people in and around Marthandam and it also became a thriving business for many people at Kattachivilai in 1944 and it was shifted to Marthandam in April 1945.

After a while his attention fell on making sand paper. Men went from house to house collecting pieces of glass. Women powdered and mixed them with some other chemicals and made three kinds of powder which were used for making sand papers. Hat making was another handicraft business by which Rev. Fr. Joseph tried to ensure a day's wage to the poor. The hats made by them were taken to Alapuzha for sale and it was a profitable business that continued for years. Nevertheless, he started sewing, embroidery, mat making, rubber tapping etc. for the financial improvement of the common people. The people involved in such works secured employment throughout the year and sufficient money to live. Thus, he tried to solve the financial problem, especially poverty, from the life of the people of Marthandam region.

Social Services

Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil always had a soft corner to the poor and helpless. Balamandiram, old age home, rehabilitation centre, family orientation centre and daycare centre were some other institutions started by

Rev. Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil and still it offers service to many. On the advice of Rev. Fr. Joseph, D.M. sisters gave protection to some girls in the Daughters of Mary Convent at Marthandam in 1950. Later as their number increased a separate orphanage was constructed for them on 20th August 1962. Moreover, he took some initiative measures for the construction of a boy's orphanage at Kaliyal in Kanyakumari district. Thus, he rendered his valuable social services for the betterment of the common people.

Health Services

When Rev. Fr. Joseph landed in Marthandam he saw the unhealthy and untidy condition of the people. They had no proper drainage system, toilets, bath rooms and also wells. Thus, they suffered very much under unhygienic conditions. One day on the way of his travelling in the North Street of Marthandam, a pregnant lady suffered much out of labour pain. People rounded that lady and she wept a lot because of her pain. The family members of that lady thought that it was an activity of the devil. Therefore, they called Poojari (temple priest) and he conducted some kinds of witchcraft poojas. But it ended in failure. In this critical juncture, Rev. Fr. Joseph went to that home and he gave medicine to that lady. After that she gave birth to a male child. This incident shows the pathetic condition of the people of Marthandam region in those days in the field of health.

Soon after Rev. Fr. Joseph's arrival at North Street in Marthandam, Cholera entered the area in 1936. Not a single family was left to escape the clutches of mortal disease. But the young and daring priest with a heart overflowing with love and compassion for the sick visited the affected families by giving them medical help as well as spiritual help especially by his prayer. He found out grass oil (Pulthailam) was a very effective medicine and through this medicine he was able to save thousands of people in and around Marthandam.

In this juncture Rev. Fr. Joseph at first taught the people the importance of sanitation. He told them that an unhygienic situation only creates more diseases. Hence along with the Daughters of Mary sisters and Herphominaras medicine box, he visited the house of the people, checked the health condition of the people and gave medicine to them. Nevertheless, he gave more importance to pregnant ladies and their health. He gave nutritious food to them and also to the poor children. He also gave more importance to the protection of the environment and preached among the people to wear clean cloth. Moreover, he gave financial assistance to the people for digging wells in their houses. He also gave more importance to rain water harvesting in order to increase the level of ground water.

On those days many people used to go to the Daughters of Mary convent in Marthandam in the morning and evening to dress their wounds. Therefore, on the advice of Rev. Fr. Joseph and some of the sisters were sent for a nursing course. In December 1943, Rev. Mother Mary (the co-founder of D.M. convent Marthandam) had to undergo an appendectomy at the C.S.I. hospital at Neyyoor. Again, on the advice of him, some sisters were sent to Rawalpindi for a nursing course. On 25th September 1944, when the sisters returned from Rawalpindi, they accompanied him and his work became more effective and efficient. Moreover, he used to take patients into various hospitals. In this critical situation he realized the importance of a hospital in the Marthandam region. Thus, he started the construction work of a hospital. The first mission hospital named St. Joseph hospital was established at Anchal on 17th May 1953. In 1962 another hospital named St. Joseph hospital was inaugurated at Panachamoodu, an area without any health facility at that time. The sisters took to running dispensaries and mobile clinics in many other places with the sole intention of providing affordable basic healthcare to the poorest of the poor.

Estimate

Thus, the Marthandam region before the arrival of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil was a very backward place with so many handicaps. But because of his social services and his concrete works undertaken in and around the Marthandam region made Marthandam as a centre of high literacy, highly cultured and became a developed area with all facilities. All these achievements happened because of the Good Samaritan services undertaken by Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil at Marthandam region. Therefore, people recognized the efforts taken by Rev. Fr. Joseph and they called him as their 'Great Father'. In order to recognize his services, the Catholic Church gave the title Monsignor (Msgr) to him. After fulfilling the will and wishes of God on earth, he breathed his last breath on 23rd August 1983.



Tomb of Msgr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil

He was buried in the church campus of Christuraja Malankara Syrian Catholic Church at North Street, Marthandam in Kanyakumari district. Though he lost his physical body on earth still he is living in the midst of the people through his eternal services.

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