

The Educational Activities of the Portuguese in Jaffna - A Historical view

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Introduction

The Portuguese landed in Sri Lanka at the beginning of the 16th century. One of their objectives of coming to the eastern areas was to spread their religion. Thus they engaged in spreading the catholic religion in the captured areas. Education was one of the ways they used in spreading Christianity. They constructed schools very close to the church. They were keen in spreading their religion to the students who came to the schools, whether they liked or not. They succeeded in this activity to some extent. As a result of the educational activities of the Portuguese the traditional education pattern in Jaffna tended to become weak. But the people of Jaffna did not lose completely the Hindu tradition and the Hindu education. But it was evident in another form not only during the time of Portuguese but during the successive Dutch and the British period.

In this research, different aspects are analyzed. They include education pattern of Jaffna prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, their way of handling education with the objective of spreading their religion in Jaffna and the difficulties met in the traditional education system of Jaffna.

I have used the primary sources for this article. They are the Portuguese documents, archaeological and other historical materials. I have also utilized as secondary sources, the relevant researches, other books, articles in the journals, magazines and internet based on primary sources.

Education system of Jaffna prior to the arrival of Portuguese

At the outset, it is very important to understand the educational system found in Jaffna before the arrival of Portuguese in Jaffna and later their control and implementation of their system of religious education. At that time Jaffna was in the Hindu atmosphere having the traditions based on Hinduism and the Hindu educational system. One can observe the influence of Hinduism in the cultural aspect of peoples' life. The educational pattern of Jaffna before the arrival of the Portuguese in Sri Lanka was not an organized one. Moreover the people of Jaffna, did not have the habit of writing on papers Generally the educational system of Sri Lanka was based on ancient Hindu education in the Tamil area while in the Southern areas it was based on Buddhism. Sometimes, these were known as native systems of education. At the initial stages, the education was in the hands of the Brahmins and others. The residences of the teachers were the main centers of education. This was the traditional system of education called the Guru -Kula Education. After the introduction of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the 3rd century B.C the Buddhist monks took the responsibility of education (Haivasam, D.P.J, 1969).

The Hindu education in Jaffna was seen at Nallur, Uduppiddy, Puloly, Velanai, Araly, Atchuvely, Karainagar, Varani, Chunnkam, Thellipalai, Kopai, and Madduvil. A small category of people in the Jaffna society received this type of education and they passed their knowledge to others (Sasikala, K, 2001). The subjects taught were Tamil literature, Tamil grammar, Hinduism, Logic, Astrology, Sanskrit, and Ayurvedic medicine. But after the 13th century during the times of Jaffna kingdom, the kings took the responsibility of providing education and considered it as their duty (Ambikaipagan, K, 1969).

This traditional pattern of education fulfilled the needs of the Jaffna people to some extent. It was accepted that the people of the society based on agriculture were expected to read and write. In the latter period the village schools provided the primary education to Jaffna people. This system of education in Jaffna was closely linked with the Hindu tradition as Jaffna was having close contacts with the south India. In this background the educational pattern closely related to Hinduism was prevalent in different parts of Jaffna. The general objectives of education were developing Tamil language and literature, imparting the religious values and moral character. The *Brahmanical* or Hindu education included the reading and writing of Tamil language, the study of Tamil grammar and Tamil Literature. Besides, the students were trained in religious worship and good conduct (Sivalingaraja, S, 1983). But this native educational pattern declined after the Portuguese brought Jaffna under their control and some people showed interest in Catholicism (Arumugam, V, 1976).

Arrival of Portuguese in Jaffna

Jaffna was under the complete control of the Portuguese for 37 years (A.D 1621-1650). During this period there were many changes in education. Before the arrival of the Europeans in Jaffna, South India influenced mostly the social life of the people. The European civilization philosophy and education influenced by the Greek civilization guided the people of Europe. This had its influence in the contemporary Jaffna civilization, philosophy and educational activities after the Europeans conquered Jaffna. In this way the life style, civilization and the educational activities based on the Catholic religion made changes in the life of Jaffna people. In this

respect, following the Catholicism of the Portuguese, several changes took place among the people of Jaffna in their life styles civilization and educational activities. The changes took place in the educational activities of the people of Jaffna combined both the traditional and new perspectives.

The European countries like Portugal and Spain were interested in discovering the new sea routes in the 15th century. The main reason for this was that the land route between the eastern nations with the western nation through the central Asian areas was blocked (Ilayathamby, M, 1969). As a result many attempts were made to discover a route India by going round the South African Cape. Thus the Portuguese arrived in India in 1498. Following that, they made Goa as their head quarter of their activities in the East. Moreover they paid attention to Sri Lanka also in spreading their religion and engaging in the trade especially the cinnamon. The Portuguese accidentally landed in Sri Lanka in the early 16th century (Anthansiz, R.G). There after they used the political conflicts prevailed in the kingdoms as the favourable factors to expand their power (Pieris, P.E, 1995). They gradually captured the Sri Lankan coastal areas in order to achieve their objectives. After many years of contact the Portuguese finally invaded Jaffna under by the commander DED Olivera in 1619 (Abeyasinghe, Tikiri, 1986) and brought it under their complete control in 1621.

Following this the Portuguese declared Jaffna as an administrative unit and a captain major was appointed look after this area. The Mannar area which was solely administered by the Portuguese from 1560 until Jaffna was conquered (Pathmanathan, S, 2001). Thereafter this Kingdom was very powerful in economy also. When the Portuguese conquered the Jaffna kingdom, it included the Jaffna peninsula, the adjoining islands and the areas from Mannar to Mullaitivu (Queyroz, Fernao De, 1930).

Educational activities in relation to Catholicism

Generally the colonial rulers gave a prominent role to education in order to strengthen their power in the areas they had captured. In this respect, the research on the colonial educational policy has been given an important place (Santhirasegaram, S, Karunanithi, M., 1993). The early 16th century was considered as a turning point in the whole Sri Lankan history including the history of the Tamils. This is due to the fact that the Portuguese had to concentrate their attention in Jaffna for the spreading of religion strengthening, their defense in Jaffna and the trading activities in elephant and pearl. Therefore there was no doubt that their attention was turned to the Northern part of Sri Lanka.

In the voyages of the Portuguese to the Asian countries their main objectives were religion and trade. First they engaged in spreading Catholicism among the fishermen of the Eastern cost of India around 1540s. But the spreading of Christianity in Sri Lanka was started in 1543 in the maritime provinces. At the initial stage the Franciscan missionaries were given the responsibility of spreading religion in the whole Sri Lanka (Abeyasinghe, Tikiri, 1966).

In the way their first mission was started in Mannar. Generally this type of Missionary activities was linked with the expansion of the Portuguese rule in the world. The Portuguese expected that this would create a cultural and political link with the colonies, through conversion to their religion and religious activities (Don Petter, W.L.A, 1969). The king John III who had sent Francis Xavier to India as a missionary gave the missionaries facilities in Sri Lanka including the Franciscan priest. J.V.Villa da Gond who Presided over this committee (Queyroz, Fernao De).

In 1543 an agreement was made between the Portuguese and king Sankili of Jaffna. The king later agreed to pay tribute annually to the Portuguese. It was on basis of the weakness of Sankili that St. Francis Xavier came to Mannar. According to the agreement signed after 1560 war, the missionaries spread Christianity without any barriers in Mannar, Jaffna, Islands and other Tamil areas (Gunasingam, M, 2008). The Sri Lankan Kings and others who did not support the Portuguese in their evangelical activities were killed. But prior to this period king Sankili and others who succeeded him to the throne of Hindu dominated Jaffna did not favour the propagation of other religions. But in Mannar many Hindus were converted to Christianity during this period. Therefore king Sankili was enraged and murdered the newly converted Christians with the help of his forces. The Portuguese documents confirm this (S.Kirshnarajah, S, 2000). During the time of King Ethirmana Sinha and Pararajasekara many Franciscan priests came to Jaffna. At the outset, the Catholic *mudaliyars* and *Talaijaris* and others engaged themselves in the propagation of religion. They were successful in their activities. After 1619 the activities of the missionaries directly influenced Jaffna.

The Portuguese records mention that thousands of people were converted to Christianity. But one could see the exaggeration in this description. But one would observe many people were Christians at that time. Because Fr Queyroz describes Jaffna as the Christian country (S.Kirshnarajah, S, 2000.). After the fall of the Jaffna kingdom nobody was found to help the Hindus in Jaffna. The newly converted Christians were enjoying the exemption from taxes. As those who became Catholics were exempted from *marale* enjoyed certain privileges. As a result some people accepted Catholicism even at their death bed to safeguard their properties. During their inquires the Portuguese gave the converts lesser punishment.

The Portuguese gave less punishment to the Christians after the inquiry of their criminal activities. The Christians were given preference to government jobs. Catholic religion was declared as the state religion (Sasikala, K). Some ideas of the native religion also were included in Christianity so that ordinary people also would be ready to accept Christianity. In this background many Hindu temples were destroyed. People were forced to embrace Christianity. Moreover they used education as a means for the spread of Christianity. Thus all could embrace Christianity without any age difference.

They had the firm belief in their own religion. So they worked hard to convert the people of the countries they captured to Christianity. The Portuguese formulated their educational policy combining some favourable traditional educational deals of particular countries with their own in the language of the particular country. Not only in Jaffna but also in the other parts of the island, they established schools to spread education and catholic religion (Santhirasegaram,S, Karunanithi,M). At the beginning, the Franciscan missionary groups engaged themselves in the religious activities and education in Jaffna. After fifty years, the Jesuits missionary group were sent to Sri Lanka in 1602, during the time of king Philip II. Following them, the Dominican Missionary group in 1605 and the Augustinian missionary group in 1606 arrived in Sri Lanka. The activities of these four missionary groups increased the influence of the Catholic religion among the Sri Lankan people (Richard, Chandra De Silva, 1972). The kings of Portugal gave financial assistance to the missionaries who propagated religion (Catholicism) through education (Queyroz, Fernao De, 1930).

At the beginning the Franciscan priests established schools adjacent to the Churches. These schools were known as parish schools. The education based on Bible was imparted here. Later the students were taught to read and write. The main aim of Portuguese was spreading their religion in the established method to develop the religious knowledge. They supported an educational policy aimed to create a Catholic society fostering Catholic culture among the Catholic and others (Don Peter.W.L.A, 1969). The school was used as the medium of spreading Christianity. They evaluated the educational progress of the students with the prayers that the students had memorized. They divided Jaffna into *Kovilparru* divisions. They built a church and a residence for the priest in each *Kovil Parru*. They requested the people of Jaffna to attend the church in their area and listen to the sermons delivered by parish priest on Sundays.

The other type of educational centre established by the Franciscan missionary groups in Jaffna and in the southern part of the Island was the college. This was the centre for the training of the priest. Here religion, reading, writing, literature, grammar, music, Latin and discipline were taught. There were 25 parish schools established in Jaffna other than the colleges. All functioned with the support of the government (Perera.S.G , 1995). One may state briefly that the full responsibility of education in Jaffna was in the hands of the missionary priests. They followed this policy in different parts of Sri Lanka but during the time of Dutch in Sri Lanka full responsibility on education was given to the *parish* school and not the missionary priest (Don Petter, W.L.A, 1969).

The activities of the Jesuits in Sri Lanka marked another step in the development of Christian education in Jaffna. There were 34 Parishes in Jaffna. A church and school were established in every parish. They established churches and schools following the pattern of the Franciscan missionaries group. The churches established earlier were administered by the Franciscan missionary and the Churches established later were administered by the Jesuits. The number of Christians in 1627 was 40000. With the activities of the Jesuits, it reached 50000 within two years (Gnanaprakasara,S, 2008). This missionary group established a church and a college in Jaffna during the period of Olivera. That is, the Jesuits paved the way for the establishment of the first school in Jaffna. Besides they received financial assistance from the government and private agencies. Thereby they were able to introduce free education for the children. Yet the college they established in Jaffna was not big enough like the college they established in Colombo. (Perera, S.G, 1941). The Jesuit priests were superior to other priests in the field of education. This clergy was created by the various students at *Paris*. This group emerged in Paris with the help of the university students. Moreover this missionary group gave excellent training to the members. They had a well improvised syllabus because many scholars tested and approved this curriculum. which was designed to give training to the teachers and to impart good knowledge to the students. The Jesuits established the educational system with three phases namely, primary secondary and higher education. All these functioned under one principal. This principal generally understood the importance of mother tongue. Because of this, the primary education was taught in the mother tongue. The students were taught to read write and sing. The religion was also taught there. They also used drama and music to spread their religion (Siriseena,U.P.G). The children actively participated in the drama. After the arrival of the Jesuits here the educational facilities increased not only in Jaffna but in other parts of Sri Lanka too. The primary education was given to all the children in each parish but the higher education was restricted to the children of the Portuguese and the Sinhala officers of the civil and military section (Siriseena, U.P.G). The Jesuits started the secondary school as there was a gap between the parish school conducted by the Franciscan and the college level school. The students started to learn read and write the mother tongue. Following that the missionary priests also started learning the native languages. The

daily the religious classes were organized for the students whose parents were willing to be converted to Christianity. Thus these children were baptized within a short period. Moreover they expanded their religious knowledge too. e.g 700 children went for the religious class held at Achchuvely. But only 140 children studied at the ordinary school (Perera.S.G, 1941).

At the beginning the missionary activities were carried on with the help of the translators in Jaffna. But the missionaries were not satisfied with these activities. Therefore the missionaries felt the importance of learning any one of the native languages. Sermons were conducted for this children and adults in their mother tongue (Don Petter., W.L.A, 1979). During this period Sri Lankan Tamils generally looked up to South India for inspiration to Tamil language. This language was used for the Christian thinking and preaching there. Some of the missionary priests came from South India. Therefore they had a lot of experience in the usage of Tamil for religious purpose. Some Christian Tamil books were already written by them in India. These were taken to Sri Lanka by the missionaries and distributed to the Christians in Jaffna. The evening prayer service and the sermons also were conducted in Tamil in the churches of Jaffna. The songs hymns and the religious activities for the school students were also carried out in Tamil. Rev.Constantine Joseph Beski was a Catholic priest from Italy. He changed his name as Veeramamunivar and behaved like a Hindu priest by changing his clothes behavior and attitude. The records say that when there was an invasion from Kandy to Jaffna some of the Jesuit priests were hiding in the fort in Jaffna where the chief priest of Jaffna ordered them to conduct lectures on Tamil grammar.

Some of the centers for the missionary officers were joined with the residences of the missionary priests in each residential area where there was a school. There were two residential centers in Palai and about 2270 Christian students stayed there. Moreover these were seen in Pulopalai Thamankeni, Aliyavalai, and Periapalam. There was a Tamil school at Pulopalai. There was also a big residential school (School with Hostel) at Chankanai and about 614 students were learning there. (Gnanaprakasas,S,) The great success that the Jesuits attained in Jaffna cannot be compared with other parts of Sri Lanka and with India. Though they achieved a lot within a short period they had to cope up with the challenges from Goa. This missionary group moreover contributed a lot for the Tamil language. Rev.Robert de Nobily, Jesuit priest stayed in Jaffna for two years and wrote books for children. He also translated some hymns prayers and books on religious matters.

Following the Jesuits the Dominican missionary group established many Catholic churches in the southern part of Sri Lanka. They also constructed two churches in Jaffna. But there were no records that the schools were built adjoining the churches. Yet there were possibilities that there could have been schools (S.Kirshnarajah, S, 2000). These missionary groups constructed a convent for the nuns at the eastern boundary of Jaffna. This could be considered the first organization for women priests in Jaffna. This organization served a lot for women in education. One could get much information on education with the help of the letters published by the Portuguese. We come to know that the alphabet was taught in education. We could also understand that the Christian doctrine was taught to the women in the morning and to the men in the evening (Don Petter, W.L.A, 1979). Memorizing method was used in education then. The main reason for this was that no adequate number of books was written in the native languages. It was considered that the Christian teaching was also done through memorizing. This was considered a faster method than by the books given after the students were able to read. Memorizing the lesson was not a hard one for the students in Sri Lanka especially for the Tamil students who had been using this method since the ancient days. The missionary priests praised the memorizing talents of the students then and there (Don Petter, W.L.A, 1979).

The arrival of the Portuguese made many changes in the history of Jaffna. Many schools were firmly established and they were well administered. The salary of the teachers depended on the attendance of the students. Therefore the teachers worked hard to increase the students' attendance. Many studied here shedding all differences in caste and religion. Women also had opportunities to learn in schools. Therefore the concept of female education had started and all accepted that the women had right for education. The village students who had no facilities for education were able to learn in the educational institution found in their places.

Conclusion

The Portuguese came to the Eastern countries for spreading their Catholic religion and expanding their trade activities. Thus they arrived in Sri Lanka also and influenced this country by fulfilling their purpose using the political situation favourable to them. They constructed churches in Jaffna the Northern part of Sri Lanka where a lot of Tamil people have been living as they did in some other areas. They made their missionary activities easy by constructing educational centers very close to the churches. They used 'privileges' and force methods to spread their religion. They used education as a tool for spreading their religion and succeeded to some extent in their activities. Although they gave prominence to their religious activities they failed to give importance and opportunities for others in the educational field. Because of this the traditional rural education was neglected in Jaffna. They had the government control over education for their religion. For this purpose they invited the

missionary groups including the Franciscan missionaries to control the education and religion. Thus they succeeded in the educational activities not only in Jaffna but also in some other parts of Sri Lanka.

Notes

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