

## ‘Charity’ to ‘Justice’: Jesuits in Madurai Province

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**S**t. Francis Xavier, one of the first members of the Society of Jesus founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola in 1540, came to the Tamil country in 1542 as a missionary. He was followed by other notable Jesuits, such as Robert de Nobili (1577-1656), John Britto (1647-1693) the Martyr, Joseph Constantine Beschi (1680-1747) the great Tamil scholar and many others who tried in their different ways to address the social and economic circumstances of their times. This article, part of a much longer paper, is concerned with the movement from charity to justice. It presents a brief historical account of the Madurai Mission, followed by an outline of change at the level of Jesuit colleges and at the level of the Madurai province in the state of Tamil Nadu in Southern India.

#### The New Madurai Mission

While the old Madurai Mission was founded in 1606, the new Madurai Mission with the French Jesuit missionaries in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century addressed the needs of the weak and the poor, especially during the famines when they distributed food and offered monetary help. As in the rest of India these were acts of charity based on their personal contacts. The commitment of the French missionaries to social equality<sup>1</sup> suggests that the ideals of the French revolution, namely equality, liberty, and fraternity, still inspired them. In Tamil Nadu the fight by the intermediary castes for justice against brahminical hegemony began in the 1920s with E.V.Ramasamy Naicker or Periyar, the Justice Party and the Self Respect Movement. The new Madurai Mission however spoke for the lowest in the caste ladder, the most oppressed, in other words, the dalits. “The Jesuits actively championed the cause of the depressed classes and the Panchamas for justice and fought for their basic human rights,”<sup>2</sup> writes Louis Leguen as early as 1938. Woven into all this was

<sup>1</sup>\* Victims of Kalugumalai in 1895 and Sivakasi in 1898 were protected by Fr. Caussanal and other Jesuits. They fought for their legitimate rights in society. Cf. *Les Missions Catholiques - Bulletin Hebdomadaire Illustré de L'oeuvre de la propagation de la Foi*. XXVII. January - December 1895. Also Cf. Fr. A. Caussanal SJ, *A History of Tirunelveli District*, 1910, p. 40.

\* The Jesuits, especially Fr. Caussanal as the parish priest of Vadakankulam, defended the legitimate rights of the downtrodden people in church in November 1910 by taking a bold decision to demolish the wall in the church built to separate the caste Catholics and the downtrodden. Cf. *Historical Notes on Tirunelveli District*, Vol. II, pp. 25 - 27.

\* The Bishop of Tiruchirappalli, Peter Leonard SJ, took all steps to break the barriers in the church in his jurisdiction in 1936, resulting in the parishioners making a complaint against the Bishop himself to the Pope. ‘Parishioners’ Complaint Against Bishop,” Tiruchirappalli, with regard to railing in the Church, July 1936. Cf. *A Petition of the Caste Christians of Tiruchirappalli to the Pope*, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1936, French Jesuits Archives, Vanves, Paris.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Leguen, *Stranger than Fiction, A Hundred Years of the Jesuit Madura Mission, Souvenir of the Centenary of the Jesuit Madura Mission*, July 1938. p.12.

Mahatma Gandhi's call during the Freedom Movement for sarvodaya through antyodaya (welfare of all through the welfare of the least and last) as well as the call for nation building resounding through the country after Independence. Both calls found a response from Jesuit communities. After Independence some native Jesuits concentrated on the formation of co-operative societies, enabling poor villagers to realise the extent of government help to which they were entitled. By forming cooperatives they also learned the importance of being united and working together.<sup>3</sup>

### Student Participation

Jerome D'Souza, the great Indian Jesuit and four times member of the Indian Delegation to the United Nations Organisation,<sup>4</sup> underlined the pressing need to impart the idea of social service to students in Jesuit colleges. Jesuits picked up the importance of student participation in the development process and made it mandatory for each Jesuit college to have a Social Service League<sup>5</sup> (SSL) to enable students to do social service in their surroundings. In addition to the SSL, they initiated associations of students in all their colleges such as the Sodality, *Bharat Sevah Samaj*, Beschi Social Service Society, Youth Welfare Service Group and Old Boys' Association, to undertake social service in villages. These new initiatives suggest the transition in their approach to social action, and young minds were made aware of the importance of looking at and helping those less privileged than themselves. The social service of the students complemented the charitable activities in which Jesuits were traditionally engaged.

Privy Chamberlain, B. S. Gilani, invited the Catholic student community to build a Christian Social Order in free India through social services.<sup>6</sup> Thus, from the 1950s to the 1970s, social work camps in rural areas for the development of the poor became a regular feature in the life of students, Jesuit scholastics and trainees under the leadership of Jesuits. As early as 1954 the then Provincial noted that the scholastics of Shembaganoor and the students of the Jesuit colleges were doing excellent social work in their surroundings, winning the confidence of people and public appreciation both for the Church and the Society.<sup>7</sup> Along with the Social Service League, the services of the National

<sup>3</sup>Letter of Fr. Lamahieu SJ to Fr. Superior General on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1953, ARSI, Rome, 1013, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Served in the UNO in the years 1949, 1951- 1952, 1955 and 1957 . Cf. Lawrence Sundaram, A Great Indian Jesuit -Jerome D' Souza SJ, Gujarat Shatiya Prakash, Anand, 1986. p. 222.

<sup>5</sup>"The Role of the University Students in the Social Apostolate" Speech delivered by Fr. Jerome D' Souza, SJ, in Loyola College, Chennai, on 22 December 1952. Cf. All India Catholic University Federation Souvenir of the First National Congress, Madras from 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, December 1952, p. 49. (French Jesuit Archives, Vanves, Paris).

<sup>6</sup>"Christian Social Order in Building Free India", Speech delivered in Loyola College, on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1952, by B.S Gilani, Privy Chamberlain Cf. Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>7</sup>Letter from Fr. Gordon, SJ, the Provincial of Madurai, to Fr. Superior General on 6 August 1954, Provincia Madurensis, ARSI, Rome, Vol. 1013, pp. 4 - 5.

Service Corps of the colleges were also gradually utilised in this process.<sup>8</sup> Events and activities during this period give a clear picture of the developing trend and the conceptual clarity evolved by the Jesuits regarding the needs of the people whom they served. Fr. Ceyrac SJ, Chaplain of the AICUF noted: "In a country of acute poverty and widespread illiteracy like India social services are an urgent necessity. Unless people see concrete facts, concrete work of social relief, they will never believe in the sincerity of 'our social theories'."<sup>9</sup>

Training camps and social analysis courses, offered to college students through the AICUF movement animated by Jesuits, played a dominant role in bringing about change in the thinking of the student community through its social awareness camps and seminars on social issues. Insertion camps stimulated its members to reflect on the situation of the people and students began to raise questions about the condition of the poor.<sup>10</sup> Ideology was a favourite subject of discussion. Books like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire were widely read by Jesuits and students,<sup>11</sup> and the campus culture of Jesuit colleges was slowly transformed. Students who were involved in that process are today making important contributions to society, in Tamil Nadu, at national and at international levels. AICUF also created an impact on the minds of the members of the province, a fact noted by the Province Survey in 1968 in its comment: "It is to be noted that the AICUF was one of the important factors that led the province to social action. ...One cannot deny its significant role."<sup>12</sup>

## The Plight of Dalits

A more specific and local impetus to the move from charity to justice may be traced to the report of Francois Houtart Canon, a Belgian sociologist appointed in 1972 to conduct a survey of Ramnad district. He identified the basic social issues and rights of the dalits<sup>13</sup> – the 'untouchables'. Struggles by dalits to enter temples in the villages of Iravucherry, Kannankudi, Uruvatti and Velimuthi in the district in 1954, the murder of Immanuel Sekaran a dalit leader in 1957 at Paramakudi<sup>14</sup> and Siluvai Muthu, another dalit leader, in

<sup>8</sup>Letter from Fr. A M Varaprasadam SJ, Provincial of Madurai to Fr. Superior General, Rome on 8 January 1968, ARSI, Rome, Vol. 1018, 68/1, pp. 5 – 6.

<sup>9</sup>'Towards Leadership', speech by Fr. P. Ceyrac SJ, in All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF), National Session for the Leaders, Mysore, from 25 April to 5 May 1953, p.15

<sup>10</sup>Madurai News Letter, Dindigul, February 1969, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Mike SJ, Unpublished Report, PALMERA 25 *aam aandu Niraiou Vizha, Munnaal PALMERA Uruppinar Kuuttam*, (Tamil), Devakottai, 21 – 22 October 2004, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup>The Madurai Province Social Survey Part IV, The Jesuits and their Apostolate, Dindigul, September 1968, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup>Dalit is a Sanskrit term which means broken, scattered, crushed and the destroyed. Cf. Monier Williams, A Sanskrit – English Dictionary, Delhi, 1976

<sup>14</sup>A. Ramaswami, Ramanathapuram District Gazetteer: Tamil Nadu, Government of India, Madras, 1972, p. 669.

1967<sup>15</sup> and 42 dalit labourers by a landlord at Keelavenmani in the nearby Thanjavur district on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1968<sup>16</sup> – all made the youth, especially dalit youth, reflect on their oppression and the need to come together. As part of their struggle, the dalits in Devakottai area in the district started a movement under the banner of *Thazhthappattor Nala Iyyakam* later renamed as "*Uzhaikum Makkal Urimai Iyakkam*."<sup>17</sup> With the new emphasis on justice within the church, dispensing charity to the poor gave way to seeking justice for the oppressed.

## The Province and PALMERA

The 1960s and 70s saw the Second Vatican Council, Liberation Theology and GC 32, and the shift became far more pronounced and formalised. At GC 32 in 1972, the Society of Jesus noted "The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement."<sup>18</sup> This preferential option for the poor may be seen as a turning point in the history of the Society, calling for the eradication in the human heart of attitudes that engender structures of oppression."<sup>19</sup> The Madurai province in Tamil Nadu was one of the first ones to translate the message of that document into concrete action in the local situation.

From strictly Christian themes Jesuits had moved to development, motivation, leadership, and later social analysis. A three-day seminar was held in Madurai in 1977 on the theme: "The Church and the Society in East Ramnad District." It underscored defence and promotion of the rights of dalits as the primary task of the Church in East Ramnad.<sup>20</sup> The Jesuit pastors of Madurai province at a meeting a few months later on the theme, "Faith and Justice as Integral Elements of the Jesuit Mission" decided to dedicate their efforts and energies towards the removal of all forms of indignity and oppression to which the 'low' caste brothers and sisters were being subjected. The shift in the minds of Madurai Jesuits was permeating the whole province. At the end of October 1977 the Jesuits reflected for two days on caste as an unjust structure in the parish milieu and on the problem of lay leadership in the task at hand.<sup>21</sup> Wider discussions and deliberations on the topic came to the official decision-making body, the Provincial Congregation held in January 1978. This body drafted a proposal to work among the exploited and humiliated dalits and it

<sup>15</sup>Ilan Kumaran, *Kizhanrthezhuhirathu Kizhaku Mukhavai*, (Tamil), Thamizhamutham Publication, Madurai, 1996, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>T. N. Gopalan, *Jathi Chandaikalum Mann Kuthiraikalum, Unchanaiyil Vanchanai*, (Tamil), Nithersana Publications, Madras, 1983, p. 25. Also Cf. The Indian Express, Madurai Edition, 30 October 1983.

<sup>17</sup>*Uzhaikum Makkal Urimai Iyakkam Or Aaivu*, (manuscript), (Tamil), Devakottai, 1987, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>Document of the General Congregation 32 of the Society of Jesus (Indian Edition), Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1976, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>20</sup>Madurai News Letter, Dindigul, September 1977, pp. 2 - 3.

<sup>21</sup>Jesuit Madurai Province Golden Jubilee (1952 - 2002), Souvenir, op.cit., p. 408.

was sent to Fr. Superior General in Rome. The Jesuits now saw their social commitment to work for the dalits as a moral obligation, a historical imperative and a mandate imposed on the province by poor dalits. Consequently the province started PALMERA,<sup>22</sup> a social action centre in the Ramnad district. Madurai Province took up the justice cause earlier than other provinces perhaps because the plight of dalits even after Independence, especially in the Ramnad area in south eastern Tamil Nadu, was heart-wrenching.<sup>23</sup>

Consciousness of caste was not easily eradicated within the Christian community. In Paraltchi village in Madurai district, for example, the Arunthathiyars, a dalit caste, suffered at the hands of 'upper' caste Christians. As dalits they were socially untouchable and economically weak, not allowed even to enter the Church. Recognising their pitiable condition, the parish priest built a chapel for the Arunthathiyars in the teeth of opposition from 'upper' caste Christians, but these efforts by individual Jesuits were woefully inadequate in proportion not only to the magnitude of the issue, but also to the population of dalit Christians in the church. The Madurai province for a long time had failed to respond adequately to the problem of caste discrimination, but now the shift in the minds of Madurai Jesuits of what constitutes true social service had occurred. It led to the definite option for the poor and the organisation of the dalits.

The martyrdom of Fr. Rutilio Grande SJ in the central American Republic of El Salvador in 1977, Fr. Joao Boxo Burmier in October 1976 in Brazil and Frs. Martin Thomas, Christopher Shepherd Smith and Brother John Conway in 1977 in Rhodesia<sup>24</sup> inspired the Jesuits of Madurai province. Their martyrdom, austerity and commitment were a great example for the Madurai Jesuits about the nature of true service. God seemed to be speaking to the Society of Jesus through the pouring out of their blood and inviting them to a deeper dedicated service for the liberation of the marginalised in Tamil Nadu.

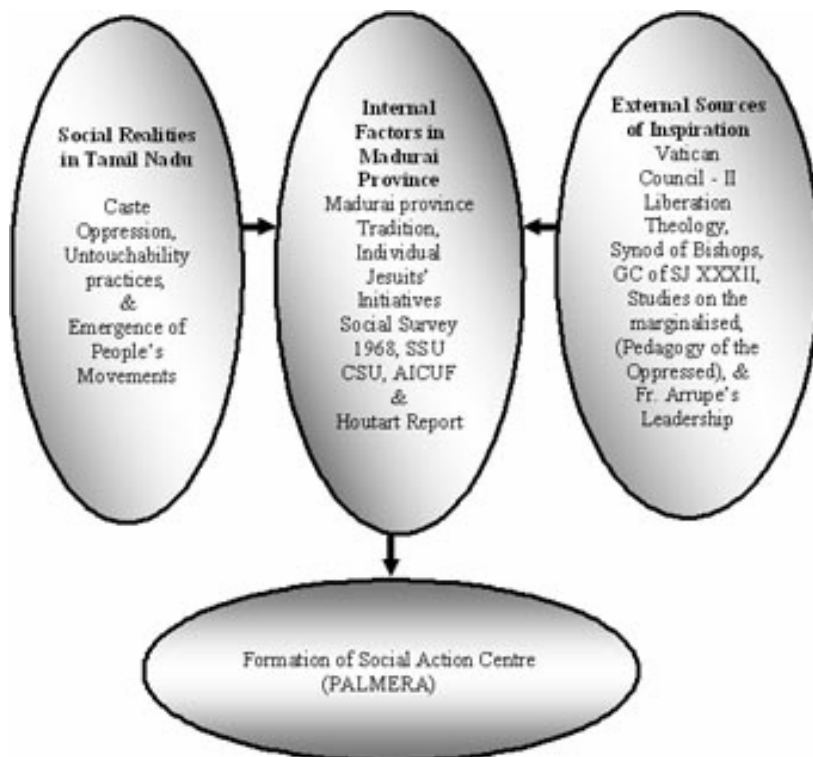
The Madurai Jesuits concretised liberation theology in the context of the Indian situation with special reference to Tamil Nadu's social milieu. Deeper reflection and sociological analysis subsequently resulted in the launching of an action programme of support and solidarity with the poor. While other religious congregations were still concentrating on such traditional missionary activities as parish work and education, the Jesuits threw themselves into a new type of mission. The diagram below illustrates the factors leading to social action in Madurai Province.

<sup>22</sup>It is an acronym for People's Action for Liberation Movement in East Ramand Area Cf. Madurai News Letter of Jesuits, Dindigul, September, 1978.

<sup>23</sup>Human Rights in Tamil Nadu A Status Report 1996, People's Watch, Madurai, 1996, p. 75.

<sup>24</sup>Madurai News Letter of Jesuits, Dindigul, April - May 1977.

### Formation of Social Action Centres



Madurai was once branded as a conservative province. But over the years it has followed the path of greater social involvement. In 1954 there was resistance to working for social change, as is evident from what the rector of St. Joseph's College wrote to the Superior General: "It seems to me that undue insistence is given to social service in the scholasticate of Shembaganur to the detriment of real intellectual formation of our young men."<sup>25</sup> It is very different now. Madurai province, once it took up the preferential option for the poor as an organised endeavour, was the first to think of a common vision for the mission of the entire province.<sup>26</sup> From isolated acts of charity by individual Jesuits, through a project phase characterised by social work camps to the present commitment to social action<sup>27</sup> – such has been the trajectory of the move from charity to justice in Madurai Province in Tamil Nadu.

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<sup>25</sup>Letter of LC Fernandes SJ, Rector, St. Joseph's College to Fr. Superior General, Rome on 22 July 1954, ARSI, Vol. 1013, p. 1

<sup>26</sup>Xavier Alphonse SJ (ed), *Set the World on Fire: Jesuit Madurai Province Golden Jubilee 1952 - 2002*, The Jesuit Madurai Province Publication, Dindigul, 2002, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup>M. Arockiasamy Xavier, *Contribution of the Jesuits to Social Awakening in Tamil Nadu*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Bharathidasan University, Thiruchirappalli. 2006. p.58.