

CREATION OF INDIGENOUS CLERGY AND THE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY THE MEP

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Abstract: The MEP Missionaries inspite of various problems like caste system and customs of Indians, division among Christian Community, lack of proper disposition of the candidates, desertion of seminarians, want of money and men, young and imprudent professors, etc., achieved their prime objective of creating priests in Pondicherry Mission in *Verampattinam*, Pondicherry and finally till date in *Malleswaram*.

Keywords: Christian Community, desertion of seminarians and MEP.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though Christianity is right from the beginning of first century, Missionary activities were accelerated after the discovery of new sea routes and European trade and commerce with India. In their attempt of proselytizing Indians they felt the need of creating native clergy to assist and succeed them. There were attempts by various religious congregations before MEP. The seminaries could not with stand with the vicitudes of time.

Taking all these into consideration it can be rightly said that the establishment of the seminary by MEP in Pondicherry was the first sustained effort conducted at the level of the local church of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh towards an indigenous clergy. In this context, the following essay tries to study the efforts of Missionaries and the problems they encountered in the achievement of their primary objective of the society.

2. INTERNATIONAL SEMINARY OF VIRAMPATTINAM

The early founding fathers Mgr. Pallu and Mgr.Lambert de la Motte decided to have a major seminary (College General) in 1664, to serve all the mission territories of MEP in the far East, was established at Ayuthia in Thailand. Fr.Laneau became its first superior and there were nine students. Due to war between Burma and Thailand in the years 1765-1767, it moved to Cochin chine (the present South Vietnam) and again due to persecutions it was moved to Pondicherry, a safe and secure place in the French territories.

Fr. Pigneau de Behaine, the director of the seminary bought a land 10 km from Pondicherry at Virampattinam Fr.Pigneau continued to be director upto 1774 and he leaves for Vietnam when the situation became conducive for mission. Fr. Mathon takes up directorship and he gets the approval of Pope Pius VI and puts it under the special care of the Holy See. Fr. Magny succeeds after the death of Fr. Mathon, unfortunately the seminary had to be closed down in 1781 for lack of students. We have to wait a college of such genre till 1807 at Penang in Malaysia.

When Mgr.Brigot took of Malabar (Carnatic) Mission or Pondicherry Mission, with all eagerness he hurriedly wanted to utilize the existing major seminary at Veerampattinam. He sent three students. But later he had to withdraw his students. The parents who did not want their children to live with foreigners opposed this move. Mgr.Brigot withdrew his students and decided to start a seminary of his own.

Obviously the failure of first major seminary can be attributed to casteism in India. Though it is an international or provincial seminary, the Indians due to their staunch caste consciousness could not tolerate the presence of other nationals. They considered the other nationals as outcastes, instead, brothers in Christ. Consequently there were no entries in the seminary and it had to be closed on lack of admissions.

3. MGR.BRIGOT'S MAJOR SEMINARY

Mgr.Brigot was very firm in starting a major seminary in Pondicherry Mission. After much discussion with his Missionaries he started a major seminary at Ulgaret with an ex- Jesuit Fr. Busson as its director. There were fifteen students enrolled. The success of the first batch was none of them got Ordained. Even the Student considered "remarkable candidate", Mgr.Champenois sought permission from Rome; left the seminary before permission reached Pondicherry.

When the next bishop Mgr.Hebert took up the Mission, Fr.Magny was director. He expresses his disappoint saying out of dozen students only three or four were Ordained. The political situation in the Mission area made Christians demoralized and scattered. Tippu Sultan started persecuting the Christians, Churches demolished, communities ruined. Mgr.Hebert thought of closing the seminary, due to lack of economic resources in 1813.

The Indians never accepted anything which the Missionaries introduced in the form of reform. Fr.Brigot Beauclair 1832 introduced certain reforms. As reaction the seminarians left one by one. Fr. Brigot left the seminary yet the situation prevailed. As a result the seminary is closed till 1835. The closure finds second time. Mgr. Hebert was fed up and he did not take interest in the seminary. He did not admit any 'Malabar' to ordination before they were thirty or forty years of age.

Here again we find four reasons for the failure of second time. First the students were not properly disposed. They had western education but were not inclined to become priests. Second lack financial resources. Third the persecutions in the time of Tippu. Fourth has as usual the caste and customs of Indians. The native Christians were always prejudiced with whatever the Missionaries did.

4. THE SYNOD OF 1844 AND SEMINARY

The synod of 1844 clearly gives us the idea of college general and Petite Seminaire. So far, for any lay reader college general was confusion. Is it a seminary or a college is a question? It is solved when we see the outcome of the synod.

The minor seminarians should be separated from the senior students. A minor seminary would be built at once and a major seminary as and when financial circumstances allowed. The synod puts down the subjects to be taught. Importance will be given to Latin, Tamil, French and English. Besides the elements of history, geography, arithmetic, astronomy and Physics will be considered components and complements of genuine education. Three staff was immediately appointed. Admission is open to all except the outcaste. Admission of married Hindu boys was barred. The minor seminarians continued to be in Petite Seminaire along with other Christian, Hindu and Muslim students. In 1877 Mgr.Laouenan built a new building for major seminary, the minor seminarians were brought to the grand seminary as boarders. Here after the institution Petite Seminaire will be a French college pure and simple.

5. GENESIS OF INDEPENDENT MAJOR SEMINARY

To reform and improve the existing major seminary the following deliberations were made.

- The setting up of a major seminary separated from the minor seminary has been decided upon, and thus we will teach, as in France, Philosophy, theology and Sacred Scripture.
- The very wise regulation, adopted in Europe for the direction of these establishments will be implemented there.
- We are of the opinion that the sending of the young people to live with a missionary will be an excellent means of testing their vocation, before they are ordained.

We have thought that it would be expedient to send them in this manner, after this Philosophy and usually before the tonsure. We leave the question of tonsure to the decision and the discretion of the council of the seminary, who should demand as a strict stipulation a certain period of stay in the seminary.

6. CASTE PROBLEMS AND REBELLION OF CHRISTIANS

The decisions of the synod leaked out and there was wide range of interpretations among the Christians. The discontentment was fanned to a full scale rebellion by an interested cabal. The rebellion lasted for five months. The parents took away the seminarians. Christians refused to enter the seminary. The Synod became a remote cause of the rebellion.

Side by side, a crisis broke out in the seminary. The professors -first Fr. Leroux, and then Fr. Godelle and Fr. Virot took meals along with seminarians. This news reached the parents. The Christians objected Europeans eating with natives as it was contravention to native usages and practice. The Malabars were quite unhappy with innovations.

7. IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF REBELLION

On the feast of St. Michael on 29th September 1847, during a ceremony four seminarians were asked to put on cassocks to assist at the Vespers and the procession without Thalappa (Turban). This gave rise of big protest, Abusive languages, outrageous writings, insults of every kind, slanderous accusations, were poured down on the missionaries. They even went to the extent of ridiculing the nobility of the caste of the European through anonymous letters and through articles inserted in the Tamil newspapers published from Madras. The situation went out of control. Therefore on 27th December Mgr. Bonnard closed the seminary under the form of "indefinite holidays". This is third time seminary is closed. It was reopened on 1850.

8. BISHOP'S ACTION TOWARDS PROBLEMS

Not discouraged by all these events, as a pastor and head of the local church he took certain measures. Fr. Leroux was given a new post. This transfer in January 1848 calmed down the feelings of Christians and the revolt ended.

Next he converted the minor seminary into Petite seminaire College. Thus writes Mgr. Bonnard, "At the end of that quasi-revolution, we have decided to put our seminary on the same footing, as minor seminary in France, opened to all young men for their education". A new building for major seminary is built and blessed on 18th Sep. 1850. All the major and minor seminarians were put up in the seminary and the Petite seminaire shall remain a college.

As the rebellion spread all over the Mission-Karaikal, Tranquebar, Kumbakonam, Cuddalore, etc. Mgr. Bonnard believed a pastoral letter in Tamil. It was read in all churches on Sunday, 19th November 1847. Mgr. Bonnard explained eating with seminarians would create proximity with students. The white dress was more apt for the service of the altar. On 9th December 1847 wrote to missionaries about the general feelings of the Malabar Christians. "The devil took care to maintain in the Christians this first idea that we wanted to paranaise everything and the idea kept them in an attitude of espionage towards us and towards all our measures".

9. VOCATION AND THE OUTCASTE IN THE MISSION

This essay will be incomplete if we do not speak of the neglect of vocations from outcaste Christian community which contained more than 75% of the total Christian population of the Mission. In spite of the repeated demands and revolts for equality in the Church, Vocations from the community and removal of separation walls in the Church were neglected by the Missionaries. The outcastes were denied Church bells and Benches. In the wake of 20th century the members of the pariah community agitated. The years 1903-1912 witnessed sordid picture the demand of outcaste Christian's and opposition of high caste Christians led consecration of Mgr. Morel in 1908 in an empty Cathedral with police protection. The consecration of Sacred Heart Church was delayed by four years; Nellitope parish was closed for four years by Fr. Huguet. Finally the arrogance of caste Christians led to a loss of solid number of pariah Christians joined seventh day Adventist in 1930's.

In the 1920's the scenario in the inlands of the mission was encouraging. Fr. Thomas Gavan Duffy assistant to Mgr. Colas in Chetpet firmly believed in the age hold mode of evangelization. By establishing St. Anne's School, Teachers cum Catechist Training School, a Model School, a boarding house, etc in Tindivanam. He collected children from all the parishes of the diocese. As there was great number of Christians from dalit community, automatically a huge number of dalit children benefited. The sudra Christians could not play their malicious role as they did in Petite Seminaire. The time changed. Once knowledge and teaching were sole monopoly of Brahmins. Fr. Duffy changed this concept. He not only taught dalit children, in turn, he made them teach others. A community which was neglected education became a teaching community. This is his achievement. This great education Missionary is aptly called the benefactor of dalit Christians.

When Mgr. Colas, manager of Tindivanam was promoted Bishop he recruited three dalit children Periyannayagam of Vetavalam J. Susai and Arockiasamy of Nangathur, old students of Tindivanam. Frs. Periyagasamy and J. Susai were the first dalit Priests in the Archdiocese. The myth of outcastes unfit to priesthood was scattered.

11. ST. AGNES SEMINARY CUDDALORE

The minor seminarians attended the Petite Seminaire College only for English course. Bishop thought that it would be better to shift minor seminary to some other place. It was decided to shift it to Cuddalore. In 1921 the minor seminary was opened at Cuddalore. The minor seminarians shall attend School in St. Joseph's High School. Thus Petite Seminaire is no more a seminary.

12. ROAD TO MALLESWARAM

The new building of the major seminary more spacious in 1875 became too small in the beginning of 20th century. The reason was Pondicherry seminary has become "Provincial seminary, training priests for other dioceses-Coimbatore, Mysore, Kumbakonam. The Vocation to Priesthood was also steadily increasing.

It became imperative that the seminary should move to a new ground in the most space for the future expansions. Malleswaram on the out skirts of Bangalore became the choice of the bishops of the Province. In July 1934 silence descended upon the corridors of Primary block of Petite Seminaire, when major seminary moved to Malleswaram after an existence of 157 years in the soil of Pondicherry, during which it had produced 184 Indian Priests not an ordinary achievement to speak of.

St. Peter's Seminary ran peacefully for 50 years. Since 1980's as usual trouble exists. This time, it is not the caste but language and ethnic problem. The murder of rector Fr. K.J. Thomas in 2012 is a sacrifice we were made.

13. CONCLUSION

In the formation of native clergy in India, as we stated in the introduction, many religious congregations attended to start seminary in India. But many of them decamped or desist some shifted from the birth place. But MEP is the only congregation which withstood all the vicitudes and magnanimously exists today.

In the above study we can understand fourfold problem in the formation of native clergy. The first Problem is the caste system of the Indians. The Malabar Christians were sudra Christians. They were adamant to adhere to their prestige, in today's parlance their ego. In Pondicherry Mission there were no so called high caste Christians-Brahmins. These sudra Christians themselves low in the caste ladder boasted themselves superior to Europeans and Pariahs. Their inferiority complex is blasted into superiority complex.

The second problem is neither the Missionaries nor the Christians could demarcate what are their culture or customs and what are religious or Hinduism. The Missionaries did not have the discernment to solve the problem. For each and everything they referred to Rome. The Christians on the other hand were insisting everything their custom. As Mgr. Bonand rightly says, "The fact that the non-Christians were willing to support the agitating Christians on the plea of caste customs being violated is indicative of a typical Indian situation where caste customs cutting across religious differences are often considered to be more important even than religious practices".

The third problem is resources –men and money. Lack of students, immature professors, and lack of proper funds led closure of seminary two times by Mgr. Hebert. MEP managed this problem by providence.

In spite of all vicitudes MEP withstood and continued the formation of native clergy. This we must acknowledge and appreciate. However, a very regrettable aspect of the work of the Missionaries tell about the middle of 20th century is that they did not promote vocations from among outcastes. This is fourth problem.

The opposition from upper castes and the fear about the acceptability of dalits as priests and religious prevented the missionaries from recruiting vocations from dalits. This had its pastoral consequences. The pastoral consequences of the missionary practice regarding caste can be observed even today.

In short, the MEP despite its undeniable contributions towards the formation of the native clergy, education of the young and direction that it gave to pastoral administration of the Mission, did not or could not take a stand firm enough to put an end to controversial issue of caste system within Catholic Church. In this sense, it must be said that the formation of native clergy, despite the great things that have since been achieved, is quite incomplete and remains so to this day.

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