

A HISTORY OF PERSECUTION ENDURED BY DEVASAHAYAM PILLAI FOR CATHOLIC FAITH (1712-1752AD)

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ABSTRACT

Though the rulers of Travancore were said to be more tolerant towards various religions that survived in that land, their minds could not accept the conversion of any High Caste Hindu into a Christian because of their strong faith in their father's religion, and in one such an incident the ruler and his agents had sternly tortured a wise man named Devasahayam Pillai only for the reason that he had abandoned his father's religion and embraced Christianity with full faith. Devashayam Pillai lived with saintly characters, did miracles using his religious spirit, and died as a Martyr. No one Indian Christian had ever done anything as Devasahayam Pillai did in his lifetime, as he was beyond comparison with anyone who had faith in Christianity. For Christians of South India, he is an apostle of Jesus to be remembered forever. This paper attempts to investigate the actual history of persecution endured by Devasahayam Pillai in his lifetime and the obstacles imposed on him by the people and Government.

Keywords: Nilakanda Pillai, Devasahayam Pillai, Martyr, Christianity, Persecution, Living traditions, Marthanda Varma.

Introduction

While the caste system was not so rigid in Madras and Bengal Presidencies which were much affected by foreign invasions in those days, the caste system was rigid with so many social disabilities in Travancore because of modest interruptions by foreigners and people's inherent faith in old religious superstitions and prejudices.¹ Not only the rulers but also people were quick-tempered in their religious matters such as laws, customs, manners, and traditions, which are unique to the Princely State. There were numerous castes in this state, of which Namboodris, Nairs, and Vellalas who had extraordinary influences in the Government were considered to be higher castes while Nadars, Ezhavas, Mukkuvas, Kammalas, Pullayans, Allayans, Vaniyans, Vannars, and Sambans were low caste people. The Namboodris were at the top of the caste hierarchy, followed by Nairs, then Vellalas, and the low caste, so the epitome of the caste system had created so many favoritisms to high caste people but the low caste people were almost mistreated by the Government and the administrators. Devasahayam Pillai's father was a Namboodri and his mother was Nair woman, and the whole incident happened during the reign of Marthanda Varma (1729-1758AD).

Vasudevan Namboodri, the father of Devasahayam Pillai, was a native of

Maruthamkulamkarai village near Kayankulam in Kollam District of Kerala, from which he came and settled at Nattalam in Vilavancode taluk of Kanyakumari District since he was appointed as a priest in the famous Thirunattalam Sankaranarayanan temple by King Ravi Varma (1684-1718AD) of Travancore.² Since Vasudevan was very nostalgic about his native village when he was in Nattalam, he gave the name Maruthamkulamkarai to his house. There was an orthodox faith that if a Nair woman married a Namboodri her prestige would increase in the community, because of which a Nair girl in Mekkode village near Eraniel in Kanyakumari District married him in 1710. When they lived happily in Nattalam which is situated 12Km west of Padmanabhapuram which was the capital of Travancore, in 1712 she gave birth to a male child and gave them the name Nilakanda Pillai. During 1718-1721, he was given the basic traditional education by which he had acquired the skill of reading and writing on palm leaves, whereupon he learned Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malayalam languages for about 8 years (1721-1729) to become proficient in the language fluency and Hindu Philosophy as an orthodox Nair family did in those days.³ Besides these he was trained in martial arts such as Silambam and Sword practice in a reputed Kalaricentre to participate in battles. As soon as Marthanda Varma accessed the throne of Travancore in 1729,

Nilakanda Pillai was appointed in Government Service to supervise the religious administration of Nilakandaswamy temple and fortification of Padmanabhaswamy temple at Padmanabhapuram.⁴ Nilakanda Pillai, who was a courageous young chap with lovable moral characteristics, little by little became well-liked among the Government officials and hence many reputed Nair families vied to enter into a marriage alliance with him; he married Bargavi, a Nair girl of Mekkode family, before the idol of Badrakali who was his family deity for several decades and led a decorous life. Being a pious Hindu couple, they adored the Goddess Badrakali with much faithfulness while living in a joint family, and in a flash he was forced to take on the responsibilities of the entire family.⁵ Though his family was affluent with wealth and prospects, he was merciful towards all his fellowmen and poor people around him and lived as a simple man with austere life. His honesty and ability to extract obedience from subordinates caught the attention of the king Marthanda Varma, because of which he had regular contacts with the King and ministers of Travancore and earned all their goodwill, respect, and positive reception. That was why Marthanda Varma included him in his army when war erupted with Dutch force.

Dawn of Faith in Christianity

Trade in Colachel, which was a trading post of Dutch and British traders in the seacoast of Travancore since 16th century AD, became problematic to the Dutch when the king Marthanda Varma violated their business terms in November 1739 and hence on 29th December of the same year Dutch Commander announced a complete blockade of Colachel coast and ordered to seize all ships found in the coast, except the British trade ships. On 10th February 1740, the Dutch anchored seven large ships and several small vessels along the coast between Colachel and Kanyakumari and waged with Travancore force by which the coastal belt was captured by the Dutch. Ramayyan Dhalawa on behalf of Marthanda Varma reached there and stationed his army between Kottarand Eraniel to save the coast, and at the same time Travancore patrol boat cut off the food supplies to the Dutch Ships.⁶ Since there

was adverse wind and rough sea and there was a complete cutoff of food supplies, the Dutch force could not withstand for a long time and since heavy rain wetted the gunpowder they had it would be impossible for firing to resist the firing from Travancore force, because of which the Dutch force could not land on Travancore coast. Therefore, on 31st July 1741 the Dutch force surrendered before the Travancore force and King Marthanda Varma released the prisoners including twenty-eight Dutch High-Level Army Officers like Eustachius De-Lannoy and Duyvenschot with the condition that they should join in the Travancore Army.⁷ Thereby De-Lannoy became the Commander-in-chief of Travancore Army and undertook military activities of the State for two decades. When Marthanda Varma had reconstructed Udayagiri Fort, which was originally constructed with mud wall by King Ravi Varma (1595-1607AD)⁸ under the supervision of De-Lannoy, Nilakanda Pillai was appointed to assist him in the building works and to write the expenditure of the construction works.⁹ Construction of that Fort was completed in 1744 and a church was built therein for the worship of De-Lannoy's family; during this period, Nilakanda Pillai became a very close friend of De-Lannoy.¹⁰ It is said that sudden tragedies like crop failure, loss of cattle, and death of family members happened in his life, which immersed the courageous Nilakanda Pillai in sorrows needed to be wiped out anyway. Since Nilakanda Pillai felt some kind of relief when he was sitting by De-Lannoy inside the Church, both of them met in the church frequently and prayed together whenever there was a serious problem in Mr. Pillai's family,¹¹ by which Nilakanda Pillai became an ardent lover of Jesus Christ. It was De-Lannoy who urged Nilakanda Pillai to follow the way of Christ when he was living in Udayagiri Fort.

Conversion to Christianity

There has been a strong realization of the fact that where there is a will there will appear the fruit without compulsion, which was true with the conversion of Nilakanda Pillai to Christianity. De-Lannoy asked Nilakanda Pillai to tell him the reason for his sadness when he was together with him in the Church, to which

Mr. Pillai replied that there had been innumerable losses in the family leading to incessant sorrows. It was De-Lannoy who explained Biblical stories and Christian Philosophy in an agreeable way to enable him to feel happy in his mind, after which Nilakanda Pillai realized the Catholic religious beliefs and wanted to get baptized.¹² Arising completely out of his mind that he would anyway want to be a Christian, he requested De-Lannoy to introduce him to a Father who could baptize him. Following this, De-Lannoy sent him a reference letter to Rev. Fr. Buttari Ittalus SJ who was in the Holy Family Church at Vadavankulam of Tirunelveli District.¹³ Having accepted his baptismal vow, after realizing his strong will on Christian faith, Rev. Fr. Buttari, on 14th May 1745, baptized Nilakanda Pillai as Lazarus but soon after that, he changed his name into Devasahayam Pillai, meaning “the servant of the God” and continued to spread Christianity among the people, for which he used to trek to Churches located at somewhere about 18Km away from Padmanabhapuram to deliver his religious duties as a good Christian. Being a man with deep Catholic faith, he tried to convert everyone in his family with much hope into Christianity; when he tried to convert his wife Bargavi to the Christian faith, she resisted him by telling him that abandoning one’s own religion in which we were born is worthless and meaningless custom, but he stressed her to accept that the real god that creates, protects and destroys is the same as has been shown in the Bible, and that existence of different gods for different functions as dealt with in Hinduism was a meaningless doctrine. Finally, Bargavi accepted his vows to get baptized and became a Christian in the name Tresa, who was also baptized by Father Buttari of Vadavankulam Church. Even if the God almighty had enabled Devasahayam to succeed by converting his wife into a Christian, he could not do the same with other members of his joint family so many problems arose in his family and put him into throbbing.

Persecution

In contrast to his determination, his orthodox family felt that, if all the family sorrows had to be wiped out, an icon of goddess Padrakali

should be mounted in the house and regular pooja should be conducted to sacrifice the deity. As per the will of all the family members, the head of the family had installed the idol of Padrakali and arranged for an offering to the goddess in one evening, for which Devasahayam Pillai was also requested to visit to participate in the pooja. But, what was the unexpected thing that happened there was that the Brahmin priest who was engaged in the installation of an idol with devotion approached Devasahayam Pillai and attempted to offer the sacred ash (Thiruneeru) to him, to which his reaction was quite different from that he denied accepting the holy ash to be smeared on the forehead of Hindus.¹⁴ The priest assured him that since Mr. Pillai had despised the Goddess worshipped by the King and his subjects, he would derive out the madness of Pillai and root his religion out of this country, to which Pillai stated that he could just do so. Without any delay, the priest rushed to the palace and told the whole story to Singaram Annavi who was the Superintendent and Private Secretary to the King. Singaram Annavi who wanted to defame Devasahayam Pillai in the Royal Court urged all the officials in the palace to take necessary actions to mistreat Mr. Pillai whenever there were chances to penalize him.¹⁵ As the matter that Mr. Pillai had refused to receive the sacred ash from the priest because of his faith in Christianity was carried to the King and Government officials, everyone was keenly expecting an opportunity to maltreat him. Much has been said of the religious tolerance of Travancore rulers but it has not been recognized that a man was punished because of his faith in Christianity other than Devasahayam Pillai, which was a well-planned make suffer to death. When there was a need to have some teak timbers for the construction of Church buildings at Vadavankulam, the Reverent Father Buttari requested Devasahayam Pillai to apply to the Travancore Government for permission to carry timbers through Aramboli pass and hence he applied for the permission of the Dewan Ramayyan, but the unexpected thing that happened there was that the Dewan, instead of issuing the order to carry teak timbers, threatened, abused and warned Devasahayam Pillai that the

Christians would be soon exterminated from the land in which strong Hindu faith has been living. All that we can realize from this is that commend did not come from the King but had been put forward by the Dewan who was in charge of the Government to punish a guiltless man because of his religious faith. For this, Devasahayam replied to the Dewan that he may do it as he likes.¹⁶ The Dewan carried the fallacy that Devasahayam Pillai's conduct was not good in official matters to King Marthanda Varma, for the support of which he had furnished counterfeit morally wrong conduct in provoking forms. His main intention at that time was that the King had to be irritated enough to treat Pillai very badly and ordered Mr. Pillai to be brought before him in the Royal Court. For that reason, the Dewan brought Devasahayam Pillai before the King to refer his case, upon which the King ordered the Dewan to put him in prison for a few weeks; so, his legs were tied with iron chains to obstruct his free movements and he was put in the prison at Kuzhithurai.¹⁷ It is said that in the penitentiary he was anguished severely by offering diminutive food and water, regular beating with bamboo sticks and stuffing red chili powder into the nostril, eyes, and mouth, and allowing him to stand still in open sunlight, to which his faith standstill. So, also, there was another belief that the King and his assistants had sent some of his well-wishers to Devasahayam to get rid of his faith in Christianity to get him back to his native religion, for which there is no evidence in the available pieces of documents but the Christian community has been in full vow in this regard. To affront him badly, when his mind could not be changed even a little, the king ordered to put a garland of Calotrophis flowers around the neck of Devasahayam and then he was mounted on the back of a buffalo and led through the human settlements in Kunnathur, Thiruvithancode, Nattalam and Nelveli where he was put in prison for a few days.¹⁸ Whilst his wife Bhargavi met him in the prison, he advised her to live in the Christian faith forever and to suffer unwaveringly to keep the Christian faith alive in the family and when it was the time for his wife's departure from the prison, he blessed her "By the mercy of God, we shall meet again". The matter of

imprisonment of Devasahayam reached all over Travancore and the entire Christian community offered their eye drops to him, but the people could do nothing against the King, except praying for him. The two men who visited the prison to meet Devasahayam Pillai were the military Chief De-Lannoy, because of whose motif he became a Christian, and Father Buttari who baptized him Lazarus; other people had not been allowed to meet him in prison. After such tortures were done for a few weeks, the king felt that he could not resent him back to his native religion in any way and hence he ordered his martyrdom to terminate his life. For what reason Mr. Pillai was arrested by the King remains unclear because on one side Christians stated that he was arrested only because his faith in Christianity throws away his native Hindu tradition and on the counter side the administrators stated that Devasahayam Pillai was charged with a case of theft of teak woods through Aramboli pass for the construction of some church buildings at Vadavankulam. If the wise man Devasahayam Pillai could be found guilty of the theft of teak woods, then he alone could not carry such huge logs through the pass, for which support of some other people might be quite necessary and the Father Buttari might be the real cause behind the theft but no evidence is there in the forest records to prove it. Furthermore, if Devasahayam Pillai was found guilty of theft, the person who supported and induced the theft might have also been punished by the King which did not happen at that time. The king did not attempt to attack Father Buttari because of the reason that he was an influential personality in the Madras Government which was under the East India Company. We, therefore, conclude that the king might have ordered to kill Devasahayam Pillai as he was his subject who was arrested for theft of teak woods, but he could not punish Father Buttari as his settlement was not within the territory of Travancore.

In far the greatest number of cases of persecution against Christians, many people were tortured only since they were Christians who were not ready to throw away their Catholic faiths. Father Buttari has reported that "Christians were people who were poor and unclean of this world and were ignorable

creatures who did not wash; the chief among them was Devasahayam Pillai who mingled with people so vile and unclean and he was living in the King's court dealing with people unclean and noble as Brahmins".¹⁹ Converted Christians, except the Christian converts in coastlines, were forced to throw away the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary and even the cross appended to their Thali.²⁰ In Travancore, even upper caste people who had embraced Christianity had lost their social status and privileges thereof,²¹ and Christians needed to pay special taxes for being Christians²². Father Clement Joseph reports that Christians who could not want to flee were arrested, denied their faith impiously, and tortured violently to death.... Some others endured imprisonment and torture for a long time offering most willingly their bodies unto death to avoid having to worship idols.²³ Paolino has given valuable information that, if Christians were ready to return to the native religion, they were made to drink diluted cow dung- urine mix for the purification of pollution from baptism.²⁴ This background information, therefore, implies that Devasahayam Pillai might have been tortured for being converted to Christianity but not for theft of teak woods to construct Church buildings in Vadakankulam.

Martyrdom of Devasahayam Pillai

It is said that, soon after De-Lannoy had known about the order issued by the King for the arrest of Devasahayam Pillai, he tried to interfere with his arrest, for which he sent a European soldier who was his confidant to report him whatever had to have happened to Mr. Pillai. But, the infuriated Secretary of the king reported to the Highness that the European Captain had sent his spy to look at the conditions in the palace. Therefore, the king sent his messenger to De-Lannoy and ordered him not to interfere with the affairs of the palace; he and the missionaries should mind only their works as the missionary priests did before for fisher folks and he should not try to perturb the righteousness of the worship of Hindu Gods.²⁵ That is why De-Lannoy had a lofty vision of the martyrdom of Devasahayam. On 13th January 1752, King Marthanda Varma ordered his sepoysto carry Devasahayam Pillai

to a local Mount called Kattadimalai and shot him down to death.²⁶ Accordingly, he was brought from Thiruvithancode to Peruvilai that enroot Puliyoorkurichi wherein he got tired and thirsty and asked for drinking water but the sepoyprovided him a little dirty water unsuitable for drinking, which was to insult him as a worthless creature. Devasahayam prayed to Jesus and dashed the ankle of his hands on a rock, soon after which a fountain of pure water flowed from the rock to quench his thirst. Having seen his miracles the officers got angry and adamant to kill him soon. An arachar who was a resident of Peruvilai village of Kanyakumari district was ordered to execute the king's order. On 14th January 1752, sepoytook Devasahayam Pillai to Kattadimalai, near Aramboli, which was the destined place for his martyrdom. The sepoy let Devasahayam kneel and pray to his Lord and Saviour, whereupon they fired at him thrice, as a consequence of which he fell down crying "Lord Jesus Save Me".²⁷ Devasahayam did not die even after three shots so that the sepoy once again shot him down and thrown away his body at the foothill. Priests were forbidden to get the corps of Devasahayam Pillai to perform the usual rituals of Christian burial; after so many days, the bones of Devasahayam were gathered from Kattadimalai and assembled into the whole skeleton and interred in front of the St. Xavier's Church at Kottar.²⁸ The line "Lord we praise or Te Deum" was encrypted on his tomb. After many years, a small church was erected at the place where he was shot dead and a huge stone cross was installed at the top of the hill, which is a grand tribute to the great saint Devasahayam.

Living Traditions of Devasahayam Pillai

Even after death, Devasahayam Pillai has been living like a saint in the heart of the people, which is witnessed by the living traditions expressed in their faith and beliefs. It is certainly true that, before his conversion, Devasahayam had a habit of taking rest under a banyan tree at Thattarmadam in Tuticorin District whenever he used to visit Thiruchendur by walk, and that he appeared in the dream of a woman and insisted to erect a cross in the place where he took rest, because of which a stone cross was installed at

Thattarmadam and then in memory of Devasahayam a small church was constructed in the place. Every year in memory of the death anniversary of Devasahayam people celebrate Pongal as a thanksgiving offering to honour him for all benefits they received from the grace of God. Every year drama of Devasahayam Pillai has been performed in well-planned stages during festivals at Pugatyillapatti (Dindigul district), Kottoor (Theni District), Sirunayakanpatti (Dindigul District), Amarapatti (Dindigul District), Thinayoorani (Dindigul District), and Purathakudy (Dindigul District), which is to remember and honour the faith of Devasahayam. People of Thinayoorani believe that Devasahayam has been helping people to relieve from diseases and family problems and hence they have built a small building for worshipping him there. At Kattadimalai where he was shot down, Devasahayam appeared in a vision to a lame boy and asked for water and helped the lame to walk, which seems to be a miracle to convert a Hindu boy into a Christian.²⁹ There is a beautiful church at Kurusady in Karunkulam (Dindigul District), which is a sacred place from which sand is taken and used as medicine to cure ailments of people. From a neem tree at Nataalam, which was the birthplace of Devasahayam, leaves are collected and eaten by people who have been suffering from serious illnesses; this has been in regular use every Friday. These are the clear witnesses for people's approval of Devasahayam as a saint

from whom many people get benefits miraculously.

Conclusion

It is concluded that original documents relating to Devasahayam Pillai are missing in State Archives partly due to purposeful destruction of files and partly due to favoritism of authors to keep up the dignity of rulers. From the available pieces of evidence it is confirmed that though the ruler of Travancore was tolerant towards various religions survived in that land, he could not agree to the conversion of any High Caste Hindu into a Christian because of his strong faith in Hindu beliefs and that the ruler and his agents had severely tortured Devasahayam Pillai only for the reason that he had abandoned his father's religion and embraced Christianity with full faith. The saint Devasahayam did miracles using his religious spirit not only while he was living but also after his Martyrdom. He was matchless in the devotion, faith in Christianity, purity in heart, and saintly, for which he has been living in the heart of people. Devasahayam Pillai drama is performed in Karungulam, Kottoor, Sirunayakkampatti, Pugailapatti, Thattarmadam, Maravapatti, Muthalagupatti, and Vellodu to remember the history and devotion of Devasahayam. We hope that this is sufficient to prove that Devasahayam Pillai was tortured and killed only for his aversion to Hinduism and for being a faithful Christian.

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