

# In Faith and Service: the Impact of Missionaries Tenkasi

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## Abstract

*The present study investigates the diverse effects of missionaries in Tenkasi, focusing on their contributions to the community's social, educational, and economic development. It examines how missionary activity influenced local society by providing access to healthcare, education, and social reforms. The study brings to light the transforming function of missionaries in advancing social justice and empowerment among underprivileged communities by examining the relationship between religious convictions and social activity. This study highlights the enduring impact of missionary endeavors in Tenkasi by employing a blend of historical texts, archival resources, and oral testimonies. It demonstrates how these endeavors not only promoted Christianity but also contributed to noteworthy societal transformation. In the end, this thesis sheds light on the complexity of cultural exchange and social development in Southern India and advances our understanding of the interactions between faith and community service in a historical context.*

**Keywords :** Missionaries, Protestantism, Tenkasi, Interfaith dialogue ,Cultural exchange.

## Introduction

Nestled amidst picturesque settings in Tamil Nadu, India, Tenkasi has long been a hub of social, spiritual, and cultural developments. The missionaries who came to this area with a strong sense of purpose and an unyielding dedication to serving others are responsible for the majority of these developments. This study examines the missionaries' varied effects, including their role in promoting interfaith understanding and cross-cultural exchange as well as their contributions to healthcare, education, and community development. This story, seen through the prism of faith and devotion, considers the enduring legacies that continue to influence the lives of Tenkasi's residents in addition to highlighting the historical significance of missionary activity there. We want to provide a complete picture of how faith-driven

service has shaped this thriving community by exploring individual experiences, community changes, and the wider effects of missionary endeavors.

### The Chronicles of the Christian Advent in Tenkasi

In Tenkasi, Christians make up the third-largest community. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was already prevalent. Beginning in the early 16th century, Portuguese-led Roman Catholic missionaries had an impact on the Paravas in the coastal region of Thirunelveli. Fr. Antony De Proenca and Fr. Balthazar De Costa delivered gospel sermons in Tenkasi in 1662. Furthermore, a family converted to Christianity and constructed a small church. In Tenkasi, a new church was founded in 1823. A large number of missionaries arrived in Tamil Nadu to carry out missionary work starting in the 16th century. These missionaries came from many nations throughout the world. Several notable individuals were included, along with their contributions to the creation of social welfare programs. In south India, Tenkasi is regarded as one of the holiest locations. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was already prevalent. It is mentioned in the 1662–1665 Annual Letters. There were gospel sermons delivered by Fathers Antony de Proenca in 1662 and Balthazar Da Coasta in 1663. By the end of 1662, Fr. De Proenza had made two visits to the Christians in the south and was able to personally verify the catechist's description of Tenkasi. Fr. Balthazar da Costa visited Tenkasi in 1663 and 1664. The people believed that the Angel had appeared to them. In the southern province's largest town, Patham, a yogi named Rayappan was converted by a valante who was as brave in both his name and faith. This is what occurred to Rayappan while he was still a catechumen in Tenkasi. A number of Christian missionaries, such as the Syro Malabar and Syro Malankara, Latin Jesuits, Seventh Day Adventists, Eastern Orthodox Lutheran Salvation Army, Pentecostal and London Missionary Society, which included several protestant missions, arrived and grew in Tirunelveli, South India. One of the districts that makes up Tirunelveli is Tenkasi. According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, a missionary is someone who is dispatched to another nation to educate and preach their particular faith to the local populace. Thus, a large number of missionaries arrived in India with a religious focus. Individuals from other nations mostly traveled to Tamil Nadu and India for political, economic, and religious reasons. The Europeans had invited a great number of individuals from their nations for the spiritual goal of proselytizing, with the intention of extending their religion. Missionaries were those who came to carry out spiritual work. The primary role of a missionary is that of an evangelist, someone sent and called to

preach the everlasting and universal truth. both by speech and behavior, the gospel. He cannot adhere to any restricted caste or racial group, nor can he be a narrow patriot. He must embody universal thoughts, empathy, and aspirations, much as the message of love and hope he is heralding. Therefore, a missionary cannot be considered foreign anyplace, unless it is in a very general sense. He is a son of man, just like his savior, and a member of the human family as well as a global citizen.

The higher caste withdrew from the missionaries if they approached the unfortunate people, and if they avoided the impoverished people, they were charged with violating Christian principles. Families and their Nativity were sacrificed by missionaries. The missionaries endured hunger, shipwrecks, loneliness, and unanticipated events over their tens of thousands of kilometers of waterway journey. The majority of missionaries who arrived in India never went back to their home country. In addition to their missionary work, they invested significant time in the field of medicine, brought about a great deal of social change through education, and made other significant contributions to language and development, all of which have played a significant role in the history of our nation.

### **Missionaries of Protestantism**

While Paramkottai is the more contemporary capital of the district, Tirunelveli was the more ancient one. Tirunelveli may or may not have been more than one of the district's principal towns during the Pandya era, but it is certain that for the majority of the Nayak dynasty's rule at Madura, Tirunelveli was considered the capital of their dominions' southern region. Tranquebar, a Danish outpost in South India, was the birthplace of Protestant missionary activities. A mission was established by Denmark's King Fredrick IV to propagate protestant Christianity throughout India. In 1709, German missionaries Ziegenbalg and Plutschan became the first missionaries of the Royal Danish Mission to arrive in Tranquebar and begin their work. The true founder of the Danish Lutheran Mission was Ziegenbalg. He translated the New Testament into Tamil, constructed the enormous and exquisite Jerusalem Church in Tranquebar, and established Protestant Christianity in South India. As the seventeenth century came to an end, missionary sentiment began to grow in England, and the first Anglican Missionary Society was established in 1698. Next, the Society for Christian Knowledge Promotion (S.P.C.K.) was established. By royal charter, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G.F.P.) was established in 1701. In the era of growing British authority and influence, Madras appeared to be a more suitable location for a

mission center than Tranquebar. In 1728, Schultz, a missionary in Tranquebar, relocated to Madras.

### Missionaries' Social Contributions in the Tenkasi Region

By example, the Jesuits of the new Madurai Mission were committed to defending justice. The development project, the anti-caste movement, the uplift of the downtrodden classes, the defense of peasant rights, the rehabilitation of offenders, tribal welfare, and women's emancipation were all part of the social concern's strategy.

Programs like fostering social values, literacy drives, healthcare, disability care, temperance society, famine relief, orphanages, worker welfare, etc. were all part of the new mission's social service agenda. The Vincent de Paul Society began in the Palayamkottai diocese and has prospered, now consisting of 35 branches, 3 autonomously run societies, and Central societies. During a debate, a young law student at the Sorbonne named Frederic Ozanam was challenged to explain what he and his fellow Catholic students were personally doing to help the impoverished in Paris. This challenge marked the beginning of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris, France, in 1833. Ozanam responded right away.

In a matter of weeks, Ozanam, then twenty years old, organized the club. These seven men funded their charitable endeavors with money from friends and family as well as from their own pockets. They went to the impoverished in their neighborhood and gave them the support they needed. Ozanam quickly named St. Vincent de Paul, who had dedicated his life to helping the underprivileged in 16th-century France, as the conference's patron. The first seven members of the group expanded to 600 within a few years, and they then spread to fifteen more French cities and villages, totaling over 2,000 members. SVP started to spread outside of Paris in the middle of the 19th century. Established on August 16, 1981, St. Michaels Vincent De Pauls was a sabai under the Tenkasi Roman Catholic parish. It operated on a regular basis and kept minutes. They also assisted several other religious persons who were impoverished. Once a week on Sundays, the parish volunteers receive rice that has been gathered household-by-house by the members of the Sabai. Every Sunday, rice was given to adopted families, the impoverished, widows, and elderly individuals who were between the ages of 20 and 25. In 1992, 1993, St. Ignatius led the Sabai, followed in 1994 by Antonyappa, and St. Michael. They also received rice collections from parishioners in Tenkasi, Melamgnanapuram, Agarakattu, Madathur, and Iyyapuram Vallam on a recurring basis.

## **Christian Mission's Contribution to Education Promotion**

When Bishop Middleton, the first Anglican bishop of Calcutta, visited Tirunelveli in 1816, he discovered a mission church and a Christian school at Palayamkottai, which was home to 41 students. James Hough was appointed Government Chaplain in Tirunelveli in the same year. He lists a number of tiny Christian schools, however there have been grievances raised about their lack of textbooks and qualified teachers. He established a school there in 1818 after purchasing a plot of land close to the Holy Trinity Church in Palayamkottai. Two years after his departure from Palayamkottai, he had established up to twelve schools in the district. He had also founded preparatory schools in Palayamkottai for teacher training. Later on, it was transformed into secondary training institutions. The Rev. Hough, the Palayamkottai Chaplain, requested in 1819 from the The government provides financial assistance to two schools, one in Palayamkottai and the other in Tirunelveli, amounting to twenty-five pagodas a month. He had started those educational institutions in the years 1817 and 1818, under the supervision of the Church Missionary Society's (C.M.S.) Madras Corresponding Committee, for the purpose of teaching native youth reading, writing, math, and the fundamentals of English grammar. Reverend Hough was the immediate supervisor of these schools, which had students from every caste present. The New Testament, Shelter History of the Bible, the Psalter with Lindly Murray's Grammar, and standard English spelling books were used in them. It was noted that the local population was not alarmed by the introduction of Christian scripture. However, the Madras government rejected the application, stating that they had no interest in supporting schools of this kind. Mrs. Rhenius established the district's first girls' boarding school in 1823; it is currently known as St. Mary's Sargeant Girls Boarding School. at 1843, the first teacher training institute for women was established at Kadachapuram and operated for three years. After that, it was shut down due to problems hiring enough faculty, and for two years, a women's training program was integrated with the Palayamkottai Training School for Men. But in 1858, the Sarah Tucker Training Institution—a distinct training facility for women—opened. A blind school for both boys and girls was established in 1891. Miss Swainson established the Palayamkottai Orphanage for the Deaf and Dumb in 1899 through private donations. The school is currently among the best in the state for providing instruction and vocational training to enable physically disabled people to support themselves. Another well-known feature of Palayamkottai is the juvenile offender Borstal School. On October 26, 1726, Christian Frederick Schwartz was born in Johannesburg, Prussia. On July 30, 1750, he began his

missionary activity at Tranquebar. In addition to being fluent in the native Tamil, he also studied Marathi, Persian, Hindustani, and Portuguese. In 1746, he enrolled at the University of Halley, studying under A.H. Francke. With the intention of traveling to India, he gave up his inheritance to his siblings and sisters in 1749 and was ordained into the Sacred Ministry of the Church of Christ. When he arrived in Cuddalore on July 17, 1760, Rev. J. Z. Klierander welcomed him. He then spent 16 years at Tranquebar.

Both public and private educational institutions are widely distributed throughout the area. The Tirunelveli Revenue District was divided into Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi Districts in 1986. Additionally, a new position of District Education Officer was established in Tenkasi, and the District Education Officer positions in Tirunelveli Central and Tirunelveli South were renamed as District Education Officer Cheranmahadevi and District Education Officer Tirunelveli, respectively. Tenkasi Educational District split into Tenkasi and Sankarankovil as of 2019. For a considerable amount of time, Tenkasi has been a literate taluk in the Tirunelveli district and a well-known cultural center. The Tirunelveli Revenue District was divided into the Tirunelveli and Tenkasi Districts in 2019. In Tenkasi town, there are numerous English-medium elementary schools, as well as higher secondary schools with separate enrollment for boys and girls. The town also has institutions of arts and sciences located within its boundaries. The town's literacy rate in the 2011 census was 78.49%. The purpose of the Assembly of God was first established in Tamil Nadu in the 1800s. Particularly at Kanakapillaivalsai in the Tenkasi district, the Assembly of God Mission was formed by Rev. Robert Wade Edwards and Mrs. Doris Norma Edwards in Tamil Nadu.

## Conclusion

It is evident from considering the influence of missionaries in Tenkasi that their legacy goes well beyond the boundaries of religious conversion. Their steadfast dedication to healthcare, education, and social justice has led to important developments that still have a profound impact on the community. These missionaries built schools and medical facilities that not only met present needs but also empowered future generations and paved the way for development and resiliency. Furthermore, Tenkasi's social fabric has been strengthened by the focus on interfaith discussion and cultural exchange, which has encouraged harmony and understanding between many populations. The lessons learned from the missionaries' work serve as a reminder of the transformational power of faith and service as we negotiate the complexity of contemporary society. In the end, Tenkasi's tale is one of persistent optimism

and advancement, molded by the commitment of individuals who aspired to change things. Their effect, which is based on dedication and compassion, inspires present and future generations by demonstrating how genuine service crosses barriers and fosters a sense of community.

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