

Francis Xavier and Portuguese Administration in India

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Introduction

Francis Xavier's attitude to and relationship with the Portuguese colonial administration had been consistently cordial and was based on mutuality of seeking their help for his mission and reciprocating his services in their trade embassies. He found Portuguese presence in India to be advantageous and helpful for his purpose of spreading Catholic Christianity to people of other faiths and Malabar Christians.¹ Joao III, the king of Portugal, was supportive of the efforts of Xavier to Christianize the people of other faiths and to latinize² the Malabar Christians in India. Rupture was not very obvious except when conduct and decisions of some administrators were found by Xavier to be detrimental to the process. Xavier used his relationship with the Portugal king for his cause and of the Society rather discriminately.

Xavier's relationship with the colonial administration in the coasts of India cannot be studied in isolation with his cordial relationships with the King of Portugal prior to his arrival to India in 1542. His cordiality with the Portuguese administrators was just a continuation of his relationship with the court.

Xavier utilized his authority from the King to his cause of spreading Catholic Christianity, to oppose the Portugal officials whose presence was a liability to his cause, and to defend the converted communities. He was not uncritically supportive of the Portugal administrators in the land and his relationship with them after his arrival were highly regulated by the sense of a mission from the King and the Pope, and with an added vigor of being a consolation to the local converts.

An evaluation of Xavier's attitude to Portuguese colonial administration ought to take into account the agenda set by the needs of his converts, especially in the pearl fishery coast in the southeastern of India. The changing policy of the Portugal administration under Joao III towards trade and Christianization in their colonies is another factor that needs to be taken seriously in understanding his attitudes.

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My study originally aimed to find a prophet in Xavier in the sorts of Jose de Acosta and Las Casas, the Sixteenth century Jesuits who were critical of Spanish aggression in Americas, but has miserably failed to see one such. But I could find in him a kind of prophet, who wanted to defend his coverts using his proximity to the colonial rulers. One of the factors for such a difference is the very mission of Portugal presence, which was more interested in commercial profits than in destroying the natives. The methods of Christianizing the natives in India were quite different from those by Spanish in Americas. Moreover, native converts, whom their neighbouring communities and Muslim traders exploited, in the pearl fishery coast found a stronger patron in Portugal administrators.

I have heavily relied on the letters of Xavier to infer his attitudes, asking questions of how he viewed Portugal colonialism in India and why did he view it that way. The study of his attitude to colonialism and the conclusion that he had been in favour of Portuguese colonialism in India necessarily involved the questions like why did he favour Portuguese presence in India.

Due to my ignorance of the languages in which these letters were written, I had to depend on translations by Costelloe, Schurhammer and Henry Venn. Theological commitments and agenda of each translator invariably shaped the tone of the translated letters. The perspectives of the translators make their renderings almost contradictory or beyond comparison in many places.³ While Costelloe and Schurhammer had a certain degree of admiration for the saintliness and ministries of Xavier, Henry Venn, being an honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society⁴, was unreasonably critical to the methods and attitudes of Xavier in his missionary enterprise. These differences and frequent obscurities made my task of gleaning the clues about Xavier's attitudes difficult. The translations provided me more with the attitudes of the translators than of Xavier himself.

Francis Xavier and Power-Centres Before His Arrival

Francis Xavier's attachment to the Royal court of Portugal and latter's admiration for Xavier was very cordial beyond argument and this, indeed, is very much evident in his letters. K.M. Panikkar's use of the title, 'Portuguese King's Inspector of Missions,'⁵ and Henry Venn's use of, 'the Royal Commissioner of King,'⁶ speaks volumes of the impressions these letters give about Xavier's relationship with the king. Catholic writers, such as Schurhammer and Costelloe were not totally shy of acknowledging this intimacy.

The king took a special interest, both in the process of seeking the papal approval for the Jesuit order and in preparation of the Jesuit mission to India. It was due to the admiration the king had towards the vows of Xavier.

In a letter from the royal court in Lisbon, to Ignatius of Loyola towards the end of June 1540, Simao Rodrigues, who accompanied Xavier, reports about the King's interest in Jesuit affairs, and insistence that they continue to hear the confessions at

the court itself.⁷ Rodrigues boasts that the king and the queen spent 'long time' receiving 'the extensive account of our (their) affairs.' King was impressed with their vows of poverty and their loyalty to their vows.

This mission of Xavier on a papal commission to the Portugal king, illustrates the clout of power Xavier was engrossed in. Rodrigues claims that they "have been sent by His Holiness to carry the name of the Lord to kings and to preach it to those who do not know him."⁸ King, on the other hand, was reluctant to let them return and was willing to request Pope that they remain in the court.

In a letter written to Ignatius Loyola from Lisbon, just before their departure in 1541, Xavier highlights King's enthusiasm about the mission to India and king's request that Xavier should write to him "at great length about the readiness of the poor people there to be converted."⁹ Xavier applauds the king for reforming the court into a religious house.

The above letters provide us with ample reasons to believe that the king and Xavier not only admired each other for their religiosity, but also shared common interests of spreading Catholic faith in India. It is not surprising that Xavier looked up to the king, whenever the need arises neither as king's agent nor converts' ambassador to utilize the trust of king.

Xavier's relationship with the Viceroy to India also was equally cordial. Viceroy not only sponsored their journey to India but also travelled with them in the same ship. Upon their decision to travel, Xavier reports, Viceroy "has been so very kind to us that he wishes to take care of our embarkation by himself and not leave it to another."¹⁰

On their brief stopover at Mozambique, Viceroy requested some of the Jesuits to remain in the shores to care for the sick in the Portuguese settlement, while taking with him in his ship the rest of the group. It was not only the Viceroy who found the Jesuits useful in his fleet, but Xavier himself believed in the advantage in finding favour with Viceroy for the spread of his faith. Writing in 1541, he confides, with Claude Jay and Diego Lianez, "the favour of the Viceroy will be a great help to us, since he is highly regarded by the kings who are at peace there (in India) with the king of Portugal."¹¹

Rome was another power center to which Xavier felt that he was accountable, having been commissioned as papal nuncio to the Indies. Having failed to journey to Jerusalem as part of their vow, companions placed themselves at the obedience of the Pope, wishing to go wherever Pope wanted them to go.¹² Xavier was fortified with the letters of recommendation from Pope to the king of Ethiopia and other princes of East on his departure to India. Despite doubts whether he was the Pope's original choice to travel on the mission to the Indies,¹³ Xavier definitely was one with papal powers being accountable to Rome.

The relationships of cordiality with the Portuguese king and his Viceroy to India, and being entrusted as an apostle to India was an indispensable factor

which shaped his attitudes to the colonial presence of Portugal in India. It was not merely an exploitation of his relationships with the power centers, but rather discriminate use of the relationships that he already sustained before his arrival in India.

Xavier and Portuguese Administration in India

In his dealings with his fellow missionaries and Portuguese officials in India, it is evident that he was conscious of his power that his relationship with the royal court could draw for him. He, however, did not revel in the 'authority' indiscriminately, as Venn suggests.

Venn argues that Xavier had used the 'authority' conferred in him by the king to influence the king to send Jesuits, to provide for their maintenance and to reform the 'loose' lifestyle of European Christians, whose conduct was becoming detrimental to the cause of spreading Catholic Christianity.¹⁴ Venn qualifies his claim by stating that such authority was used only when the interests of Jesuit mission in India were at stake and not to gratify his personal ambitions. Xavier was unsparing in the exercise of his 'authority' against those who 'hinder' the spread of the 'word'.¹⁵ However, the translated renderings of the letters of Xavier mellows down Xavier's claims of such authority from the king.

Venn cites several instances to prove his thesis about Xavier's use of his access to the court to the advantage of his ministry, with Venn's own translation of the letters. His English rendering of the letters looks too different with that of Costelloe. It is due to the fact, that Venn is critical about Xavier's use of his relationship with the king. Venn's language grows more polemical in references to Xavier using his 'authority' to foster the process of latinization of Malabar Christians. He concludes that Xavier's exercise of such authority from the king proved to be 'utter failure'.¹⁶ He reiterates the Xavier's dependence on this 'arm of flesh', or colonial power was "a snare and a weakness to all his Missionary enterprise."¹⁷

The polemical character of Venn's thesis is because of the very purpose of his writing. Writing in his capacity as Honorary Secretary of the CMS in the heydays of the British colonial enterprise, when there was a heightened temptation on the part of Christian missionaries to exploit their access to local colonial administrators, Venn had pedagogical motives in his writing of the book, cautioning English missionaries in India not to 'lean' on the 'arm of flesh'.¹⁸

However, the modesty and silence of Schurhammer and Costelloe cannot be an indication of Xavier's aversion towards Portuguese colonial enterprise in India. Costelloe's commitment to publish the works and letters of Xavier which have been a 'strong support' and 'inspiration' for Catholics of his day, because of the lack of comprehensive publication after Schurhammer's edition.¹⁹ The uncritical admiration of the translator finds in Xavier a saint and a source of inspiration, and not as a missionary with his limitations.

Working with these translations in my research, I could trace a common thread of evidence that suggest Xavier's view that power which Portuguese king could muster over the shores of south India was given by God to foster the spread of Catholic faith in the region. In his letter to the king, from Cochin in 1545, Xavier reminded the king the grant of the land of India was meant to spread the faith and not merely to accumulate the riches. He wrote,

... God, our Lord, has granted the rule over these Indies primarily to Your Highness, preferring you to all other Christian princess, ...he did not so much intend to enrich the royal treasury of Your Highness with precious fruits of distant lands or through the acquisition of foreign treasures, ...for manifesting your ardent zeal by the assignment of devoted missionaries to apostolic labours so that they might, on behalf of Your Highness, bring a knowledge of the Creator and redeemer of the world to the pagans of these lands.²⁰

Xavier's willingness to exploit his relationship with the Portuguese crown needs to be evaluated in the light of the prevailing situation in India, where the converts in the pearl fishery coast were in need of political patron. Converted communities in the pearl fishery coast often were identified with the Portuguese power in India to an extent that any misadventure by the Portuguese governor in Goa would have its repercussions on the communities, because the local princes attacked them in vengeance against the Portuguese armies. In a letter to Francis Mansilhas in 1544, Xavier records such an event when Portuguese fleet seized brother-in-law of Vettum Perumal, and latter wished to retaliate on Christians because of their association with Portuguese administration.²¹

Xavier acknowledges such mutual 'affection' between the Portuguese governors and the native Christians in his first year in the pearl fishery coast. In his letter to Ignatius of Loyola, he reports that Portuguese governor in the region had "great affection for the Christians who have been recently converted," giving them "much help when they were being harassed and persecuted by the Moors."²²

One of the factors for such an association is the support pearl fishers sought; a decade before the arrival of Xavier in return for their conversions to Christianity. Both pearl fisheries and Portuguese shared enmity of Muslim traders and the Vijaya Nagar dynasty. Anti-'Moorish'²³ feelings of the Portuguese Christians aided the converts to resist the armed threats from the Muslim traders who were exploiting the fishers in their pearl trade.

The need of the converts for military protection and eagerness of the Portuguese administrators to find loyal subjects made such a bond between fishers and Portuguese possible. As a missionary among the fishery communities, Xavier was not reluctant to use his access to colonial officials to his advantage when the needs of the converted communities so required him.

There were many instances, where Xavier requested the Portuguese administrators at Trivandrum and Goa to intervene when the Christian communities

in the coast were attacked by the neighbouring kings. Upon an attack by Vettum Perumal on pearl fishers, Xavier rushed to the local Portuguese to strike an agreement for the safety of the native Christians. At the news of attacks on Christian converts in the island, by the king of Jaffna, Xavier sought the military intervention from the Portuguese garrison in Cochin.²⁴ Thus, situation of attacks on local Christian converts and their need for intervention by a mightierly warranted Xavier to seek the assistance from the colonial administration.

Xavier was not hesitant to use his acquaintance with the Portuguese officials for making military deals for local princes in their rivalries, if it helped make more converts. The mass conversion of the Macuas, was the result of one such agreement between Martanda Varma and the Portuguese administration in Goa. As a reward to the mediation of Xavier on his behalf for Portuguese military assistance against the king of Tuticorin, Varma, the king of Travancore, permitted Xavier to baptize Macuas.²⁵

As a Catholic zealot, Xavier was determined to impose Catholic faith on Malabar Christians and was eager to use his good offices with the Portuguese administration. Venn accuses Xavier, for having a 'chief hand' in the scheme of latinization as part of 'Romish Mission' in India.²⁶

There is an element of truth in the accusation, given the fervent appeals of Xavier to the Portuguese king for more incentives to Mar Jacob Abuna, bishop of the Malabar church, who helped the process of latinization of Malabar church.²⁷ In another letter to the king, Xavier sought continued favours of the king to the seminary at Cranganore, founded to bring the Catholic 'light of Christ' to the whole of Malabar, which was oppressed by Nestorian 'vices and errors.'²⁸ The founder of the seminary, found a friend and trusted supporter in Xavier in his attempts to latinize the Malabar Christians.

The lifestyle of many Portuguese Christians was causing more harm in the spreading of the Catholic faith, was one of the reasons why Xavier had invoked the power from his relationships with the Portuguese court. An unrestrained entry of the some fisheries from the neighbouring regions into Parava shores is another reason for Xavier to take the advantage of his good offices with Portuguese king. Xavier, exhorts Mansilhas to restrain the expelled fisheries from Tuticorin from fishing the 'chank.'²⁹ He called these Christians traitors, and claimed that the Bay of Bengal to be the possession of the Portugal.³⁰

Moreover, Xavier had every reason to be supportive of the colonial presence of Portugal in India, because the governor undertook to fund many of the activities of the Jesuits in the land. The right of 'padroado', entitled the king to finance the missionary and ecclesiastical activities in the regions occupied and, Society of Jesus had been a beneficiary of such favours from the Portugal, while offering their services to find papal favours for their enterprise.³¹

Conclusion

Xavier's relationships with the Portuguese king, Viceroy to India, and Pope continued to shape his attitudes to and relationships with Portuguese administration in India. He found the colonial presence to be useful in his mission in India. He saw himself as being accountable to these, who were directly responsible for Portuguese colonialism in India. He understood the grant of Pope over the lands in the East to the king of Portugal as God's providence' to preach the gospel and not merely for trade.

Xavier's attitudes to the Portuguese colonial presence in India were favourable and his relationships with the administrators were shaped by his commitment to his converts, and to the process of spreading the Catholic faith. The need of the converted communities for armed protection and political patronage did not impair already cordial relationships with Portuguese officials.

He was also involved in mediation between local kings, like Martanda Varma, and the administrators at Goa for military treaties. However, such diplomacy by Xavier aimed at the conversion of the communities. He was eager to exploit his access to the Portuguese king to hasten the process of latinization of Malabar Christians.

He invoked his power drawn from his intimacy with the Portuguese court to restrain the Portuguese Christians in their exploitative dealings with his converts. Though discriminate in his attitude, Xavier saw Portuguese colonialism to be of help to his cause and did not hesitate to use whenever it could be advantageous to him and to his converts.

NOTES

1. A community of Christians in Southwest India claiming their spiritual roots to apostolate of St. Thomas.
2. The process of imposing Latin rite on Malabar Christians who were of Syriac rite.
3. Cf. *The Letters*, 103, Henry Venn, *The Missionary Life and Labours of Francis Xavier Taken from His Own Correspondence: With A Sketch of the General Results of Roman Catholic Missions Among the Heathens* (London: Longman, Green Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1862), 103. Hereafter, Venn, *The Missionary Life*.

Venn's translation of Letter dated 10th Nov., 1544.

Tell N. Barbosa from me not to employ any in the pearl fisheries at Tuticorin who have taken possession of the houses of the Christian exiles. As the King and the Viceroy have given me authority in this matter, I positively forbid it. It will greatly displease me if those who bear the Christian name, but are both contumacious and disobedient, or, to speak more correctly, downright apostates, should have the advantage of our sea fisheries.

Costelloe' translation of the same letter

Tell Nicalou Barbosa for me that he should not invite to the Chank fishery those who are living in the homes of the people who were expelled from them in Tuticorin, for I am unwilling that such disobedient individual, or, to put more exactly, Christian renegades, should enjoy the fruit of our sea.

4. Missionary minded individuals in England who mostly shared Anglican inclinations founded CMS.

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5. K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History 1498-1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), 45.
6. Venn, *The Missionary Life*, 147.
7. M. Joseph Costelloe (trans.), *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 15, Hereafter, *The Letters*.
8. *The Letters*, 15.
9. *Ibid.*, 35.
10. *The Letters*, 33.
11. *Ibid.*, 39.
12. George E. Ganss, *Ignatius Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York & Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), 41, 109.
13. *The Letters*, xv.
14. Venn, *The Missionary Life*, 148.
15. Venn, *The Missionary Life*, 148
16. *Ibid.*, 165.
17. *Ibid.*, 155
18. *Ibid.*
19. *The Letters*, 6.
20. *Ibid.*, 107-108.
21. *The Letters*; 95.
22. *Ibid.*, 62.
23. Muslim.
24. *The Letters*, xvi.
25. *Ibid.*, 104.
26. Venn, *The Missionary Life*, 152.
27. *The Letters*, 238-239.
28. *Ibid.*, 111.
29. One kind of pearl.
30. *The Letters*, 103.
31. *Ibid.*, 52, 69.