

## **Contestation for Christian Minority Rights in Tamilnadu during 1970-75: The Contributions of Bro.Thomas SHJ**

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### **Abstract**

Minority right in political field was given through making separate electorates which religious minorities enjoyed during the British India Parliament elections in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century and later surrendered it when the Republic constitution came into force in independent India. In the post colonial situations, the religious minorities were denied of their rights guaranteed in the constitution. In the literal and functional aspects of the provisions this right cannot be waived by anybody since it has been given to the community in perpetual. Unfortunately the problem of rejection or negligence of the law by the state happened in the early 1970's. The Christian educational institutions who were managing several institutions were surprisingly informed to manage without government's financial aid. The institutions reacted accordingly by forming a consortium of educational institutions mainly with the affected to negate the Tamilnadu government's decision through courts. Interestingly the association appointed a religious brother who belonged to Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus congregation located at Palayamkottai. The Brother himself was administration a higher secondary school at a village called Patthiyavaram in Vellore region. The case filed by the consortium had faced failure in the Madras High court and appeal was made in Supreme Court. Finally the constitutional right of the Christian minorities was upheld by the Supreme Court verdict on this case. Thereafter Tamilnadu government had passed bills on this regard and it became an Act (1973) and Rules (1974) binding all private educational institutions in the state.

The contributions of Bro.Thomas and his lawyers are commendable. The social condition particularly of the poor and underprivileged in Tamilnadu during that period necessitated such services rendered by a group of socially conscious persons. Fulfilling the objectives of a religious congregation and upholding social justice enshrined in constitution and bringing that into effective by a legal battle against none other than the State has happened in this historical event. As every constitutional privilege has been misused by more complex socio-political situations this Christian minority right for educational institutions had also faced several questioning on its validity. However this paper will focus only on the various stages of the case and some light on the service of Bro.Thomas in that event.

### **The Problems of Minorities in Tamilnadu and the Formation of the ‘Council of Minority Institutions’**

The D.M.K government in Tamilnadu during the early 1970's wishing to please the teachers of private schools however passed a Bill. In the beginning of 1973 they issued a draft Act <sup>1</sup> on the above subject. The main purpose was to curtail the rights of the managements of private schools (all private schools both minority and non-minority) and to give more power to the teachers, thereby to please them. The government also declared that the Minority institutions will not be given aid and recognition unless they fulfil the new norms.

In the name of rules for recognised private schools major restrictions were made for the minority institutions. They are,

1. Minority schools should create an endowment and deposit the same in government account before starting a school. The amount is for Training schools Rs.1,00,000, High schools Rs.1,00,000 Middle schools Rs. 50,000 and Primary schools Rs.25,000

2. All the priests, brothers and sisters not employed must register their names in the employment exchange and through the employment exchange only they should be appointed.

3. Roster system must be followed for appointment of teachers. That means the government has fixed a list of castes and percentage of seats to a concern caste and accordingly the appointments should be made.

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<sup>1</sup> The Tamilnadu Recognised Private Schools (Regulation) Act 1973 (Act No.29 of 1974 and Rules 1974). G.O. MS. No.1966 Education 29<sup>th</sup> Nov.1974

4. Seniority must be followed in the appointment of the head of the institutions and in promotions.

5. Reservation percentage must be followed in the admission of students also.

6. Every school primary to higher secondary must have a school committee. The school committee must have one or two or more number of staff of the school and the headmaster of the school. This committee will carry on the general administration of the school, appoint teachers and other employees, fix their pay, define their duties, and conditions of service. This committee will take disciplinary action against teachers and other employees of the school<sup>2</sup>. The most dangerous part is that any decision or action taken by this school committee is deemed to be taken by the management. This is binding on the management.

All private managements tried to reject the Act. They have decided to form a council so that to make a collective appeal in the court of law to bring their constitutional right into practice. After few weeks an exclusive Tamilnadu Minority Institution's council was formed in the wake of fighting against the government in the court of law. In that council Fr.Stanislaus was appointed as secretary and Fr.Machado S.J was appointed to help him. Mr.A.Durairaj Pillai was the council lawyer. With his help the council submitted one or two memorandums pointing out that many of the clauses of the said Act went against the constitutional rights of the minority. One fine morning the news papers flashed the news that Bro.Thomas of the Sacred Heart Brothers Palayamkottai filed a writ petition against the Act with the help of Mr.Martin a lawyer in the high court of Madras and got stay order in the name of SHJ congregation schools only.

In response to this news circulated in media the council approached Mr.A.Durairaj Pillai and asked him to file a similar writ petition for all the catholic schools of Tamilnadu, which includes all the schools managed by 13 dioceses and about 25 to 30 religious congregations (men and women) (high, middle and primary schools) numbering in all more than thousand. Mr.Durairaj Pillai agreed to file the writ petition and demanded a reasonable sum of money shared by all the schools. However a meeting was conducted by the council with the participation of all the responsible representatives to take final decision on the matter of filing writ petition or any other necessary step. The meeting was presided over by the Dr.Duraisamy, Bishop of Salem, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

then vice president of catholic schools council. Bro.Thomas however though uninvited went along with the Brother-General of the SHJ congregation who was invited for the meeting. Fr.Machado S.J. explained the whole matter and informed the participants that “things had been arranged with Mr.Durairaj Pillai to file the writ petition in the name of all our schools”<sup>3</sup>. Bro Thomas then interrupted and said very forcefully, “the case is a difficult one and needs lot of study and work as it is not one or two points but an Act with Rules, a series of points relating to the administration of our schools. His claim was accepted by members. The case was taken up in the high court in June 1975<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Role of Bro.Thomas in the Council**

There were nearly over thousand and five hundred societies both minority and non-minority who jointly filed the writ petitions. Mr.Martin had already filed the writ petition first for the society of the Brothers of Sacred Heart of Jesus and got stay order. So the case was termed the society of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart and others. The others include all the catholic societies of dioceses and religious congregation. In the year 1976, 44 schools of dioceses and congregation societies (which run schools) have been already given approval as minority institutions by the high Court of Madras on 24.9.1976<sup>5</sup>. In the end of the year 1976 the minority status for these schools was cancelled by the government at one instance. Among these 44 schools, the Roman Catholic society, the congregation of Franciscan servants of Mary, Hosur and the Roman Catholic society of Theresian Carmelites, Thuckalay had filed the civil suit in Madras High Court. They could get the minority status for each two schools managed by them whereas the other societies managing forty schools had failed to get similar order through court.

Bro.Thomas himself was known as the "court bird"<sup>6</sup>. The case was taken up by the chief justices of Madras High Court K.Veerasingam and Justice S.Natarajan. Mr.Martin put forwarded Supreme Court Judgement and high court judgement references including the 1974 Supreme Court judgement on St.Xaviers College, Ahmadabad versus the state of Gujarat which was delivered by 11 judges which upheld the rights of minorities. It was argued by the famous

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<sup>3</sup> Jayaraj Ed. *Ithaya Sabayin Udhayagnayiru* Palayamkottai, 2006 p. 125

<sup>4</sup> *Nam Seithi* An official bulletin of SHJ congregation, Palayamkottai, Nov. 2006 p 5

<sup>5</sup> Proceedings of the director of school education R.C.No.24541-G3/76 dt.20.11.1976

<sup>6</sup> Jayaraj Ed. *Opcit.* P-127

constitutional lawyer N.A.Palkiwala<sup>7</sup>, the judgement became the *magna carta* of minority rights in India. At the same time there was an adverse Supreme Court Judgement for minorities delivered by Justice Shri Krishna Iyer in the Gandhi Faiz-e-am College of university of Shahjahanpur versus university of Agra and other cases. The chief justice Mr.Veerasingam said "Mr.Martin you have done well" a rare statement in the high court<sup>8</sup>. The case went on for six days giving chance for others also to argue their points.

On 16.12.1975 Mr.R.Perumal the then director of school education sent word to Fr.Machado stating that minorities would lose all their rights when the judgement delivered on the following day<sup>9</sup>. On 17<sup>th</sup> December 1975 the chief justice delivered the judgement. More than half the sections of the Act and Rules, all of them important once were declared inapplicable to minority institutions as they are violative of their fundamental right under article 30(1) of the constitution. It was a big shock to the government and a great triumph for the council. In the meantime in 1975 a similar Act and Rules were brought into force for the colleges. It was almost a carbon copy of the school Act and Rules with some technical changes like affiliation instead of recognition, university for government. When the judgement for schools was delivered on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1975 the college act was later amended incorporating all the rights granted by the judgement of the high court for the school case.

Bro.Thomas on the basis of the high court judgement started the first minority school without endowment fund deposit to the government at Pathiavaram village in Vellore district. It was recognised by the state government and soon became aided. The state government accepted the judgement and gave recognition with grant in aid to some of the upgraded schools by a special G.O called "grant and aid for the minority institutions" by which all minority schools in Tamilnadu became eligible for government aid<sup>10</sup>. The government later enacted a law namely "*The Tamilnadu Recognised Private Schools (Regulation) Act 1973 (Act No.29 of 1974 and Rules 1974)*".The minority institutions whether opened new schools or upgraded the existing schools, they were recognised and aided without any difficulty. In 1978 Dr.K.Venkatasubramanian the director of School education started giving trouble to the minority

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<sup>7</sup> Arulraj Vizhiyaga Palyamkottai 2003, P-42

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p-47

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p-49

<sup>10</sup> Sec 14(1) of the G.O. MS. No.1966 Education 29<sup>th</sup> Nov.1974

schools because he saw that the minority institutions had unfettered rights and they could open schools if they wanted without getting prior permission from government. As the director of school education department he could not refuse recognition but delayed. After a prolonged delay in responding to the applications he used to give recognition but without aid. This matter was taken to the council and the president and secretary had sent a long detailed memorandum pointing out the legal right based on various grounds asking for aid for new minority schools. This was also addressed to the chief minister, education minister, education secretary, chief secretary, and the director. Nothing came in as reply.

The Thiruchendur bye election came. The diocesan fathers of that region met the education minister and represented the matter to him. At that instance he promised to do something just to please the fathers. He had asked the director to give only two posts available with the director to the newly opened or upgraded schools. For many years the school education department under Mr.Venkatasubramanian continued same trick of recognition without aid<sup>11</sup>. In 1980 Mr.Venkatasubramanian the director persuaded the state government to appeal to the Supreme Court against the favourable judgement the council had got in the high court of Madras. The state government once again went to High Court with special leave petition. But the chief justice of Madras High Court refused leave of appeal stating that judgement has been made based on different judgements of the Supreme Court. However the school education department of Tamilnadu government went to Delhi and persuaded the Supreme Court to file the appeal against the judgement of the high court since an Act was involved and there were many points to be dealt with. Somehow Bro.Thomas got sudden news from his friend in Delhi about it. Immediately Mr.Martin and Bro.Thomas went to Delhi and filed Caveat. A lawyer from Delhi was engaged and Mr.Martin assisted him. The Tamilnadu government wanted stay of the judgement<sup>12</sup>. Because of the argument made by the lawyer Martin, though the leave of appeal was permitted stay order was refused<sup>13</sup>. Had the stay order been granted, the minority schools would have been treated like any other non minority school.

It was a big disappointment to the government. The minority schools continue to enjoy the rights granted by the judgement of the high court by the chief justice Veerasamy.

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<sup>11</sup> Arulraj Op.cit. p- 45

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p-47

<sup>13</sup> Jayaraj Ed. Op.cit p-129

## Case in the Apex Court

Coming to the Supreme Court case, as mentioned earlier the appeal was filed in 1980 by the Tamilnadu government. It is only a Supreme Court lawyer who could file the case. So the minority institutions council engaged one Mr.Naunitlal who had knowledge of the minority rights and appeared for a number of minority cases earlier. Bro.Thomas having seen Mr.Martin's argument in the Madras high court decided that Mr.Martin should handle this case in the Supreme Court also and in 1981 he fixed the fee. It was just Rs.30, 000 for all the schools. Sad to say Bro. Thomas died of heart attack and left the burden on Fr.Machado to conduct the case<sup>14</sup>. He took interest in the case. With his experiences in the school administration, rules etc. Mr.Martin and Fr.Machado used to discuss about some of the difficult points and made them clear among themselves before court session. After the death of Bro.Thomas, Bro.Arulraj the administrator of the Sacred Heart Brothers institutions in Pathiavaram was roped in and the three member group was conducting the case. The government was not interested in the case though they were refusing teachers posts to the minority schools. On the other hand the three were anxious that the case be taken soon. So Mr.Martin, Fr.Machado and sometimes Bro.Arulraj went to Delhi to push up the case. In July 1986 the council has got a wire from the Delhi lawyer that the case would be taken up immediately.

The council based the claim on two points,

1. In 1964 free education was introduced in the state which meant that schools not collect fees and the government would pay all the teachers and non-teaching staff<sup>15</sup>. The council had the copy of the government order.

2. Constitution article 30(2) clearly states that 'the state shall not in granting aid to educational institutions discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority whether based on religion or language.

In the meantime from the year 1980 to 1984 the Tamilnadu government had sanctioned approval for nearly 100 high schools each year and all of them are non-minority schools and

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<sup>14</sup> Letter written by Fr.Machado S.J to Bro.Arulraj dt. 26<sup>th</sup> Nov.1981

<sup>15</sup> Arulraj Op.cit. p-53

were given approved teacher's post<sup>16</sup>. The council felt that this is a case of clear discrimination and against the scope of the constitutional provision. The council managed to get the copy of the government orders related to the opening of new schools and appointment of teachers in the government and non-minority private institutions. Bro.Arulraj of Sacred Heart Brothers filed a case with the help of Mr.Martin for a SHJ school in Athipet in Vellore region to get sanctioned approved post. After some hearings the high court ordered the government to pay the teachers' salaries as interim relief. But the government appealed against this judgement in the Supreme Court where Mr.Martin argued this case also and won. After this incident number of middle schools managed by the Kottar diocese was upgraded with aid. Some Catholic religious congregations also got the facility for their schools. The situation infuriated the government and they were bent upon winning the pending case in the Supreme Court filed in 1980. They engaged three senior eminent Supreme Court lawyers. Mr. Shanthi Bushan has been the leading lawyer who was paid Rs.75, 000.

In the year 1985 Mr.Frank Antony (an Anglo Indian) M.P. and a supreme court senior lawyer himself who has also managed an Anglo Indian School in Delhi was challenged in the supreme court by his own teachers because of low salary not par with the government schools and the miserable treatment. Justice Chinnappa reddy (a catholic from Amhora) delivered an unfavourable judgement against Mr.Frank Antony who himself argued the case. The judge ordered him to pay right salary to his teachers and treat them better. This judgement was flashed in the news papers as a hard blow to the minority rights. Connected with the Tamilnadu governments Supreme Court case on private schools regulations, some of the school teachers in Tamilnadu from minority schools (non-catholic) had filed cases in the Supreme Court for their unjust termination of services by the management. They approached Mr.Chinnappa Reddy and requested him to take up the Tamilnadu situation also. Justice Chinnappa Reddy agreed and arranged with the chief Justice to transfer the council's cases to himself and another judge. After having watched the situation Mr.Martin seemed to become a little nervous but all the same was quite confident of his defence. In the meantime Mr.Palkiwala India's number one constitutional

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<sup>16</sup> Gazetteer on Minority Schools published by Govt.of Tamilnadu , 2001, Pp 199-209



lawyer has asked the apex court's single Judge's order on Mr. Frank Antony's case for review. It was refused<sup>17</sup>.

It was clearly a big victory for the council. The council members were waiting for the chief justice of the Supreme Court to constitute a larger bench of five judges. The Tamilnadu government has lost its eager upon the case since they foresee the trend of the case. The case when taken up by five Judge Bench lasted for two weeks, as there were so many points argued. Same points have already been declared in favour of the council based on the Gujarat, St.Xavier's college case with eleven judges and some other very important Supreme Court cases. Though Bro.Thomas had fixed Rs 30,000 as fees for Mr.Martin the council had paid Rs.40000 in recognition of his efforts and he had to mind the case from 1980 to till 1987. He has become an authority on minority rights and approached by number of clients thereafter. Justice Chinnappa Reddy retired after this case. He has created a good climate in favour of the minority educational institutions in India.<sup>18</sup> On 18.4.1988 more than 100 new schools possessed court order and were able to ask the government to pay all the salary arrears up to date. Minority institutions council of Tamilnadu had praised the noteworthy services of Bro.Thomas, Mr.Martin, Fr.Machado and Bro. Arulraj in this regard<sup>19</sup>.

### **Aftermath of the Supreme Court Judgement**

The Supreme Court validated the Madras High Court's judgement and released stay order to the Tamilnadu government's Private Educational Institutions (Regu) Act 1973. Some of the privileges are started to be enjoyed by the minority institutions from 1977 onwards immediately after the Madras High Court judgement on the year (Justice Veerasamy's Judgement). But in general the whole lot of privileges are started to be enjoyed by the minority institutions after the Supreme Court judgement only.

The judgement of the Madras High Court in the year 1978 runs as follows,

“We declare as inapplicable to minority institutions sections 8(1) (a) the right under each of Art 28 to 30 is not subject to any limitation or restriction. The right guaranteed in Art 30(1) is in

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<sup>17</sup> Jayaraj Ed. Op.cit p- 24

<sup>18</sup> Arulraj Op.cit Pp 67-71

<sup>19</sup> Jayaraj Ed. Opcit. p-27

absolute terms and no abridgement of the substance of the right is therefore permissible. We should think that though the various decisions of the Supreme Court as we see them absolute character of the right, has always been kept in view and any erosion on its substance has not been permitted"<sup>20</sup>

Based on the Supreme Court judgement several disputes had been cleared subsequently related to the minority institutions in Tamilnadu. The DEO of Pattukkottai was informed by the Director of School Education that since the council of Minority schools have obtained the stay orders from the operations of Rule 17 of the Private Schools Act and Rules in the supreme court of India New Delhi, the Private Schools Act and rules and the amendment there to cannot be implemented. Any actions taken based on that Act also becomes null and void.<sup>21</sup>

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