

St. Francis Xavier in South India

His First Encounter with Hinduism

Tuticorin had a mixed population. A good many pagans lived here among the Christian Paravas and Saint Francis for the first time came into close contact with the pagan beliefs and practices of India. One could only enter a temple barefooted. There in the darkness of the sanctuary and in the dim light of an oil lamp could be seen grinning down at the visitor an ugly, black idol, ill-smelling from the coconut oil with which it was smeared. There were numerous images of the gods in the temple and wayside chapels, on the borders of the streets, and in the fields. These were made of wood, clay, metal and stone in every possible form. Frequently they were only heaps of sand, earth, or stone shaped like little pyramids. Those who passed by them tossed upon them as a sign of respect a handful of sand, a stone, or the twig of a tree so that the devil living within them might not harm them. Besides these, there were stones with the fearful portrait of a cobra with either one or seven inflated heads, or of a reclining, stone bull, the sacred mount of Shiva, or of a peacock, the mount of the god Subramanya, and representations of gods and goddess with many arms and all kinds of symbols, and especially that of the bloodthirsty Kali. Among these were Hanuman, the ape-god; Puleyar, the fat-bellied god with an elephant's trunk, frequently placed at a street crossing so that he could watch for a mate who would be more beautiful than his mother, a devil in the form of a crow; gaily painted horses, cows, and elephants made of a clay, the mounts of the protecting god of the village and his companions when they set out at night to drive the evil spirits from the fields; and statues of temple guards with raised, menacing clubs.

The Brahmans were the priests of the temples and lived off of their revenues.

Twice a day a trumpet made from the shells of tritons, gongs, and drums announced the offerings that they brought to the gods; rice and curry fruit, melted butter, palm sugar, flowers, and incense. When the aroma of the food had been dissipated, the priests ate the offerings, using banana leaves as plates. They never tasted meat. On feast days, the idol was adorned with precious ornaments and led in solemn procession through the streets with loud music. The priests, who were held in the highest esteem by all the people, could tell many ridiculous and even filthy stories about their gods. The Brahmans bathed every day and scrupulously avoided any contacts with the lower, and especially the unclean castes. They took careful note of the distinction between good and bad days, between favorable and unfavorable omens. When a child was born, an astrologer was called to take its horoscope in order to see if the infant had seen the light of day under a favorable or unfavorable constellation; and countless were the ceremonies which had to be observed from dawn to dusk and from birth to death.

The religion of the pagans was, especially for the common people, a religion of fear. If one died a violent death, his spirit found no rest and wandered about as an evil demon. In fact, the whole world was full of evil spirits, of bloodthirsty devils who had to be pacified with sacrificial offerings. When the Brahmans lacked provisions, they threatened the people with the wrath of gods in order to obtain what they needed. When a woman was expecting a child or when someone fell ill, a Brahman was called to pronounce his *mantras* over them and to tell the people what must be offered at the pagoda that their prayers might be heard. Before a suppliant brought his offering, he anointed himself with oil, washed his body, cleaned his teeth, rubbed his body with fragrant sandalwood, cooked a mess of rice, killed a goat, or some chickens, and had a meal with his companions near the temple.

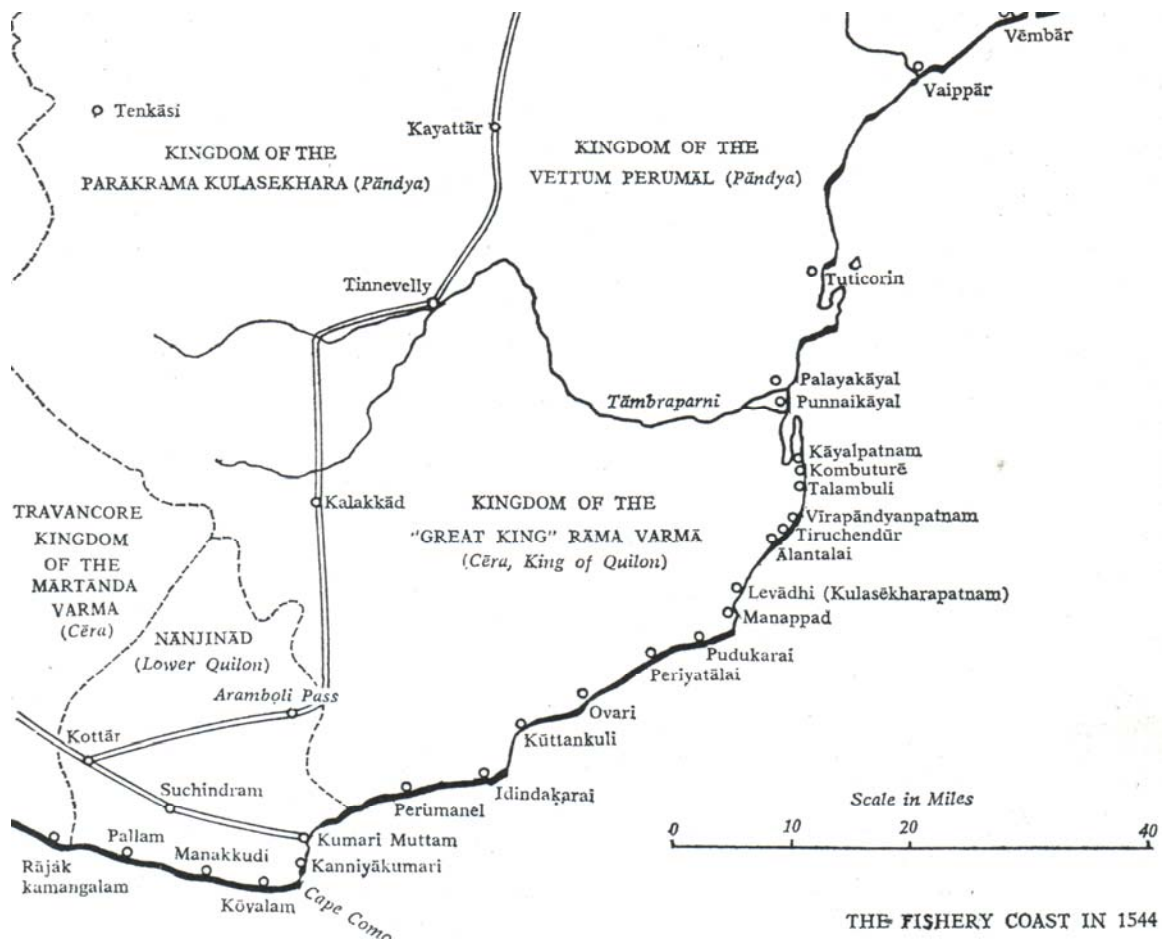
At other times a reunion would be held in the house of the house of the sick person at night. Animals would be slaughtered, for the demons who caused the illness longed for blood. Palm wine was passed around, and while the reveling was going on to the light of oil

lamps, a devil-dancer, a man from a lower caste, came into the cottage fantastically tricked out as a demon with brass bells and ankle bones. The musicians kept time with drums, cymbals, and bells. The dancer moved slowly at first with irregular, convulsive gestures, as all watched in silence. Then the music and the dancer's movements increased in tempo, his leaps became wilder and more frenzied as the musicians, in the room reeking with the smell of blood and arrack, whipped him into a state of madness with their instruments and cries. Suddenly the dancer stopped. His glazed eyes stared through the darkness. The spirit had taken possession of him and now spoke through him. All present threw themselves as if dead upon the floor and prayed to the demon within him. He answered their question, gave the name of the devil that had caused the sickness, and indicated how many *fanams* [ed. *old south Indian money*] and how much cloth should be given, and how many goats or hens would have to be sacrificed to him so that he would not slay his victim.

When a man died, his body was burned, and his widow had to follow him into the next world. A great funeral pyre was kindled in a trench and the wife was brought to it dressed in festal garments, her neck and arms adorned with golden ornaments. As the village musicians played their instruments, the widow's relatives danced with her about the pyre, removing her jewelry and clothing piece by piece. After she had been made drunk with palm wine, her closest male relative danced once more with her about the ditch and then shoved her into the fire, which, being fed with oil, consumed its victim within a few moments so that not even a bone remained of her. If a widow refused to allow herself to be burned, she was repudiated by her relatives and condemned to a life of shame.

(Excerpts from: *Francis Xavier; His Life and Times. Vol II.* by Georg Shurhammer. S.J.)

Below: The Southern Tip of the India. The SSPX has five Mass centers in this region where St. Francis Xavier worked almost 500 years before. The priory is located in the center of this map, the city of Tinnevely.



THE FISHERY COAST IN 1544