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Hindu Christians and Adventists in India

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A group of people among the Nadars of Tamilnadu¹ observed the seventh-day Sabbath before Adventists arrived in India. The group still exists as the “Hindu Church of Lord Jesus” and still observes the Sabbath²

Brief History

The conversion of Nadars can be traced to Christian Friedrich Schwartz, a Lutheran missionary. Arumai Nayakim Sattampillai (1823-1918), known also as Sathyanathan Pilla and Arumainayagam Sattampillai, teamed with one of his most talented trainees, David Sundaranandam, a local convert from Shanar community, to spearhead mass conversions to Christianity in the Tanjore area.³ When the approximately 35 families of the Shanar village Shanbathu became Christians in 1803, they built a church and renamed their village into “Nazareth.” About a mile away the residents of Shanbathu Puddoor became Christians in 1827 and renamed their village Prakasapuram.⁴

Arumainayagam passed the Catechism examination in 1848 and commenced work as a pastor among them. However, he soon fell out of favor with the SPG (Society for Propagation of the Gospel) missionary in charge of the churches in Nazareth and Mukuperi over the young catechist’s refusal to marry a girl recommended for him⁵ and also on a difference of opinion regarding a matter of discipline in the church that resulted in a suicide⁶ This dissent resulted in dismissal of Arumainayagam from SPG employment.⁷

Arumainayagam spent the next few years studying the Bible and biblical languages, besides Sanskrit and Hindi. He returned to Nazareth around 1957 but was expelled from the church.⁸

Meanwhile, Robert Caldwell published a book on the Shanars intended to solicit support in England for the community in South India, but which for several reasons upset the group themselves. The year 1857 was the time of Indian Great Mutiny, and with that in the background, Arumainayagam summoned the people of Mukuperi and Prakasapuram and read and explained to them Caldwell’s book, causing them to turn against missionaries.⁹

Arumainayagam led the group away from European influence and established an independent “Hindu Church of Lord Jesus” in an effort to Indianize Christianity. He used the term “Hindu” as a geographic term rather than religious, and adopted Hindu (Indian) customs in worship, noting that they were similar to what he found in the Old Testament. They included sitting on the floor for worship and prostrating in prayer.¹⁰

At first Arumainayagam or *Sattampillai* (“Teacher”) held his services on Sundays outdoors. But a few months later he began to implement various Old Testament practices and ceremonies, starting with the seventh-day Sabbath.

In 1878 Sattampillai had a dream in which he saw that Sabathkeeping missionaries from America would come to teach them.¹¹ However, soon after that a dispute broke out in the group over property issues, and the majority abandoned their leader and formed a new organization.¹²

Beliefs

J. L. Shaw, G. F. Enoch, and J. S. James, Adventist ministers who visited the Hindu Christians in 1907, enumerated their commendable practices and beliefs as follows:¹³

1. Inspiration and infallibility of both the Old and New Testaments.
2. Strict observance of the seventh-day Sabbath from 6:00 p.m. Friday to 6:00 p.m. Saturday which at their latitude was nearly to sundown to sundown.
3. Baptism by immersion.
4. Support of gospel work through tithes and offerings.
5. Use of unleavened bread and unfermented wine for communion.
6. Reverence for the house of God.
7. Simple and efficient form of congregational organization.
8. Church-school system.
9. Withstanding persecution.

The three Adventist pastors also note the following, which they considered errors to be corrected:

- 1.

Extreme Jewish influence on many beliefs and practices.

2. Marked ritualism
3. Observance of Passover, Pentecost, New Moons, etc., with no understanding of the typical meaning.
4. Modified observance of caste.
5. Their understanding of the nature of man and the state of the dead.
6. Wearing jewelry.

Contact with Adventists

The huge Chicago World Fair of 1893 generated interest all over the world. A significant dispute surfaced over whether the fair should be open or closed on Sunday, which led to agitation over the matter of Sabbath observance. Reports of a Sabbathkeeping group in the United States reached Sattampillai, who wrote a letter asking for literature and addressed it to "Seventh-day Keepers, New York, City, U.S.A." The postal authorities delivered the letter to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Battle Creek, Michigan. Some correspondence between F. M. Wilcox and the group followed.¹⁴

The first known physical contact with this group by Adventists was probably through Fairley Masters, a literature evangelist from New Zealand working in Madras. In 1894 he met a railway guard who sensed common interests between the Indian and American groups, and sent someone to meet Masters. The man described himself as a pastor and leader of a community of native Christians who kept the seventh-day Sabbath. He was overjoyed to learn of other Christians who observed the seventh-day Sabbath and purchased two copies of Uriah Smith's *Daniel and Revelation*, one for himself, and the other for his church. Fairley Masters does not name him nor his group, but it most likely was Sattampillai and his Hindu Christians as no other Sabbathkeepers have been identified.¹⁵ Wilcox confirms this in a letter that describes Masters learning of a group of Sabbathkeepers 20 miles from Madras who hold to the system of tithing and observe some Jewish ordinances.¹⁶

Harry Armstrong and G. K. Owen in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) encountered a branch of these Sabbathkeepers in 1905, drawing renewed attention to the group near Madras.¹⁷

J. S. James, designated by Adventist leadership to work among the Tamils, commenced study of the language in Bangalore in December 1907 along with G. F. Enoch. Providentially, James's Tamil tutor happened to know of the Sabbathkeeping group and gave him their contact information. James wrote to them and arranged for a visit. Elders J. S. James, J. L. Shaw (superintendent of the India Mission), and G. F. Enoch (who was also studying Tamil in Bangalore) accompanied him on a visit in December 1907.¹⁸ They observed that Sattampillai had letters and literature from the General Conference.¹⁹

James finally moved in among them on March 17, 1908. The group vacated their school building so the missionary family could live in it and granted them two acres on which they could build. Though it was promised as a gift, James may have had to pay for it eventually. He constructed a mission bungalow in 1909. However, soon after the bungalow was dedicated, a split took place with about 25 families leaving the Hindu Christian congregation and joining James for worship on the verandah of the new bungalow.²⁰

The Adventists that originated from those "Hindu Christians" have contributed significantly to the progress of the church through the years. A number have served in leadership positions at the union and division levels.

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NOTES

1. See the Facebook page of the Nadar History Center at <https://www.facebook.com/nadarhistorycentre/posts/arumai-nayakam-sattampillai-nadar18231918-known-popularly-as-arumainayagam-satta/461747967255452/>. Accessed April 1, 2020.?
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 6. Solomon and Raj, 28.?
 7. *Ibid.*?
 8. *Ibid.*?
 9. D. A. Christadoss, *A History of Christian Mission* (Tamil) (Palayamcottai: Tirunelveli Diocesan Press, 1950), cited in Masimalloni, 100.?
 10. "A. Sattampillai," *Wikipedia*, accessed September 15, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._N._Sattampillai.?
 11. J. L. Shaw, G. F. Enoch, and J. S. James, "A Tour Among the Sabbath-keepers of South India," *ARH*, April 2, 1908, 16. They were shown the diary by Sattampillai's two sons. The entry was in Tamil, but the date and the word "Americans" were in English.?
 12. Masimalloni, 105, refers to James's report that only three or so families were left with him.?
 13. Shaw et al., 14-16.?
 14. *Ibid.*; A. O. Tait to O. A. Olsen, May 23, 1894 (R. G. 11 Incoming Letters, 1893 International Tract Society, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, cited in Masimalloni, 92).?
 15. Fairley Masters as told to Stella Parker Peterson, "He Left His Blacksmithing, Part II – Australia Sends Out His First Missionary," *The Youth's Instructor*, November 21, 1950, 7. See also "News Notes," *ARH*, April 21, 1896, 256. The pastor informed Masters that the Sabbath truth had been handed down from St. Thomas which opens up the possibility that there were a group of Seventh-day Sabbath observers among the Thomas Christians of Kerala.?
 16. F. M. Wilcox to O. A. Olsen, 1896? (Incoming Letters R. G. Box 8, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, cited in Masimalloni, 94).?
 17. Harry Armstrong, "Ceylon," *Eastern Tidings*, September 1905, 4; J. L. Shaw, "Our Mountain of Hope," *ARH*, November 2, 1905, 11.?
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