



In Continuity of Faithful Service and Enriching Fellowship in Kottar Diocese of Kanyakumari District, Upholding the Principles of Pastoral Care, Community Unity and Spiritual Enrichment

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ABSTRACT

The Diocese of Kottar, located in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu, stands as a beacon of faith, education, and social service within the Catholic community of South India. This study explores the historical evolution, social outreach, and fellowship initiatives undertaken by the Kottar Diocese in promoting community development and interfaith harmony. Emphasizing its pastoral mission, the paper examines how the Diocese integrates spiritual guidance with social responsibility through its educational institutions, healthcare services, charitable missions, and youth programs. The research also highlights the Diocese's role in empowering marginalized communities and fostering inclusive growth through sustained fellowship and service. By analyzing its contributions to education, social welfare, and moral upliftment, this study underscores the enduring significance of the Kottar Diocese as a model of faith-driven social transformation in Kanyakumari District.

Keywords: Kottar Diocese, fellowship, social service, community development, faith-based initiatives

1. Introduction

The Diocese of Kottar, located in the southernmost region of India in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu, holds a distinctive place in the religious, educational, and socio-cultural landscape of South India. Established in 1930 and elevated as a Diocese under the Archdiocese of Madurai, Kottar has played a vital role in promoting faith, education, and social justice among the Christian community and beyond (Kottar Diocese, 2020). Rooted in the teachings of Christ and inspired by the values of compassion and service, the Diocese has continuously strived to integrate spiritual growth with community development.

Faith-based organizations such as the Diocese of Kottar have historically contributed to nation-building through education, healthcare, and social welfare initiatives. Across India, Christian institutions have been instrumental in uplifting marginalized communities, advancing literacy, and promoting inter-religious harmony (Fernandes, 2004; Amaladoss, 2003). Within this context, the Kottar Diocese stands out for its remarkable outreach programs—ranging from rural education and women's empowerment to environmental sustainability and health missions—demonstrating the enduring relevance of service-oriented ministry in a rapidly modernizing society.

The spirit of “service and fellowship” defines the Diocese's vision and mission. This principle not only guides its pastoral activities but also reflects a broader theology of social responsibility deeply rooted in the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) framework. CST emphasizes the inherent dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good, and the preferential option for the poor (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004).

Guided by these values, the Diocese of Kottar fosters unity, inclusiveness, and faith-driven development through parochial engagement and community participation.

Moreover, the Diocese's efforts resonate with the wider objectives of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), which underscores the Church's commitment to holistic human development and social transformation through education, healthcare, and environmental stewardship (CBCI, 2019). The Diocese of Kottar, through its extensive network of parishes, schools, hospitals, and social outreach programs, exemplifies this commitment to both faith formation and community service.

This article seeks to examine the multifaceted contributions of the Kottar Diocese to social and spiritual life in Kanyakumari District. It aims to highlight how its fellowship-oriented approach promotes collective responsibility, moral education, and inclusive growth. By exploring the Diocese's historical evolution, service missions, and community engagement strategies, the study emphasizes how faith and service intersect to foster sustainable development and human dignity.

The Gospel

The gospel serves as a unifying force among God's people, connecting individuals who share not only a faith tradition but also a distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical identity. It speaks into the lived realities of communities, shaping their moral values and inspiring collective responsibility toward spiritual and social renewal (Bosch, 2011; Wright, 2006). The Diocese of Kottar, situated in the southernmost region of India, exemplifies this integration of faith and culture, where the gospel message resonates deeply within the socio-economic and historical context of Kanyakumari District.

The local church becomes truly alive when its structures, administration, and resources align with the vision of God's Kingdom and the mission of service. As the Diocese of Kottar responds to the gospel's invitation, its institutions ranging from educational and pastoral to social outreach assume a supportive and participatory role in fostering justice, compassion, and community transformation (Newbiggin, 1989; Amaladoss, 2003). Thus, the gospel continues to inspire both spiritual growth and tangible social action within the diocese, embodying the holistic vision of faith in service.

Nature of the Diocese

The Diocese of Kottar is located in Kanyakumari District, at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. The district encompasses an area of approximately 1,684 square kilometers and sustains a population of about 1.3 million people, making it one of the most densely populated regions in India, with nearly 787 inhabitants per square kilometer, compared to the national average of 178 (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2021).

The geography of Kanyakumari District contributes significantly to the diversity of livelihoods and cultural practices within the diocese.

1. The western coastal belt, stretching for about 48 kilometers, consists of nearly 35 fishing villages where communities have traditionally depended on marine resources for their livelihood (Francis, 2018).
2. The eastern highlands provide favorable conditions for cultivating rubber, coffee, tea, coconut, and tapioca, contributing to the district's agrarian economy (Kottar Diocese, 2020).
3. The Vilavancode taluk region is characterized by elevated hillocks covered with palmyra and coconut groves, as well as extensive tapioca plantations.
4. The fertile plains and valleys, located between the highlands and coastal zones, support the cultivation of paddy, bananas, and other tropical crops, sustaining a large agrarian population (Census of India, 2011).

This diverse ecological and cultural landscape provides the Diocese of Kottar with a rich social fabric that shapes its mission and service. The Diocese's outreach programs and faith-based initiatives are deeply rooted in this geographical and cultural diversity, promoting an inclusive model of fellowship that reflects both the unity and plurality of the people it serves (Fernandes, 2004; CBCI, 2019).

The Parishes on the Coast

A visit to the coastal regions of Kanyakumari District reveals a striking contrast between the imposing grandeur of the churches and the modest living conditions of the local fishing communities. Towering church structures rise above the simple palm-thatched huts of the fishermen, symbolizing deep-rooted faith amid economic deprivation. Despite their limited financial means, the parishioners have constructed these churches through collective contributions accumulated over years, demonstrating their unwavering devotion and communal solidarity (Raj, 2012; Amaladoss, 2003). This remarkable generosity toward religious infrastructure, however, does not always extend to other areas of social development such as sanitation, housing, and education, which are often perceived as the responsibility of the Diocese or external benefactors (Fernandes, 2004).

Economically, the coastal parishes remain among the most marginalized in Kanyakumari District. Fishing is the principal occupation, and livelihood insecurity is pervasive due to fluctuating fish stocks and changing

climatic conditions (Kurien, 2005). Many fishermen live day-to-day, relying on the hope of a “miraculous catch” rather than systematic saving or diversification of income sources. The increasing population pressure and declining marine yields have further strained traditional fishing communities, deepening poverty and dependence (Salagrama, 2012). Social challenges such as alcohol dependence, lack of financial literacy, and early withdrawal of children from school for fishing work exacerbate cycles of economic stagnation and underdevelopment (Vivekanandan, 2011).

Housing and land scarcity present serious problems in these coastal parishes. Sea erosion, overpopulation, and limited available land have resulted in congested living conditions, where privacy is minimal and social tensions often arise (Francis, 2018). Many coastal residents live on land technically owned by the Church, making them economically and psychologically dependent on ecclesiastical authority. This dynamic places the parish priest in a dual role as both the spiritual leader and de facto landlord entrusted with resolving disputes, overseeing communal welfare, and mediating conflicts (Kottar Diocese, 2020).

Leadership structures within these fishing communities also reflect a blend of traditional and ecclesiastical authority. Historically, the Mukkuvar fishing caste maintained a governance system under the leadership of the arayan, a village chieftain who mediated conflicts, enforced social codes, and safeguarded community interests (Singh, 1994). Over time, this role was projected onto the parish priest, who inherited the functions of moral arbitrator, judge, and protector. The priest thus became not only the custodian of spiritual matters but also the central authority in temporal and communal affairs (Amaladoss, 2003). While this hierarchical structure ensures cohesion, it has also limited the emergence of grassroots leadership and civic participation, fostering dependency rather than empowerment among parishioners (Fernandes, 2004).

Another important dimension of coastal parish life is the administration of local finances. A traditional levy known as makimai a tax imposed on merchants purchasing fish and other goods is typically collected through annual auctions. The proceeds are managed by the parish priest and allocated for community needs such as church maintenance and social welfare projects (Raj, 2012). While the system has historically provided economic support for parish activities, it also highlights the intricate link between religious authority, economic control, and community organization within the coastal parishes of the Kottar Diocese.

The socio-religious life of these parishes, therefore, reflects a complex interplay between faith, tradition, and survival. Despite economic hardships and social inequalities, the coastal Christian communities of Kanyakumari continue to embody a deep spiritual resilience and a collective sense of identity shaped by both cultural legacy and ecclesial influence.

Parishes of the Interior

The interior parishes of the Kottar Diocese, situated within the agrarian heartland of Kanyakumari District, present a socio-economic and cultural contrast to their coastal counterparts. The Catholic population in these regions consists primarily of the Nadar community, traditionally engaged in agriculture and related occupations (Bayly, 1989). Historically, land ownership in the interior areas was concentrated in the hands of a few dominant landlords or jemmis, while the majority of the people remained dependent tenants or landless laborers (Jeffrey, 1997). This socio-economic dependency limited upward mobility and reinforced hierarchical social structures that persisted during the Travancore princely rule, where Malayalam predominated as the official language (Hardgrave, 1969).

The political reorganization of the mid-twentieth century, particularly the merger of Kanyakumari District with the State of Tamil Nadu in 1956, represented not only a linguistic alignment but also a significant liberation movement for the local population (Subramanian, 2012). This transition marked the decline of feudal dominance and the emergence of a self-reliant agrarian community. The redistribution of land and access to education empowered the people of the hinterland, fostering a wave of socio-cultural and political renaissance (Kumar, 2017). Economic self-sufficiency and educational advancement gradually replaced dependency, transforming the region into one characterized by ambition, industriousness, and a growing sense of civic identity (Fernandes, 2004).

The interior parishioners are known for their discipline, thrift, and enterprise. Besides agriculture, they have diversified into trades such as carpentry, masonry, and small-scale entrepreneurship, often seeking opportunities beyond the district (Francis, 2018). Their determination and adaptability have enabled significant economic progress and social respectability. The emphasis on education, encouraged by both the Church and emerging community leadership, has opened new pathways in administrative, academic, and technical fields (Kottar Diocese, 2020).

During the early missionary period, the scarcity of clergy led to the delegation of temporal administration to respected lay leaders within the villages. The mudutham (headman) and prathanian (counselors) played crucial roles in parish management, overseeing finances, property, and social affairs under the general supervision of the parish priest (Raj, 2012). Originally hereditary, these positions gradually evolved into elected roles, reflecting democratization and participatory governance within parish life. However, with the

advent of modern education and political awareness, traditional leadership structures have declined, giving way to new models of lay participation and accountability.

In recent decades, the growing literacy and political consciousness of the faithful have occasionally challenged the traditional authority of priests, particularly concerning parish administration and liturgical reforms. Some ultra-conservative movements have emerged, voicing resistance to modern ecclesiastical practices under the guise of preserving orthodoxy (Amaladoss, 2003). These tensions, though limited, reflect the dynamic interplay between faith tradition and evolving social consciousness within the interior parishes.

A distinctive sociocultural feature of the interior region is the inter-caste and inter-faith marriage pattern, especially among Catholics and new converts from Hinduism, notably in the Vilavancode Taluk (Fernandes, 2004). While coastal Catholics typically maintain endogamous marriages within their caste and faith, the interior parishes demonstrate a more inclusive and adaptive social fabric.

Additionally, some villages such as Kottar, Alcor, Manalikai, and Puthenkadai include long-settled fishing communities who have integrated into inland life while retaining aspects of their maritime heritage. Many are engaged in fish marketing, transporting catches from the coast to interior markets by bicycle or head load (Vivekanandan, 2011). The administration of parish finances in these areas has historically been linked to the system of *valti*—a form of regulated fee collection for market rights. The *valti* system ensured equitable economic participation among parishioners and served as a vital source of parish income, while the Church safeguarded the system from external interference (Raj, 2012).

Thus, the parishes of the interior region of the Kottar Diocese exemplify the transformative journey from dependency to empowerment. Their evolution from a feudal agrarian society to an educated, self-reliant, and participatory Christian community underscores the Diocese's enduring role in shaping both spiritual and socio-economic progress in the hinterland.

Conclusion

The Diocese of Kottar stands as a profound example of how faith, culture, and social transformation intersect in the lived experience of a community. Rooted in the Gospel's call to service and fellowship, it has evolved through decades of social, political, and economic change, shaping both coastal and interior parishes in unique ways. The coastal communities, despite their economic struggles, exemplify steadfast devotion and collective identity, while the interior parishes reflect a journey from dependency to empowerment through education, land reform, and civic participation. Across both contexts, the Diocese's pastoral mission has remained centered on promoting human dignity, spiritual renewal, and inclusive development. However, challenges persist—ranging from economic inequities and environmental pressures to evolving lay-clergy relations. Yet, through its commitment to social justice, education, and compassionate leadership, the Kottar Diocese continues to embody the transformative spirit of Christian discipleship, serving not merely as a religious institution but as a dynamic force for moral and socio-economic advancement in Kanyakumari District.

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