

Converting a 'Heathen' King: Kotte under Missionary Pressure

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Conversion of rulers to Christianity in the new territories where Portuguese temporal power was extended, remained a primary combined strategy of the State and the Church. The missionaries mistook the spirit of tolerance which prevailed among the ruler and the populace, as an open invitation to carry out the spread of their gospel. It was not at making 'rice Christians' out of beggars, concubines and other lowly strata of the society in which they made some progress, that they aspired, but of converting the rulers and courtiers in the hope that massive conversion would follow. The political circumstances in Sri Lanka were seen as conducive to bringing about the conversion of the ruler of Kotte, who was under immense pressure from his brother Mayadunne on one hand, and who was keen to receive Portuguese support for his grandson to succeed to the throne, on the other hand. To achieve this objective, immense pressure was brought Bhuvanekabahu personally by the chief Franciscans missionary who came with the king's ambassadors. Other methods were tried later, which included the king's beliefs and heaping insults on his religion.

Finally, the king was exposed as not only unreliable, but proving 'obstinate'. An opposition was built up against him through communications of the friars, including Francis Xavier, addressed to the king, the Viceroy and others. They even found fault with Portuguese authorities for extending patronage to Bhuvanekabahu.

Supported by Viceroy Alfonco de Souza, missionaries exerted to get the Portuguese sovereign to revoke the Royal Decree supporting Dharmapala to succeed him on the ground that he has caused the death of his son Jogu Bandara who was ready to be baptized. The death in Goa of the two princes whom the plotters wanted to crown in Dharmapala's place and as the ruler of Jaffna and Kandy respectively brought the affair to an end.

Bhuvanekabahu was personally insulted by the new Viceroy Noronah who harassed him to part with money and was killed after the Viceroy left the shores by a Portuguese mulatto under very suspicious circumstances. Dharmapala was crowned immediately. From then onwards, the Portuguese made Dharmapala a tool in their hands to extend their political hegemony as well as proselytizing activities.

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