

## Early Initiatives of Tranquebar Mission and the Native Response in Tharangambadi Region– A Study

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### Abstract

Social intercourse between European Christians and the Tamils was not easy yet, the converts dared to become Christians and associate themselves with the "foreigners." They have applied the passive approach of dialogue with the other religious people regarding the belief and faith. Ziegenbalg corresponded with several scholars and practitioners of Tamil bhakti religions. Ziegenbalg and his successors gave them a Tamil version of the Bible, catechisms, theologies, songs, and other religious practices. The cultural adaptations helped Indian Christians to establish themselves as an alternate community that is fully functional even now.

**Keywords:** Catechism – Ordination - Mission Schools – European Missionaries – Ziegenbalg – Plutchau – Dialogue – Conversion - Religious Practices - Cultural adaption .

### Introduction

Early Tranquebar missionaries exercised a profound influence on the emergence of Christian faith in the areas in and around the port of Tharangambadi by their passive approach towards the indigenous people. This study is to explore the passive approach of dialogue with the other religious people regarding the belief and faith. It also highlighted the views of the Missionaries and the native people in the above subject matter has also been studied. The native people who were unwilling or unable to negotiate the socio-religious boundaries of their mundane existence in their traditional life setting resisted the message communicated by the Christians in Tranquebar, and tried to find discrepancies. For the question, of what certain Tamils thought about Christianity and why they chose not to become Christians, Ziegenbalg received several replies.

### Christianity as Contrast

Some of the native people of Tharanagambadi region regarded Christianity as an "alien" system of faith and way of life, which did not fit into the Tamil idiom of meaning and purpose.

1. They thought that Christians challenged and even transformed several social conventions such as the mixing of castes and the allowing women to sit in formal religious gatherings and listen to religious discourses. This was unacceptable for those whose modes of modesty and shame disapproved of inter-caste relationships and joint endeavour of women and men.

2. They also found that Christians did not celebrate many religious festivals (only Christmas, New Year, Easter, and Pentecost) and thus lost valuable occasions for reiterating social services and distances between people of various caste groups and testing the levels of religious purity of people<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Ordination of the first Protestant Indian Pastor Aaron, Lutheran Heritage Archives, 1998, P-21

3. Christians also did not enact the stories about the life and work of Jesus Christ. This seemed absurd in the context, where epic and puranic episodes (relating to Shiva, Vishnu, and other deities) were enacted at regular intervals<sup>2</sup>.

4. Apart from these aspects, Christians also did not observe certain mandatory dietary habits. For example, in the mission schools' children from several caste backgrounds ate together, which caste-conscious people found abominable. Moreover, Indians observed that European Christians did not use water, but only toilet paper, to clean themselves after having used the restrooms (i.e. toilets). Similarly, they also did not wash their hands and mouths before they sat down to eat<sup>3</sup>. These habits, however trivial they might seem to be, were objectionable to many Tamils of that time. Important reasons, why many Tamils, especially those belonging to the higher castes like the Brahmins or the landowning communities such as the *Pillais* and *Mutaliyārs*, did not become Christians, had to do with the necessity of keeping caste purity, caste-based social ties and professions, and thus continue to profit from the *matippu* (social esteem), *mariyātai* (civility, social respect) and *antastu* (social rank and standing), which people of supposedly lesser status accorded to them<sup>4</sup>.

5. They also thought that Christianity was the faith of the poor and low-caste people, who did not have adequate opportunities to specialize themselves in the religious philosophies of town-centered, book-based great religious centers. Thus, mingling with them meant a disgrace. Consequently, they did not consider the option of becoming Christians.

6. Additionally, some Tamils expressed their conviction that all religions were culture-specific and thus essentially similar. Therefore, there was no need for any religious conversion. A Brahmin informed the Christians in Tranquebar that the Almighty and all-knowing God "may have caused one kind of doctrine to be revealed to the Europeans, and another to us Malabarians, seeing that we are all together so different from each other; but still, the object of both is the same, although we set about it in a different manner. Like various roads leading to the same town, do the various systems of religion in the world. All these various religious people concentrate on the worship of one Supreme Being, from whom they all flow, and to whom all things return".

7. A Tamil responded to the Christians in Tranquebar saying that "every man may be saved in his religion, if he does what is good, and avoids what is evil" (Conferences, 37)<sup>5</sup>. Another Tamil stated that Christianity might have been a suitable religion for the Europeans in Europe, but not for Indians because the Tamils were very different from Europeans and their customs also differed from that of the Europeans. Hence, the European garment of Christianity could never be a fitting dress for the Tamils<sup>6</sup>.

### **Response of Christian Missionaries**

Christians responded to these clever arguments by saying that similarities on the periphery did not guarantee the same understanding of God. Human beings, however good they or their actions may be, could not earn their eternal salvation because salvation is by grace alone. At the same time, they believed that Christianity was not a

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, the Father of Protestant Mission: An Indian Assessment (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), p- 26

<sup>3</sup> Henriette Bugge, Mission, and Tamil Society: Social and Religious Change in South India 1840-1900 Curzon Press Ltd, 1994, P-133

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, the Father of Protestant Mission: An Indian Assessment (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), p157

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey A. Oddie, Christians and Missionaries in India, Cambridge, U.K,2003, P 158

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Ordination of the first Protestant Indian Pastor Aaron, Lutheran Heritage Archives, 1998, P-24

culture- or people-specific religion. It could fit into any culture, but could never be identified with a particular culture. It would challenge the evil side of every culture<sup>7</sup>.

### **Early Interaction of Natives**

Further, the Christians in Tranquebar insisted that Christianity did not revolve around mere religious concepts, but was inseparably linked to knowledge) (HB III: 66). He also changed the method of presentation. Ziegenbalg's text is narrative, but Walther's text is Conversational. Following the Christian catechetical system of teaching or Sanskrit Vedic methods of instruction, Walther recast the entire text into an interactive, question-answer method of communication. A question is asked first and then a detailed answer is provided. Only the designation of the title of Walther's booklet is slightly different, but the content and its message remain unchanged. However, Walther was willing to listen to the voice of his dialogue partners and make necessary adjustments from negation to affirmation, from defence to interaction<sup>8</sup>.

Similarly, Ziegenbalg corresponded with several scholars and practitioners of Tamil bhakti religions. His partners disclosed and explained the reason and meaning of numerous mythologies, spiritual practices, ritual habits, and other forms of religious expressions; but many of them chose to remain in their ancestral faiths. Some of his correspondents were *Vairaventa Guru*, *Pañcaccara Guru*, *Mappillai Guru*, *Sésa Sastrin*, *Minaksi Sastrin*, *Citampara Sastrin* and *Mokampara Sastrin* (HB I:343). Most of them seem to have been Shaivites and Sudras, who have read what Ziegenbalg wrote about Christianity. Instead of (polemically or apologetically) interacting with Christian teachings, these scholars were content to explain their religious beliefs and practices.

There is no information on whether or not any of these scholars ever became Christians. But, amazingly, they were willing to correspond with Christians and remain in conversation with them at all. Few Tamils, especially of those low-caste people, who were in touch with the Christians in Tranquebar, became Christians. They dared to come out of the shackles of caste and tried to form an alternate community with new socio-religious values. Christian converts were invariably exposed to social ostracism and hatred.

They were derided as *kulam püöüavarkao* (those who adopted another caste, i.e., caste deserters). Access to public wells, pathways, and other facilities was denied to them. No non-Christian Tamil wanted to entertain any social marital or business contact with Christians (HB III: 46). Yet, the Tamil Christian converts did not hesitate to relate themselves to Europeans in general and European missionaries, who were generally thought to be ritually and socially polluting. It was considered to be a "sin" even to listen to the religious teachings of the Europeans. It was not desired that

Europeans visited the Tamils in their homes. Hence, social intercourse between European Christians and the Tamils was not easy (HB I: 851-852). Yet, the converts dared to become Christians and associate themselves with the "foreigners."

### **Early Conversion**

May 12, 1707, marked the beginning of a series of conversions of Tamils who later joined the Protestant church in Tranquebar. On that day Ziegenbalg baptized five Tamil "slaves," who worked for Europeans<sup>9</sup>. Their conversion prompted Ziegenbalg to erect a separate church building so that the Tamils could have their own place

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<sup>7</sup> Monica Juneja, *Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India- Volume III*, Franckesche Stiftung, Halle-2006, P-128

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, P-864

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, the Father of Protestant Mission: An Indian Assessment* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), p 148

of worship, teaching, and other social gathering. On June 14, 1707, the foundation stone was laid and the church Jerusalem was dedicated on August 14 of the same year. By August 1708, there were 102 converts in the Jerusalem church, and they came from different castes and professional backgrounds.<sup>10</sup> What made them become Christians - against all the odds of their time – needs yet to be worked out. The life and work of Jesus Christ, as taught by the Tranquebar missionaries, seems to have attracted them. Moreover, their new alternative community publicly affirmed and protected their most fundamental needs such as humanity, worth, and dignity. This also seems to have given them the hope that in Tamil society, they would collectively be able to negotiate a better social status and respectability. This also meant that these Christians needed alternate religious symbols and practices.

Ziegenbalg and his successors gave them a Tamil version of the Bible, catechisms, theologies, songs, and other religious practices. Soon the church building could not accommodate the increasing number of Christians. As a result, the New Jerusalem church was built and dedicated on Tuesday, October 11, 1718<sup>11</sup>. By now Tamil Christians worked with the German missionaries and mightily contributed to the spread of the message of Jesus Christ into neighbouring villages and other towns. By the end of the eighteenth century, Protestant Christians lived and worshipped in several Indian cities (in Cuddalore from 1718, in Madras from 1726, Tanjore from 1728, in Calcutta from 1758, in 1762 in Tiruchirappalli, and in Palayamkottai from 1785).<sup>12</sup>

From the time of Aaron's ordination as the first Lutheran pastor on December 28, 1733, there were some outstanding Tamil Christian pastors who looked after the welfare of their fellow Christians.<sup>13</sup> Of them the following are important: Diago (1709-1781), who was ordained on October 22, 1740; Ambrose (d. 1777) on April 9, 1749; Philip (1731-1788) on December 28, 1772; Rajappen in 1778 and Sattyanadan in 1790.<sup>14</sup> All of them were great leaders; and their contribution to Tamil Christianity, has yet to be studied.

In the course of time, an alternate community emerged through the manifold interactions between the European missionaries and South Indians. It was a new entity that sought to find its own legitimate place within the larger socio-cultural context of the Tamils. Tamil Christians took the lead in integrating and consolidating their identities as Christians and Tamils. For example, their pre-existing notion of a married woman required that the wife should always wear the marriage badge known as the "tali. But Ziegenbalg did not allow the Tamil Christian women to wear any tali because he had earlier observed that the devadasis (female servants of a god) used it also (HB I: 182). But the Tamil Christians kept on negotiating the proper way of adopting this ancient custom.

As a result, on January 14, 1730, C.T. Walther mentioned that the Tamil Christian wives, whose husbands were alive, were allowed to wear Christian *tali*. A compromise was found. While the heart shape of the *tali* was retained, it did not have any religious symbols of the Shaivites and Vaishnavites. Instead, a cross was inscribed (HB III: 490). Thus, married women convert also got their own identity marker. Similar cultural adjustments were also made in ceremonies related to the passage of life (e.g., name giving, funeral), social habits (e.g., greeting others), habits related to food. Consequently, Christians could be true to their living environment and its cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p148-149

<sup>11</sup> Karin Kryger, Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India, 2006, P 253

<sup>12</sup> Arno Lehmann. E, It Began at Tranquebar, A history of the First Protestant Mission in India, CLS Chennai, 2006, p144-145

<sup>13</sup> D. Dennis Hudson, Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706-1835, p 32

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, Ordination of the first Protestant Indian Pastor Aaron, Lutheran Heritage Archives, 1998, P-16

distinctive. These and other cultural adaptations helped Indian Christians to establish themselves as an alternate community that is fully functional even now<sup>15</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The Royal Danish-Halle Mission, the mother of all Protestant overseas missions to India, was a Danish initiative that incorporated the participation of like-minded Germans, Indians, and the British (from 1709). Among the fifty-four European missionaries who worked in Tharangambadi, Nicolas Dal (1690-1747) alone was a well-known Dane, and Johann Zechariahs Kiernander (1710-1799) belonged to Sweden. The remaining were Germans. Ziegenbalg and Plutschau were well-known missionaries from Halle. Johann Georg Bovingh (1676-1728) from Kiel had several Orthodox Lutheran elements. Benjamine Schultze was a linguist who translated the Bible and other German writings in Tamil and Telugu language. C.T. Walther was a Hebraist who tried to promote a national church with its own cultural spheres. Christian Frederick Schwartz (1726-1798) was a missionary of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and engaged himself in diplomatic activities along with local rulers in South India. Christoph Samuel John (1747-1813) and John Peter Rottler (1749-1836) were instrumental in scientific study in the mission schools in Tranquebar and Madras.

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Jeyaraj, *A German Exploration of Indian Society*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2005),p.54