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## History of Christian mission and their educational contributions in India - (15<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century): An overview

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### Abstract

The presence of Christianity in India is aged almost two thousand years commencing from the arrival of St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ and martyred in 72 A.D. in Chinnamalai, Mylapore Chennai. Since then Christianity spreads its roots in different parts of the country mainly in south India. Commenting on the contributions made by Christians Dr. Rajendra Prasad said on December 18, 1955, "Remember, St. Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe had not yet become Christians, and so those Indians who trace their Christianity to him have a long history and a higher ancestry than that of Christians of many of European countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened". However, the early history of the Christian community is fables and traditions and only a few records exist. Their contributions are outstanding in the field of education and in preserving the culture of the people. They occupied a significant place to reach the country far through their trade and commerce.

**Keywords:** Christian mission, educational contributions, European countries

### Introduction

India was invaded by the Aryans around 1500 BCE and merged with the earliest inhabitants to evolve classical Indian civilization. Jainism and Buddhism arose in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Apostle Thomas and some Jews came to India in 52 CE and spread the Gospel in South India. Also in the eighth century, the Arabs made inroads in India and established a Muslim foothold in western India. This was followed by different rulers and emperors one after another. Later came the Portuguese followed by the Dutch, the French, and the English after which the East India Company was established, and the British secured control of most part of India. Such was the background of India in the early period.

There are different famous views among scholars about the origin of Christianity in India. One is the Tradition of Apostle Thomas or St. Thomas Tradition. Another view may be mentioned here as St. Bartholomew Tradition. There is also a view related to the East Syrian or Persian churches. However, this paper will deal with the origins and beginnings of the Christian mission through the Tradition of St. Thomas. It further focuses on the Roman Catholic missions, their methods, and their contributions towards the spread of Christianity in India in Goa, Madura, Tuticorin, and the Mogul Court.

### Origins of Indian Christians and the Tradition of St. Thomas

One of the Traditions about the tradition of Christianity in India is known as St. Bartholomew Tradition <sup>[1]</sup>. Bartholomew's tradition does not say specifically to which part of India Bartholomew and Pantaenus of Alexandria <sup>[2]</sup> went to propagate the Gospel. Another tradition is that speaking of the history of Christianity in India Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then President of India said that St. Thomas came to India when many of the Europe countries had not yet become Christian. The Indians who trace their Christianity to St. Thomas have a long history and a higher ancestry than that of Christians in many European countries <sup>[3]</sup>. So this tradition said that Christianity in India is as old as Christianity itself. That is to say Christianity in India did not come initially from Europe <sup>[4]</sup>.

St. Thomas Christians community is proof that Indian Christianity is as old as Christianity itself <sup>[5]</sup>. These Christians developed an individuality of their own, profoundly influenced by the social-political environment of India, and in particular Malabar.

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The Indian Church was ruled by Persian bishops, yet preserved a kind of autonomy and individuality of her own and adapted to the local circumstances till the arrival of the Portuguese and the Western colonial powers. The Indian church of St. Thomas had a vital, organic growth in the midst of the living realities of India. T.K. Krishnamachari, the then Minister of India for Commerce and Industry said on one occasion in 1952:

The Christian communities...those in South India, have integrated themselves very closely with the general public. In fact, their ways of life today are such that it is hardly possible to find any difference either in appearance or in how they live between Christians and Hindus in South India...Those who doubt the place of Christianity in this country should go down to South India and see how Hindus and Christians live as perfect brethren <sup>[6]</sup>.

The lifestyle of the St. Thomas Christians of the pre-sixteenth century is of unique importance. Their ecclesiastical life did bear the characteristics of an early church that had its origin and growth outside the Greco-Roman world. As a church that was free from the fear and favor of the imperial power, it could preserve the authentic early traditions undisturbed and uninterrupted. The fidelity to the Law of Thomas was the touchstone of their authenticity and orthodoxy. It stands for the whole lifestyle of the St. Thomas Christians. It includes the ecclesiastical, liturgical, spiritual, and socio-cultural life of the Thomas Christians.

### The Jesuits Mission in Mogul Court

Christianity excited the intellectual curiosity of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), the well-known Mogul ruler of northern India. In 1579 when Mar Abraham was still proceeding over the Malabar Church, a messenger arrived at the Jesuit college of Saint Paul at Goa with a letter from the Mogul Emperor. Akbar in which expressed his desire to study the teaching of Christianity and ask for a religious teacher who can explain the Christian teachings to him. He had become interested in Christianity through discussions with several Portuguese including a Jesuit from Bengal <sup>[7]</sup>. It was decided therefore to accept the invitation, and three Jesuits, Father Rudolf Acquaviva (1550-1583) Antonio Monserrate, and Francisco Henriques were selected to head the mission band. They arrived at Akbar's court in February 1580. He received them with much honor; he was attracted to their teaching and religious discussion. But, he refused to become a Christian <sup>[8]</sup>. He, however, was polite and kind towards the fathers, he paid due reverence to the Bible, and placing it on his head he knelt before the picture of virgin Mary, while entering the Chapel removed his turban as a mark of respect <sup>[9]</sup>.

This act of the emperor greatly encouraged the fathers. But whenever they urged he drew back. He seems to be interested in several religions- Hinduism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism as well as Christianity but to adhere to none. The one thing definite was his reaction to and dislike of Islam. Then in 1582, he propagated a fancy religion invented by himself (the Din Ilahi) combining elements drawn from all the faiths in his dominions. Therefore the Jesuits returned to Goa in 1583. Another mission was sent in 1590 at Akbar's request but soon returned in disgust <sup>[10]</sup>. Two years later Akbar made his third and last request for the fathers of the Society of Jesus. Observing the failure of the first and second missions the regional father was very

reluctant to send any more priests. However, after consultations with Ecclesiastical authorities, he decided to send another mission under the leadership of father Jerome Xavier, a great-nephew of Saint Francis Xavier, accompanied by father Emanuel Pinero and Brother Benedict De Geos. The third mission reached in 1595, and from then onwards there were Jesuits at the Mogul court for the rest of that dynasty's rule <sup>[11]</sup>.

### Catholics Mission in Tuticorin: Francis Xavier Mission

Francis Xavier (1542-1552) was raised in a Spanish family in Basque territory, educated at the University of Paris, and was one of the charter members of the Jesuits, he is one of the most famous Roman Catholic missionaries <sup>[12]</sup>. The arrival of Francis Xavier in 1542 created a new impetus for Roman Catholic missionary activities. He concentrated on converting the low castes like the pearl Fishery folk on the Coromandel Coast and the Mukkuvars. He found it difficult to convert the high castes. As a result, Roman Catholic Christians came to be nicknamed *Pharangis*, and Christianity was considered by the high castes in those regions as low-caste religion. It was known as *Pharangi Marga*. Though the word *Pharangi* was used to denote especially the Portuguese, it was used with some implied meanings. It suggests meat-eating, wine-drinking, loose-living, arrogant persons, etc..... <sup>[13]</sup> He worked among the Paravas, converted many at Tuticorin, and founded a number of churches in Goa.

Xavier's mission method was simple. He lived and worked in whatever hospital or poor house for incurables he could find as the earliest members of the company had done. He also had a little bell which he rang and did a kind of Pied Piper thing by using the equivalent of today's rap artistry to teach prayers and the creed. He would ask the children to teach these to their parents as well. When he found someone who would say they believed the articles of the creed, their catechumenate was over and he baptized them. He usually then sent his converts out to destroy every Hindu image they could find and rejoiced when they did so <sup>[14]</sup>. Xavier was especially happy to be able to baptize dying babies, believing that he gave them a better life after death in doing so. One of the common methods adopted by Xavier in his ministry is 'Mass Baptism'. Wherever he goes he gave importance to baptizing people. During his visit to the Paravas he baptized all the unbaptized children and babies he could find <sup>[15]</sup>. He also baptized large numbers of Mukkavaras a fisher caste in Travancore <sup>[16]</sup>.

His mission approach to the Paravas and their oral culture included teaching young people prayers, which had been translated and set to music, as well as the creed and the Ten Commandments. They would, in turn, teach other villagers what they learned through memorization. His method of instructing the Paravas can also be seen in his letter as follows:

Every Sunday I collected them all, men and women, boys and girls, in the church. They came with great readiness and with a great desire for instruction. Then, in the hearing of all, I began by calling on the name of the holiest Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and I recited aloud the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Creed in the language of the Country: they all followed me in the same words and delighted in it wonderfully. Then I repeated the Creed by myself, dwelling upon each article singly. Then I asked as to each article, whether they believed it unhesitatingly; all,

with a loud voice and their hands, crossed over their breasts, professed aloud that they truly believed it <sup>[17]</sup>.

Wherever he goes, he gave more importance to the instruction of the Christian faith than any other else. He built simple chapels of mud and thatch for daily prayer and lessons. The people came willingly enough for it was gratifying for the first time to be receiving pastoral care from the church that had baptized them <sup>[18]</sup>.

Xavier also started a few schools to give education to the converts and children. But these schools were primarily meant to provide nurture in the Christian faith. During his time the St. Paul College in Goa founded by the Portuguese in the 1540s was under the management of the Society of Jesus and it became a theological institution too, where the Malabar Syrian Church was also trained <sup>[19]</sup>. He also gives importance to the translation work. In his letter to the other Jesuits in January 1545, he mentions that I translated all these prayers: The Lord's Prayer, Apostle Creed, The Ten Commandments, the *Ave Maria*, and the *Salve Regina*, into the language of the country <sup>[20]</sup>. His main focus was to translate all these catechisms into the language of the given communities and then to teach them, so as to make them know what is their belief. Xavier played a very important role in this field. Wherever he goes he goes for translation work, as he stated that "I leave the Christian doctrine in writing in the language of the country" <sup>[21]</sup>.

A contemporary Jesuit scholar, suggests that Xavier offers the first instance of "dialogue" when he did enter into a discussion with a Brahmin who helped him to understand that they, too, worship one God but keep this secret and make it available only to their special initiates, lest the revenues of idolatry dry up. Xavier was happy with their monogamy as well. The Brahmin friend wanted Xavier to baptize him but to keep it a secret which the saint would not do <sup>[22]</sup>. The dialogue that Xavier carried is a one-way conversion method. He stated; one day later, I happened to enter a Pagoda (Brahmin Temple), and we had a long conversation, after which I asked them what their gods enjoined them in order to obtain the life of the blessed. In return, an old man of more than eighty years asked me, what commands the God of Christians laid on them. I saw the old man's perversity and I refused to speak a word till he had first answered my question <sup>[23]</sup>.

### **Jesuits Missions in Madura: Robert De Nobili**

Robert De Nobili was born in Rome in September 1577, the son of Pier Francisco and Clarice, a family which claimed its descent from Otto III of Naples. His forefathers held high positions in the State such as governors and consuls. At the age of seventeen, he was convinced of his vocation as a Jesuit missionary <sup>[24]</sup>. De Nobili tried a number of experiments. He wanted to open the doors of Christianity to as many people as possible. He befriended a schoolmaster who was well-versed in Hindu theology and held the title of guru in his own sect. From their conversations, De Nobili was able to understand the attitude of Hindus toward Christianity. The first thing he understood from the teacher was the intense caste feeling among the Hindus. He learned that besides the four castes and sub-castes, there were a number of untouchables and outcastes. The Hindus saw that Christians did not observe the caste system, and they ate beef, which only the untouchables did. So Hindus included the missionaries and their converts among the untouchables and outcastes. Therefore they called Christianity parangi

markkam (a nickname given to them). The first thing Nobili did was to give up this reference as parangi markkam and to call Christianity, satya vedam (true religion).

Realizing that the repudiation of caste alone would not be sufficient to win the goodwill of the people, he tried positive action. He spoke Tamil and learned the customs and manners of the locals. In spite of this, the educated Hindus in their homes did not accept him. So he became a *Sanyasi* <sup>[25]</sup> (a person who renounced everything) and gave up eating beef. Later he gave up his black cassock and wore a saffron dress, shaved his hair close to his skull, made a rectangular mark on his forehead, discarded his leather shoes, and wore wooden sandals. He built a little mud-walled house and chapel, established himself as a guru in his mutt, observed a strict ascetic regime, attended by his Brahmin cook and servants, lived on rice, vegetables, fruit, and milk, and ate only one meal a day, and going out very seldom.

Another interesting development was that he decided to have a caste (as Indians) and thought it proper to accept the caste of a Raja (Kshatriya) because he too had a royal ancestry, and declared that it was wrong for them to him a parangi as he belonged to the Raja caste. He also found some support for the sacred thread (a triple strand of white cotton hanging from the left shoulder across the breast and back and tied near the right thigh) from the principles laid down by Thomas Aquinas. For sacred threads, different materials were used by different castes and De Nobili held that this was not a mark of religion but of rank in the caste structure. So De Nobili was able to secure permission from the church authorities to allow the use of the sacred thread even after baptism.

De Nobili realized that if Christianity could be shown to be the religion that crowned the Vedas, it should have a claim on every orthodox Hindu. So he extracted from approved commentaries of the Vedas a collection of texts and allusions best suited to demonstrate the truth of Christianity, and he called it the 'Fifth Veda', according to which primitive religions revealed that mankind, was lost due to sin but embodied again and perfected in Christian revelation. As his reputation grew, much time was spent in religious and philosophical discussions with people who came to see him. One point of teaching that he emphasized was the necessity of a guru. A number of the younger men were willing to become his disciples <sup>[26]</sup>. He learned Sanskrit through Brahmin Pandit by which he hoped to be able to meet the Brahmins on their own ground <sup>[27]</sup>. In the year 1609, the number of converts rose to 63. They were of several castes, some Nayaks, some cultivators, and some Brahmins. They were Baptized of course in water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost by the ordinary Latin rite; but they were not required to break caste or change their dress, food, or mode of life except in the matter of idolatry; nor were they expected to join themselves to the Parava congregation. Those who had worn the sacred cord and the kudumi or hair tuft retained them <sup>[28]</sup>. There had been some deliberation about this because such emblems had been forbidden by the Synod of Goa years before; but Archbishop Roz, supported by Archbishop Menezes, allowed it. Similarly, the ceremonial bathing and the rite of investiture with the cord, and the Tamil rite of Pongal were kept, with Christian prayers substituted for the Hindu mantrams. Thus the converts were able to remain in their families <sup>[29]</sup>.

During his fifty years of service, he wrote a number of



books in Tamil. His principal work is *Gnanopadesam*, a full-scale treatise of scholastic theology in five books. He also wrote in Sanskrit verse a Life of the Blessed Mary and in the same language composed canticles to be sung by the Brahmin Christians of Madura at weddings and funerals. Besides these he wrote hymns in Tamil and Telegu. He is said also to have written a summary of Christian doctrine in a hundred Sanskrit slokas <sup>[30]</sup>.

### The first Protestant mission

The first Protestant mission to India came from Denmark. King Frederick IV was an ardent follower of Lutheran teachings. He believed that it is one of the duties devolving upon monarchs to make provision for Christianising their non-Christian subjects. A mission was founded in the Danish settlement of Tranquebar in South India. The first Protestant missionaries to arrive on Indian soil were two German missionaries Ziegenbalg and Plutschau sent by the King. They landed on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1706 in Tranquebar a Danish trade post. Julius Richter says that this marked the birthday of Protestant missions in India. Since the Danish trade post never crossed the boundary of Tamil kingdom, their missionary work was confined mainly to Tamil Nadu region. The Protestant missionary work gained momentum only after the arrival and the expansion of Anglican power. The British Government had three roles in India, first that of a trader, second that ruler, and then that of a Christian propagandist. British rulers held and professed Christianity. Consequently British rule was equated with Christian domination. In the early years of its rule, the Company had taken a position of neutrality with regard to the religious and social affairs of its subject. The East India Company decided not to interfere with the traditional cultures of the people by supporting missionary work. The company's policy was non-interference in Indian education but favoring traditional Hindu or oriental learning. The non-interference probably based was on the fear that missionaries through English education expecting to aid conversions might offend the Hindu subjects of the company and create unrest <sup>[31]</sup>. This policy of non-interference with the customs and traditions of the natives and lack of support for missionary work were reviewed after the Company Charter was reviewed in 1813. Finally, in 1833, the policy of the company was changed under pressure from the Evangelicals in England. This marked the first decisive step of missionary work in India. A spokesman of the Evangelicals declared: "The true cure of darkness is the introduction of light. The Hindus err because they were ignorant and their errors have never fairly been laid before them. The communication of our light and knowledge to them would prove the best remedy for their disorders <sup>[32]</sup>." The Charter of 1833 approved the permanent presence of missionaries in India and made provision for Anglican hierarchy at Calcutta. With the expansion of the British Empire missionaries began to arrive and Christianity began to spread by establishing dioceses at Madras and Bombay. Ever since there existed a renewed cooperation between the missionaries and the colonial power in helping one another in their mission. By the end of the eighteenth century a new wave of the spirit of evangelization permeated Protestant Churches. In 1792 the English Baptists organized the first Anglican mission Baptist Missionary Society <sup>[32]</sup>.

### Christian Contribution to Indian Education

Christianity in India dates back to St. Thomas, one of the

twelve disciples of Christ, who arrived in India around 52 AD. But while the Christians have been here for the last 21 centuries, their presence is known mostly through their service, and their contributions to society are largely reflected in the communities and villages they dwelt in. They have chosen to live in a well-assimilated manner and the most recorded history of their contributions start some four hundred years ago.

With the stress and importance given to the social needs of education and health, it is not surprising to see the high literacy rates of states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which were part of the early areas of Christian growth. The 19th century saw the consolidation of British rule and the impact of western ideas on the social, political, and religious life of Indians through the medium of the English language. Christian missionaries were pioneers in education. The Santa Fe School in Goa, founded in 1540 by the Franciscans was the first formal Christian educational enterprise anywhere outside Europe. In 1542 it was taken over by St. Francis Xavier and in 1548 it was raised to the status of a college and renamed St. Paul's College. Soon more missionary schools appeared in other parts of India — at Bassein (1546), in Cochin (1549), at Punnacayil in Tamil Nadu (1567), in Madurai (1595), in Pondicherry (1713), a High School in Tamil at Ellacurichi in Tamil Nadu (1731) and a Sanskrit School at Mannanam in Kerala (1846).

Christians have been pioneering educational initiatives from pre independence time onwards and now has some 25000+ schools, colleges, and universities even in very remote and rural areas, imparting quality education to all irrespective of caste, creed, or language, contributing to the progress and development of the nation in a most altruistic manner. Christians decry the limitations of ideologies, narrow religious assumptions, social prejudices, economic disparities, and gender discrimination in all its forms, and declare the fraternity of all persons in a community of mutual love and respect. Education is for greatness in human growth and economic wellbeing, with equal rights and equity of opportunities as children of God and equal citizens of one nation. This education provides an inclusive and integral education space, digitally empowered and skill oriented, with holistic values and wisdom of healthy life management. Minority institutions reach out to the weaker sections of society mostly in rural and tribal areas, through selfless service rendering not only educational services but also service in the areas of health care, social work, and developmental programmes. It has raised their economic standards and improved their social status and prestige in society <sup>[33]</sup>.

One of the activities of the Christian missionaries in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the work among women. The missionaries were the first to promote women's education in India.

Women's education led to the enlightenment of Indian women of all religions, castes, and regions in modern times. The first ever girls' school in India was opened by the missionaries at Kottayam in 1819. The CMS missionaries Mary Anne Cooke, and Mrs. Wilson started female education in Calcutta in 1820. Serampore Mission took lead in organizing female schools in the Serampore area in 1821. With the progress made through Zenana visitation, a number of mission societies have established special societies such as the Zenana Mission and the Bible Medical Mission, and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (1881).

The first attempts towards the education of women in North East India were made at the turn of the twentieth century. The inception of women's education was a major breakthrough in the transformation of society at large.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Clearly, Indian Christian Higher education has made women's education a priority. The first women's college, Isabella Thoburn College, was established in Uttar Pradesh State in 1886 with the noble goal of sharing with women the love of the Lord through higher education. Quite aptly the motto of the college is "We Receive to Give." This was followed by the establishment of the second college exclusively for women, Sarah Tucker College (1895), in Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu, a highly conservative and under developed area. In 1947, the year of independence, out of the seventy-two Christian Colleges in India, sixteen were exclusively for women. Quite interestingly, all four Christian colleges started in 1948, the first year of independence, were for women. Historically, the importance of providing education to women among Christians is well documented. In the co-educational Christian colleges, 56% are girls. In government colleges, that percentage drops by more than half.

The importance of education in the new independent India, which Dr. Ambedkar humbly acknowledged, was reflected in the desire that every child up to the age of 14 should enjoy the right to and have enrolment in education by the 1960's (a 10 year deadline was set in the article itself). Yet this intent was passed as Article 45 under Directive Principles of State Policy, which "are not enforceable by the courts". The original Article 45 of the Constitution, "seeks to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14". Although the Constituent Assembly of India said we would be "cheating the nation" by not providing education to all, 62 years down the road, we are yet to accomplish this fundamental goal. Both educational and social services provided by the Christians were addressed in great part to the lower classes and castes. There was far more investment in helping the lower classes than the elites. In fact many of the present day elite institutions started as services meant for the poor. But, undoubtedly the change in the concept of education from being a privilege of the upper class to being the right of all citizens owes much to the Christian inspiration.

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3. He delivered the speech on the auspicious day of St. Thomas Day celebration in New Delhi in 1955 Dec 18<sup>th</sup>.
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19. Jeyakumar, 41.
20. Kuriakose, 32-33.
21. Kuriakose, 33.
22. Joseph Costelloe M. S.J., Letters and Instructions of St. Francis Xavier (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992), 47.
23. Kuriakose, 31.
24. George KM. Christianity in India Through the Centuries (Hyderabad: Authentic, 2007), 120.
25. Hearing of the foreign Sanyasi, many people wished to visit De Nobili but he did not at first make himself easily accessible. The visitors would be told that the Aiyar was bathing or occupied in meditation, and sometimes they would be obliged to call several times before being able to meet him. Then they would be admitted to his presence, he sitting up on a dais, they, after making their Namaskarams, seated on a carpet spread on the floor, and he would charm them by his elegant Tamil, apt quotations and penetrating sayings.
26. Firth, 112.
27. He made acquaintance of a Telegu Brahmin pandit named Srivadarma with whom he began to learn Sanskrit. He even persuaded the pandit to teach him some of the Vedic texts, and, what is more, even writes them down for him. This had to be done in secret, for in those days only Brahmins were allowed to study the Vedas, and usually it was all done by memory to write them down was an unheard-of thing.
28. Jeyakumar, 58.
29. De Nobili believed and taught explicitly that, when a man became a Christian, he need not leave his caste or station in life; for he was persuaded that caste was a social custom parallel to distinctions of class and rank in Europe, and an evitable feature of the Indian way of life, - just as the Apostles treated the institution of slavery as an inevitable feature of life in the Roman Empire, and did not oppose it. Nor was this view an innovation.
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