

From the annals of history ...



CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SCENARIO OF KERALA

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The Christian missionaries disembarked on the soil of Kerala lulling in their heart the message of their Master – “Preach the Good News till the end of the earth!” (cf Mt 28, 19). Though their first priorities were evangelization and formation, they gave equal importance also to charity and socio-cultural activities. The contributions of the missionaries, in this sense, are invaluable. One can also see that it is on these firm foundations we received, that the great castles of language and literature here were built and developed. It is also crystal clear that these missionaries have been the forefathers in the field of printing, publication and the modern journalism.

The missionaries who came to India are of various religious congregations. The Franciscan Missionaries who landed in Kerala in 1517 are

the first group. Then came the Dominican Missionaries and followed by the Augustinians, the third group. The fourth group in the chronological order was the members of the Society of Jesus, popularly known as the Jesuits. St. Francis Xavier, Arnos Padiri (Fr. John Ernest Hanxleden) etc. are the prominent figures among those Jesuits. It was the Carmelite Missionaries who came last in the series and brought printing press and started printing both in Goa and at Ambalakatt of Kerala. The Carmelite Missionaries started their activities in 1659 at Varapuzha (Verapoly) as the centre. It was during that period the Vicariate of Malabar was established and Dr. Joseph Sebastiani assumed the office as the first Apostolic Administrator. The Carmelite era ended on November 15, 1934 with the retirement of the last Missionary

Archbishop of Verapoly namely Dr. Angel Mary Perez Cecelia OCD.

Though there are many towering personalities among the missionaries who contributed substantially in the socio-cultural development of Kerala, here in this article I would like to commemorate gratefully in a special way the person of Arnos Padiri who authored "*Arthe Malabar*", the Language-Grammar-Book and "*Puthenpaana*", the Malayalam poem.

Though it is only about three hundred years back that Arnos Padiri lived, Kerala history has few record on him or his times to offer, either dating back to his days or based on research thereafter. In fact the socio-cultural history of Kerala has large gaps making it difficult for the discerning student to chart out the delineation of the evolution of the psyche of the present-day population of the land. The period from the beginning of the Christian era to the 7th century is 'dark age' of which the only information available is from travelogues, often based on mistaken perceptions. The next seven centuries do not fare much better though fallout from Tamilian studies throws some light. From thereon, reports written by heads of foreign contingents to their rulers alone provide the only information.

The exact situation on the ground at any time in the past is therefore anybody's guess. For instance, it surprised me that no record of the life or works of *Thunchath Ramanujan Ezhuthachan*, the great poet-saint supposed to be the father of Malayalam language, exists in any historical recording as I was gathering information prior to writing a fictional biography. Every historian I approached revealed total helplessness and advised gathering of whatever possible from folk history still prevalent particularly in areas where the great man had studied, gone and worked.

The picture of sixteenth-century Kerala I could gather was a sorry one. The *Samoothiri* ruled in the north, *Perumpadappu* next towards south, *Valluvakkonathiri* on the hill regions north of both of these and *Venat* in the south but they did no more than extorting heavy taxes, fighting each other and also the smaller kingdoms within their own territories that, though subjugated, often

threw a challenge justifiably or otherwise against their overlords.

Life was miserable for all sections except the few families that belonged to the uppermost caste who, having established their clout over the rulers on the basis of their assumed proximity to God, enjoyed ownership of all land and exercised power without responsibility. A detailed pecking order had been established for hundreds of castes down the line. Law and order maintained, again by the same caste overlords, was tailor-made to serve status quo.

The foreigners who came to trade brought in armies and weapons too to help bargain better or get what they wanted at gun point. They, to improve their sway, also made the local rulers who already had no love lost between themselves, fight each other. More wars meant still heavier taxes and greater misery for the population of which all the young were dragged to battle and eventual decimation so that agricultural and every other productive activity suffered leading to starvation.

The first person to challenge the caste system was *Thunchath Ezhuthachan* but he was finally exiled, though his renaissance zeal could not be obliterated. Meanwhile, particularly in the south, many had opted for Christianity as it was casteless. In the north it was Islam that was embraced on the same grounds. Christianity had, unfortunately for it, meanwhile got identified with the atrocities perpetrated by the Portuguese.

It was exactly two centuries after the Portuguese arrived that Arnos Padiri reached Kerala. He was here for over three decades, devoting himself to the service of the language, the people and the mission. A very clear picture of his travails – the preparations, the long and hazardous journey, the struggle to find a foothold, humiliations while interacting with the upper castes (who later became his ardent admirers) and the very exacting living conditions - emerges from the biography.

To carry out his mission, he had to talk to the people here and also understand what they said. His decision to learn Malayalam was almost similar to one deciding to learn swimming after landing oneself in deep waters. But in just a couple of months he masters the spoken language, also learns to read and write. But the

language of power was Sanskrit, the knowledge of which alone was the passport to the club of the social elite. Also, though having done his philosophy already and known the tenets of Vedanta, he wanted to read the texts in the original.

The uppermost caste had the monopoly over Sanskrit and the scriptures. He had to win their confidence to be trusted with these. Being a foreigner, he was fortunately 'casteless'. But he was alien. It was here that the charm of his personality, humor and scholarship came to his aid. He found the right people to teach him. Of course, among those who knew the scriptures, there were worthy men too.

To make assurance doubly sure for himself that he understood every word right, he wrote a dictionary of Malayalam words and a book of grammar too so that it could also help other missionaries who wanted to work in the land. The two volumes prove beyond all doubt his prowess in linguistics and have served as basic material for all those who followed.

The volumes of devotional songs composed by him are tributes to his poetic creativity. It is rare that an astute linguist writes sublime poetry, in any language for that matter. Arnos Padiri did. This was when all local talent available in the same area was devoting itself to banter with a dressing of obscenity. Most historians of Malayalam literature take note of the pioneering efforts of the Padiri. It is indeed fortunate for the language that he came, lived, worked and made these contributions.

If compared to other regions of India Kerala is in the forefront in education, healthcare, civic sense, religious tolerance and many other desirable qualities, it is the Padiri and his kind that have to be thanked. They have been the emancipators and the beacons, the apostles of true Christian virtues, the simple and selfless who strived to give God's love to one and all irrespective of caste, religion, region, color or sex.

As I pay tribute to the contributions of Arnos Padiri, I would like to remember also the great Carmelite missionaries of Varapuzha (Verapoly), who are to be studied and evaluated with much respect and appreciation. It was Dr. Angelo Francis of St. Teresa who was the Bishop of

Varapuzha Vicariate (1700-1712) who prepared the first Grammar Book for Malayalam and a dictionary and a second Book of Grammar and thus eternalized himself. It is quite unbelievable that Dr. Angelo Francis was able to take up such a vast scientific study of the language in the midst of his twelve years of pastoral responsibilities. "*Grammatica Linguae Vulgaris Malabaricae*" and "*Gramatica Malabarico Lucitana*" are the two Books of Grammar authored by Dr. Angelo Francis. The dictionary is spread in the latter pages of the first Grammar-Book. This is first of this genre created collecting so many Malayalam and the corresponding Portuguese words. The second Grammar-Book follows the suit. Fr. Stephen of St. Peter, Fr. Geminiani of St. Octovia, Fr. Clement Viannius etc. are the further Carmelite Missionaries, who contributed Grammar-Books to Malayalam language. Fr. Clement Viannius among them commands special attention, because, besides being a grammarian, his is the first book which was entirely printed in Malayalam, namely "*Samkshepa vedartham*"; the same was taken to Rome and having engraved the Malayalam letters it was published. Fr. Paulinus, who was the English teacher of His Highness, the King of Thiruvithamkoor, was also a Carmelite. His book "*India Orientalis Chirstiana*" occupies a prominent position in the linguistics and the history of the Church.

All these Carmelites had Varapuzha alias Verapoly as the centre of their activities. A number of spiritual books were also published from Varapuzha. In short, the printing, publication and journalism are the eternal contributions of the Carmelite Missionaries who served centring Varapuzha. Keeping all these facts in mind I pay tribute to the Archdiocese of Verapoly, which had been the fertile land for the beginning and blossoming of the great Carmelite legacy in Kerala.

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