

ZIEGENBALG – THE PIONEER OF TRANQUEBAR MISSION

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Introduction

Tranquebar, the Queen of Coromandel Coast and commercial centre and sea port had been a multi-cultural melting pot for many centuries. The medieval period witnessed the arrival of mainly Arab merchants who settled down there. From Sixteenth Century onwards the Portuguese arrived there. During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries the Portuguese language became an important means of communication. A new epoch dawned in the annals of the Christianity with the Danish-Halle missionaries called Royal.

Danish missionaries. Danish stations in Tranquebar and Serampore emerged as missionary centres in the church history of India. Raghunatha Nayak granted a strip of land at an annual rent of Rs. 3111 on the eastern coast of his jurisdiction. The Danes purchased an area of fifteen square miles around Tranquebar in 1620 and built a fortress there called Danesborg and carried on regular trade with outpost.

The Danes extended their trade from Tranquebar to Masulipatnam and Bengal. Between 1621 and 1637 two clergymen were sent to Tranquebar. The Danish church service was held in the fort regularly. The clergy men purchased land near the fort and built up a church. It was completed in 1701 and dedicated with the name 'Zion Church'. The Maratha rule which in 1676 succeeded the Nizams assumed the right to receive the yearly peshcash (tribute) from Tranquebar.

King Frederick- IV(1671-1730) of Denmark founded the Tranquebar Mission as an effort to improve the welfare of his subjects at home in Denmark and also in distant colonies. The establishment of the Tranquebar Mission in Tamil Country opened a new epoch in the history of Christianity in India. It was neither the powerful British nor the Dutch who first sent missionaries to India but Little Denmark. The King Frederick -IV sponsored the despatch of the first protestant mission to Tranquebar, an insignificant trading settlement in India.

The King Frederick –IV of Denmark sent two young missionaries Ziegenbalg and Plutschau to Tranquebar and they arrived there on 9th July 1706. Tranquebar became the best known cradle of Protestant Missions. Indian Church could not neglect this date because the missionary endeavour of Evangelical church began in India on that date.

The cession of land to the missionaries at Tranquebar was opposed by merchants of the Danish East India Company which had been trading in Tranquebar as they thought that this was an infringement- of their rights.' They were not even informed of this. The traders

had little or no interest in their religion. The Danish East India Company was concerned with the survival of the company, maximum economic profit for its share holders and their own salary. They regarded missionaries as intruders. Hence the missionaries had to face and overcome several social, political and economic conflicts. It was difficult to trade in India according to the precepts of the "sermon on the mount" and trade business and religion did not go way well together.

The missionaries were ostracized by the Europeans who thought that they might serve as spies. Hence the missionaries were caught in a double fire. They met with the hostility of the arrogant Danish Governor Hassius who was afraid that their monistic way of life of the Danish bureaucrats would come under scrutiny and be reported adversely to the King of Denmark. The missionaries had to live in the poorest part of the town and had to earn the good will of those who surrounded them. Ziegenbalg successfully weathered the situation. Ziegenbalg remarked that the missionaries experienced great opposition from Government they did not receive sufficient outward means.

The Hindus and Mohammedans were kind enough to the missionaries. Those Europeans who pretended to be Christians were worse than Hindus. At the bottom the European traders had shown to the missionaries all the ill will and malice. The Directors of the Danish East India Company in Copenhagen soon after the missionaries left Copenhagen, they sent secret orders to their Governor in Tranquebar directing him to extinguish every effort of the missionaries to establish their mission. They thought that Christian mission would jeopardize their trade.

Ziegenbalg was a pioneer of the process of indigenization and contextualization of Christian mission in India. He studied the ground reality and planned his work accordingly. Soon after landing, he was convinced that if the mission had to be succeeded, the language of the people had to be used. He regarded the local language as the gate way to the people in the mission's region. He determined to learn Tamil, the language of the natives and studied it with rigorous dedication.

The missionaries started their missionary work immediately on their arrival and did not show any slackness in their goal. They studied Tamil and Portuguese. For learning Tamil, they joined in an elementary school and studied along with Tamil children. Two native Tamil scholars Madaliappa and Kannapadi taught Tamil to Ziegenbalg. In order to quicken their missionary work they divided their field of work between them on the basis of language. Ziegenbalg preached in Tamil and Plutschau preached in Portuguese language. They gathered the people, both adult and children and imparted them the basic tenets of Christianity besides engaging themselves in religious discussions with the leading Brahmins and Mohammadans. Soon the membership of their congregation increased. The steady raise of the adherents gave a signal for speedy expansion of Christianity.

The missionary work of Ziegenbalg at Tranquebar attracted the attention of the local population who showed much interest in their life and preaching. Many Hindus were attracted to his teachings and some came forward for conversion. The first baptism

ceremony took place on 12th May 1707. The new convents were not permitted to worship in the Zion church as it was exclusively reserved for the use of Europeans. Hence the missionaries were determined to construct a separate church. They faced Many difficulties to build" the church, including- -finance which- they - fulfilled by contributing from their own .salaries. At this critical juncture a wealthy native came forward to build the church at his own cost. The caste Hindus strongly leveled their opposition against him for his support in building the church. Even then a few of their antagonists gave their small contributions s. In spite of all oppositions the missionaries laid the foundation stone on 14th June 1707 for the New Jerusalem Church. Finance received from different sources including the local people. The work was completed in two months. On 4th August 1707 the building was consecrated with the name 'New Jerusalem Church'. The dedication ceremony was conducted in both languages in the presence of a large crowd of Christians, Mohammedans and Hindus. The seeds of the Protestant Christianity was sown by Ziegenbalg and Pultschau on a fertile and it ensured the decay of traditional institutions. The missionary work spread to other regions of the central and southern parts of Tamil Country. It had its impact in Tanjore, Tiruchirappalli, Madras, Cuddalore, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari Districts .

Challenging Period

The founding of a local church for the mission appeared a fulfillment of the immediate desire of Ziegenbalg. He faced many difficulties one after another and Tranquebar Mission passed through many ups and downs. They did not get the required financial support from their home land. The opposition from the local zamindars was another obstacle to their mission. Responding to the call of the missionaries, the suppressed section especially the slaves started embracing the new faith and were baptized. This changed the attitude of the slaves, made their masters in losing their services and hence they turned against the missionaries. Caste formed yet another obstacle that stood against the growth of evangelism. As': the caste-Hindus had strong faith in their traditional religion, they did not tolerate any deviation from It. The strict observance of caste principles prevented them from embracing any other faith. If anyone dared to follow the Christian faith by taking baptism he would be an outcaste, losing all the rights and privileges in the society.

In an unknown foreign land, and in the midst of opposition and criticism the missionaries- tirelessly continued their activities with zeal and enthusiasm.. Fredrick IV, the king of Denmark sent huge money to the missionaries. Unfortunately the money was lost in the sea when the coffer was transported in a smaller boat from the ship in anchor to the shore of Tranquebar. The boat capsized in the strong wind and five Europeans and two Indians lost their lives in the large waves near the shore. This occurrence changed the situation from bad to worse. Inspite of these difficulties, the work of Ziegenbalg gradually gained momentum. He was getting large number of Tamil-speaking converts and also saw the possibility of quite a lot of Tamils to embrace Christianity. To their benefit he translated the Bible into Tamil."

When the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K) realized the work of the missionaries, it took great interest to help the Danish Royal Missionaries at Tranquebar in 1709. The S.P.C.K patronized the mission. Hence all the financial burdens of the missionaries came to an end. In the mean time, on 20th July 1709 the mission received £ 3000 from the Queen of Denmark. Moreover three missionaries J.G. Boviah, Grandler and Jordan brought a considerable amount of money. With this amount they settled their debts, purchased a house in the king's street and also purchased a large area at Poraiyar for further expansion of their work. With this encouragement Ziegenbalg intensified his mission by touring the Tamil Country. When opposition emerged against the missionaries, the Rajah of Tanjore assured a guard to accompany the missionaries, So the missionaries were able to travel into the interior of the territories. Ziegenbalg, decided to get more converts by collaborating with the natives. He used to speak with the untouchables and made association with the high castes. The first fruit of his labour was the conversion of a young man of high caste which caused confusion in the locality.

Even the life of the missionaries was threatened. When it was reported to the Rajah of Tanjore he sent an officer for his protection. Though some of them created problems to Ziegenbalg and his servants when they visited a village, they received friendly treatment among other Hindus. On 2nd September 1709 Ziegenbalg started his travel from Tranquebar into the domains of the King of Tanjore. Ganapathy a teacher and a son of Tamil translator, embraced the Christian faith on 16th October 1709 with the name Christian Fredrick.

The mission of Ziegenbalg was successful in Tranquebar. He wanted to expand his work in the British areas of Madras and Cuddalore. The English East India Company was highly impressed with his work and offered considerable financial help. Because of this cordial relationship prevailed between the British and the missionaries the activities of the Tranquebar mission gradually extended to Madras and Cuddalore. The work of Ziegenbalg was highly appreciated by the Court of Directors of the Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G) of England and in recognition of the Danish Protestant Missionaries at Tranquebar, they sent a printing press, utensils and paper. Plutschau and J.G. Boviah started to Denmark in December 1711. After reaching Denmark, Pultschau met Fredrick IV the King of Denmark and explained every activity of the missionaries at Tranquebar. He was satisfied with the dedicated services of the missionaries and on 12th June 1712 he ordered to release from his treasury 2000 dollars per year.

This unexpected financial support was a great advantage for the mission work. The S.P.C.K. of England purchased and presented a printing press and despatched to India. Five ships from England carried the machinery for the press, 100 reams of paper and many useful books for Tranquebar. It also carried 213 Portuguese New Testaments. Along with the printing press and all necessary apparatus, James Fincke, a trained printer with free passage from the East India Company was sent in 1711. But the vessel was captured off the coast of Brazil with a ransom of 300 pounds sterling which gave an indication of the value of printing establishment.

At Brazil the printer Fincke died. However, the printing press, being repurchased by the S.P.C.K. safely arrived at Madras in August 1712. By this time, the missionaries received from Germany a fount of Tamil printing types. By using it they first printed New Testament in Tamil. A second printing press arrived in 1713 accompanied by three Germans. Along with them a fount of Tamil letter types, prepared in Halle were also despatched. By using these types, the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles were printed. Besides, the New Testaments and the four Gospels the missionaries compiled and wrote thirty three works in the Tamil language including a dictionary. Also he wrote books on Malabar Arithmetic, Malabaric Grammar and even poetical dictionary. He was the first one to introduce singing in Tamil churches with hymns translated from German which was a bold attempt from the literary point of view. The songs he introduced had European melodies. In 1713, Ziegenbalg also compiled a book of hymns which was set to Malabaric music." The remarkable works of Ziegenbalg in the printing world were 1. Gnanaubadesa Kurippidam. Three books containing fifty –one Sermons. 3 Thrumarai Sarithram 4. Church Questions – Answers (Catechism) 5. Chhulamandalatharukku Oru Nirubam 6. Gnanapattukal 7. Prayer Book 8. Kodunthamil Akarathi 9. Senthamil Akarathi 10. Tamil Grammar.²¹ The printing endeavour indeed promoted the prospects of Christian literary work and translation ministry.

On 28th October 1714, Ziegenbalg left from Tranquebar to his home country after a long eight years of his service in India, to explain about the Tranquebar mission directly. Along with him he took Meleiappan, a native youth, who assisted in his Tamil dictionary and in translating the Old Testament work during the voyage. Ziegenbalg reached Bergen in Norway on 1st June 1715. From Norway he moved to Denmark. Owing to the war, King Fredrick camped in Stralsund. On the advice of Geheimerad Von Holstein (friend), Ziegenbalg- visited the camp and met him. Then he moved to Halle where he was most warmly received. He married Mary Dorothea Sulzmann, his former pupil, who proved to be an admirable consort. From Halle the missionary reached England. He met the royal family of King George, and S.P.C.K. members and got many offerings for his work.

He started his journey back to Madras on 1st March 1716 with his wife and reached on 10th August 1716. After a few days at Madras, Ziegenbalg rejoined his colleague, Grundler at Tranquebar and resumed the laborious work of his mission with renewed vigour. He was incessantly employed in the translation of the Bible in Tamil. He made a journey to the neighbouring districts and had usual religious discussions with the Hindus and the Mohammedans. He returned to Tranquebar by the end of August 1716.

Hussius the commandant and Governor of Tranquebar did not extend cooperation to the mission work of Ziegenbalg and ill-treated and arrested the latter. So as per the reports and request of Ziegenbalg, Hassius was summoned to Denmark²⁵ and Brun, a very good friend of Ziegenbalg was sent to Tranquebar in his place. Brun the new commandant and Governor of Tranquebar co-operated with Ziegenbalg in all his works. As a consequence, large number of people were converted. Slaves of the Catholic religion and the

Portuguese officials also accepted the protestant faith. Friendship between the Danes and Portuguese speaking population of Tranquebar improved substantially. To promote Christianity Ziegenbalg conceived the idea of founding a seminary. On 23rd October 1716 he started a seminary at Tranquebar with eight trainees. Among the trainees, the most efficient was Aaron. In 1718 Ziegenbalg visited Thiukadaiyoor, Sirkazhi, Chidambaram and preached the Gospel. Many accepted the Christian faith and obtained baptism from Ziegenbalg. In 1718, he gave baptism to 58 persons.

In the mean time, the first small Jerusalem Church was washed away by the sea. Subsequently, on 9th February 1717 the Danish Governor, Bum laid the foundation stone for the new building at Tranquebar which came to be recognized as one of the earliest protestant places of worship in India. On 11th October 1718 the building was dedicated with the same old name New Jerusalem Church. The church was built in the form of a Greek cross with four sections of equal length. It became more prominent by being the venue of the renowned Tranquebar Conference on 1st May 1919, which marked the origin of the Church of South India (C.S.I.).

When the mission was booming with the branches of teaching, printing, training and healing, its servants were suffering for want of money. The pressing financial problems of the mission, the discouraging reply from the secretary, coupled with constant efforts of Ziegenbalg for the promotion of the Tranquebar Mission made him weaker both physically and mentally. On 10th February 1719, he handed over all the responsibilities to Rev. Grundler. It was because of jealousy of some pastors and their vindictive false reports, the foreign money and support were stopped. By this situation, Ziegenbalg was perturbed. Very soon his spleen was affected. By the end of 1718, he realized that his health was very beyond recovery. On 23rd February 1719 he was battling for life, and passed away. His mortal remains were deposited in a vault inside the New Jerusalem Church.

Conclusion

The Protestant Mission in India was highly indebted to the rare abilities as well as earnest labours of this first missionary. Ziegenbalg was a great Indologist who had the vision to transmit Tamil culture and civilization to Europe. He enriched the Tamil language through his publications. He penetrated deeply into the Dravidian civilization. Tranquebar was the centre from where the protestant mission spread first along the coast to Cuddalore, Madras and Calcutta and in Tanjore, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai, Palayamkottai and Kanyakumari. Less than a month after the death of Ziegenbalg, three new missionaries - Benjamin Schultze, Nicolus Dal and J. H. Kistenmacher reached Madras on 20th March 1719 and then went to Tranquebar on 16th September 1719. Expansion in Northern Tamil Country. The newly arrived missionary Schultze determined to expand the mission activity to Madras. With the support of the English East India Company he started work and established missionary centres in Madras and Cuddalore. As soon as Schultze assumed the leadership of Tranquebar Mission he regarded it as his duty to remove the caste disabilities from the Tamil converts. He preached against the caste system and tried to create a situation

that all are equal. The missionaries demonstrated keen interest in maintaining cordial relationship with the Kingdom of Tanjore.

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