

## A SHORT HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSIONS IN INDIA

The first Indian convert to Christianity can be traced to the time when the Apostle Thomas, disciple of Jesus, came to India in around 48 AD. The Apostle Thomas sailed from Alexandra with Habban, the merchant king of Gundnaphor, to the Indus and reached Taxila (now in Punjab) about 48-49 AD. From there he went to Muziri on the Malabar Coast via Socotra about 50 AD. He reached Muziri in 51-52 AD. [1]

A study of the book of the Acts in the New Testament will reveal that the apostles often chose the synagogues established in various Jewish settlements of the world as an opening ground for the preaching of the Gospel. It has been reasoned that Apostle Thomas' choice of the Tamil coast was because of the flourishing Jewish settlements along the coast, in Madras and Cochin dating back to the Jewish Diaspora or even back to King Solomon's trading centres in the Tamil coast. There were also many Roman trade settlements flourishing in this coastal areas, as known by the abundant coin evidences in Arikamedu, Calicut, Coimbatore and other places.

Tradition holds that many Brahmin families were converted through the ministry of St. Thomas and

seven churches were established in Palur, Muziri, Parur, Gokkamangalam, Chayal, Niranam, and Quilon. After forming several more congregations out of Jews as well as of Dravidi people, Apostle Thomas went to Meliapur where even the Raja was converted with many of his subjects. This infuriated the Brahmins (of Aryan origin).

According to tradition, St. Thomas was speared to death by Brahmins near Mylapore. According to many early Church fathers, the mortal remains of Thomas were shifted from his tomb in India to Edessa.[2]

After Thomas, came the Apostle Bartholomew who ministered in the Kalyan area of the West Coast. He came around 55 AD. From this time onwards the area around Kalyan and the coasts had a large Christian population. This has been authenticated by historians such as Cosmos Indicopleustus (522 AD).

After Bartholomew came Pantaenus, the teacher of Clement, around 189AD on the West Coast. Bishop David of Barsa came around 295 AD. Thereafter, we can witness a number of immigrations from Syria. Kna Thomas came with Metropolitan Mar Joseph and a company of religious teachers as well as 400 Syrian Christians, who fled persecutions in Syria for their faith under Sapor II (339-379 AD). And thus, Christians grew in number in India and spread to different parts of the land. Many Dravidians got converted. There was

slow and steady mixing of the community of followers from Jewish, Syrian, and Dravidian origin in the Southern peninsula.

Nestorian Christians as well as monks from Beth Abhe and other monasteries came into India during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Worshipping communities were found in large numbers in the Ganges Valley of North India in 525 AD, according to Assemani. Christians were found in Punjab and Bihar.

When Vasco DaGama visited Calicut in 1498 AD, he found over 2 lak Christians in the Kerala area.[3] The estimated population of Christians before Vasco DaGama's arrival was about one million in India. The percentage is about the same as of today.

The ancient Christians of India were reputed for their industry, diction, respect for parents, elders, and clergy, and for their great contributions to Dravidian literature. Converts to Christianity such as Valluvar contributed to Tamil literature. Christian themes can be found in a bulk of non-Brahminic Tamil pietistic literature.

The era of Hindu revivals throughout the land of ancient India beginning at the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century AD led to active persecution of non-brahminical religious systems such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Christianity. There was mass extermination of Buddhist monks; many fled persecution. Non-brahminical literatures and signs were also wiped

away. Thus, history shows an abrupt disappearance of even traces of these great religions. If it were not for the historical accounts of foreign travellers and some antiquities, we would not even have known about all those great conversions in India.

However strong the persecutions, they were not able to completely wipe out the Christian population, which flourished in, majorly, the coastal regions, even as Vasco DaGama testified.

Influx of European merchants such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and British did not result in Christian conversions, as history shows. All the colonial power consistently refused to allow the white missionaries till 1813 to sail by their ships. Most of the colonies refused entry to the missionaries into their colonies. The Britishers felt that the missionaries would dishevel their interests by preaching and teaching the pagans. It was for such reasons that William Carey had to seek asylum in a Danish territory in Serampore.

In 1837, the British Colonial Government, very reluctantly, permitted entry of white missionaries in its territory because of the pressure from the evangelical lobby in the British parliament. The missionaries received no spiritual support from the British government and had to look after themselves. It was their sacrificial lifestyle and social action that turned many Indians to Christianity. Missionaries like Fraser and Carey unleashed a relentless fight against social evils such as slavery

and sati. The activity of missionaries against social evils, against liquor, and their preaching about the equality of men was irritant to the British Colonialists.

Many who were benefiting from the missionary ministries began to convert to Christianity. The untouchables who once were ashamed of themselves, now began to radiate joys of knowing Christ as their emancipator. The Christian missionaries went to their humble homes and awakened them to a sense of better earthly existence. Through the efforts of the Church Missionary Society in 1891, the "Padial Protection Law" was enacted. Other Acts such as the Bengal Tenants Protection Act, Indigo Planters Act, and the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1843, were initiated by Christian efforts.

Christian missionary activities amongst tribals have been more effective in turning them to Christ than among the rest of India. The once suppressed tribals were literated and educated. The tribal languages were given script and grammar. Mission work aimed at liberating and uplifting the tribals. As a result many of them flocked to Christianity. Many more turned to Christianity because of its doctrine of one God, the Savior, and deliverance from evil spirits. There were mass conversions.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Awakening triggered an evangelistic and missionary zeal in the churches. Many missions began to look at India as a field of mission work. The American Baptist Mission brought

the Gospel to many parts of North East. The Welsh Presbyterian Mission and the Baptist Missionary Society brought Christianity to Khasi and Jaintia Hills and to Mizoram. Hindu missionaries, at this time began to flood the left over Tripura areas and also portions of Manipur. The once head-hunters of Nagaland became Christians. Thus, Christianity spread in the North East. Assam was already taken over by Aryanism, though it blended with its Mongoloid background.

After the Independence, India began to unchain itself gradually from foreign supports, though missions in India were not able to completely shake off the need of the help of Christians outside of India. Though many more were converted to the various lines of Christianity, Christian population has suffered from both biological and conversion growths. Census reports reveal that the Christian population has declined in percentage levels. Conversions still take place in different parts of India. But there are as much as "going backs".

In modern times, the growth of Charismatic and Spirit-filled ministries has triggered a great focus on spiritual transformations. The preaching concentrates on repentance from sin and turning to God through Jesus Christ. Deliverance from various maladies and demonic oppression is a regular experience. Consequentially, a large number of nominal (name-sake) Christians have been revived and have abandoned their past unchristian-like lifestyles. Also, a number of people

from other faiths have embraced the Gospel message.

There are also a number of cases in which some false missionaries falsely report mass conversions in paper. This has engendered much consternation. However, their works are soon also exposed. The Bible tells us that even in the days of the apostles, there were people who got into the mission work just for the sake of money and looked at religion as a kind of commercial industry. They weren't genuine, but were wolves in sheep clothing. The Bible called the church to beware of them and stay away from them. And, true worshippers do identify and expose the false ones.

The true people of God, however, cannot avoid testifying of what they have experienced in Jesus Christ; as the Apostle Paul said, "We can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth". It is an inbuilt nature of a human to share his/her joy, to not keep a good news secret, but celebrate it; and, witnessing about an inner spiritual transformation to others through words and action is just that.

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1. J.N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London, 1913), p.20. As cited by Ebe Sunder Raj, *The Confusion called Conversion* (New Delhi: TRACI, 1998), p.4

2. "St. Gregory, Naceanceu, St. Ambrose, and St. Eranimus, all of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and Bishop Canthencius, and St. Paulinus both of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, bear evidence that the Apostle Thomas worked and was killed in India for his faith by those who opposed his message..." Sunder Raj, *The Confusion called Conversion*, pp.4,5
3. Kaa. Naa. Subramanyam, *The Catholic Community in India*, as cited by Sunder Raj, *Op. Cit*, p.7