

CULTURAL COMMUNICATION-ENCOUNTER OF THE ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS WITH THE HINDUS IN KERALA

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The ancient Christians of Kerala very early in their existence developed a lifestyle. This life style, in Church matters reflected to some extent the pattern of the Persian Christians. In the socio-cultural realm it was not different from that of their Hindu neighbours. In the social set-up of Kerala they emerged as the peers of the higher classes, especially the *Nayars*. The long experience they had acquired of the Hindu way of life and the good neighbourly relations they maintained with the Hindu brethren enabled them to build up a more positive approach towards Hinduism and Hindu practices. Their integration to the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala was most satisfying. How far this integration reflected in their spiritual life, worship, Christian thinking, Church structure, etc, is problematic. The *Yogam* or Church Assembly at the local as well as at the general level and the position of the Archdeacon, who appears always to have been the national leader of the community, was a unique characteristic of the Kerala society.

The Kerala Society before the Sixteenth Century

Kerala had already become a mosaic of natives and groups of foreigners. The natives were divided into several groups of classes, such as *anthanas*, *billalas*, *ezhavas*, *maravas*, *vedas*, *kammalas*, *ayads*, *vellalas*, *kuravas*, *pulayas*, *paravas*, *parayas*, *mukkuvas*, *konars*, *salyas*, and so on. The chieftains, kings, and priests were also drawn from these classes. The conversion of the *Chera* kings of *Vanchi* into *Kshatriyas* and linking them with the *Suryavamsa* was the first step of the Brahmins (*Namputhiris*) for ushering in the caste system. The *Chera* kings also were *billavas* and the *Ay* kings who were shepherds, all the belonged to the *arachar* (kings) class till then. In course of time the lesser kings and chieftains also were made *Kshatriyas*. The *eradis*, *vellodis*, *nedungadis*,

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pandlas, *adiyodis*, and *unniyadis* were what are known as *Samanthas*, supposed to be the progeny of *Namputhiris* and *Nayar* women.

Allegedly it was as a result of this process that caste system originated in Kerala about the seventh or eighth century and grew during the course of a few centuries after. Both the kings and *Samanthas* became devoted followers of the Brahmins and defenders of the caste system. The emergence of the *Nayar* community (they, though classed as *Sudras*, were soldiers equal in many respects to the *Kshatriyas*), of *marumakkathayam* (matrilineal system of inheritance), and the *janmi* (landlord) system of land holding, all of which are, in the opinion of modern historians of Kerala, inter-linked, and is attributed to the Brahmin/*Namputhiri* domination (seventh to the twelfth century).

Among those who did not profess Hinduism as their religion or who did not belong to communities who are today classed as Hindus, were Christians, Muslims and Jews. Among these communities there were both natives and foreigners or who had foreign connections. It is mainly on these communities the rulers relied for the promotion of trade and commerce.

The rulers of Kerala, though great devotees of the now Brahmin-dominated Hindu religion, were enlightened and benevolent enough to keep intact and even foster the age-long tradition of tolerance towards other religions and their followers. It is commercial interests, which attracted people of various creeds, races and nations to the Kerala coast; it is the same interest, which induced the rulers and the people of Kerala to show such hospitality to the 'alien' people professing 'alien' creeds and practicing, responsible for the harmony and the cultural 'symbiosis' that came to prevail in Kerala from very early times up to the advent of the Portuguese. Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and later, Muslims, both Indian and foreign, lived in harmony. The Hindus offered hospitality to the people of other creeds from time to time leading to a situation where peaceful coexistence of different communities became necessary and possible. This relationship was sybioitic but not parasitic, since it was an agreement for mutual advantage (Cf. Narayan 1972: vii, 6, ix). It is believed that the Brahmin-Kshatriya prejudice against trade

and navigation also induced them to leave such affairs to the foreigners or those who had foreign connections. The result was a cultural 'symbiosis', as M. G. S. Narayan points out.

The multicoloured fabric of Kerala society has been woven through centuries with Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic elements coexisting without losing their identity or even their contrast in character. It must be remembered that each religion brought to Kerala not only a creed but also its own specific way of life. Perhaps the best characteristics that the Kerala people acquired were temperamental adjustability and open-mindedness, while the worst were love of imitation and lack of self-confidence. The minority groups were Indianised, Hinduised, and Keralised. It may be pointed out that the Jains was almost completely absorbed in the *Nayar* community and the Buddhist in the *Ezhava* community. Both typical of Kerala. The Jews acquired a whole division of Malayalam-speaking 'Black-Jews' in spite of all their well-known exclusiveness. We have to add that Kerala was perhaps the only land where they enjoyed religious and social tolerance for centuries. The Christians received Hindu names, practiced rituals of worship like the use of the native *nilavilakku*, built temple-like churches, and accepted social customs like the wearing of *tali* by the bride. The Muslim also constructed temple-like mosques, adopted matriliney in certain areas, and cultivated a new dialect of Arab-Malayalam with its own folk-literature (Cf. *Ibid*).

Christians and the Kerala Cultural Symbiosis

Small communities of Christians did live at different times in various parts of India. But it was in Kerala, in the symbiotic socio-cultural context described above, that the bulk lived and grew until the arrival of the Portuguese. Even a superficial student of history of St. Thomas Christians wonders at the spontaneity with which the community adjusted itself to its milieu at least as far as their social life was concerned. The natural impulse led to the acceptance of certain practices and customs, a few of which perhaps tended to be prevarication of genuine Christians life, and the Synod of Udayamperur (or of Daimper, CE 1599) had some justification in correcting them. But the Synod went

a step further and in way stifled this spirit of spontaneity itself so much so that it may be said that from the end of the sixteenth century the community gradually became less adaptive. It would make an interesting study to trace the history of the community from the point of view of its adaptation, analysing the elements, which constituted the adaptation. In the decrees of Udayamperur (Synod of Diamper) (Cf. Scaria Zacharia: 1994 E & M), there are a number of prohibitions and restrictions. It means Christians were practicing most of them. They are indication of the cultural integration of St. Thomas Christians to the socio-cultural context of Kerala.

Childhood and Education

The Synod of Diamper recommends parents to employ Christian midwives not only to ensure that they may render to the child the spiritual help in danger of infant mortality, but also to avoid some ceremonies, superstitious ceremonies for the Portuguese, which non-Christian midwives practiced (Act IV, Decree 8). About six months after the birth of a child there was the ceremony of giving rice to the child. The priest took, in a circular vessel marked with a cross of gold or gold-plated silver, a little from the rice mixed with jaggery and put it to the mouth of the child. The relatives and friends repeated this action. Dinner followed this. Women after childbirth, the Synod decreed, are to shun not only "ceremonies and superstition of the heathens" but also practices of Judaic origin, e.g., segregation for forty or eighty days, as if the women were unclean for such duration.

The education of the children probably consisted of two stages; one before the child attained eight years of age, and the other after that till the twenty-fifth year. During the first stage possibly both boys girls received very elementary education. Perhaps that was the end for girls. The boys went further. All the boys began their training in reading and writing, in warfare in *kalari* (school) under a *panicar* (master/fence master), either Hindu or Christian, from eight years of age and continued till they reached twenty-five. (Cf. Gouvea: 1606, 49, 61v.). Regarding this system of education, which prevailed in Kerala we get some more light from the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper. Act III, Decree 12 says that sending

Christian children to school run by Hindu masters was alien to Catholic tradition. (Catholic tradition here means the tradition prevailing then in European countries, like Portugal, where there was no such cohabitation of different religious communities as in Kerala). The Synod admits that the situation in Kerala was different. But the description of this different situation is negative when the Synod says that the Hindu rulers rarely permitted Christians to be schoolmasters. But the general impression we get from the contemporary documents is that it was not because of any restriction on the part of the Kerala rulers that Christian children went to schools run by Hindu masters. They did not share the apprehension of the Portuguese; they were just following the open attitude created by the symbiotic context of Kerala. If they wanted their own schools, run by Christian masters, exclusively for their children, no objection would have come forth from the part of the rulers, who were very generous in showering on the Christian community many privileges, honours and perquisites. The Christians had developed no such exclusive attitude. So the Hindu and Christian children got their training under the same teacher whether he was a Hindu or Christian. This produced a healthy social interaction between the Hindus and Christians in the day-to-day life.

The following Decree of the Synod (III,13) clearly says that there were not only Hindu *panicars* but also Christian *panicars*. The Synod may have been right in insisting that Christian children should not be send to such masters as that would force even Christians pupils to venerate Hindu *pagods* or idols and to follow Hindu ceremonies. It is however, doubtful how far the Synod was justified in prohibiting Christian masters to keep in their schools Hindu idols for veneration by Hindu pupils.

Occupation, Day-to-Day life

As it was pointed out earlier, the Muslims, the Christians and the Jews, who had foreign connections, carried on trade and commerce. Even agricultural activities seem to have rested with the Christians, if not also with the Muslims. There seems to have been no Hindu *Vaisyas* in the Kerala social set up, whose duty it was, in the Hindu caste system, to carry on trade and agricultural activities.

Christians, probably also Muslims, were soldiers like *Nayars*, their peers in the Kerala society. Gouvea (Cf. Gouvea: 1606,49,61v.) writes at the close of the sixteenth century that even though the Christians of St. Thomas did not eat meat unless very rarely, they were robust, fast and strong men and the best soldiers on the battlefield. According to him all went about with swords and shields, and some with guns and lances, which they left at home only when going to the church. When men were thus occupied in military service, the women stayed at home according to the custom of the nobler caste and did the household work.

Various Other Aspects

Naturally the social life the Christian led was not different from that of the higher classes of the Hindus. The aspects of the symbiosis are many. Some of the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper are revealing.

The Synod says that there were a number of 'evil' customs in the diocese of Angamaly (among St. Thomas Christian community), which are to be rooted out. Such were ritual washings of corpses of the dead, ritual baths of the relative of the dead, making circles with rice and putting in them the couples to be newly married, taking a thread out when a web of cloth (*pudava*) is cut, the taking back of two grains from the paddy measured out and sold, the bathing of the couples four days after the marriage, the rule that they can go to church only after this bath (IX, 1, Zacharia 1994 M: 201).

The Synod (IX, 2) considers superstitious and absurd the custom of the higher classes in Kerala keeping themselves untouchable from the lower classes. Even touching a high caste person who had been touched by a lower caste person was considered polluting. The Synod recommends the abolition of this practice among Christians. However, in consideration of special situation in which they were found the practice is tolerated in public forums. Otherwise the social intercourse with the high castes was impossible and that intercourse was of advantage to the Christians. But the practice could be avoided whenever and wherever that could not be noticed by the people. Hence it forbids the practice of taking a bath after a Christian happened to touch a person or persons of the low caste, as nobody would know whether one took a bath or not (This seems

to be a point easily taken for granted by the Synod but in practice it would have only complicated matters). Untouchability with *Nayars* practiced by Christians in certain places is to be completely avoided.

Just as Hindus, the Christians also performed purification rituals over wells or cisterns, which had been touched by persons of lower class. The Synod considers this custom as very un-christian and least tolerable. Persons having recourse to such purification rituals were to be excommunicated.

The Christians used to join the Hindus in the celebration of the *Onam* (harvest) festival and participated in the mock fighting conducted on the occasion, in which some were wounded and even sometimes killed. The Synod forbade Christians to take part in these festivities. The Christians should observe only their own holy festivals among themselves.

Another series of proscriptions are against consulting witches and fortunetellers, witchcraft, conjuring, charms (IX, 6-8); buying and selling of children (IX, 13).

Archbishop Meneses and the other Portuguese missionaries, whose initiative and assessment were most decisive in all the prescriptions and proscriptions of the Synod, looked at the social practices of the St. Thomas Christians from their own 'orthodox' viewpoint. For the Indian Christians these practices were part of their symbiotic social context. The Portuguese lacked the experience of living with Hindus so closely and could never come to terms with these social customs and practices. Hence they saw them as evil resulting from the living together with the Hindus. Hence the Synod insisted that the Christians bear external marks by which they could be easily distinguished from the higher class Hindus; that they live together by themselves away from the 'contaminating' influence of the 'heathens'. Act IX, Decree 17 reads:

Whereas the distinction of the faithful from unbelievers [this is how the Portuguese called Hindus those days], even by outward signs and habits, is a thing which has always been endeavoured, so that the one may be known and divided from the other; therefore the

Synod having observed that there is no distinction either in their habits or in their hair, or in anything else, betwixt Christians of these diocese and the heathen [again Hindus are meant] Naires, doth command, that henceforward no Christian do presume to bore their ears,...(Zacharia, 1994: 210).

And Decree 23 prescribes:

The Synod being desirous to have all the Christians of this diocese to live together in their villages, by reason of the great inconvenience they are under that live in the heaths, as well as by reason of the great communication they must have with infidels, ... so that they may live more civilly, and be separated from the communication of infidels ... (ibid. 213).

It is in this light we have to understand Act V, Decree 14 which forbids Hindu musicians not to remain in the church after the creed is said, "so that they may not behold the holy sacrament". Similarly it forbids priests eating with Hindus, Muslims and Jews, upon pain of being suspended for four months (VI, 11). So too children were not to be given in baptism names that are common with Hindus.

A Unique Christian Vision

The social and socio-ecclesiastical life, which the St. Thomas Christians had been leading before the arrival of the Portuguese, reflect a unique Christian vision of this community. As Antony Mookenthottam states (1978:24) their identification with their socio-culture milieu was very thorough. This oneness with their socio-cultural milieu implies an implicit, lived international approach, an awareness that Christ in becoming man assumed everything human and redeemed all social and cultural values. Their long encounter with the Hindus helped them to develop a Christian vision of other faiths.

The Synod of Diamper forbade, as mentioned above, a number of customs and practices, which the Portuguese considered 'pagan' (Hindu). These prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the Synod is a witness to the communal harmony and cordial relations that existed between the

Christians and the Hindus. This communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered as a typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision.

In Act III, Decree 4 of the Synod we read:

Each one can be saved in his own law, all laws are right: This is fully erroneous and a most shameful heresy: There is no law in which we may be saved except the law of Christ our saviour ... [And the footnote says:]. This is a perverse dogma of politicians and those tolerant ... Consequently being indifferent they wander very far away from the truth.

It is to be noted that the Synod attributes this 'error' to contact with 'pagans'. What is really at stake is the understanding of the doctrine, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('outside the Church no salvation'), by the Portuguese and the St. Thomas Christians, respectively. The Portuguese came from the West where a rigid interpretation of the dictum had prevailed for a long time and had become acute in the sixteenth century in the context on the anti-Protestant Counter-Reformation spirit. They sensed danger in the more liberal attitude of the Indian Christians towards Hindus and Hindu religion. Archbishop Meneses and his Portuguese advisors drew up a decree condemning an 'error', which they thought was implied in the liberal attitude of the Indian Christians.

The Synod is right in attributing the 'error' to the contacts the St. Thomas Christians maintained with 'pagans' (Hindus). It would take centuries before the Europeans acquire a life-experience of other religions, before a theology of the religions of the world would emerge, which would give due respect to the positive elements in those religions and their providential salvific role for millions of people. But the Indian Christians had been living for centuries in positive encounter with the high caste Hindus and had developed a theological vision of the Hindu religion - a vision more positive and liberal. Today in the light of modern theological approaches to world religions one must admit that the vision of the Indian Christians was a more enlightened one than that of their European contemporaries.

The vision of the St. Thomas Christians was broader and more liberal. But their position was not that radical and extreme as expressed by the synodal decrees. The wording of the decrees must have been dictated by the over-sensitivity of Meneses and his advisors to a liberal but orthodox approach to other religions.

Even the worship of the community, which in general followed the East-Syrian pattern, seems to have had certain local accommodations. It is possible that in some places rice cakes and palm wine were used in the Eucharist, instead of the normal practice of using wheat loafs and grape wine. In connection with the sacred rites of baptism, matrimony, burying the dead, etc. there were a number of ceremonies derived from Indian local social practices common to Hindus and Christians.

The Institutions of *Palli-Yogam*, a Church Assembly, in which clergy as well as lay representatives participated and which was presided over by the 'Archdeacon of All India' had also great relevance to the Kerala social context. The Archdeacon was a local priestly dignitary whose local designation was *Jathikku Karthavian* ('Prince and Head of the Christian Community'). It is believed that the Christians formed a 'Republic' under the sovereignty of the local *rajās* or rulers. All major question of administration of the Church had to be decided in the *Yogam*, both at the local and general levels. This institution was similar to the assemblies, which administered temple properties. In the *Sangam* and the post-*Sangam* period they were known as *manrams*. (Cf. Mundadan, 1989: 147, 161.)

All this point to an identity and an autonomous status of the Christian community of Kerala, marked as it is by a Christian vision of its own, the vision of well-integrated community into the Kerala social and cultural context. If this vision is not written down in elaborate works, it is clearly reflected in the life and tradition of Kerala Christians prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. When the Jesuit missionary, Roberto de Nobili, and his collaborators introduced a way of Christian life well adapted to the Indian socio-cultural sentiments, they pointed to the life of the St. Thomas Christians, as a model and as justification for their own

novel method of preaching and practicing the Gospel of Jesus (Cf. Mookenthottam, 1978:189).

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