

GENESIS OF TRANQUEBAR MISSION IN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Introduction

The small expedition that was started in Danish company ship, *Shopie Hedwig* on 29th November 1705 from Copenhagen by Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Henrich Plutchau as Royal Danish Missionaries to the Danish colony at Tranquebar, a coastal town on the Coromandel coast made a remarkable impact on the social and cultural history of Tamil Nadu.¹ To mention specifically, it is not only the establishment of Protestant Christianity in India but also the historic beginning of the Danish interest in Indian Christianity that has led to the 315 years of Indo-Danish relations in the Christian Mission. This study has been undertaken mostly with the help of extensive work done by George Oomen and Hans Raun Iversen and Daniel Jeyaraj who made an extensive survey of Danish and German literary sources.

This study is aimed at reviewing the significant historical developments in the concerned European countries that resulted in sending the Lutheran Christian Missionaries to the coast of Tranquebar, nowadays known as Tarangambadi, a Danish colony in Coromandel Coast.² In practice, the Protestant Christian Mission to Tranquebar was carried out through European collaboration between Danes, Germans and Britain. The pietistic Germans in Halle had the missionary candidates and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) supported the venture with money and materials have worked out their mission among heathen people of the Danish colony.³

Danish Initiative

The Lutheran world Mission originated from an initiative taken by the Danish King Fredrick IV (1699 -1730) in 1705 as a result of the Peace Treaty of West Phalia in 1648 which has ended 30 years of religious wars in Europe. It also made the ruler follow the principle of *cujus region ejus religio* (whoever rules determines religion).⁴ To establish peace and order and prevent religious wars the king was entitled to control religious life in the Gio kingdom. It meant that the Danish king should take care of his subjects in their colony at Tranquebar as well.⁵

King Fredrick IV ordered his court preacher Franz Julius Lutkens to find Danish Missionary candidates to work in the Danish colonies in East India, Africa and West Indies.⁶ As no Dane was willing to become a missionary, Lutkens wrote to his friends in Berlin to find appropriate missionary candidates for this purpose.

German Missionary Support

Considering the appeal of Franz Julius Lutkens, his friends in Germany, Director Lange, Pastors Lysius, Camp and Laurentius Geusichen thought that Ziegenbalg would be the best candidate for this assignment. They asked him for his opinion and he hesitated to accept it on the ground that he was young and experienced and also that he was sick. Three weeks later, (in October 1705), the Pietists in Berlin assembled in Berlin to discuss the second letter of Lutken's on the same matter but the proposed destination on missionary was changed from the Danish colony in the West Indies to the Danish colony in Guinea in Africa. Lutke's friends managed to convince another candidate Henrich Plutchau to travel with Ziegenbalg. Crily after his older friend Plutchau agreed to go as a missionary candidate, Ziegenbalg expressed his consent for his new assignment Plutchau's firm decision to become a missionary even having the handle of leaving her aged mother behind impressed Ziegenbalg very much. Plutchau also seems to have distinguished himself not in Preaching and language learning but in Practical service to the poor, destitute, widows and other needy people. On 7th October 1705, Ziegenbalg wrote to Francke and conveyed his

decision to sail to Africa as a missionary and left from Berlin to Copenhagen and reached there on 15th October 1705.⁷

On 11th November 1705, the King listened to Ziegenbalg's sermon and gave his approval. On the same day, Ziegenbalg and Plutchau were ordained by Bishop Bornemann in the Copenhagen Cathedral named Vor Frue Kirke ("Our Lady's Church") as missionaries. Both of them vowed that they would sincerely endeavour to teach spiritual principles enshrined in the writings of prophets of the Old Testament and Apostles and also the books of symbols of the Lutheran Church. They also promised to administer the sacraments in an appropriate manner. More of them pledged their obedience to their authorities. The missionaries were assigned to transplant a Danish Church among the non-Europeans living in Danish colonies.

On 17th November 1705, Ziegenbalg and Plutchau signed an official job description which was attested by King Frederick IV with his signature.⁸ This meant that the missionary was directly accountable to the king and not to any civil or religious authorities not even to the local governing council of the colonies. The job description contained eleven distractive but interrelated duties. They are,

1. The Missionaries should find out the residual knowledge of God among the people and lead them to a right knowledge of the God that is revealed in the word of God (Holy Bible)
2. They were discouraged to discern how, when where and in which situations they should build a bridge between the existing residual knowledge of God and the knowledge of God revealed in the Bible.
3. They should not doubt the power of the word of God to bless the people.
4. They should not teach any other doctrine that was not found in the books of symbols of the Lutheran Church, especially of the *Augsberg confession*.⁹ Their sermons should revolve around the major themes of repentance, conversion and the forgiveness of sins.
5. They should teach simple lessons which ordinary non-Christians could easily understand and should become an example of the Christian life.
6. They should bring every need to god in prayer and faithfully pray for the Royal House of Denmark.
7. They were urged to be one mind with the Danish colonial clergy and to be satisfied with their annual salary.
8. They are required to send faithful reports regularly on their work and recommend further steps for improvement.
9. They should know that they had made their promises in God's presence and should keep them diligently.
10. This royal order authorized Ziegenbalg and Plutchau to work for three years and instructed the colonial authorities in the Danish colonies to pay them an annual salary of 200 Royal Dollars.¹⁰

On 30th November 1705, they boarded the ship "*Princess Sophie Hedwig*". Originally, it was planned that this ship would sail either to West Indies or Guinea in Africa. However, something happened on its way, and the ship changed its course towards Tranquebar, otherwise, it would have been a different history.

Challenges at Tranquebar

As Fredrick VI was the absolute monarch of Denmark, he did not consider involving the Board of Directors Danish East India Company (DEIC) in the decision-making. Hence, they felt ignored and offered by the king. They secretly instructed their subordinates both on the ship *Princess Sophie Hedwig* and in the colony of Tranquebar to suppress the activities of the Missionaries.¹¹ This was also one of the reasons that the missionaries were not treated friendly in the ship, and they were not received with a welcome note on their arrival at Tranquebar on 9th July 1706.¹² Amidst such opposition from their land, Ziegenbalg and Plutchau were standing on the beach of Tranquebar with a royal letter of protection. In this challenging situation, both the missionaries started their historic mission.

It is interesting to note that among all the fifty-four European missionaries who worked in Tranquebar, Nicolas Dal (1690-1749) was the only well-known Dane and Johann Zechariah Kirenander (1710 -1799) was a Swede. All the rest were German.

It is known from the census conducted by the Danish authorities that 6000 people lived in the walled city of Tranquebar and about 30,000 people in the adjoining fifteen villages. Only twenty-four Danes were living amidst 100 Portuguese, 500 Roman Catholics and about 2000 Muslims in Tranquebar.¹³ There were fifty-one Tamil Temples in and around Tranquebar and the major deities were *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, *Brahma* along with minor deities such as the male god *Aiyandar* and goddesses *Maiyamman* and *Ellamman*. It is also interesting to note from the sources

that ninety-six caste groups were prevalent in this area and each had its way of life and most of the people were economically poor.

Tranquebar was under the control of the Danes with the extent of 40 square kilometers as the rented territory from the ruler of Tanjore. Even though the ruler of Tanjore was a custodian of Shaivism, he permitted the Danes to practice their Lutheran faith of Christianity at Tranquebar. It is also important to note that he did not mention anything about issues of religious interaction or conversion.

The primary aim of the presence of Danes was for trade activities. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Danish trade in Tranquebar was not promising and as a result, John Sigismund Hassius (1704-1716), an interim governor of Tranquebar was not very particular in promoting the economic and administrative welfare of the Danish East India Company.¹⁴ Like other European powers, he also tried to enforce the policy of non-intervention in the socio-religious and cultural aspects of Tamil society. Hence, the then Governor of the colony, Johann Hassius, first tried to persuade them to work as teachers in the tiny Danish school, but they stuck to the directions of the mission instruction and requested the Governor's help in their mission assignment.¹⁵ Danish merchants secretly cautioned and fearing their activities might threaten profits, induced the governor to throw Ziegenbalg into prison where he languished for four months from 19th November 1708 to 26th March 1709.¹⁶

By 1712, with the help of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in London, Ziegenbalg imported a printing press.¹⁷ When it arrived, the Tamil Christians assisted in developing India's first commercial printing workshop along with a paper factory. By printing their traditional literature in this new form, Ziegenbalg unveiled knowledge of Tamil literature, poetry, and religion denied ordinary Tamil people for almost two millennia.¹⁸

Ziegenbalg and Plutchau were well known Pietists from Halle. Johann Gerog Boningh (1676 – 1728) from Kiel had several orthodox Lutheran elements. Benjamin Schultze was a linguist and great translator of the Bible and other German writings into Tamil Telugu.¹⁹ C.T. Walther was a Hebraist who wanted to promote a national church with its own cultural specifics. Christian Frederick Schwartz (1726-1798) was a missionary diplomat in the service of the society for the promotion of Christian Knowledge and the local rulers in south India. Christopher Samuel John (1747-1813) and John Peter Rottler (1749-1836) were people of European Enlightenment who promoted scientific study in Mission schools in Tranquebar and Madras.

At the final Danish census in March 1844, the number of Europeans was found to be 118 among these 118 were Danes. The last Tombstone in the Danish cemetery where after the sale only persons of Danish origin were allowed to be buried according to the provisions made by the British) was raised over Miss. Arabella Due. She was born in Tranquebar in 1820 and died there a spinster on 26th January 1889, the last Dane in Tranquebar.²⁰ There came the end of the official Danish connection.

Finally, Tranquebar was sold to the British East India Company at a price of 1,125,000 Danish rix-dollars by the Treaty of sale that was executed on 22nd February 1845 and the colony of Tranquebar was transferred to the British on 7th November 1845.²¹ The Danish King Christian VIII has specifically prescribed that (i) The Lutheran Missionary work must be allowed to continue, (ii) The transfer to the British must not include the property of the Mission and (iii) The King reserved the right to send Lutheran missionaries to Tranquebar in the future. In due course of time, though the Danish Missionary society in Denmark showed an interest in taking over the old Tranquebar Mission, the national church management was not willing to comply with these wishes. Instead, the Tranquebar Mission was transferred to the Dresdner Mission and later transferred to the Leipzig Mission on 7th March 1847. Official Danish involvement in the Tranquebar Mission hereby ceased.²²

Conclusion

Though the Tarangambadi Christians constituted a very small community when compared to the efforts taken by the Lutheran Protestant missionaries in 139 years of their stay at this tiny coastal town in the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu, they were successful in creating an alternate faith community of new holistic values of human life consisting of hope, perseverance and scientific learning. This historic Tranquebar Mission contributed to the emergence of other Christian communities in different parts not only in Tamil Nadu but also in the entire Indian country. Today's Protestant Christianity in India is a living legacy in India that evolved out of Tranquebar Mission.

End Notes :

¹ Daniel Jeyaraj, *A German Exploration of Indian Society*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2005),p.52

² F.R.Hemingway, *Tanjore Gazetteer*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2000, p.232

³ Pietism is a movement originating in the Lutheran Church in Germany in the 17th century that stressed personal reverence to god over the religious formality and orthodoxy.

⁴ Daniel Jeyaraj, *A German Exploration of Indian Society*, p.20

⁵ *Ibid.*,p.46

⁶ Ferd J.Fenger, *History of Tranquebar Mission*, Madras: M.E.Press, 1906, p.13

⁷ Daniel Jeyaraj, *A German Exploration of Indian Society*, p.20

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.20

⁹ Augsburg confession is the primary confession of faith of the Lutheran Church and one of the most important documents of the Protestant Reformation.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21

¹¹ Daniel Jeyaraj, *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, the Father of Protestant Mission: An Indian Assessment* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 43

¹² John Rutherford., *Missionary Pioneers in India*, (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot Press, 1896), p.5.

¹³ Geroge Oommen & Hans Raun Iversen, (ed.), *It began in Co openhagen*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), p.

¹⁴ Erich Beyreuther,“Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg-A Biography of the first Protestant missionary in India, C.L.S. Madras. p.34,

¹⁵ Geroge Oommen & Hans Raun Iversen, (ed.), *It began in Co openhagen*, p.103

¹⁶ Arno Lehman, “It began at Tranquebar; A History of the First Protestant Mission in India” CLS, Madras. p.6

¹⁷ Eugene Stock., *The Romance of Missions: Beginnings in India*, (London: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917), p.6.

¹⁸ Daniel Jeyaraj, *Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, the Father of Protestant Missions, an Indian Assessment* (ISPCK New Delhi, 2006), 57.

¹⁹ Fleming Stevenson., *The Dawn of the Modern Mission*, (Edinburgh: A.C. Armstrong, 1888), 15

²⁰ Geroge Oommen & Hans Raun Iversen, (ed.), p. 93

²¹ *Ibid.*,p.90

²² *Ibid.*, p.12