

Chapter – III

ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

Travancore was a staunch Hindu Princely state where the people had no common customs and conventions. Each community had its own customs and conventions. The people were highly superstitious and every activity of their life was controlled by supernatural powers. They worshipped many gods and goddesses. The people had no authentic religious philosophy. There was no one to guide them to get out of the superstitious faith. It was in this circumstance Christianity came to India. Eventhough many Christian sects came, it was the Protestants who were responsible for fighting for the social identity of the people of Travancore.

According to tradition, Christianity came to India through the visit of St. Thomas the Apostle. He is believed to have landed in Caranganore.¹ which was at that time one of the important sea ports on the Malabar Coast. He landed there in 52 A.D.² He first preached to the Jewish settlers at Cochin. Afterwards he worked among the Hindus. His love and affection attracted many high caste Hindus to Christianity. It is believed that he founded seven Churches along the west coast.³ After Preaching he went to

¹ The ancient name of Caranganore was Muziris.

² The most Rev. Juhanon, Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and a Brief History of the Marthoma Syrian Church*, Madras, 1968, p.1.

³ The Seven Churches were Malankara (Caranganore) Palur (Chavakad) parur, Gokamangalam, Niranam Chayal. Nilakal, Kalyan (Quilon).

Malabar, and then to the east coast and preached Christianity. Another tradition states that the Apostle met with an accidental death by the arrow of a fowler. His body was buried at Mylapore. However, it is understood that the Brahmins at Chennai became jealous of his success and speared him to death on St. Thomas Mount, near Chennai.⁴ However, it is believed that St. Thomas founded the Malabar Church and St. Peter founded the Roman Church.⁵

The History of Christianity both in Malabar and Travancore between the second half of the 1st century and the closing years of the second century is shrouded in darkness because of non-availability of authentic sources. Authentic sources are available with the visit of Pantaenus, who was sent by Demetrios of Alexandria on the request of the Christians of Malabar.⁶

3.1 The Syrian Christians

In the middle of the 4th Century A.D, the visit of Thomas of Cana created a new stage in the history of Christianity. Thomas of Cana was a Syrian merchant. Tradition says that the Catholics of Jerusalem learnt about the needs of the people of Malabar Church and, sent Joseph, Bishop Edessa and some priests and deacons. They were well received by the local Rajah

⁴ The most Rev. Juhanon, *op.cit.*, p.2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4.

and the people and they settled around Madhaevapattanam.⁷ The Rajah donated them certain towns for their exclusive use. Thus, for the first time the Syrian community settled in Malabar.⁸

During the 6th Century A.D., Alexandrian merchant cosmos⁹, left on records that in Ceylon and in Malabar, where pepper grows, saw Christians as a well organized community with Bishop from Persia ruling over them. He assigned the origin of Christian community to the fifth century. It was purely Nestorian in Character.¹⁰ The Malabar Church met with practical isolation with the rise of Islam. The Indian sea was dominated by the Muslims. The Syrians desperately attempted to get Bishops from West Asia.¹¹

During the 9th century, there was authenticated immigration of the Persian Christians. This was the period of Cheramanperumal in Kerala. Tradition says that he left for Arabia and became a Muhammadan and never returned¹². After he left, the kingdom was divided into three kingdoms such as the Zomorin of Calicut, the Raja of Travancore and Cochin¹³.

⁷ Old Caranganore.

⁸ The most Rev. Juhanon, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

⁹ Cosmos was a great sailor, because of his many voyages in the Indian sea, he is known as Cosmos Indigo pleustes i.e., the Indian Voyager.

¹⁰ The most Rev. Juhanon., *op.cit.*, p.5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹² The Malabar Era in Kerala begins with 15th August 825, A.D. and date in which Cheraman Perumal left the Kingdom.

¹³ The most Rev. Juhanon, *op.cit.*, p.6.

The Syrian Christians in the state of Travancore and Cochin grew to such a social and political eminence that they elected one of their members as king. The Syrian Christians were scattered in different places. Later on the ruling class became extinct and no authentic records are found to this effect. The Christians presented Vasco Da Gama in 1502 a staff with silver work and three silver bells which they said formed the scepter of their king¹⁴.

3.2 The Malabar Christians

After the arrival of Vasco Da Gama in 1498 at Cochin the fortune of the Malabar Christians began to undergo substantial changes. They requested the king of Portugal to take them under his protection. From 1498, the date on which Vasco Da Gama landed in Calicut, for a century and a half the Portuguese had the command of the eastern seas¹⁵. With the establishment of the Portuguese empire in the east the Pope saw an opportunity of bringing the Malabar Christians under his supremacy. During this time St. Francis Xavier landed in Goa in 1542. He baptized hundreds of people along the sea coast. He made extensive missionary tours in India¹⁶. The situation was also highly conducive for the same. It was during this time Vasco Da Gama, the Portuguese sailor opened a sea route to India round the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. It paved the way for further growth

¹⁴ The most Rev. Juhanan, *op.cit.*, p.7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.19.

of Christianity. Converts began to pour in. The Diocese of Goa was also established in 1584¹⁷. From there Christianity began to radiate to other parts¹⁸. They wanted to convert more Hindus and add them to the fold¹⁹.

During this time the clash between the Parayas in the coastal area and the Muslims occurred. The Muslims by nature were more aggressive and adopted the principle of Holy Jihad. This aggressive policy of the Muslims was not well received by the Hindu Paravas²⁰. Hence, a clash took place between the Paravas and the Muslims. The Muslims were more aggressive and started violent persecution. As the Paravas could not resist the aggression, they sought the help of the Portuguese at Cochin. The Portuguese who were propagating Christianity took it as a god send opportunity, and came forward to help the Paravas. In return, they asked for the conversion of the Paravas of the pearl fishery. Thus, the fishermen community slowly began to feel what Christianity could offer to them.

3.3 The Cape Comorin Mission

After the arrival of Francis Xavier the Christians began to increase in number. Further exploring a sea route to India by Vasco Da Gama made travel easy. Every ship brought number of Missionaries, who devoted their

¹⁷ The most Rev. Juhanon, *op.cit.*, p.9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Villavarayan, J.M., *The Kottar Diocese*, Nagercoil, 1956, pp. 12-15.

time and energy to the propagation of Christianity. Consequently in 1584, the Diocese of Goa was established by Pope Paul III²¹.

During this time, the Paravas of the Pearl Fishery Coast made complaints that the Muslims were persecuting them. The Portuguese at the Goa Diocese promised protection to them on condition that they should embrace Christianity²². As a pledge of good faith 85 leaders from all the Parava villages went to Goa. All the fisher folk leaders were baptized by Fr. Michael Vaz, the Vicar General of Goa. The Parish priest of Cochin and four other priests were sent to the Pearl fishery coast which came under the influence of Christianity. Two thousand Paravas accepted Christianity²³. The whole area from the coast of Kollancode to Pearl fishery of Kottar came to be called the Cape Comorin Mission²⁴. They entrusted the Management of the Cape Comorin mission to Francis Xavier. He reached Cape Comorin in 1542 and then proceeded to the Pearl fishery²⁵. Thus, Xavier was put in charge of the Cape Comorin Mission. Xavier visited village by village, taught the Creed and the Ten Commandments and baptized those who came to him.

In 1537, the king of Travancore promised Fr. Michael Vaz to allow the conversion of the fisherman of his kingdom on condition that they should

²¹ Rev. Dr. Villavarayan, J.M., *op.cit.*, p.15.

²² *Ibid.*, p.16.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

supply him with horses for his cavalry. Now, during the visit of Xavier the Vadugars or the Vijayanagar forces attacked Travancore²⁶. Xavier helped the king to drive the Vijayanagar forces away and saved the kingdom. As a token of love and good faith Xavier was permitted to propagate Christianity. Thus, during the reign of Unni Kerala varma Christianity began to grow fast because Francis Xavier got the license to work. Churches were established in the following places: Poovar, Kollancodu, Vallavizhai, Thoothoor, Poothurai, Thengapattanam, Enayam, Midalam, Vanniyakudi, Colachel, Kadiapattanam, Muttom and Pallam²⁷. Xavier made Kottar the main centre because Kottar served as an important centre in the Venad Kingdom²⁸.

3.4 Roman Catholics

The rulers of Travancore were reputed for their religious tolerance. They permitted the existence of other religions side by side with Hinduism, the state religion. They willingly allowed them to prosper and thrive. They had the firm conviction that every religion preached the doctrine of truth and that philanthropy was the very essence of all religions. So in spite of the fact that Martanda Varma, the founder of modern Travancore, surrendered the state to his tutelary deity Sri Padmanabha and took the state as the Vassal of God and though Hinduism was the dominant religion, Christianity thrived.

²⁶ Rev. Dr. Villavarayan, J.M., *op.cit.*, P. 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

In Travancore, Christianity flourished and thrived to an enviable extent. No doubt, the ascendancy of European powers in Travancore directly or indirectly favored the growth of Christianity. But it was the rulers who really encouraged the growth of Christianity. So far, the British Parliament was not concerned with the spiritual life of the people of the British dominions in India. As a result there was no free flow of missionaries. This situation was completely changed by the British Prime Minister Castlereagh's resolution of 1812. The resolution made it clear that it was the duty of the English to promote the interests and happiness of the native inhabitants of the British dominions in India. The resolution stated the right of the British Government to help the Christian Churches in a convincing manner. It was carried out in the house by 125 to 50 Votes²⁹. The passing of the Emancipation Act³⁰ of 1813 in the British Parliament gave a further impetus to the missionary enterprise in Travancore.

The Missionaries of Travancore were very fortunate to have Col. Munro as the British Resident of Travancore. He was in no way less zealous a Christian than his predecessor Col. Macaulay. He was a deacon of the Church in Scotland and as was natural with any ardent Christian, so it was with Munro to avail of the willingness of the Ranis to encourage the philanthropic work carried out by the missionaries. He did so much good to

²⁹ Arthur Mathew, *Christianity and Government of India*, London, n.d. p.100.

³⁰ Velu Pillai, T.K., *op.cit.*, Vol.I, p.725.

the Travancore church that he is aptly called the father of "The Christian Missionaries in Travancore".

Above all, Rani Lakshmi Bai and after her Rani Parvathi Bai evinced keen interest in the uplift of the people. They were remarkable for their solid achievements in the field of education and amelioration of the condition of the depressed classes. With the noble principle that charity was their household divinity and having it as their cherished motto, the Ranis had the welfare of the subjects foremost in their hearts³¹. They were ready to do everything conducive to their welfare and progress. It was at this juncture that the Christian missionaries started both religious and social work in Travancore. They formed the first private agency to do social work among the poor and the backward classes. The Ranis appreciated the honorable and selfless work done by the missionaries and readily responded to the requests of Munro to give all aid to them. No doubt many people were converted to Christianity. As a result, no province in India presents such a vast population of Christians as Travancore and Cochin have. The Missionaries were able to carry on their work most successfully and the Christian missions flourished because of the timely grants given to them by the Ranis with a voluntary spirit of help. They were sure that the enterprise of the missionaries was bound to illumine the glory of their administration.

³¹ Sreedhar, *Travancore Re-born*, Kottayam, 1939, p.15.

It is not possible to ascertain the exact time, when Rome began to send her missionaries to the coast of Malabar, but it is an undisputable fact that the Malabar Christian Church existed even before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498. They were quite surprised to find a body of Christians in Malabar. But it can be said that it was only during the rise of the Portuguese power in India that the Catholic Missions started their regular work in Travancore. Cochin became the chief centre of the progress of the Catholic Church in South India. The Catholic missions of the 16th and 17th centuries proceeded from Cochin.

3.5 The Synod of Udayamperoor

From 1498, Portugal had the command of the eastern sea with the establishment of the opportunity of bringing Malabar Christians under her supremacy. St. Francis Xavier landed in Goa and baptized hundreds of people along the seacoast. He was responsible for introducing the Inquisition at Goa. His missionary zeal brought multitudes unto the fold of Christianity within a short period³².

Another effort made by the Roman Catholic priest was the establishment of Seminaries where young men could be trained for the ministry in the Malabar Churches. But the Syrian Christians refused to

³² The Most Rev. Juhanan, *op.cit.*, p.9.

accept those trained in the Roman Catholic Seminaries³³. There were difficulties for the Babylonian Bishops entering into the country. One Bishop Mar Joseph was deported to Portugal. Another Bishop was put into miserable conditions. In 1592, Arch Bishop Menezes, failed to achieve, enforcing the Roman Catholic ideology in Goa. Even he was prepared to use force and bribery to achieve his ends³⁴. In 1599, he called for a Synod at Diampur or Udayamperoor situated between Cochin and Travancore with certain ideologies, such as Perfect union of whole Catholic Churches³⁵ to accept the Roman Catholic church of Rome as Supreme and to accept the Bishop of Rome, the universal pastor of the Church³⁶. After long deliberations the announcement made by the Arch Bishop was accepted. New doctrines and practices were introduced. But, the freedom of the Church was lost. Arch Bishop Menezes went to Goa leaving the work of Romanizing the Malabar Church to the Jesuits and other workers.

After the invasion of Tippu Sultan, towards the close of 1790 great political changes took place. The Raja of Travancore issued an order, which virtually favoured the Vicar Apostolic a good deal³⁷. This order gave full liberty to all the churches of the Roman Catholic denominations to obey either the Arch Bishop of Cranganore or the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly, as

³³ The most Rev.Juhanan, p.9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.10.

³⁷ The Most Rev.Juhanan, *op.cit.*, pp.10-11.

they chose. The Resident of Travancore also gave considerable protection to the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly. Thus, through the power of the Raja and the influence of the Resident, Verapoly acquired as many Churches as possible and brought them under its jurisdiction. The Catholics, propagated only their faith to the coastal people. They worked among the sick, the afflicted and gave alms to the needy. But they did not work for the social awakening among the people of Travancore and to the adjacent places. The people were groaning under a wretched system of administration and social life. It was in such circumstances the Protestants came.

3.6 The Protestants Mission

The London Missionary Society was founded in 1795³⁸, which was very much the child of Evangelical Revival in England³⁹ a philanthropic organization mainly looking after the propagation of the Christianity during the 19th century. Two great men George Whitefield and John Wesley were responsible for religious awakening in England.

The great awakening created by them in the churches of England instilled a sense of missionary fervor in the minds of the people. Consequently, new missionary societies came into existence. The London

³⁸ Rev. Joh A. Jacob, *the South Travancore London Missionary Sanga Charithram*, 1806-1959, (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1959, p.31.

³⁹ Rev. John, A. Jacob, *History of the London Missionary Society*, Nagercoil, 1956, p. 29.

Missionary Society was one among those societies. Taking advantage of the fissiparous tendency⁴⁰ among the members of the Halle mission⁴¹, the Anglican Church began to work in India through the society for promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.K.C.), the Society for Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS)⁴².

There were thirty persons in it as members. A blue flag was selected as the flag of the society with three doves and an olive branch as the emblem. The Church Missionary Society wanted to send missionaries to various parts of the world to preach the Gospel. They purchased a small ship named "The Dalf" for sending the missionaries to foreign countries⁴³.

During this period, the society for promoting Christian knowledge S.P.C.K., was in need of a missionary who had knowledge of English and Portuguese. They found that Ringeltaube was the right man. Hence the society decided to send Ringeltaube. He reached Calcutta, in October, 1797. He started his services in Calcutta among the European Christians. But he did not like to serve among the European Christians. He liked to serve among the Indians who have not heard of Christ and Christianity. His health

⁴⁰ Rev. John. A., Jacob, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

⁴¹ Halle Mission, was established by the King of Denmark, Christian IV. As Halland and Denmark were one, the Mission was called Danish Halle Mission.

⁴² Lehman, E., Arno, *op.cit.*, p.7.

⁴³ Nathaniel Forsyth was the first missionary to come in India. Nathaniel first worked in Calcutta. But due to the opposition of the east India Company, he went cinsura 20mile away. From Calcutta, William robinson, *op.cit.*, p.42.

condition was not satisfactory and financial condition was poor. So he resigned his job and went to London, in July 1799. During this period, the London Missionary Society wanted to send missionaries to India. The name Ringeltaube was considered for this purpose and they sent him to work in south India.

Ringeltaube accepted this offer. So he and five other missionaries came to India in a Danish ship named "Kings Packet". Among those missionaries, three of them went to Srilanka, and two of them went to Visakapatnam. Ringeltaube reached Tranqueber⁴⁴ in the South East Coast of India on 5th December 1804.

He was one of the first three Christian missionaries of the London Missionary Society of India. His two companions Rev.G.Cran and Augustus Des Granges elected to study Telugu at Tranquebar. Ringeltaube was drawn towards the south. So he learnt Tamil under the guidance of Rev.Kohlhoff.

The Protestant Church of Travancore is several centuries younger to her sister churches of the Syrian Christian and the Roman Catholics. But very soon it achieved remarkable progress. The Roman Catholic faith and the Syrian faith were planted in Travancore by foreign missionaries whereas the Protestant faith has the great honor of having been planted in Travancore by

⁴⁴ Tranquebar. The Tamil term for Tranquebar is Tharangampadi. It was a Protestant Missionary Station in the south Ogilvie, J.N., The Apostel of India, London (nd) pp.210-213.

Travancore's own subjects⁴⁵. It migrated from one of the ancient orthodox Hindu states – Tanjore into Travancore, through the instrumentality of one of her humble subjects by name Vedamanickam, whose Hindu name was Maharasan and who hailed from Mylaudy, a little village, 5 miles north – east of Cape Comorin in Nanjilnad.

3.6.1 Vedamonickam

In 1799, Maharasan with his nephew Sivgurunathan went on a pilgrimage to Chidambaram temple with the hope of getting enlightenment and spiritual peace. Maharasan expected a very holy atmosphere in the temple, but he was disappointed to find there nothing but revelry. He decided to return to his own native place. But in the night he saw a dream in which a man dressed in white told him that he would guide his way. Believing this, Maharasan with his nephew started the return journey, but on the way they were guided to go to Tanjore.

Tanjore was then, the only city of south India, where the Protestant Mission had been established. The Tanjore Mission was presided over by Rev. John Casper Kohlholf. Maharasan and his nephew happened to hear one of the sermons of Rev. Kohlholf. The Sermon had an imperishable effect on them. After the sermon was over, Maharasan told the missionary, how he came there. The missionary was very much pleased to know that they were

⁴⁵ Hacker, H., *A Hundred years in Travancore*, 1803 – 1906, London, 1906, p.424.

eager to know the truth and so gave him a tract called "Meygnanam" or "True Vision". After a few days Maharasan expressed his wish to accept Christ. He stayed at Tanjore for a few months, and studied so earnestly the truth about Christ that he became the very first fruit of the London Mission Society in Travancore to Christ⁴⁶. After baptism Maharasan and his nephew Sivagurunathan took the names Vedamonickam and Masillamony respectively.

Vedamonickam expressed his desire to Rev.Kohlhoff to impart the truth he gained to his own people, and returned to his native village. When the villagers saw him and his nephew, they greeted them and earnestly asked for the "Holy Ash and the Sacred rice", which they expected of them from Chidambaram. To their utter surprise, Vedamonickam held out a copy of the Tamil New Testament, saying "here is the Holy gift of the Lord of all Lords"⁴⁷.

Vedamonickam first preached to his own people. About 30 persons, who nominally professed Christ became the first flock of Christian under Vedamonickam. This constituted the very nucleus of the Protestant church of Travancore. In 1805 Vedamonickam resolved to visit Tanjore to consult Rev. Kohlholf as to the measures to be adopted to propagate the Gospel. Guided by Kohlholf, he went to Tranquebar and met Ringletaube. He invited

⁴⁶ Hacker, H., *op.cit.*, p.441.

⁴⁷ Emily Gilchrist Hatch, *Travancore*, London, 1933, p.238.

Ringeltaube and he agreed to go to Travancore and work for the London Missionary Society.

In 1806, Ringeltaube set out his journey to Travancore. He reached Aramboli ghat. He was taken with fear and afraid to meet the Christians at Mylaudy. The Brahmin officials of Aramboli did not provide him with decent accommodation to stay at night⁴⁸. The Missionary spent his first day in the huts of the local Pariah community. The Parayahs provided him with only such comforts that they could. Thus the destiny of Ringeltaube brought him to the destined place. He paid a visit to Col.Macaulay at Cochin. And requested the Resident to get sanction from Bala Rama Varma, the Raja of Travancore for building a church at Mylaudy. The sanction was delayed because of the interference of the then Dewan Velu Thambi. At the end of 1806 Ringeltaube went to Trivandrum, where he stayed as the Maharaja's guest. He seized this golden opportunity to get the permission of H.H, the Raja to build a protestant Church at Mylaudi. But unfortunately at that time political troubles (Insurrection of Velu Thambi) started and the permission was kept in abeyance.

Maharasan Vethamanickam, came forward and offered a piece of land that he possessed at Mylaudy. Ringeltaube as promised by Col.Macaulay obtained permission to construct a church at Mylaudy. The church was constructed under the supervision of government officials according to the

⁴⁸ Emily Gilchrist Hatch, *op.cit.*, p.238.

instructions they received from the Resident⁴⁹. In Sep. 1809, the church was consecrated and many came and obtained baptism from Rev.Ringeltaube. This was the beginning of Mylaudy Mission⁵⁰.

Ringeltaube preached in many villages, distributed copies of the scriptures and made steady endeavor to spread the faith. By 1810, he developed six more churches⁵¹. They were Thamaraikulam, Puthalam, Eathamozhy, Jamestown, Athikaadu and Covilvilai⁵². At the end of 1810, the number of baptized Christians increased to 394. Vethamanickam was appointed Catechist and Masilamani the fellow pilgrim and nephew of Vethamanickam was appointed the first catechist of the Puthalam Church.

Col.Munro succeeded Col. Macaulay at Travancore as Resident. He was sympathetic with the oppressed classes who were suffering from injustice, forced free labour and poll taxes. Col.Munroe used his good office to free the Christians from forced free labor on Sundays by a Royal Proclamation in July 1815⁵³. When severe famine broke out in 1813, the Christian Missionaries along with Ringeltaube, came forward to help the suffering people.

⁴⁹ Hacker, I.H., *op.cit.*, p.24.

⁵⁰ Velupillai, T.K., *op.cit.*, p.770.

⁵¹ Augur, C.M., *op.cit.*, pp.151-152.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ John A.Jacob, *A History of the London Missionary Society in South Travancore*, Nagercoil, 1998, p.118.

Arrangements were made for supplying drinking water and employment not only for the Christians but also for those who opposed Christianity. Those who were not capable of doing strong physical work were asked to go to Marunthuval Malai and collect herbs for the preparation of medicines. He helped the poor people to get vaccinated to save them from epidemics like Cholera⁵⁴.

Thus, Christianity came to Travancore. Of all the Christians, the Syrian Christians and the Roman Christians did not do much for the upliftment of the people who were highly superstitious and controlled by customs and conventions. It was the Protestant Missionaries who could bring about enlightenment and social awakening among the people. The pioneer missionaries laid a strong foundation for the social awakening among the people.

⁵⁴ Nagam Aiya, V., *op.cit.*, p.48.