CHAPTER IX

THE CATHOLIC ASHRAM: AN INDIGENISED MONASTERY

In the preceding chapters we have discussed the dynamics of indigenisation in various domains of the lives of the Tamil Catholics. The common thread that ran through was that the people themselves have been the main authors and primary agents of the indigenisation of Catholicism. This is significant considering that it is usually the clergy that plays a dominant role, especially in religious matters, in the Catholic Church. In this chapter we shall consider one of the most visible expressions of indigenisation, namely, the Catholic ashrams which have come into existence almost as an exclusive creation of the clergy. This fact of indigenisation, it is important to note, significantly differs from the initiatives of the laity.

The idea of monastic life is very much a part of the Catholic Church and has existed for centuries. In its effort to identify itself with the local culture, Catholicism has incorporated the tradition of ashram in India in its monastic life. Attempts at relating the Christian faith with the tradition of sannyasa and ashram were first made by the Protestants in the 1940s and then gradually by the Catholics (Wilfred 1993:43). The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) provided the legitimisation and ideological framework for indigenisation, which in turn has led to the emergence of a number of Catholic ashrams.1

Ashram is a place specifically designed to help a sannyasi seek single-mindedly the bliss of inner freedom. Known as sannyasa in Hinduism, the concrete expression of
this renunciation is found in the *ashramic* life. To analyse the extent to which the Catholic monastery is indigenised in India, the researcher undertook a participant observation study of the Saccidananda Ashram at Thannirpalli in Karur District of Tamil Nadu. This Ashram was chosen as it is situated in Tamil Nadu, the geographical area chosen for our study, and this Ashram was started before the Second Vatican Council. The observational data are supplemented by interviews with the inmates of the Ashram, some Catholics of the village and a few Christian leaders.

**Monasticism in India and its Adoption by Catholicism**

There is evidence of the existence of ascetics in India from the beginning of the first millennium BC. The practice of *tapas*, which included silence, fasting and asceticism in general, was already established. Though the tradition of the individual ascetic mendicants had become deeply rooted in Indian culture, there was no organised centre of such ascetics. Monastic life in the sense of a community of monks renouncing the world and living in poverty and chastity began with Jainism and Buddhism in the sixth century BC. The early Jain and Buddhist monks, like the Hindu ascetics, originally lived as wandering monks, begging for their food, and it was the necessity of remaining in the same place during the monsoon season which compelled them to build monasteries (Griffiths 1980:432). The first monastic organisation of the Hindu ascetics dates from the eighth or the ninth century AD, and these were established by Sankaracharya in the four quarters of India (Ghurye 1995:5 and 6). Thus, though asceticism began as an individual practice it has developed into a religio-social institution, and a large number of ascetics now live in monastic centres or *ashrams* (ibid. 1995:220 and 270).
Ashram life has been considered from ancient times in India to be a very effective means of attaining union with God. In a setting that is simple, peaceful, austere and welcoming, it makes it possible for persons to experience the divine. Ashram is a place where a sannyasi, one who has renounced the world, lives. The sannyasi wears kaavi (ochre-coloured garb) which is symbolic of this renunciation.

Life in ashram is generally one of self-control and discipline: The daily routine includes a set of religious observances of physical purity, mastering and reading of sacred texts for mental elevation, communal prayers for group ecstasy, and preaching for the religious benefit of the lay people. The ascetics are vegetarian and they take two meals a day. The main source of income of the monasteries consists of the offerings of lay devotees and the land donated by the devotees. The visitors may take part in the pooja performed there.

Since Christianity also recognises asceticism as a legitimate mode of life, it has not been difficult for Catholicism to adapt itself to the indigenous ashrams. In what follows we shall discuss the Catholic ashram in Thannirpalli that has remodelled the Christian monastic life drawing extensively from the Hindu concept of ashram.

For the first time in the history of the Catholic Church in India two priests were permitted by the Bishop of Tiruchirappalli (Rt. Rev. Dr. Mendonca) to adopt the lifestyle of a sannyasi to lead their religious lives (Monchanin and Le Saux 1964:90). These two pioneers, Fr. Jules Monchanin and Fr. Henri Le Saux, visited a number of Hindu ashrams in order to gain experience of the life there. Among the ashrams visited the one which influenced them most was the Sri Ramana Ashram at Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu (Stuart 1995:29). They found that this Ashram to be the Indian equivalent of
contemplative life in the Christian tradition. They were impressed by the intense and sustained quest for the divine there and the emphasis laid on *sadhanas* or specifically Hindu spiritual exercises. They noticed the similarity between the Christian monasticism and the Hindu *sannyasa*, and between the lifestyle in the Hindu *ashrams* and that of the Christian monasteries. Thus, they founded a Christian *ashram* to absorb the spirit of the Hindu tradition and in doing so they strove to live a monastic life in the setting of a Hindu *ashram* (Stuart 1995:38).

*Sannyasa*, as these pioneers understood, was not the fourth *aasarama* (a stage of life) which follows those of *brahmaacaarya* (student), *grihastta* (householder) and *vanaprassta* (retirement to forest); rather, it is *atyaasrama*, that is, beyond (*ati*) every stage of life. It belongs to no category whatever and cannot be undertaken along with anything else. Thus, this stage of life is in keeping with the Christian monasticism, wherein the person has only one desire and that for God alone (Abhishiktananda 1975:4 and 5).

*Sannyasa*, as a way of life, has many features of asceticism which are common to all religions. These include fasting, or at least reducing the intake of food; abstention from meat and alcohol; life-long celibacy and total abstention from sensual gratification; vow of silence; sleeping on bare ground; going bare foot; minimal clothing; and absolute indifference towards the world. The emphasis on complete renunciation in *sannyasa* has a close parallel in the Catholic monastic life.

In accordance with the Indian tradition, these two priests took Indian (Hindu) names for themselves: Fr. Jules Monchanin’s became Parama Aruubi Aananda (Bliss of the Supreme Formless One, the Spirit), and Fr. Henri Le Saux became Abhisikuttesvarananda (Bliss of the Anointed One, the Lord) and later shortened it to
Abhishiktananda. Initially their lifestyle and the rule by which they were guided were hardly different from a Western Benedictine monastery, lived out in huts on the banks of river Kavery. But, gradually, they adopted the *kaavi* dress, the ochre colour garb of a *sannyaasi* (Ralston 1987:92).

**Saccidananda Ashram (Ashram of the Holy Trinity)**

The Saccidananda Ashram was founded in the year 1950 on the feast day of St. Benedict on the banks of the river Kavery. They gave the name Shantivanam (Grove of Peace) to the whole campus and dedicated the Ashram and the chapel to the Holy Trinity and called it Saccidananda (*sat-* being, *cit-*consciousness, *ananda-*bliss) Ashram, after the name for the god-head in Hinduism. By choosing this name they showed that it was their intention to identify themselves with the Hindu quest for god as *saccidananda*, and to relate this quest with their own experience of god in the mystery of the Christian Trinity. The commonly used name for this Ashram, however, is Shantivanam.

The location of the Ashram, on the banks of the river Kavery, is significant. Kavery is regarded as a holy river, and it is even described as the Ganga of South India. Thus, the ‘holy location’ is intentional, that is, to make the Christian *ashram* resemble the Hindu *ashram* in its setting.

The Sanskrit word *aasarama* is derived from the root *sram*, which means exertion; that is, a stage of intense exertion in the duties of life. This term *aasarama* is used to refer to (a) the hermitage or forest dwelling-place of a person who spends his time in meditation and austerities or (b) the stages in the life of a twice-born Hindu, characterised by appropriate spiritual exertion (Chenchiah, Chakkarai and Sudarianam 1941). In the context of the Ashram, the word *ashrama* is used to refer to the hermitage of a seer. The *risis*
(seers), while in *tapas* (austerities, penance), are believed to have received the Vedas from the gods. In their forest hermitage the *rishi* composed the Upanishads. Sitting at the feet of the *rishi* the disciples listened to their teaching and shared their experience of the Brahman (Parrinder 1971:236). The Catholic *ashrams* have drawn from the Upanishadic tradition and Vedanta philosophy (especially *advaita* or non-dualism) for their spiritual search and ideology (Abhishiktananda 1969 and Griffiths 1982). The Saccidananda Ashram adopted the *ashram* life characterised by meditation, asceticism and strenuous spiritual endeavour.

The founders sought this Ashram to be a genuinely Indian Benedictine *ashram* following the principles of St. Benedict as the basis for life there. However, this Ashram differs from a Benedictine monastery on the following grounds: (a) The Benedictine monastery prescribes regular hours of liturgy - the monks meet seven times a day to pray together – and lays emphasis on the Mass and community prayer. In the Ashram emphasis is laid on the Mass and the study of Vedanta, the observance of the Hindu methods of prayer and meditation by the practice of yoga. Sanskrit chants are extensively used in the Ashram prayer and worship. (b) As prescribed by St. Benedict, the monastery is a ‘closed’ institution, but following the Hindu *ashram*, the Saccidananda Ashram is essentially an open community. (c) In the course of time the Benedictine monastic life has become institutionalised, but in the Ashram there is much liberty and less organised life (Griffiths [nd.]: 48-50). (d) The head of a Benedictine monastery is the Abbot, whereas in the Ashram it is the *guru*, who is not elected but ‘recognised’ as a spiritual guide by people. (e) The Benedictine monks live in a community, and very few of the Benedictine monasteries allow along with community life the life of a hermit. The Ashram leaves the members free to live either in the community or as a hermit. (f) The *sannyaasi* in the
Ashram chooses a typical Indian (Hindu) name, whereas as this is not the practice in the Benedictine monastery. Thus, the founders of the Ashram have consciously indigenised the monastic life based on the *ashram* tradition in Hinduism.

Parama Arubi Ananda (Fr. Monchanin) died in 1957, before the Ashram had been fully established. Abhishiktananda (Fr. Le Saux), after continuing alone for some time, eventually settled as a hermit in the Himalayas, where he died in 1973. After the latter’s departure the Ashram was taken over by a group of monks from Kurisumala in Kerala, who have continued the combined traditions of Christian monasticism and Hindu *sannyasa* (Griffths [nd.]: 46). Fr. Bede Griffths, a monk from Kurisumala, who took the name Swami Dayananda, was the last *guru* and spiritual guide of Shantivanam. It was during his time that the Ashram became a centre of spiritual pilgrimage.

In the Upanishadic tradition the *guru* is a spiritual guide – the one who dispels darkness and enables the seeker to become conscious that the world is a transitory place and *moksa* (liberation) is what needs to be sought. Great importance was attached to the *guru* in the ancient tradition, because of the belief in the necessity of a spiritual guide to attain knowledge of the Brahman and liberation. In the Christian *ashram* Jesus is seen as the *sat guru* (the true *guru*) (Abhishiktananda 1974a:202). Traditional *ashrams* in India are led by *gurus*, and a *guru* is recognised by others as a person of deep spiritual experience. In the Christian *ashram* the human person is only a representative of Christ, who is the true head of the *ashram*.

The conceptualisation of *ashram*, *guru*, and *guru-disciple* relationship, in both the Hindu and the Christian writings appears to lay great emphasis on charismatic authority in which the power to command is legitimised by the extraordinary qualities of grace.
believed to rest in a person. In addition to this, we observe with Max Weber (1958) that, charismatic authority is socially constructed in recognition, acceptance and legitimisation by followers of the extraordinary qualities of a leader. Thus, the *guru* is not appointed but *recognised* by people as a *guru*. Following this tradition, the *guru* is not appointed in the Ashram. The last *guru* of this place was the late Swami Dayananda (Fr. Griffiths), and after his death the Ashram is without a *guru*.

It is important to note that the Ashram is not completely autonomous. Since the Catholic *ashrams* have all been founded by priests or religious congregations, they are all in varying degrees under the authority of the local Bishop, and in many cases under the authority of the head of a particular religious institution. In 1980, Shantivanam was affiliated to the Benedictine Monastery of Camaldoli in Italy. With this, the *sadhaka* (seeker or the aspirant) and *Brahmachari* (the one who has committed oneself to the search of god) of the Ashram, when they become permanent members as *sannyaasi*, make their profession as monks affiliated to this Monastery in Italy.

**Membership of the Ashram**

Those who seek permanent membership of the Ashram go through three stages of formation: The first stage is that of *sadhaka*, the initial stage of seeking. The second stage is that of *Brahmachari*, the stage in which the initiate need not remain permanently in the Ashram. The third stage is that of *sannyaasi*, the stage in which the initiate makes the final and total dedication. On attaining *sannyaasa*, the person is given *kaavi* (ochre-coloured garb), which is a symbol of renunciation. Following this indigenous formative method, Swami Dayananda (Fr. Griffiths) had given *dhiksa* (initiation to *sannyaasa*) to three of his disciples. Among them two are ordained as priests. The researcher interviewed one of
them, namely, Fr. Christopher, who is presently the administrator of the Ashram. In the words of Christopher, 'I was initiated on the bank of the river Kavery. Swamy Dayananda baptised me with the water from the sacred river Kavery and pronounced the sacred name into my ears, he then gave me the *kaavi* dress to wear.' *Dhiksa* establishes formally the *guru-sisya* (master-disciple) relationship. Initiation takes the form of communication of a *mantra* (sacred name or formula) and it may be also by touch, sight or thought (Ralston 1987:49). In the Christian monastery definite formation programmes are charted out for a certain number of years. This has been reformulated according to the traditions of the Indian *ashram*.

The Ashram’s community is small: Today the Ashram has six permanent members and all of them are male. However, the *ashram* is open to men and women, single or married, as visitors and even as part of the community.

**The Lifestyle in the Ashram**

An atmosphere of peace prevails the Ashram. Silence is observed as a matter of course. The monks follow the Upanishadic precept that 'practise of silence is really the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge, for only by leading such a life does one find the *Atman* and meditate' (Vandana 1980:47).

The basic lifestyle is simple and is in keeping with the indigenous lifestyle of the Hindu *ashrams*. The living quarters of the *sannyasasis* consist of individual huts with thatched roofs (see Photo 9.1). For the visitors there is a long low guest building, a hall serving as the dining room, a library and a church built in Dravidian style of architecture. Most of the buildings have thatched roofs and cement flooring. The Ashram is situated
amidst flower gardens, cultivated fields, and papaya, mango, and coconut groves. The setting indeed recalls the descriptions of ancient Hindu ashrams.

In external customs the Ashram follows traditional Hindu patterns: The monks wear *kaavi* instead of the Catholic habit common in all Catholic monasteries, go barefoot, and sit on the floor for prayer and meals. The food at the Ashram is vegetarian, and the meal is taken seated on the floor. Before and after every meal a Sanskrit prayer is said:

**Grace before meals:** ‘*Om sahana vavatu, sahanau bhunaktu, saha viryam karavavahi, tejasvina vadhitamastu, ma vidvishavahai, om shanti, shanti, shanti*’ (let us agree together, let us eat together, let us behave honourably, let our knowledge be resplendent and let us not be divided - from Vedas).

**Grace after meals:** ‘*aham vaishvanaro bhutva, praninam dehamashritah, pranapanasamyuktah, pacamyannam chaturvidham*’ (becoming fire of life in the bodies of living creatures and mingling with the upward and downward breath, digest four kinds of food - Gita 14 and 15).

Hospitality is the mark of a monastery, and in the Ashram it is in tune with the Indian tradition. The Ashram is open to all irrespective of caste or creed and hospitality is shown to all visitors. It offers spiritual guidance to all those who seek such guidance. The guests are allowed to take part in prayer, meditation, yoga and work. However, there are conditions to be met by persons wishing to stay in the Ashram. Silence is to be observed in the premises, and smoking and liquor consumption are prohibited.

The common *saadhanaa* (way of life) in the Ashram is prayer, study of sacred scriptures, and manual work. One does one’s own personal work and workers are employed only for common work, maintenance of the Ashram and cultivation of its land. The Ashram is also involved in social service and developmental work in Thannirpalli
village. It runs a home for the aged and a training centre for young girls. It may be pointed out here that though all three *maargaas* - *jnaana* (knowledge of god, growing in wisdom and intellectual discrimination), *bhakti* (devotion) and *karma* (doing one’s duty) - are followed in the Ashram, the emphasis is definitely on *jnaana margaa*.

**Indigenisation in Prayer**

*Sandhyaa* (twilight)\(^4\) is conceived as the sacred time of the day, a time meant for ritual offering made to the divine: sunrise, midday and sunset are set apart for silent meditation, the time consecrated for worship by the Hindu and the Christian traditions alike. In the morning, after silent meditation, the Mass is celebrated; at midday and in the evening, prayer is held in common. On these occasions devotion is enriched with Sanskrit and Tamil texts and songs. Every prayer starts with the sacred syllable *Om*.\(^5\) ‘This word first appears in the Upanishads as a mystic monosyllable and is regarded as the object of the most profound religious meditation. In the Manduukya Upanishad it is said that this syllable is all that has been, that which is and is to be; that all is *Om*, only *Om*’ (Gispert-Sauch 1982:547). This word is taken to denote Christ, who is referred to as the Word by John, one of the disciples of Jesus.\(^6\) Every Sanskrit chant starts with *Om* and the *sannyaasis* intone the word *Om* three times followed by the Sanskrit chant. For example, the morning prayer begins with ‘*Om Bhur Bhuva Svaha,*’ etc. (see Appendix 9.1).

Litanies to Jesus – ‘*Om Bhuta Krute namaha*’ (Salutation to the Creator) - and to Mary - ‘*Om Shri Matre namaha, Shri Maharajnyai*’ (Holy Mother, Holy Queen) - are recited in Sanskrit (see Appendix 9.1). The basic prayer and the Bible readings remain in English. The readings from non-Christian Scriptures, for example, from Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Thiruvasakam and Thevaram (Tamil Saivite spiritual writings), are
also included in the prayer. Thus, the communal prayer in the Ashram is less formal than in the monastery, where the community meets seven times a day to pray the Psalms of the Catholic Church.

During the evening prayer a Sanskrit hymn to the Trinity — ‘*Vande Saccidanandam*’ (Worship to the Trinity) - is sung. This hymn (see Appendix 9.2) was written by Brahmabandhab Upaadhyaaya, born of a Bengali Brahmin family and converted to Christianity in 1887. He saw Christianity as a western religion hidden under a series of unfamiliar terms and structures. He found that in the Hindu conception of *Saccidananda*, the mystery of the Trinity could be unfolded. His hymn begins with the verse of worship to the Trinity as *Saccidananda* and goes on to describe the three-fold unity, of the Father, the Son and the Spirit (see Boyd 1989:63-85).

As in the Hindu temples, people entering the place of worship in the Ashram leave their foot wear outside. All follow the indigenous style with regard to posture for prayer - cross-legged, prostrate, seated on a low stool or a wooden plank. At the end of the prayer the *sannyaasi* makes a *casTaaMka nmaskaaram* (prostrating oneself on the ground).

Indigenous religious materials and symbols are used during the communal prayer: *cantanam* (sandal paste) is used during the morning prayer; it is applied on the forehead and hands as a sign of consecrating oneself to god at the beginning of the day. *kuMkumam* (vermilion) is used during the midday prayer; it is placed on the forehead. *vibhuti* (ash) is used during the evening prayer.

The day begins and ends with *aaratti* (waving of light). *aaratti* is derived from ‘rati’ which means delight, joy or devotion (Vandana 1980:45). *aaratti* with burning camphor is waved before the Blessed Sacrament and the light is brought to each one
present for the prayer. Each person passes her/his palms over the flame and places it on the eyes (see Photo 9.2).

**The Mass in the Ashram**

The Ashram follows the Roman liturgy in the celebration of the Mass. However, some symbols from the Indian Rite Mass (detailed in Chap. 3) are incorporated. The Mass is celebrated on a low stone altar (see Photo 9.3). During the offertory the priest sits in front of the stone altar and makes an offering of the four elements - water, earth, air, and fire. The priest sprinkles water around the altar and then on the people as a sign of purification, and then takes a sip of water in order to purify himself. Next, the priest places *chappatti* (Indian wheat bread, instead of the usual wheat wafer) and Wine on a brass plate. He also places on this plate eight flowers reciting Sanskrit *slokaas* referring to the eight directions of the space.

In the ritual offering of flower the priest uses the five fingers of the right hand to pick up the flowers gently, then turns the fingers with the flower upwards and softly offers the flower at the Lord’s feet. The five fingers represent five senses (Parthasarathy 1994:102). Offering flowers to the eight directions of the universe is a symbolic act, denoting that the Mass is celebrated in the centre of the universe. The priest makes the *aaratti* with incense (representing the air) and with camphor (representing the fire). The symbols and gestures used in the Mass are drawn from the Hindu customs.

As in the Hindu temples, indigenous ways of adorning the place of worship are followed on Tuesdays and Fridays. On these days cow-dung water is sprinkled in front of the Chapel and *koolam* is drawn. On other days plain water is sprinkled and *koolam* is drawn.
Indigenisation of Place of Worship

The place of worship is built in the Dravidian style of South Indian temples. Parama Arubi Ananda (Fr. Monchanin), one of the founders of the Saccidananda Ashram, saw a Shiva temple at Magadipettu in Pondicherry, and it became the model for the chapel in Shantivanam (Stuart 1995:47). He constructed only the garbhagirha (sanctum sanctorum explained below), and later Swami Dayananda (Fr. Griffiths) completed the building using the local village craftsmen.

At the entrance is the koopuram or tooraNavaayil on which is shown an image of the Holy Trinity in the form of a tirumuurtti (three-headed figure), which according to Hindu tradition represents the three aspects of the godhead: as creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe (see Photo 9.4). Interpreting this as a symbol of the Christian Trinity, the figure (the father depicted as an elderly man, the Son as an young man and the Holy Spirit as a woman expressing the feminine side of god) is shown emerging from a cross, implying that the mystery of the Trinity is revealed through the cross of Christ.

Between the koopuram and the manTapam (outer court of the temple) there is a cross (cosmic cross) enclosed in a circle on a raised platform. In this symbol, Christianity and Hinduism are symbolically joined by Buddhism: the cross of Christianity is enclosed by the circle representing the wheel of the law (dharma) of both the Hindu and the Buddhist traditions. At the centre of the cross is the word Om, denoting Jesus, the Word.

In the manTapam or outer court of the temple, where the congregation assembles, there is a similar cross having the words ‘saccidanandaya namaha’ in Sanskrit meaning worship to saccidananda. Over the doors leading to the inner sanctuary or muulastaanam there is an inscription in Sanskrit taken from the Mahanarayan Upanishads: ‘Param arth
sṛvam evaikonanyosti jagata pate’ which means ‘you are alone the Supreme Being: there is no other Lord of the world.’ Below it are the words inscribed in Greek letters ‘Kurios Christos,’ the Lord Christ. The same is written in Tamil ‘ulirukum ulkuvaan, uliruntey ulkuvaan.’

The garbhagiraha (sanctum sanctorum), found in all the Hindu temples, is replicated here. The form of the church is transformed by the Hindu concept of an inner sanctum sanctorum, which is like the womb of the sacred space. In the physical structure of the church this is the inner sanctuary with a stone altar. There in a tabernacle is preserved, the Blessed Sacrament, the sign of the presence of Christ.

At the base of the vimaanaa/koopuram (see Photos 9.5 and 9.6) are the figures of the beasts of the Apocalypse, the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle (Revelation 4:7, Good News Bible), which represent the whole creation redeemed by Christ. Above them are four figures of saints, representing the redeemed humanity, and above them are four figures of Christ in different postures seated on simhaasana (royal throne) surrounded by four angels. Simhaasana, a feature familiar to Hindu iconography, is used here as the seat of Jesus to denote his role as the King.

The figures in each direction present the different postures of Christian divinity: In the east, Christ is depicted as King in the royal posture. Beneath him, Mary is depicted as Queen of Heaven, an Indian woman seated on a lotus. In the north, Christ is depicted as a priest in the abhaya mudra, taking away fear and conferring grace. Beneath him is placed St. Peter holding the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the south, Christ is depicted as a prophet or teacher in the posture of a guru. Beneath him is placed St. Paul, as the teacher of the nations. Finally, in the west, Christ is depicted in a contemplative dhyaana
(meditation) posture. Beneath him is placed St. Benedict, the Father of monks and founder of contemplative life in the west.

Above the figures of Christ and the saints is the Throne of God, represented by koopuram (the dome) covered with peacock feathers. At the top of the koopuram is the lotus, symbol of purity, supporting the kalasa (an ancient symbol of the four elements earth, water, air, and fire), pointing upwards to the akaasa (the infinite space) in which god dwells ‘in inaccessible light.’ Thus, at the entrance to the temple the mind is directed to the mystery of the godhead as three persons adored by angels. The underlying idea is the basis for the syncretising religious traditions.

Outside the chapel is an altar on which Mary is placed dressed in a sari (see Photo 9.7), replacing the grotto in the Christian churches.

Influenced by Sri Aurobindo, Swami Dayananda (Fr. Griffiths) incorporated yoga as part of the Ashram life (Sahi 1998:108). A circular hall is built for yoga and meditation. At the centre of this hall is placed the figure of Jesus seated in padmasanam (meditation posture) on a lotus, facing the four points of the compass. In this posture Jesus is viewed as the axis around whom all time and space revolves (see Photo 9.8). In the campus of the ashram the statue of Jesus is depicted as a sannyasi, dressed in kaavi (see Photo 9.9) and Mary is also depicted in Indian style (see Photo 9.10).

The Ashram as Viewed by the People

From the interviews with the Catholics of Thannirpalli village we gather that the Catholics have come to accept the lifestyle of the priests in this Ashram. They are highly appreciative of the simple lifestyle. Some of them come to the Ashram to spend some time
in prayer. Though the Ashram is quite a distance away from the village its personnel have established a friendly relationship with the villagers.

According to the theologians and priests, who have knowledge of the Ashram, the Ashram has emerged as an institution akin to the Christian monastic life and it is a model for religious life in India. However, it has not been a popular movement in the Catholic Church. As *ashrams* are meant for persons who are drawn towards silence and prayer not many show interest in it. Moreover, the *ashram* life demands greater discipline and only persons drawn to contemplative life can conform to it.

For the founders indigenisation meant the expression of the Christian religious experience in theology, spirituality, liturgy and symbols which are drawn from the indigenous culture. In their quest they drew from the tradition of ancient Hinduism to evolve a Catholic *ashram*. As such, the Ashram has made contributions to the indigenisation of architecture of the place of worship and the dwelling quarters of the religious, as also to the indigenisation of worship and the development of an indigenous theology. Many theologians whom the researcher interviewed agreed that the Ashram has been an ideal setting for the development of indigenous theology (see Abhishiktananda 1969, 1974, 1975 and Griffiths 1966, 1982).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the theologian Amaladoss avers

I think the *ashrams* had their day and they are all on the decline. None of the *gurus* has left any serious disciple. I do not see the Ashram either as the ideal of indigenisation or as an instrument of indigenisation. I think persons who want to lead a contemplative life in monasteries try to live in some kind of an *ashram* setting. I do not look to them as means of indigenisation because the real authentic indigenisation should come from the people where the people feel free to respond
to the gospel in and through their culture. Eventually the theologians try to be the voice of the people, in line with the teachings of the Church.

Amaladoss seems to distinguish between the people (laity) and leaders (clergy) as though they have irreconcilable differences on indigenisation. But, as this study has suggested, as far as indigenisation goes, both have significant, if different, roles to play.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Both in Hinduism and Christianity there is a long tradition of institutionalised contemplative life. While in Hinduism it is called *ashram*, in Christianity it is known as monastery. Even before the Second Vatican Council, a few Christian monks began to reorganise their monastic life on the pattern of Hindu *ashrams*. Taking the Saccidananda Ashram in Tamil Nadu as one such initiative, this chapter has sought to establish *ashram* as one of the highpoints in the process of indigenisation. We tried to elucidate this by highlighting the salient features of the Ashram in terms of the structure of the Ashram, the living quarters of the monks, the lifestyle of the inmates (dress and food habits) the indigenous elements in prayer and worship conducted in the Ashram, and the indigenisation of the place and methods of worship.

We observe that there is religious syncretism in the Christian *ashram*. The two religious traditions, the Catholic and the Hindu, have merged together to form one. The Catholic priests have incorporated the idea of Christian monastic life with that of Hindu *sannyaasa*. This involves living a life based on the principles of St. Benedict and the study of Hindu doctrine and methods of prayer and meditation. They have adopted the Hindu *ashram* way of life by wearing *kaavi veesTi*, eating vegetarian food, living in huts, going
bare foot, using Vedic chants in prayer and adopting Indian elements at worship. The head of the Catholic ashram is called the guru and the guru is not appointed but recognised as such by the people. Since the common ground for the meeting of two religious traditions is the need for contemplative life, they reinforce each other. No wonder, Abhishiktananda saw monasticism, whether Christian or Hindu, as one basic vocation.

Diehl (1969:151) points out that in the Christian ashram the exchanges of religious elements from one religious context to another are made quite intentionally on an assumption that they are inter-changeable. Such a substitution of Hindu ashram life in place of Christian monastic life has come quite naturally to some Christian clergy who are eager to adopt Indian customs in their religious endeavour.

Endnotes

1. A directory prepared by O'Toole (1983) lists thirty-nine Christian ashrams. It is, however, difficult to determine the exact number of ashrams existent today, as ashram has become another name for prayer houses in many religious congregations.
2. As part of her fieldwork the researcher visited this Ashram.
3. For an understanding of the Benedictine monastery, the researcher visited the Benedictine Monastery in Bangalore, Karnataka. This monastery derives its name from its founder, namely, St. Benedict, who has laid down a set of principles to be followed in all Benedictine Monasteries.
4. Dawn and dusk are important sandhyaa, but midday is also considered as sandhyaa, since at this time the sun changes its ascending course up to the heavens and descend once more to the horizon (Sahi 1998:129).
5. The sacred syllable Om is extremely simple. It is formed of three elements, A and U, which combine to make the sound O, and M, which prolongs the O in a nasal resonance. It is thus composed of three letters in a single sound. The Upanishads not
only saw in this syllable an expression of Brahman but also identified *Om* with Brahman (Panikkar 1994:769).

6. ‘Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God... The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to mankind’ (John 1:1-5, *Good News Bible*).

7. ‘In early Christian iconography the peacock was a symbol of the resurrection. Its flesh was thought to be incorruptible, and it was often imbued with the same properties as the phoenix which rises miraculously unconsumed from the flames’ (Bayly 1992:263).
9.1 Individual Hut of a Sannyasi

9.2 Receiving the Flame in Saccidananda Chapel
9.3 The Mass Celebrated on a Low Altar

9.4 Entrance of Saccidananda Chapel
9.5 The koopuram

9.6 Mary Seated on the Lotus on the koopuram
9.7
Mary in an Indigenous Grotto

9.8
Yoga Hall
9.9 Jesus in *kaavi*

9.10 Mary as an Indian Woman
Seated on Lotus.