



India

Lesson 7: Christian Missions in India

Christian Missions in Tanzania

(adapted from a short history of Christian Missions in India by Missionary David Koenig)

First Protestant and Lutheran Missionaries to India

Denmark (A Lutheran Country)

In 1620, the country of Denmark established a trading colony in India on the East Coast at a city called Tranquebar. And in 1676 the established another trading post in Serampore. Chaplains were sent out to minister to the colonists as was the custom with all the Protestant colonial powers in those days. And although they were also expected to work with and spread the Gospel to the native people of India, it consisted mostly of enslaving them. For nearly one hundred years little or no evangelism was done among the natives while the money made at the trading colony was sent to Copenhagen. It was not until Frederick IV ascended to the throne of Denmark in 1699 that a change took place.

King Frederick, when he was a prince, was surprised that no efforts were being made to convert the heathen in Danish overseas territories. When Francis Luetkens became court chaplain in 1704 the king found an able assistant for his outreach efforts. Volunteers from the Danish Lutheran Church, who would be willing to travel to India to spread the Gospel, could not be found. As a matter of fact, the Danish state church criticized this missionary venture that was proposed. Thank God for a king who worshiped and ruled under the King of kings, Jesus Christ. Volunteers were finally found in Germany. These volunteers were men who had trained at the seminary in Halle, Germany. Their names were Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Pluetschau. And so it began, sadly so long in coming.

On the Mission Field

The eventual arrival of Missionaries Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau in India was in preparation long before 1706. When Bartholomew Ziegenbalg's mother lay on her deathbed, she called her children to her bedside and informed them she had laid up a treasure for them, a very great treasure. You can imagine their excitement. When they asked where they might find it, the mother answered, "Dear children, search for it in my Bible. There you will find it. There is not a page that I have not moistened with my tears." Bartholomew found the treasure and in his twelve years in India shared his Savior's love. His mother's treasure was passed on.

After seven months at sea the two men arrived on July 9, 1706 at Tranquebar. Though Pluetschau had to return to Germany due to ill health after five years, he continued to support the work in India from Germany.

Ziegenbalg plunged into the work and amazes us with his organization and accomplishment. He had effectively learned the Indian language of South India

called Tamil in one year. He translated Luther's Catechism, sermons, tracts, and school books. By the time of his death, he had finished a translation of the New Testament in Tamil and was well into the Old Testament.

Through Many Tribulations

But now what if after traveling over rough seas and over long distances people don't want you there? How would you feel? While one would expect trouble from the Hindus, greater troubles arose and persisted with the Danish commandant, Hassius. For instance in 1708 while trying to obtain justice for a widow, Ziegenbalg was arrested and kept in solitary confinement for four months. Had the good King Frederich not supported this venture, there would have been worse trouble.

We should not underestimate the force of Hindu opposition either. A convert, Kanabadi Vathiar, like many other converts had to endure bitter opposition from his people. These people threatened and cajoled and tried poison when all else failed. Sadly, ultimately this man reverted to Hinduism. All told about 250 were baptized through these early years.

Ziegenbalg returned to Denmark and Germany to build support. He also had to defend himself against false charges, believe it or not. In this process though the Lord blessed him with a wife who came back to India with him in 1716. The last five years of his work also involved trouble with the secretary of the mission board in Copenhagen. There were arguments about restriction of funds and cutting of funds. Ziegenbalg reminded the secretary that they were dealing with people so poor that they could not afford a piece of white cloth to wrap the baby in for baptism. Therefore, he wrote that spiritual and material help could not always be so clearly delineated.

Funds were cut anyway. Much later when the king understood what was happening, he removed the secretary. Despite such, the work of laying a foundation went forward. What these first two men did was of benefit to all future Protestant mission work in India.

This July 9th (2014) is the three hundred and eighty anniversary of the arrival of these two faithful men at Tranquebar, India. We celebrate God's abundant blessing in the Gospel coming to India. And we remember how God uses us to accomplish His purposes; a mother on her deathbed, a king in his palace, a missionary in the field.

This summer when we have our VBS in the USA let's remember the work in India that still needs to be done today. We can help with our offerings to allow Hindu children to hear the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection. Last year in just one of our sister church's districts there were 555 children in VBS classes. 112 of those children were Hindu. This means that one in five children heard the Gospel of salvation, perhaps for the very first time.