

## CHRISTIAN ART IN INDIA

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### Abstract

*India is a land with a great artistic tradition and also with a great religious tradition and art and of religion, has been closely intertwined at every phase of their history. To Indians, even in these modern times of Western-style industrialization, religion and art are both of major importance, and the two are felt to belong very much together. India is a land of religious art.<sup>1</sup> One may also hope that the history of Christian art in India may be of some interest and use even outside the Christian Church. It is true that the Christian community is only a small minority in the nations of the sub-continent, being far outnumbered by Hindus and Muslims.*

**Keywords:** *industrialization, religion, Vijayanagar, Great Chaitya Temple, Salsette Island, white Jews*

The Christian church does not have images it generally afford the vast, empty courts, and the huge, largely unfunctional towers. <sup>2</sup>The Christian church must have space for congregational worship, in which the local 'family of God' can 'gather round' the Word and sacraments. The Christian prefers his church to be a space which is largely covered and also walled. In some climates, perhaps even in the Indian, church does not need the wall for comfort: even there, though, church still, perhaps perversely, wants it for the sake of privacy. Hindu religious architecture provides no easy prototype for such a building. This is the main reason why temples, disused or confiscated, have rarely been converted into Christian churches. The earliest is at Thiruvancode, in Travancore, where a Jacobite church is said to have been originally a Hindu or a Buddhist temple. The Portuguese occasionally similarly in places near to Goa. At Narve, in the Goa Territories, there is a catholic chapel which was formed out of a Vijayanagar temple about 1546. On Salsette Island near Mumbai the Great Chaitya Temple among the 'Kunnery Caves' was turned into a church. And at Mount Poincur a cave - temple became a catholic chapel in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and remained thus at least until quite recently, though now the plaster which the Christians had covered the wall-carvings has been removed, its Christian use is still permitted or desired. Much later, when Protestant missions became very active in the Tinnevely area, there were cases of similar use of temples. Under Indian pastors sent out by the great Schwartz, three temples in villages completely converted to Christianity were turned into 'Prayer-halls'.

Tribal art is now a recognized and significant part of Indian culture. It has a special interest for Christians, since some of the tribal styles have been used for Christian painting. This is partly because some Indian artists find the tribal styles congenial. The great Bengali painter Jamini Roy was considerably influenced by Santal art: he never became a Christian, but he had Christian sympathies and often painted Christian themes in Santal or semi-Santal terms.<sup>3</sup>

As for the Jews, some of them arrived in India perhaps two centuries earlier than the Parsis, and they form little communities of great influence and interest, some of them with wide cultural concerns. But the ancient synagogue of the 'white Jews' at Cochin, that at Mattancherry (1770). The well-known 17<sup>th</sup> century 'white Jews' synagogue at Cochin has a lovely set of Chinese tiles on its inner walls: tradition has it that they had been ordered by the Raja for his palace, but the leading Cochin Jew, a man much in favor at the court, told the Raja that cow-dung had been used in their manufacture, and was then able easily to persuade him that it would be better if they were given to the synagogue.

Madras, and a few other towns, are their only distinctive artistic contribution—a mere drop in the ocean of Indian art. The Christian adaptations need not altogether despair of finding Hindu prototypes which can be models for new church building. The well-publicized *Jabalayam* (prayer-room, chapel) of the Krista-Kula *asrama* at Tirupattur was built in 1928/32 by S. Jesudasan and E. Forrester-Paton, as a little shrine surmounted by a *vimana*, fronted by a *mandapam*, and enclosed by a small garden and a wall pierced by an entrance-gateway in *gopuram* form. The late Fr. H. Heras, S.J., made a Marquette for a Christian church, reasonably functional and not over-expensive, which contained nothing western but combined sundry elements from Indian temple architecture; this was exhibited at the 1949 Vatican Exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the tragically long history of inter-communal disputes between Hindus and Muslims throughout the last millennium in India's history, these two great traditions of Hindu and Muslim art have not united to form one 'Indian art', but have very largely gone their own ways in separate developments. Nevertheless, there has been some blending, and this is worth noticing, as a sign of what might be a possible way for Christian art in India. Christians and Muslims can easily interchange architectural ideas. They have historically often interchanged actual buildings, with only slight alterations. In India itself, the Jesuits at Agra used as their cemetery chapel a small Armenian tomb in Persian style; the Anglicans at Lahore for some time used the tomb of one of Jahangir's mistresses as their church; later (1883), at Peshawar, they built All Saints' Memorial church in mosque style. The Syrian church's surviving artistic contribution to India is confined to Kerala, with an outlier at Mylapore. Some of the shrines in the Hindu temples of the Goa Territories show a remarkable resemblance to the local Christian altar-shrines, though this may perhaps be due to the Hindus assimilating Christian forms.<sup>5</sup>

Zoffany's altar-piece at St. John's Church, Calcutta, can be unreservedly included here because it was painted in India for an Indian Church and has never been outside India. The altar-crosses inside the churches, ornate outdoor crosses survive at the west fronts of some of the Pre-Portuguese churches in Kerala. The designs on their bases, and the carvings on them, are markedly Hindu in style; they were, moreover, used for holding lamps at festivals, just as were, and are, some of the minor erections in front of Hindu temples.

The churches at katutturutti and Edapalli have fonts with Hindu-style carving on them. This kind of work comes from the later medieval period. Portuguese period or later. They established churches at all the main trading Canters; a few still survive, as notably at Calcutta. At Madras their church was first built in 1712 and then rebuilt in 1772. The style of these churches could be called a simplified Portuguese. Indeed, they cooperated much with the Portuguese in church matters.<sup>6</sup>

Contribution in India is the gravestones of the, merchants and their families, carved with the beautiful Armenian script and a kind of mercantile heraldry. Fine examples can be seen in Madras at the Armenian Church, on the north-west bastion of Fort St. George, and at some of the Portuguese churches. There are others at Calcutta and Masulipatam.<sup>7</sup> The Portuguese began their church building in India almost as soon as they arrived. The very earliest of the Portuguese work in India actually contains some echoes of the European Middle Ages. Portugal was erecting some of her buildings in the 'Manueline, style, her own peculiar variant of Gothic; and in some of the churches whose pillars, doors and windows were built in other styles, Gothic lingered on in the vaults.<sup>8</sup>

On the east coast, near modern Madras, there was a major Syrian Christian settlement ; and some artistic remains of this exist even today. At Mylapore, and at little and great St Thomas' mounts there are buildings which enshrine a long through not undoubted tradition of the mission, martyrdom and tomb of the apostle. The tomb-shrine was at Santhome, near Mylapore. Both the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. In madras there is a cave under the chancel of an old Portuguese church on little St Thomas' mount, and at another old Portuguese church on the summit of great St Thomas' mount, on the supposed site of the actual martyrdom, is the famous St Thomas' mount cross.

It is the silver shrine of St Fracis Xavier in the Church of Bom object on which Goa lavished its finest materials and craftsmanship, for the saint's body had been and was, as it still is, focus of much devotion. The major churches of Goa and other Portuguese centers were aglow with frescoes and oil paintings. But time is not kind to such art anywhere, if it is not kept in gallery conditions; certainly it perishes easily in the Indian climate. Yet much does remain, after a fashion. At Goa, San Francisco and Santa Monica (the only nunnery in the city) have much fresco work on their walls and vaults; it will not last indefinitely, the bulk of the art work in the Portuguese churches in India must have been done by painters born and trained in India. That much of the church pictorial work in the mid- 16<sup>th</sup> century was done by non-Christians, that is, by Hindu Indians.

In 1557 an ordinance was published requiring all heads of guilds at Goa to be Christians; but it was not till 1559 that the head of the painters' guild, who was a neighbor and good friend of the Jesuits, and who had done a great deal of church work for them and others, finally accepted baptism. The engravings, there were plenty of other Christian works of art in the palaces of 'the great mogul'. Both Akbar and Jahangir had their various palaces frescoed with Christian angles and saints; the later had Christian pictures in his bedroom, and even said his morning prayers before pictures of Christ and the virgin. He

went so far as to adorn the tomb of his father Akbar at Sikandar with Christian frescoes; unhappily these were later destroyed by the orthodox and puritanical Aurangzeb. Pictures of this kind often seem to be pastiches or even free compositions or genre studies rather than copies of any one particular engraving. Thus, the India office library at London has a tinted drawing, supposed to be a 'last supper', though the subject is so imaginatively handled, even apart from the Portuguese dresses, that some have taken it to be a "marriage at Cana". Another very similar version of the same unknown prototype was sold at Sotheby's on 27<sup>th</sup> November, 1974, from the Warren Hastings album in the great Phillips collection in the catalogue of that sale it was called a "marriage at Cana" and dated as mid 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In painting Christian scenes they had to try to picture the truly historical Divine, the Transcendent shining through humanity, 'the World made flesh'. One may indeed hope that some of the Mogul artists felt the added pleasure of this new challenge in their tasks; but after all it was the patrons rather than the artists who would choose the subjects. Moreover, was this truly incarnation quality of Christian art at its highest. The dolphins at the sides, in the crosses at the mount and at Valiyappalli, are common Christian symbols. The curled bands at the foot of the crosses have been thought by some to be stylized lotuses, and thus to be Indianizations; but not all are shaped in a way that makes this very plausible. The unique element, however, practically unparalleled elsewhere, is the combination of an empty cross and a dove descending onto it.

Temple cars had their impact on the Christian and Muhammadan cultural also in Tamilaham. In order to identify themselves with the native culture, they seem to have imitated some aspects of Hindu culture in socio-religious life. In many places like Velankannai, Avur, Tuticorin, Sarugani, Idappadi and Dindigul the Christians conducted car festivals. The church of the Lady of Snows at Tuticorin acquired a golden car. The Muslim car festival was known as *candanakkudu*. The *Bahar-i-A'zam Jahi* of Ghulam 'Abdul-Qadir Nazir describes such a festival which took place in the Dargah of Qutbu'l-Aqtab Hazarat sayyid Abdul-Quadir Shahul-Hamid at Nagur. Such festivals are still celebrated in many places like Andakkulam, Hamumanthagudi, Manamadurai and Nagur. Thus the temple cars had some impact over the Christian and Muhammadan culture of Tamilaham.<sup>9</sup>

In 18<sup>th</sup> -century Jesuit recorded a church then at Madurai which was in a mixed Indian and European style. Fr E.R. Hambye, S.J. reports, of a 'double church' at Aroor, just south of Tiruchirapalli (1747/50 and 1802), that 'at least its interior is definitely Hindu architecture adapted to Christian use'. The most notable adornment of any church in India is also of mixed European and Indian style, and it is a truly major work

**End Notes**

1. Vijaya Kumar Gupta, **Tourism in India**, Gian Publishing, Delhi, 1987, Pg. 1.
2. Christopher O'Mahony O.C.D, **Church History**, Pontifical Institute Publication, Alwaye, Pg.25.
3. John F Butler, **Christian Art in India**, CLS Pubication, Madras, 1986, Pg.12.
4. Ibid, Pg.20.
5. Ibid, Pg.33.
6. Ibid, Pg.34.
7. Ibid, Pg.38.
8. Ibid, Pg.44.
9. Raju Kaildos, **Temple Cars of Medival Tamilaham**, Vijay Publication, Madurai, 1989, Pg.237.